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Creative Sensibility in Wordsworth's Poetry

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Romantic poets, as a rule, are supposed to lust for strong emotions and ardent feelings; many of them pant for reveries and supernatural world. Wordsworth, however, gives us a little different impression. We cannot expect from his poetry such supernatural and visionary worlds as Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" or Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner". In a letter to Southey of July 29, 1802, Coleridge wrote about "a daring humbleness of language and versification [in Wordsworth's poems], and a strict adherence to matter of fact",¹⁾ which startled him. Wordsworth himself acknowledged this tendency with pride when he compared his own mental life with Coleridge's abstract and vagrant habits of fancy:

This tendency naturally made his nature poems marked by unusually exact observation. Discussing the two lines of his first published poem, *An Evening Walk*: “And fronting the bright west, yon oak entwines/Its darkening boughs and leaves, in stronger lines” (11.214–215), Wordsworth made the following comment:

This is feebly and imperfectly expressed, but I recollect distinctly the very spot where this first struck me. It was in the way between Hawkshead and Ambleside, and gave me extreme pleasure. The moment was important in my poetical history; for I date from it my consciousness of the infinite variety of natural appearances which had been unnoticed by the poets of any age or country, so far as I was acquainted with them; and I made a resolution to supply, in some

degree, the deficiency. I could not have been at that time above 14 years of age.³⁾

Thus Wordsworth deliberately developed the capacity for observing and describing nature with accuracy. His power to see and to note, for example, is made clear to us in his account of the ivy-clad ash tree in the college garden:

A single Tree

There was, no doubt yet standing there, an Ash
 With sinuous trunk, boughs exquisitely wreath'd;
 Up from the ground and almost to the top
 The trunk and master branches everywhere
 Were green with ivy; and the lightsome twigs
 And outer spray profusely tipp'd with seeds
 That hung in yellow tassels and festoons,
 Moving or still, . . .

(Prel. VI, 90-98)

In the later years of his life he never lost this disciplined habit of writing with his eyes on the object and stating the simple truth. Even as late as 1815, he could be still specific on this question of natural phenomena; he wrote in the Preface of 1815:

The powers requisite for the production of poetry are: first, those of Observation and Description, — i.e. the ability to observe with accuracy things as they are in themselves, and with fidelity to describe them, unmodified by any passion or feeling existing in the mind of the describer; whether the things depicted be actually present to the senses, or have a place only in the memory. (PW, II, pp. 431-432)

However, though this aspect in question is important and essential in Wordsworth, it does not of course represent his whole attitude. Wordsworth's deliberate statements either on nature or on poetry, as typically seen in the famous Preface of *Lyrical Ballads*, often contain hyperbole, ellipsis and condensation, thus sometimes vulnerable to misinterpretation.⁴⁾ Take for example a short poem in *Lyrical Ballads*, "Expostulation and Reply":

"The eye — it cannot choose but see;
 We cannot bid the ear be still;

Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against or with our will.

“Nor less I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a *wise passiveness*. (11. 17–24, my italics)⁵)

There has been a tendency to read this “wise passiveness” as representing Wordsworth’s whole attitude toward nature and therefore applicable to most of his nature poems. But in view of other important poems, this phrase, though essentially sound, seems to be a vigorous exaggeration coloured by Wordsworth’s anti-intellectualism at this period⁶) and, like all sweeping statements, it seems to ignore many things. Indeed, to quote these lines as a sober summary of Wordsworth’s doctrine of nature is to ignore the fact that the speakers of this poem (“William” and “Matthew”) are dramatic characters, and that their languages are appropriate only to the debate, a genre that allows hyperbole, ellipsis and condensation. In this poem we are not told what the poet means by “wise” in the phrase “wise passiveness”, but its companion-piece “The Tables Turned” supplies some clue and gives us a chance to reconsider the meaning of the famous phrase:

Sweet is the lore which Nature *brings*;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
We murder to dissect.

Enough of Science and of Art;
Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth, and *bring* with you a heart
That watches and receives. (11.25–32, my italics)⁷)

These lines suggest that the passiveness is only necessary to free the mind from its superficial drives toward rational comprehension. The “wise passiveness”, then, is no mere state of listless lethargy. It is rather the consummation of the intense activity with which nature should be wooed – note the deliberate double use of the verb “bring”: “sweet is the lore which Nature *brings* . . . /Come forth, and *bring* with you a heart/

That watches . . . ” In short, one-sided passiveness is not enough; the “wise passiveness” in fact requires an “active” contribution on our part.

The idea mildly expressed by these two “brings” is to develop into a very important theory of Nature and Poetry. It finds expression, for example, in “Tintern Abbey” as “all the mighty world/Of eye and ear, — both what they half create,/And what perceive” (11.105-107). Among several references in *The Prelude* to the same idea, the one I quote in the following reveals a mature insight into the makings of poetry and the workings of his own imagination. At the end of Book XII, Wordsworth speaks of his early poetic efforts (specifically “Guilt and Sorrow” composed in 1794):

. . . then I must have excercised
Upon the vulgar forms of present things
And actual world of our familiar days,
A higher power, have caught from them a tone,
An image, and a character, by books
Not hitherto reflected . . .

. . . and I remember well
That in life’s every-day appearances
I seem’d about this period to have sight
Of a new world, a world, too, that was fit
To be transmitted and made visible
To other eyes, as having for its base
That whence our dignity originates,
That which both gives it being and maintains
A balance, an ennobling interchange
Of action from within and from without,
The excellence, pure spirit, and best power
Both of the object seen, and eye that sees.

(XII, 360–379)

The basic ideas of the Preface of *Lyrical Ballads* are repeated here. In his poetry Wordsworth treats not a far and mystic world but “vulgar forms of present things”, “actual world of our familiar days” and “life’s everyday appearances”. But here, unlike in the Preface, the emphasis is laid on the process by which those “forms” and “appearances” are to be transmuted. Note the introduction of the concept of “A higher power” — a power

higher than that of picturing or copying things as they are. It is also worth noticing that the exercise of the power is placed in apposition to the catching of a tone, an image, etc.: “*have exercised . . . /A higher power, have caught from them a tone . . .*”. In other words, Wordsworth suggests here that the giving and receiving are intimately unified elements of a single imaginative act. Everyday life is to be so transfigured as to become “a new world” that deserves to be made known to other people. And the very basis of this “new world” is formed by a dialogue of energy between the observer and the observed: “a balance, an ennobling interchange/Of action from within and from without”. To maintain the balance, the poet must be keenly receptive at the instant he creates. This idea of “balance” is very important because, while it marks a step forward from the idea of “wise passiveness”, it also marks a distance from other Romantic poets. De Selincourt cites Coleridge’s famous lines from “Dejection: An Ode” — “O Lady! we receive but what we give/And in our life alone doth Nature live” — and comments on the difference of poetic mind between the two poets:

To Wordsworth, as to Coleridge, the poetic mind was creative, but unlike Coleridge, he held that it was stimulated and worked upon by the creative power of Nature, since Nature was possessed by that same divine being, which ran through all things, of whose presence he was conscious in his ‘own interior life’. (*Prel.*, p. 619)

De Selincourt’s comment sheds a helpful light upon the meaning of Wordsworth’s frequent pairing of the two adjectives, “sensitive” and “creative”, like in:

I shook the habit off
Entirely and for ever, and again
In Nature’s presence stood, as I stand now,
A *sensitive*, and a *creative* Soul. (*Prel.* XI, 254–257, my italics)

or like the phrase in, “I still retained/My first *creative sensibility*” (*Prel.* II, 379). We can safely say that in Wordsworth’s vocabulary the two words are virtually synonymous; both denote the prime characteristic of an imaginative mind.

Incidentally, while the passage in question has been talking about balance and unification at some length, it is of some interest to note that

the syntax of the last two lines realizes the meaning of the whole passage and realizes it very brilliantly:

The excellence, pure spirit, and best power
Both of the object seen, and eye that sees. (11. 378–379)

“Object” – substance of nature – and “eye” of the poet are made equivalent as genitives appertaining to the unifying word “power”, and even more subtly, they are forced into grammatical interchange with each other: “seen” and “sees”. This represents a concrete, syntactic illustration of the balance and unity of object and subject.

Now, by taking a brief look at two passages, I intend to show how the theory of “creative sensibility” is realized in his poetical practice, producing a sort of poetic effect which is peculiarly Wordsworthian.

“Resolution and Independence” opens with the description of a warm, welcoming nature:

The grass is bright with rain-drops; on the moors
The hare is running races in her mirth;
And with her feet she from the plashy earth
Raises a mist; that, glittering in the sun,
Runs with her all the way, wherever she doth run. (11. 10–14)⁸⁾

Here again Wordsworth shows his preference for exact description. The last quoted line, however, also shows how the poet went beyond the descriptive exactness and attained a novelty that precise description alone cannot be depended upon to supply. Note the double use of the verb “run” which, of course, is a timeworn personifying verb idiomatically used for inanimate things. Wordsworth, however, breathes a new life into the verb in his skilful application of it to two different things, one in connection with the hare (an animate thing) and the other in connection with the mist (an inanimate thing). The second “run” of the hare lends some of its force to the first, that of the mist, and thus the mist comes to assume the quality of something alive and volitional. What is peculiarly Wordsworthian here, I think, is that this brilliant image of a running mist seems less an invented than a discovered one: not one that was simply invented for poetic effect but one that has come to the poet by accident through

the act of close observation.

Wordsworth's use of visual paradox, of momentary illusion, can be observed even more significantly in the following passage from *The Prelude*:

... can I leave untold
 The joy with which I laid me down at night
 In my accustomed Bed . . . that Bed where I, so oft,
 Had lain awake, on breezy nights, to watch
 The moon in splendour couch'd among the leaves
 Of a tall Ash, that near our cottage stood,
 Had watch'd her with fix'd eyes, while to and fro
 In the dark summit of the moving Tree
She rock'd with every impulse of the wind. (IV, 71–83, my italics)

Again the poet's eyes are "fixed" on the objects, yet the still moon, with a kind of optical inevitability, seems to move with "the moving Tree". Wordsworth's use of the word "move" or "motion" is always worth watching. Physical movement was to him, as it is to every imaginative mind, stimulating in a high degree. In "I Wandered Lonely", for example, he watches the daffodils "Tossing their heads in sprightly dance" (1.12) and expresses his delight overtly in a subjective manner, "And then my heart with pleasure fills,/And dances with the daffodils" (11.23-24).⁹ Here the motion of the flowers and the "motion" of the poet's mind receive separate treatment. The passage quoted above from *The Prelude*, on the other hand, expresses a similar idea in a more objective and concise way: "She (i.e. the moon) rock'd with every impulse of the wind." The moon "rock'd" not with mere wind in the tree but with its "impulse" — *OED* defines "impulse" as "force or influence exerted upon the mind by some external stimulus." Then, the implication is that the poet's mind as well "rock'd" with the impulse. Thus, while his eyes remain "fixed" on the objects, the whole scene becomes gradually animated, until the physical movement turns into spiritual delight in a single act of observation. Here, the poet's "creative sensibility" is brought into full play.

Since A. C. Bradley seriously stressed the importance of Wordsworth's visionary aspect, many critics have come to premise their reading of the

poet on the paradoxical strains and equivocal attitude in his poetry. Bradley himself commented on “spots of time”¹⁰⁾ in *The Prelude*: “Everything here is natural, but everything is apocalyptic”.¹¹⁾ According to H. W. Garrod “the mysticism of Wordsworth is grounded and rooted, actually, in the senses”.¹²⁾ Geoffrey Hartman remarked that “His [Wordsworth’s] realism, surely, is a kind of surrealism”.¹³⁾ And Yasunari Takahashi wrote to the effect that Wordsworth is at once a realist and symbolist.¹⁴⁾ Since realism is often thought the negation of mysticism, and symbolism an escape from realism, these comments by famous critics sound radically embarrassing. Indeed, to elucidate this paradox is no light task, nor is it my primary concern in this essay. Yet, we may at least assert that the idea of “creative sensibility” supplies one of the most helpful clues for explaining the paradox.

Notes

- 1) Quoted from R.D. Havens’ *The Mind of a Poet* (Baltimore, 1941), pp. 11–12.
- 2) *The Prelude: or, Growth of a Poet’s Mind*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd ed. rev. by Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1959), Book VIII, 598–606. Hereafter cited as *Prel.*. I have used the 1805 version throughout.
- 3) I.F. note to *An Evening Walk. The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1940–1949), Vol. I, pp. 318–319. Hereafter cited as *PW*.
- 4) For example, in spite of his insistence in the Preface on the use of “language really used by men”, he wrote many poems which contain dense syntax and polysyllabic vocabulary as well as a wealth of sheer abstraction.
- 5) *PW*, IV, p. 56
- 6) In a sense, this famous phrase (and the crude theory of the Preface of *Lyrical Ballads* for that matter) can be viewed as the product of temporary reaction from Godwinism which had led him into the abstract theorizing.
- 7) *PW*, IV, p. 57.
- 8) *PW*, II, p. 235.
- 9) *PW*, II, pp. 216–217.
- 10) A series of mystic experiences with nature in the poet’s childhood which, with their distinct preeminence, stand out in the whole description of *The Prelude*.
- 11) A.C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures On Poetry* (1909; rpt. London, 1970), p. 134.
- 12) H. W. Garrod, *Wordsworth : Lectures and Essays* (Oxford, 1923), p. 105.
- 13) Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1787–1814* (New Haven, 1964), p. 100.
- 14) Yasunari Takahashi, *Ecstasy no Keifu* (Genealogy of Ecstasy) (Kyoto, 1966), p. 101.