



ROMANTICISM IN WORDSWORTH'S POETRY AND THE CULT OF THE CHILD

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Romanticism is the revolution in the European mind against thinking in terms of static mechanism and the redirection of the mind to thinking in terms of dynamic organicism. Its values are change, imperfection, growth, diversity, the creative imagination, the unconscious. The creative power involved in Romanticism is the presence of sensitive and creative soul that is ennobling and enkindling interchange of action. Romanticism is broadly defined with two things – a general and permanent characteristic of mind, art and personality, found in all periods and all cultures. Secondly a specific historical movement in art and ideas which occurred in Europe and America in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Modern Poetry is indebted to the romantic tradition in spite of a frequently proclaimed antipathy to Romantic attitudes.

Romantic poetry is subjective in that the poet creates his own order; there are no formal rules for him to work by, and he is likely to be praised for originality. The finest poetry is identified with the most impassioned language, and the lyric or short poem took on a special character as “more eminently and peculiarly poetry than any other.”

Words worth has always talked about a special message concerning nature's relation to man and man's relation to nature.

Wordsworth was a part of a general European literary movement which had its correspondences in the music, the painting, the architecture, the philosophy, the theology, and the science of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Poetry for Wordsworth is conceived of as a compulsive but creative act. Wordsworth's mature experience was a natural sequel to that of his childhood and youth, it was not simply a spontaneous growth; it was a strong and conscious revolt against the scientific view of the world and man. The poet, Wordsworth saw the universe and man as enveloped and interpenetrated by mystery and by the all comprehending unity of spirit:

“Our destiny, our being's heart and home, is with infinitude, and only there.”

A good deal of modern poetry has carried on a new “romantic revolt” against the claims and the desiccating effects of scientific rationalism. Wordsworth would be the inspiration of the modern movement.

Wordsworth rejection of rigorously mechanistic thought was essentially right, it might still be said that his peculiar faith in nature evaded rather than transcended scientific rationalism. Wordsworth dreamed of the humanizing of what was to grow more and more in human. That is not, certainly, a charge against Wordsworth himself and in his own time, but it does have bearing on Wordsworth today. Wordsworth's insights came rather from observation of his conscious and unconscious self than from observation of people, that a very high proportion of his writing was a record of his own inner history, his own feelings. He was an intensely subjective and introspective poet who had received an illumination that he had to express. He thought of his main theme as “ man, the heart of man, and human life”, and doubtless many readers would warmly endorse that claim, and some would say, in the up-to-date language of psychology, that the poet created authentic myths and dealt with important states of mind. But there is again the fact that “ the poetry of Wordsworth” means, with a few exceptions, the poetry of his happy faith in nature and man. As regards Wordsworth himself, the poetry of his great decade might have been greater if more of it had been born of conflict between the ideals of “unchartered freedom” and order. As it was, much of the poetry we have cherished was the outpouring of a too simple harmony of soul.

Wordsworth poetry is the finest, and is mainly of two kinds. One kind or group comprises some short poems in which nature is subordinated to humanity and in which there is little or no

philosophizing of these “The Solitary Reaper” might stand as a perfect example. The other group embraces a good many of the sonnets, those on Milton, on British ideals of the past and sins of the present. In these heroic sonnets, and in others of quieter nobility, Wordsworth is in line with the great poets back through Milton to the ancients. He earns the right to celebrate man’s unconquerable mind, he does make us feel that we are greater than we know.

In Wordsworth’s cloudy and baffling metaphysical idealism the relation of the immortal soul of the infinity of which it is a part is not wholly that of a wave to the ocean, because the soul has its finite, individual self – consciousness through life on earth, though even on earth it has also, at the same time, its relation to the infinite. He was a poet who used philosophical or religious concepts only as they formed part of his intuitive experience. The visionary gleam, the glory and the dream of childhood, which once rested upon nature but does so no more, is an intimation of the child’s nearness to god, who is our home, whose glory makes possible the celestial light in which every common sight is clothed. Thus it is an intimation of immortality, like “ those obstinate questionings of sense and outward things” of Wordsworth’s trances of metaphysical idealism in childhood. If nearly all of the poem is given to intimations of immortality from recollections of early childhood rather than to immortality itself, which is mentioned only briefly, still immortality is the end to which these intimations lead and is the ultimate meaning of the whole poem. Wordsworth was thinking of an individual immortality which even took the form of resurrection of the body. And later, when he is comforted in maturity by glimpses of “that immortal sea/which brought us hither,” I should say that the symbol of the sea is the symbol of infinity as life without end, of which the soul of the child is a part.

In the “Elegiac Stanzas”, Wordsworth welcomes “ fortitude and patient cheer”, which are a paraphrase of “the philosophic mind”, and then passes on at once to the reason, in the theme of immortality-“Not without hope we suffer and we mourn” Wordsworth’s “Philosophic mind” is that of the Christian philosopher who perceives through reflection what the child perceived intuitively, that is, the immortality of the soul.

He goes on to speak of his childish brooding over stories of the translation of Enoch and Elijah to heaven without suffering death. Even in his evasive apology for the heresy of pre-existence in the Ode he recurs to “our instincts of immortality”, and finally speaks of “this Poem on the “Immortality of the soul”. In all these repeated references to the theme, Wordsworth not only

makes clear how much weight and value he gives to it, but describes the convictions of childhood as faith in the permanence of self-conscious individual identity.

In “We are seven” the conviction of immortality in childhood. “If we look back upon the days of childhood, we shall find that the time is not in remembrance when, with respect to our own individual being, the mind was without this assurance and cut off from communication with the best part of his nature, must that man be, who should derive the sense of immortality, as it exists in the mind of a child, from the same unthinking gaiety or liveliness of animal spirits with which the lamb in the meadow, or any other irrational creature is endowed; who should ascribe it, in short, to blank ignorance in the child, to an inability arising from the imperfect state of his faculties to come, in any point of his being, into contact with a notion of death; or to an unreflecting acquiescence in what has been instilled into him”. Wordsworth calls it in the epigraph, which reverently cherishes and hopes to preserve in maturity the childish ecstasy in the presence of nature. It is essentially the same as “the primal sympathy which having been must ever be”, of the Ode, and is the continuation in maturity of

“those first – born affinities that fit our new-born existence to existing things.”

Wordsworth grieves over the loss of the visionary splendor of the senses which he has once possessed. But this splendor is the light which we bring with us from our life with God and slowly fades as we become more and more remote from childhood. Only the child is “haunted for ever by the eternal mind “of which it is still a part and lives in the consciousness of its immortality.” Nevertheless “nature yet remembers in maturity the childish trances of perception in which the life of the mind is the only reality, in which outward things fall away and seem to vanish into immateriality;

“Those shadowy recollections.... Are yet a master light of all our seeing” By their light we can see even in maturity, and “Our souls have sight of that immortal sea” of eternal life. The glory suggests the inradicable kinship of the soul with the life of God, and the hope of immortality. He finds strength “In the soothing thoughts that spring out of human suffering; In the faith that looks through death.” And finally this support of hope encourages the soul in the fortitude of religious reflection.

The theme of natural piety which preserves the past in the present by the “habitual” sway of nature is now entirely dropped for the symbol of sunset;

1. The clouds that gather round the setting sun 2
2. Do take a sober colouring from an eye
3. That path kept watch over man’s mortality.

So the poem returns to the theme of fortitude again, and I should suggest also to the theme of immortality, for the reference to “mortality” is surely not contradictory of Wordsworth’s thought. It is the mortality of the flesh, which inevitably implies, in this poem, immortality of the soul; to speak of mortality here is also to speak of immortality. Wordsworth is not yet ready in the Tintern Abbey poem to suggest a healing Christian Providence or the consolation of the return of the soul to its life in the life of God, as in the Ode. There are anticipations and even verbal echoes of the conclusion of the Ode elsewhere in Wordsworth’s poetry which are so suggestive as to furnish the strongest evidence of the poet’s intention. Wordsworth gives an instance of “nature teaching seriously and sweetly through the affections, melting the heart.”

It is a memory from childhood of the dying glow of an extinguished candle, which seems to the child a symbol of human mortality, like the sunset of the great Ode. Wordsworth speaks there of the power of nature “to nourish in the heart/ Its tender sympathies

“The commonest images of nature-all, / No doubt, are with this object charg’d – a path, / A taper burning through the gloom of night” It comes nearer, then, to the thought of the ode, since now love of man leads back to the love of nature, enriched by the association of human sympathies.

Wordsworth proposed creation was to take place at a more primitive level, with experiences being separated one from another and distinctly contemplated by a mind intent least of all on combining or embellishing or enriching them. Wordsworth was not perhaps aware when he began, though his boldness was to be justified, that his starting point would have been a paradise for his great predecessors in poetry: he was to imagine his recollections. But imagination is a taking fire of the dead wood of ordinary thought and feeling, and whatever is described under that light, whether it is new or old, becomes new in the quality of vitality which informs it and allows it to enter and illuminate living minds. There is little poetry that conform to Wordsworth’s definition of “emotion recollected in tranquility” taken in the strict sense he intended, but that

was the phrase for his own practice, and it is of great interest to study this “recollection” as a source of imaginative power, and so of poetry.

Wordsworth describe the main events of his life, as a child, at school, at Cambridge, in the Alps, in London, and in France, in considerable detail and with some reflection on them; the narrative is sometimes interrupted, but on the whole preserves its character as a personal history. Within this framework the central theme, as it emerges nakedly and purely from the events, is set forth with unmistakable clarity. At the beginning, when the poet is a child, what is emphasized is the influence of natural forms in shaping his imagination and vision; at the end he has reached a point where the mind and character have developed a beauty in their own right, strengthened by human intercourse and sympathy but sustained still and always at the deeper wells of feeling in the presence of natural objects.

Such was the ultimate concern of the poet. The one beauty on which his imagination fed was the beauty of nature, and whatever else he knew to be beautiful, whatever he had to lay before his imagination for working up into poetry, had to be related to natural objects and seen by the light that shone on them. His subject was the growth of his mind, an abstract and intangible one for any poet, yet for Wordsworth there was scarcely a difficulty in that problem which was not solved, apart from the few “dead” patches already referred to, since at the most important stages of his progress he unerringly directed his imagination towards concrete and living scenes, and in the blaze of feeling which enwrapped his recollection of these he was instantly wormed to an appreciation of his subject adequate for poetry. So it is that for all purposes

The inward theme emerges clearly as the influence of nature on human feelings, because for Wordsworth all feelings of worth go back to the early promptings of nature, and even those sympathies which are awakened with a new interest in men themselves are found to have come originally from his first association with such men as work continually close to nature. It is Wordsworth himself who seems just such a meditating his work in such a dawn, and he needs only a few lines more to confirm for us the knowledge, in more abstract terms, of his dedication to the labour of verse.

Wordsworth is concerned to relate some of the origins of his interest in his fellow creatures and the grandeur he feels them to possess. As always, he works from the particular to the general, from one man to many; and from one occupation of man, and from one moment of that man’s

occupation when everything about it and him seemed to be significant. He describes a shepherd as seen by him at three different times: on the hills looming with his sheep through mist, walking in sudden sunset light, and at a great distance standing at the edge of the horizon. From these appearances, where a man moved into the poet's consciousness clothed with something of nature rather than human rags, even though it was only illusions of light, his imagination was stimulated at an early age to see men as creatures of dignity and power and beauty, which later became an appreciation of the mind: hence (he says) the human form to me became an index of delight, of grace and honour, power and worthiness"

In the most awesome of all his pictures he builds up the vast prospect of mountain tops, clouds, moon, and stars, seen like another sea stretching out from Snow don into the Atlantic main, while from below he hears the roaring of torrents mounting up into the calm. Then with neither hedging nor pause, but rather with a full consciousness of adequacy, he plunges into the correspondance, one of the most audacious images in our poetry and perhaps the surest measure of his own mind. Wordsworth had to find out, from many kinds of description, from discursivereasoning, and from the analogies of tales and incidents, that anything he was to recreate through recollection must spring from the ground of the natural world, whether in itself a human emotion, an intellectual idea, or an article of faith, and he had to learn, up to the concluding book of *The Prelude*. It is rightly named "The Prelude", because it is the prelude to an unwritten poem; but in the business of preparing for that poem it has drained off so much life from the imaginary work still gestating in Wordsworth's mind that we have another case of the child being father of the man-even a child unborn.

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