On Wordsworth's Religious Mysticism Poetics

Pengfeng Zhang

College Foreign Language Teaching Department, Xiamen University, Tan Kah Kee College, Zhangzhou, Fujian, China

zpfgordon@126.com

Abstract

William Wordsworth was a celebrated English Romantic poet and launch English Romantic poetic movement with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. His poems are filled with mystic elements and contains rich theologies of deism, which enable his poems exert tremendous beauty of nature and religion. Through the analysis of his well-known poem Tintern Abbey, readers can fully appreciate its sense of natural beauty and religious thoughts.

Keywords

Wordsworth; religious mysticism; poetics.

1. Introduction

William Wordsworth (7 April 1770 – 23 April 1850) was a major English Romantic poet who, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, helped to launch the Romantic Age in English literature with their joint publication Lyrical Ballads (1798). Wordsworth's masterpiece is generally considered to be The Prelude, a semi-autobiographical poem of his early years that he revised and expanded a number of times. It was posthumously titled and published, before which it was generally known as "the poem to Coleridge". Wordsworth was Britain's poet laureate from 1843 until his death from pleurisy on 23 April 1850. Wordsworth's poetry is distinguished by the simplicity and purity of his language. It was his theory that the language spoken by the peasants was, when purified from its defects, the best of all, "because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity."[1]They convey their feelings and emotions in simple and unelaborated expressions. His theory and practice in poetical creation started from a dissatisfaction with the social reality under capitalism, and hinted at the thought of "back to nature" and back to the patriarchal system of the old time. In the meantime, his poems are filled with mysterious elements which indicate his instinct connection with nature and his worship for nature.

According to Paul Tillich, "the mysticism usually consists of three divisions which include religious mysticism, occultism mysticism and aesthetic mysticism." [1] Religious mysticism is involved with many kinds of religious thoughts, such as medieval mysticism, Buddhism and Hinduism pantheism and transcendentalism etc. occultism mysticism consists of many doctrines and activities, such as necromancy, spiritualism, astrology and spagirism. Aesthetic mysticism mainly lies in poetry and other arts and is represented by a series of art movements and poets like ancient Chinese poet TaoYanming, German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, English poet Danti Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde and so on. With these divisions, the assay mainly examines Wordsworth's religious mysticism poetics of his poems.

2. The Religious Connotation of Tintern Abbey

A number of years ago Norman Foerster wrote these words: "Tintern Abbey is great aesthetically, as we have come increasingly to see; it is aesthetically vital but unsound; in sum, this poem is expression of unwisdom." [2] The sentence reveals the sturdy which might be expected from one who had studied under Irving Babbitt. Perhaps Tintern Abbey is pronounced "unsound" because it expresses an almost monistic view of human nature: the poet's sensation, thought, moral awareness, and mystical insight

seem to have developed one into the other without a struggle; the lower faculties are not sternly kept in their place by the higher; all commingle almost as equals powerful solvent of Wordsworth's memory. If on the one hand kindness are traditionally praised as the best portion of a good life, and if mystical vision is acknowledged to possess an aspect sublime, yet the balance is redressed when "nature and the language the sense" are praised as the anchor of our purest thoughts, the guardian of our heart, and the soul of all our moral being. The poem is ways a romantic's "song of innocence" rather than a humanist's of experience."

Foerster's unstinting tribute to Tintern Abbey's artistic excellence is particularly significant coming from one who dissents from its doctrine. For the adulation which the poem has traditionally received has perhaps been simultaneously a tribute to its art and to its strong religious feeling. Such a simultaneous or total perception is the proper perception. Yet we can prepare ourselves for a perception equally total but richer if we are willing to consider at length and somewhat separately the matter of the poem's artistry. The best-known critical attention which Tintern Abbey has received in recent decades has in fact been quite untraditional: detailed rather than generalized, unfavorable more than favorable. William Empson has scrutinized the poem with an eye to meaningful ambiguities, and he ends-despite many reservations-in classing it among the less fruitful kinds of muddle, “The muddle is discovered in the orders of grammar and logic as well as in the order of philosophy.” [3] If we accept Empson's findings without qualification, we must grant that the poem's defects are as serious on the side of expression as on the side of doctrine. If we accept them only in part, our conviction of the poem's great beauty may yet survive. After all, we can afford to concede that Wordsworth's philosophy is unsystematic, just as we can concede that Immanuel Kant's language is unpoetic.

For Tintern Abbey, if inconsistent philosophically, is at least consistent poetically, consistent perhaps beyond Wordsworth's custom. Its imagery for the most part constitutes a unified and significant whole, such a whole as Cleanth Brooks has recently sought to make us perceive in the Ode on Intimations. One is struck, upon reading Tintern Abbey, by the care with which the landscape before the poet's eye is described. Wordsworth has been commonly celebrated for his difference from the late-eighteenth-century extollers of the picturesque, for somehow expressing the "spirit" of the landscape rather than examining its composition as though it were to be the subject of a painting. In some such fashion, Wordsworth is indeed to be distinguished historically. But is the distinction one to be celebrated without reservations? One must always doubt whether it is desirable for any artist, even for a poet interested in the "inner essence" of some scene before him, to ignore the matter of outward arrangement. How does the spirit of the landscape communicate itself to the poet in the first place? Certainly not as a "landscape to a blind man's eye." It expresses itself by its composition: its topography, its arrangement of vegetation, its placement of the works of man-lane, farmhouse, village, and steeple; and of course by its colors, and by its light and shade, both on the earth and in the sky. The spirit of a rolling landscape differs from that of a level plain; the spirit of a scene with rocky outcroppings from one with- out; the spirit of a partly cultivated, partly wooded valley from that of a hilltop heath. And not all of nature's compositions, as Wordsworth him- self acknowledges in Ruth, proclaims the existence of a benevolent Being within, one working at once in freedom and with restraint. Yet the common opinion is correct: Wordsworth does not regularly pay close attention to the composition of the scene before him. He often presents no more than a sort of catalogue of fragments of nature, of such items as mountains and lakes, listed in no particular order. A spirit, or at any rate an emotion, is suggested to the reader by some emotive word found in the same sentence with the catalogue, but not by any significant vision evoked by the words "mountains" and "lakes" themselves-by such words, and of course by the ordinary devices of rhetoric, and by a versification occasionally reminiscent of Milton and of Milton's impassioned seriousness. But not so in Tintern Abbey. Here, while making use of the other devices as well, he has looked also to the possibilities of the arrangement of natural objects before his eye, or at least before his mind's eye:

Once again

Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage ground, these orchard tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up, in silence from among the trees!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The hermit sits alone.

In this scene Wordsworth might be said to have found or to have created the "objective correlative" for his philosophy of that period; every detail in its composition is significant. To realize this fact one has only to think of a contrast, of many South German landscapes for instance, strikingly beautiful in their way: all human habitations crowd together into a village and scarcely a tree is left among the houses to bear witness to the continued existence of that wild nature which man has repelled; outside this concentration of masonry are wide stretches of ploughed land with- out bush, tree, or hedgerow; and then, perhaps a mile away, rises the forest, sudden, dark, ominous, impenetrable-as though civilization and primeval nature were living in an armed truce, each proclaiming to the other, "Thus far and no farther." Such a German scene would make an excellent correlative to another philosophy, perhaps to Irving Babbitt's, but certainly not to Wordsworth's in 1798. To Wordsworth's was suited rather the valley of the Wye where all intermingled in harmony and unity: the grass "green to the very door" of the cottages; the plots of cottage ground and orchards losing themselves amid groves and copses, hedgerows and woodland uniting; wreathes of smoke (from charcoal burning) telling that man was going about his labors even in the depths of the houseless woods; and lastly-a fact which Wordsworth noted first-the lofty cliffs connecting somehow the living, growing landscape with the "quiet of the sky." In observing this last-mentioned connection, as in observing all the others, Wordsworth is observing as a painter might observe, one who wished to create a composition whose diverse elements harmonized easily and gently, rather than a composition held together by balanced tensions. Yet surely in this last point of comparison as in the others Wordsworth is thinking not only as a painter but as a moralist also; in this detail as in the others he is presenting to us a passage moralize. The world of man, of pastoral farms and plots of cottage ground, merges gently, through orchard and hedgerow, into Nature's copse and woodland. And the world of organic nature, by way of the lofty cliffs, merges gently with the inorganic quiet of the sky-with what is surely a symbol of the Divine Quiet, the "Eternal Silence" as it is called in the Ode on Intimations. Thus, in Wordsworth's philosophy, the human world by way of the world of nature was connected with the Divine world. And here in the landscape, all three worlds are visibly "interfused" even as Words- worth felt they should be. To others the heavens have declared the glory of God. To Wordsworth the landscape of the Wye declared the unity of the universe. At least of that much of the universe as he was then accustomed to consider; for he later confessed that he had considered too little, the calm but not the

storm-the "lamb" but not the "tiger." The "quiet of the sky" is perhaps the most significant phrase in the poem. Wordsworth, in the days when he was composing his first great poetry, in all those teachings which are most his own, was frequently "quietist." Not for him the Heaven of dance and song, of Milton's saintly shout and Handel's reverberating Hallelujahs. Rather a Heaven like that which Henry Vaughan had chosen to figure forth negatively, by the negation of light however rather than by Wordsworth's negation of sound: O for that Night when I in Him Might live invisible and dim. And for Wordsworth likewise it was a Heaven to be achieved not by effort and struggle, not by conquest of self, not by Milton's "dust and heat," but by way of a "wise passiveness." Nowhere more magnificently than in Tintern Abbey does Wordsworth's imagery express this quietistic phase of his philosophy. The greatly not-to-be-desired life of the cities is characterized by din. The nature which in earlier days had aroused in him feverish raptures had spoken through the sounding cataract. Now in the valley of the Wye upon his second visit the sounds are less insistent. In place of the sounding cataract is only a soft inland murmur; the din of human cities has been transposed into the still, sad music of humanity. Similarly, the soul's salvation (apart from such brief eddies, such minor complexities in the poem's imagery, as the "disturbance" produced by the "sense of joy") is a pacification rather than an activation: the memories of the Wye had produced a tranquil restoration; the sight of nature impresses the soul with quietness and beauty; and, in preparation for the soul's seeing into the life of things, the eye is made quiet by the power of harmony. And this pacifying harmony is itself mute, of sights rather than of sounds. (It was the opinion of Socrates that the eye was the most piercing of the senses, the most able to perceive harmonious images of the One.) In short, the soul's goal must be the peace which passé understanding, even as the landscape's culmination is the "quiet of the sky."

Indeed, in the imagery of the poem there are two progressions to quiet rather than just one: from din to murmur to silence, and from human life to vegetable life to the cliff and sky. There is almost a suggestion of a reversal of the "great scale of being," as though at the summit of the scale were what Wordsworth was to describe in a Lucy poem as "the breathing balm," "the silence and the calm," of "mute, insensate things." To say this much might be to say too much; for this perfect landscape, like Nature's perfect child Lucy, was animal and vegetable as well as mineral-if these terms may be used without facetious intent. Yet it should be noted that four of the five places denominated, at the great climax of Tintern Abbey, as being in some way the especial dwellings of the deeply interfused Presence are in the realm of inorganic nature, on the scale of being below even the amoeba and the lichen: they are the light of setting suns, the round ocean, the living air, and the blue sky; though Wordsworth may regard all these dwelling places as "living," they are living silently and without visible turbulence. Even the round ocean, in this case, is contemplated as from a great distance, motionless and still. It is not like those mighty waters of the Ode which were heard rolling evermore. Nor is it like the sea at Calais Beach, which supplied an image of Deity, a more active Deity in this instance, precisely because it was never still and never silent.

The celebrated fifth dwelling place, "in the mind of man," has not yet been mentioned. As Empson has pointed out, this mind of man is a grammatical anomaly, distinguished from the other dwellings by being awarded a preposition of its own. It perhaps represents as separable part of the poetic and philosophical schemes as of the grammatical. Like the brief phrase about the mind half-creating as well as perceiving, it looks beyond the simple passive psychology of the school of Locke and Hartley to the more active psychology of the idealists. But it is here not sufficiently developed to obscure the poem's dominant quietism. Words- worth was to spend the next years of his life trying among other things to digest this more active element into his philosophy and into his poetry. Perhaps he never quite succeeded. Many philosophers feel that he was to produce no more than an unsatisfactory amalgam of ideas. And though he was still to write almost all his finest poetry, he perhaps never succeeded in the difficult task of imagining comprehensively and yet compendiously, within the scheme of a poem of moderate length, his newer and more two-sided philosophy. Perhaps he was never again to produce a poem, one dealing at more than a sonnet's length with Nature's influence on man, which would be so satisfactory artistically as Tintern Abbey and "Three Years She Grew"-both

poems which concentrate upon the simple task of embodying the original and more passive component of his fuller thought. One thinks here of Blake, and of how the two different aspects of his thought, the aspect seen by innocence and that seen by experience, were best expressed separately rather than simultaneously. This visit of Wordsworth to the Wye, which supplied him with a landscape suited to his philosophy of the period, supplied him with a situation which suited his purposes in other ways also. Even as the earlier, more "monistic" Wordsworth viewed nature not as an aggregation of conflicts but as an aggregation of "interanimations" (to use a Coleridgean word), so also did he view the progress of the individual soul not as a series of victories of vice over virtue, of present over past, of the New Adam over the Old, the living self over the dead self, but rather as an animation of the present by the past: The Child is father to the Man; And I could wish my days to be Bound each to each in natural piety. Past and present, the old self and the new, comprise but one totality. Perhaps we are never so vividly aware of this oneness and totality as when we are enabled sensuously to relive some past experience. The ordinary man will touch his own past when he hears again an old tune; but he touches it apparently to no purpose. An imaginative writer, Marcel Proust, will touch his own past when he tastes again a madeleine; and for him the experience will be the most significant in his life: time is annihilated; the illusions produced by his submersion in the stream time pass away, and he sees for the first time the reality underlying the illusion. In Wordsworth's case none of the so-called lower senses, usually considered most effective in producing total recall, produced the desired result; here as elsewhere he is the poet of the eye. To modify his own words: "slowly the image of his mind's eye revives again"-slowly rather than suddenly because in this as in other things he is a gradualist of the school of Burke. For a philosophy of life heavily dependent upon the sense of sight and upon the faculty of memory or recall, the ideal objective correlative is surely the revisiting of a scene visited in the past. In sum, Wordsworth's journey along the Wye in 1798 supplied him with an image for his belief in the unity of past and present as well as for his belief in the unity of man and nature.

In this same connection, how fortunate also was the company of his sister upon this occasion! She was herself at the precise stage of development that Wordsworth had reached when he visited the Wye five years before. The brother and sister together in the presence of the same scene constitute a second correlative to the union of past and present. It is as though, in the case of Tintern Abbey, there had been a conspiracy of circumstance to give to Wordsworth's great theme, the living unity of all things, in time and in space, an expression of unusual concreteness and density.

The presence of Dorothy Wordsworth suggests yet another reason for the poem's success-a reason somewhat extraneous to considerations of artistic excellence. One might say of Lucy, Nature's ideal lady: "We grant that she is animal, vegetable, and mineral; but is she human?" And so even those who love Wordwsorth's poetry are yet aware of that deficiency which perhaps he could not entirely conceal from himself, its frequent suggestion that the poet, despite his conscientious efforts to achieve a rapprochement, was in some ways a little remote from his fel- low men. Keats was aware of a similar deficiency in his own early poetry, and his apprehension of this weakness in Wordsworth was perhaps his chief reason for citing him as an instance of the "egotistical sublime." In any case, when we consider Wordsworth as teacher and prophet and not just as pure artist (and this more particularly in connection with his greatest poetry), something within us tells us, "this will never do." When we read the Prelude we are not appeased, we are perhaps merely antagonized, when we come upon the one book, the one in fourteen, which tells us how the "love of nature" leads to the "love of man." We do not question the accuracy of Wordsworth's account of his own development. We may even, if we insist, find the order of that development edifying: after all, it was through Nature that Wordsworth experienced some contact with the Divine, and Christ himself the first commandment was to love God, and that the second which was like unto it was to love our neighbor. Yet we are still pleased, human beings that we are, when in Tintern Abbey Wordsworth addresses his sister and tells her that the scene will always be more dear to him for her sake; we almost wish to congratulate her upon not having been told the reverse, that she will always be more dear to him for the landscape's sake. All in all, the ordinary reader will cherish the lines to Dorothy not only because they constitute a most

skillful recapitulation, with variation, of Wordsworth's great theme, but simply and directly for their human warmth.

But to return to the question of density and concreteness. The change from the typical literature of Augustan England to that of the Romantic Movement constitutes, so the historians of thought have told us, a development away from purportedly rational and universal ways of looking at things toward more intuitive and individual insights. For instance, Pope's "vindication of the ways of God to man" was expressed very largely as a system of logically related ideas and arguments, a sys- tem which can communicate a great deal of itself to any rational human being-though of course its sum total may not carry the intended conviction. But Wordsworth's conviction "that all which we behold is full of blessings," his sense of a lightening of the "weary weight of all this unintelligible world," was manifestly the work of his intuitions. These intuitions may not have been unique, but they were not at any rate readily reducible to traditional and universal schemes of argumentation; they were largely dependent upon the personal, the local, and the particular. Indeed, in Ruth, Wordsworth has almost admitted, what Aldous Huxley has contended, that some of the most essential parts of his philosophy are of local validity only. Both the historians of thought and Huxley express a truth. One might even go further and say that the very strength of Tintern Abbey is some- how to be found in its localization and particularity. W. K. Wimsatt has recently written of the growth in Wordsworth's day of the notion of the concrete universal , “a result of the weakening of tradition and of the increased reliance upon "original genius" and individual insight”. [6] Here in Tintern Abbey we learn of the particular experience of a particular man at a particular time and place. (I refer, of course, primarily to his experience of viewing all his relations with nature as a totality; for he does not tell us that upon this particular occasion he experienced one of his mystic insights "into the life of things.") The very concreteness of the pome seems to supply this experience with that same authentication which Pope's justification sought to achieve by other means, by being formulated in the traditionally accepted schemes of argument. Anyone who might question the possibility of such an experience as Wordsworth's is rebuffed, as it were, even as that man was rebuffed who argued a priori that a giraffe was an impossible creature.

3. Conclusion

Indeed, Tintern Abbey carries a conviction, and with that conviction a poignancy, similar to the conviction and poignancy of Arnold's Thyrsis. Like Thyrsis and like the 95th section of In Memorian, it authenticates an experience by giving it a "local habitation." And in all three poems precisely the same scenes are visited again, the same objects seen; in Thyrsis, for instance, the all-important elm is the same elm. In Words- worth's Ode on Intimations, on the other contrary, the situation is otherwise. Only for a moment does it appear that the same concentration is to be achieved: -But there's a Tree, of many, one, A single Field which I have looked upon, Both of them speak of something that is gone. But then comes the pansy which "doth the same tale repeat." It is not the same pansy, of course. From there on the poem seems to spread out, to become more diffuse and generalized. Such an abstraction from the particular the neo-classical artists recommended; such in their non- satiric poetry they sought by every device to achieve. For their own purposes their methods were perhaps correct. But for Wordsworth's purpose, the communication of a private intuition, the advantages lay with the method of Tintern Abbey. Perhaps enough has been said. After all, Tintern Abbey has been widely admired ever since its publication. One may or may not assent to Dr. Johnson's opinion that "by the common sense of readers uncorrupted by literary prejudices . . . must finally be decided all claims to poetical honors." Dr. Johnson himself did not concur with the common reader Lycidas. But surely in the case of Tintern Abbey the poetical honors have been justly bestowed

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