



On Solitude in Wordsworth's Poetry

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Abstract— *Wordsworth, preeminently a poet of solitude, has restored our lost capacity for spontaneous and uncomplicated responsiveness. Though most of his poetry is immersed in solitude, yet it is the solitude that radiates a natural and healthy humanity. His solitude is different from that of a pessimist. He is seeking and receiving the lavish grant of nature and his own salvation.*

Keywords— *Wordsworth, solitude, nature.*

There is a human loneliness
A part of space and solitude
In which knowledge cannot be denied
In which nothing of knowledge fails
The luminous companion, the land
The fortifying arm, the profound
Response, the completely answering voice...
(The Sail of Ulysses, II: 21-27)

William Wordsworth, as the forerunner of Romanticism in England, is best known as a nature poet. The glory and beauty of nature in his pen often awake an unutterable delight in readers. With all these pleasures, the recurrent words like "seclusion, alone, lonely, solitary" cannot be ignored. Indeed, there is a human loneliness, solitude in Wordsworth's poetry. However, this solitude is more than an overflow of sentimental emotions, but an embodiment of his attachment to nature.

In preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth says that the great subject of his poetry is "the essential passions of the heart," "the great and simple affections," as these

human qualities interact with "the beautiful and permanent forms of nature." The poet rejoices more than any other men in the joy, the dignity of life, which he has drawn from every minute objects in nature. As for him, mankind is incorporated with nature. In many a poem, he depicts the real life in nature, in which farmers, woodmen, shepherds rose with chirpings of skylarks and came back home with setting sun. Contrasted with the classicists who makes reason, order, and the old classical traditions the criteria in the poetical creations, he advocates direct appealing on individual sensations as the foundation in the creation and appreciation of poetry. And solitude, as a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, plays a vital role in his poetry and provides a new perspective to understand Wordsworth the man and his poetry.

For Wordsworth, solitude is a way to get closer to nature. In *Daffodils*, one of William Wordsworth's best known poems, he portrays the picturesque scene of daffodils in their full blossoms and his later reminiscences and meditations of that experience. The poem begins with "I wandered lonely as a cloud/ that floats on high over vales and hills." The image of a floating cloud can arouse a

sense of solitariness. However, Sadness emerges from the term "lonely," but it is tempered by the freedom of cloud. "Loneliness, it seems, is only a human emotion, unlike the mere solitariness of the cloud." (Shira, 30–34). Then the speaker is met with a host of golden daffodils fluttering and dancing in the breeze. Stanza two indulges in overstatement. The daffodils twinkle on the Milky Way and stretch in never-ending line. The hyperbole expresses the intensity of the speaker's excitement and joyous imaginings. The speaker doesn't stop on depicting the dancing daffodils, and along stanza three, the speaker has to succumb to the glee of the jocund company, which is a shift of mood from the original "loneliness". The concluding stanza returns to the solitude --- a vacant or pensive mood. However, the speaker is soon changed by his imaginative experience involving the massed daffodils and the accompanying bay waters. Earlier loneliness is now "the bliss of solitude". The bliss comes from what he has imaginatively created and is able to summon to his inward eye. That creation is his poem where flowers can be jocund, feel glee, dance for his entertainment, and counteract his melancholy. Such is the power of nature, a company in which humanity should be not merely silent partners but active participants. And in this poem, Wordsworth gets access to nature as a "lonely cloud" and cherishes an ever-lasting "blissful solitude".

Thoreau once writes in Walden Pond, "I have never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude." In his two-year long living alone in Walden Pond, he says, "I have a great deal of company in my house...I am no more lonely than the Millbrook or a first spider in a new house, or the north star, or the south wind, or an April shower ..." Yet more than Thoreau's finding nature as a companion, Wordsworth goes a step further by finding himself absorbed in nature. In "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey",

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 poem Tintern Abbey clearly testifies to Wordsworth's love for nature. He described a revisit in Tintern Abbey with his sister. In the first stanza, revisiting

the natural beauty of the Wye fills the poet with a sense of "tranquil restoration". And the lines quoted above are the speaker's natural overflow of his feelings. The sentence begins with that "I" behold these steep and lofty cliffs, but in the subordinate clause the cliffs become the subject that impress thoughts of more deep seclusion. The readers will be impressed that thoughts of more deep seclusion are being pressed on the speaker's mind. However, a further elaboration is that the scene itself can deliver a sense of seclusion. nature is made capable of feeling. "The—I is written out, or rather absorbed into the scene."(Bate, 2000: 145) From this analysis, one can certainly discover the solitude is both in the speaker and in the scene. Wang Guowei (1877-1927), a Chinese scholar and poet, concluded two states about poetry writing in his *Ren Jian Ci Hua* (comment on language and poetry). The first stage is "Me alive", which indicates a way of connection between the "Me" and the "scene" while the "Me" still separate himself from the scene and the poet finds the empathy on the scene. The second stage is "Oblivious of Me", where the "Me" and the scene blend into an integral whole. The "Me" dissolves himself into the scene and can feel with the scene, sympathize with the scene and be the scene. And according to Wang, the second state is a higher stage of poetry writing. Readers can always discover in Wordsworth's poetry a blending of the speaker and nature. The cause of Wordsworth's greatness, taken from Wordsworth's own words in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads, is "simple, and may be told simply." The extraordinary power with which he feels and renders and makes the readers share "the joy offered in nature, the joy offered in the simple, primary affections and duties."

What Wordsworth would arouse the readers is more than his own solitude, which is more inward and self-centered. He also touches on the solitude of other souls. Most of the lonely characters Wordsworth writes about are ordinary rustic people. He explains his reasons for this rather unusual choice of subject matter at great length in his preface to Lyrical Ballads. He writes that within rustic life "the passions of man are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature." He also writes that these rustic people are "belonging to nature rather than manners." In "The old Cumberland beggar", the poem opens with a plain beginning: "I saw an aged

Beggar in my walk.” The Old Man has put down his staff, and takes his scraps and fragments out of a flour bag, one by one. He scans them, fixedly and seriously. The plain beginning yields to a profoundly moving scene:

In the sun,
Upon the second step of that small pile,
Surrounded by those wild unpeopled hills,
He sat, and ate his food in solitude:
And ever, scattered from his palsied hand,
That, still attempting to prevent the waste,
Was baffled still, the crumbs in little showers
Fell on the ground; and the small mountain birds,
Not venturing yet to peck their destined meal,
Approached within the length of half his staff.

The Old Man is all by himself, and he is completely alone. The “wild unpeopled hills” complement his solitude. The poet has known him since his childhood, and even then “he was so old, he seems not older now.” The Old Man is so helpless in appearance that everyone—sauntering horseman or toll-gate keeper or post boy—makes way for him, taking special care to keep him from harm. However, “He travels on, a solitary Man,” Wordsworth says, and then repeats: He travels on, a solitary Man/His age has no companion.

He moves constantly but is so still in look and motion that he can hardly be seen to move. And as he moves on, he is given many kind acts of love from people he passes by. Yet the poet doesn’t focus on the charity, but continues to say:

And while in that vast solitude to which
The tide of things has borne him, he appears
To breathe and live but for himself alone,
Unblamed, uninjured, let him bear about
The good which the benignant law of Heaven
Has hung around him:”

Wordsworth’s depiction of the old man has nothing to do with social justice. He does not think of him in social or economic terms, but only as a human life. He is too absorbed into nature and only in nature can he retain

human identity. The old beggar is a free man, as he wanders in the heart of the solitudes; his freedom belongs with the nature:

Let him be free of mountain solitudes;
And have around him, whether heard or not,
The pleasant melody of woodland birds.

Mountain solitudes and sudden winds are what suit him, whether he reacts to them or not. The failure of his senses does not cut him off from nature; it does not matter whether he can hear the birds, but it is fitting that he has them around him.

The Beggar reminds us of the beggars, solitaires, wanderers throughout Wordsworth’s poetry. And for Wordsworth, the solitary characters often find a certain amount of solace in nature, as did Wordsworth himself. As Wordsworth believed nature to be of such importance, he had great admiration for those people who lived according to the rule of nature rather than the social constraints imposed by man. He admired their simplicity, and seemed to believe that more sophisticated people could learn a lot from them. Their emotions appear purer. Example of this is the reaper in *The Solitary Reaper*.

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

The speaker passes by a girl who is reaping and singing by herself. The melancholy strain reminds the speaker of Nightingale and cuckoo-bird. Part of what makes this poem so intriguing is the fact that the speaker does not understand the words being sung by the beautiful young lady. And he begins to imagine, is it about “old, unhappy, far-off things,” or “Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain”? Whatever the speaker guesses, he is convinced that what she sings is sad and sorrowful which is echoed in the melancholic tone of her melody. The words “single” “solitary” and “alone” have been foregrounded. And in the

last stanza, the speakers realize that no matter what the song conveys, he has already heard, and has sympathized with her, and in a measure, has communicated with her. Her solitude becomes his, and as long as he walks on, the music lingers on. This is a prevalent theme in much of Wordsworth's poetry. The same idea is used in "I wandered lonely as a cloud" when the speaker takes the memory of the field of daffodils with him to cheer him up on his pensive days.

Most of the characters that appear in the poetry of William Wordsworth are solitary in some way and there are none who appear to be the sociable type which can be found in the poems of other Romantic poets, such as Byron's Don Juan, and Childe Harolde. The reason for this is perhaps that Wordsworth himself was quite a solitary person and he seemed to be happiest when he had only nature for company.

Wordsworth's preference for his own company seems to begin in his early childhood.

And in Expostulation and Reply when the young Wordsworth is asked by his good friend Matthew why he is sitting near the lake daydreaming when he should be reading books to enlighten himself, he replies:

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.

Wordsworth, in his bid to bring man back to nature, portrays nature as an instructor of our minds. And he finds it important to consider and appreciate nature fully, and he often likes to do this alone. As in the last stanza, he tells his friend the answer:

Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,
Conversing as I may,
I sit upon this old grey stone,
And dream my time away,"

These verses instantaneously conjure up in readers' mind a picture of solitary boy sitting on a stone and thinking. Those happy and joyful days spent in nature saw the seed of love for nature. In 1790 Wordsworth went on a walking tour through revolutionary France and became

enthralled with the Republican movement. However he was soon disappointed by the Reign of Terror and his passions for revolution died down. In 1795, he settled in Lake District with his sister Dorothy. The returning to nature and the peace and pleasure in nature refreshed his spirit, which the readers might catch a glimpse in The Excursion. This is a long poem as a long sermon against pessimism under the disguise of a story. Wordsworth, as the optimistic Wanderer, assails Wordsworth as the Solitary, plagued by the death of his wife and children, as well as by his disenchantment with the French Revolution. He uses all his eloquence to raise this other self to his own serene mood---his serenity and tranquility in nature.

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