

Review Article

Poetic Self-Discovery and the Value of Mental Boost: Wordsworth and Coleridge

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Abstract: In examining the evolutive theory of the mind in the poetic and prosaic works of renowned romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge, efforts have been to emphasize the importance of the imagination, thus presenting them as writers who refuse to concur with the Age of Enlightenment that championed rationality over spirituality. These apparent attempts to unauthenticate the occurrence of the mind as an actual event, and as something which had, or genuinely could have happened, obscure and not testify to a higher universal truth. The intention in this article is to extend beyond the appraisal of curiosity of the mind and the work of the imagination as we defend the point that the underlying truth to which Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poetry rested was not just spiritual but also empirical. In so doing, this article seeks to make the contribution that though the romantic movement started as a protest against the cold, new age of reason, it was heralded by the writers' striving for freedom: freedom from oppressive regimes, and freedom from the chains of mediocre poetry. The argument here is that in the wake of the great enlightenment, romantic poets dramatize, implicitly or explicitly, the education involved in being a poet, as they meditate on what it is to be known and what it takes for a poet to be free. As they recognize and react against the burden of external cultural demands, they advocate mental boosting through books and soul searching, a method rejected by the Graveyard poets.

Keywords: Romanticism, poetic mind, mental boosting, Wordsworth, Coleridge.

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INTRODUCTION

The boom in English literature at the turn of the 19th century was not a sudden explosion, but the culmination of a process which began during the age of sensibility in the middle of the 18th century. During this period, a significant number of poets started to reject the rational rules and artificial conventions of neo-classical verse. For example, there was the graveyard school of poetry that suggested a greater concern with individual feelings and emotions, and who sought "... new sources of inspiration in the mysterious pagan traditions of Nordic and Celtic culture" (Cushman, 201), rejecting book learning in favour of natural wisdom. Thomas Parnell, Edward Young, James Thomson and Thomas Gray, the representatives of this school of poetry, wrote a kind of meditation describing moral reflections on human condition with a mortal consciousness that poetic imagination is inborn and mysterious, and cannot be improved by reading books and philosophies.

Eric Parisot and John Baker are critics who have written on the epistemology of the graveyard poets and have concluded that theirs lie in neo-Platonic vision, concurring the view that knowledge is to be

discovered in the self through the synthesis of faith and reason, so that the human senses, like human reason, are divine. Parisot explains that "Reason, to Parnell, is that god in man, and what reason bids, God bids" (178) [10], what Young calls "sovereign power" which apprehends in the natural world "a copy fair" of God's divine plan (qtd in Parisot, 180) [1]. In this regard, the chains associated with boosting the poet's faculty through books are oppressive and works negatively upon the heart of the individual. Therefore, to the graveyard poets, for the poet's passion, emotion, sense and enthusiasm should stay alive, and be justifiable so that they rely on divine/natural wisdom.

Thomas Parnell's "A Night Piece on Death" features a speaker who rejects book learning in favour of natural wisdom. The poem "begins with a wryly learned, Marvellian bemusement at the limitation of bookishness" (Sitter, 58). The speaker, who has been studying using a candle's blue light suddenly realizes that to understand the world and consequently be productive as a poet, one needs something more profound, and concludes that he has been wasting his time on books:

By the blue taper's trembling light,
No more I waste the wakeful night,
Intent with endless view to pore
The schoolmen and the sages o'er:
Their books from wisdom widely stray,
Or point at best the longest way.
I'll seek a readier path, and go
Where wisdom's surely taught below. (1-8)

To Parnell and his colleagues, reading schoolmen (medieval philosophers) push them to relate the wisdom of many, and this is not reliable as a means of achieving personal insight as a poet because relying on books does not take one higher beyond the transcendent insight of the thinkers you are reading. He therefore wants something deep "where orbs of gold unnumbered lie" (14). He prefers to dig below the earth than dig from books. The blue candle's light represents lack of fresh air, which suggests suffocation and oppression of the soul and mind. As the speaker walks out of the study, there is a shift both in space and in tone. His tone goes solemn not just because he is talking of the dead, but because he realizes that he has become the schoolmen and the sages he rejected at the beginning of the poem. Paradoxically, he has gained some knowledge from the books and is now using to address the silent listener on how those dead today possessed life like the listener and that time shall be when he too will go to rest.

Edward Young, another graveyard poet, in his "Night Thoughts" presents his argument on the existence of God from the point of view of empirically verifiable revealed religion and yet advocates internal and external revelation as the only channel of poetic self-discovery. John Sitter relates that Young's philosophy on mental building revolves on the premise that "The intellect of man is as it were a small compendious transcript of the divine intellect" (73), thereby echoing the sentiments that man is inherently god-like. Young was "ferently opposed to the epistemology of Locke and the new science expounded by Newton, perceiving them as narrow thoughts that enchain the mind, and are out to limit man's perception of God to Nature and the fallen material world" (Sitter, 61).

The graveyard poets therefore overlook the role of books and philosophies in the building of the poet's brain and insight. Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge on the other hand saw this as the road leading to a neglect of the significance of the creative region, associated with creativity, imagination, rhythm, spatial awareness, insight, daydreaming and intuition; an approach limited and particularly harmful for the reconstruction of various levels of the poet's mind. In this light, as it was for most Romantics, their poetry was an attack on the pre-established limits of graveyard poetry.

Writing about William Wordsworth's vision of the British past on Salisbury Plain, Alan Bewell remarks that "Wordsworth believed he had a special sense that enabled him to "look into past times as prophets look into futurity" and to hear in the distant winds "the ghostly language of the ancient earth" (43) [9]. The observation is also applicable to many of Wordsworth's contemporaries, notably Coleridge. Romantic era representations of history, politics and society often depended on a special sense that sees or hears from the depth of the minute to the inanimate world. Felicia Hemans's "Voice of the Wind", for instance, is premised on the conceit that the wind carries the sounds of vanished civilizations, which merge into a single hollow note as they echo down the dark aisles of a thousand years" (Underwood, 237) [2]. The explanation lies in a generalized sense of self-discovery as poets. Their poems sound systematically enough not just to suggest the specific social, public and private differences that create various ways of life, but more importantly, to show samples of a larger field of new poetic differences based on the poets' ability to discern them as a result of acute mental boost.

William Wordsworth and the Poetic Mind

In "Excursion", Wordsworth tells the tale of one educated by nature to be a poet, "wanting the accomplishment of verse" (84). Yet the Pedlar is among those "Poets that are sown / By Nature; Men endowed with highest gifts, / The vision and the faculty divine" (81-83). In this poem, Wordsworth separates the narrating consciousness from the experiences of the Boy: experiences that crisscross with the composing poet. The Pedlar is a relatively inarticulate twin of this poet, allowing Wordsworth to imagine what might be called a pre-verbal state, a poetic mind and a state that can only be known through words.

Wordsworth's paradoxical task is to use language to locate a state, that is, the other side of language, as he, for instance, recalls the boy's daily visits to a "School, that stood alone, / Sole building on a mountain's dreary edge, / Far from the sight of City spire, or sound / Of Minster clock!" (8-10). He details this to suggest the value of a schooling that transcends book-learning. The boy's learning works at a sensuous level, one beyond the conceptual as he derives new levels of inspiration and discernment from bracing nearness to the "mountain's dreary edge" and remoteness from "the sight of City spire, or sound / Of Minster clock!" (11-15). Wordsworth evokes a time that operates in a dimension different from that presided over by "Minster clock," one in which past recollection takes on the force of continually reiterated experience, thereby recreating what allowed it to come into being:

From that bleak Tenement
He, many an evening to his distant home
In solitude returning, saw the Hills

Grow larger in the darkness, all alone
Beheld the stars come out above his head,
And travelled through the wood, with no one
near
To whom he might confess the things he saw
(74-80).

Sight is focused on what nature has to disclose; the hills growing larger in the darkness. They do not, but merely seem to expand as they engage the boy's powers of apprehension. But Wordsworth gives sensory error the power of revelation, so that, with a forceful poetic logic, the apprehension of hills growing larger lays the ground for a further emboldened act of seeing. This act of seeing associates itself with the boy's newly discovered feeling of subjective individuality, as he "all alone / Beheld the stars come out above his head" (82-83). This aloneness is different from "solitude." It implies not just solitariness, but also the educative effects of discovering the self's remarkable and vulnerable presence in an unknowable scheme of things. Yet if the scheme is unknowable, things make themselves through their very unknowableness, as "the stars come out above his head" passed into "and travelled through the wood" (78-79).

Wordsworth does not underplay the education that a poet needs to gain from observation of and sympathy with others, especially of those feelings that are essential in the heart. He equally does not underestimate the significance of books. In "Excursion", he speaks of people who are inherently poets as failing to fulfil their promise through "lack / Of culture and the inspiring aid of books" (86-7). Without his own knowledge of books, aspects of his account would have less alluring resonance. Yet books can only take the poet so far and are the worriedly hopeful source of "Knowledge not purchased with the loss of power!" (The Prelude, 449) [3]. In what follows, Wordsworth traces the development of the boy's mind, stressing the interplay of "great objects" and "deep feelings," deploying a syntax that makes the feelings subject of the impression. In Jonathan Wordsworth's words, Wordsworth's "natural objects are stamped upon the mind" (qtd in Keshavarz, 183) [4]. The same critic draws a valuable distinction between his understanding of "imagery" ("Sensible objects really existing and felt to exist") and "imagination" ("objects ... as they appear to the mind of the poet"), and yet Wordsworth, as in the passage above, blends and interfuses the two modes of perception (Keshavarz, 174) [4]. What Jonathan Wordsworth's calls "interfusion" is, the substance and outcome of a poet's education. It is the capacity for such "deep feelings" that, in turn, generates "an active power to fasten images / Upon his brain" (Excursion, 163-4); "and on their pictured lines."

Wordsworth considered childhood as a stage particularly apt for the exploration of selfhood because

of the innocence it embodies. "Interfusion" he believes, is fully possible if the poet (like a child) goes into education with a free mind, ready for the new. If selfhood as a substitute for the soul is represented by what Jacques Lacan calls the "Ideal-I," it is always "more constituent than constituted," because "the dialectical syntheses by which [the subject] must resolve as 'I' is in discordance with his own reality", and can only be partially successful (Lacan, 2) [5]. By identifying language, "I", as that which inhibits this constitute self, Lacan suggests that the child might experience such an "Ideal" self because he is outside language. Kevin Ohi [11] argues that it is not the child himself, but the idea of innocence he represents (7), and concludes that there occurs a disjunction between language and experience, often a more specific disjunction between language and selfhood if the entire process is not properly managed, and this is Wordsworth's perception. Coleridge recognizes this and calls it "mental bombast" (Halimi, 369) [6, 12]. Nicholas Halimi quotes the label Coleridge gives to such a situation as he reacted to Wordsworth's Ode:

In what sense is a child of that age a philosopher? In what sense does he read the eternal deep? In what sense is he declared to be forever haunted by the Supreme Being? Or so inspired as to deserve the splendid titles of a mighty prophet, a blessed seer? By reflection? By knowledge? By conscious intuition? Or by any form or modification of consciousness? Children at this age give us no such information of themselves" (Halimi, 374) [6].

This mocking tirade shows how Coleridge misunderstood Wordsworth. In fact, the passage in Ode carries off its "mental bombast" with lacerating elegiac energy:

Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind, --
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find"
(110-16).

The above lines have a near-fantastical intensity, a pushing to extremes in order to make known the results of poets who passionately apply down to self-defeating point for the foundations of their minds to be laid. In such communion, poets perceive the presence and the power of greatness, deep feelings and the mind to portray objects and colour so distinct, that on their mind they lay like substances, and almost seemed to haunt the bodily sense.

In *The Prelude*, the teacher/student relationship is so intimate that Wordsworth relates it to connection between mother and child:

Blest the infant Babe for with my best
conjecture, I would trace
Our Being's earthly progress. Blest the Babe
Nursed in his mother's arms, who sinks to sleep
Rocked on his mother's breast: who with his
soul
Drinks in the feeling of his mother's eyes (234-
9)

The choice of the mother in this intellectual relationship is significant, and through this symbol, so many conclusions can be drawn. The first and the very obvious is that nature was a person to Wordsworth, raising tenderness and useful companionship. Second, the role of the mother as the teacher leaves us with the image of the active role of the mother in the early and even later stages of the child's educational career.

Wordsworth equally traces the relationship between nature and the forming of the poetic mind in "*Tintern Abbey*", a small-scale version of *The Prelude* which explores the poet's development from thoughtless childhood rapture to mature contemplation, an act of intentional looking which is aware of the infinitude of the spectacle. Here Wordsworth chronicles his return to the banks of the Wye, a landscape which recreates for him a vast image of childhood energy and its "aching joys," where he was imbued with the external world and simply blended with it. He says "like a roe / I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides / Of deep rivers, and the lonely streams, / Wherever nature led" (67- 70). The enjoyments of nature then were purely passive. Now in adulthood, Wordsworth, though physically in the scene, senses that he is on the outside, a quiet admirer whose thoughts and imagination is enchanted by the landscape. In this poem, nature moves from a simple playground to an attractive sensuous and pure lover with aesthetic appeal to an intellectual character, a teacher and an educator. By using nature as his escape from "the heavy and weary weight/Of all this unintelligible world" (39-40), he asserts the purity of nature and the important role it plays in reshaping thoughts in revealing the true nature of human unkindness. This daily retreat from the trials of life is not just a withdrawal from human society and immersion into the natural world, but a retreat into oneself and mind.

Wordsworth, by continuously speaking of his connection with nature relates how nature has been a part of his mind booster during the different stages of his upbringing. His intimacy with nature is of great assurance for the future. No doubt he states that in moments with nature "...there is life and food for future years" (64). By life and food for future years,

Wordsworth is referring a well fed mind that will relate the past and the future, thereby bringing out the difference between the physical and spiritual/intellectual food. This intellectual influence of nature on the poet is presented in the form of an intercourse:

The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse
The guide, the guardian of my heart and soul
Of all my moral being (112).

Like in *Ode*, where the "The meanieast flower that blows can give/Thoughts (207), the speaker's meeting with nature moves from the sober colouring of his eyes to the rise of profound thoughts.

In "*Tintern Abbey*", "*Excursion*" and "*The Prelude*" therefore, the sublime feelings experienced as a child and as an adult lulled the poet into a pleasant tranquility and a conscious understanding of something far more deeply interfused. In this sense, nature is not merely a playground of wild delight but the source of the awakening of the poet's being, for it gives to the poet self-affirmation and, in turn, seems to emanate a moral law which teaches him to give respect and due recognition to all of humanity, determining in him that the love of nature leads to the love of man.

S. T. Coleridge and Poetic Inspiration

The essence in Coleridge's poetry, and the principle that allowed him to create a new conception of the world around him, was his belief that the power of creativity and imagination in a poet can be improved. This will give poets the possibility to perceive and present situations in a way that surpass reality and that poked fun at reason. In "*Frost at Midnight*" Coleridge returns to his own schooldays to recapture the emotion of hope and anticipation, an emotion that is transferred as an adult parent to his child:

For I was rear'd
In the great city, pent mid cloisters dim,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and
shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.
Great universal
Teacher! he shall mould
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask. (56-70)

In a sense, this is a poem about a piece of soot, highlighting that even the most common, most insignificant of objects can serve as poetic inspiration. The poet should therefore allow his mind to be boosted

by these objects: "At school, with most believing mind,/ have I gazed upon the bars,/ To watch that fluttering stranger"(56-57). Poets should wholehearted seek to know what is typical of their moments. By identifying childhood as a particularly significant period for a form of self-understanding, and by associating the education of poets to the context of contemporaneous child study, Wordsworth and Coleridge indicate that this innocent knowledge of self was to be a project of poets' study if meaningful and thrilling poetry had to be produced. Both poets understand that like the child in Lacan's Mirror-Stage, knowledge is richer than language and should therefore serve the function of innocence. In this light, as Ohi has described: "it transcends the difference internal to language and therefore contains the difference otherwise internal to selfhood." (10).

The reciprocity, that is, Coleridge's discovered ideal of teaching and learning is caught in the repetitions and back-flowing of syllables here: "thou shalt learn far other lore" and the "Great universal Teacher ! He shall mould/ Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask./ Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee" (57). The verse is the mirror of a giving that is at the same time an asking. The imagination under such reciprocity develops organically, first by virtue of intense feeling and sensuous experience, and later through the mediation of the higher faculties, specifically books retrospection. The experiences of childhood under nature's tutelage, particularly those sublime feelings of fear and awe which bond to the natural objects of the world, constantly fuel the growing soul, and this forms the poetic mind. Wordsworth writes:

But that the soul, remembering how she felt,
but what she felt remembering not, retains an
obscure sense of possible sublimity, whereto
with growing faculties she doth aspire, with
faculties still growing, feeling still that
whatsoever point they gain, they yet have
something to pursue. (Prelude, 315-322)[3].

Vital to the disciplining process is that the child confronts his emotional states as they are projected into the world. In "Frost at Midnight" the poet avoids sentimentality by allowing wish-fulfilment to infuse and to lose itself in perceptions of such purpose. This blurring of hope and its actualization is prepared for by the way in which deprivation finds poetic recompense in the line, "And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars," where "sky and stars" breathe freely in their heaven. The repeated use of "shalt" or "shall" is the prophetic imaginings of the child's oneness with nature and sounds like spells designed to tap into an "eternal language" which the poet both cannot reach and, impossibly, intimates that he might briefly possess. Here he demonstrates how by coalescing with a surroundings of terrific forms and

merciless shapes poets can rise to enormous heights, demonstrated in the engulfing of the child in his cosmic smallness. Such is the way nature inculcates the growing soul with "unknown modes of being" (Prelude, 1.393)—metaphysical lessons [3].

In "Fears in Solitude", Coleridge presents walks in the countryside, and the peaceful enjoyment of the landscape as a response to the political turbulence of the French Revolution. For Coleridge, this was a time of withdrawal from the public sphere, and an act of taking refuge in the remote quietness. Coleridge hoped that the healing quality of the landscape would help manage their painful emotions and cultivate positive sentiments. But Coleridge's poem has another side to it, which appears to contradict the general critical dimension held so far. The poem depicts Coleridge's struggles with being afraid when alone – afraid of the productions of his own mind. It articulates the process of the poet evoking and then controlling fears through the boosting of his mind. Because he depicts a vision of English women and children fleeing their home and becoming refugees; and appeals to a patriotic masculinity many have concluded that "he mirrors the tone of many contemporary bellicose songs and propaganda literature of his days" (Favret, 542) [7]. His concern was rather to show how poets can detach themselves from the general fear through the building of their minds towards a visionary poetry. In a letter to his brother, the Rev. George Coleridge, on 10 March 1798, he said he

loves fields and woods and mountains with almost a visionary fondness – and because [he has] found benevolence and quietness growing within [him] as that fondness [has] increased, therefore [he] should wish to be the means of implanting it in others - and to destroy the bad passions not by combating them, but by keeping them in action. (qtd in Csengei, 198)

Nature mysteriously increases the mind, taking him not just to fearlessness but into profound vision for the future. By being immersed in the landscape, Coleridge proposes not to fight bad feelings, but give them attention. He believes that natural scenery helps develop other-regarding feelings in the poet, who then enables the transmission of such positive emotions to others (the function of poetry). This wish to be the instrument of spreading benevolence instead of negative emotion is, I believe, a key component of his poem's emotional dynamism which can only be possible if the poet takes a quiet moment with nature for the mind to be impacted.

Stand we forth;
Render them back upon th' insulted ocean,
And let them toss as idly on its waves,

As the vile sea-weeds, which some mountain
blast
Swept from our shores!
And O! may we return
Not with a drunken triumph, but with fear,
Repenting of the wrongs, with which we stung
So fierce a foe to frenzy! (132-54)

Nature's stir impacts the poet's mental ability. The result is his ability to release new dimensions related to the attitude the politician has to adopt after the war. The fear that gripped the mind during the war should not be immediately replaced by the feeling of triumph. The politician should not only repent, but have a moment of thinking on what went wrong.

Coleridge's troubling thoughts about the possibility of an invasion intrudes into his poetic inner world. To the poet, it is indeed a melancholy thing that "weighs upon the heart", and whose "uproar and strife may now be stirring" (36-38). The way over these is however in the "silent hills", the "sunny beam" on the "long-ivied beacon" (207-8) [13-15]. The fantasy of a haunting scenario of invasion becomes a psychological and mental booster: the invasion of the mind by an idea. So apart from being a healing force, the landscape also inadvertently contributes to this mental invasion. Coleridge cannot help but notice this element of coastal defence built in response to the heightened French invasion scare.

CONCLUSION

Coleridge and Wordsworth retain the spirit of childhood in contact with nature to direct an invariable recognition of the poet's mental growth towards power of greatness, deep feelings and the mind. The poems analysed above are exercises of poetic self-education, as they suggest that mind boosting, imagination, isolation and observation can help poets form a right relationship with the real. Revealingly, they emphasize the existential nature of education asserting that there is an education peculiarly fitted for poets, without which genius and sensibility can hardly fill the circle of their capacities. This "education" involves first-hand experience among sublime natural scenery. In this light, they articulate, authoritative narrative voice, exemplified above, and offers a reliable transmission of the poet's experiences, which constantly attends and amplifies others in more unlimited scales. In this respect, the poets function as what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as "an extra-artistic medium" and their discourse an "artistically neutral means of communication" (206) [8]. In this light, Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poetry rang true to those who believed

that the unselfconscious mind is susceptible to the same calm and chaotic forces as the weather, the waters and the forest, and in this case those forces are fundamentally good in the building of the poet's mind.

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