

Formative Yearnings in Nature: Critical Precepts in the Reading of William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge

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Abstract

This paper explores the ambivalent precepts that shape Wordsworth and Coleridge's prophetic attitudes towards nature at the dawn of the twenty-first century. It unfolds the poets' determination to prove that though the effects of civilisation abound in the natural world and the eco-system, nature is still the preserver and the treasure of our joys and sorrows. It is however noticed that the poets' imagination in their poetic yearnings is shaped by the exotic nature of the landscape and the eco-system where their spirits commune freely. It is from this perspective that they believe every natural object seems to be in possession of a soul and capable of intense communion with man. Transcendental realities and the natural beauty of the physical world are at the basis of their imagination but Coleridge derives from these a yearning spirit that can only be conveyed through mystery. He feels a moving spirit in nature described as an "Almighty Spirit". It is like an experience in which his mind moved from irritation, to imagination, to sympathy, and to vivid sensations (qtd. in Soule 1). Even though these visionary perceptions of the natural and the spiritual world are enough to contrast both poets, their interests in nature and its educational and spiritual values is the focus of this paper. However, the fact that Wordsworth is entirely ambivalent in mood while Coleridge is symbolically objective in his attitude towards nature reveals both poets' antagonistic attempts to project the coherence that exist between man and nature.

Keywords: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Nature, Yearnings, Environment

Wordsworth and Coleridge's sympathetic and contemplative venture to ordinary life and the supernatural in favour of the love for nature reveal their indignation towards the degenerating civilisation which according to Bhattacharya has right from its inception alternately lured and repulsed man; and that there has often been a feeling of being trapped within its cruel, intricate web, followed by an irresistible desire to go back to the primitive state (103).

William Hazlitt in his article "On the Living Poets" in *Poetry and Criticism of the Romantic Movement*, admits that "Tintern Abbey" depicts Wordsworth's first romantic passion for nature and gives us highest emotional descriptions of the effects of the outer world upon his own inner self. It is also the first poem in which he uses, with rare feelings phrases like "a worshipper of nature," and speaks of the deeper zeal of holier love that he feels for nature (670-3).

On a similar note, "Tintern Abbey" is a poem that moves between the outer world of nature and the inner world of the mind in a way that beautifully suggests the interaction between the two. Its alternate description of landscape is a feature that accomplishes the poet's idea that every natural object seemed to be in possession of a soul and capable of intense communion with man. The poem begins with the river Wye, bounded by its steep and lofty banks, with the pastoral farms and hedgerows, and the quiet sky. It ends with the same description, having a sense of mingled experiences, artistically very satisfying. But between the beginning and the end, intertwining with the descriptions of language is the exploration of the poet's mind and heart, and his expression of confidence and love for his sister (Dorothy) and the influence of nature upon her. He ends by telling his sister that:

If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations! (Wordsworth 124).

Nature is the preserver and the treasure of our joys. In sickness and nervous disease, she has peopled our imagination with lovely forms which have sometimes over powered the inward pain and brought with them their sensation.

However, Coleridge used nature as a platform to convey his spiritual yearnings in the form of mystery. His love for nature excites awe, provokes unfathomable experiences of the creative impulse resulting to universal images like myths, symbols, and archetypes. It is from this spiritual dimension that Coleridge's concern in nature is examined.

The value of nature that Wordsworth claims here is that it is imbued with qualities of comfort. That in absence, in time of sorrow, in the ugly rush of city life, nature becomes a place where love, peace and solace are attained. The foregoing excerpt clearly conveys this intention. The poet calls on nature to comfort his sister in the sorrows of life. That she may in the future be called upon to endure. Poor Dorothy, Wordsworth's sister, spent over twenty years in a wheelchair, ill in body and mind, and during the years of her illness, nature was almost her comfort (Hazlitt 670). To Wordsworth, the power of seeing life, and the strong perception of souls in nature is the recompense to any exceptional intuitive mind in need of therapeutic animation and offers a spiritual reconciliation with the body and the soul.

"The Prelude" captures incidents in Wordsworth's childhood where it seemed that he actually felt in Nature a moral and spiritual presence, moulding and working on his mind as a human teacher might have done, though more mysteriously and profoundly. Alone, for instance, on the hills at night, engaged in trapping birds as Hough demonstrates, he fell to boyish temptation of taking a

bird from another's snare. But the invisible monitor is watchful over even his venial fault, and as soon as the deed was done he says:

I head among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
Of undistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod (qtd. in Hough 29).

Though Wordsworth insists constantly here on the moral influence of Nature, the dominant impression is not of being watched over by a censorious mentor, but of communion with a vast invisible presence, felt perhaps at the most unlikely times, when climbing rocks after birds nest. This view is unlike Coleridge's who through elements in nature excites fear and wonder as will be illustrated in the second part of this essay on spiritual values. However, Wordsworth is concerned with the half-physical and half-spiritual sense of communion in the animated presences in nature provoked by child fancy. This could be explained as a mystical experience felt within the precincts of solitude amidst familiar shapes of homely objects, images of trees, and colours of the green fields. These natural values capture transcendental realities attainable only through the imagination.

Wordsworth's interest is to demonstrate that imagination is endowed with more lively sensibilities, more enthusiasm and a tenderness that arrest human nature and provides a comprehensive understanding of the human soul beyond ordinary experience. He believes that nature is divine. He posits that God's presence could be felt in nature. Lequouis Emille and Cazamians state that nature to Wordsworth was: "... instinct with the irrational presence of the divine; in his adoration of it, Wordsworth's creed is a mystical pantheism" (1010-11).

He even felt that man will lose something of his spiritual value if he fails to see and acknowledge the presence of God in nature. This revokes the poet's remorse over man's spiritual decay in "The World Is Too Much With Us". The poet seems to be telling us subtly that man should see nature not as it is today, but as it was before the fall of man, radiating with the presence of the divine Being, virgin and uncorrupted. This exhortation is blighted today by the reversal of these natural values in the domain of procreation and irrational destruction of the ecosystem, but the truth is that modern man can only retrieve in his perverse passions drab feelings because the course of nature can never be changed. Man remains inextricably linked to nature and without nature there no essence in life. On a cyclical note, life and death remain the pivot on which humanity is founded and this cycle is intertwine with nature/plants and man.

The foregoing discussion emphasises Wordsworth's interest in nature in relation to the spiritual values that his creative impulses bestow. However important this creative impulse may be, there is still a sterile imbalance in

Wordsworth's poetry that defeats the poet's probing spirits. A strong sense of ambivalence permeates his creative ability especially in relation to the mystical presence he struggles to capture in his world of eternal bliss. Critics have seen in his poetry all kinds of religious and philosophical beliefs, and have argued fiercely about whether he is a Pantheist or a Platonist, a Christian nature mystic or an Atheist or a follower of Hartley or a follower of Godwin or a follower of Rousseau (Hough 26). Whether Wordsworth was a pantheist or an atheist or whatever, the firm argument is that the poet suffered from creative imbalance in his attempt to capture the lovely joys of nature.

According to the poet, nature is a mother-goddess who teaches serenity and joy, and never betrays the heart that loves her. This point contradicts the poet's previous attempt to represent nature's limitless endowments through the sinister symbol of a mother as conveyed in "The Prelude".

From a deconstructive perspective, Wordsworth strips this mother of her own humanity and constructs her, instead, as a menacing and evil creature: her eyes are wild, and the sun has singed the hair/from her head. Not only does this woman look demonic, she also spawns and suckles demons: "And fiends! Faces, one, two, three,/Hung at my breast, and pulled at me" (Wordsworth 229). The emphasis here is to project the mother's dependence and her insatiable desire to mingle even with the wildest of fiends at the detriment of her male child. She paradoxically suckles and gives power to demons and relies upon the male child for her own spiritual strength. The experience of the male child's powers upon the mother is amplified in the following words:

Suck, little babe, oh suck again!

It cools my blood: it cools my brain

Thy lips I feel them baby! They

Draw from my heart the pain away.

Oh! Love me, love me, little boy!

Thou art thy mother's only joy (qtd. in Conger 7)

This sensuous and emotional attachment forcefully derived from the baby for life ultimately dissipates the rationale between mother and child or nature and man. Instead of a mother sustaining the child's life, it is instead the infant's capability of sustaining his mother's life, to save her "precious soul" or to become her "little life" that predominates this awful inextricable existence. The mother's sapping of the child's strength symbolises nature's unfathomable perversities, which prompts Marquis de Sade to think that "Nature is the source of all the perverse pleasures that an earlier age had classified as "unnatural".

Therefore suffering, emptiness and the sinister contradicts Wordsworth earlier conception of nature as a holy ground upon which the human mind

contemplates universal beauty. Rather, reality in De Sade's opinion is concealed by this kind of reflection and must be redeemed through objective criticism in favour of artistic creation. Here, the ambivalence concealed in presences at the same time revealing reality justifies the idea that Wordsworth's interest in nature appeared instinctual and reflective rather than objective and symbolical. Even though this creative imbalance excites poetic pleasures, it places Wordsworth in a parallel structure with Coleridge who succeeds to Charm the human mind through his fabulous experiences and mystical contemplation.

John Butt and Dyson hold the view that Coleridge is the one Englishman who might have elaborated a genuine Aesthetic. He was certainly one of the most stimulating and bewitching critic whose spiritual values proved that he preferred the contemplation of all that is, or has been, or can be, than depending on the mere force of illusions drawn from the outer world (66). However, it would be difficult to express Coleridge's spiritual interest without a close examination of his poetry. The poet's sense of wonder, total disbelief and awe constitute his poetic faith and is the subject matter of "The Ancient Mariner", "Kubla Khan" and "Christabel".

The mystery in "The Ancient Mariner" is fascinating and demonstrates spiritual loathe manifested in the disorder that follows the killing of the Albatross. The poem opens with a voyage, and the albatross following the ship seems to stand for the power of Nature blessing the endeavour. Then, quite wantonly and for no reason, the Mariner kills the albatross: "I had killed the bird/That made the breeze to blow" (Col. 190). This act breaks the sympathy between nature and the voyagers. Even though success continues there is the feeling of a life cut off from the deeper springs of energy which can nevertheless run by its own momentum for a time. Not for long, the ship suddenly becomes becalmed, is afflicted with draught and stifling heat (Hough 60). The situation becomes chaotic because natural beauty before now becomes hideous and threatening. The death-fires dance about the ship at night and the water that ferries voyagers assumes strange and unnatural colours. These horrifying images are directly followed by the terrifying episode of Death and Life-in-Death, in which Death wins the souls of the rest of the ship's company. The reign of life-in-Death, is more terrible than that of Death: It is what Graham Hough qualifies as the "misère de l'homme sans Dieu" (69) – the consciousness of being abandoned, and the utter inability to do anything to rescue oneself from destruction and misery.

The killing of the albatross symbolises a complete breakdown in cosmic harmony and the result is a complete paralysis of the will, symbolised by the motionlessness of the ship. In this motionless state, paradoxically, the Mariner envies the moon and stars for their steady progress through the heavens beautifully expressed as:

The moving moon went up the sky,

And no where did abide:
Softly she was going up,
And a star or two beside –

Her beams bemoaned the sultry main,
Like April hoar-frost spread;
But where the ships huge shadow lay,
The charmed water burnt away
A still and awful red. (Col. 197)

Again, the mariner watches the water-snakes in the sea. Formerly they had been slimy things, symbolising horror-but now they begin to assume a strange kind of beauty:

Blue, glossy green and velvet black
They coiled and swarm, and every track
Was a flesh of golden fire. (198).

It should be noted that the Mariner's spiritual sterility, his misery and hopelessness is abated when he suddenly changes his mind and blesses even the darkness of things like the glossy and sinister water-snakes in the sea. Through these mysterious presences, Coleridge acknowledges a harmonious glow in nature that dissipates human selfishness and irrational feelings and disgust for life. Nature and man are inextricable and the attempt to destabilise this harmony leads to human misery. The whole poem is indeed a vivid presentation of the rebirth myth. But what we must explain is that it is not the final "moral", it is the living symbolisation of the universal psychic experience that gives the poem its lasting power.

"Kubla Khan" too has the same quality of enchantment, but it is more puzzling, partly because it is a fragment, but for another reason, too - it is a fragment of private experience and not of a universal one (Hough 63). The opening lines of the poem, suggested by a passage in Purchase's "Pilgrimage", that Coleridge was reading as he entered his dream or reverie, describes an ideal landscape watered by a sacred river, of paradisaical happiness, in which Kubla is such an all-powerful lord that he can create his pleasure-dome by mere decree (qtd. in Hough 64). But in the succeeding lines (12-30) images of fear, enchantment, violent and uncontrollable energy, oblivion and death and forebodings of strife are evoked. The paradisaical landscape is cleft by a chasm which is savage and fearsome, and from it a mighty fountain turns out to be the sacred river itself. It burst out after an underground sojourn, like the classical

Alpheus, from which its name Alph seems to be derived. It flows for a little in the open, then disappears for good. The meandering body of the Alphs and its sudden disappearance evokes fear and mystery. The prophecies of war that Kubla hears echo a horrifying enchantment contrary to the paradisaical happiness that Kubla intends to create in the human world. Even the sudden switch from Kubla and the Xanadu landscape to capture a vision of the Abyssinian maid singing on Mount Abora convey Coleridge's prophetic tendencies and his strong delight in the overwhelming joy of mystical presences. This is enough to suggest that the poem, for all its-dream-like air, revokes poetic imagination, which is terrible as well as seductive.

"Christabel" is a rarefied description of a strange encounter between Christabel and Geraldine. It is an exquisite romance wrought with profound Chilvaric composition. The obstinate strange meeting between Christabel and Geraldine echoes the broken friendship between Roland and Leoline. Again, estrangement, mystery, wonder, and dejection is the intellectual and imaginative scheme of this poem.

However, Coleridge's command over the supernatural permits a gregarious intellectual uncertainty imbued in the unconscious mind which he succeeds to grapple with. His threshold of transcendental realities has been the bone of contention for most critics who have misconstrued his creative impulses as evidence of plagiarism because he imitates the ancients like Homer and Milton. It will be sad to consider this opinion because creative ingenuity has no limit and a writer is an individual in his own worth. Moreover, deep within every writer is a vast network of unconscious experiences provoked by the secondary imagination; a system of thought that reveals profound ideal reality through dream or sleep. Addressing his critics against charges of plagiarism in his preface to "Christabel", Coleridge admits that his creative experience is [his] and it is likewise yours;

But an if this will not do;
Let it be mine, good friend! For I
Am the poorer of the two (Col.. 215).

One must ascertain that Coleridge's style and subject matter is refreshing, intellectual, philosophical, innovative and imbued with a lot of truths and meanings.

The reliance on the immediate experience, the belief that Nature, rather than any intellectualising power, is the agent of education and the father of poetry, is explicitly stated in the two key poems of *Lyrical Ballads*, "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned". In the first, Wordsworth's friend Matthew, finding the poet sitting idly on a stone, dreaming his time away, urges him to quit

dreaming and to read serious books – books through which the wisdom of the past sheds light on the problems of the present. William replies that while he sits quietly he feels the force of “Powers” which give his mind a “wise passiveness”. By implication, this wise passiveness is more precious than the knowledge which can be gained by reading.

In “The Tables Turned” the poet metaphorically turns the tables on his friend, for this time it is he who makes the confrontation. The poet retorts upon his friend, exhorts him to leave his books and come out into the open, since he can learn more about man and about moral good and evil from the spring woods than from all the sages. The central concern of the poem is to develop this argument.

In stanza one, Wordsworth forcefully yet playfully urges Matthew to stand “Up! up! lest he “grow[s] double” in the “toil and trouble” of reading. In Stanza two, the poet paints a picture of the glories to be seen in nature as the sun appears above a mountain and gives the “long green fields” their “sweet evening yellow” (114). From Stanza three on, nature is embodied specifically in the sounds of bird-calls in the woods – the music of the linnets and the “blithe” song of the “throstle”.

But Wordsworth is interested in more than simply giving the reader specific images of nature. Most of the poem is given over to an argument. The “dull and endless strife” of reading books, the preachers wisdom they contain, and even the “ready wealth” they may bring – all these are not so sweet and wise as a bird’s song. The argument becomes more intense in Stanza seven and eight, where the poet’s objections to books widen to include most kinds of knowledge found in books, especially that “barren” knowledge which comes from rational (perhaps scientific) analysis by which

Our meddling intellect
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things:
We murder to dissect (Col. 114)

In contrast, the poet urges Matthew to “let nature be your teacher”, by responding to bird-songs, by deriving “spontaneous wisdom” from them in a state, not of dull toil, but of “health” and “cheerfulness”. He states his programme for wisdom in Stanza six:

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can (Ibid).

Because this is so, Wordsworth ends his poem in Stanza eight by calling on his friend to “come forth” from his books with an alert heart to receive nature’s lessons.

George Soule holds the opinion that Matthew, the representative of older values, has been identified in part with William Taylor, Wordsworth’s boyhood schoolmaster. Wordsworth tells us that “the Tables Turned” and the preceding, “Expostulation and Reply”, “arose out of conversation with a friend” (possibly William Hazlitt) “who was some what unreasonably attached to Modern books of Moral Philosophy (7).

It is precisely the kind of ideas about moral philosophy found in books that Wordsworth asserts that when a person is affected by a perception of beauty in the natural world in springtime “an impulse from a vernal wood”- perhaps a bird’s song, or a fragrant breeze, that person is made immediately and intuitively attuned to what is good and what is evil. This kind of moral intuition is more to be trusted than judgements made on the basis of philosophical systems.

The seventh stanza describes what such systems do. They reject what can be learned from the pleasing or “sweet” impulses of nature, “the lore which nature brings”. Instead, these systems encourage the minds, “our meddling intellect”, to analyse or “dissect” the “beauteous forms of things”. This last phrase is somewhat ambiguous. Presumably the mind attempts to analyse not only the beautiful impulse from nature but human actions as well. In either case, before the mind can analyse, it must kill: “We murder to dissect”. It is evident that the action of the logical mind destroys what it touches and defeats its own purpose of discovering moral principles and values which Wordsworth proposes in nature.

Wordsworth therefore criticises how the logical mind operates upon moral questions. Like other Romantic poets, he values imaginative understanding much higher than logical and rational thought, the death elements from books and philosophy. The central concern from this standpoint is to demonstrate the rationale between nature and Education. The argument points to the fact that the human mind must trust the value of imagination in order to attain completeness else the stuff that comes out from it remains cacophonous and uninventive. Therefore, there is a complimentary spirit between the analytical mind and the natural world assumed by contemplating “the lore which Nature brings”.

From the foregoing discussion, a clear cut distinction has been established between Wordsworth and Coleridge with regard to their interests in Romantic sensibilities with regard to Nature, Spirituality and Education. Nevertheless it will be important to restate in brief, both poets’ visionary experiences in order to establish a link between the two.

Wordsworth’s mystical experience was inspired by the contemplation of Nature which was at the heart of his sensibility. He emphasises on the

imagination as agent to capture the physical world in its purest form. His concern was to establish the inextricable link between nature and man in terms of mystical presences in nature that carry with them living souls favourable in conditioning human action and granting freedom. But, his conviction about nature was inconsistent and at times very controversial. He seeks to establish a pattern of human life in which his natural religion could find its proper setting. On the contrary, Coleridge's philosophy in life was simple yet intertwined with a sense of mystery. He found another profound meaning to the imagination which is secondary. The poet's claim for secondary imagination alludes to dream or sleep, a system of thought that relies on the unconscious mind and combines with the soul in abstraction to create mystery. He uses this imagination or the dream experience to capture the mysterious personality felt both within and without man. His interest in the supernatural incites wonder and awe, dejection and pain and describes the common efforts of disbelief. He charms the human mind with mystery and artistic creation. However, both poets had a similar ambition to create out of nature a living order of poetic intention and to revive traditional pieties hidden in the lore of nature and the human mind.

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