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The Moral Quality of Wordsworth's Nature

Wordsworth's assertion in "Tintern Abbey" that Nature is the "guardian of [his] heart and [the] soul / Of all [his] moral being" (110-111) raises existential questions about Nature. How and in what way can we understand Nature to fulfill such a role? While this question has been addressed in Wordsworth criticism in one way or another over the years, revisiting it, hopefully, will bring a fresh look at metaphysical and philosophical concerns at the center of Wordsworth's poetry. My purpose today, then, is not necessarily to break new ground, but to re-assess and thus understand more clearly some basic ideas upon which the poetry stands—in this case, specifically, the moral quality of Nature.

To make any sense at all, the topic must first be framed within an appropriate world view. This is especially important in modern times when moral qualities are more often than not seen as nominal rather than as essential. When this is the case, any moral force experienced in nature extends no further than the psychological projection of the poet. Joyce Carol Oates, who assumes a dualistic, morally nominal world, argues this point in her essay "Against Nature." In her polemic against "nature writers," Oates states that nature is an "absolute against which nothing human can be measured" (622). She represents a point of view that places Nature in a Cartesian world where it is existentially distinct from people. In this world, as she puts it, Nature serves merely "as the self's (flattering) mirror" (624). Stephen Jay Gould presents a similar view in his essay "Nonmoral Nature" where he argues against 19th-century natural theologians who believed nature revealed not only moral qualities, but also qualities of deity itself. Tennyson's well known line from In Memoriam stating that "Nature" is "red in tooth and claw" (LVI 15) reveals the dilemma these thinkers faced: if nature is moral, then how can we account for its negative aspects? Gould, like Oates, also solves the problem by assuming a Cartesian world, stating that "nature contains no moral messages framed in

human terms and that “nature simply is as we find it” (608). Charles Hartshorne notes that this view was consistent to the “science of the 18th and 19th-centuries [which] was essentially materialistic . . . in its view of inanimate nature and it was dualistic” (80).

Taking Gould’s and Oates’ tack into Wordsworth reduces any moral dimension nature may have to psychology and, perhaps, by extension to biography, culture, and/or gender. By and large these are the directions mainstream, modern criticism has taken. I’m stating the obvious, but being mindful of it is important because underlying assumptions are often so deeply rooted in one’s thinking as to be below conscious awareness. When this is the case, competing views based on altogether different assumptions risk being hastily dismissed, as Francis Bacon warns in his *Novum Organum* through his four idols of thinking. Bacon contends that becoming “attached to certain particular sciences and speculations” can “distort and color” the views of competing ideas (549). This principle applies to Wordsworth because his poetry is based upon assumptions that challenge deeply entrenched Cartesian views. He assumes a platonic world where, as Douglas Bush points out, the “universe and man . . . [are] enveloped and interpenetrated by mystery and by the all-comprehending spirit” (8). From this vantage, moral qualities are not nominal and thus psychological projections, but essential. Within such a model, nature becomes transparent so that one can experience these supra-phenomenal forces through it. Insofar as this view is the context for the poetry, it is only within it that we can understand how and in what way nature can be moral.

Although a great many of his works could illustrate Wordsworth’s views, his “Lines Written in Early Spring” is especially useful as it straightforwardly provides the unity between Nature and man that makes participation in moral qualities through the natural world possible. Along these lines, Wordsworth states that “Nature” and people are linked through the “Human soul that through [him] ran” (5-6). The unity both share of an antecedent spiritual force represented through “soul” opens the door to Nature serving as a moral guide. In this particular case, the “sweet mood” of the opening stanza suggests a deep, spiritual joy Wordsworth experiences through Nature. This triggers “sad thoughts” (4) because the joy he feels compels him to contemplate the human condition and lament “What man has made of man” (8). We can see, then, that Wordsworth arrives at a moral awareness through contemplation in Nature.

However, although Nature is the “guide,” it is not the source of the insight. It is but a window to a higher world. The source is an implied spiritual mind or power that supplies the “moral life” Wordsworth experiences. This falls into place once we recognize the assumptions underlying the poetry. Based upon them, Wordsworth’s experience is not psychological projection, but immediate participation in a spiritual world through Nature.

To characterize Nature as having a “moral quality,” however, risks oversimplification. The term applied to Wordsworth takes on a more comprehensive meaning. An apt synonym within the context of his poetry would be “all-encompassing awareness.” Somewhat along these lines, Raymond P. Tripp Jr. states, “Wordsworth uses the word [moral] situationally and identifies morality with ‘pure,’ that is ‘value free’ experience. His ‘moral’ measures emotional intensity rather than rightness or wrongness of specific acts . . .” (34). Although my use of the term includes Tripp’s, it goes further to suggest “moral” also, at times, does “measure rightness . . . of specific acts,” as when Wordsworth suddenly realizes he shouldn’t have borrowed the boat. At other times, however, the awareness might extend no further than a “sweet mood” or joy experienced through Nature. To some extent, Matthew Arnold targets this aspect when he praises Wordsworth’s poetry for the “extraordinary power with which Wordsworth feels the joy offered to us in nature” (343). Such a “joy” can be understood as an existential joy emanating from the source of Being itself.

Wordsworth provides a few details about how the process works. One way seems to be serendipitous. In this case, the moral awareness comes unsought as “Spontaneous wisdom” (“Tables Turned” 19) derived from “Powers” in Nature that “can feed this mind of ours / In a wise passiveness” (“Expostulation” 23-24). At other times, however, the experience seems more self-willed. In these instances it seems to be engaged through a meditative state. This is advanced in “Tintern Abbey” where Wordsworth describes the “corporeal frame” (44) being “laid asleep” (45) so that one can “see into the life of things” (48). In any event, regardless of how participation is enacted, when a moral principle is at stake, Wordsworth is clear that it is not the product of rational thought linked to syllogistic reasoning, but supra-logical. Among other places, he makes this apparent in “Tables Turned” when he states, “One impulse from a vernal wood” can be

more instructive “Of moral evil and of good, / Than all the sages can” (21-24) with their “Books” (9). Insofar as “sages” and “Books” suggest didactic lessons logically argued, Wordsworth underscores the supra-logical quality of Nature’s “moral life,” here characterized as an “impulse.” This kind of knowledge acquisition is consistent with the existential frame of his poetry, which provides for intuitive awareness.

Looking at the topic in a wider epistemological context sheds more light. Arthur O. Lovejoy coins the term “metaphysical pathos” as a way to understand the kind of knowing we find in poetry such as Wordsworth’s and in other writings whose purpose is to instill awareness of principles of being. “Metaphysical pathos,” Lovejoy explains, “is exemplified in any description of the nature of things, any characterization of the world to which one belongs, in terms which, like the words of a poem, awaken . . . through a sort of empathy which they engender, a congenial mood or tone of feeling on the part of the philosopher or his readers” (11). He goes on to say that at such moments metaphysical principles are “reached, not through a consecutive progress of thought guided by the ordinary logic available to every man, but through a sudden leap whereby one rises to a plane of insight wholly different in its principles from the level of mere understanding” (10-11). Although Lovejoy is referring specifically to a way of understanding philosophy, his description nevertheless fits Wordsworth, whose sensitivity to forces radiant in Nature can be understood as Lovejoy’s “metaphysical pathos.”

It is important to point out, however, that Wordsworth’s sensitivity to Nature may not always lead him to a higher source. Sometimes the result may be circumscribed by his own thinking, as Douglas Bush observes with his comment that “Wordsworth’s mythical or mystical view of nature was largely the creation of his own mind” (17). Psychological projection is as likely in an essential as it is in a nominal world. The problem is one of discrimination. Wordsworth acknowledges the problem through his recurring uncertainty about his reaction to Nature. Just one example is in “Lines Written in Early Spring” where he doubts the authenticity of his experience: “If this belief [insight gained through nature] from heaven be sent, / If such be Nature’s holy plan / Have I not reason to lament / What man has made of man?” (emphasis added; 21-22). The subjunctive destabilizes Wordsworth’s conclusions, as does the question mark; he’s

not sure if he's been under Nature's influence or just wishfully thinking. Essential qualities, however, remain in place despite one's idiosyncratic confusion.

Thus far we've addressed Wordsworth's moral quality of nature within its capacity to inspire and to bring joy. However, this is only part of the picture as Nature's dark side must also be considered. Largely, this comes symbolically through the well known Simplon Pass account where Wordsworth presents both "darkness and light" as essential qualities of Nature. He suggests that these contrary states are held together by a higher, unifying force. Along these lines, he presents the landscape as a place of "Tumult and peace" filled with "darkness and . . . light," which considered together are "like the workings of one mind, the features / Of the same face, the blossoms upon one tree" comprising, as it were, "Types and symbols of eternity" (Prelude 6.567-572). Insofar as Nature is a window into a higher world, metaphysical implications of such imagery are obvious: as "workings of one mind," realities that people measure as good and bad share a common source.

His awareness of "darkness," however, remains largely at arm's length rather than participated through a "metaphysical pathos" as was the case with nature's goodness. This is most apparent in "Elegiac Stanzas" where Wordsworth faces the same question as did the natural theologians of his day: how to explain suffering and loss in a universe assumedly governed by a benevolent deity. To wrestle with the question Wordsworth uses John Beaumont's Peele Castle painting, which depicts a castle and a sailboat buffeted by a storm. Dark images play prominently—a "sea in anger" (44), a "dismal shore" (44), a "rueful sky"(46), a "pageantry of fear"" (46), "fierce wind" (52), "trampling waves" (52). Over against these are views he earlier held when he saw nature as "the gentlest of all gentle Things" (12). Unlike Simplon Pass which goes no further than painting a picture, Wordsworth here paints the picture and then confronts existential possibilities it poses. This time, however, he falls into a rational frame of thought, as opposed to the intuitive "wise passiveness" at the center of his response to Nature's goodness. When facing the negative side, he concludes that the best he can do is accept the world with "fortitude, and patient cheer" (57). This is a far different kind of experience than his earlier ones when he looked through the window of nature to embrace an existential joy. When facing Nature's dark side, Wordsworth seems to shift from the

supra-logical mode of thinking that characterized his positive response to a rational, logical one. Needless to say, he falls far short of assimilating the contrary views into the “workings of [the] one mind” he presents in *Simplon Pass*. For that matter, he questions whether his earlier views were nothing more than a “fond illusion.” No satisfying resolution is offered.

At this point, turning to Blake to clarify Wordsworth is necessary. Using Blake makes sense because both poets assume a world of Ideals. The details of the two vary, but at their lowest common denominators their worlds intersect. Contextualized within Blake, Wordsworth will be seen to have fallen into an existential myopia insofar as he does not resolve “darkness and light” into a unity of “one mind.” Blake, however, does. The “Tyger” is particularly useful to look through because of its shifting points of view. One point of view is that of Blake’s Speaker who faces the same question as does Wordsworth in “Elegiac Stanzas”: how to account for a world of good and evil. He poses the question symbolically by asking if the same creative force could possibly have made both a ferocious tyger and a harmless lamb. As the Speaker puts it, “Did he who made the Lamb make thee? [tyger]?” (19-20). From the Speaker’s point of view, the answer is indeterminate, thus it remains unknown, a mystery. And this is as far as Wordsworth gets in “Elegiac Stanzas.” While he has seen through Nature to view a higher world, he cannot comprehend its contrary states.

The second point of view in Blake’s poem is provided by the logic of the poem within the context of the other “Songs” as well as the body of Blake’s poetry. From this vantage, the answer to the Speaker’s question is that the same creative force in fact did make both the tiger and the lamb and that both have their appropriate place in the grand scheme of things. This perspective resolves the contrary states into a higher unity, while underscoring the need to progress beyond limited points of view. As Blake puts it in the “Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” “Without Contraries there is no progression” (73). This insight eludes both Blake’s Speaker and Wordsworth. To get a full picture within Wordsworth’s poetry, one must read “Tintern Abbey” alongside “Elegiac Stanzas” and then—much like reading Blake—assimilate their contrasting views into a unifying picture. Along this line, the two works present what might be seen as Wordsworth’s own “Songs of Innocence and Experience.” Although he did not have Blake in mind,

Douglass Wilson nevertheless does acknowledge the relationship of these two seminal poems in his comment that “‘Elegiac Stanzas’ (1806) forms a kind of diptych with ‘Tintern Abbey’ (1798), together serving as a contrasting pair, like Milton’s ‘L’ Allegro’ and ‘Il Penseroso’” (63).

Although his topic is not Wordsworth but the co-existence of fate and free will in Oedipus the King, Bernard Knox nevertheless addresses a principle crucial to reconciling opposites that applies to Wordsworth. Knox suggests that resolution occurs not as “a logical proposition but as a mystery; the medium of exploration is not philosophy but religion—or art. . . . Only a mood of religious humility or a work of art can hold in precarious coexistence . . . irreconcilable concepts” (147-148). Put another way, Knox infers that the union of contrary states can only be understood supra-logically, which, as noted, is the avenue into Wordsworth’s moral nature. That Wordsworth himself never seems to get this far is clear; however, poetry can be larger than the poet and thus point the way to resolution. In Knox’s terms applied to Wordsworth, “art” becomes the “medium” through which union can be understood. From this perspective, in a strange irony, Wordsworth might have solved the problem through reading his own poetry.

Understanding Wordsworth’s relationship to Nature within this context explains Wordsworth’s recurring uncertainties about Nature’s ministry, especially the often-addressed problem of betrayal. Epistemologically considered, within the assumptions upon which the poetry is based, doubt and betrayal can be attributed to psychological projection of the poet, not to existential facts. When Wordsworth faces doubt or fears betrayal, to use Emerson’s terms, he is simply unable to read clearly the “hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put” (4). From this vantage, Nature doesn’t betray anyone; it can’t—it’s merely a “natural fact” showing a “spiritual fact” (23). As such, Nature cannot be held responsible for what the viewer sees. Nature reveals the wider scope; one just has to see it. Anything less is to fall into an opaque world barren of a higher mind.

Finally, to come full circle, if this topic as presented here is to make sense, one must accept—if not at the least for argument’s sake—the role of assumption. Once examined in the light of their own assumptions and framed within an appropriate world view, the moral qualities of Wordsworth’s nature offer a compelling picture of a universe

alive with an essential spirit and power. And for many, therein lies the allure of Romanticism itself.

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Other familiar poems provide more details. In "Tintern Abbey" Wordsworth describes participation of a non-phenomenal world through phenomena. Along these lines, Wordsworth writes that he has "felt / A presence" (93-94) that he conceptualizes as "A motion and a spirit" (100) with a moral quality to "chasten and subdue" (93). This force or energy "interfuse[s]" Nature and "rolls through all things" (102). It "anchor[s] . . . [his] purest thoughts," guards his "heart," and is the "soul of his moral being" (109-11). To some extent, this force or energy of "Tintern Abbey" is ostensibly the same one in The Prelude that chastises Wordsworth for robbing other people's bird snares and for borrowing the boat. "Nutting" also targets Nature's moral quality, presenting it as a "spirit in the woods" (56) that teaches us to treat Nature kindly because it is alive in a way beyond the empirical bounds that Oates and Gould concede.

Although his topic is not Wordsworth, Edward Abbey, when pondering the difficulty of discerning the “spiritual appeal” of the desert (300), epitomizes the dilemma Wordsworth faces. Abbey presents the problem as one of

confusing the thing observed with the mind of the observer, of constructing not a picture of external reality but simply a mirror of the thinker. Can this danger be avoided without falling into an opposite but related error, that of separating too deeply the observer and the thing observed, subject and object, and again falsifying our view of the world? There is no way out of these difficulties . . . (300)

In Abbey’s terms, Wordsworth questions whether or not he has confused the thing observed with his own mind. In holding forth the possibility for both participation and for projection and being unable to discriminate one from the other, Wordsworth would seem to anticipate the modern condition.

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