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William Wordsworth's Concept of Poetic Diction

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ABSTRACT

Wordsworth is led to a consideration of the poetic art itself. But here, too, he is not quite clear in his assertions. To begin with, he defines good poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', in which case there is no difference between it and the song of Shelley's Skylark that also pours his full heart In profuse strains of unpremeditated art, but if it is only this, how is it that it comes to be clothed 'in a selection of language really used by men', with meter superadded thereto, for no sudden rush of emotions can leave a poet any leisure for these? Wordsworth makes no attempt to explain the anomaly, but modifies the statement later in the preface. This paper focuses on the concept of poetic style of William Wordsworth.

Wordsworth was dragged into criticism in spite of himself. For neither by temperament nor by training, was he qualified to be a critic. Nor was his upbringing in the beloved lap of Nature that bred an indifference to books, at all conducive to a critical frame of mind. Had his share of the Lyrical Ballads, published by him and his friend Coleridge in 1798, not been violently attacked by the neo-classical critics of the Edinburgh and the Quarterly Reviews, it is doubtful whether he would have penned a single line of criticism. As it is, he had to take the field in sheer self-defense, however, where he not only made the issue more confounded, but, unwittingly, proved the opponents' point more than his own. The chief of his critical papers is the preface to the second edition of the Lyrical Ballads dated 1800, which was revised and enlarged in the subsequent editions of 1802 and 1815. The revision and enlargement, also included an Appendix to the edition of 1802 and an Essay Supplementary to the Preface to the edition of 1815. In all of them Wordsworth's subject is poetic diction and his view of poetry, which from their original enunciation in the Preface of 1800 undergo considerable modification in the others. The work, it appears, was originally to have been made by Coleridge, who even made notes for it, but was eventually left to Wordsworth who incorporated some of those notes into it.

Neoclassical poetic Diction

The question of poetic diction or the language fit for poetry, which chiefly compelled Wordsworth to write his Preface, had also engaged the attention of the neo-classical and earlier writers. Spenser, thus, had preferred the archaic language to that in vogue in his day. Milton had, similarly, a predilection for the uncommon in word and phrase in his great works. Writers followed their own bent. It was left to the rule-loving critics of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to substitute this caprice or chance in the

selection of poetic language by the system. The great Roman orator Cicero had divided style into three categories; the low, used to proverb; the middle, used to please; and the high or lofty, used to move. Although the categorization originally applied to oratory, it proved no less useful in distinguishing the 'Kinds' Of poetry by their style. The elegiac thus used the low style, the pastoral the middle, and the epic the loft. The eighteenth century reduced these three categories to only two; the low and the loft. It summarily rejected low words and phrases as unfit for poetic use, thus, that is to say, which being in everyday use became too familiar to the ear and so lost all their power to impress. There was another variety of words, not covered by any of these categories which also Dr Johnson found unfit for poetic use- the technical ones which, though uncommon and therefore perhaps high, are too much so to be intelligible to any but the profession concerned. With these two exceptions, therefore, the low and the technical, poets were free to use any language they liked. This, according to him and to the neo-classical critics in general, was the true poetic diction-a 'system of words at once refined from the grossness of domestic use, and free from the harshness of terms appropriated to particular arts'. It differed from the diction of prose by its 'happy combinations of words' or 'flowers of speech', plucked from the preamble of current forms of expression. Employed judiciously by gifted writers, it served its purpose well enough, but falling into the hands of mere versifiers, it soon degenerated into artifice. In their verses the devices employed to turn the commonplace into the grand personification, periphrasis, inversion, antithesis, Latinism appear bereft. Of all the graces found in those of the former. To illustrate the use of periphrasis only, the device most commonly resorted to, they turned shepherds into 'the rural race', a bright expanse of flowers in the fields into 'their flowery carpet', singing birds into 'gay songsters of the feathered train'. In this way poetry drifted away from natural expression altogether.

Wordsworth's Concept of poetic Diction

It was rather this abuse of poetic diction than perhaps poetic diction itself which Wordsworth originally disapproved. For in the Advertisement of the Lyrical Ballads of 1798 he stated that his object in adopting a simpler diction for his poems was merely 'to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society was adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure'. But when in spite of this modest apologia they were attacked mercilessly by conservative opinion, his tentative experiment turned into a definite concept. The publication of a second edition of the Lyrical Ballads in 1800 provided him with the occasion to explain it. His principal object in these poems, he says, 'was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men, and at the same time, to throw over them a certain colorings of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect.' Explaining why only low and rustic life was chosen for this purpose, he says that in that condition, free from all outside influences, men speak from their own personal experience and 'convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expression.' Such a language, therefore, than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets, who think that they are conferring honors upon themselves and their art in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle appetites of their own creation.'

From this he is led to attack the diction of the day. 'The reader,' he says, 'will find that personifications of abstract ideas rarely occur in these volumes; and are utterly rejected as an ordinary device to elevate the style and raise it above prose. My purpose was to imitate and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men; and, assuredly such personification does not make any natural or regular part of that language..... there will also be found in those volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction; as much pains has been taken to avoid it as is ordinarily taken to produce it..... to bring my language near to the language of men.' In poetic diction, besides the use of personification, Wordsworth includes 'phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of poets'.....periphrasis, inversion, antithesis, and other devices...and even those expressions, 'in themselves proper and beautiful', which were so frequently repeated by bad poets that they began to arouse disgust rather than pleasure.

Finally, Wordsworth points out that as a natural corollary to his concept of poetic style the language of poetry cannot differ materially from that of prose: 'that not only the language of a large portion of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to the meter, in no respect differ from that of good prose, but likewise that some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose, when prose is well written.' As an instance, he cites some lines, the only ones he considers valuable, from Gray's sonnet *On the Death of Richard West* which, in spite of that poet's insistence on the difference between the language of poetry and prose, are hardly different from what they would be in prose; such as the concluding two:

I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,
And weep the more because I weep in vain.

Whence Wordsworth is led to conclude, 'that there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition.' To the possible objection that meter itself constitutes a distinction between the two and that therefore there are other distinctions equally valid, such as those of diction, Wordsworth replies that he is only recommending 'a selection of the language really spoken by men' and 'that this selection, wherever it is made with true taste and feeling, will of itself form a distinction far greater than would at first be imagined, and will entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life; and if meter be superadded thereto, I believe that a dissimilitude (i.e. Distinction) will be produced altogether sufficient for the gratification of a rational mind.' It is as much as to admit that there is a distinction between the language of poetry and that of prose or 'the very language of men', which was Wordsworth's original object, and that the distinction lies not only in metre but also in the choice of words and phrases, which in the case of poetry must be made 'with true taste and feeling'. Not only this: Wordsworth even admits the possibility of what Johnson called 'flowers of speech' arising in the process: 'for, if the poet's subject be judiciously chosen, it will naturally, and upon fit occasion, lead him to passion the language of which, if selected truly and judiciously, must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures,' how, then, with the vulgarity added to it by metaphors and figures, is Wordsworth's concept of poetic diction in any way different from that against which he protest? Is not the prodigal son back home, again, after all his wanderings? 'Wordsworth', as Rene Wellek says, 'actually ends in good neoclassicism.' His poetic practice 'doth the same tale repeat'. His greatest poems..... *Tintern Abbey*, the *Immortality Ode*, the *Solitary Reaper*, and others too numerous to mention.....are not written 'in a selection of language really used by men'. But this is not to deny that a good part of Wordsworth's poetry, of 'incidents and situations from common life,' does succeed nobly in the language advocated in the *Advertisement of 1798*. Which all comes to this; that there is a class of poetry for which such language is certainly suited, and that neo- classical opinion only showed its inherent narrow mindedness in not judging it on its merits. And from this initial mistake on its part Wordsworth, as uncritical as his assailants, was led to overstate the possibilities of his own concept of poetic diction.

His concept of Poetry

From a consideration of the language of poetry, Wordsworth is led to a consideration of the poetic art itself. But here, too, he is not quite clear in his assertions. To begin with, he defines good poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', in which case there is no difference between it and the song of Shelley's *Skylark* that also pours his full heart in profuse strains of unpremeditated art,

But if it is only this, how is it that it comes to be clothed 'in a selection of language really used by men', with meter superadded thereto, for no sudden rush of emotions can leave a poet any leisure for these? Wordsworth makes no attempt to explain the anomaly, but modifies the statement later in the preface in this way: 'I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on.' It will be noticed here that though 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and 'emotion recollected in tranquility' are the very opposite of each other--- the one

coming on a sudden, the other deliberately recalled to memory ---words worth makes no difference between the two and endeavors to explain the one by the other. Did he mean the same thing by the two? If he did, as appears from this elucidation of the first statement by the second, his meaning in the first seems to have been that poetry 'is the final product' of the 'unforced' overflow of powerful feelings. For it is only by some such interpretation that these two opposed statements can be reconciled. That his second statement is the more considered one and explains his meaning more truly is plain enough. For his own great poems were composed in the way therein set forth. A moving sight---say the solitary reaper or the daffodils-----was seen during a walk, stored in the memory, and recalled in moments of calm contemplation as nearly as possible till it overpowered the mind completely, driving contemplation thence. So this is how poetry originates in emotion been aroused of itself in the beginning, there would have been no recollection in tranquility, and the last their expression in poetry. That by spontaneity in poetry, Wordsworth did not imply a complete rejection of workmanship, or artlessness, is borne out by his own practice. For the ever composed his poems with the greatest care, not trusting his first expression which he often found detestable. 'It is frequently true of second words as of second thoughts,' he wrote to Gillies, 'that they are best.' Nor is the principle of spontaneity in poetic composition advocated anywhere else in the foreface except in that solitary phrase. Here, too, therefore Wordsworth is not so revolutionary in his concepts he appears.

He also considered the function of poetry. It is not sheer self-expression, as its 'spontaneous overflow' might suggest. It stands or falls by its effect on the reader. For the poet 'is a man speaking to men': apart from them his song is a mere voice in the wilderness. His over-all object is, no doubt, pleasure, but it is a pleasure in which the moral gain far outweighs the aesthetic. The latter chiefly arises from the poet's way of saying things and from his use of meter or rhyme which, with their pleasurable recurrence, make even pathetic situations and sentiments painless. The moral consists partly in the refinement of feelings which true poetry effects, partly in the knowledge of 'Man, Nature, and Human Life' which it conveys, and partly in its emphasis on whatever makes life richer and fuller: 'Truth, Grandeur, Beauty, Love, and Hope-----

And melancholy, fear subdued by Faith'.

As the poet is possessed of a greater power to feel and to express his feelings than other men, he has a ready access to the reader's heart; and as his feelings are saner, purer, and more permanent than can be aroused by the same objects in other men, the reader is induced to feel the poet's way in the same situation and even in others. He emerges sander and purer than before.

Next, poetry is the pursuit of truth--- of man's knowledge of himself and the world around him. Science is engaged in the same pursuit, too, but while the truths it discovers benefit us only materially, the truths of poetry 'cleave to us as a necessary part of our existence', for they concern man's relation to man, on the one hand, and his relation to the external world of Nature, on the other, both illustrated in 'incidents and situations from common life', as in the Lines Written in Early Spring where while man harms man, the world of Nature, where everything is happy, caters for his hourly delight. It is an instance of unpleasant truth, no doubt, but in the context of its 'overbalance of pleasure' in Nature, its sum total is a pleasure. While the pursuit of science pleasure of the few who know science. Nor, being purely the product of the 'meddling intellect', are they 'felt in the blood, and felt along the heart', as the truths of poetry are. 'Poetry (therefore) is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science'.

Finally, poetry is a great force for good. Wordsworth's own object in writing poetry was 'to console the afflicted: to add sunshine to daylight by making the happy happier; to teach the young and the grace of every age to see, to think, and feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous'. From this he drew the general conclusion that 'every great poet is a teacher; I wish to be considered either as a teacher or as nothing'. This is also what Plato, with whom Wordsworth has much in common, wanted poetry to be but as the latter everywhere insists on pleasure as being a necessary condition of poetic teaching, he may be said to follow Horace more than Plato. But so far as teaching alone is concerned, words worth, in a famous passage concerning his own poems, seems to echo the very sentiments of Plato; 'they will cooperate with the benign tendencies in human nature and society, and will, in their degree, be efficacious in making men wiser, better, and happier.' In the preface these benign tendencies are defined as 'relationship and love' which it is the great

function of poetry to promote. But they are to be induced through a purgation of feelings rather than through a mere appeal to the intellect or good sense. This is what distinguishes Wordsworth's concept of teaching from that of his neo-classical predecessors.

The value of his Criticism

Whether in his attack on poetic diction or in his judgment of poetry by its appeal to the emotions, Wordsworth opposed the neo-classical practice of judging a work of art by the application of tests based on ancient models. These tests could at the most judge the external qualities of the work—its structure, diction, meter, and the like. A work might be flawless in all these and yet fail 'to please always and please all'. It may please the critic intent on looking for these niceties in it, but what about the reader whose only test of literary excellence –and came to the conclusion that it lay neither in a particular diction nor in a particular mode of writing. It lay rather in the healthy pleasure it afforded to the reader; and this may arise much from the use of common language as from the writer's individual mode of writing as from that laid down by neoclassicism. What Wordsworth says in this connection of the style of his Lyrical Ballads applies equally to his general poetic practice: 'I am well aware that others who pursue a different track may interest him likewise; I do not interfere with their claim, I only wish to prefer a different claim of my own.' This is actually all that he meant in the Preface and all that Romanticism means too. It is an application of the common principle of 'live and let live' in the sphere of letters.

Wordsworth also saw that neoclassicism made no provision for originality of genius and seldom judged it on its merits.

To sum up, it can be said that William Wordsworth's sentiments towards nature can be easily distinguished from other poets. He did not bring before the wild view point of nature. It was his exceptional quality to involve himself, not with the odd distant aspects of earth and sky, but nature in its common every day mood. He did not identify the bad sides of nature. He emphasized upon the moral impact of the nature and the requisite of human spiritual converse with the nature.

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