

UDC 821.111.09 Wordsworth, W.

Original scientific paper

Received on 30 September 2011

Accepted for publication on 15 November 2011

## Wordsworth's Crisis of Imagination

Martina Domines Veliki

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Zagreb

mdomines@ffzg.hr

The article departs from an assumption that in writing *The Recluse* Wordsworth wanted to present a single man's life within the conventions of the classical epic thus elevating the genre of autobiography to the highest aesthetic status. His autobiographical endeavour is the result of secularization of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious autobiographies grounded in the narrative of confession and conversion based on the literary models of Rousseau's and St. Augustine's *Confessions*. In writing about his life Wordsworth aspires to truth as the highest standard and he wants to traverse the trajectory of his life in order to discover the amplitude of his mind, the importance of his vocation as a poet. Thus, his autobiography is above all an act of self-interpretation in which he becomes entangled in the logocentric worldview believing in the ability of written language to recuperate the emotions found in the speech of ordinary men and the innocence of childhood experiences. The poet has two tools to help him out on his way to the past: memory and imagination. Where memory leaves lacunae in the poet's sense of the self, imagination is there to draw on an infinitely repeatable 'I am'. Imagination accounts for the affirmative self and the positive sublime arising from the poet's feeling of unity with nature. However, the forms of nature are capable of negating the mind, emptying it of all self-awareness, thus creating a poet of solitary, apocalyptic scenes. These two romantic selves, the affirmative and the negative one, meet in Wordsworth and they account for the tension in his poetry.

Matthew Arnold, one of the Victorian sages, largely responsible for the way in which Wordsworth would henceforth be perceived as a poet rather than a philosopher<sup>1</sup>, spoke about him in terms of a simple, affirmative poet of elementary

---

<sup>1</sup> In his Preface to *Golden Treasury Selection*, Arnold tells his readers that Wordsworth, the philosopher, is a sham but Wordsworth, the poet, stands next to Shakespeare and Milton. Coleridge would have disagreed with Arnold. His knowledge of the unpublished *Prelude* led him to consider *The Recluse* as "the first and only true philosophical poem in existence". (see John Jones. *The Egotistical Sublime: A History of Wordsworth's Imagination*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1970, p. 1)

feelings, essential humanity and vital joy. In his view Wordsworth's name deserves to stand next to the names of Shakespeare and Milton because he sticks to his subject and represents life as a whole. His poetry is the reality: it delivers poetic truth and teaches us how to live (Arnold 141). His language and style, Arnold says, are those of "the most plain, first-hand, almost austere naturalness. His expression may often be called bald [...] but it is bald as the bare mountain tops are bald, with a baldness which is full of grandeur." (159). Wordsworth felt himself to be a chosen son and as he explained in Book III of *The Prelude*: 'I was not for that hour/ Nor for that place' (ll. 80-81). He believed himself to be a successor of Milton and wanted to write an epic poem larger in proportion than Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Just as Milton specifies his subject and his theme, measures it against the traditional epic subjects and justifies his fitness for his task by invoking divine inspiration, so does Wordsworth adapt Milton's argument to his own poetic endeavour (Abrams 1971: 23). He announces the genesis of *The Recluse*<sup>2</sup> with the words 'On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life, Musing in solitude...' (Preface to *The Excursion*, ll. 1-2) hoping for a poem of outstanding epic proportions and in that sense aimed at surpassing his notable predecessor. He does not explicitly set forth his version of a fall and a loss of Eden but instead, he wants to create an earthly paradise, transferred from a supernatural to a natural frame of reference. Thus the mind of man becomes a central locus of poetic exploration, its heights and depths embody heaven and hell – the battle of Milton's religious epic is transposed into the poet's inner self. In this sense Wordsworth echoes Milton's own phrasing: 'The mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n' (*Paradise Lost*, Book I, ll. 254-5).

Up to the romantic age the Biblical history became a metaphoric vehicle for the conflicts and states of individual minds in the course of their experience on earth (Abrams 1971: 52). In his *Proverbs of Hell* William Blake could thus affirm that 'All deities reside in the human breast' (Plate 11) while Wordsworth proposed himself the task of exploring the human mind. Thus Wordsworth self-consciously announces his 'heroic argument':

"Of Genius, Power,  
Creation and Divinity itself  
I have been speaking, for my theme has been  
What pass'd within me...  
This is, in truth, heroic argument."  
(*The Prelude*, book III, 171-82)

Wordsworth's heroic argument meant that he had to invent a mythology for himself, a mythology that necessarily comprises a return to the past, the search for the blissful time at the beginning. The plot-form of a romantic narrative thus becomes that of a circuitous yet progressive self-education.

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Recluse* consists of *The Prelude*, Book I of Part I (*Home at Grasmere*), Part II (*The Excursion*) and none of Part III. All we are left with is the prelude to the main theme and an excursion from it.

For the eighteenth century poets like Thomson, Cowper or Akenside the 'I' was not a self-shaping force, revealing one's own subjectivity in all its multifarious occurrences. Now, with Wordsworth the poem finally has a subject – the 'I' traces the growth of the poet's own mind. Thus, what Wordsworth attempts to do in *The Prelude to The Recluse* is to present a single man's life within the conventions of the classical epic, thus elevating the genre of autobiography to the highest aesthetic status.<sup>3</sup> When an epic in the classical sense meets autobiography in the modern sense, the myth of origins of the cosmos or a nation is transposed into a personal myth of origins. Yet, in Wordsworth there exists uncertainty about the personal original moment. He would ask after all "How shall I seek the origin?", or in other words, is it possible to revive those parts of ourselves which we have only in our memory. Could memory retrieve our past or do we embellish our childhood moments with imagination? Therefore, like Rousseau's *Confessions*, *The Prelude* is a 'crisis autobiography', as M. H. Abrams argued, and as such it is the result of secularization of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious autobiographies grounded in a narrative of confession and conversion based on the literary model of St. Augustine's *Confessions*.

St. Augustine ascribes importance to his childhood memories and his life experiences point to an unstable self. Already with Augustine seemingly trivial incidents become representative moments in the growth of a personality and he is a modern figure in the sense that he is trying to figure out how God resides in him; he is aware of his own psychological depth in which good and evil fight continually. Furthermore, his account of a solitary journey through memory to self-renewal is strongly reminiscent of the trajectory Wordsworth was to pass in *The Prelude*<sup>4</sup>. He based the construction of the self upon a genetic, teleological

---

<sup>3</sup> Yet, the poet's own affective state and the creative operations of his mind find their major outlet in the lyric, the essential romantic poetic genre. There are several important reasons why British Romanticism has been primarily associated with the lyric rather than other literary genres. When Wordsworth announced that all good poetry was 'a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', the lyric, as a poetic form, becomes more highly valued than an epic or a tragedy. Up to the beginning of the eighteenth century the lyric had a lowly status in the scales of genres and the expression of a poet's feelings was considered neither to be important nor desirable. Its appraisal in the romantic age comes with the new re-evaluation of the 'trivial' and the 'banal' where to be among the English poets was a just ambition for the marginalized and deprived social classes who also had something to say. The notable example is that of John Keats who, being the son of a livery stable owner, could hope for social mobility on account of being a poet. One must not forget that there existed a sustained tradition of poets in Britain and it became synonymous with the desire to preserve a unique national heritage. Poetry in the romantic age is gradually lifted to a plane transcending its restrictive elements and it becomes expressive of British culture. (See Stuart Curran: "Romantic Poetry: Why? And Wherefore?" in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, pp. 216-236, see also M. H. Abrams 'Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric')

<sup>4</sup> St. Augustine's influence on romantic autobiography was huge and we know that Coleridge had a complete edition of Augustine's *Works* and was pioneering a revival

model which establishes three developmental stages of consciousness: that of a child who experiences the external world and his own being as one, the growing self-consciousness of a schoolboy and finally, the self-conscious philosophic mind which becomes the counterpart of nature's own creative power.

For Wordsworth's autobiographical endeavour, as for Rousseau's before him, 'truth' remains the highest standard towards which he aspires, 'truth' to discover is personal but the more so universal:

"Then, last wish –  
My last and favorite aspiration – then  
I yearn towards some *philosophic song*  
*Of truth* that cherishes our daily life,  
With meditations passionate from deep  
Recesses in man's heart, immortal verse  
Thoughtfully fitted to the Orphean lyre; (...)"  
(*The Prelude*, book I, 227-233, emphasis mine)

This 'truth' to be revealed through writing is personal but it is also a shared 'truth' which everyone can endorse – here is where autobiography meets the epic; the individual thus transcends both social and historical difference, each individual possesses a unique selfhood which is also the expression of a universal human nature. This is because autobiography is by no means only a personal matter; the 'self' expressed in Wordsworth's texts has a universal significance. The same is true of Rousseau's confessional narrative: by stating that he alone dares to do what no other man has ventured before him, telling the truth about his own self, Rousseau makes himself both unique and universal at the same time.

Thus both Wordsworth and Rousseau undertake a search for some ultimate wisdom, a universal truth that can inform their autobiographical narratives. While St. Augustine derived self-knowledge from a prior, revealed knowledge of universal truths, Rousseau and Wordsworth took the opposite course; they derived 'general truths' from self-knowledge, elevating individual feeling and reason to the status of eternal principles. For them all search for truth had to begin with individual experience. They proposed themselves a difficult task of being responsible for what they did only to their own selves. In the absence of an actively received myth, of God as the final arbiter of truth, their art had to bear the entire weight of having to transcend these inherited tendencies.

Yet, Wordsworth does not want to preach, like Augustine does, nor parade his knowledge about the universe, like Montaigne does, nor is he concerned with the

---

in Augustinian studies after the neglect of the eighteenth century. These works were available to Wordsworth and the two poets must have discussed Augustinian theology. Coleridge also gave the collection to Wordsworth when he left Grasmere for London in the late 1790s. (On Augustinian influence upon Wordsworth's ascent of Mount Snowdon see Hill, Alan G.: "The triumphs of Memory: Petrarch, Augustine, and Wordsworth's Ascent of Snowdon". *Review of English Studies* (Oxford) (57:229), 2006. pp. 247-258)

ruses of self-presentation, as Rousseau is; he only wants to traverse the trajectory of his life to discover the amplitude of his mind, the importance of his vocation as a poet (in Keats's phrasing, he is concerned with his own 'egotistical sublime'<sup>5</sup>). Writing for Wordsworth is a discovery of life, an act of self-interpretation, it is not an attempt at the vindication of a life. There he mostly resembles John Bunyan's autobiographical subject in *Grace Abounding* where his main inclination is towards interpretation of his own actions rather than their presentation. Tempted to deny Christ in a situation when the believer feels most secure, the autobiographical subject inclines towards a resolution of the hermeneutic dilemma that his actions once created and that his narrative now revives as a text (Peterson 9). Yet, unlike Wordsworth, he as interpreter is quite passive because the interpretation comes to him rather than he upon the interpretation (Peterson 9).

However, Wordsworth could be said to repeat Rousseau's project in an important way: he trusts the ability of written language to recuperate the feelings and emotions found in the speech of ordinary men. In "...That Dangerous Supplement" Derrida warns us about Rousseau's condemnation of writing as destruction of presence and as disease of speech (142). Paradoxically enough, he has to rehabilitate writing in order to recapture speech, or rather the pleasure and feelings that one feels in listening to authentic speech. In Rousseau's own words:

But when it is a question of moving the heart and enflaming the passions, it is an altogether different matter. The successive impression of discourse, striking with repeated blows, gives you a very different emotion from the presence of the object itself, which you have seen completely with a single glance. Assume that someone is in a painful situation which you know perfectly well: you will not be easily moved to cry in seeing the afflicted person, but give him time to tell you everything he feels, and soon you will burst into tears. (*Essay on the Origin of Languages*, 291)

Rousseau is thus an exemplary of the West's logocentric metaphysics since he starts from a new model of presence: the subject's self-presence within consciousness of feeling that has to be recaptured in writing (Kamuf 23). As Derrida showed, Rousseau's own texts provide the strongest evidence against his alleged writing since what is designated as a moment of presence always has to posit another, prior moment and so implicitly loses its privileged status as a point of origin (De Man 1983: 115).

When Wordsworth writes the famous Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) he trusts the power of language to present incidents and situations from common life:

---

<sup>5</sup> In *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats launches a critique of the 'Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime' describing the exemplary poetical character as intelligence without identity: "it is not itself – it has no self – it is everything and nothing – it has no character." (as cited in Thomas Weiskel. *The Romantic Sublime*, p. 51)

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; (...). (447)

In Derrida's phrasing, Wordsworth belongs to the same 'logocentric' logic of Western thinking because he strives to appropriate being, in the form of passions, of truth, of authenticity, of nature etc. which all exist among the inhabitants of the remoter rural areas of Lake District. His writing, which is at once individual and universal, tries to restore presence or the point of origin. As in Rousseau's case, the system of valorization that organizes his writings praises childhood experiences, nature, the spontaneity of emotions, over their opposites and thus creates a philosophical system (De Man 1983: 116). Wordsworth's commitment to the language of ordinary people was a radical challenge to the perception of lower classes of society. He showed that such persons as beggars, old soldiers and mad or abandoned mothers could have normal human responses to extreme states of mental or physical distress. His democratic universalism relied heavily on the capacity of feeling and the capability of speech to retrieve it. If Rousseau was the first to inaugurate the new ontology of presence - the subject's self-presence within consciousness of feeling (Derrida 98) - Wordsworth was to do the same. He is not so much concerned with accuracy about the 'objective' data of his life; his feelings guide him through the inconsistencies of his memory. Scholars have long been aware that they could not rely on the factual validity of *The Prelude* and in consequence Wordsworth was charged with intellectual uncertainty, bad memory and bad faith. Enough has been said about the evolution of *The Recluse*, its minor growing parts and Wordsworth's decision to add the middle to his narrative: his experiences in London and in France.

Yet, for Wordsworth historical veracity is less important than the emotion experienced.<sup>6</sup> He attempted to present a unitary self that is maintained over time by the activity of memory and to show that this self or 'soul' is defined, not only by the body and its sensory experience but by the human mind, by the growth of consciousness. When in *The Prelude* he hopes to build up an entirely self-sufficient and self-generating self it is the kind of autonomous, individual self that has become one of the enduring myths of modern Western culture. However, the written self remains a metaphor in Wordsworth's writing and the crucial problems that relate to any autobiographical work, i. e., the uncertain relation between the self-as-lived and the self-as-imagined (the referential vs. the written self) pertain to his autobiographical project as well. It should therefore be pointed out that *The Prelude* is also, to a significant extent, performative, i.e. about the poet's self-creation.

---

<sup>6</sup> M. H. Abrams even proposes that the six years of working and reworking on *The Prelude* finally reveal a design inherent in his life which could become apparent only to his mature awareness and it could be considered as a principle which was operative from the very beginning. In other words, his whole autobiography is a system with a distinguishable supervising idea. (See M. H. Abrams: 'Natural Supernaturalism', p. 76)

Apart from the afore-mentioned defining elements of a romantic autobiography (its relationship to epic and confessional literature of earlier times and its immersion in the logocentric logic of Western metaphysics), two further elements need to be mentioned: memory and imagination.

As stated earlier in this paper the self-as-imagined would not have come alive if it were not for memory and imagination. Wordsworth must retrieve the seeds from which the mind and the poem he wrote grew. Through the growth of his mind he establishes a new identity composed of numerous 'scars'<sup>7</sup> that constantly resurge and reiterate themselves. Thus the signification of Wordsworth's text is lodged in the very "blanks and repetitions that mark and mask its cicatrix." (Ellmann 192). Wordsworth indeed often repeats the words as if he was craving for a certainty he could not locate. His 'not but' and 'cannot choose but' constructions point to the negativity of his language that undercut the representation of a single meaning (Bahti in Reed 90). And it is through these lacunae in the text that his identity tries to reconstitute itself.

Apart from memory, imagination is that 'quality sublime'<sup>8</sup> which becomes the most vital activity of the mind. If we wished to distinguish a single characteristic which differentiates the English Romantics from the poets of the eighteenth century, it is to be found in the importance which they attached to the imagination. For Pope and Johnson, as for Dryden before them, it has little importance and it has a limited significance. They admired the apt use of images but controlled by judgment and they wanted to express what is a common experience for men, not a personal experience interested in creating new worlds (they showed the attractions of the world that everybody was aware of, not experiences of something unfamiliar and unseen).<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to the eighteenth-century poets, Wordsworth's concept of imagination draws on an infinitely repeatable, narcissistic 'I am'<sup>10</sup>. Therefore

---

<sup>7</sup> I am here referring to Maud Ellmann's expression from her article "Disremembering Dedalus: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man".

<sup>8</sup> See 1815 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* where Wordsworth states that imagination "shapes and creates" and "in none does it more delight than in that of consolidating numbers into unity, and dissolving and separating unity into number – alternations proceeding from, and governed by, a sublime consciousness of the soul in her own mighty and almost divine powers." In *Selected Poems and Prefaces: William Wordsworth* edited by Jack Stillinger, pp. 485-6

<sup>9</sup> In his "An Essay on Criticism" Pope speaks about the necessity to restrain imaginative power: 'Tis more to guide, than spur the Muse's steed;/ Restrain his fury, than provoke his speed.' (ll.84-5). In his Preface to *Annus Mirabilis*, John Dryden believes wit and imagination to be one and the same thing: 'The composition of all Poems is or ought to be of wit, and wit in the Poet, or wit writing, (...), is no other than the faculty of imagination in the writer, which, like a nimble Spaniel, beats over and ranges through the field of memory, till it springs the Quarry it hunted after;(...)' (Dryden, Works, vol. 1, p. 53)

<sup>10</sup> This type of romantic identity is the precipitate of the Coleridgean 'secondary Imagination'. The locus classicus of Coleridgean poetics is found in Chapters IV, XIII and

when in his 1800 Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, he asks a simple question: 'What is a Poet?', he describes himself as a role-model for other poets to follow:

(...) a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and more tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him (...). (453)

Thus the poet, in Wordsworth's thinking, has the power to express what he thinks or feels, coloured by the promptings of his imagination, as he can be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present. Furthermore, the poet is entangled in the interplay of the present and the absent where the absent original experience must recuperate the lacunary present moment. In Maud Ellmann's words, he has to "decompose the present that the past composed: unwrite the hand that writes" (191).

In M. H. Abrams's opinion "Wordsworth discloses that in his account of the transactions of mind and nature, the protagonist had in fact been the power of his mind, so that what he has all along been narrating is the story of the birth, growth, disappearance, and resurrection of imagination" (1971: 118). The crisis narrated in *The Prelude* is the crisis of imagination and hence Wordsworth entitled the central Books XI and XII, on his crisis and recovery, "Imagination, How Impaired and Restored". Not only is imagination divine and in exercising it the Romantics partake of the activity of God, but it is also sublime – a matter of inner genius. Wordsworth believes himself to have the capacity to express vehement and inspired passions and the power to form great conceptions (Abrams 1960: 73). Other elements of the sublime to be found in romantic poetry, such as the use of figurative language, noble diction and elevated composition can be acquired by practice and art but the first two prerequisites are far more important since their sources are internal and possessed by a rare few. As Longinus himself stated: "Sublimity is the echo of a great soul".<sup>11</sup> In Longinus's treatment, sublimity is the product of an inspired moment of passion, rather than of cool and sustained calculation. The highest poetic quality would thus manifest itself in shorter passages or even a single sentence or phrase. Such short passages have an intensity by which the reader feels immediately suffused. They shock and illuminate thus

---

XIV of the *Biographia Literaria*. In Chapter XIII entitled "On the Imagination, or Esemplastic Power", Coleridge expounds his theory of imagination and makes a distinction between primary and secondary imagination. Poetry is the product of the secondary imagination, of the 'esemplastic power'- the unifying power which enables all the faculties to be brought into play simultaneously, each playing its proper part. Where Coleridge speaks about fancy and imagination as distinct faculties, Wordsworth fuses them into one but the essential activity of the infinite, narcissistic 'I am' together with imagination as an esemplastic power is preserved.

<sup>11</sup> Longinus: On the Sublime, see chapter IX.

transposing the interpreter into the state of *ekstasis*. Thus, the 'echo of a great soul' requires an interpreter who is alone capable of seeing it as the manifestation of a romantic selfhood. Such 'linguistic omnipotence' is the characteristic of what Thomas Weiskel termed the 'positive sublime'<sup>12</sup>. Such positive sublime moment happens when Wordsworth returns at dawn from a festive dance in Book IV of *The Prelude*, surrounded by the sublime morning and suddenly comes to know his vocation:

"The Sea was laughing at a distance; all  
The solid Mountains were as bright as clouds,  
Grain tintured, drench'd in empyrean light.  
(...)  
My heart was full; I made no vows, but vows  
Were then made for me; bond unknown to me  
Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,  
A dedicated Spirit."  
(IV, ll. 333-5; 341-4)

Here Wordsworth feels that he has been chosen by a power beyond his comprehension, he was lifted out of time and space. In this case his later consciousness, or ego, becomes aggrandized by the perceptual power of its former state (Weiskel 52). Wordsworth thus erects a positive theology of the self which is ever expanding, limited only by death or the failure of memory (Weiskel 52).<sup>13</sup>

The building up of romantic identity is not only a question of the subject's relationship to the past but also of its relationship to the outer world. Since imagination is seen as creative, as productive of the meanings and patterns poetry communicates, one of the initial questions to ask when confronted with romantic constructions of the self is how the romantic subject positions itself in relation to the objective world, to 'reality'. As Christoph Bode nicely put it, we should think about whether "the subject is conceived of as something that constitutes reality, or as something that, part of an objective reality, only registers patterns and meanings that are somehow 'out there'"<sup>14</sup>. This is the dichotomy that was

---

<sup>12</sup> It is a specific transformation of Burkean and Kantian sublime which joins together the poetic efforts of Coleridge and Wordsworth. In *This Lime-tree Bower My Prison* Coleridge represents the sublime as an emotional experience of spiritual fusion with the 'one Life within us and abroad', thus also insisting on the experience of a deep awe and a profound joy.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Weiskel's book is steeped in Kant and Kant is the basis for this formulation of the 'positive sublime'. Wordsworth possibly had access to Kant's thinking via Coleridge or De Quincey.

<sup>14</sup> In anticipating an answer to that question, Christoph Bode says that Romantics are deeply ambivalent and contradictory in this matter and that they would like to have it both ways. (see Christoph Bode: *Discursive Constructions of the Self*, p. 2)

already rendered problematic in Rousseau and further elaborated by Wordsworth and later romantics<sup>15</sup>. The problem instigates itself to the heart of descriptive, or nature, poetry since everything in it rests upon the representation of reality. Yet, two types of discourse are recognised in a descriptive poem: the plain record of facts as being consonant with reality and symbolic discourse which is usually seen as being dissonant with reality (Riffaterre 107). The two types of discourse meet in all Wordsworth's poems and account for Wordsworth's difficulty as a poet or as Geoffrey Hartman explained, his 'in-betweenness' (Hartman 1987: 135).

When it comes to Wordsworth's feelings of unity with nature, he should be seen as a poet of the affirmative self and the positive sublime. However, his 'in-betweenness' arises from a problematic consciousness that finds its counterpart in nature. Sometimes the poetic 'I' turns out to be embarrassed, too matter-of-fact, or naïve to the point of rendering his experience banal. In such moments the sublime experience does not vouchsafe the unity of consciousness and creates aporia in the poet's sense of self. The 'negative sublime'<sup>16</sup>, when the forms of nature negate the mind, emptying it of all self-awareness, is just as intensely Wordsworthian experience. The absorption of the poetic self into nature is never final and besides, the forms of nature 'have a passion in themselves'.

Thus, the essential part of the poet's consciousness is not just striving for unity but for a "yewernity"<sup>17</sup> where darkness plays a vital role:

"(...) Visionary power  
Attends the motions of the viewless winds,  
Embodied in the mystery of words:  
There, darkness makes abode, and all the host  
Of shadowy things work endless changes (...)"  
(*The Prelude*, Book V, 595-99)

---

<sup>15</sup> In fact, Paul de Man registers the same problem in his seminal essay 'The Rhetoric of Temporality': Is the priority given to the natural world, limiting the task of the mind to interpreting what is given in nature (as claims Abrams: 'The best Romantic meditations on a landscape, following Coleridge's example, all manifest a transaction between subject and object in which the thought incorporates and makes explicit what was already implicit in the outer scene') or is the priority over nature given to the poetic self? In other words, is romanticism a return to a certain form of naturalism after the forced abstraction of the Enlightenment (this return would be a nostalgic return to an unreachable past) or is it a form of subjective idealism?

<sup>16</sup> I am here referring to Thomas Weiskel's notion of the 'negative sublime' or as he says 'properly the natural or Kantian sublime' that he describes as the mode of sublime in which the absence of determinate meaning becomes significant

<sup>17</sup> "yewernity" is a word play devised by Hartman in his analysis of Wordsworth's poem "Yew-Tree" and since the poem is described as a ghostly ballad with dark undertones of the yews' longevity as opposed to man's mortality and final burial beneath these funerary trees, Hartman's pun can serve as a concept bringing together 'unity' and 'darkness'.

In this way Wordsworth hopes to achieve a 'higher' and potentially universal self.

After A. C. Bradley who insisted on tensions and paradoxes of Wordsworth's best writing, John Jones also combated the assumption that he was striving to express unity. In his Essay, Supplementary to the Preface of 1815, Wordsworth himself clearly stated that "in nature everything is distinct, yet nothing defined into absolute independent singleness" (404) thus expressing his desire to show solitude-in-relationship. There are in fact two Wordsworths that we are constantly faced with: the Wordsworth as a poet of natural blendings and healing interchanges and the second Wordsworth as a poet of solitariness/singleness and apocalyptic scenes. Imagination is the unifying force which blends the two Wordsworths together, yet, it is also the one which produces the gulf between the thinking subject and the object of contemplation.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, in *Home at Grasmere*, the feeling of union with natural objects is announced and imagination pours the modifying colours over all things. The infinite poetic 'I am' feels the motions of nature: the clouds, winds, breezes, water, sunbeams, shadows, butterflies, birds, all of them are joined together in a state of pure bliss. The poet feels liberty and pleasure at the sight of all this:

"(...) we have enough within ourselves,  
Enough to fill the present day with joy  
And overspread the future years with hope".  
(*Home at Grasmere*, 860-62)

This feeling of natural blendings and healing interchanges is later on replaced by the feeling that there exist powers of nature which are beyond the control of the individual soul. The power of the imagination is still strongly felt, but that power also exists independently in nature as in the famous ascent of Snowdon scene:

"The universal spectacle throughout  
Was shaped for admiration and delight,  
Grand in itself alone, but in that breach  
Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,  
That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodged  
The soul, the imagination of the whole."  
(*The Prelude*, XIII, ll. 60-65)

From the feelings of a subjective imposition of the human mind on the real world and the poet's position which favours the idea of a collaboration, we have moved on to the point where imagination is the power beyond the control of the human soul until in the very last instance, the world of imagination is entirely

---

<sup>18</sup> The critics like Harold Bloom in 'The Visionary Company', Paul de Man in his essay 'The Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image' and Geoffrey Hartman with his own "Synopsis – Via Naturaliter Negativa" have all pointed out that there exist fissures and gaps between the poetic subject and the world he observes.

rejected. Thus *The Excursion* proclaims the absolute self's happiness to reside in the life of peace, 'stability without regret or fear' (Book III, l. 391) but also in the withdrawal from the world of imagination. The characters of Margaret, the Solitary and the Solitary's wife become victims of a disordered hope which withdraws them from life:

"the innocent Sufferer often sees  
Too clearly; feels too vividly; and longs  
To realize the vision, with intense  
And over-constant yearning; - there - there lies  
The excess, by which the balance is destroyed"  
(Book IV, ll. 174-78)

The number of tragic stories inserted in the narrative, with 'death' constantly hovering in the air leave no space for hope and the joy of life that the reader feels in *The Prelude*.<sup>19</sup> As the Solitary in Book III sums up the argument of the poem:

"Night is than day more acceptable; sleep  
Doth, in my estimate of good, appear  
A better state than waking; death than sleep."  
(Book III, Despondency, p. 65)

Night, sleep and death terminate Wordsworth's trajectory from 'sad perplexity' of "Tintern Abbey" to the final feeling of loss in death.

The self is imaged positively in many ways during Wordsworth's autobiographical project: as capable of attaining its origins in childhood memories; as a circuitous path or journey that leaves home only to return; as gaining force through the union of mind and nature; etc. But each of these tropes has negative implications that are also figured in the poem: the original moment evades fixation, the circuitous path returns to its own beginning, the marriage of mind and nature must end with a divorce. The reader is faced with several different attempts at presenting a unitary self. Yet, when entrusted to the written language, this self seems to be evading fixation. After Wordsworth we can no longer perceive romantic identity as the result of a unified, autonomous subject. Rather, the concept of the Wordsworthian sublime, paired with imagination as a self-sustaining force, call for the revision of the romantic ideal of unity. It is through the act of writing that the self and the life, complexly intertwined and entangled, take on a certain form, assume a particular shape and image and endlessly reflect that image back and forth between themselves as between two mirrors. The gap between past and present remains inherent in romantic writing of the self which can never claim final stability.

---

<sup>19</sup> The only exception to that is the story of Margaret in Book I: the death of her infant baby and the departures of her husband and the elder son find her struggling with hope and the knowledge of her approaching death. It is the only story in *The Excursion* showing the indomitableness of a character's hope.

## References:

- Abrams, M. H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. London: Oxford University Press, 1960.
- . *Natural Supernaturalism – Tradition and revolution in Romantic Literature*. London: Oxford University Press. 1971.
- . "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric" in *Romanticism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* edited by Michael O'Neill and Mark Sandy, New York: Routledge, 2006. 197-224
- Arnold, Matthew. "Wordsworth" in *Selected Poems of William Wordsworth with Matthew Arnold's Essay on Wordsworth*. Edited by Harrison Ross Steeves. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company. 1922. 1-22
- Bahti, Timothy. "Wordsworth's Rhetorical Theft" in *Romanticism and Language* edited by Arden Reed, London: Cornell University Press, 1984.
- Blake, William. *Poems and Prophecies*. Edited by Max Plowman, London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc. 1939
- Bloom, Harold. *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. 1971.
- Bode, Christoph. "Discursive Constructions of the Self in British Romanticism". *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, No 51, August 2008, 1-11.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria* (Chapters XIII, XIV, XXII) in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, third edition, edited by Duncan Wu, USA, UK, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. 691-694
- Curran, Stuart ed. *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*. Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of grammatology*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- De Man, Paul. "The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau" in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1983. 102-141
- . "The Rhetoric of Temporality" in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1983. 187-228
- Dryden, John. "Preface to Annus Mirabilis" in *Essays of John Dryden*, Ed. P. Ker. London, Edinburgh, New York: University of Oxford. 1900. vol. 1. <[http://www.archive.org/stream/essaysjohndryde00drydgoog/essaysjohndryde00drydgoog\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/essaysjohndryde00drydgoog/essaysjohndryde00drydgoog_djvu.txt)> [Retrieved 15 June 2011]
- Ellmann, Maud. "Disremembering Dedalus: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man." *Untying the text*. Ed. Robert Young. Boston, London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981. 189 – 206
- Hartman, Geoffrey, H. *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*. London: Methuen. 1987.
- . "Synopsis – via naturaliter negativa" in *Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787 – 1814*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. 1964. 30-70
- Hill, Alan G.: "The triumphs of Memory: Petrarch, Augustine, and Wordsworth's Ascent of Snowdon". *Review of English Studies (Oxford)* (57:229), 2006. pp. 247-258

- Jones, John. *The Egotistical Sublime: A History of Wordsworth's Imagination*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1970.
- Kamuf, Peggy. *Signature Pieces: On the Institution of Authorship*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988.
- Longinus. "On the Sublime" chapters VII-IX. W. Rhys Roberts translation. <http://classicpersuasion.org/pw/longinus/desub002.htm>. Peithō's Web: Classic Rhetoric and Persuasion [Retrieved 10 April 2011]
- Milton, John. *Poetical Works*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983
- Peterson, Linda H.: "Introduction: The Hermeneutic Imperative" in *Victorian Autobiography – The Tradition of Self-Interpretation*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986, 1-28
- Pope, Alexander: "An Essay on Criticism" in *English Critical Texts: 16<sup>th</sup> Century to 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, edited by D. J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera. London: Oxford UP, 1963, pp. 111-131
- Riffaterre, Michael. "Interpretation and Descriptive Poetry: A Reading of Wordsworth's 'Yew-Trees'" in *Untying the Text: a Post-Structuralist Reader* edited by Robert Young. Boston, London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981. 103-132
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Confessions*. Translated with an Introduction by J. M. Cohen. London, New York, Victoria, Ontario, New Delhi, Auckland, Rosebank: Penguin Books Ltd., 1965.
- . *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau (Vol. 6)* edited by Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly. Hanover and London: Dartmouth College. 1990. pp. 289-332
- St. Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by J. G. Pilkington. New York: Liveright Publishing Corp. 1943
- Weiskel, Thomas. *The Romantic Sublime*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976
- Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*. edited by Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, Stephen Gill. London and New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979.
- . *The Excursion*. London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co.; Windemere: J. Garnett, 1856
- . *Preface to the Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads (1800)* in *Selected Poems and Prefaces: William Wordsworth* edited by Jack Stillinger. Boston. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965. pp. 445 – 468
- . *Essay, Supplementary to the Preface (1815)* in *Selected Poems and Prefaces: William Wordsworth* edited by Jack Stillinger. Boston. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965. pp. 471 – 481
- . *Preface to the edition of 1815* in *Selected Poems and Prefaces: William Wordsworth* edited by Jack Stillinger. Boston. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965. pp. 482 – 489

## WORDSWORTHOVA KRIZA IMAGINACIJE

Članak polazi od pretpostavke da je pišući *Pustinjaka* Wordsworth želio prikazati svoj život unutar okvira klasičnog epa, pridajući tako autobiografskom žanru najviši estetski status. Njegov je autobiografski pokušaj rezultat sekularizacije religijskih autobiografija iz sedamnaestog i osamnaestog stoljeća kojima je temelj ispovjedna proza nastala prema modelu Rousseauovih i Augustinovih *Ispovijesti*. Pišući o svom životu Wordsworth se podvrgava istini kao najvišem standardu i želi ponovno proći svoj životni put kako bi otkrio veličinu vlastitog uma, tj. značenje vlastitog pjesničkog poziva. Tako se Wordsworthova autobiografija nadaje kao čin interpretacije ukotvljen u logocentrički pogled na svijet jer on vjeruje u mogućnost jezika da povrati snagu osjećaja koji proizlaze iz govora običnih ljudi te snagu nevinosti dječjih iskustava. Na svom putu prema prošlosti pjesnik se okreće sjećanju i imaginaciji. Tamo gdje sjećanje ostavlja praznine u izgradnji pjesničkoga jastva, imaginacija će posegnuti za beskrajnim, opetovanim 'ja sam'. Imaginacija tako izgrađuje pozitivno pjesničko jastvo i iskustvo pozitivno sublimnog koje izrasta iz osjećaja jedinstva pjesnika i prirode. Međutim, priroda može i negirati um, isprazniti ga od osjećaja postojanosti, stvarajući tako pjesnika osamljenih, apokaliptičnih scena. Ta se dva romantička jastva, pozitivno i negativno, spajaju u Wordsworthu i stvaraju tenziju u njegovoj autobiografskoj poeziji.

*Key words:* autobiography, self-interpretation, logocentrism, memory, imagination, positive and negative sublime

*Ključne riječi:* autobiografija, interpretacija sebstva, logocentrizam, sjećanje, imaginacija, pozitivno i negativno sublimno

