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Complexities of Voice in the Poetry of William Wordsworth

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The question of language in Wordsworthian criticism focuses today on the description of the difference within and between written and spoken discourses. Though Wordsworth was fascinated with all kinds of written language, he is also a poet of speech, "a man speaking to men" (1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*) with "another ear" for the sounds and voices around him. The multifarious occurrences of sound/voice, as metonymic images of speech, do not serve only as a backdrop to Wordsworth's expression of the self but are a dynamic force shaping and affecting the "I" of the poet. This paper looks at some of the greatest Wordsworth's poems such as *The Prelude*, the *Intimations Ode*, *Tintern Abbey*, *Resolution and Independence*, to see how the self grows from the child's silent reading of "the eternal deep", where his "mute dialogues" do not refer to the absence of voice but rather to "a communication, (...) a speech deprived of speech, language deprived of speaking" (Warminski 1987: 23) into the self of a poet-prophet hearing the voices to which others were oblivious – the voices of the poor and the oppressed in the heat of the French Revolution.

As early as 1800 in his famous Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth tells us that he needs a different kind of language in order to write. He wants to write "in a selection of language really used by men" (446), because "such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language (...)" (447). Critics from Coleridge onwards writing about Wordsworth's poetry and recognizing in the 1800 Preface the manifesto of a new type of diction for poetry¹ could not avoid speaking

¹ In the Appendix Wordsworth added in the 1802 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, 'poetic diction'





about Wordsworth's language, the very thing the poet himself believed to be central in conveying the incidents of common life and portraying the covenant between man and nature. In Matthew Arnold's view Wordsworth's name deserves to stand next to the names of Shakespeare and Milton because "his poetry is the reality: it delivers poetic truth and teaches us how to live" (Arnold 1924: 141). Arnold sees Wordsworth primarily as a moral poet whose language and style are those of "the most plain, first-hand, almost austere naturalness" (Arnold 1924: 141). Wordsworth's naturalness and his insistence that all good poetry is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (1800 Preface: 460) point to one of the central concepts of Romantic thought, that the artist himself becomes vital in the process of creation and his work of art becomes essentially the internal made external, "embodying the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts and feelings"², to use the words of Mayer Adams, one of the most influential post World War II critics of Romantic poetry.

The poet's natural genius, creative imagination and emotional spontaneity are the holy triad of best Romantic poetry to be conveyed through language, which raises the problem of how the self can be expressed by means of language. From de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1966) onwards language has become an issue impossible to avoid. Though structuralism proved to be an ill-suited framework for analyzing Romantic poetry with its claim that a text was a bearer of stable meanings and its acceptance of a finite, fixed structure, the structuralist vein of thinking also opened up new ways of dealing with language, as both spoken and written word, thus leading into Derrida's famous unsettling of the speech/writing dichotomy. From the 1970s onwards "the

is a derogatory term. There Wordsworth says that the first poets spoke the natural language, that of men, while the later Poets who, in wanting to emulate the figurative language of their predecessors, "set themselves to a mechanical adoption of those figures of speech, and made use of them, sometimes with propriety, but much more frequently applied them to feelings and thoughts with which they had no natural connection whatsoever" (465).

² Abrams, M.H. 1960. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. London: Oxford University Press. p. 22





question of language in Wordsworthian criticism no longer focuses on poetic diction but on the description of an essential “difference” within all language - “it is all about understanding the difference within and between written and spoken discourses” (Kneale 1986: 351). In the 1800 Preface Wordsworth puts great confidence into written words but later in his third *Essay upon Epitaphs* he writes:

“Language, if it does not uphold, and feed and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve.” (177)

He was indeed fascinated with all kinds of written language as can be seen from his *Essays Upon Epitaphs*, *Lines on the Naming of Places* and *Guide to the Lake District* where the act of naming, such as carving his own initials into stones, is a matter of passion. Yet, Wordsworth is also “a man speaking to men” and his fascination with speech, or voice as its metonymic image, is even more interesting. The aim of this paper is to look at the multifarious occurrences of sound/voice in Wordsworth’s poetry and to suggest that different forms of voice correspond to different possibilities of expressing the self.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge stated that empiricist philosophy³ suffered from “a despotism of the eye” (Coleridge in Abrams 1960: 160). The same could be said about Wordsworth’s poetry. It is above all the poetry of the senses and the critics have long regarded the sight as primary in conveying the poet’s original experience. Indeed, the eyes are for Wordsworth the major gates of perception, active participants in the constant dialogue between mind and nature. He knew that he was most effective when visualizing and evoking the scene he wanted to describe. In line with empiricist philosophy he believed in this constant interchange between

³ Empiricist philosophers of the time include John Locke, David Hume and David Hartley. Wordsworth was heavily influenced by their writings as they were the first to cast doubt on the unity of the self. Though he repudiated the Lockean concept of *tabula rasa*, Wordsworth agreed with some concepts of empiricist philosophy: its insistence on visual images, as replicas of the objects of sight, being the vital mental units; its claim that memory is a store-house of images moving in sequence across the mind’s eye in the same spatial and temporal order as in the original sense-experience etc.





the mind and the outer world, in which both thought and imagination are unified to modify sensation as much as sensation modifies the mind. *The Prelude*, being Wordsworth's poem about "the growth of the poet's mind", thus becomes the poem of someone whose perception was different:

Yes, I had something of *another eye*, (...)
(...) with *another eye*
I saw the quiet woodman in the woods,
The shepherd on the hills.
(1805 *Prelude*, Book IV, ll. 200-207, italics mine)

Being able to see with 'another eye' makes Wordsworth a poet. When he speaks about the things "half-heard and half-created", Geoffrey Hartman is convinced of the same mediatory role of the ear. Since the growth of the poet's mind begins the moment he is born it is interesting to recall some of Wordsworth's most well-known poems to see what he makes out of voice or rather, the absence of voice in early childhood.

Thus in the *Intimations Ode*⁴ we face the image of a child who, Wordsworth tells us, is the "best Philosopher" (110) and the "Eye among the blind" (111). We are immediately immersed in one of the central topoi of Wordsworth's poetry, his idea that a child possesses intuitive knowledge of truths that the adults he lives among have lost sight of and must struggle to regain. In his soul's immensity the little child lives in his own world, not yet yoked by custom and tradition. The Child is Father of the Man, as the epigraph to the poem says, because man's creative power depends on the ability to keep open the roads that lead back to childhood and because the child sees what a grown-up man cannot. Curiously enough this child is unhearing and silent. It has the power of "inner light" – the power to read the "eternal deep". The child's silence is a sign of a deeper understanding and of the creative life of the mind. It reads/deciphers the

⁴ Wordsworth's poem that appeared in *Poems in Two Volumes* under the title of *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*. The three shortened versions for the poem's name are *Intimations Ode*, *Immortality Ode* and the *Great Ode*, the first being used here for convenience.





things he knew before birth and here Wordsworth openly contradicts Locke's belief that our mind is a *tabula rasa* and that we come to this world in "utter nakedness". In a well-know analysis of the *Intimations Ode*, Cleanth Brooks explains that this passage is the high point of ironic qualification because the child who sees, does not know that he sees, and is not even aware that others are blind⁵. Although possessed of rare sight, the child blindly strives to forfeit it and become blind, as becoming "blind" is a matter of growing up. What Brooks fails to recognize in this very passage is the fact that the child's movement to blindness happens alongside his acquisition of the adult's language: this first imitation is fatal for the child because it results in "endless imitation":

Then will he fit his tongue
To dialogues of business, love, or strife;
But it will not be long
Ere this be thrown aside,
And with new joy and pride
The little actor cons another part,
(*Intimations Ode*, ll. 97-102)

The joy of the babe who "leaps up in his mother's arm" is replaced by the little actor's "joy and pride". As Helen Vendler explains, "if there is a centre of despair in the *Ode*, it comes in this oppressive tableau of socialization".⁶ First the child interiorly reads a text of the eternal deep that is at once illimitable and unfathomable and then he acquires the false speech of a little actor. Vendler claims that the child is a voiceless prophet because of the theological paradox crucial to the stanza:

"the child is both slave to his Immortality and the possessor of heaven-born freedom; he actively reads eternity but is passively haunted by the eternal mind, he is a philosopher who does not enunciate truths, but on whom truths rest."⁷

⁵ See Brooks, Cleanth. "Language of Paradox" *A Practical Reader in Contemporary Literary Theory*. edited by Peter Brooker and Peter Widdowson. London, New York, Toronto, Sydney etc: Prentice Hall/ Harvester Wheatsheaf. pp. 70-9

⁶ Vendler, Helen. 1978. "Lionel Trilling and the Immortality Ode", *Salmagundi*, 41, p. 75

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 76





Geoffrey Hartman also notices the prevalence of emphasis on “light” rather than “voice” in criticism on Wordsworth, although the metaphor of “inner voice” in many cases seems to be just as revealing on Wordsworth’s thought. The silent reading of the eternal deep is reminiscent of an important passage in book 1 of *The Prelude*, known as *the Blessed Babe passage*. Again we see the infant as an active agent of perception who “drinks in” sensations coming from the outer world. The infant is in fact, “creator and receiver both” and his mind is connected to the universe first through his mother and then through nature which takes over his mother’s place. There is a certain feeling of oneness with the universe and of the child’s participation in the external world’s creation. Therefore, the “unconscious intercourse” and “mute dialogues” that the child holds with his surroundings do not refer to the absence, the negation of sound but rather to “a communication, a language, *dia-logos*, deprived of speech – a speech deprived of speech, language deprived of speaking: mute”⁸, as Andrzej Warminski explains. When the child’s soul “claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul” by gathering “passion from his mother’s eye” (1805 *Prelude*, 241-43) he constitutes himself as a subject. In other words, “he identifies himself as a child of its mother by making a claim to the name of the mother” (Warminski 1987: 23). This act is a linguistic act since gathering passion from the mother’s eye is an act of reading, it is the blind imposition of love into the mother’s eye. As Warminski further states, “the child constitutes itself as an “I” by appropriating the “eye” of the mother”. He inscribes the eye/I in the face of the mother:

“The act that constitutes the mother as the mother – that puts her face together out of metonymically dispersed parts and elements (like the eye) – is also the act that, in a sense, mutilates her by using that face as a stage or a surface on which to play or inscribe the “I”.⁹

Wordsworth’s continuing attachment to the mother is dynamically present in his relationship with Nature and it is through this relationship that his self is being built and rebuilt repeatedly. The silencing of voice is

⁸ Warminski, Andrzej. 1987. “Facing Language” . *Diacritics* 17.4. p. 23

⁹ This linguistic act Warminski calls «catachresis» - the imposition of a name and a sense where there is none.





thus crucial for the poet's constitution of the "I". The inscription of the "I" in the face of the mother is possible only through "mute dialogues" with nature that will always remain a substitute love-object for Wordsworth the child. The paradox of the Blessed Babe passage lies in the fact that Wordsworth considers his mother's function to be precisely to effect the bonding between the child and the external world while, at the same time, he is conscious of the fact that nature will always be his second best.¹⁰ Mother's death becomes a necessity not because Wordsworth's mother really died before he was eight years old but because it is, as Warminski would say, "a linguistic necessity", one of those "necessary accidents of language"¹¹. Had she not died, the Wordsworth Baby could not have become an "I" and the Boy Wordsworth could not have become a poet. The oxymoron of the silent voice is there to effectuate the death of the Mother and the birth of the poet – the object has to die for the subject to be born.

Another important scene in book 5 of *The Prelude* known as the Winander Boy scene is worth taking into account. Here the relationship between the boy and the owls is established by means of voice and sound:

Uplifted, he as though an instrument
Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls
That they might answer him. And they would shout
Across the wat'ry vale, and shout again,
Responsive to his call, (...)
(The Prelude, V. ll. 397-401)

As Wordsworth tells us, it was a "concourse wild/ Of mirth and jocund din" (403-4) with redoubled "echoes wild" (402). An intimate and sympathetic contact is established between a human being and the forces of nature and nothing seems to be able to interfere in this exuberant

¹⁰ Cf. Hartman, Geoffrey. 1977. "A Touching Compulsion: Wordsworth and the Problem of Literary Representation." *The Georgia Review*, 31:2, Summer. p. 348

¹¹ Warminski, Andrzej. 1987. "Facing Language" . *Diacritics* 17.4, p. 23





exchange of sounds. Yet, a reversal happens the moment all possibility of communication is silenced. The voices and sounds of life turn into muteness as the prefiguration of death. Thus, the “pauses of deep silence” (405) shatter the perfect world in which the mind and nature reflect each other and prefigure the boy’s death, somewhat too abruptly stated in the second part of the scene. There we see the poet who repeatedly comes to the boy’s grave, stands in front of it and looks at it in silence. The relationship is established between the boy’s “pauses of deep silence” and the poet’s “mute” standing in the churchyard and we come to realize that the poet contemplates his own death. The power to anticipate is closely linked with Wordsworth’s power to remember and the structure of the scene, though seemingly retrospective, is in fact, proleptic.¹² In this case, silence or non-language prefigures the boy’s finality while the movement towards infinity can be realized only through the re-establishment of language.

In both, the Blessed Babe passage and the Winander Boy scene death becomes indissolubly linked to birth, thus affirming what Wordsworth said in the first of the *Essays upon Epitaphs*:

“Origin and tendency are notions inseparably co-relative. Never did a child stand by the side of a running stream, pondering within himself what power was the feeder of the perpetual current, from what never-wearied sources the body of water was supplied, but he must have been inevitably propelled to follow this question by another: Towards what abyss is it in progress?” (128)

The running stream becomes the proper emblem of a consciousness that is able to contain origin and end into a single awareness. Curiously enough, the most vocal forms of nature in Wordsworth’s poetry are the streams, waterfalls, rivers and lakes, something the critics would call *oral phallacy*, or the pervasive Wordsworthian notion that the voices of nature speak a language more profound than the language of books. One only has to remember “the sounding cataract” that “haunted me like a passion” of *Tintern Abbey*, the “noise of waters” from the beginning of *Resolution*

¹² Cf. de Man, Paul. 1993. “Time and History in Wordsworth” in *Romanticism* edited and introduced by Cynthia Chase. London and New York: Longman, p. 62





and *Independence*, “timely utterance” of the *Intimations Ode* or the roar of waters in the climactic Snowdon vision in *The Prelude*, to name just a few major poems that immediately come to mind.

Tintern Abbey is a miniature of the long poem Wordsworth never wrote, *The Recluse*, of which *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* would have been only parts. In this poem, Wordsworth comes to a full understanding of his poetic self in the renewed presence of a remembered scene. He learns the principle of reciprocity between the external world and his own mind¹³ and the story of reciprocity becomes the central story of his best poetry, which in itself is the illustration of “all the mighty world/ Of eye and ear, both what they half-create/ And what perceive” (106-8). As nature is there to offer “tranquil restoration” (31), the poet believes in its power to heal. What Wordsworth questions in this poem is his own changed self and the sounds around him register that change. We follow the movement from “the sounding cataract/ Haunted me like a passion” (77-8) to “and again I hear/ These waters, rolling from their mountain springs/ With a sweet inland murmur” (2-4). This is a poem about growing up from the mythic time when the boy’s “glad animal movements” (75) preceded any awareness of nature, to his adulthood when he hears “the still, sad music of humanity” (92) with a reverberating question: Will memory of the past joys and raptures in nature offer food for future years? Thus the meaningful sounds of nature that flow into the unintelligible “music” of urban life serve as a catalyst for Wordsworth’s questioning of the self and finally, his expression of doubt.

The pleasant “noise of waters” (7) from the beginning of *Resolution and Independence* turns into the leech-gatherer’s voice that the poet scarcely hears. A random encounter with this common man who gathers leeches to earn his living turns into one of Wordsworth’s “spots of time”.¹⁴ The

¹³ Cf. Bloom, Harold. 1971. “William Wordsworth” in *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, p. 132

¹⁴ Spots of time: a crucial phrase for Wordsworth’s autobiographical poems; it brings together the concepts of place and time. Various places that Wordsworth visited affected him in the past and they still strongly modify his consciousness, so strongly, in





man is a ghostly sight – he is bent double, his head is nearing his feet and yet, he has enormous dignity. His “utterance” sounds like “a stream scarce heard” (114) and he acquires a sort of archetypal value, being “like a man from some far region sent/ to give me human strength, and strong admonishment” (118-9). The importance of the encounter is unquestionable since “utterance” would reappear in the *Intimations Ode* and “admonishment” in the Blind Beggar episode of *The Prelude*. However, two questions remain: how is it possible that this immobile, ghostly figure speaks with chosen words and measured phrase “above the reach/ Of ordinary men” (102-3)? and why are his “lofty utterance” (101), and “stately speech” (103) meaningless to the poet, who cannot divide one word from another? Indeed, his monotonous, repetitive words have a mesmerizing effect upon the poet who experiences the recurrence of the very experience in the projected future time: “In my mind’s eye I seemed to see him pace/ About the weary moors continually” (136-7). Thus, as Geoffrey Hartman suggests, the unintelligible words of the old man become the more meaningful because they suggest an indefinitely extended action, or the potential of past experience to reshape the present and to affect the future.¹⁵ In other words, the failure of communication between the poet and the leech gatherer, best registered in the lines “My question eagerly did I renew/ How is it that you live, and what is it you do?” (125-6), should not be deemed as a failure at all. It is a visionary moment for the poet where the boundaries of time are dissolved when he realizes that the leech-gatherer is that figure of resolution and independence, a solitary figure with a firm mind, persevering in gathering leeches though

fact, that they are “places in his mind as well as in nature” (Hartman 1964: 211). They are also fixed points *in* time and creative *of* time, i.e. responsible for the growth of the poet’s mind. All scenes included in this paper, such as the Blessed Babe passage, the Winander Boy spot, the Blind Beggar scene, the poet’s acquaintance with the Leech-gatherer etc., belong to the “spots of time” scenes.

¹⁵ Hartman speaks about an after-image, or the possibility of the renewal or recurrence of a certain experience by including that possibility in the very structure of the experience, as in “I wandered lonely as a cloud”. See Hartman, Geoffrey. 1987. “Timely Utterance’ Once More.” *A Practical Reader in Contemporary Literary Theory*. edited by Peter Brooker and Peter Widdowson. London, New York, Toronto, Sydney etc: Prentice Hall/ Harvester Wheatsheaf. pp. 80 – 90





they are so hard to find. The poet's own fears about the future and the possible despondency and madness as his own final destiny, all vanish in the aftermath of this encounter and he gains new strength.

I want to turn back to the *Intimations Ode* for a moment to underline another important occurrence of sound/voice in that poem. This Great Ode, as a poem concerned with the ways of seeing and knowing, or to use Trilling's words "a poem about optics and epistemology" boils down to a spoken word – a "timely utterance". Critics have long struggled to figure out the meaning of that phrase, believing that without knowing what the "utterance" actually was, we will always miss the main point of the Ode. Trilling directly connects it with *Resolution and Independence* since both poems are autobiographical and written about the same time in 1802. In fact, Trilling believes that what the leech-gatherer "utters" gives the poet "relief" and Hartman adds that it is neither the only crux in the poem, nor the only mysterious phrase singled out by readers.¹⁶ Yet, if we try finding out what it means we must consider the major principle of the entire stanza. Hartman suggests the principle of echo. The stanza as a whole evokes a correspondence of breezes, sounds and feelings, where "the birds sing a joyous song" (19), "the young lambs bound/ As to the tabor's sound" (20-1) and "the cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep" (25). In Hartman's view "timely utterance" could be the three lines of the epigraph to the Ode¹⁷, or it could be a periphrasis for poetry in general, yet, what truly matters is "the sense of bond between mind and nature, of a responsiveness that overcomes the difference of speech and muteness, or articulate and inarticulate utterance" (Hartman 1987: 84). The Virgilian motto of the Ode (*Paulò majora canamus*) points to the question of poetic growth and maturation. Is Wordsworth then expressing the same

¹⁶ Hartman suggests that the phrases of importance are «fields of sleep», «thou best Philosopher», «thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears» etc. See Hartman, Geoffrey. 1987. "'Timely Utterance' Once More." *A Practical Reader in Contemporary Literary Theory*. edited by Peter Brooker and Peter Widdowson. London, New York, Toronto, Sydney etc: Prentice Hall/ Harvester Wheatsheaf. p. 81

¹⁷ The Child is Father of the Man/ I could wish my days could be/ Bound each to each by natural piety – the famous three lines are taken from 'Rainbow', the first poem in Wordsworth's cycle "Poems Referring to the Period of Childhood".





fear as in *Resolution and Independence* when he evokes Chatterton and Burns – the fear about the future and possible “despondency and madness”? Perhaps we will never be able to understand what this utterance is and Wordsworth’s “doctrine of the Logos” will remain caught up in the mystery. The mystery inherent in words could relate to the mystery of his best poetry: nature once gave the poet what he wanted but then, if he were immersed in nature again, would he find what he wanted one more time?

The Snowdon episode in book 13 of *The Prelude* was, according to Wordsworth’s own declaration, one of the several events vital in the growth of his mind and the recovery of his poetic spirits. On this mountain in Wales Wordsworth discovers the “fellowship of silent light/ With speaking darkness” – that which can only be perceived by an eye is represented as something potentially speaking:

(...) and from the shore
At distance not the third part of a mile
Was a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapour
A deep and gloomy breathing-place, through which
Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams
Innumerable, roaring with one voice
The universal spectacle (...)
(1805 *Prelude*, book 13, ll. 54-65)

Again we witness a scene where nature is “alive” and with the image of a “breathing place” we are almost at the origins of voice. Thus, the last book of the 1805 *Prelude* circles back to its point of departure – the poet standing beneath some rock “listening to the sounds that are/ The ghostly language of the ancient earth” (book 2, ll. 327-8). Wordsworth’s ability to drink in those sounds of nature and to hear nature’s “language” in childhood years will enable him later to speak that language as poetry. The “visionary power” is embodied in the mystery of words where “darkness makes abode” as Wordsworth says in book 5 of *The Prelude*. In other words, the poet’s visionary faculties will grow and this growth runs parallel to his ability to see and hear a separate presence in nature. “Nature is not a





universe of death that lives only from or within our life. It has a greatness commensurate to that in man: this greatness, this imagination is revealed on Snowdon" (Hartman 1964: 184). Just as it draws together the moon and the abyss in a continuous interchange, so does the scene break the dichotomy between light and sound, sound and silence. The crisis of the poet's "I" announced by the words 'chasm' and 'fracture' vanishes the moment the "I" widens to become aware of the "i" of nature, the "i" of the ear and even of the "i" of the eye, to use Hartman's wordplay on the two homophones.

There is a need in Wordsworth's poetry to create an authentic voice in nature, as if the voice of "a man speaking to men" must flow over into nature in order to be heard and understood. The voice, or rather the interplay of human voices or natural sounds corresponds to repeated attempts at writing the self, where language is the only link that could reintegrate past and present selves. In her analysis of the afore-mentioned Winander Boy scene, Mary Jacobus believes that "the naturalization of voice" serves to avert the threat of anarchy that voices bring with them. The closure of this gap between the past and present selves, Jacobus claims, would obliterate autobiography altogether. Yet, what happens if the poet encounters a voiceless human being, as is the case with the blind beggar in book 7 of *The Prelude*? According to de Man all Wordsworthian "figures of deprivation", whether they be maimed men, drowned corpses, blind beggars, or children about to die are figures of Wordsworth's own poetic self. He identifies *prosopopeia*, the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, as *the* trope of autobiography.¹⁸ This very trope posits the possibility of the entity's reply and confers upon it the power of speech. The blind beggar is one such voiceless entity who wears a written paper explaining his story:

(...) 'twas my chance
Abruptly to be smitten with the view
Of a blind beggar, who, with upright face,

¹⁸ See de Man, Paul. 1984. "Autobiography as De-facement" in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia UP





Stood propped against a wall, upon his chest
Wearing a written paper, to explain
The story of the man, and who he was.
The mind did at this spectacle turn round
As with the might of waters, and it seemed
To me that in this label was a type
Or emblem of the utmost that we know
Both of ourselves and of the universe,
And on the shape of this unmoving man,
His fixed face and sightless eyes, I looked,
As if admonished from another world.
(1805 Prelude, book 7, ll. 610-623)

The poet's sudden acquaintance with the blind beggar resembles that with the leech-gatherer and both figures become "admonishment" sent to the poet from afar. However, where the leech-gatherer would speak and the poet would not pay any attention to what he said, the blind beggar is mute but still a "speaking monument" (Kneale 1986: 352). In line with de Man's contention that autobiography is a process of figuration and disfiguration, manifest in the etymology of the trope's name (*prosopon poien*: to confer a mask or a face), the beggar first acquires a voice through the written label he wears upon his chest and then assumes a face – the poet's own face. In fact, his label is a written form of utterance that aspires to the innerness of voice and he is the embodiment of the discourse of autobiography as a process of self-reading.¹⁹ As Cynthia Chase explains, in the blind beggar, Wordsworth confronts an image of the autobiographical poet unable to read his own text. The entire scene becomes a metaphor for the autobiographical narrative full of interruptions and reprises or the impossibilities of writing the self and reading that same self. So Douglas Kneale is right when he suggests that *The Prelude* contains its own allegory of reading, consisting in the recurrent meetings of the poet with his own image.

¹⁹ Cf. Chase, Cynthia in Arden Reed (ed.) 1984. *Romanticism and Language*. London: Cornell UP





In portraying his childhood and young manhood, Wordsworth frequently lets us see him as a listener. The Boy of Winander pausing as “mimic hootings” pass between himself and the owls and the republican stopping on the road in France to notice a hunger-bitten girl his friend has pointed out with words “Tis against that/ That we are fighting”, are recognizably the same person caught in the same gesture.²⁰ Thus, the poet-prophet also hears the voice to which others are oblivious - he does not turn away from his own social responsibility. He is not only “a man speaking to men” but also “a man speaking *for* men”. In that sense the blind beggar, though pictured as an emblem of alienation, a ruined piece of nature, something human reduced to an almost animal state is not a prompter of charity and a pointless moral entity. This is the message only those who perceive him as an “indigestible anomaly” would get, those who believe that their identity is firmly grounded in their possessions.²¹ And here Wordsworth is very much of the Rousseauist party: property, status, the whole train of social and moral relations, between none of these and ourselves can there be the sort of happy fit that defines a human identity. The sort of call the poet hears “as if admonished from another world” is linked to his sense of bonding with others simply because they are human and because it is through our feelings that we belong to general humanity. The blind beggar should not be deemed useless because he can feel as intensely as we can. Wordsworth hearing the call of the wretched people is a man who put great trust in the ideals of the French Revolution. Regardless of the ensuing dangers, he proclaimed himself to be a republican and threw himself passionately into the cause. Books IX, X and XI of the 1805 *Prelude* have been read as revelations on Wordsworth’s political thought and in Book IX we first see Wordsworth who is utterly committed to the Revolution: “and my heart was all/ Given to the people, and my love was theirs.” (ll.124-5) The French Revolution was indeed the master theme of the age and Wordsworth embraced his role as a poet-prophet for humanity to spread the word of its noble mission for the help of the

²⁰ Cf. Bromwich, David, 1998. *Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth’s Poetry of the 1790s*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, p. 21

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 30





poor and the oppressed. The “unquiet sounds” that he heard during his first residence in France were the sounds of “universal ferment” where Wordsworth recognized the glorious cause of revolutionary ideals: liberty, equality and fraternity:

(...) mildest men
Were agitated, and commotions, strife
Of passion and opinion, filled the walls
Of peaceful houses with unquiet sounds.
The soil of common life was at that time
Too hot to tread upon. (...)
(1805 Prelude, book 9, ll. 165-170)

In the following lines Wordsworth realizes the deception of history and all written histories that, intent on recording the facts, disregard the atmosphere, the feeling, the commotion and the sound that can only be experienced on the spot. He resents the fact that many names will be forgotten, such as the names of Carra and Gorsas, the names that, when spoken out aloud, had the power of earthquakes. His unreserved belief in its ideals seemed to be an extension of Nature’s workings. By the time the Republic was proclaimed, the initial enthusiasm has died down. Passing near the prison in which king Louis lay, on his second return to Paris, Wordsworth was no longer optimistic about the final outcome of the Revolution. When after the September Massacres he says “the fear gone by/ Pressed on me almost like a fear to come” (Book X, ll. 62-3), he anticipates new atrocities: a war between England and France that broke out in 1793. The “unquiet sounds” of revolutionary enthusiasm melt down into a specific inner voice – the voice of guilt, the voice “pleading before unjust tribunals”:

I scarcely had one night of quiet sleep,
Such ghastly visions had I of despair,
And tyranny, and implements of death,
And long orations which in dreams I pleaded
Before unjust tribunals, with a voice
Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense





Of treachery and desertion in the place
The holiest that I knew of – my own soul.
(1805 Prelude, book 10, ll. 373-380)

Was his faith in the positive outcome of the Revolution ever unbending? Or was this “pleading voice” inside him from the beginning? One only has to remember the lines in Book IX where Wordsworth openly admits: “I looked for something which I could not find,/ Affecting more emotion than I felt.” (ll. 70-71) And if Nature lead him into embracing the Revolution, is this an indication of the unconsciously felt betrayal by Nature? Curiously enough, the same sense of betrayal is evident in *Tintern Abbey*, a poem that has long been described as an adaptation of landscape to consciousness. We have reasons to believe that it is far more than that. In the language of 1798 when the poem was written, September massacres, terror and the ensuing war between England and France were still fresh in Wordsworth’s mind. His hearing of the “still, sad music of humanity” could therefore be translated as hearing the cry of human suffering and need²² that he could do nothing about. His disappointment is registered in the phrase “sad perplexity” and his doubt in the lines “And this prayer I make/ Knowing that Nature never did betray/ The heart that loved her (...)” (ll.122-4) because would there be need for praying if he was absolutely sure about Nature’s fidelity. Therefore Wordsworth’s poems are the celebration of his most intimate individuality but also an expression of his social conscience and political involvement.

Thus we have moved quite far away from Wordsworth’s scenes of childhood bliss where the voiceless child feels unity with nature, listening to the language of the ancient earth and drinking in the visionary power, to the scenes of speaking or speechless solitary figures who become the poet’s alter-ego, fostering the feelings of his belonging to general humanity. The individual voice of someone who has *another ear* is built up through his relationship with nature but the same relationship is responsible for the maturing of the poet’s universal voice, the voice of a “man speaking *for men*”.

²² Cf. Bromwich, David. 1998. *Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth’s Poetry of the 1790s*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, p. 88





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KOMPLEKSNOST GLASA/ZVUKA U POEZIJI WILLIAMA WORDSWORTHA



Danas kritika pitanju jezika u poeziji Williama Wordswortha pristupa kroz proučavanje razlike unutar i između pisanog i govornog diskursa. Iako je Wordsworth bio fasciniran svim oblicima pisanoga jezika, on je nezaobilazno i pjesnik govora, «čovjek koji se obraća ljudima» (Predgovor Lirskim baladama iz 1800) koji na drugačiji način doživljava zvukove i glasove iz svoje okoline. Raznolike pojavnosti zvukova/glasova kao metonimijskih supstitucija govoru nisu samo okvir u koji Wordsworth smješta izraze sebstva, već dinamična snaga koja oblikuje i stvara pjesnikovo «ja».

Rad analizira neke od najboljih Wordsworthovih pjesama, kao što su Preludij, Oda nagovještajima besmrtnosti iz uspomena na rano djetinjstvo, Stihovi sastavljeni nekoliko milja iznad opatije Tintern, Odlučnost i samostalnost, kako bi proniknuo u Wordsworthovo oblikovanje pjesničkog «ja» od djetetovog tihog iščitavanja «duboke vječnosti», gdje se njegovi «bezvučni dijalози» ne odnose na odsutnost glasa već ukazuju na uspostavljanje «komunikacije, govora lišenog glasa, jezika lišenog govora» (Warminski 23), pa sve do sebstva pjesnika-proroka koji čuje onaj glas kojeg drugi nisu svjesni – glas siromašnih i obespravljenih u jeku Francuske revolucije.

Key words: language, sound/voice, individual vs. social self, covenant between mind and nature

Ključne riječi: jezik, zvuk/glas, individualno naspram društvenog ja, zavjet između uma i prirode





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