The Healing Power of Nature in William Wordsworth's Poetry

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Résumé: La nature est un thème majeur de la poésie de William Wordsworth. Le poète fait sienne l'imagerie ésotérique qui démontre que la communion entre l'esprit de l'individu et le monde extérieur ne peut être parfaite que si elle favorise l'harmonie entre l'âme de l'individu et l'âme de la nature. Aussi, William Wordsworth montre t-il comment les hommes qui surmontent les pesanteurs morales et physiques parviennent à un état de bien-être. Pour Wordsworth, le concept de «Nature» est non seulement multiforme mais fait également appel d'une part, aux exigences de la santé et d'autre part, à la relation étroite entre bien-être physique et bien-être mental. En conclusion, le poète invite l'homme dont la vie sociale est influencée par la nature, à se confier à la nature pour ses problèmes émotionnels, sentimentaux, mentaux et d'hygiène sanitaire.
Mots clés : poésie, nature, bien-être mental, bien-être physique, santé

Introduction

When going through William Wordsworth's poetry, we can note how far his passion for Nature is evident and multiple. This affirmation is shared by many critics. The English journalist and author, Thomas De Quincy, declares that "Wordsworth had his passion for nature fixed in his blood. It was a necessity of his being, like that of a mulberry leaf to the silk-worm, and through his commerce with nature did he live and breathe" (143). As it can be noticed, the use of the mulberry leaf and the silk-worm image expresses Wordsworth's vision of nature as a source of literary inspiration. However, Wordsworth is concerned far less with the sensuous manifestations which delight most of the poets of Nature, than with the spiritual that he finds underlying these manifestations. These words of Arthur Compton-Rickett confirm this remark: "It was Wordsworth's aim as a poet to seek beauty in meadow, woodland, and the mountain top and to interpret this beauty in spiritual terms" (308). It appears clearly that the divinization of nature, which began in the modern world at the Renaissance and proceeded during the eighteenth century, culminates for English literature in Wordsworth. Unlike his contemporaries such as Coleridge, Byron, and Keats, Wordsworth has intellectualised Nature. Hence, the nickname "Prophet of Nature" (Mukherjee 20) is attributed to him and makes him not merely a poet of nature who is concerned less to marvel at its beauty than to exult at its inner significance.

In his poetry, Wordsworth has developed his literary vision of nature through various stages. In the first stage, the child Wordsworth looks upon nature as a source of and scene for animal pleasure like skating, riding, fishing and walking. Wordsworth's first love of nature is a healthy boy's delight in outdoor life. In the second stage, Wordsworth develops a passion for a sensuous beauty of nature. As he grows up, his 'coarser pleasures' ("Tintern Abbey": line 73) lose their charm for him, and nature is loved with an unreflecting passion altogether untouched by intellectual interests or associations. Stage three refers to human-heartedness. All the aching joys and dizzy raptures came to an end with the poet's experience of human suffering in France. The French Revolution opened his eyes and made him realize the dignity of the common man. This stage is followed by a final stage of the spiritual interpretation of nature. It is known as the stage of Pantheism. In the poem "Nutting", Wordsworth describes the circumstances under which a great change comes in his approach to nature. After his 'merciless ravage' (line 45), something mysterious touches him, and he feels that there is a spirit in the woods. Henceforth, he realizes a divine principle reigning in the heart of nature. As Margaret Drabble puts it: "At this stage the foundation of Wordsworth's entire existence was his mode of seeing God in nature and nature in God" (89-90) Since the poet believes that the Eternal Spirit pervades all objects of nature, it is important to go through his poetry in order to grasp how he expresses the impacts of nature on the health and well-being of the human's everyday life. If the individual, in his quest for well-being, turns to nature, it is necessary to investigate on the relation between man and nature. Furthermore, in its healing process, we can note that nature may foster joy, love, psychological and mental relief, and teaching that cannot be obtained without mystic forces pervading nature.

Bond Between Nature and Man

The bond between nature and man originates from the creation of the world as stated in the Bible:

> And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so. And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: and God saw that it was good. […] And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth (*The Holy Bible*, Gen. 1. 11; 12; 26).

In other words, God created nature and then created man to preside over it. So the relationship between man and nature was established by God at the creation. Particularly, in his poetry, Wordsworth shows how human beings fit into the midst of the interplaying forces of nature. In "Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower", Lucy is taken up into the life of nature and incorporated with it. The same is true of "Michael", "The Leech-gatherer", "The Solitary Reaper", "The Highland Girl", and "The Danish Boy". They seem made all of a piece with the world around them, so that they almost have their being in the elemental forms that pervade their natural domain. Even the rebellious Toussaint L'Ouverture is a power among other powers in nature:

> Thou hast left behind
> Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
> There's not a breathing of the common wind
> That will forget thee; thou hast great allies.
> ("To Toussaint L'Ouverture" lines 9-12)

As Mukherjee notes, Wordsworth believes that there is a pre-existing harmony between the mind of man and nature (28). The individual mind, as the poet declared in the fragment of the "Recluse", is exquisitely fitted to the external world and no less exquisitely the external world is fitted to the mind. The mind with him is always the creative masculine principle; nature is often the feminine principle:

> For the discerning intellect of man,
> When wedded to this goodly universe
> In love and holy passion, shall find these
> (Paradise, and groves Elysian, and Fortunate Fields)
>
> A simple produce of the common day.
> –I, long before the blissful hour arrives,
> Would chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse
> Of this great consummation...
> (lines 805-811)

Herbert Read is then convinced that the tight relationship between nature and man has an impact, good or bad, on each other:

> Man and nature, Mind and the external world, are geared together and in unison complete the motive principle of the universe. They act and react upon each other, 'so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure'. The exquisite functioning of this interlocked universe of Mind and nature is for Wordsworth the highest theme of poetry; in poetry the process actually receives its final consummation (126-27)

As it can be noted, interaction between man and nature is part of the general harmony and the stability of the world. Herbert, by his declaration, emphasises the idea of harmony between the human mind and nature introduced by Wordsworth. Hence, the question that can be raised is what's the use of such close relation between man and nature if it cannot serve the former's well-being? Among the healing powers of nature treated by Wordsworth in his poetry, we note the communicative joy of nature which brings relief to man.

Nature as a Source of Joy

If we explore the inner life of nature as Wordsworth conceives it, we find that one of its characteristics is its communicative joy. In fact, for Wordsworth, the nature is not only lively, but it is also blissful. For example, several poems from the poet put in a conspicuous position joy communicated by the natural environment. In "To the Daisy" Wordsworth speaks of the 'cheerful flower' as 'alert and gay' (stanza 8). "The Daffodils" depicts the jocund daffodils that outdo the sparkling waves in glee (stanza 3). In "Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower", the poet represents nature as imparting to Lucy its own 'vital feelings of delight' (stanza 6). These examples show Wordsworth's faith that nature is an expression of joy which the author should celebrate and infuse into the reader. Melvin Rader's following examples confirm the vision of the poet:

> The clearest statement to be found in Wordsworth of his belief in Nature's joyous life occurs in "Lines Written in Early Spring". Herein he states his faith that 'every flower enjoys the air it breathes'. In the birds and the budding twigs there is also enjoyment:
>
> > And I must think, do all I can,
> > That there was pleasure there.
>
> In "To My Sister" the poet recognizes 'a sense of joy' in nature and a 'blessed power' that rolls through all things about is. These poems deserve a more absolute acceptance as a record of Wordsworth's thought that some critics have been inclined to give to them (188).

It is undeniable that the joyful character of nature contributes to reinforce man's state of mind and helps him feel better. This communicative joy of nature is also interwoven with love and kindness in Wordsworth's poetry.

Universal Love in Nature

Like other poets, with a religious determination to find design, order, and harmony everywhere in the universe, and to ignore everything that seems to contradict this providential interpretation, it is inevitable that Wordsworth, according to Mukherjee, should find that nature is 'kind' and 'kindly', that it is 'fostering nature', 'Holy nature', and that it teaches a 'lesson deep of love' (25). In Wordsworth, the conviction of the universal presence of love in nature is equally characteristic of his writing in phases as distinct from one another as those of "The Excursion" and "Lyrical Ballads". We find his classic treatment of this theme in the poem "To My Sister". On the first mild day of March, the poet asks his sister to put on her woodland dress and come out with him for a walk; they will drink in the love which is abroad in the air, and so prepare their spirits for the whole year that is to come:

> Love, now a universal birth,
> From heart to heart is stealing,
> From earth to man, from man to earth:
> — It is the hour of feeling.
>
> One movement now may give us more
> Than years of toiling reason:
> Our minds shall drink at every pore
> The spirit of the season.
>
> Some silent laws our hearts will make,
> Which they shall long obey:
> We for the year to come may take
> Our temper from today.
>
> And from the blessed power that rolls
> About, below, above,
> We'll frame the measure of our souls:
> They shall be turned to love.
>
> (stanzas 6-9)

In Wordsworth's vision love exists in nature and man has only to solicit it in case of need. But Wordsworth believes that love, joy, and kindness cannot go without mystic forces in the natural world.

Mystical Approach to Nature

It is generally asserted that invisible supernatural forces inhabit and animate the world of nature. From this conception, are born notions such as mystic nursing plants, fighting evil plants, and lucky-charm plants. William Wordsworth's poetry include the concept of mysticism as Warren Beach puts it: "Wordsworth looked at nature as the mystics of old

perused the pages of the Holy Writ, making little of the letter, but passing through it to the spiritual interpretation" (157). This only goes to show that Wordsworth finds in the meadows and the woods and mountains the spiritual stimulus. As a more comprehensive poet, he wants to go beyond but not away from nature. Sunil Mukerjee, who better perceives Wordsworth's conception of mysticism, qualifies him as a poet of "the mighty world of eye and ear" (27). In a nutshell, mysticism is deeply rooted and grounded in the poet's senses. His nature mysticism is clearly evident in "Tintern Abbey".

> We are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul:
> While with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
> We see into the life of things.
>
> (lines 45-49)

In the above abstract, Wordsworth shows that truth can be reached only through penetrating the mystic world which transcends reason. Wordsworth's tendency to mysticism is also underlined by Melvin Rader in an analysis of another passage of the same poem:

> This implication is in no way lessened by the poet's suggestion that these mystical states may be due to the 'beauteous forms of Nature':
>
> > Nor less, I trust,
> > To them I may have owned another gift,
> > Of aspect more sublime.
>
> It has always been a tenet of Platonism and neo-Platonism, as well as a favourite doctrine of many mystics, that sensibility to natural beauty leads onwards to the beauty and truth that is beyond sense (246-47).

Another affirmation from Sunil Mukerjee confirms Wordsworth's ideal of transcendentalism:

> Wordsworth was not only a poet, he was also a seer and mystic and a practical psychologist with an amazingly subtle mind and an unusual capacity for feeling. It was not the beauty of Nature which brought him joy and peace, but the life in Nature. He himself had caught a vision of that life. He knew it and felt it, and it transformed the whole of existence for him. He believed that every man could attain this vision which he so fully possessed and his whole life's work took a form of minute and careful analysis of the process of feeling in his own nature (73).

It is noticeable that Wordsworth's ideal is to transcend the beauty of nature and view in it a mystic and living substance that heals the mind as well as the body. He is sure that everyone can share with him the same vision. This leads to the logical conclusion that the mystic forces of nature mean nothing to Wordsworth if nature is not enriched with uninhibited capacities.

The Cathartic Powers of Nature

Esoteric beliefs pretend that there is a perfect communion between an individual and nature when the individual mind copes properly with the outer world. In other words, since the individual mind and the external world are exquisitely fitted to each other, communion between the two is possible. But this communion is possible only when the soul of man is in harmony with the soul of nature. In his poetry, Wordsworth shows how human beings, who are separated from all that in everyday humanity is disturbing or distressing, reach a well-being state, as expressed in these verses: 'The silence and the calm/ Of mute insensate things' ("Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower": stanza 3). In fact, the calm and the silence of nature are for the disturbed and distressed person, a motive for relief and comfort. So catharsis could be interpreted as the process of releasing strong feelings and as a way of providing relief from anger, suffering, etc. Ultimately, cathartic power appears as psychotherapeutic capacity aiming at providing well-being to an individual.

Many excerpts of Wordsworth's poems reveal the importance of the cathartic powers of nature in his poetry. First, let's examine two passages from a poem entitled "The Thorn". In the first passage, a tragic character thinks that to find a greater welfare, it is necessary to look for communion with natural elements: "And she is known to every star/And every wind that blows" (stanza 7). The second passage is from another poem entitled "Michael". In this passage, a character named Michael has good moral qualities and marked traits. Much of Michael's impressiveness is due to the statement that "When others heeded not, he heard the South/Make subterraneous music" (lines 50-51). Secondly, let's observe three passages from the eighth book of the poem entitled "The Prelude". In the first, a shepherd's life on a mountain background arranges for him attractive physical aspect: "Man/Ennobled outwardly before my sight" (lines 275-276). In the second abstract which is the continuation of the preceding passage, the poet thanks the God of nature and of man for his purifying action on man as expressed in the following verses: "Men before my experienced eyes/Did first present themselves thus purified, /Removed, and to a distance that was fit"(lines 303-305). However, the third passage is different. Although the character in this

passage spends a long time under the trees lining alongside the forest, he is not interested in nature. This lack of interest has converted him into a moral monster:

> At noon, when by the forest's edge
> He lay beneath the branches high,
> The soft blue sky did never melt
> Into his heart; he never felt
> The witchery of the soft blue sky!
> ("A Tale": lines 261-265)

In fact, neither the calm of the forest, nor the soothing blue sky can invade the character's heart to change him positively. Such an individual whose heart is not pure cannot have a conciliating moral attitude. Similarly, some passages in Wordsworth's "The Excursion" evoke the healing power of nature. In these passages, a solitary character considering himself as a typical victim of romantic egoism, melancholy and cynicism, retires to a monastic life. His only way out is to work relentlessly in order to compensate for the fact of not taking advantage of the 'natural' means at his disposal for maintaining his physical and mental well-being. The poet then recommends him to avoid studying so late but to get up early in the morning and climb the hill daily, and join too in the hunt of the 'red deer'. It is presumable that this activity in the open air can relieve the character from moral suffering. The Solitary is addressed some words of encouragement in this poem abstract: "…Take courage, and withdraw yourself from ways/ That run not parallel to nature's course…" (lines 489-490). From all this, it follows that nature represents to Wordsworth, an important factor of moral and physical stabilisation of a person in particular and harmonisation of society in general. It is then suitable to acknowledge the cathartic power of nature and emphasise its importance in Wordsworth's poetry as well as the English critic Basil Willey alleges it:

> Thus Nature's healing power, which for some may be merely an outworn doctrine, was for him [Wordsworth] a fact of experience, and the rapture of that experience, which glows through *Tintern Abbey* and much of his best poetry, can be caught by any reader, without reference to the ethical and philosophical theories which Wordsworth evolved from it (283).

Finally, we can note that Wordsworth uses the word 'nature' as signifying the laws of health and the close relation between physical and mental well-being. In the story of the poor Magdalene, he uses the word to signify the psychological conditions which, being violated may result in bodily harm. Referring to the cruelty of her employers who do not

allow her to visit the graveyard to indulge her feeling of penitence and grief over the loss of her child, he says:

> I failed not to remind them that they erred;
> For holy Nature might not be crossed,
> Thus wronged in woman's breast: in vain I pleaded–
> But the green stalk of Ellen's life was snapped,
> And the flower drooped...
> ("The Excursion": lines 997-1001)

There would be little point in multiplying examples of such use of the word 'Nature', since it is not peculiar to Wordsworth or to other poets of nature. But what characterises also Wordsworth's poetry is the didactic relief that nature provides to humanity.

Nature's Teaching

A careful reading of "The Prelude" clearly shows that Wordsworth received the best part of his education from nature. In the first two books of this autobiographical poem we find that nature has been acting as a sort of glorified parent or schoolmistress. The poet appreciates the means employed by nature through these examples of nature's 'ministries' and 'interventions' whereby it reproved his childish delinquencies:

> I heard among the solitary hills
> Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
> Of undistinguishable motion, steps
> Almost as silent as the turf they trod.
> ... ...
> But after I had seen
> That spectacle, for many days, my brain
> Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
> Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts
> There hung a darkness, call it solitude,
> Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
> Remained, no pleasant image of trees,
> Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
> But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
> Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
> By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.
> ("The Prelude I": lines 322-325; 390-400)

The first stage in experience, the beginning of each man's education, is the reception of impressions through the avenues of the senses. This stage is emphasised in two poems of 1798: "Expostulation and Reply" and "Tables Turned". In the first poem, Wordsworth's friend Matthew—a person whom the poem describes as somewhat

unreasonably attached to modern books of moral philosophy—reproaches the poet with his neglect of bookish knowledge. And it is thus Wordsworth defends himself:

Why, William, on that old grey stone,
Thus for the length of half a day,
Why, William, sit you thus alone,
And dream your time away?

"Where are your books?--that light bequeathed
To Beings else forlorn and blind!
Up! up! and drink the spirit breathed
From dead men to their kind.

"You look round on your Mother Earth,
As if she for no purpose bore you;
As if you were her first-born birth,
And none had lived before you!"

One morning thus, by Esthwaite lake,
When life was sweet, I knew not why,
To me my good friend Matthew spake,
And thus I made reply:

"The eye--it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against or with our will.

"Nor less I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.

"Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum
Of things for ever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking?

"--Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,
Conversing as I may,
I sit upon this old grey stone,
And dream my time away,"[1]

(“Expostulation and Reply”)

In the second poem, Wordsworth asks his friend to leave his books and come out into the open air, since he can learn more about man and about moral good and evil from the spring woods than from all the sages:

UP! up! my Friend, and quit your books;

[1] The inverted commas in the poem are used by the author to express the dialogue style.

Or surely you'll grow double:
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;
Why all this toil and trouble?

The sun, above the mountain's head,
A freshening lustre mellow
Through all the long green fields has spread,
His first sweet evening yellow.

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it.

And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
He, too, is no mean preacher:
Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.

She has a world of ready wealth,
Our minds and hearts to bless--
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

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

Enough of Science and of Art;
Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives.

(“Tables Turned”)

We might object that an impulse from a vernal wood cannot in fact teach us anything at all about good and evil. However, we find the lines that follow more easily acceptable:

Sweet is the lore which nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things;
We murder to dissect.

(“Tables Turned”: stanza 7)

Here, Wordsworth is not recommending an abandonment of books and learning, but is simply urging a restoration of the balance between book-learning and the direct inspirations of nature. This point of view is shared by Graham Hough:

> Beneath a half-playful and even superficial opposition to science and philosophizing, there is the wholly serious demand, central to Wordsworth's faith, for a total response by man's nature to the non-human nature around him. Those who are worried by Wordsworth's habit of finding sermons in stones are free to give up that side of his work, but they would also be wise to remember the remark of a later poet, Yeats, extremely unlike Wordsworth, that in the poet's church there is an altar but no pulpit; and that morals drawn from the lesser celandine are not the core of Wordsworth's belief (49).

Graham Hough raises here Wordsworth's preoccupation which is the relation between man and nature. However, he doesn't consider this relation as an absolute and exclusive question. So to speak, Hough reveals the opposition between Wordsworth and Yeats who proposes a balance between the pulpit and the altar.

Conclusion

Wordsworth's unique virtue as a poet comes from his preoccupation with the indestructibles in nature and in human mind. Wordsworth uses the word 'nature' as signifying the normal course of things, to which it is wise for man to submit as a matter of hygiene. Nature is then taken as a norm of conduct for man. Science impartially notes that nature is full of pleasure and pain. The poet finds in nature various healing means and expresses it in such a way that the reader should grasp its importance. Through Wordsworth's poetry, we know how nature appears as a mental, intellectual, sentimental, didactic, and moral relief for man. In any attempt to understand what nature means to Wordsworth, due weight should be given to the healing power of the impersonal over a sick mind.

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