

The Nature of Nature: an analysis of Romantic ideology on man's place in the natural world through the poetry of William Wordsworth and John Keats

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Through the lens of Romantic ideology, the undiluted capture of nature is the ultimate pursuit of poetry. For these poets writing in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, the historical context of industrialization and urbanization spurred the Romantic exploration of the relationship between man and the fleeting natural world. Specifically, William Wordsworth uses poetry as a tool to try to uncover the relationship between the two, and ultimately comes to two distinct conclusions. In Wordsworth's "Preface to Lyrical Ballads", which appears as a sort of manifesto of his ideas on Romantic poetry, he writes both about "the real language of men" and "great permanent objects," and presents the implicit argument that these two ideas on poetry cannot be reconciled (Wordsworth Preface). However, in his poem "Lines Written In Early Spring" he seems to achieve that which he initially considered impossible, resulting in a contradiction of his terms of Romantic poetry. His work leaves us with lingering questions: how can man understand what his relationship with nature should be? And if the language of poetry cannot truly represent nature, then what is the role of poetry? Rather than try to resolve these questions within the works of Wordsworth, it proves more fruitful to turn to John Keats' poetry, written several decades later. Keats returns to these ideological questions regarding Romanticism and attempts to answer them in "Ode to a Nightingale." He uses the comparison of man's situation in the world to that of the nightingale's to work through the difficulty of man's relationship with nature and with poetry. However, ultimately Keats' response to Wordsworth concludes that, despite the fact that poetry cannot replicate the purity of nature, it can be nearly, if not equally as relevant, suggesting that the role of poetry is to seek natural expression, but never to actually achieve it.

Wordsworth plays an important role in the Romantic ideology, because he was the first to articulate the questions regarding man's relationship with nature, and how poetry fits in to this relationship. In the preface to his prominent collection "Lyrical Ballads," Wordsworth states, "poetry is the image of man and nature" (Wordsworth Preface). For Wordsworth, poetry should attempt to capture the connection between man and nature; as a product of language and thought, poetry represents human expression, but Romantic poetry also often describes nature. However, the connection between the two is fragile at best because, in Wordsworth's view, poetry cannot possibly replicate nature authentically. By way of solution, he presents two ideas in "Preface to Lyrical Ballads:" the theories of the "real language of man" and "the great and permanent objects." Firstly, the concept of the real language of man maintains that, to write in a way that reflects the "permanent" and "philosophical" expression of "common life" (Wordsworth Preface). In order to accomplish purity of expression, Wordsworth uses very simple language that forms a departure from typical contemporary poetry. He does so because he believes it will bring him closer to nature (Wordsworth Preface). However, his second theory on poetry confuses this resolve. He maintains that poets, in order to achieve clarity of mind and spirit, should surround themselves with "great and permanent objects," like rocks and trees. These objects, "which are equally inherent and indestructible," offer a sense of permanence in an otherwise changing society (Wordsworth Preface). Living surrounded by nature allows one to understand the workings of one's own mind in contrast, and analyze the connection between that consciousness and nature. Although both of these theories present productive ways of understanding man's relationship with nature, the fact that Wordsworth maintains the terrific importance of both of them also presents an implicit problem. If one is to fully embrace living in nature and surrounding himself with "great and permanent objects," this involves a rejection of society. However, the "real language of man" is predicated entirely on an

experience of human society. The two are irreconcilable within the space of a poem because of the persistent distance that exists between poetry and nature.

Despite his analysis of man's relationship with nature in the "Preface," in "Lines Written In Early Spring," Wordsworth seems to contradict himself, using personification to close the distance between human consciousness and nature. Because the poet's experience of nature and reproduction thereof is predicated upon human consciousness, a poem generally represents nature, rather than manifests it. However, "Lines Written In Early Spring" articulates an important connection between man and nature:

The budding twigs spread out their fan,
To catch the breezy air;
And I must think, do all I can,
That there was pleasure there. (Wordsworth 17-20)

The narrator's ability to use personification to apply human sensual experience onto a tree blurs the line between man and nature. He zeros in on one key human understanding- that of pleasure- and attempts to comprehend the natural world through that lens. The fact that he chooses "budding twigs" as his focus of comparison conveys a sense of newness and rebirth, which is apt considering the human consciousness is at its most unadulterated in youth. A very young child understands the world as a spectrum of pleasure and pain, which is as close to a natural state as possible. In the third line, the narrator uses two imperatives, which build upon each other to convey a sense of urgency. Wordsworth makes his use of personification necessary and powerful, and in doing so successfully closes the gap between "the language of man" and the natural world. However, the very fact that he seems to resolve this question creates a contradiction within his ideas of Romanticism. If the theories of "the language of man" and "the great and permanent objects" are irreconcilable, what role does "Lines Written In Early Spring" play? A look at the poetry of John Keats offers this question some resolution.

In “Ode to a Nightingale,” Keats acknowledges that nature and man are inherently separate, and in doing so he simultaneously acknowledges that the space Wordsworth discusses in “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” presents a problem. Though he does not attempt to write using the same “real language of men” that Wordsworth does, “Ode to a Nightingale” deals with the questions of human expression within the context of nature. The narrator spends the beginning of the poem with a description of the human world:

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
 Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
 Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
 And leaden-eyed despairs; (Keats 24-28)

By referencing “here” as the setting for his experience, he keeps “here” inherently separate from “there,” or the world that the nightingale inhabits. For the narrator, the natural world as represented by the joyful nightingale’s song brings the tragic world of man into sharp relief. The fact that he uses the word “men” is significant, because any characters in the rest of the poem are given fantastical titles like “light-wingéd Dyad of the trees” (Keats 7). Men are kept decidedly separate from this natural world, instead occupying a depressing, dismal existence. Keats uses “youth,” as the figure that dies because, as discussed above, youth signifies purity, and by allowing youth to “grow pale, and spectre-thin, and die,” any purity in the world of men is dissolved. The song of the nightingale provides potential for escape, potential to “leave the world unseen” (Keats 19). However, the very fabric of human consciousness upholds the distance between man and nature and makes the reconciliation of the two seemingly impossible.

Keats uses “Ode to a Nightingale” as a place to discuss human consciousness and the difficulty of merging that consciousness with nature, which echoes and expands upon Wordsworth’s ideas from “Lines Written in Early Spring.” Because the poet’s experience of nature and reproduction thereof is

predicated upon human consciousness, it is inherently different from any other form of natural expression. Keats uses “Ode to a Nightingale” to respond to the specific questions by Romantic ideology, working through his own interpretations of nature and of expression in an attempt to reach some conclusions about how poetry fits into the picture. As discussed above, “Ode to a Nightingale” tells the story of the narrator wishing to leave the world of men behind and follow the nightingale’s song:

Away! Away! for I will fly to thee,
 Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
 But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
 Through the dull brain perplexes and retards: (Keats 31-34)

Keats describes the narrator’s potential journey into the natural with the nightingale within the context of literary allusions. “Bacchus and his pards” refers to the Roman god of festivity, who rode in a chariot pulled by leopards. The narrator’s refusal to be “charioted” by Bacchus implies a rejection of social interactions, in favor of the “viewless wings of Poesy.” Viewless in this context refers to invisibility, and Poesy is another spelling of poetry. Therefore, the narrator is implying that poetry, as an unseen “chariot,” is the best tool to achieve a union with the natural world. However, the final line of this section presents another difficulty: the very experience of poetry is predicated upon the “dull brain” that is presented in so negative a light. Eventually, Keats comes to the conclusion that death is the only way to escape this “dull brain” and become fully a part of the natural world: “Darkling I listen; and, for many a time/ I have been half in love with easeful Death” (Keats 51-52). For the poet, the experience of death means release from the world of men, and for this reason it holds a certain appeal. “Easeful” implies that to die would finally allow simplicity. However, despite the fact that death would allow total connection with nature, it would also render the experience of poetry impossible. Ultimately, the narrator eschews this possibility and returns to his “sole self” (Keats 71). He finishes the poem by asking, “was it as vision, or a waking dream?” (Keats 79), which echoes the return to the human consciousness. However, by

chronicling this experience with the natural world, Keats works through the questions Wordsworth asks, and comes to an implicit resolution. He concludes that the human consciousness is too large of an impediment to poetry's attempt to replicate nature, and the attempt is ultimately in vain. However, for Keats, this conclusion is not a disappointing one, it simply sheds light on the nature of poetry.

Ultimately, despite the fact that Keats concludes that the attempt to use poetry to understand man's place in the natural world is a losing battle, his conclusion ultimately proves a very productive one: although poetry cannot authentically capture natural expression, the attempt to do so is a form unique of expression.

The difficulty presented by Wordsworth is one that echoes the sentiment of the time: if modernity means that men are further and further away from the natural world, how can we understand our place within nature? He presents his two possible resolutions to this problem as equally important, and therefore impossible to resolve. The implicit argument he offers in "Lines Written in Early Spring" further complicates the issue. However, with the distance of several decades, Keats is able to address the question from a different perspective, and his conclusion offers the reader an interesting and complex idea about the role of poetry. Although poetry cannot be called an authentically natural form of expression, like that of the budding twigs or of the nightingale's song, it occupies a very important place in understanding the connection between man and nature. As an art form born of human-consciousness, poetry cannot replicate natural expression authentically, but it can give meaning to and context for man's experience with nature while simultaneously using a uniquely human form of expression. This very lack of resolve forms a complete answer: poetry cannot replicate nature, but the fact that it attempts to do so gives man an important link to the natural world.

Works Cited

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