**Wordsworth, landscape, and politics**

William Wordsworth, who began writing his best poetry towards the end of the 1790s, is one of the most gifted of those poets that we call the Romantics. To call Wordsworth a Romantic poet probably suggests thinking of him as the poet of nature; a poet who writes with great intensity and feeling about mountains and daffodils and rural life, and this is not wrong. Those sound like timeless subjects, and Wordsworth indeed wrote that he wanted to deal in the grand elementary feelings of human nature.

Yet, the 1790s were a period of intense political crisis, triggered by the French Revolution of 1789, which affected Wordsworth deeply. We know this because he recorded his experience in his long autobiographical poem *The Prelude* (in Book 10 in particular), which was published only after his death. He was in France for the start of the Revolution, and like many other liberal-minded thinkers rejoiced in the rise of a new age of democratic freedom. ‘Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven’ (10.693-4). He was in France again in 1792, during the September massacres, days of mob violence when the inmates of Paris’s prisons were indiscriminately dragged to the guillotine. This began the period known simply as ‘the Terror’, when the Revolution – threatened by invasion by foreign powers, including Britain – turned upon itself, and descended into a frenzy of denouncing and guillotining not only its opponents but also its own supporters. Addressing his friend Coleridge, Wordsworth writes of the traumatizing effect of that time, which left him with dreadful nightmares:

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Most melancholy at that time, O friend,
Were my day-thoughts, my dreams were miserable;
Through months, through years, long after the last beat
Of those atrocities (I speak bare truth,
As if to thee alone in private talk)
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. (10.371-383)
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Notice at the end of that passage how Wordsworth imagines himself not only as victim but also as obscurely guilty, with a sense of his own ‘treachery and desertion’. How can we understand such a response? It is as if he felt himself implicated in, somehow responsible for, the failure of that radical idealism – complicit, even, in those violent atrocities. At the least, the passage vividly transmits the impossibility of keeping the self separate and insulated from what is going on in the world.

The question is, how should we relate *that* Wordsworth, deeply affected by the events of the 1790s, with the more familiar ‘Romantic’ Wordsworth, the poet of nature, whose best poetry often seems to have little to do with the times in which he was writing?

There is no simple right answer to that question. If it is partly a question about Wordsworth, it is also a question about how you choose to read, and what you think poetry is (or should be). At one extreme, some readers may reply that when Wordsworth writes, say, about the
feelings evoked by mountain landscape that he is going deeper than the turbulence of contemporary political life, offering us something of more enduring value, and that it is precisely the appeal of Romantic poetry that it so often does this, and so rises above and beyond its historical moment. The best poetry, such readers might point out, doesn't date. At the other extreme, different readers have replied that historical context always matters, that it is often detectable in Romantic poetry as a kind of anxious subtext, and that a Romantic poem which offers to transcend history is precisely in that respect the product of its historical moment. One influential source for this way of thinking is Jerome McGann’s study The Romantic Ideology (1983). McGann writes:

In the case of Romantic poems, we shall find that the works tend to … occlude and disguise their own involvement in a certain nexus of historical relations…. For this reason the critic of Romantic poetry must make a determined effort to elucidate the subject matter of such poems historically.

According to this way of thinking, poetry that evokes the beauty of a mountain landscape is not doing so innocently, but as a way of displacing or evading the pressure of social and political realities, and that is where its true interest lies.

This is a controversial area in literary studies, and the tension between these two approaches has a big effect on the way that poetry is taught and studied. You may notice that some teachers, or some modes of assessment, are keener than others to invite you to relate poetry to its historical context, or understand that relationship in different ways. It is always worth thinking about the implications of this.

With all these questions in mind, let us now look at a longer passage from earlier in The Prelude. Wordsworth is remembering his childhood, growing up in the Lake District. In this passage he remembers an event that made a great impression on him. As a boy, one evening he stole a boat, or borrowed it without permission, and went for a row on the lake: but as he pulled away from the shore, looking back at the skyline, it seemed that a great cliff rose up in pursuit of him.

As you read the passage, mark any phrases that you find particularly striking.

One evening (surely I was led by her) ['her' refers to Nature] I went alone into a shepherd’s boat, A skiff that to a willow tree was tied Within a rocky cave, its usual home. ’Twas by the shores of Patterdale, a vale Wherein I was a stranger, thither come A school-boy traveller, at the holidays. Forth rambled from the village inn alone No sooner had I sight of this small skiff, Discovered thus by unexpected chance, Than I unloosed her tether and embarked. The moon was up, the lake was shining clear Among the hoary mountains; from the shore I pushed, and struck the oars and struck again In cadence, and my little boat moved on Even like a man who walks with stately step Though bent on speed. It was an act of stealth
And troubled pleasure; not without the voice
Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on,
Leaving behind her still on either side
Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
Until they melted all into one track
Of sparkling light. A rocky steep uprose
Above the cavern of the willow tree
And now, as suited one who proudly rowed
With his best skill, I fixed a steady view
Upon the top of that same craggy ridge,
The bound of the horizon, for behind
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
She was an elfin pinnace; lustily
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
Went heaving through the water, like a swan;
When from behind that craggy steep, till then
The bound of the horizon, a huge cliff,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head. I struck, and struck again
And, growing still in stature, the huge cliff
Rose up between me and the stars, and still,
With measured motion, like a living thing,
Strode after me. With trembling hands I turned,
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the cavern of the willow tree.
There, in her mooring-place, I left my bark,
And, through the meadows homeward went, with grave
And serious thoughts; and after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; in my thoughts
There was a darkness, call it solitude,
Or blank desertion, no familiar shapes
Of hourly objects, images 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 the trouble of my dreams. (2.375-430)

There is much to notice in this extraordinary piece of writing. For instance:

- the several suggestions, even before the climax, that the landscape is uncannily animate. As well as the active verbs and participles given to the landscape, notice the phrase ‘growing still in stature’, where one meaning of ‘still’ (unceasingly) undoes the other (unmoving), which ought to apply to the cliff but, disturbingly, here doesn’t.

- the sense that the activity of rowing is charged with a significance beyond itself (look at ‘struck’ and ‘stroke’ (violence?? sex??), whose sound seems to generate the terrifying ‘strode’; or how ‘a rocky steep arose’ seems to trigger ‘I rose upon the stroke’ which in turn triggers ‘the huge cliff / Rose up’).
the force of Wordsworth’s negative and indeterminate expressions, especially in the last ten lines, describing – or rather, not describing, but yet communicating, at the edge of consciousness – the effect this event had on his mind. ‘Uncanny’, ‘awesome’, or ‘sublime’ are among the words that might be used to describe this strange effect.

At one level, we can see that nothing extraordinary happened. The young boy, who already felt uneasy about taking the boat, was spooked by an optical illusion. (As the boy pulled away from the craggy ridge, the huge cliff behind it came into view.) But the poetry remembers the experience so vividly that it seems, nevertheless, like a moment of real revelation, which the remembering adult honours and commemorates, rather than explains away.

The question is, how do we understand that intensity? What makes this experience seem so enduringly significant? It is important to recognise that Wordsworth himself has no clear answer to that question; he is reflecting on a mystery. But there are some things we can say. The boy rows ‘proudly’ and ‘lustily’, ‘with his best skill”; on the edge of adolescence, he is acting on his own desires, asserting his separateness, his independence. But this separateness and independence are an illusion (nature was ‘surely’ leading him all the time), and his act is therefore a kind of transgression, symbolised by the ‘stealing’ of the boat, which Nature rises up to rebuke. The guilty terror this arouses is the recognition that he is not, ultimately, a separate being, but part of a larger, interconnected life – such that ‘mighty forms that do not live / Like living men’ can pass irresistibly though his mind.

How – if at all – would you want to relate this experience of guilt and dread, which is so personal, to the feelings of guilt and dread which afflicted Wordsworth after the Revolution, and relate to events in the public, political world? He is, we can note, remembering the childhood experience as an adult who has lived through the political Terror. There are different ways in which you could think about this. You might think that his adult experience is colouring his memory of the childhood episode, and that the sense of Nature’s admonishing power is transferred or displaced from the political context. (It’s at this time that ‘power’ becomes a term that can be used of a landscape or a creative work or of artistic creativity; elsewhere in The Prelude Wordsworth refers to his ‘power’ as a poet.) Or you might think that the childhood experience is primary, and that its quality of obscure revelation, of being a valuable education in the limits on individual agency, offers a larger context for understanding his later political dismay: the Revolution releases nightmares into the world because it challenges ‘Nature’ herself. Or you may perfectly well think that the two passages – triggered by such different events – and the nightmares they produced have nothing to do with one another. Still, it is interesting to note that ‘Gothic’ literature, so full of guilt and dread and supernatural threat, though often with little obvious political content, first takes hold in the 1790s.