

Wordsworth: Naturalness as Aesthetic

Taylor Skinner, Lynchburg College

A perfect naturalness in poetry is impossible. Like all other forms of art, poetry presents a distorted or enhanced version of the world to match the poet's subjective understanding.

Wordsworth defined "good poetry" as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" ("Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" 498), but he never defined poetry as a concept, and he rejected one of the most common definitions, "metrical composition" (501). Therefore, because there is no single authoritative definition, poetry may be generally described as "elevated language." Implicitly, poetry is "elevated" above ordinary language. Wordsworth explains in his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," that he "adopted" and "purified" (497) the "real language of men" (495) in his writing; his phrasing in this passage implies that his poems consist of refined but imperfect imitations. Because he was educated and because there exists a distinction between the poet and the average person ("Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" 498), this "real language of men" did not come naturally to him. None of these claims undercuts Wordsworth's sincere pursuit of naturalness as an aesthetic and moral ideal. Nevertheless, a poem like "Tintern Abbey," which centers on Wordsworth's own emotions, better exemplifies the naturalness necessary to write what he considers good poetry than do the supposedly naturalistic poems like "We Are Seven" or "The Mad Mother."

In "We Are Seven," the speaker interacts with a young girl who counts her deceased siblings among her family. The lesson that children are ignorant about death (4) appears in the first stanza, so the speaker feels obligated to tell the story in an indirect manner. The didactic tone of the opening creates the impression that "We Are Seven" is more of a proof invented to convince the reader of an argument rather than being an expression of the speaker's natural

feelings. Further, the speaker attributes to the girl phrases that a young child would not likely use, such as characterizing the sunset as the time “When it is light and fair” (46). This description is plain, but the line sounds forced in this context. Other lines suffer from the same flaw but to a greater degree because instead of merely adding details, they introduce a new idea, which then is summarily dropped, like winter “...[when] I could run and slide/ My brother John was forced to go” (58-9). If the poem is a transcript of a conversation with a real girl, a young child’s short attention span would help to explain this *non sequitur*. Even if this line were intended to represent childlike speech, the reader has already recognized that the narrative is intended to prove a point, so the line about playing in the snow seems like selective editing merely to maintain an artificial rhyme scheme.

“We Are Seven” does not manage to impart a moral, though it may have been written to do so. The poem might have easily praised a child’s innocence and devotion, but here the girl is petulantly stubborn and naïve. The speaker dismisses the conversation as “throwing words away, for still/ The little maid would have her will” (66-7). He desires to instruct her, not to learn from her, as Wordsworth claims the reader can through the example set by the common people. The repetition of the same questions and answers indicates to readers that there should be a greater purpose in the poem. Additionally, since the speaker has revealed the conclusion in the opening stanza, the last stanza cannot relieve the tension caused by the repetition. Wordsworth never elaborates on the relevance of the realization that children do not understand death, so the poem becomes an empty observation instead of a commentary, nor does he indicate what a child’s perception of death should mean to the reader, and the poem is not compelling enough to prompt a reader to ponder that question. The overall effect is a dissatisfying impersonation of simplicity and naturalness.

“The Mad Mother” begins similarly to “We Are Seven”: an expository stanza, followed by dialogue. Thus, the poem’s conceit is straightforward, but the mother’s speech is rambling and confusing. The average (modern and certainly contemporary) reader knows too little of psychology to distinguish between an accurate and an inaccurate portrayal of madness. Instead, it is easy to accept features of the character’s speech and actions, like her tendency to speak to the baby as if she understands her, as would be natural to someone in her position. This interpretation partially justifies the poem’s lack of a direct, logical sequence and the mother’s incoherence. However, insanity fails to explain her archaic phrasing or awkward syntactic inversions. The poem does not provide cues that throw light on her mental processes, so the reader cannot be certain whether those processes are sound or not. In the absence of description, the reader cannot even discern whether the “waves below” (43) and the people who “taunt” (71) them are present in the world, in her memories, or in her imagination. The mother is free from the “influence of social vanity” (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* 497) in that she belongs to the lower-class whom poets had previously scorned, but she defies the conventional sense of honesty or purity that rustics are assumed to represent. Her naturalness results from her inability to control herself normally, not from “communicat[ion] with the best objects” (“Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” 497), so the mother’s song may not rightfully belong to the “real language of men” (“Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” 495).

Wordsworth does not aim to promote insanity as wise or moral; rather, the mad mother’s talk of “fiendish faces” (23) and “fire... within [her] brain” (21) should inspire fear or revulsion in the audience. In fact, the strange quality of “The Mad Mother” was meant to invoke the audience’s visceral response to the novelty of a situation that resides beyond the realm of common experience. Wordsworth designed the mother as an Anglophonic foreigner who had

crossed the sea (4), and experienced the complicated circumstances of migration, precisely to highlight the union of disparate concepts (Wu 385), and thereby heighten the reader's response. Sympathy, in turn, deepens the reader's imagination. According to Wordsworth, poetry possesses a power by which a reader "must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, his taste exalted, and his affections ameliorated" ("Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" 498), so this outcome is the moral purpose of "The Mad Mother."

In "We Are Seven" and "The Mad Mother," Wordsworth employs a type of character, but in "Tintern Abbey," the speaker nearly aligns with Wordsworth himself. It is difficult to judge whether or not a character speaks simply or naturally since a short poem barely offers a glimpse of a personality. In the first two poems, Wordsworth focuses more on presenting the characters to the audience than he does on presenting a belief from the perspective of those characters. Nor is this matter one of point-of-view; "We Are Seven" is told in the first person, and both it and "The Mad Mother" contain mostly dialogue, which should facilitate characters expressing themselves. Though the young girl and the mother speak plainly, they have nothing significant to say. They are objects upon which to meditate, the message instead of the messengers. In a sense, "We Are Seven" and "The Mad Mother" are not simple, direct, or natural because the characters are symbols to be deciphered, less for the sake of enriching the meaning of the text than for the sake of deriving some significant meaning.

By contrast, in "Tintern Abbey" Wordsworth deals with the complex, abstract subject of inner life, both as Wordsworth himself experiences it and as that experience applies to humankind. Familiarity allows him to describe the Wye with a certainty that begets the natural tone, which continues through the entire poem. His vocabulary is more diverse and specific, but still easily understood. He has deliberately sought simplicity, for the style of "Tintern Abbey" is

far clearer than the lengthy, winding sentences in his “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.” It is elegant but neither sentimental nor pompous.

In “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth explores the complicated connections among his relationships to nature, humanity, and divinity. The subtlety and importance of the ideas in “Tintern Abbey” compel Wordsworth to write directly. The arrangement may initially appear erratic, but it obeys a logical, cognitive sequence. For example, the reader may not recognize in the first reading that “what then I was” (79) refers to his former self “five years” (1) ago, but such leaps are intuitively linked by cause and effect. Each verse paragraph explores one aspect of the larger theme of change and relates it to his altered perceptions of the countryside. When a thought has arrived at its final conclusion, the next verse paragraph returns to another physical example that the reader can grasp, be it the river (61), the landscape (80), or Wordsworth’s sister (126), a distinct divergence from the vagueness of “We Are Seven” and “The Mad Mother.”

“Tintern Abbey” succeeds where the other two poems falter because writing it required Wordsworth to exercise all of his skill. “We Are Seven” and “The Mad Mother” seem to have started as grains of ideas that he first formulated and afterward clothed in the semblance of simplicity. Readers could piece together the gist of “We Are Seven” or “The Mad Mother” even if they ignored the weaker lines. However, to intelligibly discuss God, nature, the soul, and especially his emotions, Wordsworth needed to peel away layers of confounding philosophy and feeling. Phrases like the “purer mind” (30) or “to see into the life of things” (50) indicate concepts too broad and immaterial for a single word. To surmount this obstacle he had no choice but to invent his own terms. “Tintern Abbey” is as simple as possible; otherwise, no one else would be able to comprehend its abstract concepts, and Wordsworth--between his longings to express himself and to inculcate particular values in others--believed that he must strive to reach

his audience. “Tintern Abbey” sounds natural because the original composition is also the published version, untouched from the day when he drafted it (Wu 407). More importantly, Wordsworth had to rely on himself to find the words for unnamed ideas; therefore, he used those that came to him naturally, probably the ones with which he himself thought. The archaic words and exuberant metaphors work here, for as a poet and a person who had pondered long and deeply, the way in which he observed, thought of, and wrote about the world would have changed. Indeed, “Tintern Abbey” attributes his best traits to nature’s teachings (111-4). Wordsworth composed “Tintern Abbey” in a manner that was natural for him, and in doing so, he produced a poem of singular beauty.

Works Cited

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