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Wordsworth’s Romanticism

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In moving from the poetry of Thomas Gray to that of William Wordsworth, a shift in perception occurs and the age of Romantic poetry really begins. Gray emphasizes the ideas of loss and pessimism, while Wordsworth counters loss with recompense and an optimistic outlook instead of a pessimistic one. By looking at the poetic content of one of each of their works, the use that they both make of memory can be seen. However, the uses that they make contrast markedly against one another in the feelings they provoke. Gray’s utilization of memory in “An Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” emphasizes lost innocence and the impossibility of recapturing happiness. Wordsworth, on the other hand, uses the force of memory as a restorative to calm the mind and to express in poetry the recollection of an event in pleasure-inducing terms. This ability of Wordsworth’s to recreate the past pleasantly will be seen specifically in “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey.” By a careful examination of these two poems and the “Preface” to the Lyrical Ballads, the justification for Wordsworth’s poetry being termed “Romantic” will be proven. This proof will come in the conclusion that the way in which Wordsworth idealizes the past by connecting it to the present in a pleasant way makes it Romantic; in contrast to the pre-Romantic poetry of Gray which associated only loss and pain in the present replacing the past’s happiness.

A furtherance of the definition of Wordsworth’s Romanticism can be explicated as his attempt to incorporate memory into an idealistic state of being wherein time becomes infinite.
The ideals of being a Romantic poet mean to look with hope and romance on the past, present, and future. Wordsworth writes in “Tintern Abbey”: “While here I stand, not only with the sense/ Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts/ That in this moment there is life and food/ For future years” (29-32). The Romantic poet looks with nostalgia on the past which is something gone, but which can be recreated, at least in Wordsworth’s vision, through contemplation and poetry. The present is something to be made idyllic by use of use of the past image of perfection, and from there the future follows as a time when one can always look back fondly on the past and what is now the present but will soon become the past. Throughout it all, however, the Romantic poet remains an optimist who looks at the world with a lens of hope, idealism, and romantic intentions.

In the “Preface,” Wordsworth’s purpose in writing poetry is to replace what he sees as the degrading evil of society’s “thirst after outrageous stimulation” (576). What Wordsworth is attacking are the “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluge of idle and extravagant stories in verse” (576). To Wordsworth, literature has become immoral and full of nothing of genuine import. He wants to replace these evil influences which dumb down the human mind with a mode of writing that has a higher goal and appeals to man’s better nature. Although Wordsworth does not specially mention the melancholic type of poetry written by Thomas Gray, the equivalent of its being ultimately tragic, like the German Tragedies, and frantic, like the gothic novels, is enough to put it in the same basket of evil. The subject matter of Gray’s poetry which incorporates too much of the pain of life and not enough of the pleasure to uplift the reader must be counted as part and parcel of the literature that only gratifies the baser feelings of human kind. To clarify the point of Wordsworth’s on the important necessity of pleasure in the reading of poetry, it is useful once again to turn to
the “Preface”: “the Poet ought…especially to take care, that whatever passions he
communicates to his Reader, those passions,…, should always be accompanied with an
overbalance of pleasure” (580). To Wordsworth, the poet must excite pleasure in the reader
or else his writing simply becomes frantic, sickly, and stupid with no greater purpose than to
fulfill fleeting desires. Instead of a pleasure that quickly fades, Wordsworth’s poetry strives
to offer a timeless pleasure that can be appreciated at any moment. The element of pleasure
brings across one of the main distinctions of Wordsworth’s poetry in contrast to Gray’s. For
Wordsworth the only way to make pleasure accessible and long lasting is to tie it within the
poem to something the reader would have intimate knowledge of and which the reader could
come back to time and time again. This vehicle for Wordsworth is memory, and more
specifically, happy memories recollected in tranquillity that are generally tied to nature.
Gray’s poem, “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” only uses memory to provide a
fleeting glimpse at what pleasure was once but which could not be regained.

By reintroducing intense pleasure to the poetic form, Wordsworth reformed poetry
into something optimistic, romantic, and idealistic. As mentioned above, the element of
pleasure is integrally tied to recollection in tranquillity to Wordsworth. By the process of
contemplation, the event that fostered a sense of pleasure in the poet can be distilled down to
its essence and recreated for the reader, who can then in turn gain pleasure from a facsimile of
the original event. Through the spread of poetry readers from all over can have their minds
uplifted by a higher pleasure that encases them too in peaceful reflection. Wordsworth
promoted the idea that a return to nature is what is called for in order to combat the evils
which sickly literature has promulgated. However, he also understood that not everybody has
the leisure to affect a return to nature and “So in the Preface he is concerned to show how
poetry can have the same restorative effect as nature” \( (\text{Oracle and Hierophants}, 153) \). By making poetry a vehicle which could replace and actual return to nature Wordsworth made it possible for more people to experience an overabundance of natural pleasure, which in turn helped to combat the invasive craving after excess immoral stimulation.

In “Tintern Abbey” Wordsworth uses memory in order to show how he has progressed from the past to the present in his appreciation of the restorative aspects of nature. By this method, he introduces pleasure in what the eyes perceive in nature, but also in how the soul is affected by nature and made the better for it.

\[
\text{For I have learned} \\
\text{To look on nature, not as in the hour} \\
\text{Of thoughtless youth,….} \\
\text{And I have felt} \\
\text{A presence that disturbs me with the joy} \\
\text{Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime,} \ (89-96)
\]

In this quote Wordsworth encapsulates his theory of how the mind can come to a better perception of reality after contemplating that reality and recreating the emotions it inspires. He says that what he saw as a youth was seen without thought, but in the present he has learned through thought to look on nature in a new light wherein he can see its sublimity and awesome power. To him, the pleasure of simply enjoying nature in the moment is past but in exchange he has gained something even more wonderful, which makes the pleasure overabundant, and that is the “elevated thoughts,” the moral thoughts which contemplating the memory of nature in tranquillity causes. He even puts it in those words, “other gifts/ Have followed, for such loss, I would believe/ Abundant recompense” (“Tintern Abbey” 87-89). These “other gifts” are exactly the ability to better perceive and understand nature in its ability to offer to men a moral stronghold that can refresh them in times of need. The “loss” is
merely that of his youth. But it is because of this loss that Wordsworth is grateful, because instead of lingering on a past that he can not reclaim he turns it around so that the recreated memory from youth, as seen through the lens of contemplative thought, is more pleasing than the original.

In contrast to this, Gray’s “Eton College” recreates a past set in a natural habitat whose only function is to establish loss with no pleasing thoughts whatsoever. To Gray the appreciation of nature is counteracted upon by the sense of futility in life itself and in loving anything. He writes, “Ah happy hills, ah, pleasing shade,/ Ah, fields beloved in vain” (11-12). For Gray, the “happy,” “pleasing,” and “beloved” aspects of nature are all enjoyed in vain. There can be nothing lasting in the love of them because with the advent of adulthood these childish things are left behind for the harsh and cruel real world. Gray agrees with Wordsworth that the happiness that one experiences in youth is thoughtless, although he uses the word “ignorance” (99). Both are the same in meaning though: when one is young appreciation is scarcely intelligent, it is merely instinct and feeling. But then Wordsworth, on the one hand, takes that childish appreciation and by the use of thought matures it into a pleasurable memory in his present. Gray, on the other hand, is only able to mourn the loss of that happy ignorance. In his present the scenery is not pleasing, the vales do not roll gently and grant a pretty picture, instead they are used to denote the passage of time, “the vale of years” (81). By turning nature into the march from birth to death, Gray takes all the pleasure out of it. If one looks at a vale and thinks only of how many years they have lived and how few they have left to live then the whole prospect of looking at the vale becomes repugnant. Also, to Gray the very idea of using thought to destroy the happy ignorance is anathema, “Thought would destroy their paradise./ No more; where ignorance is bliss,/ ‘Tis folly to be
wise” (98-100). Instead of recollecting and recreating the past in order to make something better out of the memory, Gray treasures the ignorance of that moment in time. In these last lines he proclaims the past to have been bad because it was so brief, but that the present is worse because one can only lament the fleeting, happy past. In his poem, then, Gray offers only loss of the past with no recompensing quality to balance it out in the present. Thomas Gray’s message on the ability of nature to produce pleasure is a sour note that provides no uplifting moral implications, but only melancholic melodrama.

And yet it is possible to conceive of the idea that perhaps Gray would not have been so melancholic if his best friend, Richard West, had not passed away in the same year that “Eton College” was written. The sense that the poem gives of the futility of life could easily be seen as a mourning for the happy times when Gray and West could still play together as children, before the coming of disease and death which the poem seems so afraid of. Or even more than fear of death, the debilitating effects of the human emotions that he lists in lines sixty-one to eighty show Gray’s growth from childhood to adulthood. The most striking amongst all these otherwise hurtful desires is love, which, though normally viewed as the one saving grace, for Gray it is instead that: “pining Love shall waste their youth” (“Eton College” 65). It can be gleaned from the short biography on his life that Gray was homosexual and in love with West (British Literature 2677). If Love for West caused him to feel like his youth was wasted, than Gray’s dislike of why his past was all in vain becomes clearer. In being happy as a child Gray was truly happy because he could be with his friends, but when love entered the picture and he could not fulfill that love but only pine after it, the happy memories of youth became tainted.
For Wordsworth, though, the past can still be comforting because he has his “soul mate” with him always. Wordsworth’s capacity to appreciate nature comes from how he can reconstruct the past and make it coalesce with the present into a unified pleasurable whole. However, as evidenced by “Tintern Abbey,” the only way in which Wordsworth is able to totally recollect the past is through his sister, and without her one must assume that he would be lost. In the poem Wordsworth is grappling with “questions of presence and absence as they relate to the attempt to represent what may not be there” (Dark Interpreter 218). In this struggle of trying to reconstruct a memory which is past, though not non-existent, within the present moment Wordsworth has a problem in reliving the moment as an epiphany and rewriting it as a reminiscence. The main question, then, is whether he can find the rapture of the original moment in order to re-create it and provoke the overabundance of pleasure in readers that is needed for the poem to be Romantic. However, what Wordsworth discovers over the course of writing “Tintern Abbey,” is that: “I cannot paint/ What then I was” (76-77). It becomes apparent to him that no matter how hard he tries he cannot recreate that moment five years ago when he first beheld the Wye and Tintern Abbey. It is only in the final stanza with the introduction of his sister to the poem that Wordsworth is able to behold what he then was:

and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! Yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I was once, (117-121)

Through his sister, Wordsworth is able to experience his original pleasure in the surrounding nature. Through her voice and eyes, two of the five senses, he re-sees and re-hears his own nature.
past. It is interesting to note that just a few lines previously he mentions these two senses, “the mighty world/ of eye and ear, both what they half-create,/ and what perceive” (106-108). Thus, through the eye and voice of his sister, Wordsworth see and hears—half perceiving and half re-creating the world of his past. The link that Wordsworth shares with his sister is integral to his ability to recreate/re-perceive the past. Indeed, the only way in which he can accomplish this feat is by invoking “the continuity of his past self in the present aspect of his sister” (*Landscapes of Memory* 111). This quote returns the paragraph to the initial point that without the presence of his sister, Wordsworth might find it very difficult to “behold what [he] was once.” She provides the continuity for Wordsworth that Gray lacks, and through her Wordsworth is able to express his pleasure in the present, and past, and the future where even if he is gone she will continue to remember him with even “warmer love” and “deeper zeal” (“Tintern Abbey” 154). In this manner, Wordsworth can take pleasure in any adversity because he has assured himself immortality with his poetry, his connection to nature, and most of all, with his sister’s loving memory of him.

It is precisely this pleasure which is tied in no small degree to love that makes Wordsworth’s poetry Romantic. By idealizing the past, connecting the present and the future, and doing it all through an other separate from him yet still a part of him, Wordsworth makes his poetry Romantic. He offers a sense of hope, of optimism, in the face of the future by grounding people in their own memories and recollections of those memories in tranquillity. By taking the discourse of his poetry outside of time, in a sense, Wordsworth creates a magical space wherein pure pleasure in the appreciation of the sublime aspects of nature can be accomplished. The fact that the whole process hinges on the fragile link of his sister’s memory is what makes it all the more Romantic. Romanticism is also the optimistic belief of
an idyllic state of abounding pleasure centering on the exchange of mutual feeling between
the self/poet and the other/beloved. This is why Wordsworth’s poetry is Romantic and Gray’s
is not: Wordsworth has a beloved whom the poem was directed at/through and Gray does not
possess an other to counter his own melancholic thinking.
List of Works Cited


