RHETORIC OF SYMPATHY IN THE SONNETS OF WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Dr. Rahul Dhankhar

Abstract:

As Wordsworth points out in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), his poetry is about the fundamentally ambiguous nature of all profound human experience, or, as he puts it, the "fluxes and refluxes of the mind," and Wordsworth's technical achievement in communicating this truth is an important and somewhat neglected aspect of his art. Thus in the poetry, as in the theory, Wordsworth explores the paradox of a poetic art in which the contradictory functions of emotion and thought, of spontaneous overflow and intellectual discipline, are integrated into a meaningful and purposeful whole. In his poetry, as perhaps in that of no other English poet, one sees a mystical, joyful affirmation of the universe subjected simultaneously to a moral and intellectual scrutiny.

Introduction:

The three major sonnets at account, works of the highest imagination, not only illustrate the theory of poetry that Wordsworth formulates so carefully in the Preface, but actually embody the imaginative truth in that theory, the moral struggle to come to terms with the ambiguity of deep human experience and to establish and communicate the discovery as the rational basis for human joy. Fundamentally, Wordsworth's rhetoric of sympathy is rooted in his rare ability to enter fully into the experience of the human figures of his poems, "to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs." And not only people, for the poet finds, "every where objects that immediately excite in him sympathies." The reader is involved in Wordsworth's compassionate universe through pity, sympathy, or simply fellow-feeling, which give him a sense of "closeness" to the poet's experience, and recreate in him the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" which Wordsworth thought should re-energise his moral sense. Wordsworth employs the logic of ordinary prose syntax as the vehicle of this rhetoric because the precise articulation of feeling demands ". . . a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets, who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men. . . ." Thought enters the complex emotional process as a qualifying factor, for, as Wordsworth makes plain, his poetry is also the result of thinking "long and deeply."This implies a sense of intellectual detachment, allowing the moral judgment full play and fundamental to the communication of this "distancing" effect is Wordsworth's consistent use of irony for, as he stresses, "upon the accuracy with which similitude in dissimilitude, and dissimilitude in similitude are perceived, depend our taste and our moral feelings." This intellectual perspective, created by the rhetoric of irony, is embodied in an imagistic technique which creates a sharply distinct experience of the poem from that offered by the syntactical development of the rhetoric of sympathy. In the sonnet, "Composed upon Westminster Bridge," Wordsworth's use of the traditional sonnet form, the octave setting the situation and the sestet clarifying and resolving the poet's response to it, supports the rhetoric of sympathy. The poem's logical development, opening with a large rhetorical statement and concluding on a note of breathless wonder, carries the burden of its joyful lyricism. The transfiguring and liberating vision of the city in rare harmony with the natural world is dominant because Wordsworth overcomes his reader's critical defences by generating suspense about the poem's subject, which is held over until the fourth line, while the developing personification of the city and the apparently straightforward appeal of "Dull would he be of soul who could pass by" draw on the reader's common stock of ready sympathy. The city is further humanized by the metaphor, "mighty heart," which includes the sleeping houses and the citizens in its involvement with the natural universe; a relation which includes both speaker and reader, perceiver and perceived. But Wordsworth also wants the reader to realize that the emotion excited by the poem is in excess of its subject and while the logical development of the poem's syntax presents a pure, limpid vision, the sonnet has another life going on in its imagery. In one of Wordsworth's letters, mentioning an objection to his ambiguous description of the city as both "bare" and "clothed," he

suggests how the poem's moral vigour lies in the dichotomy between its syntax and its imagery; "The contradiction is in the *words* only — bare, as not being covered with smoke or vapour; — clothed, as being attired in the beams of the morning." Nothing stands between the beauty and the observer because the syntactical meaning is negated by the image. Essentially, this is the process of the poem's ironic rhetoric and it is best displayed in its central metaphor, the rapturous encounter between the sun and the city, which overtly symbolizes the union of the human and natural worlds. The syntax suggests that the city wears the garment of beauty like a bride on her wedding morning. The sun approaches as a lover and the city lies "open" to his fierce embrace, to be "steep[ed]" in "splendour." The vitality of this sexual imagery is a powerful source of the poem's surprising revelation of harmony, but the sense of joy it generates is illusory, for the strength of the statement makes a telling contrast with the images of death-like torpor governing the city's response. Supine, passive, its indifference renders the union sterile and simply ironic. This central contrast between appearance and reality is supported by the dichotomy between the houses which *"seem* asleep" and the "mighty heart" which *"is* lying still" [my italics]. The sonnet's conclusion logically seems to proclaim the reconciliation of civilization and nature, but the statement of vital harmony is ironically negated by the imagery to enforce the reader's simultaneous apprehension of a world of moral death. Thus the deep calm which the speaker experiences is dangerously seductive, producing a false sense of liberation. His observation of the river's capricious joy as it "glideth at his own sweet will" is conditioned by a vague, idealizing response, which is reversed by the final, imprisoning image of the city's dead heart. As Wordsworth remarks in the 1802 Preface, in truth the city will "reduce [the mind] to a state of almost savage torpor." Throughout the sonnet the innocent vision is counterpointed by one of disenchanted experience as its syntactical meaning is reversed by the imagery. The declamatory force of the opening line, proclaiming one of earth's most glorious prospects, is ironically undercut by the concluding, bathetic image, "fair," while the neutral "sight" and the conventional "touching" and "majesty," emotionally abstract and bland, imply a shallow emotional reaction. Moreover, when one examines the images employed to evoke the city's beauty it is curiously not there; that is, not concretely there. Its glory shrivels to the tinsel light generated by such vapid images as "beauty of the morning," "All bright and glittering," "first splendour"; *clichés* of feeling which produce only an emotional haze. Moreover, the city's "calm" is only majestic in direct proportion to the pulsating chaos absent from the morning scene but kept in the reader's critical eye by such negative images as "smokeless," by the huddle of neutral buildings and by the strange stillness of the city's heart. The calm is, after all, in reality only the serene majesty of a corpse. The idealized vision of the city, which the speaker shares with the common reader whose sensibility is not entirely atrophied, is succinctly summarized by the lines "Dull would he be of soul who could pass by/A sight so touching in its majesty." But their syntactical meaning, stressing a wondering submission to the experience, runs counter to the imagistic meaning, which emphasises that only the insensate would fail to be arrested by the view. Of course, Wordsworth does not disparage the idealizing tendency, but he is concerned to alert the reader to the danger of an overflow of undisciplined feeling. This perhaps has its origin in the context of

the sonnet's composition, which also supports the interpretation I am urging, that sees two contrary voices at work in the poem's rhetoric. . Wordsworth could hardly have been unaware of the personal irony and it is this ironic, detached, intellectual point of view, intercalated into the poem's structure, that saves it from naive idealism and ensures instead a balanced account of complex experience. The rhetorical process is reversed in the sonnet, "I watch and long have watched with calm regret," in which Wordsworth explores the apparently tragic dichotomy between the world of nature and the world of man. Here again one finds innocence equated with ignorance and excessive emotionalism, and experience with the stubborn refusal to be deceived. Once more the poem's syntactical development presents a coherent and self-consistent set of values which constitute its surface meaning. In the octave, the reader enters the poet's dominant viewpoint, a detached contemplation of the universe, and the quietly elegaic tone in which the limpid vision of the "slowly-sinking star" is presented, the stately movement of the verse, its descending stress and the intimately parenthetical "(So might he seem)" all conspire to draw the reader into the poet's mood of serene wonder. But the poem's sympathetic rhetoric also depends on Wordsworth's establishment of the bleak contrast between the beautiful, ordered cosmic drama and the human muddle and insignificance, which is sharply focussed in the sestet. Like the star, moving towards the barren landscape of death, man pays his debt to time, but while the moment of the star's eclipse is also the moment of its greatest glory, man's drift towards death ends with his achievements being simply "Depressed; and then extinguished." The poem's conclusion poignantly underlines the futility of man's preoccupation with progress for, unlike the star, he is a child of time. The sonnet's strict logic demands that we read it as a pessimistic statement of the tragic hiatus between the worlds of time and eternity. But this view, conveyed by the quiet pathos of the voice of innocence, is only one aspect of Wordsworth's vision and the world of experience, which is revealed through the imagery, embodies a more profoundly optimistic set of cosmic values, which man ignores.

Conclusion:

The syntactical logic of this sympathetic rhetoric suggests that Wordsworth is looking back nostalgically to a primitive pantheism. However, this is a superficial reading of the sonnet, for the balancing rhetoric of irony at work in the major patterns of imagery probes and qualifies these simple assumptions, asserting the intellectual perspective of detached moral judgment. This depends, as Wordsworth pointed out, on the reader's perception of both the "similitude" and "dissimilitude" inherent in the triple pattern of triangular love relations which cuts across the sonnet's traditional organization.the tension between sympathy and judgment, between the spontaneous overflow of feeling and the restraint of intellectual discipline, is finally reconciled in the poignant realisation that the poet and society have failed each other. It is" unfortunate that critical studies of Wordsworth have largely neglected his sonnets because in them we find the mature vision and technique of the authentic Wordsworth. They are, as I have tried to show, not

only works of high imagination, but also the products of an extremely self-conscious art. A careful reading of these poems permits a better understanding of the sceptical, intellectual aspect of his mind, an attitude which includes detached moral scrutiny as well as impulsive, joyful affirmation. More importantly, perhaps, it allows a fuller appreciation of the subtlety of his early poetic theory. "Symbiosis" in Wordsworth is the paradox of a poetic art in which the contradictory functions of emotion and thought, of spontaneous overflow and intellectual discipline, are meaningfully integrated. The rhetoric of Wordsworth's sonnets therefore, is the communication of these "fluxes and refluxes" of the poetic mind and the establishment in his readers of what Wordsworth calls an attitude of "rational sympathy" toward the universe; a hard-won, undeceived, unembittered response of intelligent joy.

References:

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