

### Clarifying Wordsworthian Nature

To the Editor:

In "Nature and Art in the Nineteenth Century" (*PMLA*, 92 [1977], 193–202), Carl Woodring traces the line that ties Wordsworthian "glorification of nature" to the self-enclosure of Wilde's art through Victorian actualism by way of the Darwinian rule of chance. With the demise of Wordsworthian Nature, writers asserted that art, like Nature, was perfectly useless as a guide to anything.

The logic of this nineteenth-century esthetic, it seems to me, is to relegate art eventually to empty museums and historical libraries. To pursue beauty for its own sake is as stultifying as to pursue truth, goodness, or happiness for its own sake. Beauty, like goodness, truth, and happiness, is relative to the observer, from which truism it follows that these qualities or states are relative to one's experience. With all due respect for poetic form, Wordsworth found that his primary motivation stemmed from the use to which he thought poetry should be put. Literature, to paraphrase the great Romantic George Bernard Shaw, should be judged by the amount of good it has done in bringing the human spirit to self-knowledge.

To speak of literature as "self-enclosed" smacks of an analogy between mathematics and literature, such as Frye makes. This abstraction makes them both impermeable to empirical reference. But words are not numbers, for where numbers are, in a sense and by definition, absolute, words are always subject to empirical interference: their sounds change; their meanings, as poets have long complained, elude specificity; and even syntax can be wrenched out of shape. Words, therefore, are inclusive where numbers are exclusive, as Bronowski states. The only language that is set and exclusive is a dead language.

One can only agree with Woodring's assertion that today we cannot make a rationally coherent choice between "the glorification of nature and the view of art as self-enclosed." But the issue, I think, is rapidly becoming "academic" for the reason that Keats gave in *The Fall of Hyperion*: the poet as opposed to the humanitarian is a mere dreamer, and unless the poet climbed the painful stairway to reality, he would rot (this is Keats's metaphor) in his dreamworld.

Wilde is an inevitable successor of one implication of the Wordsworthian view of the poet as prophet. Once Wordsworth established the idea that the poetic consciousness was itself the subject of the poem, all aspirants to the muse became their own subjects in an ultimate solipsism. But Wilde did not have the "feeling intellect" (an aspect of

Intellectual Love, or perhaps another term for it), which Wordsworth in *The Prelude* describes as the alter ego of Imagination. The real dichotomy is between the humanitarian-secular view and the esthetic view of art. Technology forced Wordsworth, as Woodring notes, to accept theoretically steamboats, viaducts, and railways into the poetic consciousness. But the Esthetes and Decadents, being unable to accept the new environment, proclaimed their alienation in what rapidly became a stereotyped pose. Their version of individual perception was not at all the fusion of the inner world with suffering humanity that Keats had envisioned.

And yet, the difference between Wordsworth and Wilde is not so historically restricted as Woodring implies. It is, rather, an opposition between a wide-ranging individualism and a restrictive aspect of the humanist tradition. Wordsworth's poetic revolution is an attempt to synthesize the idealist and the empirical traditions of knowledge, not as a philosopher abstracting from life, but as a poet describing the vital interaction of mind and body. Wordsworth stated this concept in the 1800 Preface when he said that a poet must be a man of more than usual sensibility, as well as being one who had thought long and deeply. As we all know, what emerged from this union of the physical and the mental was a poetry that evoked the principle of psychic growth particularized (and universalized) in a representative mind.

While Wordsworth, as Keats noted, is at times in the humanitarian tradition, Wilde is more strictly in the humanist tradition. By the simplest definition, a humanist is one who deals in words, loving them to the point of obsession. For Wordsworth, the word is as likely to veil as to reveal the human reality that is the referent for action and speech. If we contrast Wilde's detachment with Wordsworth's compassion (a word I like better than "environmentalism" to describe Wordsworth's position), we get a clear idea of the choice that science has forced upon the humanist, namely, whether we will continue to accept Bacon's dictum that the ways of the humanist and the ways of the scientist are separate. For science, as C. P. Snow said, is humanitarian. It has to be because its products directly affect life. The question for the humanist today is how to bridge the gap between words and things. Wilde did not attempt to bridge the gap; he surrounded himself with a pose of irony. When he did try to render the humanitarian view in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," all he could manage was sentimentality. He demonstrated the bankruptcy of the esthetic pose when he had to deal with genuine feeling.

The environmental/detached dichotomy is a

dilemma created by the culture itself, and it is unfortunate that literature and literary studies by and large have accepted the pole of detachment for their major thrust. Until we define, rather than ignore, the relationship between the good and the beautiful or between survival and pleasure (as Wordsworth tried to do so memorably in the *Intimations Ode*) the world will simply pass us by, and justly so. Keats defined Wordsworth's genius as exploring "those dark passages" where "We see the ballance [sic] of good and evil. We are in a Mist—We are now in that state."

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*Mr. Woodring replies:*

For the tenor of John Milstead's letter, I have only applause. Neither his ascription to Wordsworth of qualities other than environmentalism nor his observation that I did not refer to those qualities in the piece on nature and art gives me cause for complaint. I did try to say that "the idea that the poetic consciousness was itself the subject of the poem" (Milstead's words), insofar as that description is valid, was an epistemological *donnée* rather than a romantic purpose. If Wordsworth "established" this idea, it was from humanistic motives that included the humanitarian.

Elsewhere—for example, in the special joint number of the ADE and ADFL *Bulletins*, No. 32, September 1976—I have lamented the narrowness of linguistic focus in much recent literary study. But we need not accept passively a polarity of "humanist" and "humanitarian" that limits the humanist to the husks of language. "Greek letters" is poor shorthand for what Ficino, Erasmus, and Montaigne bequeathed in common. The humanitarianism of those whose chief signs are numbers is not so universal that custodians of words and literature should abdicate their claims and responsibilities as humanists. In "A Poet's Epitaph" Wordsworth repudiated the tendency to self-sterility in "the fingering slave" as well as in the "smooth-rubbed soul," the empiricist as well as the abstractionist. If the hungry sheep now look up only to scientists, it is not because numbers are intrinsically more nutritious than letters. Academe, with or without groves and with or without recovery rooms, is a place for clarification rather than for charitable medication; but Matthew Arnold gave the good advice that we should strive not merely to clarify but to make clarification prevail. I am glad to join Milstead in the attempt.

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