CONCEPTUAL DISSONANCE BETWEEN THOREAU AND WORDSWORTH'S VIEW ON NATURE AND IMAGINATION

Mahshad JALALPOURROODSARI[1]

Abstract

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) and William Wordsworth (1770-1850) belong to two different sects. The former is a Transcendentalist or a member of American Romanticism with its unifying account of self and nature, and the latter is an English Romantic poet belonging to a group of poets called the "lake School [or] the lakers" (Ruston, 2007: p. 90-91) who were involved in the appreciation of and dissolution in their natural surroundings. Despite the fact that these two figures have much in common, there are points and junctures where they diverge in their perspectives towards the essential grounds of their parallel philosophies. Through having a look at Thoreau's *Walden* and Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, this paper would attempt to present a broad account of the major aspects in which their literary ideas and points of views approach or diverge in regards to nature and imagination.

Keywords: nature, imagination, solitude, inspiration, meditation/exploration

I. Nature's Natural Allure vs. its Codified Nature:

The premier focus of the two above mentioned figures is their heightened attention to nature. One might assume that the Romantic spirit revolving around their description and representation of nature would mould their understanding of it. However, this is only partly true. Thoreau looks at his surrounding with a scientist's eye trying to scrutinize its mysteries and decipher its disguised meanings. His nature has layers of significance including spiritual and material ones (Buell, 1995: p. 171) which need to be demystified and knowable to him. As a Transcendentalist, this aspect of his work can be traced back to his mentor, Emerson, who "sacralized nature as man's mystic counterpart [believing that] nature could be decoded as a spiritually coherent sign-system" (p. 171). The observative texture of Thoreau's reading of nature is enriched with a labor being analogous to a physical one which fuels his intellectual and spiritual absorption of nature (Schneider, 1995: p. 93) in order for it to be controlled and eventually be "overcome" (p. 100). The point to be remembered here is that, such empirically and scientifically approached nature only brings him an unnatural allure which he describes as the "cheap but pleasant effect of walking over the hills" (Buell, 1995: p. 182). On the contrary, Wordsworth doesn't have such intellectual approach to nature. To Wordsworth, nature has the aura of present and past. It inspires him to go back in time, taste the lost hours of his youth and feel nostalgic for the "coarser pleasures of [his] boyish days / and their animal movements [which are] all gone by" (Wordsworth, 1985: Lines 74-75). Such feeling triggered by the natural scenery, is to Wordsworth a means of gloomy pleasure that "haunts [him] like a passion …" (line 79). The time gone by of

[1] PhD Student, Department of English, Tehran University

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which Wordsworth talks, deprives him of a true and genuine vision of nature which could have potentially led him towards reality, and brings instead the "loss of the real life and sight" (Abbott, 2007: p. 115). The nostalgic sensation having high frequency in Wordsworth's poetry can equally be seen in Thoreau's work in a different manner. The desired object for Thoreau is not quite the same as Wordsworth's lost and longed for vision. His is a longing for a "pristine simplicity … intensified by nostalgia for life at Walden" (Buell, 1995: p. 178). Thoreau wants to go back spatially and temporally to an Eden like Walden where he could peel off all unneeded layers trapping him and preventing his "spiritual growth [attained] through nature" (Corrente & Spring, 1984: p. 3). Hence, one can see the difference between Wordsworth and Thoreau in that Wordsworth is lamenting an already diminished or gone state of mind and feeling, whereas Thoreau's progressive growth is feasible in time through an engagement with nature.

Nature to both these poets is a refuge in which they find solitude and calm. Nevertheless, their conception of solitude sought in nature is quite different. To Thoreau, the solitary feeling provided by nature in Walden is a fluid one having the undertones of a "subversive and carnival attitude" (Schneider, 1995: p. 102) which brings the two milieus of city and its surrounding natural environment together. Thoreau retains his "social being …but through a continuous effort and a rigorous discipline [connects it] to the phenomena and processes of the natural world" (Taylor, 2005: p. 236). That is why the solitude he desires gains a carnivalesque tone, in that it moves between the two domains and develops a dialogic interaction between them. For Thoreau, there is no single solitary space in which he finds solace. In line with his scientific view of nature, the serenity and solitude he pursues, would not come in a meditative account of it, but in an explorative journey between two borders (Schneider, 1995: p. 92). On the other hand, the solitude that Wordsworth finds in nature is of a different nature. It springs from a truth value embedded within nature's bosom. This truth is what consoles Wordsworth and is "carried into his heart by passion" (Cited in Abbott, 2007: p. 116) at times when he has a "solitary walk" (Wordsworth, 1985: Line 136) amongst the hills and woods. In wandering through the hills and the mountains, he becomes a "rover …on the lonesome peaks" (Lines 53-54) and experiences a solitary moment filled with feelings of "tranquil restoration … [and] unremembered pleasure" (Lines 32-33). Therefore, Wordsworth's solitude is endowed with the restorative power which is quite contrary to Thoreau's subversive view of it. Wordsworth's understanding of solitude which is at odds with Thoreau's volatile perception of it, is beautifully put in his account "Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods / or of some hermit's cave, where by his fire / the hermit sits alone" (Lines 21-23). To Wordsworth, the solitary hermit is dissolved in nature which welcomes him inside (the cave) and provides him with a unique pleasure unremembered before. Such solitary moments can bring the gift of a blessed mood; or as Wordsworth states:

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Of Aspect more sublime than blessed mood
In which the burden of the mystery
…….
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened- That serene and blessed mood
In which the affections gently lead us on. (Lines 39-44)

Therefore, Wordsworth's solitary meditation and reflection on nature unravels the mystery of an unintelligible world, while with all his attempts to decode nature and its concealed significance, Thoreau's obsessive exploration of nature would only leave him with a "dual …[representation of it] as both knowable and unknowable" (Schneider, 1995: p. 101). Thus, Thoreau's unfixed positioning in Walden leads him towards forming a double facetted nature. One which lends itself to a rigorous scrutiny in the form of "discovery, retrieval and respect for the realm of physical nature" (Buell, 1995: p. 178) and another one which extinguishes any chance of its comprehension due to its multilayered essence. The former investigative approach deprives Thoreau of what Wordsworth would call the "harmony and the deep power of joy / We see into the life of things" (Wordsworth, 1985: Lines 49-50) and the latter's veiled spirit annuls any integrative marriage of self and the aloof nature.

II. Elemental Role of Imagination:

Another significant aspect to be noted about Thoreau and Wordsworth is their insight into the concept of imagination. Thoreau regards the image making power as being indispensable in that he sees the "capacity for vision … [as a] key to a successful and necessarily solitary journey of inward exploration" (Schneider, 1995: p. 103). This intimate understanding of self through imagination is in line with the very dual perspective he has towards the external world. As was previously mentioned, the outside nature to Thoreau is both comprehensible and incomprehensible at the same time, and in the face of such dual account, imagination would play the essential role of facilitator and mediator. It facilitates the reading of nature's true significance which is wrapped up in coded chunks of meaning (Buell, 1995: p. 171). Therefore, Thoreau's objective digestion of nature is facilitated by the innate power of imagination. Furthermore, in Walden, imagination provides him with the ability to bridge the "material and spiritual worlds … the earth and the sky" (Schneider, 1995: p. 101) through the image of the pond and its symbolic implication mirrored in its "smooth and reflecting surface" (p. 101). Here imagination brings about a more immediate connection between the self and nature which he describes as "heaven [not being] distant in time or place but … [being present] immediately under our feet here and now" (p. 101).

However, In Wordsworth's poetry, imagination gains a different texture or what he would name his "purer mind" (Wordsworth, 1985: Line 31). His vision is mixed with wonder and admiration at the sight of a nature inspired from outside while reverberating

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inside. This is the poet's purer mind or his inward eye which creates "harmony and the deep power of joy … in the life of things" (Lines 49-50) even though such sensation might be alien to others facing the same sublime nature. To Wordsworth, imagination is the natural offspring of being in the presence of "scattered yew-trees and the crags … / that look upon [him]" (Lines 40-41) and make his heart beat fast. It is when he is filled with inspiration and expectation that he can color the world with his imagination. This elevated state for Wordsworth is an involuntary one, in that it rushes and takes control of his vision:

> My anxious visitation hurrying on
> Still hurrying, hurrying onward, how my heart
> Panted – among the scattered yew-trees and the crags
> That looked upon me, how my bosom beat
> With expectation! Sometimes strong desire
> Resistless overpowered me, and the bird
> Which was the captive of another's toils
> Became my prey ……. (Lines 38-45)

Therefore, it can be seen that through his vision the invading scenery becomes one with the poet when he gets filled with its strong presence and transubstantiates the natural world into his prey or object of his private imagination. However, it should be noted that to Wordsworth, such integration with nature via imagination is a slippery one that diminishes as the time goes by. The fact of its gradual extinction causes him pain as he becomes unable to form a clear picture of what he sees and can only receive a "recognition [which is] …dim and faint" (Line 60).

Quite in line with Thoreau's analytical account of nature, it can be stated that his perspective of his role as an imaginative poet-creator was entirely different from that of Wordsworth's. Thoreau never believed himself to be a common observer but a man endowed with an astute intelligence unlocking the "laboratory of creation … [and] declaring the …operations of nature "(Richardson, 1995: p. 19). Hence, while for Wordsworth, the retreat to the past is a cause of grief due to the loss of his vision and imagination, Thoreau's retreat is of an utterly unequal nature:

> This retreat gives him time to reflect on the past …it affords
> Thoreau new views of the familiar landscape by allowing him
> to walk over its surface, measure it with surveying tools, and
> observe the new uses to which men and animals put it. Thoreau
> then comes full circle with his vision of nature resurrected. (Schneider, 1995: p.97)

Wordsworth immerses himself in his vision and the outward sight inspiring him, whereas Thoreau keeps the necessary distance from his object of study. Thoreau makes an effort to resurrect the nature thus viewed in a god-like manner. Whereas to Wordsworth the poet has no divine quality, to Thoreau the Transcendentalist, "imagining

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something is in a way creating something, man could create God [and nature] … and being who was capable of creating the divine must be divine himself" (Corrente & Spring, 1984: p. 3). Thus, Thoreau's imagination takes him so far as replacing the supreme reality engendering it all. He reactualizes nature and engages in adoring his creation through presenting compliments to it (Thoreau, 1854: p. 179). On the other hand, Wordsworth keeps no distance from nature and gives himself no such supreme position. His existence is melted into that of nature's which demands no intellectual or godlike action in the face of the immense pleasure derived from their interplay. It is true that Wordsworth feels the presence of God in nature, nevertheless:

> Of visitation from the living God
> He did not feel the God, he felt his works
> Thought was not; in enjoyment it expired
> …….
> He neither prayed nor offered thanks or praise;
> His mind was a thanksgiving to the power
> That made him. It was blessedness and love.
> (Wordsworth, 1985: "Pedlar" Lines 108- 114)

It can be seen that to Wordsworth, the conjured up sensations are different from Thoreau's. While both Thoreau and Wordsworth look at nature as a "source of inspiration" (Witherell, 1995: p. 57), their inspirations are dissimilar and diverge into unlike paths. Wordsworth is inspired to plunge in nature and thank his blessed power of imagination which brings him joy and love, whereas Thoreau's praise of nature takes him up and above any common and ordinary joy devoid of any motive to comprehend and dominate it.

Therefore, it can be stated that Wordsworth and Thoreau's account of nature and their ostensibly similar journeys therein, are in fact quite demarcated in their various understanding of its significance, beauty and intricacy. Acknowledging the unique imaginative angle through which they look at their natural surroundings, makes one have a more thorough appreciation of their poetic worlds engraved and ornamented with subtle touches which would be hidden to an inattentive observer.

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