

## The Design of Wordsworth's Sonnets

G. M. HARVEY

THE history of Wordsworth criticism generally has been that of a rather abstruse struggle to understand his poetry by continual reference to his theory. I suggest that the light which the poetry may throw upon the theory is a more valuable approach and it is the one I wish to employ here. 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,"<sup>1</sup> and Wordsworth's technical achievement in communicating this truth is an important and somewhat neglected aspect of his art. Bearing this in mind, we may see that what constitutes Wordsworth's curious ability to write two poems with apparently discrete and self-consistent meanings within the same space on the page — an effect which A. E. Dyson has called "symbiosis"<sup>2</sup> — is his employment of a rhetoric of sympathy balanced by a contrary rhetoric of irony; a process securing simultaneous identification and judgment, which produces such a complex effect in the reader's experience of his poems. 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. The three major sonnets I discuss, 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."<sup>3</sup> And not only people, for the poet finds, "every where objects that immediately excite in him sympathies."<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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. . . ." <sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup> 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. Thus, I am arguing, the vitality of the three sonnets under discussion lies in the setting up of a dialectic between what one might term the voice of innocence, conveyed by the sympathetic rhetoric, and the voice of experience, carried by the ironic point of view because it is the reader's response to these two states of being in the sharpest contrast that creates the interior drama of the poems. However, it is not necessary to reject one "meaning" of the poem in favour of the other, for they are mutually dependent and enriching. As Wordsworth makes very clear, poetry must engage the reader's intellect as well as his emotions, "the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves . . . must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, his taste exalted, and his affections ameliorated."<sup>9</sup> The rhetorical aim of Wordsworth's poetry, in short, is to effect in his reader a condition of mind in which identification and judgment are held in tension; a state of muted exaltation, which Wordsworth calls "rational sympathy."<sup>10</sup>

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."<sup>11</sup> 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 appre-

hension 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."<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the sonnet the innocent vision is counterpointed by one of disenchanting 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. As Dorothy's journal records, she and William did, in fact, pass by this powerful yet illusory vision.<sup>13</sup> 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. The dominant, beautiful image of the magnificent star "transmuted to a dusky fire" carries over to govern the sestet, where it works in conjunction with the image "Angels and gods!" which separates the contrasted states of octave and sestet and looks forward and backwards with deliberate ambiguity to form part of the poem's ironic rhetoric. As the images, "immortal Sire" and "glittering quire" suggest, the star gathers to itself the majesty of angels and gods but it is also humanized by the image, "bright attire" and in nothing is the star more godlike than in its humanity, in its submission to the laws which govern its transience and, at the same time, confirm its immortality. But, ironically, man's sense of his immortality, his equality with angels and gods, everywhere mediated through the natural world, has been betrayed by his egotistical, linear view of time and in striving to become a god on his own terms — to transcend the "flying moments" — in effect he also rejects his humanity. In contrast the star, by simply obeying the laws of the universe transcendently fulfils itself. But, more importantly, the star is part of a profoundly optimistic vision, for its glory, its patriarchal nature, its sacrificial obedience and its final resurrection embody a religious and specifically Christian pattern of experience. This is why, for Wordsworth, the star's death cannot stand apart from its resurrection for the point at which the eternal submits to time symbolizes

the continually redemptive act of God. The images of the star and of angels and gods thus serve to distance the reader in judgment on man, cut off alike from the deeper values of the temporal process and from the profounder assurance of his divinity.

What, finally, governs the sonnet's rhetoric is the speaker's sympathetic and yet ironic relation with the star. His mood of "calm regret" allows him the necessary detachment for a dispassionate contemplation of "our fate" and yet it permits him at the same time to address the star in intimate terms at the conclusion of the poem. For the poet the ironic distinction between the star and mankind becomes a double irony and thus a vehicle of sympathy, when the hidden parallel between their destinies is discovered to be stronger than the obvious contrasts. The sonnet's concluding lines stress this central paradox; "and our state,/In this, how different, lost Star, from thine,/That no to-morrow shall our beams restore!" Here, as throughout the poem, the meaning of the imagery contradicts the pessimistic logic of the syntax. Clearly time serves star and sun alike and the sunshine of man's glory, although temporarily dimmed will, like the star's majesty, be restored through the inexorable process of time. The laws governing God's universe are in truth contingent upon each other, so that the star's immortality is affirmed in conjunction with time, while man's life gains significance only when placed in the context of the infinite. The poem does not lead to stoic resolution but to a synthesis of sympathy and judgment in its assertion of the joy that lies beyond despair. The contrary rhetorics of sympathy and irony are thus held in tension throughout the poem as the means of being profoundly true to the complexity of human experience.

The symbiotic design of Wordsworth's rhetoric is most complex in the sonnet, "The world is too much with us," which possesses more of the expansive quality and fundamental sanity of the mature Wordsworthian vision and is



at once a more philosophical and urgently personal poem. The reader's sympathetic assent to the poet's position is initially gained by the implied perspective of conventional nostalgia of the opening lines and by the poet's willingness to share the common guilt rather than to preach. However, Wordsworth deplors the spiritual hollowness of our allegiance to the commercial ethic and the sonnet's rising note of bitterness quickly includes both poet and reader in this judgment as Wordsworth describes the sterility of life governed, not by the rhythms of the natural world, but by the shallower, more urgent rhythms of "late and soon," "getting and spending," an enervating process which "lays waste our powers" and which alienates us from a mysterious, magical harmony with nature. The radical dislocation of our perceptive faculties, "out of tune" with nature, is juxtaposed with the tranquil harmony of the sea, the moon and the winds and the reader's sympathy is focussed more personally in the sestet, where Wordsworth's abhorrence of the stultifying, imprisoning effects of the cash-nexus is expressed by his preference for a discredited faith. The neurotic, fragmented experience of modern life is contrasted with the wholeness of experience offered by the ancient faith, which embodies a perception of our necessary relation with the elemental world, symbolized by the gods, Proteus and Triton. The deadening, pathological preoccupation with the ego is contrasted with the direct, outward-going vision of magic and joy with which the reader comes to identify, for by the end of the poem the poet's situation is seen as an emblem of his own.

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. Wordsworth's loss of the ideal vision of a balanced, tripartite, mystical relation between man, nature and society is more profound than simple nostalgia can affirm, for he sees man as cut off from the ground of his being and the stereotyped, romantic image, "We have given our hearts away" registers his sordid betrayal of the natural world, a betrayal of instinct by will.

The ideal relation between the elements of the universe, humanity's only true model, is imaged in the sonnet's second triangular relation between the sea, the moon and the winds; an image full of mysterious paradoxes. While the sea and the moon are traditional masculine and feminine symbols, "This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon" is also an image at once erotic and maternal. The moon is both lover and child, while the image of the "up-gathered" winds strongly suggests sleeping children. This multiplicity of relations creates a complex "family" symbol of harmony by which Wordsworth asserts man's need to achieve a balance between the masculine, feminine and childlike aspects of experience, for the modern ethos, which fosters the aggressive exploitation of nature, is dominated by masculine will rather than by feminine instinct or childlike innocence.

For Wordsworth, man can only discover and fulfil his total humanity and divinity in a dynamic relation with the universe and the third triangular relation in the poem, between the ancient poets, the gods, Proteus and Triton, and the sea, proclaims that historically this has been possible. Unlike the first relation, broken by our narrow, linear view of time and the second, ideal relation that stands outside time, this third relation depends on a profound articulation of time and eternity. At an archetypal level the elements of air and water of the second image cluster are accommodated meaningfully into this third

group of images symbolizing man's natural origins. Although tabooed by the modern, Christian ethic, ancient society instinctively grasped the joy of this magical relation and incorporated it into the texture of religious and cultural experience. As mythical gods, Proteus and Triton function as symbols of their society's highest ideals. Proteus, with his ability to change his form and Triton, with the head and trunk of a man and the tail of a fish, present cogent images of an intimate, complex harmony between man and nature, each embodying aspects of the other. The joyful humanity of gods like "old Triton" stresses the richness of this direct vision of man's dynamic relation with the ground of his being, a relation which subsumes the generic elements of experience as the erotic image of Proteus rising from the sea is balanced by the poet's desire to be "suckled" in the old creed.

In this sonnet Wordsworth's rhetorics of sympathy and irony are synthesized in a union of the syntactical structures and the triple pattern of image clusters exploring the paradox that in modern society man has set himself up as a god but in doing so has forfeited the source of his true divinity. And not only society, but the poet himself is included in this general feeling of loss. "Great God!" which separates octave and sestet, fulfils an ironic function in this respect because, for Wordsworth, man's godhead is nowhere better manifested than in the power of the mind in creation — the theme of his major poems, *The Prelude* and *The Recluse*. Thus, while the sonnet's syntactical development is sympathetic to the poet, as the pattern of imagery suggests, the poem also contains desperately ironical self-criticism. Because of his alienation from the inner truths of the natural world, Wordsworth is denied the poet's proper prophetic role. Shorn of this moral vitality he stands in ironic contrast with the wind, in Romantic poetry a traditional symbol of poetic inspiration, and with Proteus, who also represents the gift of prophecy. He feels the loss of the prophetic vision of the ancient

poets, whose creative energy after all Proteus symbolizes, and has retained instead only the narrower egoism bred by the materialist ethic.

While the rhetoric of sympathy ensures that the reader shares the modern poet's predicament as the spokesman for his disintegrating culture, the imagistic rhetoric of irony distances him in judgment. Rhetorically, Wordsworth succeeds in presenting his poetic power at a low ebb while preserving sympathy for the poetic *persona* and vividly evokes what has been lost while suggesting the sterility of the mind which records the process. The images of the sea, moon and winds are concretely and compellingly real, but when Wordsworth describes his personal situation the imagery becomes flaccid. There is the innocuous flatness and faint archaism of the Spenserian echo, "pleasant lea,"<sup>14</sup> which serves to emphasize, like the images of Proteus and Triton, also drawn from Spenser and Milton, that the sights he longs for are themselves the creation of literary mythology and as such are merely symbols of a more profound, direct vision which has been irretrievably lost. In this sonnet, 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.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 247.

<sup>2</sup>"Symbiosis in Wordsworth," *The Critical Survey*, 6 (1973), pp. 41-43. I am indebted to Mr. Dyson's perceptive analysis of the Lucy poems, in which he identifies a "symbiotic" relationship between their syntax and imagery. However, unlike Mr. Dyson, I regard it as a highly conscious effect, fundamental to Wordsworth's poetic design, particularly in the sonnets, and I do not agree that "to accept both meanings is to oversimplify."

<sup>3</sup>*Lyrical Ballads*, p. 256.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 245-46.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>11</sup>*Wordsworth's Poetical Works*, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), III, p. 431.

<sup>12</sup>*Lyrical Ballads*, p. 249.

<sup>13</sup>*Wordsworth's Poetical Works*, III, p. 431.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 424.