



Tintern Abbey to Westminster Bridge: Exploring Spatiality, Temporality and Liminality in Select Poems of William Wordsworth

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Abstract— “The highest priest of nature”, William Wordsworth, who helped in forging a new poetic sensibility in English literature, is more or less synonymous with the Romantic Movement he belongs to. The beauty of his lines and his radical departure from the earlier sensibilities, giving primacy to the rustic over the classic, the nature over culture, and the ordinary over elite leave space for further analysis of the multiplicitous binaries that the poet tries to address and resolve. Tintern Abbey, which is located on a rustic landscape overlooking the Wye river is spatially antithetical to the Westminster Bridge that overlooks the Thames river in bustling London. Unlike the general notion that romantic poetry invariably captures the rustic landscape, a close reading of Wordsworth’s poems would reveal a more slippery spatial reality that transcends the boundaries of the countryside. Oftentimes, the poet is trapped between fantasy and reality or in an imaginary liminal space from where there is no escape. Navigating between the past and the present, the poet is equally trapped in the temporal liminality of birth and prenatal existence. The landscapes of liminality in Wordsworth’s poems can be better understood through the various dualisms it tries to resolve. There is a genuine attempt to resolve the binaries of modernity and antiquity, happiness and grief, life and death, youth and old age as well as Christianity and Paganism. This paper attempts to locate (or rather understand) the boundaries of space, time, and emotions in the poetry of Wordsworth. The poems selected for analysis include: “Tintern Abbey”, “Resolution and Independence”, “Upon Westminster Bridge”, the Lucy poems (“Three years she grew”, “She dwelt among untrodden ways”) and “London, 1802”.

Keywords— *Liminality, Spatiality, Temporality, Wordsworth.*

"Myself will to my darling be
Both law and impulse: and with me
The Girl, in rock and plain,
In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
Shall feel an overseeing power
To kindle or restrain"

- (Three years she grew)

One of the most celebrated nature poets, William Wordsworth, who embodies the zeitgeist of the Romantic

age through his sensory lines, emotional depth and incomparable devotion to nature has an equally compelling idiosyncratic way of addressing a plethora of apparently unresolvable binaries which he attempts to synthesize and make sense of. The binaries wouldn't seem intelligible to someone who has a myopic historical vision that wouldn't let them see the various socio-political as well as economic conflicts that impelled the age like no other. The transition from the neoclassical to the romantic age was not an isolated literary phenomenon; rather it was part of a much greater schema of socio-political shift that undermined the

earlier oppressive social order of Continental Europe and beyond.

This paper attempts to understand the various binaries in the works of Wordsworth and the kind of phantasmagoric boundary lines it creates. Such blurred boundaries often lead to the formation of a liminal space, be it of time, space or emotions. Liminality, a term largely associated with postcolonial literature, traces its origin to anthropology. Citing the British anthropologist, Victor Turner, who coined the term as part of his extensive research on the rituals of Ndembu people of Central Africa, Fetson Kalua, in the article “Homi Bhabha's Third Space and African identity” writes:

“Turner observed that the entire ritual process revolves around one term: limen or liminality- the preeminence and dominance of the median or in-between stage during which time ritual initiates go through a period of disorientation and inhabit new forms of identity at any point in time, slipping in and out of determinate identity at will and generally displaying protean, ambiguous and sometimes diametrically opposed attributes such as alienation, confusion, amorphousness, ambiguity and/or individuality, among other things”. (Kalua 24)

The ruptures as well as slippages in Wordsworth's poems don't undermine either its aesthetic beauty or its philosophy; rather they leave space for a better analysis of the multiplicitous internal turmoils that surface when the disjunctive realities cross space.

Spatiality:

There is a general notion regarding the spatial configuration of Wordsworth's poems as a romantic work that it invariably captures the local and rustic landscape of the English countryside. City and modernity are often seen as antithetical to the innocence and tranquility of nature and the rustic life. However, only a closer look at his poems would reveal the real spatial contours that transcend the countryside.

There are poems that exclusively invite the readers' attention to this problem zone. “Earth has not anything to show more fair”(Composed) – this opening line of the poem, “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” is a romantic description of a space that is generally not associated with Wordsworthian poems. The poet goes on to describe the morning in London city as a “sight so touching” that only a person with a dull soul could turn a blind eye towards it. The ontology of anything that has fluid edges is problematic so much so that the description of the contours of the London city in the poem leaves space for such an analysis. The city is described as “silent,

bare./ Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie/
Open unto the fields, and to the sky” (Composed). The open borders of the city warrants a closer examination of the extent of the city landscape that ‘essentially’ demarcates it from the countryside. These fluid borders create a liminal space that is not quite a city or countryside rather an “in-between” territory that offers the possibility of both and none. The existential question of the city is connected to its temporal movements as much as it is to the frontiers. Explaining the ambiguous nature of the city and its temporal ontological shifts, Peter Larkin in his article “Wordsworth's City Retractions” argues that, “The “Westminster Bridge” sonnet ponders what a sleeping city can mean- not just as dreaming of its own elsewhere but one that lays bare its exteriority which seems able (while remaining inert) to re-encounter its interior life.” (Larkin 54)

The spatial ambiguity in his poems is not simply physical; rather it is equally that of the mind and emotions. The mental as well as emotional space of the poet is equally scattered and splintered between the corruption of the city life and the angelic innocence of the countryside. This binary is addressed and attempted to resolve in a number of poems of which the most prominent one is his celebrated poem, “Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey”. Revisiting the Tintern Abbey that is situated on the banks of the Wye river after five long years, the poet illustrates the power of nature in offering a safe retreat to the human race that is lost in the dullness and desolation of modern life. The poet finds solace in the presence of nature which lightens “the weary weight/ of all this unintelligible world”. Lost in such a wearisome world, his spirit would transcend the limits of the physical body. It yearns to cut across the physical spaces of the city to reach the Wye river which offers the poet a “tranquil restoration”. The poem reads:

“In darkness and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart—
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!” (Lines
Composed)

The space invariably has a deep impact on the psyche of the poet which is precisely why he longs to escape the monotony of the city life to find consolation in the lap of nature. The internal spaces of the poet are intertwined with his external ones and the invocation of

nature is an attempt to break free of this unpleasant, yet deeply interconnected reality of the spaces.

Life v/s Death:

Liminal Space, in Wordsworth's poems, finds an expression between the state of Life and Death as well. The death of Lucy, for instance, doesn't make much of a difference in the life of many who barely felt her presence when she was alive. In the poem, "She dwelt among untrodden ways" it is said that "she lived unknown, and few could know/ When Lucy ceased to be" which implies the non-difference such an event has in the life of those around Lucy, however, with the exception of the poet who finds her absence as an irreconcilable loss. The poet, who is affected by the death of Lucy, exclaims "But she is in her grave, and, oh,/ The difference to me!" (She Dwelt).

To the general collective, Lucy has a liminal existence wherein she is neither alive nor dead, which in derridean terms is an "absent presence". Lucy was absent to the general public even when she was physically present, on the contrary, for the poet, she is present even when she is dead (or absent). It is hence difficult to pin down Lucy's state of existence as merely presence or absence instead it is safe to assume that it occupies a liminal space where presence could be absence and vice versa. Even when she is dead, Lucy finds a mediated presence through the poems of Wordsworth. In other words, Lucy finds a presence through 'text' which, according to Derrida, is the only possibility of existence which he asserts in his seminal work, *Of Grammatology*, that "there is nothing outside the *text*" [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*] (Derrida 158). The closing lines of another Lucy poem, "Three Years She Grew", read:

"How soon my Lucy's race was run!
She died, and left to me
This heath, this calm and quiet scene;
The memory of what has been,
And never more will be." (Three Years)

Even though Lucy is dead, her memory lingers around and even finds an absent presence in nature. The spectral presence of Lucy is seen in the "calm and quiet scene" which makes her resurgence possible even when she is physically absent. Nature, in Lucy poems, is a liminal space where one could witness the bending of time, space and even the state of being.

Death also leaves a void to be filled; a gap that validates the need to resuscitate the dead ones. Realizing the pitiful state of England, Wordsworth invokes the dead poet Milton, in "London, 1802", as he is the only one who

could save the country which he considers as a "fen of stagnant waters"(London). The poet says, "Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour... Oh! raise us up, return to us again"(London). Invocation of the dead is equally an invocation of the old values when the new ones are taking a disastrous turn.

Youth v/s Old Age:

Where do the borders between youth and senility lie? Can someone be both at the same time? Is it possible to transgress the barriers of age through one's attitude? Is old age a premature form of death? This is a binary that Wordsworth addresses in the poem, "Resolution and Independence" which deals with the paradox and cruelty of life that prematurely took away the young Chatterton, at the same time, presents the indomitable will and resolution of a drooping old man who is a Leech gatherer.

The old man seems to be dead even when he is alive. He is too old to be alive, however, he is still breathing. The poem reads: "Such seemed this Man, not all alive nor dead,/ Nor all asleep—in his extreme old age"(Resolution). This liminality of his existence makes him a curious figure for the poet who is moved by the undying spirit of the old man. Initially, however, the poet chides the old man saying, "What occupation do you there pursue?/ This is a lonesome place for one like you"(Resolution) suggesting that he's overstepping his boundaries as an old man. This old man, however, doesn't respect any boundary that limits his being; there is a strong desire to push his limits to live his life as originally as possible. The boundaries of age, the bodily limits set by his waning health condition, the societal expectations of a 'dignified' occupation are challenged or even subverted by the resolution of the old man.

The poet feels that it is his mental willpower that subdues the leech gatherer's bodily limitations. Furthermore, he critiques the boundary between dream and reality.

"And the whole body of the Man did seem
Like one whom I had met with in a dream;
Or like a man from some far region sent,
To give me human strength, by apt
admonishment" (Resolution)

The old man, who appears to be sent from elsewhere, breaks the boundaries of the region and thereby exists in a state of flux. This fluid ontology of the decrepit man gives strength to the poet who has resolved to think about him when life gets difficult.

Spaces of Composition:

The fundamental philosophy of Wordsworth's poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; (it takes its origin from emotion) recollected in tranquility" warrants a closer examination of the mental as well as physical space of poetic composition. Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy, has written on her brother's compositions even though her generalizations of the places where such compositions take place are criticized to be lacking attentiveness. He "walks backwards and forwards", Dorothy writes in a letter, "and though the length of his walk be sometimes a quarter or half mile, he is as fast bound within the chosen limits as if by prison walls". "He generally composes his verses out of doors". (Letters Vol. 1). Such perambulatory compositions are however not the norm; in fact they are surprisingly rare. Dorothy writes in February 1808 that her brother has been "confined" to writing indoors when "in a milder season he would have composed his verses in the open air" (Letters Vol. 3).

There are other testimonies as well which describe the nature and space of Wordsworth's poetic compositions of which Charles Greville's "Memoirs" are important. In his Memoirs (1875), Greville recollects Wordsworth's own words that "he never wrote down as he composed, but composed walking, riding, or in bed, and wrote down after" (Memoirs 504). The final result of Wordsworth's creativity was neither extemporaneous nor necessarily in the presence of nature; rather it was largely a practice in recollection. Across the poetic career of Wordsworth, the spaces of his composition are not constant; instead it is in a flux. Andrew Bennet observes that:

"Wordsworth's effusive, alfresco, extempore, spontaneous, perambulatory mode of composition focuses on just a part of his practice, which in fact involves writing, re-writing, deleting, scratching out and overwriting, murmuring, "bumming and booping about", revising and dictating, in a variety of places and postures that include walking, sitting, lying down, standing still, riding a horse or sitting in a carriage as well as, finally, sitting at a table in a house, pen or pencil in hand, to write out words that - after revision and replacement, deletion review, re-revision, alteration, correction and editing - become completed poems." (Bennet 7)

Thoughts break the boundaries of the past and visit the poet who would compose poetry that would surpass the boundaries of his temporal existence. "My former thoughts returned", Wordsworth writes in "Resolution and Independence" which is suggestive of the

thought process behind his compositions. Events are hence not restricted by its temporal field of occurrence rather it spreads along its temporal axis which is the productive force behind Wordsworth's poetic compositions that have an existence beyond the poet. W.H Auden's meta-poetic, yet pessimistic lines from "In Memory of W.B Yeats", sums up this boundless nature of poetry that surpasses the life and death of its creator. Auden writes:

"You were silly like us; your gift survived it all...

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,

A way of happening, a mouth" (Auden)

CONCLUSION

The antithetical images of Westminster bridge and Tintern Abbey are used as entry points to understand some of the conflicting themes in Wordsworth's poems, specifically that of Life and Death as well as Youth and Old age, apart from problematizing the ideas of time, space and the nature of composition. The binaries also help in understanding the fluid borders that create a hybrid space that renders a new identity to the poems.

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