

Wordsworth's Meditative Imagination and the Other English Romantic Poets (1)

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Wordsworth の瞑想的想像力と イギリスロマン派詩人 (1)

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The aim of this study is to investigate the main attributes which constitute Wordsworth's imaginative and transformational activity in comparison with the other English romantic poets, especially Blake, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats. The main attributes are solitude, meditation and the other world. Wordsworth finds the other eternal world by his solitary meditation. His imagination works so well when he muses alone, and earthly things are transmuted into unearthly things at that time. The study of that process of transformation is the integral part of the understanding of Wordsworth.

The first part of the study deals with the explanation about Wordsworth's specific qualities, and the comparison between Wordsworth and Shelley in connection with the solitude which is one of the specific qualities of Wordsworth's imaginative working. As Wordsworth loves the solitude, Shelley tries to do so. But the poet of Shelley's "Alastor" can not find "the bliss of solitude" as Wordsworth can. That's due to the difference between their ways of thinking.

I

In Wordsworth's "To the Cuckoo," there are the following lines.

To seek thee did I often rove
Through woods and on the green ;
And thou wert still a hope, a love ;
Still longed for, never seen.
("To the Cuckoo," 11. 21-24)¹⁾

These words describe the state of Wordsworth in his boyhood. In the boy who seeks the cuckoo and roves through woods and over the field, we can see the typical figure of the romanticist. The romanticist flees from the "City's walls" (*The Prelude*, I, 7)²⁾ into the natural world where he can get mystical experiences. His interest lies not in the visible world but in the invisible world. Wordsworth says, "there is a spirit in the woods" (l. 56) in "Nutting." He wanders through woods in order to commune with the spirit or the absolute reality. In "To the Cuckoo," the cuckoo is sought not merely as that of the ordinary world, but as the spiritual thing. To seek the cuckoo is to seek the other eternal world. In the poet's mind, the cuckoo of the ordinary and visible world is transmuted into the supernatural and invisible thing. Such a trans-

mutation has a very important role in the romanticists. Blake sings about the transmutation in the following words very well.

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.
("Auguries of Innocence," 11. 1-4)³⁾

The world which the romanticists seek is this transmuted world. The power which causes such a transmutation is called imagination. The imagination has a close relation with insight. Wordsworth says,

Imagination, which, in truth
Is but another name for absolute strength
And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
And reason in her most exalted mood.
(*Pr.*, XIII, 167-170)

When the imagination works, he can get an "clearest insight" into the truth. In case of Wordsworth, the imagination works best when he muses in an isolated state. Wordsworth gets the transmuted or imaginative world by a solitary meditation. The solitary

meditation is the very important means to reach the other world. Wordsworth stays in his own isolated world, muses his past individual life and passes beyond the visible or finite world to the invisible or infinite world. This is his fundamental method to recognize the truth.

In "I wandered lonely . . .," a poet who meditates in solitude is described.

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye,
Which is the bliss of solitude:
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

("I wandered lonely . . .," 11. 19-24)

Meditating in solitude, the poet finds "the bliss of solitude." The daffodils which he has seen before, flash upon his "inward eye" and he is filled with pleasure. Solitude is the important element in his after-meditation. And it is so in the previous experience on which he muses.

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

("I wandered lonely . . .," 11. 1-6)

The poet wandered lonely and saw daffodils. His encounter with the daffodils occurs in a solitary world. It can not occur in crowded places. In the crowded places like the city, individuals lose their independent existences. In the solitary world, individual things appear with special meanings which can not be found in the noisy places.

The most significant aspect of the isolation or solitude is shown in the description of "a blind beggar" in the large city in *The Prelude*. Though the beggar lives in the throng in the city, he belongs to the solitary world. When the poet meets him, he finds deep meanings in him. Before we consider the significance of the beggar, we had better look at the state of the inhabitants of the city who lose their individuality in the crowd.

Oh, blank confusion! and a type not false
Of what the mighty City is itself
To all except a Stranger here and there,
To the whole Swarm of its inhabitants;
An undistinguishable world of men,
The slaves unrespite of low pursuits,
Living amid the same perpetual flow
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
To one identity, by differences

That have no law, no meaning, and no end;

(*Pr.*, VII, 695-704)

"One identity" described above, has no good meaning. It means that the inhabitants in the city lose their individuality and can not be distinguished from each other. They have "no law, no meaning, and no end." They have no dignity as human beings and we can not expect that anything precious will be produced by them. In such a throng, the poet meets a blind beggar and gets a great shock from him.

. . . on the shape of the unmoving man,
His fix'd face and sightless eyes, I look'd
As if admonish'd from another world.

(*Pr.*, VII, 620-622)

From the point of view of social value, the beggar who always begs for money in the street, has little worth. We are apt to ignore him and do not want to recognize him as an individual. But such an unworthy beggar gives the poet a profound shock. He feels "as if admonish'd from another world." The poet must have found something beyond this world in the figure of the beggar who sat alone. This silent beggar tells him the significance of the individual fluently. The beggar has the firmer existence than those inhabitants with eyes and limbs who are moving amid the flow of trivial objects in the city.

At the same time, we must not forget that the poet is also solitary. Even in the city, the poet lives in the solitary world and keeps his individuality. He does not lose himself in the crowd. So, though the large city reduces the inhabitants to "one identity" or nothing, it has a different meaning to the poet and he can find something precious where others can not find anything. The state of the city, "blank confusion" is different to the poet.

It is not wholly so to him who looks
In steadiness, who hath among least things
An under-sense of greatest; sees the parts
As parts, but with a feeling of the whole.

(*Pr.*, VII, 709-712)

The poet has the faculty of insight for discovering something significant which others can not find. His faculty for having "an under-sense of greatest/ Among least things" and seeing "the parts/As parts, but with a feeling of the whole" is the same faculty as Blake's faculty for seeing "a World in a Grain of Sand and a Heaven in a Wild Flower." This faculty of insight is imagination. Wordsworth's imagination is the most active in the solitary world and can grasp deep meanings from the solitary. It is true in case of "the solitary reaper" or "the leech-gatherer" as well as the blind beggar.

As an example, I would like to consider the leech-

gatherer in "Resolution and Independence." In the poem, when the poet wanders at a lonely place, he happens to see an old leech-gatherer. The old man is also wandering about alone. But he is different from the inhabitants of the city. He exists firmly like a huge stone and gives the poet a great shock.

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie
Couched on the bald top of an eminence;
Wonder to all who do the same espy,
By what means it could thither come, and
whence;
So that it seems a thing endued with sense:
Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf
Of rock or sand reposes, there to sen itself;
Such seemed this Man, not all alive nor dead,
Nor all asleep-in his extreme old age;
("Resolution and Independence," ll. 57-70)

The old man exists like "a huge stone" or "a sea-beast." This sense of existence arises from his solitary life. His life is filled with unhappiness and misfortune but he does not lose his individuality. While he lives his own life at lonely places, he comes to possess human dignity. The solitude makes him sublime. The poet's "meditative mind" (*Pr.*, I, 150) is attracted by the figure of the old man and the poet gets an insight into the real worth of the old man by his imagination. Then I would like to think about the solitary meditation more profoundly. The meditation on the past experience plays a very important role in Wordsworth. It has a deep relation with imagination. While the poet muses on the past experience, it is transmuted into the real experience by the imagination. Wordsworth's imagination is the faculty to find "Infinity and God" (*Pr.*, XIII, 184) at the ultimate state. So, the transmuted experience has the divine aspect within itself. We can find examples of such transformation in the meditation on "the experience in the Alps" in *The Prelude*, and the meditation on the Wye in "Tintern Abbey." In those examples, when he muses on the past experience, he is carried away into the eternal world, and sees into the eternal life by the imagination. "The experience in the Alps" is that though he climbed towards the Alps, he crossed it unconsciously and coming back disappointedly, he saw the impressive sight at the Symplon Pass. And when he muses on the sight afterwards, it comes to have the eternal aspect.

... the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfetter'd clouds, and region of the Heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,

Of first and last, and midst, and without end.
(*Pr.*, VI, 565-572)

Wordsworth sees the sight as the symbol of eternity just as Blake sees "a Heaven in a Wild Flower."

In "Tintern Abbey," when in the midst of the city, the poet muses on the Wye which he first visited, he feels "sweet sensations" ("Tintern," l. 27) and in addition to that, he gets "another gift/Of aspect more sublime" (ll. 36-37).

... -that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,-
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
Which with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.
("Tintern Abbey," ll. 41-49)

If we compare the state of the poet, who meditates in the city, with his state of the previous experience, we can understand the effect of the meditation. While he meditates, the previous experience is transmuted into what belongs to the other world, and he is in the blessed mood. The past experience is the one "that had no need of a remoter charm/By thought supplied, nor any interest/Unborrowed from the eye" ("Tintern," ll. 81-83). And his state is described in the following words.

... the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and the gloomy
wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite: a feeling and a love,
("Tintern Abbey," ll. 77-80)

Selincourt points out that this state corresponds to the state explained in *The Prelude*, "'twas a transport of the outward sense,/Not of the mind, vivid, but not profound" and "the inner faculty is asleep." (p.314) When he first visited, he could not appreciate the significance of the experience. It is after-meditation that makes him appreciate it and see into "the life of things" in "the blessed mood." The other world is opened by the meditation. The romanticists seek the invisible, mystic, eternal and absolute world. Wordsworth gets to that world by the meditation.

It can be seen in "To the Cuckoo," too. About the words, "O Cuckoo! Shall I call thee Bird,/Or but a wandering Voice?" ("To the Cuckoo," ll. 3-4) in the poem, Wordsworth says, "this concise interrogation characterises the seeming ubiquity of the voice of the cuckoo, and dispossesses the creature almost of a corporeal existence; the Imagination being tempted

to this exertion of her power by a consciousness in the memory that the cuckoo is almost perpetually heard throughout the season of spring, but seldom becomes an object of sight" and that the process of the imagination is "carried on either by conferring additional properties upon an object, or abstracting from it some of those which it actually possesses and thus enabling it to re-act upon the mind which hath performed the process, like a new existence."⁴ These explanations are made about the process of the transmutation by the imagination in his meditation. When he hears a cuckoo's voice, it awakens his "meditative mind," makes him recollect the cuckoo which he heard in his boyhood and finally the cuckoo is transmuted into "no bird, but an invisible thing/A voice, a mystery" ("To the Cuckoo," 11. 15-16) by the imagination. An ordinary bird comes to belong to the other spiritual world.

It is meditation and imagination that make such a transformation possible. In order to understand the relation between them, it would be better for us to compare them with fancy. Imagination and fancy are explained as the faculties "to modify, to create and to associate."⁵ And Wordsworth says, "to aggregate and to associate, to evoke and to combine, belong as well to the Imagination as to Fancy."⁶ About the difference between them, he says, "either the materials evoked and combined are different." He says that fancy's materials are "slight, limited and evanescent" and that fancy is "as capricious as the accidents of things." And he says, "Fancy is given to quicken and to beguile the temporal part of our nature, Imagination to incite and to support the eternal."⁷ Fancy belongs to the ordinary world and not to the meditative world. The difference between the fancy and the imagination arises from the fact that the fancy has no meditation. The meditation arises from the meditative world. And if the meditation does not evoke the imagination, the eternal or invisible thing will not be embodied. If the meditation and the imagination exist individually, the poet can not reach the eternal world.

In "To the Cuckoo," after he asked whether the cuckoo was a bird or a wandering voice, he is absorbed in meditation, saying "from hill to hill it seems to pass/At once far off, and near" ("To the Cuckoo," 11. 7-8). When he says, "Though babbling only to the Vale,/Of sunshine and of flowers,/Thou bringest unto me a Tale/Of visionary hours" ("To the Cuckoo," 11. 9-12), he spreads his thoughts over time and space. When he is sure that to him the cuckoo is yet "no bird, but an invisible thing,/A voice, a mystery" (11. 15-16) and "the same whom in my schoolboy days/I listened to" (1. 17-18), the cuckoo which is omnipresent in space, becomes omnipresent in time, and the ordinary bird is transmuted into the spiritual thing. Then the distinction between the earth and the spiritual world disappears and the poet

restores "golden time" (1. 28). The eternal world appears around him.

O blessed Bird! the earth we pace
Again appears to be
An unsubstantial, faery place;
That is fit homes for Thee!
(*"To the Cuckoo,"* 11. 29-32)

Such a world arises from the solitary meditation. While he meditates alone, the imagination which lies in the inner depth of the poet, works and leads him to the other world.

Wordsworth's famous definition about poetry, "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin in emotion recollected in tranquility,"⁸ also shows that the poetry has the deep relation with the meditation.

The solitary meditation is Wordsworth's fundamental way of recognizing the truth. While he muses on his past individual experience, the other world is opened before him by the imagination.

II

Solitude is the important aspect of Wordsworth. His inner faculty works in solitude. In "A Poet's Epitaph," he says,

And impulses of deeper birth
Have come to him in solitude.
(*"A Poet's Epitaph,"* 11. 47-48)

Those impulses lead him to "the bliss of solitude." He says in *The Prelude*,

How gracious, how benign, is solitude;
How potent a mere image of her sway.
(*Pr.*, IV, 357-358)⁹

The pleasure felt in solitude is due to the world which is opened by meditation.

On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life,
Musing in solitude I oft perceive
Fair trains of imagery before me rises,
(*"Preface" of The Excursion,* 11. 1-2)

"Fair trains of imagery" which rise in solitude give Wordsworth much pleasure. But the same things inflict acute pain on Shelley. While Wordsworth describes the solitary's joy, Shelley describes the solitary's agony.

Shelley attaches great importance to the solitude as well as Wordsworth. In *A Defence of Poetry*, he says, "A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds."¹⁰ We can find the words of "solitude" in his poems.¹¹ He says, "My thoughts arise and fade in solitude" ("My

Thought." 1. 1), "I love tranquil solitude" ("Song." 1. 37), "I love all waste/And solitary places" ("Julian and Maddalo," 1. 15).

The theme of the solitude is dealt with in Shelley's "Alastor," too. The sub-title of "Alastor" is "The Spirit of Solitude." It is deeply influenced by Wordsworth. The influence can be seen on the subtitle and the fact that Wordsworth's words, "natural piety," "obstinate questions," and "deep for tears" are included in "Alastor." Though the theme is the same solitude, "Alastor" is very different from Wordsworth's poetic world. We can not find "the bliss of solitude" there. The poet who suffers from the agony which arises from the solitude is described in "Alastor." The poet in "Alastor" wanders like Wordsworth's wanderer. But his travel is filled with the agony which has its root in the quality of the romanticist. His agony arises from his aspiration for the ideal or the absolute. Though Wordsworth has the same aspiration, he finds the ideal when he muses in solitude, and feels not the agony but "the bliss of solitude."

In "Alastor," the poet who has spent his youthful time happily, leaves his native land. He is a romanticist who searches for the absolute truth. In the preface of "Alastor," Shelley says that the poet is "a youth of uncorrupted feelings and adventurous genius led forth by an imagination inflamed and purified through familiarity with all that is excellent and majestic, to the contemplation of the universe."¹² He wanders through Athens, Tyre, Balbec, Jerusalem, Egypt, Arabia and various places in the world.

It is a lonely travel. It is the aspiration for the ideal that makes him wander. And as soon as he sees it, the solitude leads him to the destruction. He throws away all the earthly things and devotes himself only to the ideal. The solitude makes him leave the earth, drives him to the ideal and the poet can not think of anything except the ideal. In the preface, Shelley says, "the poet's self-centred seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin."¹³ About the time of the change for such a ruin, he says, "the period arrives when these objects cease to suffice. His mind is at length suddenly awakened and thirsts for intercourse with an intelligence similar to itself. He images to himself the Being whom he loves."¹⁴ In the poem, "the Being" is described as "a veiled maid." A vision of "a veiled maid" that appears before the poet when he sleeps in the valley of Cashmire, brings about great changes in the life of the poet.

A vision on his sleep
There came, a dream of hopes that never yet
Had flushed his cheek. He dreamed a veiled maid
Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones.
Her voice was like the voice of his own soul
Heard in the calm of thought,

("Alastor," 11. 149-154)

The poet seeks the embrace of the "veiled maid" and they are united into a flame of passion.

He reared his shuddering limbs and quelled
His grasping breath and spread his arms to meet
Her panting bosom . . . she drew back a while,
Then, yielding to the irresistible joy,
With frantic gesture and short breathless cry
Folded his frame in her dissolving arms.

("Alastor," 11. 182-187)

Until he sees this vision, he has spent his youthful time communing with Nature, studying philosophy and wandering through the ruins of the ancient civilizations. But after this experience of the vision, he can not help seeking to meet the "veiled maid" again and "a distempered dream" (1. 225) comes into his sleep. At night "the passion" comes like "the fierce fiend" (11. 224-225). The youth who struggles for the maid is described as the image of "an eagle and a serpent." And such an inner state reflects itself on the outer world.

The waves arose. Higher and higher still
Their fierce necks writhed beneath the tempest's
scourge
Like serpents struggling in a vulture's grasp.
("Alastor," 11. 323-325)

The poet "eagerly pursues/Beyond the realms of dream that fleeting shade" (11. 205-206) of the vision which he saw in his sleep. "For sleep, he knew, kept most relentlessly/Its precious charge" (11. 292-293), sleep comes to have a very important meaning to the poet. Sleep stands very near to death. He says, "Does the dark gate of death/Conduct to thy mysterious paradise,/O Sleep?" (11. 211-213). It is sleep and death that the poet of "Alastor" seeks. He thinks that he can find the unearthly, beautiful and ideal in sleep and death. Shelley sees the ideal in his dream when he sleeps, while Wordsworth sees it in the solitary meditation. To stay in solitude means to leave the ordinary world. Shelley's solitude makes him reject the earthly things strongly and seek only the ideal madly. It is an initial explosive to the destruction and never brings consolation to him.

Wordsworth is also the romanticist who seeks the ideal. But he does not forget the earth. It is described in "To a Skylark."

Leave to the nightingale her shady wood ;
A privacy of glorious light is thine ;
Whence thou dost pour the world a flood
Of harmony, with instinct more divine ;
Type of the wise who soar, but never roam ;
True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home !

("To a Skylark," 11. 7-12)

On the other hand, Shelley's skylark has no interest in human affairs. She does not show her figure, soars high and flies away from the earth.

Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest
Like a cloud of fire;
The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever
singest.

("To a Skylark," 11. 6-10)

Shelley's skylark is "the scorner of the ground" ("To a Skylark," 1. 100). Shelley wishes to soar high with the bird. In "Alastor," the poet soars and roams. According to Wordsworth's words, the poet in "Alastor" is not "the wise." In Wordsworth's "To the Cuckoo," the cuckoo becomes an invisible thing or a spirit but to the poet it is more important for the earth to be transmuted into the spiritual world than for him to fly away from the earth with the bird. In Wordsworth's solitude, the earth is united with the heaven and is transmuted into the eternal. As for Shelley, who despises the earth and seeks the heaven, the solitude strengthens such an inclination and makes him leave the earthly things. But the poet is a man who must keep his body and live on the earth. So the solitude means the agony to him. The difference of the solitude between Wordsworth and Shelley, does not arise from the solitude itself but consists of their

characters. The characters of the poets reflect on the solitude, one comes to "the bliss of solitude" and the other to the destruction by the solitude.

References

- 1) Wordsworth's poems except *The Prelude* (Text of 1805) are quoted from *Wordsworth Poetical Works*, ed. T. Hutchinson (Oxford Univ. Press, 1936)
- 2) Wordsworth, *The Prelude or a Growth of a Poet's Mind* (Text of 1805), ed. E. de Selincourt rev. H. Darbishire (Oxford Univ. Press, 1960)
- 3) Blake, *Poetry and Prose of W. Blake*, ed. G. Keynes (The Nonesuch Library Press, 1967)
- 4) Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works of W. Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt (Oxford Univ. press, 1952), II, 437-438.
- 5) *Ibid.*, II, 441.
- 6) *Loc. cit.*
- 7) *Ibid.*, II, 442.
- 8) *Ibid.*, II, 400.
- 9) *The Prelude* (Text of 1850)
- 10) *Prose of the British Romantic Movement*, ed. J. R. Nabholz (Macmillan, 1974), p.727.
- 11) Shelley's poems are quoted from *Shelley Poetical Works*, ed. T. Hutchinson (Oxford Univ. Press, 1970)
- 12) *Ibid.*, p.14.
- 13) *Ibid.*, p.15.
- 14) *Ibid.*, p.14.

(Received January 30, 1985)