

Romantic Poetics

If the Romantics were right, that there is a need for poets to tack against the rationalist gust and allow the Source of all Wind to blow through them...then how far does the prosody change? If Wordsworth writes about the scene before him, and keeps the faith of telling accurately what he sees in Nature...Is he there yet? Not really, he's just writing journalism. There are hawks in the air and daffodils blooming... Very pretty.

But he doesn't just do that, he says – *I was standing there in this Mood....then I was seeing these wondrous things and it ravished me. And truly these ravishings are more important to me than anything and I shall remember them all my life and shall cause you to remember them all yours as well.* Now he has kindled the moment when Nature blew across his pipes...and the musicality of his lines give proof. Proof that there is music in Nature, that Beauty opens the heart, that nature is Everything. The Romantics said *that* was an act of Imagination. But there is something Not Quite about this... to my mind.

If we write words, even on the spot, as our sensibility is flooded with rapture over a landscape, we are one step removed from conversion. It is still an act of Kiss & Tell. The Self inflates to magniloquence, orates to an audience that the scene is being seen, by a genius, exhorting dear readers! to look upon the world like he, and to recognize the superiority of this philosophical stance.

In Chinese tradition, a Taoist or Buddhist poem was meant to be infused with the moment and its setting...in such a way that time collapses, and consciousness changes so that not only does the reader appreciate the eloquence and feel reminded that it is in a good cause...the reader senses the enlightening bolt, feels how transparent the writer or painter is as a conduit of the Tao. Of course just as in the Romantics' work, there are only a few poets in Chinese tradition that totally embody this...and Wordsworth gets very near to these in his best.

But if one were to live out fully the notion that explanation and Logic are obstacles to Imagination, then the poet would need to step right out of that skin. The scene would infuse the poet to the degree that rather than simply describing it, the poem would be merged with it, a force within nature, nature itself leaking through the drizzle of semantics. The marsh would yield its daemon, its spirit forces. Tam-o-Shanter might be afoot.

Or, as I believe was the direction of the surrealists and some of the Beats...the poetry would simply take off beyond rational expectations of language. Maybe Gerard Manley Hopkins got nearest this by going so far with his musical sensibility...and yet there was no doubt that he was looking down at a pool in a creek.

Romantic theory says there is a Primary Imagination...which is as deep as Nature itself, partakes of the Divine. Secondary Imagination is the Apollonian consciousness – it is Logos, if Primary is Mythos. Intellectual... if the other is emotional. Childhood is when we are living in Primary; Wordsworth wrote a great deal in lament of having lost that in Adulthood.

When I read “Tintern Abbey” or Coleridge’s “Lime Bower”, I hear two men telling me of this, describing how inspired they were in the wild scene. Yet in the usual sense of ‘Imagining’, these poems are lacking. The natural scenes are described As They Are, then the state of mind, the exaltation is reported and placed at the highest echelon of human knowledge by dint of eloquence rarely ever touched in English. But...*all* these elements are rational. Beautifully so, but...it’s the accurate physical world, and the discussion is reasoning of the best sort.

In contrast, consider a Dickens story, Alice in Wonderland, Midsummer Night’s Dream... or the Ancient Mariner for that matter. Imaginative literature, of the ‘Primary’. Reading Dickens one can be certain he is Seeing the landscape, characters, plot, mood...from his mind’s eye, imagining a new world from deep sources. Perhaps we confuse the meaning with the word ‘creative’, or ‘genius’...the sense that a literary genius is one who ‘makes-up’, creates, originates.

In that light Coleridge & Wordsworth are really philosophic poets...in the Classical tradition. They shared that drive to produce a long poem with Classical themes, something to put them in the pantheon with Virgil. Sometimes when they veer into consideration of the Pagan, they leap to the comfort of Grecian mythology, rather than to the pantheism of ancient Britain or some wilder new consciousness like Pantisocracy. It’s hard to consider such poems as works of great Imagination. There is the feel of college friends talking about everything wild and free, but eventually settling for careers of discussing these things and writing to tell the world how exalting it is to think about exaltation.

Except. The mind must enter a kind of inspiration in order to imagine a blank page transformed into Blank Verse. And to imagine that one can get into a flow of such verse so that the Highest poetic music will result. ...”*abstruser musings...*” We are not accustomed to this music in our Age – it embarrasses us, we never hear it and thus cannot conceive it as something sprung from Genius, something Imagined. It is clearer if someone were to say: “Beethoven’s Late Quartets are works of great imagination” It’s not Subject Matter that we mean. It’s a sonic beauty never before conceived.