

Wordsworth's Relation to Nature

Tsuneko SUEOKA

ワーズワスと「自然」との関係

末 岡 ツ ネ 子

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Abstract

This essay took up current environmental issues. Wordsworth's specific objects of love were his rural region, the Lake District. When he learned of plans to extend the railway into his region, he strongly opposed them and wrote in protest to preserve nature and the way of life of his neighbors. This opposition is said to be the starting point of the National Trust Movement. The trend of current society has put higher priority on the human sciences or economics over nature. As we have seen in Wordsworth's works, casting a light on a sense of reverent awe and love of nature, which in turn leads to the love of mankind, might enable us to take a new look at our relationship with the natural environment.

1. Introduction

In this essay, I will examine Wordsworth's relation to nature from the

viewpoint of ecology. In recent years, roughly two centuries since Wordsworth's time, various environmental issues, including global warming, have been the focus of attention: for example, the UN climate change conference (COP21) on global emissions, held in Paris in December 2015, the result of which (the so-called "Paris Agreement") entered into force in November 2016. However, issues such as the coexistence of man and nature, friction between developed and developing countries, and the competition for natural resources are growing yet more severe. The environmental crisis caused by the increase in human activities of recent times is one of the critical problems for us today. In the Humanities, which focus upon human thought and activity, "literature and the ecology" has been discussed since the 1990s. Among Wordsworth's numerous works, ecological studies have focused upon *Guide to the Districts of the Lakes* (1810), *The Ruined Cottage* (1797), "Tintern Abbey," "Michael, a Pastoral Poem," "The Last of the Flock" in *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), and Book Eight in *The Prelude* (1805). However, apart from Book Eight, little research has been made into *The Prelude* from an ecological standpoint on the whole. Since *The Prelude* is a long autobiographical poem, it would thus be of interest to learn more about the relation between the poet and nature. In this essay, I will examine Wordsworth's relation to nature, mostly in *The Prelude*, from an ecological point of view, tracing interactions between Wordsworth and nature, which he deeply loved.

2. The Term "Ecology"

The word ecology is sometimes translated as *seitaigaku* (生態学) or *seitaikankyo* (生態環境) in Japanese and the word ecology itself is commonly used in Katakana Japanese. The term "ecology" (エコロジ

—) was coined by the German zoologist Ernest Haeckel in 1866, who applied the term *oekologie* to the “relation of the animal to both its organic as well as its inorganic environment” (ASLE-Japan). The word is derived from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning house or dwelling-place. The word ecology was first recorded in the English language in 1873 (McKusick 29); therefore, it did not exist in Wordsworth's time (1770-1850).

James McKusick claims that a true ecological writer must be “rooted” in the landscape, instinctively attuned to the changes of the Earth and its inhabitants (24). Since Wordsworth was an inhabitant of the Lake District and he composed various works from a distinctive view of this region, McKusick considers Wordsworth to be the most important, “climactic figure in the development of ecological consciousness” (24). In addition, the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge foreshadows the modern science of ecology in its holistic conception of the Earth as a household, a dwelling-place for an interdependent biological community (29).

3. The Ground, the Earth, and Dwelling

As is generally known, Wordsworth is one of the Lake poets, born and raised in the Lake District. He left the Lake District to receive a university education in Cambridge. After graduation, instead of finding regular employment, he kept moving from place to place until he returned to the Lake District with his sister, Dorothy. Wordsworth and Dorothy took up their abode in Grasmere, known as Dove Cottage, when he was twenty-nine years old, in 1799.

At the outset of Book One in *The Prelude* (1805), Wordsworth relates to us a feeling of joy; however, soon the tone changes, as we can see in

the following lines:

On the ground I lay
Passing through many thoughts, yet mainly such
As to myself pertained. I made a choice
Of one sweet vale whither my steps should turn,
And saw, methought, the very house and fields
Present before my eyes; nor did I fail
To add meanwhile assurance of some work
Of glory there forthwith to be begun—
Perhaps too there performed. (1. 79-87)

Wordsworth gently paced on and shortly came to a green, shady place, where he sat down under a tree. After a while, he lay on his back on the ground and thought about his future prospects. As for the “sweet vale” in line 82, in Saburo Oka’s opinion, it suggests Racedown (Oka 507), in southern England. However, J. Wordsworth, Abrams, and Gill state that “sweet vale” refers to Grasmere in the Lake District. I am in favor of the latter because the words “the very house” appear in the next line. Since the “sweet vale” and “the very house” are closely connected, “the very house” in Grasmere refers to well-known Dove Cottage. He recollected the moment when he would move into Dove Cottage and set about the composition of *The Prelude*. It was on the ground, in line 79, that Wordsworth lay, resolving in his mind to settle down in this region and to spend the rest of his life as a poet. In other words, he made such a decision when his body physically touched the ground.

In the next stanza, the poet told us that he could not see nor hear anything until an acorn fell from the trees, since he was so devoted to his passing thoughts:

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Thus long I lay
Cheared by the genial pillow of the earth
Beneath my head, soothed by a sense of touch
From the warm ground, that balanced me, else lost
Entirely, seeing nought, nought hearing, save
When here and there about the grove of oaks
Where was my bed, an acorn from the trees
Fell audibly, and with a startling sound. (1.87-94)

Most people see acorns already fallen on the ground; only a few have ever heard the sound of an acorn falling onto the ground. Wordsworth, for one, was able to hear the sound, which was loud enough to startle him. That was just because he lay on the ground; his ears were nested in the pillow of the earth. A warm sensation came from the ground and spread to Wordsworth's whole body. The pleasant contact with the genial earth gradually calmed Wordsworth down; therefore, he thought that he would no longer wander from place to place. An idea arose—that he would stay in this region and devote himself to composition. For Wordsworth, the feeling of the contact with the ground was tightly related to the Greek word *oikos*, meaning house or dwelling-place, from which the word “ecology” stems. Bidding farewell to a long wandering life, Wordsworth reached a decision to settle down in Dove Cottage in Grasmere, which is just about eight kilometers from Hawkshead, where he spent eight years in his boyhood.

4. Fear

In the first Book of *The Prelude*, in which Wordsworth dealt with his childhood and schooling, he wrote about his relation to nature as follows:

Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear,
Much favored in my birthplace, and no less
In that beloved vale to which erelong
I was transplanted. (1. 305-9)

Since Wordsworth lost his parents in his early days, for him, in place of his parents, nature played an important role of fostering and educating in his life. In the short lines above, there are two specific places that Wordsworth tells us he loved: his “birthplace” (307), Cockermouth, and “that beloved vale” (308) where he was sent after his mother’s death, Hawkshead. As Stephen Gill states that “Wordsworth regarded the whole region as home, as a little Paradise” (Gill 21), Wordsworth felt such a deep affection for that region as to call it “home,” although he lost both of his parents.

Wordsworth was fostered not only by nature’s beauty but also by the fear instilled in us by nature. After the above lines, he clearly described the fear in the woodcock snaring episode. Since woodcocks were fair game for food at that time, the boy Wordsworth went out to catch them. He confessed that he had been a “fell destroyer” (1. 317) because he had shouldered as many springes as he could. He felt that this behavior would disturb the peaceful tranquility of the moon and stars over his head. When he took away the prey from others’ snares, he heard strange sounds in the open heights: “low breathings coming after [him], and sounds of undistinguishable motion, steps almost as silent as the turf they trod” (1.330-32). Wordsworth underwent such a frightful experience, as if nature admonished him not to be greedy.

5. Ambiguity in Wordsworth's Concept of Nature

Similarly, Wordsworth heard indistinguishable sounds in the succeeding episode of the raven's nest. He relates his ambiguous experience when he almost fell off a crag after plundering a nest which a mother-bird had built:

Though mean
My object and inglorious, yet the end
Was not ignoble. Oh, when I have hung
Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass
And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock
But ill sustained, and almost, as it seemed,
Suspended by the blast which blew amain,
Shouldering the naked crag, oh, at that time
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ears; the sky seemed not a sky
Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds! (l. 339-50)

The young Wordsworth was again admonished for his theft by the "strange utterance" (348) of the loud wind. Interestingly, however, he wrote "though mean [his] object and inglorious, yet the end was not ignoble" (339-41). Nature occasionally displays a hazardous aspect. When stalking a raven's nest, Wordsworth almost fell off the crag; however, he was able to hang on the ridge owing to the strong wind shouldering the naked crag. At that time, fortunately, the strong wind did not blow him away. The wind helped him from falling down. While hanging onto the ridge, Wordsworth heard a strange utterance produced by the loud, dry wind, blowing through his ears. Regarding the lines from 348 to 350, Kensuke Morimatsu suggests that Wordsworth expressed two feelings coincidentally: the one, that nature helps us, and

the other, that nature is fearful (Morimatsu 168). Through this kind of experience, Wordsworth had learned of nature's ambiguity. It is likely that he bore not only a sense of fear, but also a sense of awe toward nature in his boyhood.

Furthermore, Morimatsu argues that "in Wordsworth's time, there were no nuclear power plants, or their terrors, either. However, in these times, we need to grasp the polarity of nature: she provides human beings with wisdom for living and power, while she also demonstrates her enormous and terrible power according to our attitude" (my trans.; 168). Japanese people would like to indelibly inscribe this warning in our minds, since we encountered an unprecedented disaster on March 11, 2011.

6. Wordsworth's Sense of Paradise

In Book Eight, whose subtitle is "Retrospect: Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind," the poet relates to us a process of finding love of mankind from love of nature, through his experiences in his boyhood in the Lake District. We can sense his nostalgic affection toward the region where he grew up in the following lines:

Beauteous the domain
Where to the sense of beauty first my heart
Was opened—tract more exquisitely fair
Than is that paradise of ten thousand trees,
Or Gehol's famous gardens, in a clime
Chosen from widest empire, for delight
Of the Tartarian dynasty composed
.....
But lovelier far than this the paradise
Where I was reared, in Nature's primitive gifts
Favoured no less, and more to every sense
Delicious, ...

(8. 119-26, 144-7)

One of the features of English Romanticism from the late eighteenth century to the nineteenth century was a sense of yearning for distant, foreign countries. Wordsworth himself was fond of reading travel books and voyages since he was attracted by exotic scenes and manners. In fact, he undertook a journey to the Continent many a time. He had traveled around various places within Britain and kept moving until he settled at Dove Cottage. However, Wordsworth likened the region that had inspired his imagination, and where he had realized the sense of beauty in nature for the first time in his boyhood, to a paradise. He also underlined that the paradise where he was reared was far lovelier than the famous Gehol gardens of the Tartarian dynasty because his paradise was blessed with "nature's primitive gifts" (145), being more abundant in beauties of nature than that famous man-made gardens. Since Wordsworth had been rooted in the landscape as a dweller, he admired and sufficiently appreciated the primitive beauty of nature in that region, rather than the magnificent landscape garden.

7. Shepherds, the Pastoral, and Reverence

Returning to Grasmere in the Lake District from wandering about, the poet experienced a moving sensation of the love of mankind, for the first time in his life, because of a lofty shepherd whose work coexisted best with nature. Young Wordsworth used to encounter a local shepherd when he was seeking a raven's nest or fishing in a mountain stream. He had felt the shepherd's presence in his own domain, as of a lord and master, or a power, without knowing the real reason (Bk 8, 390-93). In fact, the shepherds in that mountainous region had a noble character, being humble, kind to others, and disliking conflicts (Oda 142).

The pastoral, a literary genre, has a long history. It originates from the ancient Latin and Greek. According to the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, it is defined as “literature, music, or works of art, in which rural life or the life of shepherds is portrayed in an idealized or romantic form.” In addition, environmental writing has very deep historical roots, harking back to the archetypal image of the garden, as canonically represented in the Garden of Eden, and often described in the classical mode of pastoral poetry as the *locus amoenus* or “pleasant place,” a garden of earthly delights (McKusick 19-20). Terry Gifford states that the pastoral in the literary tradition, which involves a retreat from the city to the countryside, originates in ancient Alexandria and becomes a key poetic form in Europe during the Renaissance (Garrard 37). The English Romantics were indeed aware of “their participation in that literary tradition of immemorial standing, whose most proximate version was the concept of Pastoral, mediated by writers from ancient classical times to the sentimental writers of the later eighteenth century” (McKusick 19). It is likely that Wordsworth inherited the traditional concept of pastoral; however, the image of shepherds that Wordsworth described in *The Prelude* was widely dissimilar from the shepherds in the Arcadian environment of ancient times, as we can see in the following lines:

There, 'tis the shepherd's task the winter long
 To wait upon the storm: of their approach
 Sagacious from the height he drives his flock
 Down into sheltering cove, and feeds them there
 Through the hard time, log and storm is 'locked'
 (So do they phrase it), bearing from the stalls
 A toilsome burthen up the craggy ways
 To strew it on the snow. (8. 359-66)

What Wordsworth described above was not a shepherd living peacefully in the open fields. Since Wordsworth closely watched the shepherd's life as a dweller in the same region, he defined the shepherd's work precisely; in severe winter, the herdsman sagaciously penned his flock in rocky recesses and carried them food through the snow. Although real lives in the Lake District were severe, for Wordsworth, it was an ideal, beautiful land which he regarded as the equivalent of a paradise on earth. According to contemporary author James Rebanks, his father loved the landscape around him with passion and his work "bound him to the land, regardless of the weather or the seasons" (Rebanks 72).

The Normans conquered England in 1066. They ruled over the plains; however, they showed little interest in inaccessible, economically worthless places, such as valleys among the hills and mountainous regions (Oda 133). In regions where the Normans did not pay the least attention, there emerged a society just like an ideal republic, which consisted of shepherds and statesmen who had independently led a simple life in their hereditary, small-scale lands for generations (Oda 135). However, their plain lives began to change when Wordsworth came back to settle in this area in 1799. A family's tragedy caused by the transition to a modern, industrial, economic system can be seen in "Michael, a Pastoral" in *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). As the poet wrote in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that "man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature" (259), men and nature are as inseparable as Siamese twins for Wordsworth. Therefore, through "Michael," Wordsworth reveals the injustice that befell this family, who had lived close to nature and were forced to relinquish their ancestral land.

As the subtitle (“Retrospect: Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind”) of Book Eight suggests, for Wordsworth, the love of nature and the love of mankind are closely connected; the love of mankind follows as an extension of that of nature. The next lines are about the scenery and people that the poet tenderly loved:

Here calling up to mind what then I saw
A youthful traveller, and see daily now
Before me in my rural neighbourhood—
Here might I pause, and bend in reverence
To Nature, and the power of human minds,
To men as they are men within themselves.
How oft high service is performed within
When all the external man is rude in shew,
Not like a temple rich with pomp and gold,
But a mere mountain-chapel such as shields
Its simple worshippers from sun and shower.
‘Of these,’ said I, shall be my song. (12. 220-31)

Wordsworth’s specific objects of love, and potential themes of his poems would be “[his] rural neighbourhood” (223). They were rural, simple people and had been rooted in the Lake District where the poet then dwelled. Wordsworth stood by the rural people of that region and argued firmly about the harmful influence caused by the Industrial Revolution that had spread to every corner of the country. In 1844, when the plans to extend the railway from Kendal to Windermere in that region were presented as a bill before Parliament, the poet strongly opposed and wrote in protest to *The Morning Post*, two consecutive times, explaining the reason (Yamada 217).

8. Conclusion

McKusick cites Rigby that “romanticism remains inspirational in its resistance to that severing of the natural from the human sciences, matter from spirit, reason from imagination, techne from poesis, which has characterized the intervening era of industrialization—and with such calamitous consequences” (McKusick xii). Since the Industrial Revolution, the trend of society has obviously put higher priority on the human sciences over nature, on matter over spirit, on reason over imagination, on technology over imagination, and what followed was environmental destruction and crisis, which has become our vital, universal issue. However, a fundamental solution has not yet been reached by international negotiations or cooperation on the political, technological, or economic level.

In such current circumstances, it is literature which focuses upon human thought and activity that has a key role of taking a positive approach to the individual mind. Casting a light on the ambiguity of nature and a sense of reverent awe and love of nature which leads to the love of mankind, as we have seen in Wordsworth's works, might be an opportunity to pause to take a new look at our relationship with the natural environment. As Saeko Yoshikawa states, ecological thought is basically a point of view whose first step starts off at dwelling in a certain area and becoming aware of one's dealings with one's neighboring environment (Yoshikawa 118), environmental issues which require a global solution will need bottom-up consciousness; in other words, to reach a solution we must start by turning our attention to the surrounding, living environment.

Wordsworth loved roaming and traveling in his lifetime; on the other

hand, he loved the Lake District most of all. Moreover, in many of his works, the poet thematized and wrote about his neighbors, who had lived simply and independently in his beloved region. Bate argues that “the business of literature is to work upon consciousness” (*Song of the Earth* 23). In Wordsworth’s lifetime, there was no term such as “ecology.” However, if we read *The Prelude* now, in the 21st century, from an ecological point of view, we cannot help but feel a sense of reverent awe of nature and this sense enables us to discern truth from the ideology of so-called human “progress” or “development,” which are satisfying words to hear and which have dominated mainstream consciousness since the Industrial Revolution. *The Prelude* provides us with a key to considering our relation to nature once again.

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