

Commodification and Trauma in Wordsworth's Poetry: A Preface

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ABSTRACT

Commodity refers to physical sexual desire to fulfill the material needs as well as to lead the luxurious life and the colonial system affects the life and literature society and everywhere. The Romantic period, particularly the time of Wordsworth, witnessed turbulent social upheaval due to the ascendancy of commodification in British life. Although the Romantic writers used to describe British life as reverberating with natural richness, it was actually a ploy to hide massive natural devastation as Jerome McGann's alleges in The Romantic Ideology (1983). England, during the Romantic age, had been engulfed by modernization, deforestation, industrialization, urbanization and other different types of problems, including traumas.

KEYWORDS: British Romantic Period, William Wordsworth, Commodification, Romantic modernity, Romantic ideology, trauma

1. INTRODUCTION

Before the publication of *The Romantic Ideology* (1983) by Jerome McGann, the general critical opinion about British Romantic poetry was that it was the result of the Romantic poets' esemplastic imagination and transcendental vision. The standard way its criticism was written was what we call Romantic formalism. Since the publication of Jerome McGann's seminal work, Romantic works are being seen as the products of a particular historical ideology, an ideology that has engaged the allegiance of the contemporary critical reader as well as of the originating poet. Since then the new historical critic recognizes the grand illusion of Romanticism: that it can reach beyond the illusory; "its ideology," according to McGann, is "that it transcends ideology" (70). According to Beerendra Pandey (207), "Arguing from a generally Marxist, materialist perspective, McGann posits that Romantic poetry typically skirts its socio-historical contexts which it replaces with the idealized universe of Romantic ideology" (63). For example, Wordsworth and Coleridge, disillusioned in their hopes for this-worldly amelioration in the failure of the French Revolution, attempted to find a new stability in doctrines of a transcendental Nature, and of a creative imagination that apprehends immutable truth. The fact that these ideologies are illusions, instances of false consciousness, does not render the poems valueless: they present us with dramas of displacement, full of the intellectual and emotional tension that such drama entails, and, in some cases, at least, they provide an implicit critique of the very ideologies they embody.

Wordsworth's theory of natural piety, according to Peter J Kitson (2005), "serves the interest of the ruling class and helps to maintain the status quo as it remains complicit with a conservative-minded project to turn people away from attempting to change society by political means. Similarly, Coleridge's interest in the transcendentalist philosophies of Immanuel Kant and his idealist successors. Fichte and Schelling, marked an attempt to divert people from material protest to a spiritual politics which is essentially quietist. (675-76)

What is McGann's critical contribution is that the much-hyped apolitical Romantic imagination masks the exclusions of the then socio-political structure, traumas, and admissions of guilt.

One of the pleasant fall-outs of the McGannian new historical approach to British Romantic poetry is the increasing study of what we call High Romantic Poets in terms of the commodity culture. One such study is by David Simpson's *Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern: The Poetics of Modernity* (2009), which presents the major leader of the Romantic Movement as a poet of the commodity culture.

Commodities, according to Simpson, are "abstractions" that "lead a virtual life conducted according to the constantly shifting protocols of commodity form which significantly determine modern social relations" (6). The growth of commodities in Europe around 1800 coincides logically enough—with a significant moment of modernity linked inextricably with the forces of industrialization, war, and empire. Commodification brings about the dehumanizing spectral nature of society that ultimately leads to alienation, poverty, and a breakdown in the capacity for people to interrelate in both linguistic and emotional terms.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

Wordsworth's is a poetics of modernity, Simpson contends, because it addresses what the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* calls "a multitude of causes unknown in former times," a phrase that Simpson glosses in a variety of historical and theoretical registers. Wordsworth's causes include extreme poverty, global war, homelessness, and machine labor; new forms of communication, consumption, and economic exchange; a profound sense of the increasing rapidity of historical change; and, above all, the development of the commodity form. It is Wordsworth's engagement with such issues that "renders this poetry prospectively contemporary with our own present and indeed with our foreseeable future because the conditions that generated it have not gone away" (2-3).

For Simpson, "social concern" (a phrase occurring in the title of the book) captures the sense in which Wordsworth's poetry explores the limits of social connection, raising questions about suffering and sympathy that had dominated Romantic literature. In "his stagings of narrative incapacity and detachment in the face of the needs or sufferings of others," Simpson

argues, Wordsworth represents social life with an abstraction that mirrors “the dynamics of commodity form” (7); his ghosts and spectral figures are animated by the same energies that animate “the operations of commodity form, itself the ghostly heart of all sorts of communications and exchanges in the modern world” (5). It is the structuring logic of the commodity itself—elusive and yet all-pervasive—that grounds Simpson’s approach to Wordsworth. A work like David Simpson’s *Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern: The Poetics of Modernity* shows that Wordsworth’s embattled rural workers, displaced veterans, and other victims of social upheaval are historically accurate depictions of human suffering at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The assumption is that Wordsworth’s writing is haunted by the changes occurring to the society due to the ever growing modernity.

These changes were also traumatic in nature. William Wordsworth, due to a series of traumatic events experienced throughout his life, may have suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Wordsworth developed coping strategies which included the use of memory retrieval techniques similar to some treatments for PTSD. These techniques resulted in the composition of the “spots of time” episodes in his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, which describe some of the traumatic events he experienced. The French Revolution was a pivotal event and perhaps the central trauma of his life. There are the following three pivotal events in Wordsworth’s life that were central to his poetry:

- In July 1787, the Wordsworth brothers were reunited with their sister Dorothy after the boys waited for horses (that never showed up) to take them to spend summer vacation with Dorothy at their grandparents’ home. They experienced delayed mourning for the earlier losses of their parents. The circumstances were similar to the traumatic incident that occurred just before his father's death in 1783, that of William waiting for horses to take him home from school.
- The collaboration with Coleridge led to a prolonged period of creative productivity. After attempting “The Recluse,” a philosophical work assigned by Coleridge, Wordsworth returned to familiar subjects of personal grief and human suffering, resulting in the 1799 *Prelude*.
- The death of Wordsworth’s brother John in 1805, followed by the deaths of his young children Catherine and Thomas in 1812, was further complicated by the diminishing of his relationship with Coleridge. John’s death led to a reconsideration of his goals and aesthetics, and further postponement of “The Recluse”.

The above defining events shaped the creative and personal development of the poet. Beginning with the death of Wordsworth’s mother when he was eight, a pattern of loss was established in his life that resulted in periods of depression, recurring after subsequent deaths and tragedies that occurred throughout the latter part of his life.

CONCLUSION

There is one other pivotal moment that profoundly impacts Wordsworth's poetry, arguably the most significant: the French Revolution. His travels in France between the crucial years of 1790 and 1793 encompassed the heady moments of the republican coup, the bloodshed of the Reign of Terror and his passionate affair with a Frenchwoman, Annette Vallon, which resulted in an illegitimate child.

The above four moments are indeed crucial moments as they define Wordsworth as a poet and as a man. All of these are trauma-driven. Even the collaboration with Coleridge was born from the shock and disillusionment that followed the collapse of the Revolution, a catastrophic event upon the world stage. In a post-Revolution world, the relationship was a creative match of two wounded men who emerged shaken after having witnessed the battered ideals of liberty falling victim to the chaos of violent factions struggling for power. For Wordsworth, the other two of these pivotal moments were undeniably traumatic losses, personal and private traumas involving the deaths of his most cherished loved ones. His father died five years after his mother, the unexpected death and loss of the family breadwinner, effectively rendering the Wordsworth children homeless.

To wrap up, new historicist approach to Wordsworth's poetry paves up the way for re-reading his so-called imaginative and transcendental poetry from the perspective of the private problems of his life and his response to the rising commodity culture of his time.

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