The Sinking Sublime and Reflections on Wordsworth’s ‘Lycoris’ Poems

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Abstract
In this paper, I shall explicate upon the phrase ‘sinking sublime’– its application and subsequent interpretation of Wordsworth's lesser known but revealing Lycoris poems. I proceed with a study of his fragmentary “Essay on Morals” and derive the philosophical basis of my critical discussion. The product shall be transposed with the making of the Sublime, and an attempt shall be made to illustrate why the sinking sublime is a heightened moral question if nothing more.

“Essay on Morals”, as W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser tell us, was first drafted in Germany circa 1798 in the same notebook where the first draft of The Prelude took shape. A fragmentary piece that never proceeded beyond its first flights, this essay allows a rendition of what had intrigued the poet’s philosophy, and how its theoretical propositions had or must have inspired his verse compositions. It is not my intention here to articulate if the essay is an improvement upon the 18th century understanding of morals or of moral education. I shall understand, on far simpler terms, whether the essay is consistent in the consolidation of a moral eponym, and what its possible implications are through its obvious inconsistencies. I begin with a platitudinous remark of Wordsworth’s: “In a [strict?] sense all our actions are the result of our habits–but I mean here to exclude those accidental & indefinite actions, which do not regularly & in common flow from this or that particular habit” (Owen, Smyser ed. 103).

The first section of the quote is platitudinous to the extent that it does not add to the maxim, and in hindsight to our moral knowledge. What does add to our knowledge is the word “exclude” in the next section of the quote; it severs the moral from being taken-for-granted by acknowledging moral experiences beyond the pale of both customary habits and actions. This is where one can situate the best of Wordsworthian poetry, and in studying this exclusion, one understands where exactly the subconscious perplexity of Wordsworth lies, to paraphrase William Empson in his Seven Ambiguities of Language. To simplify further, although all human actions are redundant and are traceable to a satisfying degree, it is in analyzing the accidental action that one can decipher the accidental habit. What intrigues further is that the irregular, or the uncommon is an agglomeration, and it is an accident only in so far as it is intermittent, which solidifies the argument that the “accidental & indefinite” are in fact immanent and possess permanent epistemic value despite their unpredictability. The accidental moral, as a result, transforms into a new moral, but its worth, wisely understood, cannot be determined by the paradigms already provided to us by the habitual morals. What is

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generally excluded can only be included by an act of exception—“yoked by violence together”, as Dr. Johnson would say. The ruminations multiply in their complications soon after:

Can it be imagined by any man who has deeply examined his own heart that an old habit will be foregone, or a new one formed, by a series of propositions, which, presenting no image to [mind?] can convey no feeling which has any connection with the supposed archetype or fountain of the proposition existing in human life? (Owen, Smyser ed. 103).

An abstract meaning generated from this reticulated sentence informs us that it is impossible for a new habit to be reared from an old habit without first realizing that the new is more an offspring of the old rather than a new entity or species altogether, and that the transition can never, at any cost, comprise only intellection and nothing else. The argument therefore proceeds briskly where the new moral is an evolution in the genealogy of morals and secondly, the moral is subject to the duality of both intellection and feeling, or is it so? Wordsworth, using his freedom of choice, straitens the argument to an opinion, albeit a theoretical position: “These moralists attempt to strip the mind of all its old clothing when their object ought to be to furnish it with new. All this is the consequence of an undue value set upon that faculty which we call reason” (Owen, Smyser ed.103).

At its acme of epistemology, the moralists infantilize the older moral by overemphasizing the “reason” in the new, dismissing the former as either lesser reason or pure feeling, but never the new as an elevated “feeling” as opposed to or seconded by reason. Wordsworth’s observation is interesting, since it very subtly pushes the moral beyond reason, beneath the Providence, into the realm of “elevated feeling”, authorized but not hectored at by reason—the realm of the Sublime, of the idea proper:

I have said that these bald & naked reasonings are impotent over our habits, they cannot form them; from the same cause they are equally powerless in regulating our judgments concerning the value of men & things. They contain no picture of human life; they describe nothing. (Owen, Smyser ed. 103, original emphasis)

This is overstating the case in the accepted “habits” of the Romantic temperament. Three opinions of Wordsworth are worthwhile here in defense of higher or elevated feeling: first–reason, in absence of form and persuasion, is fallow; second, reason is “powerless” in delineating the subjective depth of man even if it pertains to reason and lastly, reason cannot “picture”, and thus cannot create what science calls memory, for without our ability to picturize, we cannot “describe” and hence, cannot study the evolution of the mind in its various states. This, critically understood, neither means that feeling is superior to reason, nor that feeling itself is the moral gavel. It means that Man has access to higher feeling—the kind which elevates reason into higher domains, when man is susceptible to the more primitive attributes of the “habits” of feeling. Reason shrinks by its very nature, is its own natural caveat, whereas the relatively marginalized feeling browses beyond that rational caveat in its subjective exploration before the act itself perpetuates its noble objectives: “We do not argue in defence of our good actions, we feel internally their beneficent effect; we are satisfied with this delicious sensation; & even when we are called upon to justify our conduct, we perform the task with languor and indifference” (Owen, Smyser ed. 104, author’s emphasis).
A “good action”, so to say, is a coupling of higher feeling and disciplined reason operating in its limitation. When left to their subjective state of synthesis, they are perfect, and akin to the sublime. When subjected to objectify their synthesis, there is what I shall call a “sinking”, as if justification at all times is an impeachment. Is this not a fair moment to conclude that ‘Essay on Morals’ creates the first germs of what I suggest by the ‘sinking sublime’? I shall explain the phenomena further in the last section of the paper.

‘Ode to Lycoris’, composed in 1817 and published three years later, commences with the Sublime reverence of humankind for mother Earth:

An age hath been when Earth was born
Of lustre too intense
To be sustained; and Mortals bowed
The front in self-defence. (Hutchinson ed. 389, ll. 1-4)

The statements are unilinear; there was, in the birth of our celestial body, not the Sublime but the sublime excess, and Wordsworth avers that whereas the “Mortals” were likely to appreciate and incorporate the “lustre”, they had also generalised that the excess, signified by “too intense”, must be emptied of its cloying intensity in order to cease “self-defence” and initiate assimilation. A mediator is required who shall absorb and deprive the Sublime of its excess, and this is exactly the role the poet is suited for in order to educate the masses:

Enough for one soft vernal day,
If I, a bard of ebbing time,
And nurtured in a fickle clime,
May haunt this horned bay; (9-12)

After a description of all the Greek mythical figures regaling in the twilight, Wordsworth’s defiant admission of the Sublime excess in the first line is worth taking notice of. “Enough” is at once a call of retreat (since the “soft vernal day” should not be over-regaled) and a desire to participate in the euphony. The poet’s desire, at least in the first stanza, symbolizes an annihilation of the excess while embracing the twilight, since the bard himself must immortalize both mankind and connote the realm of the Providence. The word “haunt” can be interpreted as the poet’s intrusion into alien quarters for the furtherance of human Knowledge, which is very Biblical if one reads all aspects of its use. The more knowledge one acquires of the sublime “Tree of Life”, the more he climbs the “Tree of Knowledge” while being no more than an intellectual apparition in the former territory, an adumbration of its fading sublimity. As the poem progresses into the next stanza, the imagery and the implied meaning both reek of fading exhilaration as a sign of maturity:

In youth we love the darksome lawn
Brushed by the owlet’s wing;
Then twilight is preferred to Dawn,
And Autumn to the Spring.
Sad fancies do we then affect,
In luxury of disrespect
To our own prodigal excess
Of too familiar happiness. (19-26)

It will be no exaggeration to claim that in Wordsworth, if youth is thought necessary (youth here being equivalent with the biological form of growth), after-youth is not winter but “Autumn to Spring” is “preferred”, implying that harvest is just as gratifying as sowing was. To explain it in pedagogical terms, the sublime excess, constituting the sublime is not the sustainable sublime, keeping the transient principles of youth in front of mankind. Instead, a controlled, continuous and scientific depredation of the sublime excess sustains the ebullience of youth well past the days of prime and resuscitates the sublime without triggering the excess, just as the phrase ‘sinking sublime’ intends to suggest—the preference of “familiar happiness” over “own prodigal excess”. As Alex Zwekjdling rightly asserts, “the mythic imagination is essentially immature, that is only when we are old that we can “wither into the truth” (347). The second section of the second stanza is more enlightening as far as moral pedagogy is concerned:

When Nature marks the year’s decline,
Be ours to welcome it;
Pleased with the harvest’s hope that runs
Before the path of milder suns;
Pleased while the sylvan world displays
Its ripeness to the feeding gaze;
Pleased when the sullen winds resound the knell
Of the resplendent miracle. (29-36)

To quote Zwekjdling at length here:

The poem, then, is a kind of elegy, and like most elegies, it replaces the sense of loss with the hope of consolation, the consolation in this case being found in the “ripeness” which the ordinary “sylvan world”, though deprived of its Dianas and Cupids, displays “to the feeding gaze” of maturity. (347, italics mine)

The ripeness, as I reiterate again, is almost religious; the quality of “universal toleration” reflected in the second line of the quote echoes the exact sentiment. The sinking sublime, or sinking sublimity, is in the continence of the individual who restrains the sublime excess and hence is “Pleased”—a word, that through no coincidence, appears thrice in the same stanza with a trochaic effect. Through such an action, the individual as a spectator loses nothing of the sublimity, since the maturity of the world order is able to draw an experiential equivalent in the poet-speaker. As the third stanza commences, the intentions get clearer:

But something whispers to my heart
That, as we downward tend,
Lycoris! Life requires an art
To which our souls must bend. (37-40)

The source of the instruction is rendered clandestine in order to create the impression of a prophecy; what is more appealing is the poet’s response or communication not with the rationale, but “to my heart”, with the feeling. That the higher feeling is the voice of a prophecy is a nuance, but why? Wordsworth upends the question by replying that the physiognomy of an individual, by its very nature, will “downward tend”, implying that the rationale has always a solipsistic stick to offer. Like a savant, Wordsworth suggests that a bent “soul” is a sapient soul, since life cannot revolve around the excess of either the myth, the sublime, or the desire for an infinite rationale. The “art” in “Life” is to arrest the sublime and systematically reduce its excess through artistic restraint:

A skill— to balance and supply;
And, ere the flowing fount be dry,
As soon it must, a sense to sip,
Or drink with no fastidious lip. (41-44)

This, I believe, we readily understand. To the larger question however: is the bent sublime moral? Or is the moral the “skill” that shall substitute old age with after-youth? Eugene L. Stelzig observes in this ode the “chastening meditative hauteur” (636) and goes on to explicate that “His edifying sentiments do not make for sublime poetry, but there is a kind of moral proficiency to his utterances which suggest his resignation to growing old:” (636). The word “utterance” has been illustrated adroitly by M.H. Abrams with reference to Wordsworth,† but more of that later. The term “moral proficiency” is relevant to the context as the poem entails to an end:

While blossoms and the budding spray
Inspire us in our own decay;
Still, as we nearer draw to life’s dark goal,
Be hopeful Spring the favourite of the Soul! (51-54)

It is erroneous to conclude that these lines “do not make for sublime poetry”; subtle indicators like “Inspire”, “life’s dark goal” and “soul” occupy pivotal positions all throughout. What Stelzig should have stated is the sublime has been rivetted since physical as well as rational ruin is imminent. What keeps the press running is the moral that rivets the subtler feelings of the Sublime and divests it of its natural excess, ensuring what Stelzig calls “proficiency” on its part. The ‘sinking sublime’ therefore is the sublime rivetted in order to ensure “moral proficiency” lifelong.

The second poem, entitled ‘To the Same’ uses blank verse to make a second-order statement, choosing an imagery different from the mythical order of the former. Composed in the same year as the ‘Ode to Lycoris’, it begins with the rhetoric one encountered midway through the first stanza of the first poem under consideration:

Enough of climbing toil! – Ambition treads
Here as ‘mid busier scenes, ground steep and rough,
Or slippery even to peril! And each step,
As we for most uncertain recompense
Mount towards the empire of the fickle clouds,
Each weary step, dwarfing the world below
Induces, for its old familiar sights,
Unacceptable feelings of contempt, (390, ll. 1-8)

The admittance here, in this poem, is not sugar-coated in myth and then the cloak removed as in the last poem. This one is explicit in its naked disgust of the “toil” that is idealized by “Ambition”. The “peril” involved here is physical as well as moral, since ambition is bound to “bend” the moral to its purpose. In this case, the moral is inclined towards the evil of the “fickle clouds” that dwarfs “the world below”, creating an illusion that Man can assume himself superior to his bearer. Even an impermanent incident with sublime implications might create an illusion and subject man to immoral conclusions involving supercilious behaviour. The anger relies upon the fact

That Man could e’er be tied
In anxious bondage, to such nice array
And formal fellowship of petty things! (9-11)

Instead, the poet’s axiom is fairly straightforward:
Oh! ’Tis the heart that magnifies this life,
Making a truth and beauty of its own. (12-13)

What is interesting here is Wordsworth’s complete denial of the sublime object and its associative “toil”, almost on the verge of denying the Burkean formula of the sublime. The lines afore-quoted are Kantian in the creation of a sublime subject whose trajectory has no objective retrospect, and the Sublime, as an act of habit, never can be transposed with anything. The significance of “the heart” is a repetition, and it strengthens my argument that our attempts at rationalizing the sublime by seeking physical validation are futile. The higher feeling within dismisses the rationale post the experience of the sublime—the Sublime having sunk its rationality post experience and an approval of pure feeling divested of physical labour. As the poet confesses in the third stanza,

Long as the heat shall rage, let that dim cave
Protect us, there deciphering as we may
Diluvian records; or the sighs of Earth
Interpreting; or counting for old Time
His minutes, by reiterated drops,
... To awe the lightness of humanity. (32-36, 40)
According to J.L. Khan, “Wordsworth’s passage is grounded in tranquil meditation as it captures the entire process of creation and re-creation since the time of the geological beginning of the earth and its Biblical account” (323). Be that as it may, the meditation, although it belongs with the poet, has its therapeutic effects upon the admirer of the sublime worshipper as opposed to the sublime subject of thought itself:

We two have known such happy hours together
That were power granted to replace them...
Loth should I be to use it: (47-49)

I shall conclude by saying that the sinking sublime manifests itself as an explicit entity, where the physical experience is divested of its rationale, and its conscious sinking by the individual engages the true sublime, whose moral benefits can be assessed and universally begotten as a substitute to other forms of the sublime or access to any other forms of “power”. I rest my case here.

Works Cited: