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J. Sturrock

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Wordsworth's "Phantom of Delight" and the Development of the Imagination

by J. STURROCK

Wordsworth's poem to his wife, Mary, "She was a Phantom of delight," is essentially a poem of love and celebration. Yet it follows a similar pattern to that traced in clearer, if darker, colours in "Tintern Abbey," "Peele Castle," and other major poems. These poems all record how the excitement of intense visual experience is superseded by the more chastened insight which proceeds from a knowledge of human suffering. Although all differ strongly, and are the responses to different occasions, the underlying similarity discloses a way of organizing and understanding the continuum of experience which is central to Wordsworth's poetic habits, and to the impetus behind his poetry. When the poem to Mary is seen in terms of this pattern it reveals from a new aspect Wordsworth's insight into the growth of the imagination.

The first stanza of "She was a Phantom of delight" records an entirely visual experience: Mary is appreciated not as a thinking and feeling person but as a "moment's ornament." The diction of this passage sounds strange in our ears: like the vision of Mary it, too, haunts, startles and waylays. This strangeness lies in words which stress the merely visual, and thus hallucinatory quality of the experience: "Phantom," "Apparition," "Shape" and "Image." These are all used elsewhere by Wordsworth, as they are here, to indicate appearance as consciously opposed to an integrated reality. The verbs, too, communicate the unearthly and unreal quality of the experience: the vision haunts, like a ghost, something visible but not tangible; because of its two-dimensional unreality it startles and waylays. The phantom is not merely seen; it actively "gleamed upon my sight." A similar unusual active usage occurs in "The Sparrow's Nest": "On me the chance-discovered sight / Gleamed like a vision of delight." It gleams thus in this poem because it instantaneously awakens in Wordsworth a childhood memory. In both poems this curious usage communicates a real sensation which is experienced as if it were fantasy: for an objective reality seems like a subjective reality (a memory, a phantom), and the intensity of impression makes the object of sight seem active and the subject passive under it: it is not the poet who sees but the woman who gleams upon his sight. (This passivity of the seer and activity of the seen is also suggested in the verb "waylay.") The vision of Mary is a vision of light, with star-like eyes, and the qualities of "the cheerful dawn."
The second stanza records a second level of experience. No longer is
the object of the senses the active party: now "I saw her upon nearer
view." The seer is active, but the sight is at a more commonplace level.
This stanza records Mary no longer as a visual experience but as part of a
human relationship. It acknowledges her as "a Spirit" but its attention is
directed to her as a woman. It is a diminishing though loving vision:

A Creature not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food;
For transient sorrows, simple wiles,
Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles.

The "Phantom" has become a "Creature"; the brightness no longer
dazzles; and, with her "transient sorrows" and "simple wiles," the
woman seems more like a child. This second stanza records a transitional
stage in the relationship, as is suggested in the way the countenance is
seen as bearing "sweet records" of the past, referring back to the first
stanza, and "promises as sweet" of the future, referring forward to the
third stanza. This bears comment as this second stage of experience is not
recorded in the other poems under consideration.

With full knowledge comes deep respect, and in this third stanza bril­
niance is restored in the insight of the "eye serene." The syntactical struc­
tures in this stanza, echoing as they do those of the first two stanzas, un­
derline the very different quality of the perception. "The reason firm,
the temperate will, / Endurance, foresight, strength and skill" is a con­
struction parallel to "transient sorrows, simple wiles / Praise, blame,
love, kisses, tears and smiles." The parallel construction emphasizes the
contrast between the early perception of a woman seen as existing only in
a rather passive relationship with others, and the final appreciation of
her independent virtues. Similarly (as Lothar Honnighausen has pointed
out) "A perfect woman, nobly planned / To warn, to comfort, and
command" echoes in its structure the first stanza's "A dancing Shape,
an Image gay / To haunt, to startle, and waylay." The contrast under­
lines how that which was first perceived as an unsubstantial vision has
developed into an experience of "a perfect woman." Wordsworth knows
Mary finally as a person, both as body ("the machine") and as a soul
("the very pulse") with its own destiny: "A Being breathing thoughtful
breath, / A Traveller between life and death" and as a soul of splendour
and nobility. The woman of this stanza, unlike the "Phantom" of the
first stanza and the innocent virgin of the second, is part of a life of suf­
ferring and difficulty, a life in which there is urgent need for "The reason
firm, the temperate will, / Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill," and
for warning, comfort and command. The brightness of the first stan­
za returns undiminished, but now it is seen as shining from a spiritual

1. The parallel structure of the three infinitives is mentioned by Lothar Honnighausen in "Words­
worth's 'She was a Phantom of delight,' " Die Neueren Sprachen, LXV (1966), 153-59.
source: Mary is now radiant with "something of angelic light." Thus in this stanza the powerful sensuous vision is replaced by the informed insight of the "eye serene," and a physical radiance is replaced by a spiritual light.

"She was a Phantom of delight" shows the growth from a purely visual delight to a more thoughtful love. The poem was written in 1804, the year in which Wordsworth possibly also wrote "Vaudracour and Julia," a poem which makes a similar distinction between young love and mature love. The poet suggests that Vaudracour and Julia might well have attained to a more mature love in time:

But what so ever of such treasures might
Beneath the outside of their youth, have lain
Reserv'd for mellower years, his present mind
Was under fascination; he beheld
A vision, and he lov'd the thing he saw.

Here, as in the poem to Mary, the lover's youthful experience of the beloved woman is seen as an enchantment, as a visual experience so intense as to have a hallucinatory quality; and the implication is that this stage is necessarily superseded by something better. Thus the same pattern of development in love relationships is suggested. Yet Wordsworth perceived this pattern not only in human relationships, but in his own relationship with the whole external world of sensation. "She was a Phantom of delight" is not directly about Mary but about the changing nature of Wordsworth's experience of Mary. This is clear from the stress on the various stages of sight: when first known she "gleamed upon my sight"; next "I saw her upon nearer view" and finally the present tense and the full understanding: "And now I see with eye serene." In its pattern and imagery, this record of the changing experience of one beloved woman is very close to the poetry of the changing experience of natural objects, to "Tintern Abbey" and "Peele Castle" especially, but also to the Immortality Ode, to parts of The Prelude and other poems. All these poems show the passing of an early radiant visual experience and welcome a new kind of experience changed by thought and by the knowledge of human suffering; both types of experience are consistently connected with light.

In "Tintern Abbey" Wordsworth writes of his past and present experiences of the Wye Valley: he describes his first experience among the hills as coming at a time when he felt for natural objects

a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm
By thought supplied, nor any interest
Unborrowed from the eye. (ll. 80-83)

3. The chronological structure of the poem is noted by the editors of The Explicator, 1 (1942), no. 5, item 46.
As in "She was a Phantom of delight," the early experience is purely visual. He sees his sister as being at that same stage of experience now:

in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleases in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. (ll. 116–19)

Again these intense pleasures of early experience are connected with the eye and expressed in terms of light; later, in lines which refer back to those just quoted, these "shooting lights" become "gleams":

If I should be where I no more can hear
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams
Of past existence (ll. 147–49)

Again, as in "She was a Phantom of delight," the word "gleam" is connected with the delight of early experience. In both poems, the first experience, whether of place or of person, is an experience of the eye alone, or of the eye and a youthful imagination intoxicated by the eye: the present experience is less sensuous and impassioned and more thoughtful, tempered as it is by human experience. The kind of experience which is suggested in the "Being breathing thoughtful breath / A traveller between life and death" in the last stanza of "She was a Phantom of delight" appears also in the present mode of vision in "Tintern Abbey":

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. (ll. 88–93)

The new elements of experience are thought, and the experience of human suffering. And although the purely visual response to natural objects has passed, the delight in the visible world remains, transformed into a more creative kind of perception by thought.

Seven years after "Tintern Abbey," in "Peele Castle," the change between past and present experience is more strongly felt, and the brilliant early vision more sharply rejected: the imagination has been disciplined by this stage not only by the normal process of maturing, but through the "deep distress" caused by the death at sea of his closest brother, John. Again the early unqualified delight is seen in terms of vision: "I dwelt in sight of thee"; "I saw these every day"; "Whene'er I looked, thy Image still was there." And again the vision is expressed in terms of light: "the gleam / The light that never was," and "of all the sunbeams that did ever shine / The very sweetest had to thee been given." Surely "the light that never was, on sea or land," is the same light which transformed Mary into a "Phantom" and an "Apparition." So intense is the visual experience that it becomes almost hallucinatory. The imagination is enchanted.
by the senses. Again the intense early experience is expressed as a “gleam”; and here again this word is used of an extraordinary kind of visual experience. In “She was a Phantom of delight” the gleam comes from the object of sight, in “Tintern Abbey” from Dorothy’s eyes: Wordsworth uses the word to express something beyond ordinary sight, that is, a transforming light of the youthful imagination: it communicates a visual activity rather than a passive absorbing of experience. The intensely visual nature of this early experience is underlined by the concept of the scene as a painting; the sight of Sir George Beaumont’s painting of Peele Castle in a storm stirs the poet to create a sort of imaginary companion-piece from his early experiences. The scene he communicates is illusory: it is not a reality but a construct, and it is not a valid construct for its creator has to reject it. It is not valid because it is based only upon intense sense impressions and not upon thought or knowledge. This illusory quality is stressed by the nature of the memory which is not so much of the actual castle as of its reflection: only a very calm sea on a very clear day can carry a clear reflection: “Thy Form was sleeping on a glassy sea” (l. 4) and “thy Image still was there” (l. 7). As in “She was a Phantom of delight,” the word “image” is used to contrast appearance with reality, as is the word “form.”

“Peele Castle,” like “Tintern Abbey,” records a later experience which is tempered by a knowledge of human suffering; it rejects the earlier vision because of its falsity to the human condition, for no human joy can be pure and eternal, and any joy which seems pure achieves this semblance only by ignoring the pain of others:

Farewell, farewell the heart that lives alone,
Housed in a dream, at distance from the Kind!
Such happiness, wherever it be known.
Is to be pitied; for ’tis surely blind.

But welcome fortitude, and patient cheer,
And frequent sights of what is to be borne!
Such sights, or worse, as are before me here.
Not without hope we suffer and we mourn. (ll. 53–60)

This mature “humanised” understanding of experience depends fundamentally on vision (“such sights or worse”) but as in “Tintern Abbey” it depends on vision as a guide rather than a pure pleasure and insists that the sense must be qualified by thought.

The expression of the intense nature of early experience is, of course, strongest and plainest in the Immortality Ode, where the contrast between the youthful and the mature experience of natural objects is clearest. But here the response to the contrast is quite different, for the change is realized most intensely as a loss: the “visionary gleam” is not, like the lights of the other poems, seen as partly illusory or inadequate, but as a revelation of the profoundest truth. Yet, although the understanding and emotional response involved in the experience is different, the image and the
pattern stay the same: the early experience is essentially a visual experience, and is consistently communicated in terms of light; this has been so frequently demonstrated as to need no elaboration here.  

In the Immortality Ode the word "gleam" is again used of this youthful experience: "the visionary gleam" (l. 56). And again, the "gleam" implies a kind of visual experience whose intensity arises not from the nature of the objects seen but from the nature of the mind which sees them. The compensatory experience of the mature adult, too, is seen in the same way as in the other poems discussed; its richness comes through thought and through the growing knowledge of a human world of suffering and decay: "In the soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering" (ll. 187-88). And though the early radiance is gone, a glow remains: "The Clouds that gather round the setting sun / Do take a sober colouring from an eye / That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality" (ll. 200-3).

The Immortality Ode shows one aspect of the pattern, in which the joy of youth is contrasted with a less joyous maturity. The other aspect of this same pattern is that stressed in "Peele Castle," where the unthinking idealistic hedonism of youth is contrasted with the more realistic, more human, insight of maturity. The pattern appears thus in "Resolution and Independence." This poem begins with the brilliance of sunshine after rain, and from his delight in this glittering brightness the poet falls into dejection, considering how "We Poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof come in the end despondency and madness." The vision of the leechgatherer, and his story, his patient endurance of all the blasts of weather and old age and poverty, restore the poet to a calm understanding: it is knowledge of ordinary life and its suffering, and of the fortitude to bear such suffering, which give a true perspective to one's experience of life. And this imaginative knowledge comes most strongly and immediately through the sight, through the vision of the strange isolated figure of the bent old man.

"She was a Phantom of delight" records the changing nature of experiencing one person; it does not explicitly discuss, explain or attempt to rationalise this change as do some of the other poems which show this same pattern. Perhaps the most explicit rationalization of the pattern comes in The Prelude (1850, Book XII) which records a time

When the bodily eye, in every stage of life
The most despotic of our senses, gained
Such strength in me as often held my mind
In absolute dominion... (ll. 128-31)

Vivid the transport, vivid though not profound;
I roamed from hill to hill, from rock to rock,
Still craving combinations of new forms.

New pleasure, wider empire for the sight,
Proud of her own enjoyments, and rejoiced
To lay the inner faculties asleep. (ll. 142-47)

Here the state of total preoccupation with experience through the eye is seen as a kind of disorder and tyranny, as in "Tintern Abbey" it is seen as a kind of escape (ll. 70-72), and in "Peele Castle" as a kind of delusion (l. 56). The recovery from this state of chaos is connected with the love of human beings and of common life:

Thus moderated, thus composed, I found
Once more in Man an object of delight,
Of pure imagination, and of love;
And, as the horizon of my mind enlarged,
Again I took the intellectual eye
For my instructor, studious more to see
Great truths, than touch and handle little ones.
(1850, Book XIII, ll. 48-54)

The "intellectual eye" of line 52 is in clear antithesis to the "despotic eye" described in Book XII, and is I think parallel with the "eye serene" in line 21 of "She was a Phantom of delight." Both poems show how a purely visible mode of experience (implicit in the shorter poem, explicit in The Prelude) is superseded by a kind of sight which is tempered by thought and experience.

The pattern is visible from 1793 onwards for even An Evening Walk records it in part:

Fair Scenes: with other eyes, than once, I gaze,
The ever-varying charm your round displays,
Than when, erewhile, I taught, "a happy child,"
The echoes of your rocks my carols wild:
Then did no ebb of cheerfulness demand
Sad tides of joy from Melancholy's hand;
In youth's wild eyes the livelong day was bright,
The sun at morning, and the stars at night. (ll. 17-24)

This sounds like the conventional blending of nostalgia and melancholy of the eighteenth century descriptive poem of which in many ways An Evening Walk is so typical a specimen. Yet in it already we see the connection between youthful delight in nature, the eye, and brightness—and, incidentally, the "wild eye" of Tintern Abbey.

The beauty and importance of "She was a Phantom of delight" lie not only in its statement but in its implication, not only in the tribute to Mary but in the shaping and ordering of Wordsworth's experience of Mary. It implies an insight so important to Wordsworth that he returned to it again and again. I do not mean to confound the varying experiences recorded by the various poems: each occasion seems new, each poem different. Yet behind each statement lies this same pattern of understanding of the development of knowledge and imagination. In this short lyric the
pattern is always implied, never stated, and perhaps it is the clearer for that. In it we see again what Geoffrey Hartman calls "the relentless humanizing of the imagination." We see intense youthful experience which is purely visual and which has the brightness of one kind of imagination, the gleam of "Tintern Abbey," the Immortality Ode, and "Peele Castle." We see, and with special clarity in "Peele Castle" and the poem to Mary, that the intensity of such seeing gives it a hallucinatory quality. We see this pass into commonplace experience: like the splendour of the Immortality Ode it "fades into the light of common day." As one light fades another replaces it: finally we see the restoration of imaginative experience through a knowledge of endurance and suffering. The eye once again has an important role, but now it has become the "eye serene" whose sight is informed by human feeling and knowledge, and which is a source not so much of delight as of understanding. Once again also the imagery of light returns, but now it is "angelic light" and not the phantom brightness of first sight. The first imaginative experience must fade, but imagination can be restored through human experience. And of course, for Wordsworth, light is essentially the image of the mind and the imagination: light is transformed and restored, just as, to use Wordsworth's own expression, the imagination is restored.

Because the imagination is capable of constructing a perfect joy, early experience often has a hallucinatory quality, for its delight can be projected endlessly forward. Experience teaches, as reason or literature might have taught, that earthly joys cannot be permanent or unmixed. And the imagination must have absorbed this knowledge and experience before it can radiate spiritual truth: the "eye serene" and the "intellectual eye" see more clearly for their vision is not just that of sense, but of the mind and heart. In the repeated pattern in both major and minor poems we see how important for Wordsworth is this insight into the development of the imagination.  

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver

6. This essay is based on a paper read at a meeting of the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English, at Laval University, Quebec in May, 1976.