

Contemplations on Man and Nature

— A Comparative Study of the View of Nature Between William Wordsworth and Wang Wei

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Abstract. Both William Wordsworth and Wang Wei are prominent idyllic poets who chanted nature and sought beauty and divinity from nature. While sharing similarities, they contrasted each other in many respects in their poetic works. Wang Wei's poems were deeply influenced by Zen Buddhism, which gave nature a rich connotation in addition to the idea of "unity of heaven and man". William Wordsworth, greatly affected by pantheism, resorted to poetry to explore philosophical issues in life like the relationship between nature, man and divinity of the Heaven. In the current era, the process of economic development and the continuous integration of different societies and civilizations are still full of contradictions. Thinking, deepening and adjusting the relationship between man and nature is to maintain harmony between man and nature, so as to arrive at the destination of promoting economic development and social progress. This article focuses on the similarities and differences between William Wordsworth and Wang Wei as well as their works, analyzes the causes, and then reveals the significance and insight, in order to provide constructive references to build a modern harmonious society.

Keywords: *view of nature, unity of heaven and man, Zen Buddhism*

1. Introduction

Nature, the womb where men originate and survive, is the target that artists of different schools have been depicting and eulogizing. In China, it was since the Wei and Jin Dynasties that nature has become an independent aesthetic object, and has gained and enjoyed the popularity ever since; pastoral poems of the Tang dynasty in particular, the idyllic and simple elegance and quietness between human beings and the natural world have been set as the keynote in them to convey the genuine feelings that man is the integral part of the nature. The conception of harmony between man and nature has thus been advocated. Wang Wei, born in 701 and died in 761 in the Tang dynasty, is one of the outstanding poets who wrote a number of pastoral poems. Wang epitomized the school of natural conception either in poems or in paintings. Sushi, one of the literary masters of Song dynasty, once commented Mojie (secondary personal name of Wang Wei), "The poem is in the painting, and the painting is in the poetry," which best summarizes Wang Wei's artistic state.

Influenced by pantheistic thoughts in the West, people's cognitive experience of nature is much like the respect for God, and generally do not pursue more. Free association halts with the assistance of nature. The ecstasy of forgetting oneself in physical substances often does not win the preference of poets. William Wordsworth, the founder of the British Romantic Poetry, is known as a poet who eulogized nature, and he depicted the respect for the mysterious God with plain and unremarkable language.

This article intends to demonstrate the similarities and differences between William Wordsworth and Wang Wei in terms of the view of nature, mainly from the perspectives of their striking language features, the source of thoughts, and realm of thoughts.

2. Similarities in Their Thoughts and Works

2.1 Similarity in Romantic Conception

Both Wordsworth and Wang Wei's views on nature are shrouded in rich romantic atmosphere. In the process of thinking about nature and poetry, they both advocated nature and opposed pretension. Wordsworth's poem "To the Cuckoo" can be regarded as a representative work in this respect.

In "To the Cuckoo", the ordinary bird has become "an invisible thing" and "a voice, a mystery" in the poet's heart. "And thou wert still a hope, a love; Still longed for, never seen." It makes the poet's heart reminiscent of the good old days, "till I do beget that golden time again". By portraying the poetic, moving and floating voice of the cuckoo, the poem has strongly expressed the poet's pursuit of romantic and aesthetic harmony between man and nature.

Wang Wei's poems also glowed with romantic thoughts. He inherited a large number of romantic styles from Qu Yuan, the pioneer of Chinese romanticism. Together with his conviction in Buddhism, Romantic contemplation is properly expressed. For example, his "Ascending to the Bianjue Temple":

The path among bamboos goes ascent from the mountain foot,
Lotus-like peaks rise high above the illusive city.

The land of Chu State comes into view through the window,
All the rivers flow peacefully beyond the woods.

Soft meadow bears my cross-legged sitting,
Pine trees high resound the Buddhist chanting.

Residing in emptiness besides the dharma atmosphere,
Viewing the secular world I enlightened nirvana.

“登便觉寺”

竹径从初地，莲峰出化城。

窗中三楚尽，林上九江平。

软草承趺坐，长松响梵声。

空居法云外，观世得无生。[1]

In the poem, surrounded by the fresh beauties of nature such as the pine, the meadow, the mountain, the woods and rivers faraway, his spirit was in full liberty and disentangled all the secular affairs.

The deep romantic theme of Wang Wei and William Wordsworth made the poets' thoughts brim with pure and quiet chants in the harbor of nature.

2.2 The Blending of Dynamic-Static Method

Li Zehou, a Chinese scholar and critic, once remarked in his analysis of Wang Wei' works that everything in his poems is moving. Ordinarily, realistic and natural as they may seem to be, the meaning it conveys is dynamic. [2]

In "The Warble Ravine"(《鸟鸣涧》), Wang Wei created such an environment: in the quiet spring mountains, the moon came out through the clouds, and the birds that were inhabiting in the mountain screamed in the valley as they were awakened. At the beginning, "In quiet" showed that the poet's inner demureness enabled him away from worries, and the poet's mood fitted perfectly with environment. In "the vernal hills at night", readers have been intoxicated by the night's color and tranquility. Immediately, when the moon rose, it brought a bright silvery glare to the empty valley, so that the scene immediately changed, which startled the birds. This "startle" and the "warbling tune" in the poem perfectly embody the overall and harmonious beauty pursued by Chinese culture. In Wang Wei's poems, "meaning", "color", and "rhyme" are perfectly combined, and both dynamic and static descriptions complement each other.

Here, motion is static, but reality is empty, and color is empty. The ontology is beyond them. How beautiful is nature, it seems to have nothing to do with the world, the flowers bloom and the birds sing and spring. But in this moment of epiphany to nature, you all feel that immortality.

Wordsworth bore resemblance with Wang Wei in this regard, In “The Daffodils”, a separate scene-golden daffodil has been depicted. Although the poet also described hills, valleys, lakes, trees, they existed as the lining of the main scenery, daffodils. The daffodils described in the poem should be static, but the poet has rendered it a moving posture and emotion, making it personified because of his own emotional experiences.

“I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high over vales and hills.
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.” [3]

Wordsworth regarded nature as the supreme authority. He put his own beliefs and ideals in it. Once he lost his pursuit of ideals, his life would become meaningless. Similarly, Wang Wei also relied on nature. All natural features have become the basis for poets to express their inspiration and get rid of the fetters of reality.

2.3 Similarity in the Basis of Thoughts

Wordsworth regarded nature as the supreme authority. He put his own beliefs and ideals in. Once he lost his pursuit of ideals, his life will become meaningless. Similarly, Wang Wei also relied on nature, and all natural features have become the basis for him to express his inspiration and get rid of the fetters of reality.

The two poets chose nature as the basis of their thoughts and this was inseparable with their early experiences. Wordsworth was a radical revolutionary in the early days. When he traveled to France twice, he understood the true meaning of the revolution, but when the revolution completely failed, he completely lost his trust in radical revolution. The dramatic changes his world outlooks and the pain in his heart made him feel contradictory, and finally he realized that only nature could keep him away from pain. Therefore, nature was his reconciliation with the world.

Wang Wei had a similar experience with Wordsworth. Wang Wei was born in an affluent family who lived in the capital city in his early years, often associating with the noble officials and wise men. Yet when being expelled out of Chang'an, he hoped that he could find a spiritual oasis to resolve his political frustration in his idyllic life. All in all, Wordsworth and Wang Wei both experienced great setbacks in life. With disappointment and hope, they rushed into nature in order to find relief. They believed that nature could encompass human souls, and thus could compass their lost ideals.

2.4 Differences in Their Thoughts and Works

The differences between the two poets' pastoral poems are also obvious, which can be mainly reflected in the following aspects: different themes in poems, different language features, distinctive life philosophies, different source of thoughts and so on. Different cultural backgrounds of China and the West have had unique marks on the works of the two writers. The thoughts of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism have had a profound impact on Chinese culture, while Western culture was rooted in the development of ancient Greek and Roman mythology and Christianity.

2.4.1 Different Themes in Their Poems

Wang Wei and Wordsworth are very good at grasping the subtle movements between landscapes and expressing them in the form of poetry, but the themes of their poetry are mostly different. The

former focused on friendship, political ambition, and Buddhism as the themes of poetry, while the latter wrote on issues such as children, love, and rural.

Wordsworth began to focus on children, love, death, and the country after having gone through life setbacks and social changes, as he believed that in the irreversible life path, human goodness will gradually be lost, and everyone should find the childhood innocence and beauty. Thus it is often said that Children are the models of adults. He hoped that people could face the world with nature and love through his works.

By contrast, Wang Wei rarely covered the topics above. In his poems, he often took the themes of friendship, political ambition, and Zen Buddhism. Although he wrote many farewell poems to express the kind of hardship between friends, Wang Wei has repeatedly suffered frustrations in his career, which made him more inclined to convey his depressed and gloomy emotions by describing natural landscapes. It was the strikes and blows in real life that drove Wang Wei to believe in Buddhism even more, thus in his poems, traces of Zen Buddhism could be easily identified.

2.4.2 Different Language Features in Poetry

Poetry in the Tang Dynasty had strict requirements on language. Wang Wei's poems excel in the beauty of rhyme and symmetry. The language is naturally vivid, euphemistic, exquisite, and rhythmic. For instance, his "Autumn Dusk in My Mountain Reclusion":

The mountain stands vacant
Newly after the late autumn rain
Bright moon shines among groves of pine
While crystal brooks flow over the huge stone
Among the rustling of bamboos return the washing ladies
With the joggling of lotuses launch the fishing boats
O let the spring blooms go to seeds
While the prince may well keep your stay
“山居秋暝”
空山新雨后，天气晚来秋。
明月松间照，清泉石上流。
竹喧归浣女，莲动下渔舟。
随意春芳歇，王孙自可留。 [4]

Yet Wordsworth believed that the subject matter of poetry should be universal, and the language of poetry should try to imitate the true language of life. According to Wordsworth, poetry originated from emotions recollected through tranquility, and its function is to strike a responsive cord in humanity. He adopted vivid, simple and concise language to directly express feelings. As Wordsworth advocated that rhythm of poetry should be as much consistent with the spoken language and intonation as possible. Most of his works use precise and concise words, which not only reflect his understanding of poetry, but also bear the style and proverbial characteristics of prose. Therefore, Wordsworth's poetic expression is more direct than that of Wang Wei.

Wordsworth emphasizes that poetry is the most philosophical of all articles, so the starting point of his view of nature is nature, but the end is the world. The famous "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" is a profound and magnificent work by Wordsworth. The beginning of the work is very close to the unexplained presentation of China's natural landscape. However, in the following three-quarters of the entire poem, the poet recalled how the image of natural beauty of the landscape gave him a peaceful mood, and how he realized pure and noble thoughts in nature.

2.4.3 Different Manifestations of Poems

Wang Wei's poems emphasize the unity of connotation, form and righteousness. From an aesthetic perspective, Wang Wei's pastoral poetry pays great attention to the unity of color and image beauty. Wordsworth's poems focus more on vivid description. In addition, the length of the

two poems is not the same. Wang Wei's poems are mostly five-character or seven-character poems, while Wordsworth's poems are relatively much freer in form.

2.4.4. Roots in Different Source of Thoughts

Since middle age, Wang Wei has gradually been influenced by Zen Buddhism. His achievements in poetry and art have largely benefited from his practice of Zen. In his poem, he once recorded his life with Zen: "In the mountains I was never short of Buddhist companions; in freedom and leisure our group gathered and chanted." When Wang Wei silently spoke about nature and Zen, he could capture the quietness and the supreme loneliness. Buddhism influenced Wang Wei's poetic creation. Therefore, his poetry often has a far-reaching perception beyond words. [5]

Wordsworth eulogized nature. Thinking about nature and exploring the relationship between man and nature were mainly the result of being deeply influenced by western pantheism. In the West, pantheistic ideas originated in ancient Greek philosophy. Once having an important influence on philosophy, literature and art, etc., the "assimilation of man and nature" advocated by romanticism is a pantheistic view. Wordsworth's view of nature contains three levels. The first level is the soul of God; the second level is the soul of nature; the third level is the soul of man. The soul of God exists in nature, and God's spirit exists everywhere in nature. The human soul is dependent on nature. He is convinced that the existence of God is reflected in everything. The scenery of nature has the ability to heal human trauma. Similarly, the poem "The Daffodils" embodies this idea:

"For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flesh upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills
And dances with the daffodils." [6]

This is the last stanza of this poem, which expresses the poet's true thoughts: The beauty of nature can not only heal people's pains, but also the beauty of divinity engraved in the poet's heart can bring joy to the painful soul. "Intimations of Immortality" has shown us a humanism that does not decline divinity but that reveals "the poet's spiritual imagination finding subtler imprints of divinity within human consciousness." [7]

To sum up, Westerners worship nature and imitate nature; Orientals are close to nature and integrate with nature. Westerners are natural and are endowed with divinity; Orientals have a natural taste and cultivate humanity. This undoubtedly explains what makes people different in their view of nature.

3. Conclusion

In modern society, human beings and society are generally considered to be continuously progressive, but this progress essentially comes down to the growth of material wealth and the improvement of technological power. Human progress should not only increase in quantity, but also include qualitative improvement; it is not achieved in the opposition between man and nature, but in the harmonious unity of man and nature. It is the symbiosis and prosperity of man and nature.

The theory of "unity of man and nature" holds that man and nature are an organic whole, and man is a part of the whole. Therefore, we should strive to achieve the unity of all things, to make the whole nature alive and full of vitality: to make human society flourish and harmoniously in the embrace of nature. Rethinking the relationship between man and nature with the mind of the poets and the wisdom of the philosophers can effectively resolve the contradiction between human society and nature, and can truly realize the harmonious unity and prosperity between man and nature.

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