

Foundation English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832
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Romantic Poetry 3
Aesthetics Wordsworth

Hello everybody, in this session we will continue our reading of the English Romantic writers specifically poetry why are the aesthetics the employed? Today's session is devoted to aesthetics and Williams Wordsworth. You will recall that we have discussed 2 principal forms of aesthetics that influenced to the English Romantic writers, the sublime and the picturesque. The sublime was aesthetics of awe, fear it instilled in the viewer's sense of immensity of incomprehensibility.

Landscapes drawn by John Martin, Louthembourg and others where about extensive ruling land or sea immeasurable depth, width and intensity, so mountains, oceans, the sky itself were instances of the sublime and humanity in comparison appears very small but more worryingly the sublime is an aesthetics of awe and when the human perceives himself or herself in the sublime it instils in them the idea that whatever you are seeing is incomprehensible. It is an aesthetic of boundarylessness, of limitlessness.

The picturesque in sharp contrast is the aesthetics of fairly well-defined lands bounded hedged in with fences and walls or whatever it is of organized variety, so the picturesque instils in you a sense of peace and harmony. It requires variety it will have ruin melancholy is built into the picturesque, so is poverty but it would be organized lands, so that is the difference between the picturesque and the sublime. Effectively you can read them as antagonistic aesthetics, so let us take a look at our opening slide which is an excerpt from Williams Wordsworth, The Prelude 1805 edition.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:20)

I found myself of a huge sea of mist,
Which meek and silent rested at my feet.
A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved
All over this still ocean, and beyond,
Far, far beyond, the vapours shot themselves
In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,
Into the sea, the real sea, that seemed
To dwindle and give up its majesty,
Usurped upon as far as sight could reach.

....

from the shore
At distance not the third part of a mile
Was a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapour,
A deep and gloomy breathing-place, through which
Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, steams
Innumerable, roaring with one voice.
The universal spectacle throughout
Was shaped for admiration and delight,
Grand in itself alone, but in that breach
Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,
That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodged
The soul, the imagination of the whole.

The Prelude 1805



Note on your screen now how he opens this particular except. ‘I found myself of a huge sea of mist, which meek and silent rested at my feet. A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved all over this still ocean and beyond far, far beyond, the vapours shot themselves in headlands, tongues and promontory shapes into the sea, the real sea, that seemed to dwindle and give up its majesty, usurped upon as far as sight could reach.’ He will go on to describe ‘... a blue chasm, a deep and gloomy breathing place and through which she says mounted the roar of waters, torrents, stream innumerable, roaring with one voice. The universal spectacle throughout was shaped for admiration and delight’.

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In these lines, as Philip Shaw rightly points, out, Wordsworth is employing the aesthetics of the sublime.

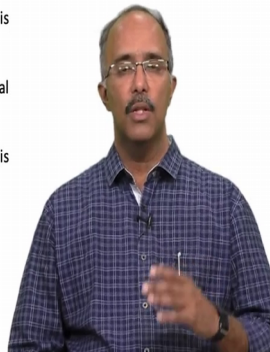
Note the description of vastness, boundarilessness and the sense of awe that these sights generate in the mind.

Oceans, roaring waters, grand spectacles : Nature here is terrifying (this is not the Nature of *Tintern Abbey*)

But Wordsworth, as is typical of him, does not stop at the ‘universal spectacle’.

Once he no longer sees the mountain, which is mighty, it drives his imagination to greater heights, argues Wordsworth:

Slide:



If you pay attention to this you can readily make out the elements of sublime as Philip Shaw has pointed out this is where Wordsworth sublime makes its most significant presence. Note the description of vastness, boundarylessness and the sense of awe that these sites generate in the mind. So you have oceans and roaring waters and what you call universal spectacle which by definition is more or less incomprehensible.

What is the emotion you experience? Now noticed from the description and can go back to your slide nature here is terrifying, it does not make you feel nice experience pleasure instead what it shows you is how terrifying nature is. So this is not the nature of Tintern Abbey and we look at Tintern Abbey in a bit. What Wordsworth is talking about is nature on an extraordinary scale or an astronomical scale, something so vast you cannot even perceive because our vision does not comprehend what we are seeing.

In the late 20th and early 21st-century and the eco-critic Timothy Morton will speak about hyper object, objects which are so vast that they cannot hope to understand their dimensions but Wordsworth which is typical of him does not stop at the universal spectacle. Once he can no longer... and look at what he has said he speaks about 100 hills but once he moves away from this as in when he is no longer physically located near the mountains, once he can no longer see the mountain he imagines bigger mountains.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:55)

A meditation rose on me that night
Upon the lonely mountain when the scene
Had passed away, and it appeared to me
The perfect image of a mighty mind,
Of one that feeds upon infinity,
That is exalted by an under-presence,
The sense of God, or whatso'er is dim
Or vast in its own being ...



Now on a screen the next slide which will tell you this ‘A medication rose on me that night upon the lonely Mountain when the scene had passed away’ this is vintage Wordsworth if you recall Solitary Reaper he will tell you that he is trying to recall, will no one tell me...and he

will conclude the poem by saying ‘the music in my heart I bore long after it was heard no more, implying that it is the memory of the song that that is crucial and in all poem of his it will be the memory that he has of something beautiful that drives his imagination.

So you will recall daffodils as well that when he comes back after seeing the daffodils, he comes back home and he is lying on his couch, they flashed upon the inward eye he will say, so it is the memory of the natural sites that drive him to imagination. Here too having seen 100 hills he now meditates on it, he says a meditation rose on me that night upon the lonely mountains when the scene had passed away, when the scene had passed away.

So what you can see here is Wordsworth measuring humanity in comparison with nature ‘and it appeared to me the perfect image of a mighty mind, you should be able to see echo here in the later poem that is Shelley’s *Mont Blanc* where the sight of something grand produces a grand imagination. So this is what he is saying here, when the scene has passed away it appeared to me that is the mountain, it is the perfect image he says of a mighty mind of one that feeds upon infinity.

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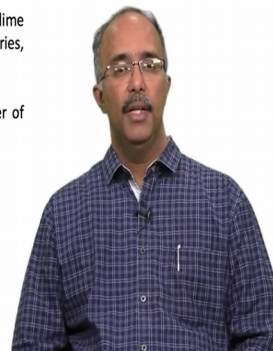
The grandeur of the scene he witnesses on Mount Snowdon creates and is replaced by the grandeur of the imagination.

Thus, the magnitude of the mountain is replaced by the ability to imagine these kinds of magnitudes.

Wordsworth, not very differently from Shelley in *Mont Blanc*, finds the sublime in nature as paralleled by the sublime in the imagination – without boundaries, vast and awesome.

This is in tune with what he would say in *Tintern Abbey* about the power of Nature’s spectacle on the mind of the poet:

I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused .



So the grandeur of nature is smashed only by the grandeur of the human imagination. In other words the poets appreciate the sublime nature has a sublime mind, so the grandeur of the scene he is just witnessed on Mount Snowdon is replaced by the grandeur of the imagination and the magnitude of the mountain is replaced by the ability to imagine magnitudes, so it is not really the poet or the speaker who is standing and admiring nature, the poet is the man who witnesses this goes back home and is able to build those mountains in his imagination,

the sublime in nature parallel by the sublime in the imagination without boundaries, vast and terrifying.

This is more or less in tune with what he would say in one segment of Tintern Abbey about the power of nature's spectacle on the mind of the poet. I quote now Tintern Abbey and Wordsworth writing about the influence of nature on him 'I felt a presence that disturbed me with the joy of elevated thoughts, elevated thoughts like a mountainous in an elevated topographical feature and he calls it a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:42)

How divine, The liberty, for frail, for mortal, man
To roam at large among unpeopled glens
And mountainous retirements, only trod
By devious footsteps; regions consecrate
To oldest time! and, reckless of the storm
That keeps the raven quiet in her nest,
Be as a presence or a motion--one
Among the many there; and while the mists
Flying, and rainy vapours, call out shapes
And phantoms from the crags and solid earth
As fast as a musician scatters sounds
Out of an instrument;

The Excursion



Let us take another example this time from The Excursion and he will again describe vast, incomprehensible landscapes 'How divine, the Liberty, for frail, for mortal, man to roam at large among unpeopled glens and mountainous retirements, only trod by devious footsteps; region consecrate to oldest time and reckless of the storm that keeps the raven quite in her nest be as a presence or a motion-- one among the many there and while the midst flying and rainy vapour call out shapes and Phantom from the crags and solid earth as fast as a musician scatters sound out of an instrument.

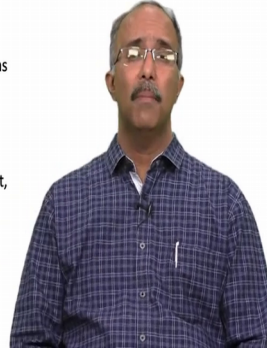
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Here, again, Wordsworth employs the sublime (especially the trope of obscurity and excess).

But it is not about being overwhelmed by the sights and sounds - it is about 'one / Among the many there'.

Wordsworth, rather than being overawed here, sees the setting as generating the sublime imagination. 'the sense sublime', in fact.

The poet is a part of the 'natural sublime', in other words. This suggests that the poet is at home in Nature, he shares the same tumult, chaos of Nature because his mind is sublime.



Here again Wordsworth employees this line especially the tropes of obscurity you cannot see very clearly and of course the (())(8:29) of stress but it is not about being overwhelmed by the sight and sound, it is about being one among the many, so as we know Wordsworth is not really interested in nature per say he is interested in the effect nature as on his mind and how he fits into nature.

So Wordsworth rather than being overawed here, sees the setting as generating the sublime imagination. 'The sense sublime' as he puts it and the poet is therefore a part of the nature sublime in other words. This suggests that the poet is at home in nature, he shared the same tumult, the chaos and the grandeur of nature because his mind is also sublime. That was an instance of Wordsworth sublime, I know move on to the second aesthetics that Wordsworth has often employed in his poetry and that is the aesthetics.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:19)

In poems like 'Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth prefers the quiet landscape, organized, and ordered.

Also in *The Excursion*

Slides



Let us take a look at poems like 'Tintern abbey' as I told you in the beginning of today's stock the picturesque is a quite landscape, it is often pastoral not quite Arcadian but pastoral, sometimes georgic so there will be labor. It is cannot necessarily the labor, visible labor in Arcadian landscapes but this definitely labor in the georgic landscape and the georgic landscape is a landscape of cultivation and you will recall in our earlier session we did speak about Thomas Gainsborough and others on Pastoral land and farmland and things, so we will look at couple of examples. This is Wordsworth's picturesque, we just looked at Wordsworth sublime. Here is a slide accepting Wordsworth, The Excursion.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:10)

he day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.



Day is come when I again repose and notice the quietness of it, he is sitting quietly and he is sitting at rest (10:16) tree and he says and view these plots of cottage ground, these orchard-tufts, which at this season with the unripe fruits are clad in one green hue and lose themselves with groves and copses. Once again I see these hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms green to the very door and wreaths of smoke sent up in silence from among the trees with some uncertain notice, as might seem of vagrant dwellers in the houseless words or of some hermit's cave, where by his fire the Hermit sits alone.

Famous lines of course from Tintern Abbey and look at what he is saying there are...he is sitting and resting, here there are plots of cottage ground, now by definition plots are organized bits of land it is not natural topography at all and here he is saying there are hedge rows, kind of frames, borders. Remember what I told you about the picturesque, the picturesque is the landscape which has been organized and harmonised variety has been put together fenced in and all that.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:27)

Where peace to Grasmere's lonely island leads,
To willowy hedge-rows, and to emerald meads;
Leads to her bridge, rude church, and cottaged grounds,
Her rocky sheepwalks, and her woodland bounds;
[Where](#), undisturbed by winds, Winander sleeps
'Mid clustering isles, and holly-sprinkled steeps;
Where twilight glens endear my Esthwaite's shore,
And memory of departed pleasures, more.
An Evening Walk



There is, here, an emphasis on order, harmony and variety...

Hedgerows, fences, etc, that organize the land.



Another excerpt here from ‘An Evening Walk’, ‘Where peace to Grasmere’s lonely Island leads to willowy hedge-rows and to emerald meads leads to her bridge, rude church and cottage grounds. Her rocky sheepwalks and her woodland bounds where undisturbed by winds, Winander sleeps Mild clustering isles and holy sprinkle steeps where twilight glens endear my Esthwaite’s shore and memory of departed pleasure, more. Again bridge, Church, cottages, woodland all limited. What do you think the emphasis on? Clearly the emphasis is on the order harmony and variety, hedgerows, fences that organise the land.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:11)

When crowding cattle, checked by rails that make
A fence far stretched into the shallow lake,
Lashed the cool water with their restless tails,
Or from high points of rock looked out for fanning gales:
When school-boys stretched their length upon the green;
And round the broad-spread oak, a glimmering scene,
In the rough fern-clad park, the herded deer
Shook the still-twinkling tail and glancing ear;
When horses in the sunburnt intake stood,
And vainly eyed below the tempting flood,
Or tracked the passenger, in mute distress,
With forward neck the closing gate to press—
Then, while I wandered where the huddling rill
Brightens with water-breaks the hollow ghyll
As by enchantment, an obscure retreat
Opened at once, and stayed my devious feet.



The picturesque as we have already discussed in the earlier session was an aesthetics of property and ownership as well and that is why the fences, the fences are barriers, they organize the land but they also delimit ownership and here he will speak about another

excerpt where you can actually see the closing gate, the fences and things like that. We are not looking here at vast open fields we are looking at organized fields.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:43)

This picturesque scene also incorporates another element: poverty. In the poem, the beggar woman with two babies, wanders looking for shelter and hope.

Wordsworth would use the helpless woman trope elsewhere too: in The Female Vagrant, The Ruined Cottage, 'Her Eyes Were Wild', among others

Slide



I mentioned early today that the picturesque also incorporates another element; poverty. The beggar woman, the peddler, the vagrant are all central characters in Wordsworth picturesque, they wander around looking for shelter or if they are in a shelter they are also described as being very poor and if you look at the female vagrant poems and some of the poems from incidence upon The Salisbury Plain you will discover Wordsworth's interest in the dispossessed shall we say and Wordsworth will use the helpless women trope again in the female vagrant, The Ruined Cottage, ' Her Eyes Were Wild', among others. Here is a small incident coming up on the variant of the picturesque as well.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:31)

when the sleety showers her path assail,
And like a torrent roars the headstrong gale;
No more her breath can thaw their fingers cold,
Their frozen arms her neck no more can fold;
Weak roof a covering form two babes to shield,
And faint the fire a dying heart can yield!
Press the sad kiss, fond mother! vainly fears
Thy flooded cheek to wet them with its tears;
No tears can chill them, and no bosom warms,
Thy breast their death-bed, confined in thine arms!



When the sleety showers her path assail and like a torrent roars the headstrong gale, no more her breath can thaw their fingers cold. Their frozen arm her neck no more can fold, weak roof a covering form two babes to shield and faint the fire a dying hear can yield. What is important to understand is there is a politics to the picturesque like there is a politics to the sublime.

The sublime transfer nature into something wild, huge, uncontrollable, so the politics of sublime as Patricia Yeager, Neil Hertz and several critics have commentated have pointed out, the sublime was effectively a masculine aesthetic and it showed the man, emphasis is on the gender, the man overcoming something, conquering something, so the sublime was primarily about the masculine ethos of the age. Patricia Yeager has a famous book on the female sublime and what it does and the politics of sublime which now many more people are discussing.

The picturesque on the other hand is organization of land around (14:44) property, so the picturesque as a land owner will say I want this land fenced in or manicure or whatever it might be is showing that it is only from the control of the land can it be beautified? The picturesque was obsessed with questions of improvement but you see you cannot go and improve your neighbour's house you can only improve your own, it requires so sovereignty, so the question of the picturesque had a lot of political subtext to it including questions of ownership and property, so as you can see Wordsworth employed both the sublime and the picturesque.

Sometimes often in the same poem specially extended works like the prelude and what we need to understand is if the sublime is incomprehensible, the picturesque is ordered. If one you cannot capture and comprehend the sublime you can certainly do so with the picturesque and these are not neutral as (())(15:39) pointed on the ideology of the aesthetics, all aesthetics have a political function. Thank you.