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The World Is Too Much with Us

The Poem

In “The World Is Too Much with Us,” William Wordsworth offers his reader a sonnet, albeit an idiosyncratic one that deliberately ignores or adapts the traditional sonnet conventions to convey its theme. The sonnet is typically a poem composed of fourteen lines that features two “movements”: an octave, or opening set of eight lines, that presents a dilemma or conflict, the resolution to which is offered in the closing sestet, or set of six lines. Besides this structural convention, the traditional Italian sonnet, which is the basic form the poet builds upon, also features an *abba*, *abba*, *cde*, *cde* rhyme scheme, in which each letter represents a new end rhyme for each line.

Wordsworth elects, however, to manipulate both conventions and substitute his own formula instead. Rather than the traditional octave and sestet, there is only a brief break, or caesura, in line 9 to distance the previous lines from those that follow; the effect is that the reader immediately is transported into the climactic declaration of line 9. Similarly, the poet also posits his own rhyme scheme, beginning with the traditional *abba* form, but ending ostentatiously with three rhymed couplets.

These decisions to forgo convention are part of the poet’s Romantic temperament and his thematic tendencies. In effect, the form of the sonnet embodies the poet’s theme. Wordsworth—the most respectful of tradition among the clan of “rebel spirits” whose poetic company includes George Gordon, Lord Byron, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge—nevertheless is concerned with creating his own form and promoting it.

The poet begins with a straightforward declaration, “The world is too much with us,” then proceeds to explicate the meaning of this maxim. First offered is a comment upon the maxim’s scope: “late and soon.” Comprehensively, totally, utterly, the poet opines, people are captives of the world they seek to understand or control.

The reader is implicated with the poet (“us”) in “getting and spending” and laying “waste our powers” to see in “Nature” what is “ours.” “World” as cosmos, as debilitating “system” that robs people of their perceptions, is contrasted with “Nature,” the benevolent teacher through which one might learn of his or her inner nature and thus be free of deceit and cunning. The poet concludes, “We have given our hearts away,” and this is a “sordid boon!”

Wordsworth follows this assessment with a series of images from nature that underscores one’s ignorance and leads one to an abrupt denouement. The sea and the winds that might liberate one from world-weariness are depicted as singers or musicians with whose song people “are out of tune.” The reader is then startled by the poet’s sudden, aggressive “anti-confession”: “Great God! I’d rather be/ A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn.”

One looks for the “than,” the syntactic particle that would complete the comparison—the poet would rather be a pagan than what? The implied answer is “a citizen of Christian civilization,” one who has too quickly been

dulled to the glories and lessons of “the pleasant lea” on which he stands.

He feigns, in conclusion, to prefer the ancient mythology, so dated, yet so contemporary, that would bring him “glimpses” of “Proteus rising from the sea” or “old Triton blow[ing] his wreathed horn.” From beginning to end, the sonnet is seen as an unrelenting attack on superficiality and conventionality in faith and in human motivation promoted by the fixed contours of “the world.”

Forms and Devices

Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) set forth a manifesto of poetic insight that shook the nineteenth century poetic establishment. Decrying tradition and classicism for their own sake, the poet undertook to write poetry “in the real language of men” and to defend his new techniques as a more authentic response to the world at large.

Wordsworth and his fellow Romantics sought nothing less than the revitalization of poetry and literature in the lives of common men and women, not just the aristocracy, while at the same time hoping for a more prestigious place for himself in the arbitration of taste, virtue, and religion in the public square.

“The World Is Too Much with Us” exemplifies both the proud, buoyant spirit and the dark undertones of his endeavor. In the poem, Wordsworth simultaneously employs and flaunts the traditional form as it has come to him. The sonnet serves as a bridge between the arrant traditionalism in which he was nurtured and the emancipated imagination of a new age, an age in which “the spontaneous overflow of emotion” would define poetic achievement.

The first eight lines are constructed with the expected metric and rhyme schemes; as readers arrive at what appears to be a conventional octave-sestet structural split, they are struck by the abrupt shift in tone, marked by the caesura, and the auspicious launch into rhymed couplets. The latter device, the equivalent of a “jingle” in twentieth century advertising, jars the reader’s poetic sensibilities and, further, undermines his or her confidence in interpreting the poem aright at first glance.

These conventions broken, the poet proceeds to navigate new thematic territory as well. Faithful to his self-confessed predilections for “common language,” the diction of the sonnet is unpretentious, if graphically sensuous. The poet’s ploy of depicting the pre-Christian worldview as a nursing mother to be suckled surely shocked its original audience. This rather indelicate juxtaposition of “Pagan creed” and, by implication, “Mother Church” foregrounds Wordsworth’s—and, more commonly, the Romantics’—disdain for organized religion and what he regarded as its untoward effect upon the appreciation of nature as a source of spiritual enlightenment.

Themes and Meanings

This sonnet comprises an apt summary of many of the themes Wordsworth pursued throughout his tumultuous career. Primarily, “The World Is Too Much with Us” is a poem about vision, about lines of sight, about the debris of history that prevents the observer from seeing through to the real meaning and purpose of human life.

Throughout the first eight lines of the sonnet, two competing worldviews are silently compared before the poet explicitly declares in line 9 his allegiance to a modified paganism that preserves nature’s autonomy and authority apart from human control or divine manipulation. In short, the poet seeks to divorce Christian vice from pagan virtue and form a hybrid ethic that permits the soul to return to its spiritual moorings.

The poet’s intellectual vista envisions a decadent West poised on utter industrialization and eventually ruin. The incipient “environmentalism” found in the sonnet undergirds most of Wordsworth’s other works, especially his long narrative poem, *The Prelude* (published posthumously in 1850), and his verse drama, *The Borderers* (1842). Nature is conceptualized as a willing teacher, a personified, secularized “Holy Spirit,” who will “guide us into all truth.”

The “world” that is “too much with us” is the world as stylized, fixed, unmalleable—the world of a sovereign deity who has placed humankind in a cosmos of his and not their making. Echoed here, then, is the poet’s rebellion against this fixedness. The sonnet is thus a call to arms, a rallying cry to cease “getting and spending” with the coinage of heaven and to turn to a “creed outworn” for sustenance and guidance.

In this, the sonnet reflects the poet’s quite explicit preoccupation with expressing the nature and consequences of self-consciousness for an appreciation of nature’s role in forming the human spirit. In commenting upon his poetics, Wordsworth offered that “the study of human nature suggests this awful truth, that, as in the trials to which life subjects us, sin and crime are apt to start from their very opposite qualities.” In other words, whatever merits Christian civilization may have presented, its excesses breed the very behaviors and social conditions that cause its dissolution.

This sentiment is in line with the sonnet’s poetic form and theme, and with the poet’s own testimony about his life in the autobiographical work, *The Prelude*. Therein Wordsworth suggests that he had sought a rudder for the future by attaining a clear sense of his own past, and not merely the historian’s pseudo-objective reconstruction of the past.

That past, the past of each person, is available for introspection, and thus evaluation, in the poet’s view only to the extent that one breaks free of the “world” as a prison house. To regain “our powers,” people must get “in tune” with nature’s melodies. The alternative—from the perspective of the sonnet and the poet himself—is to reap captivity of spirit and poverty of soul. Hence, “The World Is Too Much with Us” is a prototypical Romantic anthem, impishly prodding readers to reconsider the basis of their transcendent faith and their despair at reclaiming nature for their own purposes.

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