

The Boundless Canopy and the Ruthless Power: A Study in Wordsworth's Series of Sonnets on the River Duddon and Its Dual Conclusion

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Abstract. Wordsworth's series of sonnets on the River Duddon has two distinct, and even conflicting, conclusions. Given the romantic commitment to unity, this work is almost unique. This study tries to explore the thematic aspects of the River Duddon sonnets that practically compelled Wordsworth to conclude this series twice. The paper argues that there are two themes that run throughout the series: the primary theme of the complementarity of man and nature, and the secondary, more implicit theme, of the antagonism between them. "A reconciliation of opposites," in the customary romantic fashion, seemed out of the question because of the wide gap separating the two themes. Therefore, after sonnet titled "Conclusion" where harmony and complementarity are affirmed and celebrated, there is, therefore, yet another sonnet titled "After-Thought" where conflict and separateness are sadly remembered and eventually accepted.

Most works of art, no matter how complex or diverse, have a single conclusion. It is very difficult to think either of *Hamlet* or Keats' "Lamia" as having two conclusions. "The Ancient Mariner," it could be argued, has two conclusions: the Mariner's re-entry into the human community, and the Wedding Guest's emotional and moral growth evidenced by his sudden turning away from the wedding festivities, a wiser and sadder person. The two conclusions in the case of "The Ancient Mariner," however, are appropriate in view of the poem's complex structure as a story within a story. The "two" conclusions, moreover, are thematically interrelated, for the Wedding Guest's turning away, an expression of his new awareness, is in turn occasioned by his new insight into the Mariner's life drama. Finally, the two conclusions, despite their superficial dissimilarity—the one implying re-entry into the communal, the

other an avoidance of it—are profoundly similar. Both the Wedding Guest and the Mariner are innocents caught up in the trivia and flux of life, conducting their respective lives according to the principles of pleasure and utility. Both undergo a form of re-education of the senses, the Mariner directly, the Guest vicariously. The Guest's retreat from communal life is only temporary, for he too, since his experience is but an echo of the Mariner's, will presumably re-enter it with a newly complex vision.

Wordsworth's series of sonnets on the River Duddon, however, has two distinct, and even conflicting, conclusions. Given the romantic commitment to organic unity, both on the level of critical theory and literary practice, one is led to ask: why then a dual conclusion? This paper will confine itself to the consideration of this one particular critical issue, with the obvious exclusion of other, probably more important, ones (such as problems of chronology, the conventions of topographical poetry, etc.). To achieve its objective, this paper through a close reading of the text, will explore and underscore the thematic aspects of the River Duddon Sonnets that practically compelled Wordsworth to conclude this series twice. It is hoped that the critical "reading" presented might help answer the question asked and consequently shed some light on the totality of the work in a way that probably cannot be otherwise achieved.

The first sonnet in the series ("Not envying Latian shades—if yet they throw")⁽¹⁾ exemplifies the typical Wordsworthian attempt to go back to the thing itself, "the native stream," rejecting any mediating devices between the poet and the object of his contemplation, be they literary traditions (Horace's "Fons Bandusiae") or conventional pretensions to splendor or loftiness ("Persian fountains" or "Alpine torrent"). The occasion calls for the use of the central Wordsworthian metaphor of the river, wherein the fully integrated life is compared to a river, and fully integrated poetry flows freely: "Pure flow the verse, pure, vigorous, free, and bright...." Since the identity of poet and river is implied in the metaphor of "flowing," the speaker in the sonnet asserts most unambiguously the realm of his song: "For Duddon, long-loved Duddon, is my theme! "

The same idea of a deep, abiding bond between poet and river is carried on in Sonnet III ("How shall I paint thee?—Be this naked stone"), where the speaker expresses the hope that his verses will serve as a "speaking monument" "to the eyes of men" of the "features" of Duddon. And once more the conventional is rejected, coupled this time with a rejection of the immediate and the transient:

No sign of hoar Antiquity's esteem
Appears, and none of modern Fortune's care.

(1) Thomas Hutchinson, ed., *Wordsworth, Poetical Works, with Introduction and Notes*, a new edition, revised by Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 296-303.

The river emerges as a symbol of something permanent, characterized by autonomy and self-sufficiency. It has “shed a gleam/Of brilliant moss, instinct with freshness rare” round itself. The poet, who will celebrate this autonomy and self-sufficiency, chooses a “naked stone” as his seat, implying a basic similarity and a deep link between river and poet.

Sonnet V (“Sole listener, Duddon! to the breeze that played”) celebrates a scene of almost perfect harmony between man and nature. A “Cottage rude and grey” is found “Mid sheltering pines”

Whose ruddy children, by the mother’s eyes
Carelessly watched, sport through the summer day,
Thy pleased associates.

Even though the river is the dominant element here, with human beings as mere “associates” (not exactly a word carrying positive connotations in the lexicon of a post-associationist Wordsworth); nevertheless, the over-all impression is one of the deep love between river and man.

The optimism in this, and other sonnets, stems from Wordsworth’s firm belief that man and nature are exquisitely fitted to each other, a belief that sustained him throughout his life and that underlies most of his poetry. The same theme of harmonious complementarity is resumed again in Sonnet IX (“The struggling Rill insensibly is grown”) in which the river is so closely identified with the life of man that both young and old recognize their respective strengths and weaknesses in the river.

The next sonnet (“Not so that pair whose youthful spirits dance”), titled “The Same Subject,” deals with the triumph of pastoral love, with the dizzy flood of Duddon forcing a not-so-reluctant Shepherd-lass to give her hand to the Shepherd boy, thereby bringing about a rather predictable, ‘happy ending.’ The “subject” of this sonnet is as remote as can be from that of the preceding one, but the “theme” is the same, namely, the abiding relationship of love between man and nature, with the river acting here as an agent of:

The frolic Loves, who, from yon high rock, see
The struggle, clap their wings for victory!

In Sonnet XXVI (“Return, Content! for fondly I pursued”) the river is identified with the ideal of freedom. As a child the speaker had viewed the river and perceived both its splendor and freedom. From the river he had learned “random cares and truant joys” that protected him from mischief and stain as he was growing into manhood. His “maturer Fancy” learned “Impetuous thoughts that brook not servile reins.” Coming back to the river, the speaker re-establishes the link with it and views

it as an image of his life's totality, encompassing both the cruder pleasures of the child and the deeper thoughts of the man.

The harmony and complementarity between man and nature (and God) reach a climax in Sonnet XXXI ("The Kirk of Ulpha to the pilgrim's eye"). A series of images suggests the inter-relatedness of all elements: the church is first compared to a star, then to a palm tree, and finally to an Indian tree. All images imply the restoration of deep harmony, after a temporary, perhaps unreal, disharmony. The church to the pilgrim's eyes (after the travails of the pilgrimage) is compared to the star which presents

Its shining forehead through the *peaceful* rent
Of a black cloud diffused o'er half the sky.
(Italics mine)

The fruitful palm tree "towering high/O'er the parched waste beside an Arab's tent," is a natural element that affords him shelter and security in the face of a hostile environment, thereby mitigating, perhaps even eliminating, the conflict between man and nature. The "Indian tree, whose branches, downward bent," probably signifying apparent decline, "Take[s] root again," and rather than turning into a bare stem, becomes "a boundless canopy that shelters and protects". Given this deep harmony and rich balance, the speaker yields to the moment and its leisure. He paces to "mark the summits hoar,/Of distant moon-lit mountains faintly shine." The elements of the image suggest a definite ascent and a measure of transcendence. All natural elements coalesce to bring about a deep serenity. So even though the poet is sitting "mid that... churchyard," the place brings him no gloomy thoughts of his own mortality; on the contrary, he extracts "thoughts divine" from "pastoral graves," for the churchyard is described as "wave-washed," and the river, in the background of the sonnet, stands as an unquestionable symbol of harmony that restores and heals. The poet is indeed, "Soothed by the unseen River's gentle roar."

In Sonnet XXXII ("Not hurled precipitous from steep to steep"), the speaker reaches the end of his journey, as the river flows "toward the Deep/Where mightiest rivers into powerless sleep/Sink, and forget their nature..." But this is not death, for the energy of the river never slackens; it still glides "in silence with unfettered sweep." And in a majestic scene quite reminiscent of the setting of "Upon Westminster Bridge," the Duddon is linked with the Thames:

Beneath an ampler sky a region wide
Is opened round him:-- hamlets, towers, and towns,
And blue-topped hills, behold him from afar;
In stately mien to sovereign Thames allied.

The river literally does not die or end; it is simply unified with the sea (“that receptacle vast”). The apparent end is actually no end at all. The part, in merging with the whole, reenters a new cycle, its extinction being only apparent.

Accordingly, the next Sonnet XXXIII (“But here no cannon thunders to the gale”), titled “Conclusion,” is not in the least elegiac. All pomp and fanfare are once more rejected; no funeral oration is recited, and none is needed. For the speaker is sustained by the belief and hope that he too, like the river, will advance “Prepared, in peace of heart, in calm of mind / And soul, to mingle with Eternity!” If man is like the river, if nature and the mind of man are complementary, and if God dwells in man and nature, then there is no real conflict, and the circle is then complete. No gaps exist, no identity is needed, and death, that ultimate wound inflicted on man, is indeed no wound at all.

But Wordsworth is neither facile nor simple, and therefore the pattern of harmony is at times enriched by gentle forms of conflict between man and nature. Sonnet III, as we mentioned earlier, celebrates the complementarity between man and nature, but there is a definite hint of their difference (and difference implies a gap and an attendant form of conflict). After describing the self-sufficiency of the river and the “gleam of brilliant moss” it has shed around itself, the speaker describes it as “Prompt offering to they Foster-mother, Earth!” The line inevitably calls to mind Stanza VI of the Immortality Ode:

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
 Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
 And, even with something of a Mother's mind,
 And no unworthy aim,
 The homely Nurse doth all she can
 To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,
 Forget the glories he hath known,
 And that imperial palace whence he came.⁽²⁾

In both poems Earth is a Foster-mother, and there are two children, a human one in the Ode, and a natural one in the River Duddon sonnet. A Comparison of the two poems would reveal the basic autonomy of the River as opposed to the growing dependence and eventual decline and descent of the human child. In the sonnet, the River *gives* offering to his Foster-mother, thereby asserting his autonomy and strength. In the Ode, it is the other way around, for it is the human child who *receives* from his Foster-mother nature. Earth, as the poem avers, “fills her lap” with earthly pleasures to wean the human child away from the celestial light “And that Imperial palace whence he came.”

(2) Hutchinson, p. 461.

There are many other instances of this gentle conflict and basic difference between man and nature. Sonnet IX, referred to earlier, is a good case in point. Even though the River is seen as an analogue of the life of man, the boundless energy of the river is stressed; its clear waters:

.... pursue their race
Without restraint. How swiftly have they flown,
Succeeding--still succeeding! Here the Child
Puts, when the high-swoln Flood runs fierce and wild,
His budding courage to the proof.

The child in this context is definitely natural and probably human, unlike the aging man in the next few lines, who is distinctly human:

And here
Declining Manhood learns to note the sly
And sure encroachments of infirmity,
Thinking how fast time runs, life's end how near!

Sonnet XIII ("Hail to the fields--with Dwellings Sprinkled O'er") deals with the same theme of gentle conflict. The poet paints a fierce natural scene:

When bleak winds roar
Through the stiff lance-like shoots of pollard ash,
Dread swell of sound! loud as the gusts that lash
The matted forests of Ontario's shore
By wasteful steel unsmitten.

The speaker then seeks refuge from nature in the world of the human:

Reckless of angry Duddon sweeping by,
While the warm hearth exalts the mantling ale,
Laugh with the generous household heartily
At all the merry pranks of Donnerdale!

The speaker is here sheltered (from Duddon) by the human community, and the human laughter and warmth are contrasted with the "anger" of the River and the coldness of the gale.

The conflict in the preceding sonnets, real as it is, is not in the least radical and is encircled by the belief in eventual harmony. The gap between man and nature is neither deep nor complete. Had the conflict stayed on this plane, probably the dual conclusion would not have been called, for, because the gentle conflict would have enriched rather than subverted the theme of harmonious complementarity. But things are not always as simple as they seem, and the harmony is at times not simply enriched by a gentle conflict, but rather violated by a deep antagonism that manifests

itself as a distinct undercurrent, implicit at times, explicit at others, in the River Dud-don sonnets. It is this secondary theme that made it imperative for the poet to conclude the series with yet another sonnet, where he brings the said theme to a conclusion. The whole sonnet is italicized, probably to suggest that the second conclusion is at once a part of the series, yet separate from it.

The secondary theme can be traced back from the start in the second sonnet ("Child of the clouds! remote from every taint"), where the balance between mind and nature is violated, and the autonomy of nature is asserted. Nature is primeval whereas man is a relative intruder. What is celebrated in this sonnet is a lofty Nature and a rather remote river whose poet is "the whistling Blast," and whose "Patron-saint" is "Desolation." The River is not good-humouredly described as "angry"; it is gravely seen as a "ruthless Power" that had endured "Thousands of years before the silent air was pierced/By whizzing shaft of hunter keen!" The majestic image of "silent air" contrasts with man the "hunter keen" with his machines of destruction ("whizzing shaft").

The theme is picked up once more in Sonnet VIII ("What aspect bore the Man who roved or fled") where the speaker speculates about the Adam of "this dark dell," the first man who "In this pellucid Current slacked his thirst." This primeval figure is evoked through a series of questions about his weakness and strength, as well as his mortality. The rhetorical device of introducing a subject through such queries diminishes the importance of man and even raises doubts about his reality. The answer to the rhetorical question is a complete negation. "No voice replies; both air and earth are mute." Man has vanished, leaving no trace behind him but the river continues to flow, discharging its functions "to heal and to restore/To soothe and cleanse, not madden and pollute!" Even though the contrast is somewhat muted, nevertheless it is there, with the integrity and healing power of nature explicitly asserted and man's destructive power and insignificance only vaguely hinted at.

Sonnet XX ("The old inventive Poets, had they seen") titled "The Plain of Don-nerdale" dwells once more on the fierceness of the river and its impetuous nature. The pastoral nature of the river, flowing as it does

'mid these flowery plains;
The still repose, the liquid lapse serene,
Transferred to bowers imperishably green,

is quite deceptive; for the river, though "Innocuous as a firstling of the flock," will change its temper, break its "chains," then:

Dance, like a Bacchanal, from rock to rock,
Tossing her frantic thyrsus wide and high!

The innocent pastoral song gives way to a super-human Nietzschean Dionysian dance that breaks through all fetters and limits, a dance that dwarfs ordinary humanity.

The conflict between man and nature and the fundamental difference between them is not the main theme in the Duddon River Sonnets, but it is definitely there, running throughout the whole series, standing in sharp contrast with the more dominant themes of complementarity and gentle conflict, generating vibrancy and tension. A reconciliation of opposites seems out of the question, given the wide distance separating the one from the other. Therefore, after the "Conclusion" where harmony and complementarity are affirmed and celebrated, there is, therefore, yet another sonnet where this conflict and separateness are sadly remembered and eventually accepted.

Sonnet XXXIV ("I thought of Thee, my partner and my guide"), appropriately titled "After-Thought", starts off with typical, almost stereotypical, language of harmony and pantheism,⁽³⁾ where the river passes away just like man. But the language is used only to be brutally rejected by the poet himself -- "Vain sympathies!" (This is quite reminiscent of the structure of another sonnet, not in the Duddon series, which deals with roughly the same theme--the sudden realization of humanness and consequently of mortality--namely, "Surprised by joy--impatient at the Wind."⁽⁴⁾ In that poem the ecstatic speaker wants to share his joy with someone, only to remember his dead daughter--"deep buried in the silent tomb." The sonnet then turns from a hymn of praise into an almost penitential lament.)

Once the language of harmony is rejected, the speaker in the final Duddon sonnet then tries to understand the reason for the disharmony. Looking at the river, he sees the chasm, the radical dichotomy, between the human and the natural. The river has not "past away," as he has vainly thought:

I see what was, and is, and will abide;
Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide;
The Form remains, the Function never dies.

(3) The term "pantheism" as used in this paper needs some clarification. For one thing it is opposed to transcendence, since from a pantheist point of view the absolute (God or any other similar category) dwells in matter. It also implies a lack of any distance between creator and created and a desire, on the part of the conscious human self, to merge with nature (or any non-human entity) and get lost in it. Pantheism, in short, entails complete loss of boundaries, selfhood and consciousness. In this sense, Wordsworth's children and his "thoughtless youth," being part of nature, unaware of "solemn thought," are thorough pantheists. The state of innocence in Blake's poetry is characterized by this pantheism, where all things merge together, where contradictions, if they exist, are readily resolved and where identities have a tendency to vanish. The pantheistic moments in Keat's "Odes" are very few (for instance the moment of union with the nightingale) and are always hedged by an obstinate refusal to lose identity.

(4) Hutchinson, p. 204.

Therein lies the difference; the river is immortal, while we, who know good and evil, we “the brave, the mighty, and the wise,” we who are separate from nature and defy the “elements,” “must vanish.” At this point the ever-gliding river parts company with men, for they have fallen from the state of paradise and eternal life into humanness and mortality. For them there are no perfect fit or simple cycles, but rather deep chasms and radical discontinuities, with mortality being the central fact of human consciousness.

The state of the fall is greeted by the laconic phrase “be it so” at the beginning of the sestet. This phrase occurs twice in *Paradise Lost* in two diametrically opposed context and senses. It is used, for the first time, by Satan (I. 245)⁽⁵⁾ when he realizes the ugliness of the infernal regions and the depths of his fall. As such the phrase is an expression of moral indifference and resignation to evil. It is used, however, for the second time by Adam when he too realizes the depth of his fall, yet resigns himself to the will of God (“Be it so, for I submit, his doom is fair” [X.769]). As such it expresses Adam’s penitence and signals his willingness to return to God and the road of righteousness.

The phrase in Wordsworth’s sonnet has the complexity of both contexts. It is a submission to the fact of death, similar to Satan’s resignation to the state of hell. But it also signals the speaker’s reconciliation with his own mortality. Therefore the rest of the sestet develops the new mood of acceptance which sharply contrasts with the mood of protest in the octave. Even though we move to “the silent tomb,” nevertheless there is compensation for the human condition of separateness from nature, which he finds in the ability to create something that outlives natural time with its endless, almost meaningless cycles:

Enough, if something from our hands have power
To live and act, and serve the future hour.

If the passage of time brings with it death, if our tragedy lies in the lack of identity between natural and human times, nonetheless, it is also through time only that salvation can be achieved. In nature, there is neither past, nor present, nor future; but for man, the present moment is not final, and the actual is different from the potential. This complexity provides a measure of freedom, for if there is now a fall, there is also the promise of salvation in the “future hour.”

The speaker, however, not content with visible human “art” as a means of salvation, goes beyond his own humanism, referring to a more radical means to overcome his alienation and sense of separateness:

(5) Douglas Bush, ed., *The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 245.

Through love, through hope, and faith's
 transcendent dower,
 We feel that we are greater than we know.

The agency of salvation here has a "distinct religious (expectedly Christian) character ("love," "hope," and "faith"), and the view expounded is far from being man-centred. The use of the spousal metaphor in reference to faith is particularly significant, for it is more commonly used, in Wordsworth's poetry, to refer to man's relationship with nature. But the speaker feels that the merely natural, the merely human, and even the interaction between the two, are no longer adequate; they have to be supplemented by a belief in the divine.

The last line of the sonnet is an echo of one in *Paradise Lost* (VIII, 282) ("And feel that I am happier than I know?"), spoken by Adam *before* the fall. Describing his own state of bliss to Raphael, Adam wonders about its source, and about the power of the Creator. Similarly, it could be said that the speaker of the sonnet has almost gone back to a pre-lapsarian state through the awareness and acceptance of his own mortality and through the power of faith. In other words, the gap is somewhat bridged, the anxiety mitigated, and the harmony is relatively restored, not through pantheistic merging in endless natural cycles, nor through romantic interaction with them, but rather through a belief in man's creative powers and in the possibility of transcendence through faith.

This is decidedly the tone and outlook of the later Wordsworth. Early in his literary career, after a very brief brush with romantic escapism (in the fashion of the pre-romantics), Wordsworth shed off the simplistic eighteenth century associationism and deism with the mechanistic, atomistic psychology of the former, and the facile optimistic 'theology' of the latter. He espoused instead a view of man and nature that sees them not as completely identical, but as interacting in an "ennobling interchange." He has realized the futility of the quest for the celestial light and the severe limitations of pantheism, developing a deep awareness of the gap between man and nature, showing willingness to live with the tragic implications of his new position. Hence, for instance, the elegiac tone of the "Immortality Ode," hence too the tragic silence of the last stanza of "A slumber did my spirit seal." Most of Wordsworth's finest poems, his "classics" so to speak, were written during this second stage, where the myth of nature is used as a healing and liberating power, yet the human mind is seen as separate from nature and even as antagonistic to it at times. Complete harmony with nature is the lot only of the marginal figures who dwell outside the confines of normal humanity. Lucy Gray is one case in point; the child in "We Are Seven" is another. These figures are so assimilated to the natural order and its cycles that they are veritable pantheists with no sense of separateness from nature. The child in "We Are Seven," for instance, not only does not fear death; she does not

even conceive of it. Lucy Gray simply walks through life, through death, singing joyfully. But for the adult speaker of "We Are Seven" and for the bereaved parents of Lucy Gray, the situation is different. They are separate from nature and, therefore, acutely aware of death and all the agonies it entails. They hear "The still sad music of humanity."

As Wordsworth grew older, the philosophic mind that counsels stoic acceptance and humanistic transcendence (or resignation) acquired a religious dimension, and the loveless tragic endurance was mitigated by a belief in the possibility of a radical, religious transcendence.

The reader of the River Duddon series of sonnets can see all the phases of Wordsworth's intellectual development, ranging from the simple pantheism that sees no gaps between man and nature, through the philosophical and tragic awareness of the gap, to the religious belief that recognizes the gap, yet postulates the possibility of transcendence. Given the basic difference between these positions, the two "Conclusions" became inevitable. If the first "Conclusion" celebrates harmony and innocence, the second, that is, "After-Thought," recognizes the gap and counsels a humanistic and religious transcendence. The dual conclusion, in this sense, is but a structural expression of a basic Wordsworthian intellectual tension (actually a general tension in any secular society) which the poet succeeded in resolving at times and failed in at others. The uniqueness of the dual conclusion lies in the fact that all the conflicting philosophical outlooks are juxtaposed in the two sonnets, thereby creating a vibrant harmony and a harmonious tension.

الظلة التي لا حدود لها والقوة التي لا ترحم : دراسة في مجموعة سوناتات وردزورث لنهر دادون وخاتمتها المزدوجة

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ملخص البحث . يلاحظ أن سلسلة السوناتات التي كتبها الشاعر الإنجليزي وليام وردزورث عن نهر دادون لها خاتمتان متميزتان، بل متعارضتان . وهذا العمل يعد فريدا إذا ما أخذنا في الاعتبار الالتزام الرومانسي بالوحدة العضوية . وتحاول هذه الدراسة أن تتكشف تلك الجوانب في موضوع السوناتات التي اضطرت وردزورث أن يختم عمله مرتين . وتذهب الدراسة إلى أنه يوجد موضوعان يسريان في سلسلة السوناتات : الموضوع الرئيس الخاص بتكامل الإنسان والطبيعة، والموضوع الثانوي - الأكثر كمونا - الخاص بالعداء بينهما . وقد كان من المستحيل «التوفيق بين الأضداد» على الطريقة الرومانسية المألوفة، بسبب اتساع الهوة التي تفصل بين الموضوعين . ولهذا بعد أن كتب وردزورث سوناتا بعنوان «الخاتمة» أكد فيها التناسق والتكامل بين الإنسان والطبيعة واحتفل بهما، نجده يكتب بعد ذلك سوناتا أخرى بعنوان «أفكار متأخرة» حيث يتذكر الشاعر في حزن عميق الصراع والانفصال بينهما، ثم يتقبلها في نهاية الأمر.