

Reading Romantic Poems

by

Hiroyuki KOGUCHI

I. "Tintern Abbey"

II. "Manfred"

Reading a poem often demands high sensibility and intelligence to go beyond the literary meaning of texts, through it is not rare that multiple interpretations are possible even for a short poem. Some poems are read by critics according to their theoretical backgrounds, and others their idiosyncratic sensibilities. While a poem is compatible with theoretical reading, another is theory-proof. It is often likely, however, that the most important spirit of poetry lies in the part unsolvable by theories. The following essay attempts to present expository reading to the celebrated poems by Wordsworth and Byron. I would like to read "Tintern Abbey" as a pedagogical and reformative poem, and "Manfred" as a classical tragedy.

I. "Tintern Abbey"

The central theme of "Tintern Abbey" concerns man's relationship to nature: how nature influences and enriches the human mind and character. Here, Wordsworth portrays nature as containing at least three degrees of dimension: physical nature, a harmonious and integrated whole of physical and metaphysical

nature, and the natural, omnipresent presence of Divine Life. All these phases interfuse with each other according to Wordsworth's tenet of so-called organicism. What follows will discuss the poem by focusing on Wordsworth's pedagogical sense of nature.

The poem is written in blank verse, and it divides in meaning into four parts: the first part (lines 1–22), the second (23–48), the third (49–111), and the last (112–159). The first part introduces the return of a man to the wild nature after an interval. The sojourn of five years is repeated to deepen the significance of the past time, and the climactic stress is placed on the phrases “the length / Of five long winters!” Summers are contrasted with winters, an emphasis placed on the dramatic procession of seasons. And the speaker hears water “rolling from their mountain-springs / With a soft inland murmur”: how rhythmical and melodious the lines sound! Thawing from the severe claw of winter, the water trickles in the mountains as if heralding the birth of new life in nature. The seclusion of the mountains reminds the speaker of the “thoughts of more deep seclusion” in his mind, and he feels that his mind fuses into the lofty seclusion of nature, becoming one in the harmony of the “landscape with the quiet of the sky.” The landscape suggests not only the outward appearance of nature but also his inner scape, and in the embracement of nature he feels bliss and nostalgic comfort. At a cottage, he sees that spring has turned the wild nature into one whole green, and then he detects the wreaths of smoke and thinks of the presence of a hermit. The smoke represents a desirable lone life in the spirit of nature, and the speaker longs for a perfect unison with the wilderness, in which he perceives “beauteous forms.”

In the second part these beauteous forms of nature are explained in more details. For the speaker these beauteous forms are deprived for some time, for he has lived among “the din / Of towns and cities.” But as an afterimage of natural spirit they have continued to be in his mind and often comforted him in weariness. He calls them “gifts” and specifies them as causing “sensations sweet” and “that blessed mood.” The sweet sensations are refreshing and profound, “felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,” and they pass “even into my purer mind, / With tranquil restoration.” In this sense, nature is interpreted as medicinal. It calls up sensations, which circulate through and purify the body, the heart, and the mind. The beauteous forms also evoke in the speaker's mind “unremembered pleasure,” which he thinks is similar to such values as love and kindness and gives a supreme effect on “a good man's life.”

The speaker then calls attention to another dimension of the sweet sensation. It is “that blessed mood,” which is “more sublime,” because it lightens “the burthen of the mystery” and “the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world.” One must be aware of the important doubleness Wordsworth sees in the beautiful forms of nature. The first level concerns a therapeutic effect on the speaker, and the second level a spiritual reformation. “The mystery” refers to the inscrutable depth of man’s life, and the “unintelligible world” suggests either a human society or the inner world of man’s mind or both. In the speaker’s mind, however, the distinction between the external and internal worlds is little made, as they are closely knit together. He explicates the “blessed mood” thus:

In which the affections gently lead us on, —
 Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
 And even the motion of our human blood
 Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
 In body, and become a living soul:

(42–46)

The harmonious ecstasy of the blessed mood is almost made holy. The breath is almost suspended, signifying the transition from the corporeal breath to the spiritual breathing (note the synonymous etymology of “spir” breath). In the moment of spiritual unison with nature, the speaker feels that he becomes “a living soul,” freed from corporeal restraints. The bodily life is temporarily cancelled, and the spiritual life is awakened. This is in a way a new birth of a self integrated into the spirit of nature. With the renewed vision of the spiritual life, the speaker sets his foot on the border of the mystery of the world:

While with an eye made quiet by the power
 Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
 We see into the life of things.

(47–49)

“An eye” is a newly acquired inner sight, and in its calm and serene vision with an indescribable joy of clairvoyance the speaker perceives the true reality of the world. He has obtained an ennobled and fresh perspective.

Curiously, in the third part the speaker poses a question to the premise of his harmonious unity with nature, saying that “If this / Be but a vain belief. . . .” His understanding of the mutual exchange between his mind and nature seems

not to have reached a conviction, yet he denies at once his doubt, because he has had a secure feeling of the blessed mood. He feels from his experience that the harmonious unity is real and he has always yearned for it in his deep mind:

In darkness and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart—
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!

(51–57)

The words “in spirit” signify the transformed figure of the speaker, and he continues to have a tie with the Wye. He remembers the past:

And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
With many recognitions dim and faint,
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
The picture of the mind revives again.

(58–61)

He looks back into his memory, and with a taint of sadness he recalls his fretful years and the repetitive occurrence of the blessed moments caused by his memory of his unison with nature.

The speaker then remembers the passionate and rapturous ecstasy of his childhood in contact with nature, whose joy, however, seems passed. Yet as an adult he is not regretful, because he believes “other gifts / Have followed; for such loss, I would believe, / Abundant recompense.” He has become thoughtful, for he has come to realize “the still, sad music of humanity” which subdues the thoughtless joy of youth. He has attained ripeness and “elevated thoughts”:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,

And rolls through all things.

(93–102)

The nature with which man could be united is here taken in its broadest meaning: it includes the sun, the ocean, the air, the sky, and the mind of man. At the glowing horizon these elements are interfused and move all natural living things and object toward a certain end. Here is a catholic spirit—the pulse of nature—running through the harmonious unity of the universe. The boundary between a subject and an object vanishes, and a sublime sense of Divine Life flows and tenderly embraces the earth. Thus, the fusion of man's mind and things in nature is accomplished almost in a pantheistic mood.

According to Wordsworth, however, the power to create this sublime sense does not reside in nature. The power lies in man: "Of eye, and ear, —both what they half create / And what perceive." The power of human senses is creative, and it transforms the perceived. The speaker says, "well pleased to recognise / In nature and the language of the sense / The anchor of my purest thoughts. . . ." The sublime sense is made literary. The perceived image of nature is translated into words. In nature and language the speaker finds his purest thoughts. What is exactly "the language of the sense"? Could it refer to the perceptible laws of the sensory organs or simply the words expressing the perceived? Could it be powerful to express a deep sensibility? Probably Wordsworth means by the language of the sense a powerful literal tool to grasp the sense, because the "purest thoughts" are considered to lie in it. This means that the image and the sense are literalized, and what is literalized occupies the central part of the mind; therefore, it becomes a guide, a guardian of heart, soul, and moral being. This insinuates the pedagogical development of human character by means of language (poetry). What Wordsworth desires most is therefore the poetic mind, and he says, "If I were not thus taught, should I the more / Suffer my genial spirits to decay." The pedagogical advancement of the human spirit by language is a revolutionary idea. Hearing the "language of my former heart," he ceaselessly wishes for a renewal. Is the renewal limited to human development, or is it applicable to social advancement? As one possible reading the poem could be interpreted politically.

In the final part the speaker accosts his sister and makes a prayer that she never forgets to lose a tie with nature. Whether she is actually with him at the place or not is not an important matter. The reason for the importance of the tie is, as he explains, that nature can in joy "inform / The mind that is within

us." The growth of the mind is considered as possible through a mutual unison with nature. Cataloguing the values of nature, the speaker asserts them as indispensable in the social life of the world. The "wild ecstasies" of childhood ripen into "a sober pleasure," and it persists in man's mind as memory. Nature's serene beauties invariably provide lovely forms and "all sweet sounds and harmonies," and to Wordsworth this idealistic and eternal kinship with nature is a sort of "holier love." As in his typical afterimage poem of daffodils, he insists that after years the afterimage of nature will persist in the mind, which will be "a dwelling-place / For all sweet sounds and harmonies."

II. "Manfred"

Byron's "Manfred" is a poem about a romantic hero (often called the "Byronic hero") whose struggle with his fate represents the assertion of his adamant will, freedom, and dignity. In this poem Manfred, an outcast hero, is tormented by a sense of sheer guilt and remorse for some mysterious crime which he committed. As a "dramatic poem," the poem is full of theatrical devices: incantations, soliloquies, sweeping panoramas, three stages of theatrical development. The style of the poem is striking with its clarity of phrases, free conceptions and bold emotions, and its vigorous scenes.

Scene I of Act I presents Count Manfred in a Gothic gallery of his castle at midnight. He has done something terrible, and he has sought all the knowledge of the world to appease his grief. But he realizes that his search for the knowledge has been fatal—"The tree of knowledge is not that of life"—and a mysterious curse has been put on him "since that all-nameless hour." His agony has brought an unnatural power to him; and, by using it, he summons up the "spirits of the unbounded universe." Even the spirit of stars, which covertly rules man's destiny, obeys Manfred. The spirit's narrative by chance signifies Manfred's glamorous fate as "a pathless comet, and a curse, / The menace of the universe; / Still rolling on with innate force." Manfred urges the spirits to give "self-oblivion" to his afflicted mind, but they are helpless; being immortal, they do not know indeed whether death will solve Manfred's problem. Manfred wonders if he cannot find his comfort even in death. (This echoes Hamlet's famous soliloquy, "To be or not to be. . . ." Hamlet must undergo sufferings, because he fears that in "sleep" (death) he may still dream.) Anyway, Manfred

does not seem to have lost the power of his will; he defies the spirits thus:

Slaves, scoff not at my will!
The mind, the spirit, the Promethean spark,
The lightning of my being, is as bright,
Pervading, and far darting as your own,
And shall not yield to yours, though cooped in clay!

(155-59)

Manfred knows what his existence is and what he is doing. At his request, a spirit changes into a beautiful female figure (undoubtedly Astarte's figure as later revealed in the poem), whose appearance makes Manfred faint. Then, a voice is heard as if to torment further his sleepless mind. The voice stresses the burden of a curse on him and rebukes him by such words as "false tears," "the black blood," "the snake," "guile," "hypocrisy," "delight in others' pain." The voice seems to be seeking a revenge by plunging Manfred further to the eternal hell, but could the voice come from Manfred's victim or could it originate from Manfred's own self-torturing conscience? The scene seems intentionally to be made obscure; besides, for readers what crime Manfred has actually committed has not been revealed.

In Scene II, Manfred climbs the Jungfrau (literally the Virgin) in the morning. He no longer depends "no more on superhuman aid," determined to be solely independent. He has a mind to kill himself; yet somehow he feels a power forbidding him to do so and coercing him to undergo his "fatality to live." Is he doomed to follow his fate? His spirit "barren" and his soul "a sepulchre," he appears no longer capable of having any moral sanctions or responsibility towards his deeds; at last he seems to be losing the control of his mind. Seeing the beauties of Nature and the joy of an eagle, Manfred ponders over man's dualistic existence (body and spirit) in a moment of rapture:

How beautiful is all this visible world!
How glorious in its action and itself!
But we, who name ourselves its sovereign, we
Half dust, half deity, alike unfit
To sink or soar, with our mixed essence make
A conflict of its elements, and breathe
The breath of degradation and of pride,
Contending with low wants and lofty will,
Till our mortality predominates,

(37-45)

Clearly, there is an echo of Hamlet here. Hamlet says, "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not me; no, nor woman neither. . . ." (Act II: Scene ii). At any rate, Manfred's mood shifts soon and he turns to deny his existence: right afterwards he says, "Oh, that I were / The viewless spirit of a lovely sound." His world has been so chaotic that he appears no longer able to endure sufferings, and when he is about to jump off from a cliff, a chamois hunter stops and fetches him to his cottage.

In Act II, Scene I, the hunter tries to soothe Manfred. Yet, seeing red wine, Manfred exclaims, "Away, away! there's blood upon the brim! / Will it then never—never sink in the earth?" He identifies the blood as his, which signifies that he is living in death. He reveals part of his secret to the hunter: "My injuries came down on those who loved me— / On those whom I best loved."

Act II, Scene II contains Manfred's conversation with the with of the Alps. He confides the secret of his grief to her that he destroyed his ideal, his beloved woman, who could in truth keep "the chain of human ties" with him and had equally "a mind to comprehend the universe." In agony he has sought a way to expiate his sin. The witch offers to help him on the condition of his total obedience, but with adamant pride he spurns it. Alone, he muses as Macbeth does: "We are the fools to time and terror. Days / Steal on us, and steal from us; yet we live. . . ." All other solutions in failure, he finally decides to resort to his last resource: that is, calling the dead and ask pardon.

Scene III depicts the nocturnal meetings of Destinies and Nemesis. Scene IV shows the assembly of spirits in the hall of Arimanes, the evil ruler of the universe, and Manfred's sudden intrusion into it. Because of his immortal sufferings, deep knowledge, and fierce will, he fearlessly faces the evil spirits. Mysteriously he acknowledges the Godhead ("The overriding Infinite—the Maker") in the universe, but he does not seek the help of God. With dauntless pride he demands Nemesis's help to call Astarte. The phantom of Astarte appears but is mute; at Manfred's earnest plea, she finally speaks, then foretells his death and the end of his earthly ills, and then disappears without giving him forgiveness or love. The description of this scene is apex of Act II, teeming with unbounded passions and tenderness. Now Manfred realizes that his life is in the hands of Nemesis.

Scene I of Act III finds Manfred in a hall of his castle. Hearing that he is associating himself with unheavenly spirits, an abbot visits him to lead him into penitence and the grace of the heaven. Thankful as he is for the abbot, Manfred knows well that it is impossible for him to evade his fate: "It is too late!" He is a debtor of evil spirits and his death is sure and imminent.

Scene II portrays Manfred's farewell song at the view of the sunset. Praising the sun as the "earliest minister of the Almighty" and "thou material God," he seems to affirm the omnipotence of God and the certainty of heaven; his outcry is a paean to God, and it comes from his suffering and ennobled mind, though he knows well that he has dissociated himself from God. Scene III shows his servants' talk and the abbot's further effort to reconcile Manfred's soul with God.

Scene IV, the conclusion, describes Manfred's superhuman struggle with the evil spirits. He defies the spirits by the sheer power of his adamant will and pride. He says, "I stand / Upon my strength." He accepts his punishment, because he knows that his mind (conscience) has been the severest judge of his sin: "The mind which is immortal makes itself / Requit for its good or evil thoughts." At last, his soul is led away, and there is no knowing where it goes— to hell or heaven.

A fundamental question remains concerning Manfred's relationship with God. Why does he go to evil spirits for help instead of to God? He seems to have had penance. He says that he has acquired superhuman power by "no compact" with evil spirits but "by superior science—penance, daring, / And length of watching, strength of mind. . . ." But his penance was incomplete, because it is selfish. God never offers penance to him, and he is content only when he punishes himself severely. Unfortunately, because of his hubristic pride, he refuses to cling to God's grace: "Humility—and that I never had." Insisting on the dignity and freedom of his will, he almost appears nihilistic and eventually distances himself too far to be retrieved and reconciled with God.

Manfred's redemption, if any, derives from his sufferings; in his struggle and self-condemnation, however, he remains remarkably human. He can appreciate a hunter's and an abbot's kindness, and he unyieldingly asserts the dignity and power of his will. His sin is so fearful and profound that it goes beyond the limit of ordinary human life. It conversely begins to express his superiority. He is against his doom, refuses to succumb to anything, rebels against his human limitation. Ultimately he comes to attain a sort of freedom, dignity, and bitter triumph.

Manfred is a sort of hero in whom the concept of a hero in Greek tragedies and the romantic idea of a hero are blended. Like a Greek hero, Manfred is a man of high class, full of pride, who struggles against evil and fate. He shows not only common human attributes but also some elements which go beyond human capacities and sufferings. However, what makes Manfred different from a Greek hero is that Manfred's sin drives him to a fatal end, whereas the Greek hero struggles against external force of fate or evil (even his hubris is not often felt as a sin). And often the Greek hero lacks knowledge about his fate or the will of the gods.

Manfred has always striven to keep his soul from forfeiture, and in this sense he is also different from a hero in Goethe's Faust. Manfred's assertion of will ultimately transforms the domination of fate or evil into a sort of freedom and victory.