

The Odes of Neoclassicism and Romanticism:

Comparing the utilization of an ode to display learning from two historical periods.

In “The Progress of Poesy” and “Ode: Intimations on Immortality”, Thomas Gray and William Wordsworth use their poetry to display what they have learned. Both poets accomplish this purpose in vastly different ways, including form, style, differing sources of inspiration, such as a Neoclassic focus on allusion versus a Romantic focus on nature and childhood, different choices of language, and what they choose to focus their work on, because they lived in different periods of thought and art. Wordsworth and Gray wrote for the same purpose, but they each did it in ways that fit the time that they lived in.

Thomas Gray wrote “The Progress of Poesy” (or “Poetry”) to show how much he had learned, particularly about literature and history. Most of this Pindaric Ode is focused on classical allusion and imagery, and in a letter Gray wrote to his friend the Reverend James Brown, Gray says, “The odes in question [‘Progress of Poetry’ and ‘The Bard’] were meant to be vocal to the intelligent alone” (Young 2: 131). Gray was well-educated, having been sent to a boarding school at the age of eight likely because of marital problems between his parents. He formed a little group of friends there, and the four of them were “given to precocious conversation on life and literature” (Young 2: 130). “The Progress of Poesy” Gray wrote to display what he knew through the style and form of the poem.

“The Progress of Poesy” is a High Pindaric Ode, which means that it follows the form of the Greek lyric poems written by Pindar. In a review of his contemporaries’ work, Oliver Goldsmith said, “These...Odes, it must be confessed, breathe much of the spirit of Pindar” (240). “Progress of Poesy” is broken up into three separate sections, and each section contains three stanzas, a strophe, an antistrophe, and an epode. The form is parallel through the sections, with strophe aligning perfectly to strophe, antistrophe to antistrophe, etc. “[The Pindaric Ode] in its correct models, provided regular returns of similarly constructed stanzas. On this plan Gray has framed the versification of his two odes; and upon examination you will find in each the mechanism of a ternary of stanzas trebly repeated in corresponding order” (Aikin 185-93). Gray’s poetry was precise because he wanted the reader to know that Gray knew exactly what he was mimicking. Lord David Cecil commented, “His style is pre-eminently an academic style, studied, traditional, highly finished. His standard of finish, indeed, was so high as sometimes to be frustrating. He could take years to complete a brief poem...His choice of forms, too, is a scholar’s choice. Sedulously he goes to the best of authors for models. He writes the Pindaric Ode—making a more careful attempt than his predecessors had, exactly to follow Pindar” (51). This imitation was a distinct characteristic of Neoclassical writing. From Aristotle it was learned that all art is essentially imitation, and the writers and artists of the age copied the models of literature, particularly when it came to form, as a way to preserve the virtue of art. Certainly Gray was, in essence, showing off how well-read and how good a writer he was by laboring over creating a work so exact.

Wordsworth, on the other hand, managed to show what he knew with little regard to form in his poetry. “Ode: Intimations on Immortality” is an extremely irregular, perhaps beyond Cowleyan, ode

that contains eleven numbered stanzas, of varying length, no rhyme scheme, and without any cohesive form. A.C. Bradley examines this property by stating, “The irregular Odes are never thus successful. Wordsworth could not command the tone of sustained rapture, and where his metrical form is irregular his ear is uncertain. [“Ode on Intimations of Immortality”], like King Lear, is its author’s greatest product, but not his best piece of work. The Odes...are declamatory, even violent, and yet...they do not sing [as a sonnet would]” (Bradley 116-19). “Ode: Intimations on Immortality” does not display the perfect form of “Progress of Poesy”, nor does it contain the plethora of literary allusion, and this is what makes it a distinctly Romantic piece, emphasizing freedom of expression and highlighting an emotional outburst of poetry.

Gray’s writing is very intellectual and filled with allusion; for example, “Woods, that wave o’er Delphi’s steep,/Isles, that crown th’ Aegean deep,/Fields, that cool Ilissus laves” (lines 66-68). On the other hand, Wordsworth, true to Romanticism, is very emotion-driven. He writes about his “heart of hearts”(line 189), about “such earnest pains” (line 123), and about the “joy! That in our embers/Is something that doth live” (lines 129-131). Poetry critic Leslie Stephen states that Wordsworth’s poem did not follow science and logic, but the emotions of the heart (211-13). Stephen also states, “The Intimations of Immortality are precisely intimations, not intellectual intuitions. They are vague and emotional, not distinct and logical” (224). In “Ode: Intimations on Immortality”, Wordsworth writes, “Thanks to the human heart by which we live,” which suggests that it was valued in his time to indeed follow your heart and be led by your emotions (line 200). Wordsworth also writes, “Thanks to [the heart’s] tenderness, its joys, and fears,/To me the meanest flower that blows can give/Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” (lines 201-203). Wordsworth’s poem expresses the deepest emotions of the soul, exploring the power of the heart and of sensibility as opposed to Gray’s use of allusion and intellect.

In the 1786 edition of “Progress of Poesy”, Gray supplies a sort of preface. He says, “When the author first published this...he was advised, even by his friends, to subjoin some few explanatory notes; but he had too much respect for the understanding of his readers to take that liberty” (Gray Progress). He then adds a few notes to the poem to lend some assistance to the rest of us. These notes are all explanations of his allusions. For example, to the lines “Man’s feeble race what ills await,/Labour, and Penury, the racks of Pain,/...Say, has he giv’n in vain the heav’nly Muse” (lines 42-43, 48) Gray adds the note that “To compensate the real and imaginary ills of life, the Muse was given to mankind by the same Providence that sends the Day by its cheerful presence to dispel the glooms and terrors of the Night” (Gray Progress). Gray alludes to much more than just Greek history in his poem. Where he writes “The living throne, the sapphire-blaze” (line 99) he is alluding to the “appearance of the glory of the Lord” as described in Ezekiel (Gray Progress). He also references the book of Job, the Aeneid, Paradise Lost, Pope’s Iliad, and much of the original Pythians of Pindar.

“Progress of Poesy” is a work of unparalleled piecing together for Gray’s time. “The pursuit of the elements which go to make up the wonderful mosaic of Gray’s style increases our wonder at his enormous learning, his mastery of the great literatures of his own times, as well as those of Greece and Rome, and at his high poetic gift which could fuse into a stately and beautiful whole that he had gathered from so many

sources” (Macurdy 61). The Neoclassicists loved allusion; they yearned to return to the wisdom of the ancients. Romantics wanted more freedom. “Ode: Intimations on Immortality” contains relatively little allusion, with the notable exception of the lines that precede the poem, which are actually the concluding lines of Wordsworth’s own poem “My Heart Leaps Up.” Where Gray alludes to and quotes ancient writers, Wordsworth quotes himself, and prefaces his poem with his own previous work. This is because it was not important for him to present how much he had learned from something society had created. Romanticism was about returning to a natural, simple, un-industrial life, and in “Ode: Intimations on Immortality”, Wordsworth wanted to describe what he learned from thinking about nature and childhood. This is opposite to Gray’s emphasis on all that he had learned from literature, as well as glorifying the poet’s position.

Using superior language, Gray’s ode celebrates the progress poetry has made. He writes, “From Helicon’s harmonious springs/A thousand rills their mazy progress take” (lines 3-4). Helicon was a mountain sacred to the Muses, and Gray describes these lines by saying, “The various sources of poetry, which gives life and lustre to all it touches, are here described; its quiet majestic progress enriching every subject (otherwise dry and barren) with a pomp of diction and luxuriant harmony of numbers” (Gray Progress). Gray felt that poetry was to be written when you had something important to say, and that such poetry would then go into the world and enrich all aspects of life.

Wordsworth, too, felt that poetry could enhance life. In his “Ode: Intimations on Immortality”, he writes, “To me alone there came a thought of grief:/A timely utterance gave that thought relief,/And I again am strong” (lines 22-24). Most scholars agree that this is referring to a poem that Wordsworth felt lifted him out of his thoughts of grief (Norton 308). But poetry to Wordsworth is something very different than poetry to Gray.

One example of this difference is in the authors’ choices of language. “The Progress of Poesy” was written in very lofty language. For example, “The Muse has broke the twilight-gloom/To cheer the shiv’ring native’s dull abode./And oft, beneath the od’rous shade/Of Chili’s boundless forests laid,/She deigns to hear the savage youth repeat...Their feather-cinctur’d chiefs, and dusky loves” (lines 56-62). To the modern ear, this language can hardly be understood without careful review and rereading because this is not the language of our age. But, as Cecil states, Gray’s “diction is a consciously poetic affair; an artificial diction, deliberately created to be an appropriate vehicle for lofty poetry. ‘The language of the age’ [Gray] stated as an axiom, ‘is never the language of poetry’” ( 51-3). It is debatable, then, that the modern reader would understand Gray’s writing even if Gray lived today. Indeed, Lord Cecil compares Gray’s “Progress of Poesy” to today’s Waste Land by T.S. Eliot (53). Full of allusion, lofty language, and meant to be something higher than the common people and common society. It takes a learned person to comprehend “The Progress of Poesy.”

Wordsworth, on the other hand, displayed his learning through his poetry in a way that even the common people could understand. “There’s a Tree, of many, one,/A single Field which I have looked upon,/Both of them speak of something that is gone” (lines 51-53). In his Preface to the Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth asserted that “poetry should consist of language really used by men. . .

. Low and rustic life was generally chosen [as subject for poetry] because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil...because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity...and may be more forcibly communicated” (qtd. in Young 4:370). As a poet, “Wordsworth challenged the prevailing eighteenth-century emphasis on formal poetic diction” (Young 4: 369). To Wordsworth, displaying his knowledge did not mean using lofty language, but, in the case of “Ode: Intimations on Immortality” it meant an emphasis on the natural world and recollections from childhood.

Where Gray focused on alluding to works of the ancients, Wordsworth’s poem has a very Romantic focus on nature. “The Rainbow comes and goes,/And lovely is the Rose,/The Moon doth with delight/Look round her when the heavens are bare,/Waters on a starry night/Are beautiful and fair;/The sunshine is a glorious birth;/But yet I know, where’er I go,/There hath past away a glory from the earth” (lines 10-18). Through picturesque descriptions of nature, Wordsworth shows us what he has learned about the immortality of our souls.

Wordsworth’s contemporary, Samuel Coleridge, outlined one of Wordsworth’s strengths as the truth of nature in his imagery that was obviously taken directly from nature, and “[proved] a long and genial intimacy with the very spirit which gives the physiognomic expression to all the works of nature” (268-69). Through a particular and familiar connection to nature that Wordsworth held, he displayed his learning about the sublime and his words “like the moisture or the polish on a pebble...neither distorts nor false-colours its object; but on the contrary brings out many a vein and many a tint which escape the eye of common observation, thus raising to the rank of gems what had often been kicked away by the hurrying foot of the traveler on the dusty road of custom” (Coleridge 269). Wordsworth felt that nature was alive and that there was much to be learned from the Earth. Romantic artists felt that nature was the greatest source of sublime truth. Walter H. Pater observes, that to Wordsworth, “every natural object seemed to possess more or less of a moral or spiritual life, to be capable of a companionship with man full of finesse and expression, of inexplicable affinities and subtle secrets of intercourse” (455). In “Ode: Intimations on Immortality”, Wordsworth wrote to present what he had learned from nature and from what he remembered feeling about nature as a child. He believed there was a deep connection between nature and man, and that truth could be revealed through that connection, which was closest during youth.

Where Gray displays his literary education because that is what was expected of a Neoclassic poet, Wordsworth reviews the deep truths revealed in recalling childhood. He uses an extended metaphor, a very Romantic tool, to say that just as a child acts a part, humans are merely acting a lesser part in mortality because “The Soul that rises with us, our life’s Star,/Hath elsewhere in its setting,/And cometh from afar” (lines 59-61). Pater comments,

“[Wordsworth] had pondered deeply, for instance, on those strange reminiscences and forebodings which seem to make our lives stretch before and behind us, beyond where we can see or touch anything, or trace the lines of connection. Following the soul backwards and forwards on these endless ways, his sense of man’s dim, potential powers became a pledge to him, indeed, of a future life; but carried him back also to

that mysterious notion of an earlier state of existence, the fancy of the Platonists, the old heresy of Origen” (462).

In “Ode: Intimations on Immortality”, Wordsworth proclaims that the peculiar instincts of childhood testify to the immortality of the soul (Stephen 211-13). To a Neoclassicist like Gray, truth was found in logics, in studying history, in literature. But to Wordsworth and his contemporaries there was a great desire to return to the simplicity and innocence of childhood. Both of these writers, though, had a similar purpose in different times.

Wordsworth and Gray both desired to show off what they learned, and they did so in ways that made sense to the society of their times. Gray taught through logical, precise, imitative writing. Cecil states, “Gray never talks nonsense; each poem is logically designed, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Every line and every phrase has its contribution to make to the general effect; so that the whole gives one that particular satisfaction that comes from seeing a problem completely resolved” (54). He wrote an intellectual, elaborate poem to praise poetry in general and to display what he learned throughout his life, because that is what his society expected of a poet. “A poem like ‘The Progress of Poesy’ is like nothing so much as some big decorative painting of the period in which, posed gracefully on an amber-coloured cloud, allegorical figures representing the arts and the passions offer ceremonious homage to the goddess of Poetry or Beauty” (Cecil 54-55).

Wordsworth likewise glorified poetry and displayed what he had learned, and he did it like a true Romantic. Emotion-driven, centered on nature, and using the extended metaphor of childhood. “His peculiar function was ‘to open out the soul of little and familiar things,’ alike in nature and in human life. His ‘poetry is great because of the extraordinary power with which he feels the joy offered to us in nature, the joy offered to us in the simple primary affections and duties’” (Bradley 107). Both Wordsworth and Gray accomplished their goals and taught their worlds what they had learned through their poetry.

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