WORDSWORTH AND WABI:
An Insight Into Wordsworth’s Poetry About the Low and Rustic
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William Wordsworth is a memorable British-Romantic poet (1770-1850), well-known today as the “poet of nature...[who] provided a moral philosophy of life, of childhood, [of] joy, of memory and consolation”\(^1\). However, in his own time, opinions about him were divided: one of utter offence at his poetry’s simplicity and the other in a sense of awe over the “power and pathos”\(^2\) present in his “new style and new spirit”\(^3\) of poetry. As for Wordsworth himself, knowing that his poetry was going to be unfamiliar, he decided to defend and explain the idea behind writing poetry that had a “simplicity in style...[with a] focus on rural life and language”\(^4\). That is why in his first collection of poems, *Lyrical Ballads*, he included a “Preface” where he talked in great length about himself as a poet, the growth of his mind through poetry, the meaning and purpose of a poet, the language of poetry and so on. In reading the purpose, explanation and definition of his original style of poetry, a connection has been made between the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi* and Wordsworth’s ideas about poetry. This aesthetic of *wabi*, although not explicitly religious in nature, is imbued with the spirit of Zen Buddhism. A broad introduction to this aesthetic will be given to show how Wordsworth’s poetry and philosophy of a poet can be interpreted through its lens. Then, the Zen Buddhist perspective of nature’s low and rustic will be paralleled with Wordsworth’s ideas of the low and rustic. Such comparisons will help reveal an outlook to Wordsworth’s poetry that is drastically different.

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3 Ibid.
from the conventional perspective he is generally understood in (i.e. in a British-Romantic historical context).

The quintessentially Japanese aesthetic *wabi*, that many Western Oriental scholars have tried to describe but interestingly very few Japanese scholars have done so themselves, is an aesthetic that permeates the very essence of Japanese spirituality and their way of looking at things. Hence, one will find many expressions of it in Japanese cultural arts, such as in painting, poetry, flower arrangement, calligraphy, garden design etc. The peak of *wabi* is said to be found in the Japanese ‘Way of Tea’ which unifies several manifestations of *wabi* in one place: the Tea ceremony. For now, only the poetic and folkcrafts aspect of *wabi* shall be focused on when comparing this aesthetic to Wordsworth’s thoughts on poetry.

It has been mentioned that rarely did Japanese scholars themselves attempt to define the aesthetic of *wabi*. This is due to it originating from Zen Buddhism where the first people involved with it were Zen masters.\(^5\) So the aesthetic is marked with a general tendency of avoidance for explanation, scholastic classification or other forms of intellectualization. Juniper states that Zen Buddhists “have always been wary of the pitfalls of language and consider it the greatest obstacle to real understanding”\(^6\). They prefer ambiguity over clarity when it comes to the intangible; an act that reflects the very spirit of Zen.\(^7\) Such feelings are reiterated in the infamous quote: “those who do not know speak and those who know speak not”\(^8\). Koren simplifies this Zen concept in that no essential knowledge can be conveyed through the written or spoken word, only from mind to mind.\(^9\) But since there are no English counterparts for the word *wabi* that can be used to describe the aesthetic,

\(^7\) Ibid.
\(^8\) Koren, *Wabi-sabi for artists*, 16.
\(^9\) Ibid.
some attempt of defining it must be made to be able to understand it. Thus, while being cognizant of the limitations of language, literal English translations will be employed with the help of their suggestive implications to understand a more in-depth meaning of this aesthetic.

The word wabi, Frentiu translates, in a literal sense means ‘poverty’. From this, one could derive a further understanding of “longing for primitive simplicity [that is]…close to the natural way of being”. Often associated with wabi, is the adjective sabi that is “literally translated as ‘loneliness’ ”. Juniper notes that one of the earliest references to this word was found in Japanese poetry to express a “sense of desolation...[that was used to convey] the existential transience of life...around which Zen philosophy revolves”. Wabi and sabi were originally two stand-alone words with their separate meanings in the Japanese language but over time they became closer to each other. Koren points out, they have become so synonymous with each other today that if a Japanese speaker uses the word “wabi they also mean sabi, and vice versa. Most often people simply say wabi-sabi”.

To further explore the use of this aesthetic in poetry, Frentiu explains that since the beginning of the history of Japanese poetry, it has always been described as a spontaneous act of emotion in relation to the intensity of the words used – with the root of this intensity being the human heart. The poetry “constituted of three essential elements: emotion, which is the source of the poem, the poem proper which is born out of this emotion, and an external event that has caused this emotion.” Matsuo Basho, the renowned 17th century poet, had access to a style of poetry that had a structural relationship with emotion as its basis. Hence, he could create a new poetic genre known as haiku through it – the

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11 Ibid.
12 Juniper, Wabi sabi: the Japanese art, 49.
13 Koren, Wabi-sabi for artists, 22.
essence of which was *wabi-sabi*. It expressed “profound…introspection with such precision and awareness of nuance, with sincerity and sobriety…while reminding one of the supreme moments of existence.”\(^\text{15}\) The *haiku* is said to be the shortest poetic form in literary history, reduced to only three lines of 19 syllables structured in the order 5-7-7. In its shortness, Basho sought to convey as much meaning as possible with as little said when writing about “the diffuse, [the] ineffable…a moment of grace, and especially about [eloquent] silence.”\(^\text{16}\) Freniti stresses, for Basho only the very short and concentrated poem was able to capture and convey instants of momentary impressions that he found around commonplace events in the nature surrounding him. Through such attempts at poetry, he wanted to show an aspect of beauty or its mysteries (perhaps) which could be defined through the aesthetics of *wabi-sabi*.

It is significant to note here that the aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* views the natural world in a similar light to what Wordsworth wrote in the “Preface”. Wordsworth states that the most important and crucial goal in writing poems was to produce a “class of Poetry”\(^\text{17}\) in a style that rejected figures of speech and was prose-like. He wanted to use ‘real’ language which was closer to the common life of the average reader, so much so that it would “interest mankind permanently.”\(^\text{18}\) In doing so, he chose the subject of the low and rustic life as he believed such an environment was capable of helping the heart attain maturity. Such maturity would allow one to speak a purer, more emphatic language without any restraints. This in turn would bring it closer to the ‘real’ language that he was seeking.\(^\text{19}\) In writing about such intentions in his “Preface”, it can be understood that Wordsworth was attempting to establish a new aesthetic, that he

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\(^\text{15}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., 460.


\(^\text{18}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{19}\) Ibid.
conceived in his ballads, in relation to viewing the natural world. His intentions for a novel aesthetic are especially emphasized in his “Preface” when he writes about his aspirations to interest mankind in this aesthetic permanently and not just as a trend in his time.

Similarly, just like Wordsworth, Basho too was experimenting with poetic styles when he came up with the formula for the haiku. He was endeavoring toward creating a poetic form that could capture (in the famous words of Wordsworth) the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”20 Except in Basho’s case, these powerful feelings were not recollected in tranquility but focused on the ‘instant’ of the moment itself with the poem defined as the “quick, uninterrupted notation of th[at] moment.”21 In contradiction to that, Wordsworth laboured to recount the details of his contemplative emotions in response to his natural surroundings in an unrestrained, prose-like manner before they eventually disappeared. Though opposite in their experimental methods, one cannot deny their goals were the same, i.e. to find a new poetic style that could convey their sudden rise of powerful emotions and capture the utter instant of that moment.

Since their goals were quite similar, it is not surprising that both found the support for their goals in nature. In a haiku, Basho tries to arrest the moment in such a way where he is able to become one with the surrounding nature during the poetic impulse. Important questions may arise about what does it mean to become one with nature and why is it necessary for the poet to do so? To understand such essential questions, a look at what Wordsworth does in his poetry when being surrounded by nature can perhaps reveal the answer. In his poem Michael, Wordsworth (the narrator) says:

It is in truth and utter solitude;

Nor should I have made mention of this Dell

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20 Ibid., 443.
But for one object which you might pass by,
Might see and notice not. Beside the brook
There is a straggling heap of unhewn stones!
And to that place a story appertains 22

Here, Wordsworth noticed an ordinary heap of stones. While seeing such commonplace events in nature, he could contemplate on the ordinary which reveals to him something unusual from within it. Such observances of nature cause him to recall a tale about Michael the shepherd that he goes on to convey in the rest of the poem. What is important here is the act of contemplation on natural objects. Wordsworth claims, it is in the practice of contemplation that allows a poet to be possessed with “more than usual organic sensibility” and in turn permits him to think long and deep until he can create poems of a ‘worthy’ purpose.23 In relation to Zen Buddhism, the act of contemplation of natural objects is also present. But it is on a deeper level where it allows one to perceive the beauty within the object. To do so, one needs to overcome barriers such as ‘the subject’, ‘the object’, ‘I’ and ‘it’. Ultimately dissolving one’s ego and the dualities present in one’s surroundings until a realm of “Non-dual Entirety”24 can be reached. Yanagi explains, “a true awareness of beauty is to be found where beauty watches beauty in its entirety, not where ‘I’ watch[es] ‘it’. The ‘I-it’ relationship cannot reveal beauty in its entirety but only a small part of it.”25 In following this concept of Zen philosophy, Basho learns to overcome his own ego/limits by “submerging [him]self with the object until its intrinsic nature becomes apparent to him, stimulating a poetic

24 Yanagi and Leach, The unknown craftsman, 152.
25 Ibid.
impulse within him.”

Such an act is described as ‘intuitive looking’ where one is able to see the true nature of things. It is the essence of this act, Frentiu emphasizes, which had crystallised itself into the haiku. Though the method of contemplation on natural objects was on different levels between Basho and Wordsworth (this in turn reflects their different poetic styles), nevertheless it is significant to note that both were capable of finding poetic impulses through the act of contemplation when they intuitively looked at the nature around them.

To further understand the relation of nature supporting poetic impulses, it is helpful to trace back why such an uncommon stance toward a rustic aesthetic occurred in the first place. But before that, one must admit that wabi-sabi is a profound concept and is perhaps quite difficult to conceptualize without the aid of visual materials. That is why another adjective is useful to know: the aesthetic of shibui. Yanagi states that this aesthetic is easily found in tea utensils that are used in tea ceremonies and is a means towards the objective of wabi-sabi. The grand Tea masters were able to formulate a “criteria for recognizing beauty at its height…through such concrete features as form, colour, and design” that they found in folkcraft. This chosen folkcraft took central place within the Tea ceremony. English words to describe things shibusa (noun form) would be “‘austere’, ‘subdued’, and ‘restrained’”, but Yanagi highlights, “to the Japanese [person] the word is much more complex than that, suggesting quietness, depth, simplicity, and purity. The beauty it describes is introverted; the beauty of the inner radiance. Another way of approaching its meaning would be to consider its antonyms: ‘showy’, ‘gaudy’, ‘boastful’, and ‘vulgar’.” Shibui is most easily recognized in (but certainly not limited to) the craftsmanship of Japanese earthenware such as tea-bowls, water pots, tea-caddies and

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
other utilitarian vessels found in folkcrafts. These crafts were used as a means of appreciating a beauty that is described as irregular, rough, natural or imperfect that forces the viewers to draw the inner beauty (shibusa) out from within the craft themselves. As Yanagi gracefully describes: “[it is a] beauty that makes an artist of the viewer.”31 As a result, shibui is used to convey wabi-sabi through matter. Therefore, it can be said that they are one and the same, except shibui is tangible and wabi-sabi is intangible. That is why Yanagi notes “the word shibusa is in everyday use in Japan [whereas wabi-sabi is not], and the criterion it sets up is taken as a measure to determine the depth or shallowness of the beauty of any given object.”32 To reflect that everyday use, Koren selects the English word ‘rustic’ to convey this aesthetic in simple terms where he says “the closest English word to…[this aesthetic] is probably ‘rustic’…while ‘rustic’ represents only a limited dimension of the…aesthetic, it is the initial impression many people have when they first see…[this aesthetic’s] expression.”33

In light of the aesthetic of shibui, a parallel can be drawn between the way Wordsworth chose his poetry to be about the low and rustic and the way the Tea masters chose their shibusa tea utensils. The early Tea masters wanted to change the history of the ‘Way of Tea’ by bequeathing folkcraft to be at the center of their Tea ceremonies. This is because the Tea masters wanted to move away from the expensive, gaudy, high-art of Chinese ware that was much sought after in their time. So they purposefully selected tea utensils “from the plain, the natural, the homely, the simple, and the normal.”34 They were motivated to express the universal aspects of beauty which, Yanagi concludes, in their eyes was described by “the single epithet: the word shibui.”35 Yanagi further mentions, “they explored the uneventful, normal world for the most unusual beauty. Can anything be more uncommon than to see the

31 Ibid., 124.
32 Ibid., 148-149.
33 Koren, Wabi-sabi for artists, 21.
34 Ibid.
35 Yanagi and Leach, The unknown craftsman, 185.
uncommon in the commonplace?” A similarity is noticed here between the Tea masters and Wordsworth. The motivation for change for both came about as a reaction to the society’s overly shallow taste in fancy things. Wordsworth’s opinion, akin to the Tea masters, showed a similar disregard for the public’s taste. He states in the “Preface” that there were “arbitrary and capricious habits of expression…furnish[ed] for fickle taste and fickle appetites” in writing present during his time. He sought to counteract this malady that he perceived in the public’s taste by adopting a much simpler, permanent and philosophic language in his poetry. Therefore, it is understood that principally both the Tea masters and Wordsworth were moving away from shallow tastes of beauty in order to “apprehend the profundity of shibui” in a manner where they could combine the idea of beauty with the low, the simple and the natural – the rustic.

An important point to note here is how the rustic quite fittingly correlates with Wordsworth’s ambitions of writing a new type of poetry that uses ‘real’ language. For in the low and rustic life, Wordsworth finds a purity of language that he states was present due to the manner of life in rurality itself. In his “Preface”, he explains that the language of the people living there is purified from “real defects…because [they]…hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because [they are]…less under the influence of social vanity they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions.” Interestingly, in opposition to this, Coleridge wrote in his Biographia Literaria that what Wordsworth was describing here was merely an act of “persons of elevated rank and superior refinement [in a]…happy imitation of the rude unpolished manners and discourse of their inferiors.” In essence, he was implying

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36 Ibid.
38 Yanagi and Leach, The unknown craftsman, 184.
that Wordsworth did not look at the actuality of the truly low and rustic life. He went on to say that to be really like the characters in Wordsworth’s poems, the person would require some sort of independence, education, original sensibility etc. before they could prosper in the rustic life or be improved by its nature.\textsuperscript{41} In the above criticism, Coleridge believed that Wordsworth’s poetry about the low and rustic was unrealistic and could not benefit a person in any substantial manner. To truly understand Wordsworth’s actions and the theory upon which his poetry of ‘real’ language is based, one needs to distinguish that Wordsworth was not idealising the rustic or pastoral (which \textit{can} be uneducated at times) or creating a ‘happy imitation’ of it. But instead, he was with a refined mind finding inspiration in the simple and natural. This is because he believed the human mind was capable of perceiving beauty and dignity within nature and he was trying to enlarge that aspect of the human mind in his poetry. Consequently, it is not hard to notice that Wordsworth himself is the most apparent example of the characters in his poems, where he is the educated person with an organic sensibility that prospers in the rustic and is improved by its nature. Therefore, this process can be understood as the act of a refined mind/taste choosing the rustic.

While looking closer at how a refined mind chooses the rustic, Wordsworth’s manifold definition of what a poet is becomes easier to understand. Wordsworth describes a ‘Poet’ as someone who is “endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness…more comprehensive soul…who rejoices more than other[s]…in the spirit of life…to these qualities [there is an added]…disposition to be affected more than other[s]…by absent things as if they were present.”\textsuperscript{42} The superlatives may be daunting in their inability to be measured and understood. But the point that Wordsworth is trying to make here is that a poet is someone who has the ability of \textit{seeing things} in a similar fashion.

\textsuperscript{41} Coleridge, “Biographia Literaria,” 693.
\textsuperscript{42} Wordsworth, “Lyrical Ballads,” 439.
that Yanagi asserts the Tea masters have. The definition of seeing things
in Yanagi’s case is the “ability to perceive significant loveliness”43 (i.e.
beauty). As most people have grown accustomed to the conventional, it
is the person who can draw out the inner-beauty and see the extraordinary
in the ordinary that can be called a ‘Poet’. Essentially, Wordsworth is not
making an argument that a poet is a genius and someone who has a ‘less
comprehensive soul’ cannot become a poet. Rather what he is stating, if
one compares his writing to the Tea masters, is that a poet is like a Tea
master whose gaze can penetrate into things and extract the shibusa out
of them.

In conclusion, the comparison of Wordsworth’s philosophy of
poetry with the Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi (with the additional help
of shibui) allows one to find fresher ways of appreciating Wordsworth’s
aims to revolutionize poetry. Even though Wordsworth’s ideas and the
Japanese aesthetic are two individual concepts with a vast difference of
culture and time between them, they are surprisingly similar in their goals
of finding beauty in the low and rustic. Wordsworth’s primary intension
was to create a new class of poetry that could find inspiration in nature’s
low and rustic. This is because for Wordsworth the optimum environment
when it comes to perceiving beauty is the natural. Those who can
‘intuitively look’, when contemplating on the simplicity and the
ordinariness within the natural environment, are the true poets. An idea
like this was unheard of during his time, but it cannot be said that he was
the first or the only one with such a unique view. In understanding
Wordsworth’s aims through the lens of wabi-sabi, hopefully we will now
come to appreciate his poetic endeavors in a more comprehensive
manner.

43 Yanagi and Leach, The unknown craftsman, 88.
Bibliography


