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“Nutting” and Wordsworth’s “Myth of Nature”

As Wordsworth himself claimed that “Nutting” was originally intended to be part of his autobiographical epic *The Prelude*, the poem represents the poet’s state of mind in his youth; more specifically, I reckon the poem vividly depicts the first and second stages of his mental growth in his theory of the “myth of nature,” which is famously described in “Tintern Abbey.” The poet’s shift of attitude toward nature can be interpreted as his transition from the more naïve first stage to the turbulent, paradoxical second stage of mind, although the change is subtle just as how these two stages are not clearly divided but are mingled in “Tintern Abbey.” Moreover, the moral at the end of the poem echoes the poet’s mindset in the third stage of maturity, even though the message here is more restricted compared with that in “Tintern Abbey.”

已註解 [MOU1]: Yes.

已註解 [MOU2]: Yes, I agree.

In the first forty lines of “Nutting,” the poet relates his experience of joy in nature when he sets out to collect hazelnuts “in the eagerness of boyish hope” (line 4) and “[i]n that sweet mood when pleasure loves to pay / tribute to ease” (line 39-40). This delightful feeling, however, is what Wordsworth calls “[t]he coarser pleasures of my boyish days” (line 73) in the first stage of his mental development in “Tintern Abbey” since it only derives from the natural appeal to his physical senses without more elevated value; it is merely “a passion,” “[a]n appetite; a feeling and a love / That had no need of a remoter charm” (line 80-81). This superficial passion is mocked when the poet ironically recounts this petty, rural activity as a heroic venture of an egoistic, self-absorbed knight. He enjoyed the beauty of nature as if the

已註解 [MOU3]: Yes.

sole purpose of its existence was to satisfy his own needs and imagination; the projection of his own desire on nature is further reflected when he viewed nature as a “virgin” (line 21) waiting for a knight like him, a “banquet” (line 25) to be served to him, and compared the stones to “a flock of sheep” (line 37) to be governed by a shepherd just like how Adam rules all creatures as the first steward of the world. Through deflating nature as a passive being like a reified woman, an object, and an animal, he affirmed his ascendancy over nature. It is worth noting that although his relationship with nature was unilateral, he could still maintain a balance at this point because he refrained himself from harvesting and exploitation “with wise restraint” (line 23).

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已註解 [MOU4]: Yes.

Nevertheless, the poet changed his attitude as his complacency gradually soared up, and he began to wreak havoc on nature: “And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash / And merciless ravage” (line 44-45). Now that the harmony was destroyed, the poet could no longer receive the beauty that nature used to afford him: “and the shady nook / of hazels, and the green and mossy bower / Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up / Their quiet being” (line 45-48). Here, as though confused by his mixed feelings, he inserted a parenthesis “unless I now / Confound my present feelings with the past” (line 48-49) before explaining his emotions at that time: “Ere from the mutilated bower I turned / Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings, / I felt a sense of pain when I beheld / The silent trees, and saw the intruding sky” (line 50-53). Even though he still felt conceited with his gains from nature, he also sensed a kind of pain, and this paradoxical feeling resonates the “aching joys” (line 84) and the “dizzy raptures” (line 85) in the second stage of his mind that Wordsworth records in “Tintern Abbey.” Replacing the sheer delight that he used to experience, this perplexity he now felt seems to suggest the impropriety of his one-sided demand from nature and a sort of ideal unity between nature and human beings.

Eventually, the poet explicitly imparts the lesson he learned from his past to a maiden in

the last three lines of the poem: “Then, dearest Maiden, move along these shades / In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand / Touch – for there is a spirit in the woods” (line 54-56). This design resembles the last part of “Tintern Abbey” where Wordsworth addresses Dorothy about the growth of mind that he has experienced himself and expects to happen to her, and the moral about worshipping the holiness of nature corresponds to the third stage of mental maturity in the “myth of nature.” However, the two poems differ in their scope of meanings: “a spirit in the woods” (line 56) in “Nutting” seemingly refers to a supernatural being residing in nature, hence rendering nature as a mere self-sustaining mystery. By contrast, while Wordsworth also refers to “a spirit” in the third stage of mind in “Tintern Abbey,” it is a spirit not only in nature but also “in the mind of man” (line 99), “a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And roll through all things” (line 100-102). In other words, the spirit described in “Tintern Abbey” is more like the spiritual communion between humans and nature, the force that binds humans and nature together, instead of a mythical entity as described at the end of “Nutting.” Therefore, while the previous lines of the “Nutting” lead the poet through the naivety of the first stage and the confusion of the second stage to somewhere supposedly higher and grander, it **does not arrive at the final stage** in the “myth of nature” where human mind and natural beings are **mutually reflected but ends** with the mystification of nature.

In conclusion, I consider that we can read the shift of the poet’s mindset in “Nutting” in terms of the first stage of self-satisfaction and the second stage of puzzlement that are explained in “Tintern Abbey.” As for the moral of the poem, it urges us to respect and to be in harmony with nature, yet **it does not really realize** the communion between humans and nature in the final stage of the “myth of nature.”

Your ability to compare two works by close reading is great. Yes. I agree with you. The speaker’s moralizing in “Nutting” only dictates but fails to realize the communion. He is on

已註解 [MOU5]: Yes.

已註解 [MOU6]: Yes, you are right.

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the brink of it by experiencing the “pain.” which confuses him.

I mark this piece 90.

Works Cited

- Wordsworth, William. "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 10th ed., vol. D, W. W. Norton, 2018, pp.299-302.
- . "Nutting." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 10th ed., vol. D, W. W. Norton, 2018, pp.319-320.