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Wordsworth's Poetry: Liberating Readers from Rigid Personas

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Abstract

All humans have the inherent ability to adjust themselves in the society in which they live. But in the blind pursuit of placing themselves elatedly in the outer world, they tend to forget as to who they really are. They dress up themselves in the masks of certain roles overtly. The result is that in order to be acceptable to the social norms and mores, they become what Jung would call persona-possessed; and thus they lose touch with the essential being. This paper is an attempt to read Wordsworth's poetry as a way of liberating humans from their rigid personas in order to make them more efficient, productive, healthy and peaceful individuals of the society.

Keywords: Wordsworth, Jung, the Romantic Movement, persona

Introduction

Some Jungian scholars read the Romantic Movement as an imaginative reaction to the extreme rationalism and industrialization of the 18th century in which people focused more on the material gains and comforts of life. The thrust of the society was mainly to the outward. The appearance was more important than the reality; the body than the soul; the part than the whole; the persona[1] than the

unconscious[2], as a Jungian would put it. Most of the 18th century poets and writers laid emphasis on the appearance and style of their work; the word was more important than the meaning. Such was the backdrop of the age in which writers like Wordsworth and Coleridge grew up. They knew that in the pursuit of a good style, the 18th century writers had created what Wordsworth calls "poetic diction" (Preface to LB, 306)—something which he says distances the reader from the meaning. This is why Aritro Ganguly says:

> The Romantics grew up in an age where words were fast losing their inherent vivacity, in other words the 'soul' that Plato was talking about. This loss affected the poetic brilliance and creativity and the Romantics in their own ways were trying to bring back the lustre to words (8).

The emphasis on the appearance rather than on the reality; on the style rather than the meaning; on the persona or the consciousness rather than the unconscious gives birth to the disconnect which imbalances a work as much as it imbalances an individual or even a society. This trend did not set well with the romantic poets, especially William Blake and Wordsworth. Perhaps that is why Wordsworth says, "that now our life is only drest / For show; mean handy-work of craftsman, cook / Or groom" ("Written in London, 1802," 2-4).[3] These lines of Wordsworth clearly refer to the outward appearance and prosaic consciousness of life. Not that the exterior or the appearance is not important. But this too is a fact that apparent luster without much substance usually makes such an object or person ludicrous. The word, "now" lends deeper meaning to the lines; it clearly shows how Wordsworth juxtaposes the here and now with there and then. Not that it refers only to the popular nostalgic streak of the Romantics to idealize the past; it also shows how the appearance has become more important.

Interestingly the word, "now" occurs again in the line 8 of the poem. In addition to strengthening the lines quoted above, this time it also points to what a Jungian would call the overdevelopment of the persona or the conscious: "No grandeur now in nature or in book / Delights us" ("Written in London, 1802," 8-9). Not that the lustre or the "grandeur" is gone; it has not. The blind pursuit of the social roles we play and the overdevelopment of the consciousness blind us to the beauty around us. The idea can be better expressed in the words of S. T. Coleridge, who says, "I see, not feel, how beautiful they are" ("Dejection: an Ode," line 38. Emphasis mine). And again in the words of Coleridge from the same poem, we

"may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within" (45-46).

Wordsworth believes that in their blind pursuit of adjusting themselves to the social environment and the world surrounding them, humans distance themselves from 'Nature', i.e., the unconscious. "The world [becomes] too much with [them]," and as such they turn their back on the unconscious which, by virtue of fluidity, flexibility, vastness, immensity depth, irrationality and primitiveness, I believe, is Nature in Wordsworth's poetry. This is why Jung says, "Civilized life today demands concentrated, directed conscious functioning, and this entails the risk of a considerable dissociation from the unconscious" (*The Portable*, 276).

This idea is in line with what Jung calls the persona, which, in his opinion, is humans' inherent ability to adjust themselves to the social environment in which they live in order to be acceptable to the society. Humans consciously pursue the growth of the persona and as a result go farther away from the unconscious. In their attempt to be acceptable to the society, they end up losing touch with their essential being. All humans have to play different roles in life; their interaction with another invariably gives birth to a role of sorts. Depending on one's inclination and interaction, one or another of these "roles" becomes dominant. For example, a business person, a police sergeant, or an army person acquires a role due to his/her profession. In the blind pursuit of being a successful businessman, sergeant, or army person, one may overlook the other roles or responsibilities one has to fulfil. While being a police person or business person is an essential part of one's personality, one is also a spouse, a parent, etc. Letting the former dominate one's personality by turning back on the latter is what, Jung believes, leads to a "lopsided" (*Dreams*, 26, par. 227) personality—only that side dominates which they consciously overdevelop. The opening lines of *The Prelude*, Bk.-1 are worth-looking at:

> … escaped
> From the vast city, where I long had pined
> A discontented sojourner: now free,
> Free as a bird to settle where I will.
> ……
> I cannot miss my way, I breathe again!
> Trances of thought and mountings of the mind
> Come fast upon me: it is shaken off,
> That burthen of my unnatural self,
> The heavy weight of many a weary day

Not mine and such as were not made for me.
……
For I, methought, while the sweet breath of heaven,
Was blowing on my body, felt within me—
A correspondent breeze that gently moved
With quickening virtue, but is now become
A tempest, a redundant energy,
Vexing its own creation. Thanks to both,
And their congenial powers, that, while they join
In breaking up a long-continued frost,
Bring with them vernal promises, the hope
Of active days (6- 9, 18-23, 33-42).

There is a kind of "unease" in these lines that he feels due to being not himself. It may not be inappropriate to say that his stay in the city demands of him things and roles with which he feels uneasy. Being in the city is not just due to being homesick; he is not quite himself there. The days he spends there are neither his nor are they "made for" him. The big city somehow makes him feel confined. The word "escaped" brings the image of an inmate who has broken loose from a prison. The expression, "shaken off," further strengthens this image: he has broken the shackles, and he "breathes again." The last image clearly points to how his time in the city was like part of him was not alive; the self that perhaps makes his identity was dormant. The "many a weary day/Not mine and such as were not made for me" are over. He is back to himself and with himself!

There is a clear juxtaposition of the "vast city" with the "open air." The former, by virtue of being limited and confined symbolizes the conscious; the latter, by virtue of being open stands for the unconscious. While being in the city, he had to fit himself to the roles he had to play but he was not happy with that part of his being. The movement from the open air into the vast city and back into the open air helps him realize how there is something missing in his being. The conscious effort to suit himself to the environment of the city life, which is what Jung would call the development of his persona, takes him away from himself. He knows that the life he has in the city is not what he wants; there is a disconnection between his inner and outer selves. The conscious and the unconscious have lost touch with each other. The "sweet breath of heaven" helps him connect his conscious with the unconscious; the external and the internal world enter into a dialogue of sorts. The being that was dead in the vast city (the "long continued frost" symbolizes death) comes back to life with the "sweet breath of heaven" that blows on his body: he is reborn. The "vernal promises" and the "active days" not only show his

excitement and joy about the cessation of his "sojourn" in the vast city, but they also suggest that he has integrated his persona into his conscious. He is not what he has to be in the vast city; he is what he is in the open air: "free as a bird to settle where" he wills to.

By thanking "both," Wordsworth points to the inseparable relation between the external world and the internal one, or the conscious and the unconscious. The life he has in the city or the persona, as Jung would say, does not afford an opportunity to him to look inside. Instead of being stuck in the persona, he connects with his unconscious. Without it, humans develop lopsided personalities. It is only after the flow of traffic between the conscious and the unconscious is established that humans are more creative, productive, and useful. I argue that Wordsworth warns humans of the disconnection between the persona and the unconscious. Not that the former is not important; it indeed is. The adequate persona helps us fittingly interact with our surroundings. However, the blind pursuit of a role that we play takes us away from the unconscious. Thus instead of being multi-dimensional, we converge on the persona and look at everything and being from that particular perspective. Instead of celebrating diversity, we insist on imposition of uniformity on everything. And once that happens to humans, both at individual and collective levels, they cease to be productive and useful members of the society. Their infinite potential is reduced to a finite role. They are driven by their persona. The problem of extremism so common in the world today is perhaps a good example of the collective persona most societies have allowed to overdevelop. Instead of looking at our fellow beings as humans, we see followers of one or another religion, ethnicity, colour or caste.

Stuck up in the rigid personas of power, wealth, caste, colour or creed in the society, we are only meeting the external demands of the conscious and are not paying any heed to internal needs of the unconscious. That means we are not in tune with the unconscious, and lose sight of what we really are. As Wordsworth says:

> The world is too much with us; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
> Little we see in nature that is ours;
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
> This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
> The winds that will be howling at all hours
> And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
> For this, for everything, we are out of tune;

> It moves us not. ("The World" 1-9)

This lack of communication between our persona and the unconscious makes us lopsided individuals. We develop our social roles to the neglect of the unconscious. Wordsworth's emphasis on 'going back to nature' symbolizes holding communion with the unconscious, which can help us empathize with others and thus become more productive and efficient. It is only after we are connected with the unconscious that, according to Jung, we can understand its symbolic messages and can integrate them into our conscious attitude which leads to liberate us from our rigid personas. Wordsworth's interaction with nature is his "unconscious intercourse" (*Prelude* 1, 562). It is this interaction or a flow of traffic between the persona and the unconscious that persuades humans to individuate themselves, which, in the words of Jung, is

> Nothing less than to divest the self of the false wrappings of the persona …[and] becoming an "in-dividual," and in so far as "individuality" embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self (*The Portable,* 121, 123. Quotation marks original). [4]

Conclusion

The seminal message we get from the whole discussion is that reading Wordsworth's poetry helps us liberate from rigid personas especially in our times in which extreme behaviours and attitudes have turned human society lopsided. It guides us to understand the problem Wordsworth and others believe is there with their society and its denizens. Man as an individual is as much important as the society as a whole is and vice versa. They are the faces of the same coin; one should not be without the other. Utter disregard for the social norms and mores isolates an individual from the rest. On the other hand, letting social norms and mores get on one's nerves to the neglect of individual preferences and likes and dislikes is not desirable either. While development of the persona and the conscious is important for an individual to be an acceptable denizen of society, its overdevelopment allows the social norms dominate the individuality of a person. Rational and conscious growth of the persona, which is only the exterior, distances the individual from his inner world, and the society from the rest of the humanity outside the society.

Notes

[1] Jung believes that persona is only a mask of the collective psyche. It is not the real face but an outer covering exposed to the outer world which a person puts on in order to adjust himself/herself to the social environment or norms. He says, "It is a compromise between individual and society as to what a man appears to be" (*Portable*, 106). A well-known Jungian, Marry Ann Mattoon, says:

> Persona, the Latin word for mask, designates the part of the personality that one presents to the world to gain social approval or other advantages, and to coincide with one's idea of how one should appear in public. Thus the persona reveals little of what the person is; it is the public face, determined by what one perceives to be acceptable to other people. An example of the persona is the polite behaviour of most adults; we go through the motions of consideration for others, saying, "Excuse me" and "Thank you" even if we do not feel apologetic or grateful. The persona is composed primarily of positive behaviours that conceal the negative qualities of the shadow. Hence the persona, more than the ego, is the "presentable" alternative to the "unpresentable" shadow (28. Italics original).

For further detail see C. G Jung, "Relations Between the Ego and the Unconscious," *The Portable Jung*. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. Ed. Joseph Campbell (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1971); Frieda Fordham, *Introduction to Jung's Psychology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1953), pp. 47-49; Edward C. Whitmont, *The symbolic Quest: Basic Concepts Analytical Psychology* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 156-59; and Andrew Samuel, Bani Shorter and Fred Plaut, *A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1986).

[2] Jung's psychological theory is based upon the primary assumption that the human psyche has two aspects—the conscious or an outer realm and the unconscious or an inner realm. Jung believes that the unconscious is an essential part of the psyche which, being a hidden counterpart is compensatory to the conscious. It is an infinite storehouse of contents which cannot be all known to the conscious. Only its parts can be accessed, illumined and integrated into the conscious attitude. The qualities Jung attributes to the unconscious are freedom, flexibility, vastness, immensity, irrationality, disorder, chaos, darkness, primitiveness, infiniteness etc. He further says that the conscious and the unconscious are complementary to one another and form a totality which he calls the self. For further detail see C.G. Jung, "The Relations Between the Ego and the Unconscious," *The Portable Jung*. Trans. R. F.C. Hull. Ed. Joseph

Campbell (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 70-138. Also see C.G. Jung, *On the Nature of Psyche.* Trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Princeton University Press, 1960) Rept. by Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1982, pp. 94-109; and Frieda Fordham, *Introduction to Jung's Psychology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1953).

[3] This and all other subsequent textual references are to William Wordsworth, Wordsworth: Poetical Works, 1904, Eds. Thomas Hutchison and Ernest De Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1936, Rept., 1974), and are shown in the text of this work by title and line numbers in parenthesis unless otherwise indicated.

[4] For detail see M.L. von Franz, "The Process of Individuation," in C. G. Jung, *Man and his Symbols* (New York: A Laurel Book, 1964), pp.207-54.

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