WORDSWORTH’S AESTHETIC CREED

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From the standpoint of literary criticism, Wordsworth’s contribution to English literature is of doctrinal importance: in his execution of the Romantic ideal in poetry Wordsworth achieved valuable innovation as well as reformation of literary method which was destined to rate great in English literary criticism. If Dryden was the formulator of English critical literature as independent of the French influence, Wordsworth is to be credited with the first utterance on the modern psychological problems in English literature. The problems of capital importance in modern literary criticism were first initiated by Wordsworth to the English reading public. Wordsworth in a number of ways anticipates the modern psychological manipulation of literature, and the particular method he employed for the examination of literary value involves a great deal of the so-called psycho-analysis in the modern sense.

This is an especial point of interest to the moderns, for this innovating feature of the Wordsworthian doctrine was no result of any conscious attempt on the part of the poet but the direct consequence of his Romantic ideal of literature—his absolute distrust in the Classical authorities and his bold re-examination of human experiences in order to set up a new standard of literary criticism. It is beyond doubt that Wordsworth’s doctrine influenced English criticism into the modern direction, that is to say, into the scientific effort to re-examine the values involved in literature. In this sense the examination of the literary principles enunciated by Wordsworth in terms of the characteristic modern literary doctrine is a little more than a matter of passing interest, not only from the standpoint of literary history but from the psycho-philo-
sophical viewpoint. For in the subject-matter of discussion introduced by Wordsworth and in his handling of the material, there is nothing that would not likely prove to be of paramount interest to the moderns. By the term, modern interest, I mean largely scientific interest, the emphasis on the analysis of appearance, the effort to penetrate into the substance of the object, which is the passion of our age.

The most pronounced utterances based on the pretentious psychological analysis in literature we find in I. A. Richards’ literary criticism. Whether or not one should agree with his pronouncements is another question; but we may safely assume that there would be no question as to the propriety of quoting Richards as a most representative exponent of the modern scientific criticism of literature. And the purpose of this essay is to show how the comparison between the Wordsworthian doctrine and that of Richards indicates the essential oneness of the points of view held by the two authors, in spite of a number of apparent discordant utterances, and how the one ultimately endorses the other; furthermore, how the doctrine thus commonly held by the two English critics representing different literary ages and movements does singularly correspond to the orthodox Continental viewpoint, largely represented by Bruntière today. More specifically it is my purpose in this essay to show how the conception of the ideal critic set forth by Richards is substantially, if not apparently, identical with the conception of the ideal poet advocated by Wordsworth; thereby indicating how far the Wordsworthian doctrine might be called valid in terms of the present day scientific conception of Art. The task, however, is hard, for the problems prevalent in the two ages are different both in quality and in quantity. Moreover, it must be borne in mind that Wordsworth, in his pronouncements of literary principles (as chiefly set forth in his prefaces) is not always spontaneous and analytical, characteristics which we generally identify with Richards; for he was chiefly reacting against the tendency of his own day which was merely a petty pathological case in literature, and consequently his seemingly revolutionary
expressions are nothing but commonplace statements. Subtracting, then, this reactionary element from his critical composition, we might list the central problems of modern interest as follows:

1. Art for Art's sake in poetry; the propriety of that attitude in art.
2. Problem of Pleasure: definition, whether it should be a conscious aim of the artist.
5. Problem of Universality as a criterion of literature.
6. Problem of Permanency as a criterion of literature.
7. Problem of Diction: simplicity against complexity, the meaning of it.
8. Problem of "organized sensibility" as the fundamental aptitude of the artist.
9. Subject-matter of poetry.
10. Relation of life, nature and poetry.

The present study aims to treat these problems in terms of the Wordsworthian doctrine, thereby indicating the applicability and inapplicability of the doctrine to modern literature.

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1. The problem of Art for Art's sake is a long disputed one in literature. Wordsworth's conception of Art seems to be profoundly introspective and philosophical. To him "poetry is the image of man and nature": he values poetry as an incentive to philosophical reflection, which he places in the final stage of the appreciation of art. Mere delight of senses means little to the ultimate good that poetry is supposed to do for the human mind. His sense of the mission of poetry is purely reflective and philosophical to the extent of mysticism; the characteristic utterance on this point we find in the following lines:

Aristotle, I have been told, has said that poetry is the most philosophic of all writing. It is so. Its object is truth—not individual and local, but general and operative. Not standing upon external
testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion: truth which is its own testimony; which gives competence and confidence to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal.1

The delight of diction and the enjoyment of images, these are but contributing factors to set the human mind operative, so to speak—to inspire it into deeper introspection which otherwise is unattainable. The poet worthy of the name, according to Wordsworth, must

describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature, and in such connection with each other, that understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified.2

This placing of the sense impression in the secondary and subordinate place in the poetic appreciation singularly corresponds to Bruntière's idea of the stage of literary appreciation. He says:

La première impression doit être la point de départ seulement. Après la considération esthétique vient le jeu de l'intelligence qui jeut différemment de la sensibilité.3

This distinction by the French critic of "sensibilité" and "intelligence" is exactly what Wordsworth had in mind when he insisted on reflection and deep thinking as the necessary condition for the production of true poetry. To Wordsworth poetry is more of a unified expression of all departments of human knowledge rather than an art independent of the other phases of mental activities. In this sense Art for Art's sake is but a meaningless utterance of no consequence; the idea of poetry for poetry's sake, in other words, amounts to the discrimination of the "poetical" experience from the ordinary human every-day experience, which is ridiculous. Wordsworth conceived that the essential mission of poetry is the enrichment of the human mind; and this notion of divorcing the

1 Preface to Lyrical Ballads, 1815 ed.
2 Preface to Lyrical Ballads.
3 Bruntière: L'Évolution des genres.
human experience from the so-called poetical experience is nothing but a poetic suicide.

This notion of the close relationship of poetry to life's experiences is carried out more positively by Richards who criticizes the maxim in the following language:

The world of poetry has in no sense any different reality from the rest of the world and it has no special laws and no other worldly peculiarities. It is made up of experiences of exactly the same kinds as those that come to us in other ways.

It is surprising how much of this utterance bears the Wordsworthian accent.

What was the basis, then, on which these critics challenge the proverbial Art for Art's sake? We find it in the theory of Good Sense directly derivative from Boileau. Wordsworth's whole reaction against the literary tendency of his day was guided by common sense or good sense. To Richards the fundamental starting point of the critic is his normality, without which no communication of experiences is possible. And it is another way of asserting Bruntière's theory that the material of art should not consist in the exceptions and the morbid, but in humanity itself, that literature should not be made up of Zola (with moral preoccupation and nothing else) or Gautier (with the theory of Art for Art's sake) but of something human and sane. The doctrine of normality thus held in common by them is in reality the back-bone of any healthy literature, of which Wordsworth is an eloquent spokesman.

2. As to the problem of Pleasure in Art, Wordsworth shows a surprising insight into human psychology and goes a step farther than the modern discussion of the subject, namely, whether or not Pleasure should be the sole aim of the artist? To this Wordsworth answers in the affirmative, which Richards pretends to destroy on a seemingly plausible basis; but a close examination will show the inadequacy of the attempt, for the Wordsworthian

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1 I. A. Richards: *Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 78.
sense of Pleasure is far more intricate and broader in its application than the common association made with the term. Pleasure, to Wordsworth, stands for "Sympathy", which again, according to the Wordsworthian sense, must be construed broadly.

We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure. . . but wherever we sympathise with pain it will be found that the sympathy is produced and carried on by subtle combinations with pleasure. We have no knowledge, that is, no general principles drawn from the contemplation of particular facts, but what has been built up by pleasure, and exists in us by pleasure alone. The Man of science, the Chemist and Mathematician, whatever difficulties and disgusts they may have had to struggle with, know and feel this. However painful may be the objects with which the Anatomist's knowledge is connected, he feels that his knowledge is pleasure; and where he has no pleasure he has no knowledge.1

This definition of Pleasure finds its exact counterpart in the extreme opposite sense in Richards' denunciation of Pleasure as the sole aim of the artist:

The evil results, as Ribot remarks, are largely confined to those individuals in whom the quest for pleasure has the force of an obsession. But . . . it is clear that all those doctrines, very common in critical literature, which set up pleasure as the goal of activity, are mistaken. Every activity has its own specific goal. Pleasure very probably ensues in most cases when this goal is reached, but that is a different matter. To read a poem for the sake of the pleasure which will ensue if it is successfully read is to approach it in an inadequate attitude. Obviously it is the poem in which we should be interested, not in a by-product of having managed successfully to read it. . . . It is no less absurd to suppose that a competent reader sits down to read for the sake of pleasure, than to suppose that a mathematician sets out to solve an equation with a view to the pleasure its solution will afford him. But the pleasure, however great it may be, is no more the aim of the activity in the course of which it arises, than, for example, the noise made by a motor-cycle—useful though it is as an indication of the way the machine is running—is the reason in the normal case for its having been started.2

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1 Preface to Lyrical Ballads.
2 Principles of Literary Criticism, p. 96.
It is noticeable that Richards in so renouncing the idea of making pleasure the direct object of Art incidentally reveals the shallowness and the narrowness of his conception of the term, compared with the broad comprehensive interpretation of Wordsworth. Why renounce the attainment of pleasure, if it is worth while to have one? However, one should not take this attitude of Richards too seriously, for his argument on this point rather tends to be sheerly logical, detached from substantial facts; and this logical display subtracted from his whole argument, there is not much left to oppose the Wordsworthian theory of pleasure, since Richards is (as we shall soon see) a believer in what is called the organized sensibility as the ultimate goal of every form of Art, which by nature could be nothing but a state of pleasure.

The Wordsworthian insistence on pleasure is significant in two ways: first, as the Romantic insistence on the direct experience of Art detached from Classicality, its rules and discipline of the most indirect nature for the appreciation of a work of art; second, as the first psychological attempt to define "the right sort of pleasure," thereby setting up a definite critical criterion. To train the human mind to be susceptible to the pleasure of orthodox sense as he himself defined is according to Wordsworth the foremost and most difficult task of the artist: for, he asserts,

the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants; and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this, and who does not further know, that one being is elevated above another, in proportion as he possesses this capability. It has therefore appeared to me, that to endeavour to produce or enlarge this capability is one of the best services in which, at any period, a Writer can be engaged; . . .

3. *Imagination.* Richards and Wordsworth essentially agree in the evaluation of imagination as fundamental for creative literature; but the nature of imagination is a little differently conceived by

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1 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads.*
The two authors. As in the case of pleasure Wordsworth conceives of imagination as something broad and introspective, and at the same time a creative faculty; whereas Richards deems it as mainly a synthetic power the notion of which is derivative of Coleridge's theory.

Wordsworth says:

"Imagination . . . has no reference to images that are merely a faithful copy, existing in the mind, of absent external objects; but is a word of higher import, denoting operations of the mind upon those objects, and processes of creation or of composition, governed by certain fixed laws. . . ."

Then he divides the function of imagination into two, the modifying and the creative. The creative imagination is further divided into two kinds: the meditative and prophetic sort of imagination, exemplified in the Bible; and the dramatic imagination the culmination of which we can find in Shakespearean literature. The above consideration was little stressed by Richards who values imagination chiefly as a synthetic, and unifying, faculty. "Compared with him (a man of imagination, meaning a poet)", Richards says,

the ordinary man suppresses nine-tenths of his impulses because he is incapable of managing them without confusion. He goes about in blinkers because what he would otherwise see would upset him. But the poet through his superior power of ordering experience is freed from this necessity. Impulses which commonly interfere with one another and are conflicting, independent, and mutually distractive, in him combine into a stable poise. . . ."2

This theory of Richards is consistent with his central thesis of the organization of the nervous impulses as the essential value of creative art. The consideration of the theory is of great interest for the student of Wordsworth because Richards essentially carries out the Wordsworthian doctrine of the "organized sensibility"

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1 Ibid.
2 Principles of Literary Criticism, p. 243.
in the modern scientific language. Life, as Richards conceives of it, is nothing but a constant process of systematization and organization of various impulses under different influences; and that organization which is least wasteful of human possibilities, is, in short, the best. The value, then, of Art should be determined in terms of how far it can exercise this function. And imagination in creative art is the one which exerts this essential faculty.

It is interesting to see how much of this utterance of Richards echoes Coleridge, who says:

That synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities . . . the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; and more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement.¹

Both Richards and Wordsworth, in other words, were aware that the rôle of imagination in creative literature involves the existential import of the art itself. The only difference is that Wordsworth’s conception is less analytical whereas that of Richards’ is pretentiously so.

4. Moral and Literature: should there be any ulterior purpose of moral import in literature?

This problem like the first one, Art for Art’s sake, is a much disputed one. To this the attitudes of the two critics are remarkably clear and agree precisely. They answer the question in the negative. Basically they hold that there should be no ulterior purpose in Art, but a purely psychological one. That is to say they believe that the sole business of Art is the formation of the right sensibility, which is of psychological interest, and that the moral effect is incidentally achieved in the course of the formation of the correct literary or artistic habit. This Wordsworth believes to be the only conscious aim that the artist may have in mind; taste,

¹ Biographia Literaria, II, pp. 12, 14.
to use the more common term, is the sole thing that the artist should consciously aim to implant in the minds of his public. "And where lies the real difficulty", Wordsworth raises a question in order to introduce his theory on the aim of poetry, "of creating that taste by which a truly original poet is to be relished?" His answer is that the formation of taste is possible only through the inspiring power that the poet exerts—at least he is supposed to exert—on the reader's mind. Without the "co-operating power" in the mind of the reader no implantation of taste is possible. And this thing done successfully, that artist is worthy of the name of genius, he affirms. Genius, in other words, is the one who, by means of his capability of inspiring the human mind introduces into it the richer and better organized sensibility or taste than what existed before. To cite his own language, he asserts:

Of genius, in the fine arts, the only infallible sign is the widening the sphere of human sensibility for the delight, honour, and benefit of human nature. Genius is the introduction of new element into the intellectual universe: or if that be not allowed, it is the application of powers to objects on which they had not before been exercised, or the employment of them in such a manner as to produce effects hitherto unknown. And this is simply another way of saying Richards' doctrine that the evaluation of arts should be done according to the degree of its efficacy on the nervous organization.

The efficacy thus internally achieved is, according to them, perfectly in accord with the moral effect. Wordsworth's utterance that the poet should widen "the sphere of human sensibility for the delight, honour, and benefit of human nature" is in itself the acknowledgement of the moral product in poetic experience. Richards carries out the point in the more pretentiously scientific manner, and says: "It is absurd to differentiate the artistic good from the moral good; for there can be no two 'goods'." Anything that is effective on the organization of impulses ought to be,

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1 Preface to Lyrical Ballads.
Richards insists, sensed as good.

This notion that the ulterior moral effect should be the necessary by-product of a good work of art is a subtle point of the problem, and finds its most pronounced counterpart in the utterances of Bruntière in France. The impression that a book leaves is not the only thing, Bruntière asserts, but there must be a certain idea at the back of it, of moral and philosophical import. And this makes possible the classification or ranking of arts according to the degree of the importance of the idea thus presented, which, however, must be attained by the artist unconsciously. The work that should last, in other words, must be a work of art first of all, but moral must be there. Technique should be there but should not be the only thing; life and its moral lesson must be there but not solely there. This rather intricate insistence of Bruntière is perfectly accountable in terms of Wordsworth's and Richards' theories which were just described above.

5. Problem of Universality as a Criterion of Art. Interestingly enough, to this popular question both Richards and Wordsworth give a cold shoulder. Richards' condemnation of the "stock response" as being detrimental to the genuine appreciation of Art corresponds to Wordsworth's Romantic insistence on direct experience unmodified by the Classical influence. However, Wordsworth with this attitude sometimes seems to go contradictory to the public by reason of his repeated emphasis on the common and elementary feelings, which literally interpreted, might mislead the reader to the conclusion that the best poet in the Wordsworthian sense is a peasant. But it is clear that this was never meant by him, for it was the emphasis on the normal and sane in reaction to the "sickly" literature which was commanding a tremendous vogue in the literary world of his day. Essentially Wordsworth was no believer in intellectual democracy but a stylist, though of quite another fashion from what the name stylist commonly designates. What he calls "the selection of language" is in fact indicative of a high stage of stylistic refinement. It is interesting to see how his intellectual aristocracy prevents him from appreciating the
work of Shakespeare because the latter made many obvious concessions to public taste, which to Wordsworth was a matter of disgust.

Richards, for that matter, equally shows his total lack of faith in the popularity of literature and the universality of appeal. Like Wordsworth, in commenting on the Shakespearean popularity he says that the greatness of Shakespeare should by no means be affected by the popularity of his work, different people go to theatre for entirely different reasons, and the very fact that so many people go and see his works does not mean the essential dramatic value of the playwright; and that after all the greatest masterpiece of Shakespeare, King Lear, is no work of wide popularity. And he summarizes his view on this point in the following language:

Against these stock responses the artist’s internal and external conflicts are fought, and with them the popular\(^1\) writer’s triumphs are made. Any combination of these general Ideas, hit at the right level or halting point of development, is, if suitably advertised, certain of success. Best-sellers in all the arts, exemplifying as they do the most general levels of attitude development, are worthy of very close study. No theory of criticism is satisfactory which is not able to explain their wide appeal and to give clear reasons why those who disdain them are not necessarily snobs.\(^2\)

And Richards’ condemnation of the public for unjustly modifying otherwise genuine human impulses, thereby producing the stockresponses, is comparable with Wordsworth’s distrustful view of city life for its affectation and spoiling of the genuine rural sentiment.

This distrust in the public does not in the least conflict with their theory of the normality of the mind as the fundamental requirement of the artist; Art must be understood by the majority, but only by that majority whose minds are properly trained.

6. Problem of Permanency as a Criterion of Literature. On this problem the two critics’ minds do not seem to be in perfect accord.

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\(^1\) Evidently Richards implies great sarcasm in this single word against the public.
\(^2\) Principles of Literary Criticism, p. 203.
Wordsworth seems to have held the general view as regards the permanency of literature that what is really good must be permanent, and seeks to "interest mankind permanently" by his poetry.

To this common sense notion Richards raises an objection: "Actual obsolescence is not", he asserts, "in general a sign of low value, but merely of the use of special circumstances for communication." Whether or not this view set forth by Richards with such a show of innovation is valid in practice, is subject to further examination; but at least of one thing we are certain—that literary masterpieces might not be permanent for some reason or other, but the permanent literature is always great for it touches human interests.

7. Problem of Diction; Simplicity against Complexity. In the theory of diction Wordsworth and Richards seem to go opposite; the one insisting on simplicity and purity, the other on refinement and subtlety of diction. But it is curious to note that in spite of this discordance the two substantially meet together in that both have a profound faith in rhetoric. In the case of Wordsworth he was merely setting up a new literary fashion basing his diction on everyday conversation, which nevertheless requires the principle of severe selection.

However, it should be marked that there does exist a certain point of irreconcilable difference of opinion in the detail of style. Wordsworth had no patience for the "capriciousness" and "fickleness" of diction, whereas Richards makes generous allowance for the eccentricity of style; and it is a logical consequence of the latter's communication theory that the primary object of Art is the enrichment of experiences, and that the more the varieties of experience so far as they are based on the normal state of mind so much the better. After all, Richards contends, it is the experience that counts and the twentieth century life requires, by reason of its complexity, certain peculiarities of expression; and the accusation of capriciousness etc. which are largely based on the "stock re-

2 Ibid, p. 222.
sponse” needs not be taken too seriously.

In the above discussion Richards seems to go a little deeper than Wordsworth in the practical consideration of diction. Whatever the theoretical difference between the two authors with respect to dictional usage may be, it should not be overlooked that both are believers in the essential normality of mind as the standard of literary criticism. In fact, the Wordsworthian insistence on simplicity and “truth of description” is closer to this normality theory than it might be generally suspected. By Simplicity Wordsworth meant specifically Regularity, which is well illustrated in his indictment of the ornate style of his day:

If Men of mature age, through want of practice, be thus easily beguiled into admiration of absurdities, extravagances, and misplaced ornaments, thinking it proper that their understanding should enjoy a holiday, while they are unbending their minds with verse, it might be expected that such Readers will resemble their former selves also in strength of prejudice and inaptitude to be moved by the unostentatious beauties of pure style. In the higher poetry an enlightened critic chiefly looks for a reflection of the wisdom of the heart and the grandeur of the imagination. Wherever these appear, simplicity accompanies them; Magnificence herself, when legitimate, depending upon a simplicity of her own to regulate her ornaments. . . .

8. “Organized Sensibility” as the fundamental aptitude of the artist. This problem has already been considered in connection with Problems 3 and 4, and it would be sufficient to conclude here that the fundamental conception of literary value of Wordsworth is essentially the same as that of Richards in deeming the cardinal virtue of art as its unifying effect on the human mind and its sensibility.

9. Subject-matter of Literature. Wordsworth takes an absolutely free-thinker’s attitude on this matter, with which Richards would agree in every word. The most characteristic utterance of Wordsworth on this subject is found in the following lines:

The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the Poet’s art as any upon which
it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of these respective sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings.

10. *Relationship of life, nature and poetry.* It is interesting to observe how different they are in tone with respect to the conception of life. Richards characterizes the Wordsworthian doctrine as being mystic and pantheistic, which is interesting in revealing how little the twentieth century Behaviorist could understand the Wordsworthian psychology; Richards sees no logical connection between man's closeness to nature and the enhancement of the nobility of his character. Richards finds, in other words, no intellectual sympathy with the Wordsworthian Naturalism.

However, as far as the principles of literary criticism are concerned, he shows much affinity with Wordsworth's genius, thereby endorsing the soundness of the Wordsworthian doctrine in the light of the twentieth century Science. And to make the matter more interesting, the common critical utterances made by Richards and Wordsworth are confirmed by the famed French critic, Bruntière, whose theory largely represents the traditionally saner side of Continental literary doctrines. They are all believers of morals, humanity, sanity and discipline in literature, the validity of which, even if it were not for the scientific justification of Richards, is unquestionable historically and humanly.