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White Knight and Leech Gatherer: the Poet as Boor

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Abstract

Claims that Carroll's White Knight's Song misreads the Wordsworth poem that it parodies. The persona of the poet as boor in the latter is not identical with the poet.

Additional Keywords

Carroll, Lewis. Through the Looking Glass. "The White Knight's song"—Sources; Wordsworth, William—Relation to Lewis Carroll; Wordsworth, William. "Resolution and Independence" (poem)—Influence on Lewis Carroll; Elizabeth Woods

White Knight and Leech Gatherer: the Poet as Boor

Ruth Berman

I cannot escape from the thought that [Wordsworth] is always solemnly thinking of himself (but I do reverence him). But this is curious: Byron was a greater egotist, and yet I do not feel the same with him. He reminds me of a beast of the desert, savage and beautiful: and the former is what one would imagine a superior donkey reclaimed from the heathen to be -- a very superior donkey, I mean, with great power of speech and great natural complacency, and whose stubbornness you must admire as part of his mission. The worst is that no one will imagine anything sublime in a superior donkey, so my simile is unfair and false. Is it not strange? I love Wordsworth best, and yet Byron has the greater power over me. How is that?

-- Lady Blandish to Sir Austin Feverel
The Ordeal of Richard Feverel
 George Meredith

Sir Austin's answer to Lady Blandish's question was that women were not high-minded enough to appreciate true beauty; Meredith's own opinion seems to be closer to Lady Blandish's. For most Victorian readers, her question was a difficult one to answer: how could Wordsworth be such a genius and--occasionally--such an ass?

In part, it is still a difficult question. Wordsworth was often insensitive to humor, and his pathos sometimes verged on bathos. In part, however, the question is a mis-reading of the poems: the sublime egotist is not always identical with his author Wordsworth.

In Lewis Carroll's White Knight Song, the mis-reading depends on supposing that Wordsworth was unaware that in some of his poems he presented himself under the persona of the poet as boor. The speaker is boorish in "Resolution and Independence" (parodied by the Knight's song), although his insistent questions and inattentiveness result from temporary despair and not from habitual rudeness; the speakers of "Anecdote for Fathers" and "We Are Seven" (similar to the Knight's song in meter and in diction) are rude without apparent excuse; the speaker in "The Thorn" (echoed once in the Knight's song) is not discourteous, but is a garrulous gossip. As such, he is a dramatic character, distinct from Wordsworth. The other three speakers are not so clearly not-Wordsworth. In "Resolution and Independence" no direct evidence is given to separate "I" and Wordsworth. In "Anecdote for Fathers" and the earlier version of "We Are Seven" Wordsworth's use of the real names of Edward and Jim encourages the identification of speaker and poet. The deletion of Jim may have been intended to discourage identification of the "I" of "We Are Seven" with Wordsworth, but Edward remained in the "Anecdote."

The correspondences between "Resolution and Independence" and the Knight's song are well known. Carroll wrote to his uncle, "[the song's] plot is borrowed from Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence,' a poem that has always amused me a good deal . . . by the absurd way in which the poet goes on questioning the poor old leech-gatherer, making him tell his history over and over again, and never attending to what he says. Wordsworth ends with a moral--an example I have not followed."¹ Carroll exaggerated slightly: Wordsworth's speaker asked the leech-gatherer what he does only twice (the White Knight asks three times), and he attended to

part of the first answer, until his anxieties distracted him. It was mischievous of Carroll to assume that the speaker was repeating answers he had not heard, but the speaker's repetition of his question (as if he had not after all heard the answer he had reported) makes the mis-reading plausible as well as funny.

Kathleen Blake, in her analysis of Carroll's use of "Resolution and Independence," shows that Carroll had a moral after all, although it is not stated explicitly: both narrators are haunted by the memory of their old men, but the poet remembers that the leech-gatherer survived by work; the singer is too impractical himself and too taken up with plans to notice economic needs, and the song "may be taken as a sabotage of the ethic of perseverance in duty It throws into question a valuation which would place work higher than wool-gathering and hobby horsing, that is, play."²

However, this inversion suggests its own re-inversion, by completing an emotional turn-about. The serious poet, plunged into gloom near the start of the poem, looks forward to being cheered in adversity by the memory of the leech-gatherer. The comic poet, looking back, weeps--apparently in sorrow for the transitory nature of living beings: "I weep, for it reminds me so/ Of that old man I used to know."³ Beneath the comic surface of the poem, the White Knight at the end of the song has reached the condition of melancholy which the speaker in "Resolution and Independence" fell into at the beginning. In accordance with this difference in emotion, the images of stability associated with the leech-gatherer are perverted to images of change. For instance, the leech-gatherer stands like a stone, and the aged man sits rocking on a gate: Wordsworth's black eyes suggest celestial steadiness, "sable orbs,"⁴ and Carroll's are dying fire, "eyes, like cinders, all aglow" (line 76).

The Knight's song also echoes "The Thorn" and "Anecdote for Fathers" in two phrases, the "Anecdote" and "We Are Seven" in the use of ballad-like rhythms, and all three in insistence on arithmetical precision of detail, exaggerated for comic effect.

Carroll's "I'll tell thee everything I can" (line 1), as Martin Gardner's annotation points out (p. 307), echoes "I'll tell you every thing, I know" and "I'll give you the best help I can"⁵ from the early version of "The Thorn." Wordsworth later removed these lines in response to Coleridge's complaint that art could not reproduce garrulity without being garrulous.⁶ Carroll's placement of the line at the beginning of the poem exaggerates the naivete of the speaker who assumes that the listener necessarily wants to be told everything. (In "The Thorn" the lines occur after the mystery of the thorn's significance to the miserable woman, and by then a listener probably does want to be told all, but might resent the delay in the telling.)

Carroll's "[I] said 'Come, tell me how you live!'/ And pinched him in the arm"⁷ (from an early version of the Knight's song) echoes "Anecdote for Fathers": "'Now tell me, had you rather be,/' I said, and took him by the arm."⁸ This echo exaggerates the speaker's over-bearing demand for answers. In revising the poem, Carroll increased the rudeness, and decreased the specific resemblance to the "Anecdote." Instead of pinching the arm, the speaker "thumped him on the head" (line 24) leaving only the insistent "tell me" as a likeness.

Rhythmically, "Resolution and Independence" moves at a stately pace, in the long pentameters and intricate rhyme-pattern of rhyme royal, further slowed by Wordsworth's use of a hexameter for the last line of the stanza. Comedy is usually funnier is quicker, lighter rhythms, and so Carroll did not use the poem's verse-form in parodying it. In "We are Seven" and "Anecdote for Fathers" Wordsworth used a ballad meter of three tetrameters and a trimeter. In the Knight's song Carroll used alternate tetrameters and trimeters, arranged in stanza-paragraphs of eight lines (with the next-to-last line of the last stanza extended into a kind of cadenza of 12 lines on a single rhyme). The exact symmetry of alternating lines increases the suggestion of comic sing-song, while the longer stanza preserves a faint resemblance to the rhythmic structure of "Resolution and Independence."

As N. Stephen Bauer points out in his "Early Burlesques and Parodies of Wordsworth," most parodies mocked Wordsworth's use of factual detail.⁹ This (apparently) simple-minded piling up of facts could itself be the main point of a parody, as in Edward Lear's version of the leech-gatherer, Uncle Arly, who lived and died on a heap of barley " (But his shoes were far too tight)."¹⁰ Carroll's main target was rudeness, but he also parodied Wordsworthian factuality.

Like Lear and other nonsense poets, Carroll especially enjoyed numbers in his use of facts. Elizabeth Sewall, in The Field of Nonsense, argues that nonsense poets typically are concerned with numbers and arithmetical precision--not simply as a comic device, but as the one stable man-made convention among the mass of shifting conventions making up the social world reflected in their verse.¹¹ In theory, the natural world in its reliability could be opposed to the conventional world, and Carroll occasionally used "nature" in that way. For example, in the wood with no names, Alice can walk "with her arms clasped lovingly round the soft neck of the fawn" (p. 227); but when they come out of the wood and remember their names the fawn runs away from her, remembering also that fawns are afraid of people.

Carroll's conscious belief in such passages seems to be a Wordsworthian faith in the power of nature: Alice in the wood is like Emily wandering in the wood with the White Doe of Rylstone, or Lucy Gray as blithe as the mountain roe, or Lucy, "sportive as the fawn" and with "the silence and the calm/ Of mute insensate things."¹² But Carroll lacked both Wordsworth's sense of the danger of dying into nature (as Lucy Gray is lost in a snow-storm or Lucy dies), and Wordsworth's faith in the existence of some super-natural state of harmony which may be discovered through nature (as Emily wins back the memory of human love in the company of the white doe). The passages in which Carroll shows Alice as a happy child of nature are sentimental and unconvincing. Carroll's power is rather in the portrayal of a world of nonsense which is terrifying like the real world (although the terror is distanced and made bearable by comedy), not in offering solutions to terror.

As the end of the White Knight's song is like the melancholy mood of the narrator of "Resolution and Independence," so Carroll's despairing vision of society is like his. Unlike Wordsworth, Carroll did not find answers in nature. His love of nature was unreflective, like the emotion Wordsworth attributed to his earlier self in such poems as "Tintern Abbey" and the Immortality Ode, not leading to any real confidence in natural forces for good. There is no way for Alice to survive in Wonderland and Looking-glass land. She becomes more adept in the course of her adventures. By the end of Through the Looking-Glass she can even parry the creatures' questions somewhat, instead of being

argued into silence as she usually is in Wonderland. But in both books the only real solution is to proclaim the unreality of the nonsense world and its conventions: "You're nothing but a pack of cards!" (p. 161); "I can't stand this any longer!" (p. 336). In nonsense-worlds denial wakes the dreamer. In the corresponding reality there is no wakening (unless in death), and the only possibility is to learn to manipulate the conventions as well as possible.

Carroll, himself a mathematician, was the nonsense writer most aware of the emotional appeal of the logical certainties of number among man's conventions, but the others felt it, too. Edward Lear's Uncle Arly wanders the hills for three-and-forty winters, and the Owl and the Pussycat have "plenty of money/ Wrapped up in a five-pound note"¹³; the plot of Gilbert's Iolanthe depends on Strephon's being seen

With a maid of seventeen;
A-taking of his dolce far niente;
And wonders he'd achieve,
For he asks us to believe
She's his mother -- and he's nearly five-and-twenty.¹⁴

It may be that, in "We Are Seven," "Anecdote for Fathers," and the early version of "The Thorn," such lines as "If two are in the church-yard laid,/ Then ye are only five"; "And three times to the child I said,/ 'Why, Edward, tell me why?'" (five times in the earlier version); and "I've measured it from side to side:/ 'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide"¹⁵ would not now strike us as being quite so ludicrous if the nonsense poets had not intervened. Wordsworth certainly meant to play off the literal-mindedness of these speakers against the wiser poetic imagination which sees the unimportance of such precision; he probably did not mean to arouse laughter. Early critics did not single out these numerical lines as comic. Byron complained in Don Juan of Wordsworth's politics, obscure language, and low subjects: "'Pedlars,' and 'Boats,' and 'Waggon!' . . . from bathos' vast abyss";¹⁶ but he did not hit on literal-mindedness and arithmetic as flaws. Coleridge singled out the 2'x3' passage, complaining that it was dull, garrulous, and so different in tone from the preceding passage as to give the reader a "sudden and unpleasant sensation of sinking,"¹⁷ but he apparently did not find the couplet ludicrous in and of itself as modern readers often do. Anthony E.M. Conran has argued that Wordsworth was in fact aware of the humor in these poems: "The main comedy in Wordsworth comes from a sense of incompatibility of persons. For instance, in We are Seven, the poet is completely unable to break the child's complacency. She treats him with perfect courtesy--as does the leech gatherer in this poem--but she does not really know what he is talking about. The comedy lies in the efforts of one person to adjust the other to his own vision. It is the comedy of a solipsist faced with something outside himself."¹⁸ Perhaps in consequence, he thinks Carroll's parody trivial. This argument is plausible, but if it is correct, it seems to me that Wordsworth was not completely successful in integrating the comic elements into these poems.

If Wordsworth was unaware of the comedy in these speakers, however, he was obviously aware of their rudeness. The readers' sympathy is with the children and against the speakers of the "Anecdote" and "We Are Seven," because Wordsworth's is, too, just as sympathy lies with the sensitive "I" of "Expostulation and Reply" and against the rude questioner of that poem. (The speakers of "The Thorn" and "Resolution and Independence" remain sympathetic--the gossip is garrulous but not rude, and the young poet's insistence comes from his distress--although they, too, are set in contrast

against the inarticulate wisdom of nature.)

To the extent that Lewis Carroll thought that Wordsworth was unaware of his personas' rudeness, he was mis-reading the poems. It was, however, a mis-reading partly encouraged by the persona usually found in Romantic poems. The typical Romantic persona is the sensitive observer of "Expostulation and Reply," an artist, and therefore better, or at least less corrupt than the Philistines who make up the rest of society (the world which is too much with us, the fen in need of Milton's redeeming powers, etc.). When there was some reason within the poem to identify the poet and persona the presence of a speaker could be double puzzling. In "Anecdote for Fathers" the presence of Edward marks the persona as Wordsworth, but not a believable Wordsworth. Wordsworth might, no doubt, have chosen to badger a child with questions (perhaps in attempting to understand the nature of a child's mind, for instance); but it is hard to believe that he would do so without a motive beyond the "very idleness" (p.67) in which he begins his questioning and in which (or so the reader is left to suppose, no other reasons being given) he continues it.

In his response to that crass persona, however, Lewis Carroll was not parodying, but re-stating in comic terms the same theme of the conflict between the over-bearing, conventional man of society and the more sensitive child, artist, or vagabond. Wonderland and Looking-glass land are peopled by just such noisy, demanding people as those who ask, "Why, Edward, tell me why": "What are you doing out here?" (White Rabbit, p. 56), "Who Are You?" (Caterpillar, p. 67), "Why did you come out here at all?" (Red Queen, p. 207), "What -- is -- this?" (Unicorn, p. 287). The "I" of "Resolution and Independence" is nowhere near that level of rudeness. It is a deliberate--and thus comic--distortion of Wordsworth's intent to turn that "I" into someone like the "I" of the "Anecdote" or like the Caterpillar.

The discrepancy between the gentle White Knight and his persona in the song is like the discrepancy between Wordsworth and the "I" of the "Anecdote" or "We Are Seven," exaggerated and mis-applied to the "I" or "Resolution and Independence" for comic effect.

It is an interesting irony--and perhaps a sly compliment to Wordsworth--that Carroll made the White Knight, who presents himself as an inattentive boor in his song, the only courteous and loveable adult to be found in either of the Alice books.

Notes

1. Lewis Carroll, The Letters of Lewis Carroll. ed. Morton N. Cohen, with the assistance of Roger Lancelyn Green, Vol. I (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 177

2. Kathleen Blake, "Carroll Versus Wordsworth in the White Knight's Song," Play, Games, and Sport. The Literary Works of Lewis Carroll (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 96.

3. Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass. in The Annotated Alice. ed. Martin Gardner (New York: Clarkson & Potter, 1960), p. 313. All following references to the Alice books are to this edition. Presumably the speaker also weeps out of physical pain and frustration: the memory comes when he puts his fingers into glue or his feet in the wrong shoes. But he does not seem to be aware that the pain, rather than the memory, may be responsible for his tears.

4. William Wordsworth, "Resolution and Inde-

pendence," Wordsworth Poetical Works. ed. Thomas Hutchinson and Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 156. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Wordsworth's works are to this edition.

5. Wordsworth, "The Thorn" (1978 version), in Lyrical Ballads by Wordsworth and Coleridge. ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London: Methuen & Co., 1963), p. 73.

6. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria. ed. J. Shawcross, Vol. II (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 36.

7. Carroll, "Upon the Lonely Moor," quoted in Gardner's annotations to the Knight's song, p. 307.

8. Wordsworth, "Anecdote for Fathers," p. 68.

9. N. Stephen Bauer, "Early Burlesques and Parodies of Wordsworth," Journal of English and German Philology. LXXIV (1975), 554.

10. Edward Lear, "Incidents in the Life of My Uncle Arly," Edward Lear's Nonsense Omnibus (London: Frederick Warne & Co., 1943), pp. 344-347.

11. Elizabeth Sewall, "What's One and One and One and One and One and One and One?" The Field of Nonsense (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952), pp. 44-54.

12. Wordsworth, "The White Doe of Rylstone," p. 327; "Lucy Gray," p. 65; "Three years she grew in sun and shower," p. 148.

13. Lear, "The Owl and the Pussycat," p. 251.

14. W.S. Gilbert, Iolanthe. in The Complete Plays of Gilbert and Sullivan (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), p. 257.

15. Wordsworth, "We Are Seven," p. 66; "Anecdote for Fathers," p. 68; "Anecdote for Fathers," 1798 version, Lyrical Ballads. p. 65; "The Thorn," 1798 version, Lyrical Ballads. p. 71.

16. Lord Byron, Don Juan (New York: Modern Library, 1949), p. 147 (Canto III, c).

17. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria. p. 38.

18. Anthony E.M. Conran, "The Dialectic of Experience: a Study of Wordsworth's Resolution and Independence." PMLA, LXXV(1960), 74.

