

The Romantic Self in Virginia Woolf

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Romantic revolution in literature made a voyage of self-discovery possible by employing reveries, landscapes or memories as a means of its expression, while Modernist renovation was achieved by the revolution in points of view, styles or forms. Virginia Woolf is known as a Modernist writer who tried to grasp a complex detail in the depth of a modern man's mind and employed the 'stream of consciousness' technique. It seems, however, that she was a visionary who had her Romantic heritage, and her Romantic self seems to be closely related with her autobiographical writings.

There are some great literary autobiographies of the early twentieth century. Some of them took fictional form—Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. Exceptions are Yeats' *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* and Woolf's *Moments of Being*. Woolf, however, also preserved her fictional myth of childhood in her novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927), where she is both Cam and Lily, child and adult. In *Moments of Being* (1976), past and present selves regard each other across the years. This thesis examines Woolf's Romantic heritage and modern Romantic elements in these two works comparing them with Wordsworth's autobiographical poem, *The Prelude* (1805, 1850) and De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821).

The development in natural science in the nineteenth century gave birth to Realism and Naturalism in literature. The writers in the early twentieth century were dissatisfied with their ideas and seeking for a new literary theory. Freudian psychoanalysis taught us that there was so much unknown to us. Aldous Huxley, in 'Tragedy and the Whole Truth', asserted that notable modern writers were engaged in describing 'the whole truth'. Woolf thought that a modern writer should pursue essence rather than describe circumstances and should capture internal reality and distill that which Mr. Bennett could never seem to get at in Mrs. Brown. Woolf, who criticized Naturalists such as Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy, seems to have something in common to Romantics, who are opposed to Naturalists. Typical ideas and imageries are found in the consummation of oneself which leads to the state of being selfless and the subjective and creative recognition of a universe in that state.

William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is a brave attempt to joint poetry and

autobiography. It was the first attempt in English literature. *The Prelude* traces the 'growth of a poet's mind', and its central theme is the interaction of nature and his mind. Wordsworth declares in 'Prospectus' that he dares to descend to the dark abyss of his mind and to search the 'shadowy ground' there, that is, the unconscious world.⁽¹⁾ He laid stress on nature which fostered him and his childhood. In Virginia's memoirs, her childhood is made much of, but her emphasis is in the reciprocal relation with her surroundings and her family and friends.

Thomas De Quincey, in *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, mentions the four facts concerning his nightmares caused by opium-eating. They appear to show Romantic characteristics very clearly.

The first is as follows:

... As the creative state of the eye increased, a sympathy seemed to arise between the waking and the dreaming states of the brain in one point... As King Midas turned all things to gold, so whatsoever things capable of being visually represented I did but think of in the darkness, immediately shaped themselves into phantoms of the eye.⁽²⁾

As the poetry of Baudelaire is compared to a kind of 'alchemy', this faculty of De Quincey's, which he calls 'the power of dreams', has the power of transformation. It makes an invisible thing visible to his eyes. It may safely be said that De Quincey's 'the power of dreams' fulfills the similar function to that of 'imagination'.

The following is an example of Woolf's 'moments of being':

... There was the moment of the puddle in the path; when for no reason I could discover, everything suddenly became unreal; I was suspended; I could not step across the puddle; I tried to touch something... the whole world became unreal.⁽³⁾

According to her, every day includes much more 'non-being' than 'being'. If it is briefly explained, 'non-being' is ordinariness which makes no 'dint' upon her, and it is expressed as 'the cotton wool of daily life'. And 'being' means that she has keenly felt something.

At visionary moments she is almost cut off from the real outer world like Wordsworth at the instant when his imagination rises up. She says it was such a strong sensation that she never forgets it. In Virginia Woolf, the keen sense of feeling means her confidence that she is living. As 'spots of time' are renovating to Wordsworth, so 'moments of being' are of great value to Woolf.

The second feature of De Quincey's nightmares is as follows:

... I seemed every night to *descend*, not metaphorically but literally *to descend, into chasms and sunless abysses*, depths below depths, which it seemed hopeless that I could ever re-ascend. Nor did I, by waking, feel that I had re-ascended. This I do not dwell upon; because the state of gloom which attended these gorgeous spectacles, amounting at last to utter *darkness*,

as of some suicidal despondency, cannot be approached by words.⁽⁴⁾ (my italics)

Wordsworth's *The Prelude* aims at the 'hard task to analyze a soul', for which he has to descend to the dark mind's abyss. In the 'Prospectus', he writes that to look into it is a more terrible adventure than any other terror of Hades, and that there is a possibility that he cannot re-ascend.

De Quincey, in describing the dream of endless architecture, cites a passage from Wordsworth which also has an image of 'sinking far into a wondrous depth'. According to Jung, sinking into a depth leads to the descending to the unconscious domain of man. Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* by Woolf, in order to be herself, sinks down beneath the level of ordinary life. Then, there, it is 'limitless', 'all dark, all spreading, unfathomably deep', and she becomes 'a wedge-shaped core of darkness'. In this way she thinks she has achieved 'eternity'.⁽⁵⁾

The third point of De Quincey's note is that he had the sense of time and space being infinite. It coincides with V. Woolf's description of the deep unconscious world. In this state, he may lose the stability of time and space in which he exists, resulting in the loss of his identity and his being fused into the infinity of time and space. Thus, paradoxically, being lost in one's subjectivity is consummated when one's self becomes selfless. This process may be horrible, as it was in De Quincey's case, but there is a possibility that it can sublimate the individual to the universal. The infinite, unconscious, selfless world can lead to 'the collective unconscious'. V. Woolf also writes that when Mrs. Ramsay had become 'a wedge-shaped core of darkness', she lost her 'personality' and became 'impersonal'. Then Mrs. Ramsay felt that 'things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity.'⁽⁶⁾

The fourth point of De Quincey is the similar sensation to that of Mrs. Ramsay, who felt 'things came together' mentioned above. De Quincey says that if the minutest incidents of childhood or forgotten scenes of later years that he could not recollect were placed before him in dreams like intuitions, he recognized them instantaneously. And he can believe from his opium experiences the vision which his mother saw on the verge of drowning. The vision she saw in the water is as follows:

... , she saw in a moment her *whole* life, in its minutest incidents, arrayed before her simultaneously as in a mirror; and she had a faculty developed as suddenly for comprehending the *whole* and every part.⁽⁷⁾ (my italics)

This vision is very similar to that of Mrs. Ramsay's at the dinner party, when she saw the 'whole' 'like a light stealing under water':

... , but at the moment her eyes were so clear that they seemed to go round the table unveiling each of these people, and their thoughts and their feelings, without effort like a light stealing under water so that its ripples and the reeds in it and the minnows balancing themselves, and the sudden silent trout are all lit up hanging, trembling. So she saw them; she heard

them; but whatever they said had also this quality, as if what they said was like the movement of a trout when, at the same time, one can see the ripple and the gravel, something to the right, something to the left; and *the whole is held together;...*⁽⁸⁾ (my italics)

The scene quoted above is one of her 'moments of being'. In *To the Lighthouse*, there are several scenes of 'moments of being', in which the ordinary world appears to some character to become an integrated universe on a heightened level. In those scenes the terms such as 'the whole' or 'wholeness' or the expression 'all the parts became one' are often used. The following is the description of the moment when the artist Lily Briscoe had her vision:

...Directly one looked up and saw them, what she called 'being in love' flooded them. They became part of that unreal but penetrating and exciting *universe* which is the world seen through *the eyes of love*. The sky stuck to them; the birds sang through them. And, what was even more exciting, she felt, too, ...how life, from being made up of little separate incidents which one lives one by one, became curled and *whole* like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach.⁽⁹⁾ (my italics)

The notion that separate constituents make up a unity is expressed in *The Prelude* here and there:

The mind of man is framed even like the breath
And harmony of music. There is a dark
Invisible workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements, and makes them move
In one society.⁽¹⁰⁾

Blessed the infant babe—
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Such feelings pass into his torpid life
Like an awakening breeze, and hence his mind,
Even in the first trial of its powers,
Is prompt and watchful, eager to combine
In one appearance all the elements
And parts of the same object, else detached
And loth to coalesce.⁽¹¹⁾

The following quotation from *The Prelude* shows the idea that 'power of love' is necessary to conceive a permanent structure in transitory things, which coincides with Lily's idea in the quotation⁽⁹⁾. The Romantic dichotomy between the transitory and the eternal is also common to Wordsworth and Woolf.

...The seasons came,
And every season to my notice brought

A store of *transitory qualities*
 Which but for this most watchful *power of love*
 Had been neglected, left a register
 Of *permanent relations* else unknown.⁽¹²⁾ (my italics)

Woolf seems to have been endowed with what Wordsworth calls a capacity of 'the blessed infant babe', which is a power 'to combine / in one appearance all the elements / and parts of the same object, else detached / and loth to coalesce.' She explains what makes her a writer as follows:

... And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together.⁽¹³⁾

A 'shock' or a 'blow' could hurt Virginia as a child. Yet she received the shock as 'a revelation of some order' and 'by putting it into words', she was able to 'put the severed parts together'. It is exactly a Wordsworthian way of writing through his imagination. Her statement that she could explain her shock only in a later time is also similar to the words of Wordsworth in the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* that he makes into poems the sensation 'recollected in tranquility'. Thus, the perceiver becomes the artist.

As an autobiographer, however, Woolf is less assertive and less self-centered in the passages of self-exposure than the Romantics. Her interest seems to lie in the relation of herself and the 'whole', how to achieve or perceive unity of her world. She was dissatisfied with the biographies before her and tried to bring 'Lives' fully into the twentieth century by making it describe that broad, yet delicate fabric of selfhood:

... This influence, by which I mean the consciousness of other groups impinging upon ourselves; public opinion; what other people say and think; all those magnets which attract us this way to be like that, or repel us the other and make us different from that; has never been analyzed in any of those Lives which I so much enjoy reading, or very superficially.

Yet it is by such invisible presences that the 'subject of these memoirs' is tugged this way and that every day of his life; it is they that keep him in position...; well, if we cannot analyze these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of the memoir; and again how futile life-

writing becomes. I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream.⁽¹⁴⁾

Her aim both as novelist and as autobiographer was to describe the stream surrounding the fish, the puzzle which lends meaning to the individual piece. And her aim of writing is closely related with her 'moments of being'. Let me quote another scene of her 'being' as it can be also considered a metaphor very similar to 'a fish in a stream' metaphor:

...I was looking at the flower bed by the front door; "That is the whole", I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower.⁽¹⁵⁾

When she analyzes her self since her childhood, she makes much of the stream surrounding the fish, the earth completing the flower. That is because she thinks not of her self alone but of the whole around her revealed in her 'moments of being'. And the imageries of her vision are organic like a flower or moving like waves, which are closer to Romantics than to Naturalists who were resting upon external facts or the objective. It is even Symbolic, as her flower imagery recalls Blake, who saw 'a world in a grain of sand, / and a heaven in a wild flower.' It leads us to the assumption that a Romantic vision or revelation has a symbolic aptitude.

The implied metaphor unifying *Moments of Being* is the perceiving eye. The young Virginia Woolf is the creative eye of the artist. She plays Lily Briscoe to her mother's Mrs. Ramsay. Like the rest of the artist figures in Woolf's novels, the Virginia of *Moments of Being* traces her lineage back to the Keatsian prototype, observer rather than actor, who apprehends the pattern, 'the whole', and thus creates the world anew.

To write a biography, a unifying principle of various facts or episodes is essential. As Elizabeth Bruss writes in *Autobiographical Acts*, the act of life-writing is necessarily accompanied with factual and individual elements, and not superficial observation but the universal process of intuition is essential to grasp the subliminal truth.⁽¹⁶⁾ The Romantics seek for the wholeness and the universal in their autobiographies to transcend a mere medley of individual facts. In the case of Virginia Woolf, the pursuit of 'the whole' seems to be not only a literary device but also an important factor closely linked with her own being or living.

Then, why did she attach a great importance to 'the whole'? As is well known, she was a member of so-called Bloomsbury Group, which made much of human relationship, especially friendship. This principle is considered to be derived from G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica*. It may be natural that Woolf made much of the stream surrounding the fish and the earth completing the flower. Secondly, it seems more important to notice that she had a tendency or a fear of her self being

cut off from the outer world, as was mentioned above in quotation (3) which describes the unreality of her surrounding world. In that scene she tried to touch something, which means she sought for a tie between herself and the outer world. The experience at a moment of being can be pleasant, but it is not always so: 'Again I had that hopeless sadness, that collapse I have described before; as if I were passive under some sledge-hammer blow; exposed to a whole avalanche of meaning that had heaped itself up and discharged itself upon me, unprotected, with nothing to ward it off...'⁽¹⁷⁾

Wordsworth was also conscious of the balance between his inner world and the outer world, for it is essentially related to his imagination. The Romantic poet cannot write verses unless 'the sweet breath of heaven' blows on him, who felt within 'a corresponding mild creative breeze'. But the breeze tends to become an unmanageable tempest, which means that his imagination makes up an autotelic world completely cut off from the real world sometimes in a morbid or destructive way. Wordsworth wishes to avoid this tendency and makes much of the balance between his soul and the real world. While Wordsworth is able to have a vision in the daily objects without drugs, Coleridge and De Quincey cannot do without them. The world which is created through Coleridge's imagination is, for the most part, unrelated to the actual scene. In most cases with Wordsworth, his imagination appears with vapour or darkness and once blinds the outer world, but the outer world is restored with some transformation.

As nature gave both 'joy and fear' to Wordsworth, the shock at moments of being was both pleasant and unpleasant to Woolf. If her perceiving mind can respond actively and creatively to the deluge by apprehending an order—or, as Woolf puts it, an explanation which 'blunts the sledge-hammer force of the blow'⁽¹⁸⁾, the shock is felt pleasant, and passive perception becomes active creation as was shown in quotation (13). Wordsworth and Woolf had similar moments of vision important to their art. Yet it may safely be said that the apprehension of unreality of the outer world is more strongly felt in Woolf than in Wordsworth. Woolf seems to seek for the tie between herself and the outer world more eagerly. After Walter Pater, who reduced all the objects to one's subjective impressions in perpetual flight, Woolf seems to try to build a fortress in the harmonious human relationship against the menace of the flux of time in the outer world. The following is a scene when the dinner party has achieved a unity in her novel, *To the Lighthouse*:

Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of *making a party together* in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against the *fluidity* out there.⁽¹⁹⁾ (my italics)

Wordsworth, by his imagination, and De Quincey, by 'the power of dreams', enlarge or transform an actual scene. For example, in *The Prelude*, after Wordsworth

had crossed the Alps, the actual scene was transformed, and the height of woods seemed 'immeasurable'⁽²⁰⁾. In *To the Lighthouse* a girl called Nancy is endowed with the power of imagination, and the following description reminds us of young Virginia at the moment of being:

...Brooding, she changed the pool into the sea, and made the minnows into sharks and whales, and cast vast clouds over *this tiny world* by holding her hand against the sun, and so brought darkness and desolation, *like God himself*, to millions of ignorant and innocent creatures, and then took her hand away suddenly and let the sun stream down..., she became... hypnotized, and the two senses of that vastness and this tininess (the pool had diminished again) flowering within it made her feel that she was bound hand and foot and unable to move by the intensity of feeling which reduced her own body, her own life, and the lives of all the people in the world, for ever, to nothingness.⁽²¹⁾ (my italics)

To make up a world like God himself employing one's subjective senses involves the danger of the reduction of all to nothingness. As a child, Woolf experienced the same kind of paralysis when she was walking on the path by the apple tree, which she connected with Mr. Valpy's suicide: 'I stood there looking at the grey-green creases of the bark—it was a moonlit night—in a trance of horror. I seemed to be dragged down, hopelessly, into some pit of absolute despair from which I could not escape. My body seemed paralyzed.'⁽²²⁾

In order to escape from the fear that the outer world becomes nothingness, Woolf's characters are always in search of a pattern in the flux that shall give meaning to the whole, and Woolf herself is as it were seeking a pattern of meaning through them. As for D.H. Lawrence, Colin Clarke analyzes Romantic elements in Lawrence in his book *River of Dissolution*. In part one Clarke examines images of dissolution and self-destruction in Romanticism, and in part two he explains 'reductive energy' in *The Rainbow*. He argues that the manner in which the imagery of dissolution is articulated throughout *Women in Love* reflects the downward rhythm in Romantic poetry.⁽²³⁾ In *To the Lighthouse*, when Mrs. Ramsay wants to be herself, she 'shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others.' Then she went beneath the surface of life and achieved the vision of the whole and of the eternity.⁽²⁴⁾ The downward movement is necessary because Woolf believes the true self lies deeper beneath the superficial consciousness.

In *Moments of Being*, Woolf confesses as follows: 'I only know that many of these exceptional moments brought with them a peculiar horror and a physical collapse.'⁽²⁵⁾ It is known that she was suffering a mental disease which is supposed to be manic-depressive psychosis. Mrs. Mieko Kamiya contributed to the analysis of her disease, but it is not completely cleared.⁽²⁶⁾ Her shock-receiving capacity is

what made her a writer though she was too sensitive to end her life in a common manner. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth mentioned his melancholic disposition in his youth, and the melancholy is described as that of pre-Romantics.⁽²⁷⁾ De Quincey's nightmare was accompanied by 'some suicidal despondency'⁽²⁸⁾. Melancholy is regarded as one of the features of Romantics, and Woolf shared this feature.

Scientific-positivism in the Victorian era produced Realism and Naturalism in novels. 'In or about December 1910 human nature changed.' Virginia Woolf made this pronouncement at Cambridge in 1924 in her lecture *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*. According to Walter Allen's *The English Novel*, there are several instances of a great change at this period caused by the introduction of Russian novels and Post-Impressionist paintings, Freud's psychoanalysis and so on; they emphasize the individual human being, the individual sensibility, the individual reaction, and there is a complete shift from the Naturalistic point of view of man.⁽²⁹⁾ As was mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, the twentieth-century writers made an attempt to grasp the whole truth. As they learned from Freudian theory that human consciousness was only the visible peak of an iceberg, they thought it impossible to describe a man's life even if they gave a full account of it scientifically. Lytton Strachey, who was a biographer and a close friend of Woolf's, criticized the detailed, thick volumes of biographies profusely produced in the previous century. His principle of life-writing was not to write everything but to 'row out over the great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity.'⁽³⁰⁾

Modern writers who had some Romantic heritage seem to capture the subjective truth resorting to Romantic revelation and illumination, as is shown in Joyce's 'epiphanies' or in the ending scenes of Lawrence's novels. For example, at the end of *The Rainbow* Ursula, the heroine, 'saw in the rainbow the earth's new architecture, . . . the world built up in a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heaven.'⁽³¹⁾ At the end of *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe suddenly completes the painting she has been working on for years. Almost by chance, her vision of Mrs. Ramsay and everything that has happened in the Ramsays' house is set down. Thus, art can impose order on the flux of lives lived in time. The comparison between her novels and her autobiographical writings shows us that her characters tend to think and feel and express their feelings exactly as Woolf herself does. Her writing and living was an attempt to grasp 'the pattern hid behind the cotton wool'⁽³²⁾ to which she could connect herself and to realize 'the whole'.

NOTES

- (1) Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (ed.), *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), vol. V, pp. 3-6.
- (2) Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (London: Macmillan, 1911), p. 126.
- (3) Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', *Moments of Being*, Jeanne Schulkind (ed.), (London: Chatto & Windus Ltd., 1976), p. 78.
- (4) De Quincey, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
- (5) Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Granada, 1980), pp. 60-61.
- (6) *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- (7) De Quincey, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
- (8) Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 99.
- (9) *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- (10) Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805) (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), p. 46.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- (12) *Ibid.*, pp. 80-82.
- (13) Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 72.
- (14) *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- (15) *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- (16) Elizabeth Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 94.
- (17) Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 78.
- (18) *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- (19) Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 91.
- (20) Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 218.
- (21) Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 72.
- (22) Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 71.
- (23) Colin Clarke, *River of Dissolution: D. H. Lawrence and English Romanticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 36-42.
- (24) Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, pp. 60-61.
- (25) Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 72.
- (26) Mieko Kamiya, *Studies of Virginia Woolf* (Tokyo: Misuzushobo, 1981) (『ヴァージニア・ウルフ研究』)
- (27) Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, pp. 194-6.
- (28) De Quincey, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
- (29) Walter Allen, *The English Novel* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1976), pp. 341-2.
- (30) Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1977), p. 9.
- (31) D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1st. 1915, 1978), p. 496.
- (32) Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 73.