

Swiss cows and an English poet: Empathic nostalgia in a sonnet of Wordsworth's

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This paper was inspired by our Texan friend Sherry Zivley, who has often spoken to me about her state's special relation to its cattle. When she turns to that subject, I, as a recently naturalized Swiss, feel a kind of personal compulsion to deny that any people can be more attached to its bovines than we are to ours. I explain to Sherry that no one, except perhaps the national soccer team, knows the words to the Swiss national anthem – that in fact Switzerland had no national anthem until the 1960's – but that every Swiss knows a centuries old cowherders' song called the "Ranz des Vaches."¹ The "Ranz des Vaches," which was used to call the cows in for milking, is quintessential nostalgia. It brings tears to the eyes of Swiss bankers, and in the eighteenth century there was a legend that it was forbidden to play or sing the "Ranz des Vaches" among Swiss soldiers serving abroad, because if they should hear it, they would be overcome with incurable homesickness – they would break down in tears, or they would desert, or else they would just waste away and die.

That story was publicized by Rousseau in his *Dictionnaire de musique* (1767/1995, p. 924), which was very widely read, with the result that during the Romantic era the legend about the "Ranz des Vaches" was known throughout Europe. Wordsworth refers to it in a footnote to *Descriptive Sketches* (1793/1984, note to line 63, p. 100), and it underlies the sonnet about the "Ranz des Vaches" that he published in his 1822 collection *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent*. Since that sonnet is not well known, I'll reprint it here:

ON HEARING THE "RANZ DES VACHES" ON THE TOP OF THE PASS OF ST. GOTHARD

I LISTEN – but no faculty of mine
Avails those modulations to detect,
Which, heard in foreign lands, the Swiss affect

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¹ The "Ranz des Vaches" is actually a semi-generic term for a number of different cow calls. Best known today is the arrangement by Joseph Bovet. A selection of audio clips can be found at <<http://www.swissinfo.org/eng/swissinfo.html?sid=7020216&cKey=1183635931000&ty=st&rubricId=25004&siteSect=25001>>. A video clip of the "Ranz" performed at a major Swiss festival in 1977 is available on YouTube: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DL1dXLLe5No&feature=related>>.

With tenderest passion; leaving him to pine
 (So fame reports) and die; his sweet-breathed kine
 Remembering, and green Alpine pastures deck'd
 With vernal flowers. Yet may we not reject
 The tale as fabulous. – Here while I recline,
 Mindful how others by this simple Strain
 Are moved, for me – upon this Mountain named
 Of God himself from dread pre-eminence
 Aspiring thoughts by memory reclaimed
 Yield to the Music's touching influence,
 And joys of distant home my heart enchain. (1822/2004, p. 374)²

This paper will examine how Wordsworth's poem creates its effect – or, perhaps more accurately, fails to create its effect. But first, so that my argument will be clear, I need to say a few obvious things about the poem. One has to do with the poem's statement. Wordsworth is in the Swiss Alps, expecting to be moved by a melody that is reputed to have an extraordinarily powerful effect upon the Swiss. But he is not moved – not until, by *wishing* to be moved and especially, by being intensely conscious of how *others* are moved by the music, he puts himself into a state where the music finally has its effect. He produces that state in himself by actively calling up his own memories of his own home.

This is no insignificant detail. Ten years ago, at our meeting in Saint Petersburg, Edmond Wright, who himself comes from the North of England, read a remarkable paper called “Is *The Prelude* a National Epic?” While discussing patriotism, which he distinguished from nationalism, Wright asked whether “Wordsworth is only writing for the British.” And he replied

One can utter and uphold this inconsistent series: it is not nature that Wordsworth is writing about, it is Cumbria; it isn't Cumbria, it is North Britain; it isn't North Britain, it is all temperate maritime landscapes, it isn't just those landscapes, it is all landscapes, and all countries, the planet; it isn't the planet, it's nature. Each is a metonym for the other, hence you do not have to be British to appreciate Wordsworth. Yet in order to ignite your own national feelings, you have to enter into his Britishness. Yevtushenko wrote in a poem about the massacre at Babi Yar that to the degree he imagined himself a Jew, to that degree he was a Russian. (1999, pp. 148-149)

Wordsworth in his sonnet about the “Ranz des Vaches” is evoking something similar, a fundamental process which allows us to empathize with the Other and her experiences by activating our memories of our own salient experiences, in particular the formative experiences of our earliest years. This process not only allows us to put ourselves in the place of the Other – it also strengthens our own sense of self. It enables us to be comfortable with ourselves while interacting positively with others.

But, to make a second obvious point about this poem, Wordsworth sees a paradox in this psychic process. Hence his conclusion “*joys of distant home my heart enchain.*” We do not normally think of joys as imprisoning us. In his conclusion Wordsworth may be trying, among other things, to evoke the bittersweet nature of homesickness (and in doing so he may be playing on the quasi-paradoxical connotations of “enchain,” a word that can be associated at once with *constraint* and with *linking*).³ But probably he is also suggesting that the empathic process I have been discussing has its limits – that empathy can never be perfect, that each of us is, in the end, a prisoner of her own experience, that we can only guess and never fully feel what the Other feels. That follows, after all, from the very definition of Otherness.

² The version of the poem printed and discussed in this paper is in fact the revised version of 1838, as given in the textual notes in the source cited.

³ I am grateful to Meg Harris Williams for pointing out the double connotation of “enchain”.

A third obvious point about Wordsworth's sonnet is that its diction is, to say the least, uninspired. The poem contains two gross clichés – the “sweet-breathed kine” and the “green . . . pastures decked with vernal flowers,” and much of its language seems unnecessarily prissy and stilted: “Yet may we not reject / The tale as fabulous,” for example, or “no faculty of mine / Avails those modulations to detect.” As a consequence, the poem does not (at least not initially) make much of an impact. Kenneth Koch once wrote that Wordsworth's “later work” is “boring / To the point of inanity, almost” (2006, p. 254), and for many readers this sonnet may be an illustration of that.

We can understand more about why this poem might appear insipid by looking at another, much better-known poem of Wordsworth's, “The Solitary Reaper” (1807/1983, pp. 184-185). In “The Solitary Reaper,” Wordsworth is walking through the Scottish Highlands. Coming down into a valley, he sees a young woman off in a field, reaping and singing plaintively in Gaelic, which he does not understand. He stops and listens, trying to imagine what the subject of the song is. Then he departs, walking up out of the valley. But the song has affected him, rather mysteriously. The poem concludes, “The music in my heart I bore / Long after it was heard no more.” The parallels between the two poems are clear. In both Wordsworth is in the mountains, away from home, and in both he is strangely moved by a piece of foreign music. But most readers feel that “The Solitary Reaper” as a poem succeeds, as the sonnet does not, in recreating the experience that Wordsworth is writing about – we readers are moved by “The Solitary Reaper” but (like Wordsworth himself in the poem) without quite understanding why.

In fact, the ability of “The Solitary Reaper” to evoke emotion has a great deal to do with its second stanza, with its two striking aural images of welcome relief after an extended period of harshness: the sound of the nightingale heard as travelers through the desert arrive at evening at an oasis, and the song of the cuckoo signaling spring in a far-flung island of the Hebrides. But imagery is precisely what is missing from the sonnet on the “Ranz des Vaches” – if the sonnet contains any sensory images at all, they are the two clichés that I've already mentioned: the sweet-breathed cattle and the pastures covered with spring flowers. More than anything else probably, it is the absence of any effective sensory imagery that makes Wordsworth's sonnet particularly uninviting.

Is it possible, however, that with this sonnet Wordsworth is writing a different kind of poem, one that requires a different kind of response from the reader? Is there a way of reading the sonnet so that we do respond to it emotionally rather than simply acknowledging, intellectually, what it describes? If so, we should probably make an attempt to read the poem that way. But what would be a more valorizing way of reading Wordsworth's sonnet?

First of all, we might take the clichés in the poem as resulting from a deliberate irony. In this reading, the first part of the sonnet deliberately and ironically sets out a conventional Romantic cliché. Then, in the middle of line 7, when the sonnet changes direction, Wordsworth denies that what he has described is merely “fabulous” – i.e., that it *is* merely a conventional Romantic cliché – and goes on to recount how he found some truth in it.

Secondly, we might choose to see the diction of the poem not as prissy but simply as precise, though cerebral. “Faculty,” for example, is a carefully used technical term from psychology (just as “modulation” is a technical term from music). And when Wordsworth refers to the story about the fatal effect of the “Ranz des Vaches” as possibly “fabulous,” he is implying exactly the same thing that I am when I refer to that tale as a “legend.” Moreover, to cite a key example, “influence,” which contrasts with the more scientific “faculty,” bears strong quasi-mystical overtones from astrology. At one point in the history of the language “influence” could mean “The inflowing . . . (*into* a person . . .) of any kind of divine, spiritual, moral, immaterial, or secret power or principle” (Influence, 1971). Furthermore, despite the lack of sensory images, the precise diction of the poem does imply a kind of imagery. Between “aspiring” and “yield,” for example, there is an implicit opposition (also developed by other words such as “recline,” “moved,” “enchain,” and even “pre-eminence”), having to do with activity versus passivity, stasis versus motion, and perhaps with upwards versus downwards movement. This second degree imagery is not gratuitous, but is related to the role of the voluntary and of the involuntary in the psychic process that Wordsworth is writing about.

This poem, in other words, is no crude, simple-minded statement of what Wordsworth experienced. It rests, on the contrary, on a carefully delineated intellectual structure, worthy of respect.⁴ Still, we can recognize that – we can even *give* the poem our respect – without, nevertheless, responding to the poem emotionally. What I would like to suggest is that if the poem does itself not *provoke* an emotional response in us, then perhaps the poem is inviting *us* to create that emotional response ourselves, not spontaneously as we usually do, but by a conscious act of the will, calling upon memories and experiences of our own. I am not affirming that this is so, just hypothesizing that it might be. But in the “Dedication” (i.e., the prefatory sonnet) to the volume in which this poem appears Wordsworth does say that the reader, through his own “vivid memory,” must “supply / The Life, the truth, the beauty” that the poem only hints at (1822/2004, p. 358). If we were in fact to do this, then the sonnet would become an exact analog to “The Solitary Reaper” in that the reader’s experience in reading the poem would recreate the experience narrated in the poem. The reader of “The Solitary Reaper” is mysteriously affected by the poem, just as Wordsworth is mysteriously affected by the reaper’s song. In reading the sonnet on the “Ranz des Vaches” in the way I suggest the reader actively puts herself into a state where her own memories provoke a plangent nostalgia, just as Wordsworth has done in listening to the cowherds’ song. If this is so, there would be no saying that the one poem succeeds better than the other in producing its effect. Simply, in order to produce its fullest effect each poem requires its own kind of reading.

Is it, then, possible, to read the sonnet on the “Ranz des Vaches” in the way I propose? It is. I know that it is, because I read the poem that way, and I find that doing so gives me a very gratifying experience. It may, of course, be easier for me to will empathy in reading this poem than it would be for most people, since I have had experiences of my own with the “Ranz des Vaches” and since the poem appeals to some of my own multiple identifications. But it would be a mistake to think that the only ones who can will empathy here are English-speaking people who have lived for a long time in Switzerland. In reality, the poem appeals, ultimately, to an identification that nearly anyone can make. Here is a very simple question, having to do with the “Ranz des Vaches”: What is a cow? The answer should be obvious. A cow is a large, gentle, female animal that gives milk. Indeed, in the “Ranz des Vaches” the singer is calling the cow to come and give her milk. If the Swiss break down when they hear the song – if I feel a personal compulsion to explain to my friend how much we Swiss, even naturalized Swiss, love our cows – it is because a cow is a mother. The childhood experience that underlies the cowherd’s call is the call of the hungry, lonely infant to his mother to come and give him milk. Who can not identify with that?

Most people, however, will probably not accept having to *make* themselves respond to a poem. They will require, rather, that a poem *provoke* their response, that it more or less magically charm them (as readers often say “The Solitary Reaper” does) into responding. There is no quarreling with such a requirement, even though it may deprive us of some potentially pleasurable (and perhaps even humanizing) experiences. It would be instructive, nevertheless, to reflect on that requirement. Doing so would reveal, I suspect, something important about why we read literature and what we expect from it. And it might also reveal something that applies more generally. I’ve been suggesting that the sonnet on the “Ranz des Vaches” is a kind of iconic representation of the act of empathizing with the Other through an act of the will. If in practice we refuse to will an empathic response to the poem and require instead that the poem charm us into that response, doesn’t that reflect our reluctance in the social world to make a spontaneous gift of our empathy to those who have not actively provoked it?

For such reluctance, of course, both in our social relations and in literature, there are valid reasons. In the social world it is dangerous to offer our empathy too naively. And in responding to literature, facile empathy can lead to sentimentality, which obscures the emotional complexity of a situation. We are well aware that the white-haired lady on the Hallmark card and the “sweet-breathed” cow in the Alpine meadow are both emotional distortions, idealized representations of the *good* mother only (whereas the “Ranz des Vaches,” it seems to me, unsentimentally expresses a longing

⁴ This structure is made even more apparent by Wordsworth’s revisions to his original text. This is the main reason why I have chosen to work with the 1838 version of the sonnet.

compounded of both positive and negative emotions). Still, empathy *always* involves risks of one kind or another. What our attitude towards literature seems to indicate is that we feel, rightly or wrongly, that those risks are lessened when instead of spontaneously offering up our empathy we wait, a little critically, for it to be provoked. And typically (though not uniquely) our empathy is provoked, as in “The Solitary Reaper,” by an appeal to the senses, faintly reminiscent perhaps of our very first sensual pleasures and satisfactions.

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