Return to Nature—— A Comparative Study of Tao Qian & William Wordsworth

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Both Tao Qian and William Wordsworth are great lyric poets. As time passes, their poems are not forgotten by people; on the contrary, we find that every time we re-read their poems, we will be duly rewarded and have a deeper understanding on life, on nature. Although the two poets are from both different centuries and cultural backgrounds, there are similarities in their life experiences, and they share the same passion for nature, the same sympathy for the poor, and the similar pursuit of life.

I Life Experiences

Tao Qian (365 – 427), courtesy-name Yuan-ming, was a native of Chai-sang, where is near the Yangtze River, Poyang Lake and Lushan. He was brought up in the beautiful country-side, and the rural scenery had made a deep impression on him throughout his life. During the time that he lived, people were increasingly aware of the beauty of nature. And in Shi-Shuo Xin-Yu (《世说新语》), we are able to see that there are many remarkable sayings by the elites of Eastern Jin dynasty, praising the splendid view of hills and waters. The magnificent description of nature in The Book of Songs (《诗经》) and The Songs of the South (《楚辞》) was a great inspiration to Tao. Therefore, he worshipped the nature from his early years:
From early days I have been at odds with the world; My instinctive love is hills and mountains.

—Returning to the Farm to Dwell

(TYM 50)

Tao was born in a declining official family. He greatly admired his great grand-father Tao Kan, who was Grand Marshal under the Eastern Jin. In one of his poems, On Naming My Son (《命子》), Tao sang highly of Tao Kan:

功遂辞归，
临宠不忒。
孰谓斯心，
而近可得？

His task once done, he came back home, Enjoying favor, he did no wrong. Who will say a heart like his Can anywhere be found today?

(TYM 34)

It is clear to see that the great achievement and noble personality of his great grand-father influenced the poet very much. Tao read widely, and the classical works of Confucianism and Taoism had aroused his interest and imagination when he was young. Taoism advocates spiritual freedom and non-action (wu wei), while Confucianism thinks highly of social concern and a duty of service. These philosophical ideas are apparently controversial, and they inspired Tao to imagine different roads of life before he entered into society. In Lament for Gentlemen Born out of their Time (《感士不遇赋》), Tao believed that man, the wisest of all creatures, had intelligence and moral principles, so we should stick to our ideals and beliefs. One might lead a reclusive life and maintain one’s own integrity, or one might perform great service to mankind and bring benefit to the people. No matter which road one took, one would be complacent and satisfied. How-

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ever, Tao did not choose the reclusive way from the beginning. Because of family tradition and the great influence by Confucius, who held the idea of "bringing peace to the people", Tao had political ambition in his early youth. In his 20's, Tao held a minor official position. After approximately 10 years at that post and a brief term as county magistrate, he resigned from official life, for he was repelled by its excessive formality and widespread corruption, and he was disillusioned by the ruthless rulers. With his wife and children he retired to a farming village south of the Yangtze River. Despite the hardships of farming and frequent food shortages, Tao was contented, writing poetry, drinking wine, and cultivating chrysanthemums that became inseparably associated with his poetry.

Similarly, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was brought up in a scenic place. Almost all of his life and work are associated with the so-called Lake District of England. The region contains a number of mountain peaks from two thousand to three thousand feet in height, about which lie many lovely tarns and mountain lakes. Wordsworth enjoyed great freedom in his childhood and youth. With exception to his schooling, he spent a lot of time boating, fishing, skating, riding and roaming the hills, snaring woodcocks or just marveling at the stars. The unroofed school of nature attracted him more than the classroom, and he learned more eagerly from flowers and hills and stars than from his books. So the child early cherished a love for nature, which he later expressed in his poetry. Wordsworth was profoundly thankful for the early freedom he enjoyed and was doubly grateful that he had been brought up in area of such scenic beauty as the Lake district. He received his education at Cambridge University. In 1790 and then again in 1791-92 he traveled and resided for some time in France during the early days of the French Revolution. He had a love affair with a French girl, who bore him a daughter, but they never married. Wordsworth was deeply attracted to the slogans of "liberty, fraternity and equality", and he hoped to abolish poverty and injustice and bring in an age of univer-
sal brotherhood and peace. As an ardent youth, he really welcomed the Revolution:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!

—Prelude, XI, 108–109

But his revolutionary enthusiasm died down as he was shocked at the massacre during the Reign of Terror under the rule of Robespierre. His political attitude turned to be conservative, and he went back to Lake District. Because of the departure from his lover and the disillusion with the Revolution, he suffered a lot from spiritual crisis for a while. The beautiful and quiet scenery of country-side comforted the poet’s disturbed mind, and cured his wounded heart. He lived in retirement and wrote poems for the rest of his life.

From their life experiences, we could see that both of the poets were brought up in country-side, and the beautiful nature inspired their poetic gifts. They were both ambitious in their youth, for they hoped to bring great benefit and peace to mankind, but later, they were disillusioned by politics. They returned to nature, where they could find peace in mind, harmony in heart and freedom in spirit. All their lives they were tightly connected with rural district, which provided them abundant inspiration for their poems. And the similar experiences made them share the similar conception about nature and pursuit of life.

II  Profound Love for Nature

As great poets of nature, Tao and Wordsworth found words for the most elementary sensations of man faced with natural phenomena. These sensations are both universal and old, but once expressed in their poetry, they became charmingly beautiful and new. Their love for nature was boundless. To them nature meant more than rivers, trees, rocks,
mountains, lakes, and so on, for it had a moral value.

1. Integration with Nature

They treated nature as a living entity that shared the poets’ feeling. Emotion was the bridge connecting the poets and nature, which made them become one with nature. Therefore, they gave an unexpected splendor to familiar things, to incidents and situations from common life just as a prism can give a ray of common sunlight the manifold miracle of color.

In the fifth one of Tao’s Twenty Poems after Drinking Wine (《饮酒》其五), it says:

| I built my hut beside a traveled road | With the mind detached, one’s place becomes remote. |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Yet hear no noise of passing carts and horses. | Picking chrysanthemums by the eastern hedge I catch sight of the distant southern hills; |
| You would like to know how it is done? | The mountain air is lovely as the sun sets And flocks of flying birds return together. |
| With the mind detached, one’s place becomes remote. | In these things is a fundamental truth I would like to tell, but lack the words. |

Through his exceptional insight, Tao found beauty in all things of creation, and he could appreciate the ordinary in a happy and content state of mood. His union with nature occurred as readily as that of the chrysanthemums by the eastern hedge as seen through the distant mountain scenery. "Distant" was applied to the poet’s state of mind (remote, detached, abstract) as well as to the mountain he saw in the distance. "It provided a useful, yet ambiguous bridge between preoccupation and perception, and introduced
the mountain simultaneously as both symbol and scenery” (2). Once it had engaged his attention, ‘south hills’ off in the distance continued to carry Tao outside of the world of men. The ‘south hills’ were an example of the enduring beauty of nature into which the birds returned at night and in which man was reabsorbed at the close of his life. A fundamental truth seemed to have been communicated without having been formulated in words.

In Wordsworth’s poetry, nature was also bestowed with a kind of spirit or disposition that was similar to the poet’s. The poet became one with nature, which became the best friend whom the poet might talk with, which had a magical force that encouraged and comforted the poet. In To the Cuckoo, he wrote:

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Thrice welcome, darling of the Spring!
Even yet thou art to me
No bird, but an invisible thing,
A voice, a mystery;

The same whom in my school-boy days
I listened to; that Cry
Which made me look a thousand ways
In bush, and tree, and sky.
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For Wordsworth, the cuckoo was not only a bird, but also a musical tune of spring, which aroused his sweet memory of past days and gave him new expectations. The objectivity of nature was personified, and was granted with a friendly, pure and equal position, and it was also given the spirit of freedom.

2. The Usage of Images

All concrete things are objective, and they do not change according to
the gamut of human feelings. But once they enter into poets’ conception, they are added with a subjective color, and thus they are granted with symbolic meanings. Therefore, images are physical objects integrated with human feelings.  Both Tao and Wordsworth chose the objects which suited their aesthetic ideals and interests. Their feelings were introduced into the objects, therefore bestowing upon them the same personalities as poets themselves.

For Laozi and Zhuangzi, all world’s myriad phenomena were stemmed from the unitary Dao, and those who shared the Daoist view saw nature not only as reflecting a cosmic meaning but also as the direct material embodiment of the transcendental principle. This immanent transcendence of nature carried artistic implications. It meant that natural objects took on symbolic values (naturalistic and personified) in Tao’s poetic landscape. In his poems, there are many typical images, like chrysanthemums, pines, flying bird and lonely cloud, which nearly become the symbol of Tao himself.

芳菊开林耀，
青松冠严列。
怀此贞秀姿，
卓为霜下杰。
——《和郭主簿》其二

Sweet chrysanthemums shine through the grove,
And green pine trees are ranked atop the hill.
They contain this true-flowering character,
Outstanding sentinels beneath the frost.
——A Reply to Secretary Kuo (TYM 81)

In this poem, Tao praised the fortitude of “sweet chrysanthemums” and “green pine trees”, which displayed their beauty against severity while all
the other flowers and trees withered. It implies that Tao maintained his integrity in the dark society.

| 常來遊鳥，     | 望云惭高鸟，          |
| 临水愧游鱼。  | 临水愧游鱼。          |
| ——《前作镇军参军序曲阿作》 | ——《归去来兮辞》    |
| I looked at the clouds and envy the high flying birds, Beside the stream I am shamed by the free swimming fish. | The clouds aimlessly rise from the peaks, The birds, weary of flying, know it is time to come home, As the sun's rays grow dim and disappear from view I walk around a lonely pine tree, stroking it. |
| ——Lines Written as I passed through Ch' u-o On First Being Made Adviser to the General (TYM 95) | ——The Return (TYM 269) |

Birds and fishes are symbols of freedom. Sometimes, Tao used them to contrast his own non-freedom, and sometimes he used the returning bird to symbolize his reclusion.

| 孤云独无依。     | 孤云独无依。     |
| 万族各有托，      | 万族各有托，      |
| ——《咏贫士》其一 | ——《咏贫士》其一 |
| All the myriad creatures have there refuge, The lonely cloud alone has no support. | All the myriad creatures have there refuge, The lonely cloud alone has no support. |
| ——In Praise of Impoverished Gentlemen (TYM 203) | ——In Praise of Impoverished Gentlemen (TYM 203) |
The lonely cloud symbolizes the "impoverished gentlemen", including Tao himself. Tao was really lonely, for he did not want to go along with other corrupted officials in their evil deeds, so there is a kind of beauty in his loneliness. "In Tao's works the symbolic capacity of a natural object largely depended on its attributes; some symbols were virtually universal (e.g., the bird), while others were so within their cultural framework (e.g., the pine and fish)."

In traditional Chinese painting, a white crane under a pine-tree gives us a sense of elegance and freedom from vulgarity; a distant mountain shrouded by mist makes us realize the profoundness of nature, and always attracts us to meditate; the different postures of birds, fishes, insects and flowers are used to express our pursuit for wisdom, morality and beauty. In this aspect, the poetry of Wordsworth had the same effect. And that might explain why Chinese people appreciate his poems very much. In To the Daisy, he praised its meekness, happiness and fortitude:

"Bright Flower, whose home is every where!"
"And Thou would'st teach him (man) how to find
A shelter under every wind.
A hope for times that are unkind
And every season?

Thou wander'st the wide world about,
Uncheck'd by pride or scrupulous doubt,
With friends to greet thee, or without,
    Yet pleased and willing;
Meek, yielding to the occasion's call,
And all things suffering from all,
Thy function apostolical
    In peace fulfilling."
He wrote a series of flowers and birds, which were symbols of freedom (e. g. the sky-lark), happiness (e. g. the green linnet), humility (e. g. the daisy), and fortitude (e. g. the celandine). He saw a soul and dignity in every meanest creature, and he captured them to form his beautiful and meaningful gallery of nature. These typical images illustrated Wordsworth’s aesthetic and moral pursuit successfully.

III Philosophical Thinking

Tao and Wordsworth are celebrated for their poetry of nature. But belong members of society, their poetry did not solely describe the rural or natural scenery, but express their view on life, on nature. They varied in philosophical thinking because of their different cultural backgrounds and times that they lived.

They were from completely different times, and there are 1400 years between them. Tao lived in an agrarian society, and his opinion about nature stemmed from Daoism. In Zhuangzi’s book, Chapter I, a story was told concerning the difference between the large fish and the small bird. Though there is a great difference between these two, yet both of them are happy, so far as they both act according to their own nature. The absolute freedom described in the first chapter is not exactly the freedom of the small bird and the large fish, but the pure experience and freedom with self-consciousness. Tao was deeply influenced by this idea. In his mind, “nature” was opposed to the corrupted official circles and vulgar upper class. He considered them as a “cage”, and he thought that life in the “cage” was fettered and violated the nature of people. So when he returned to the farm land, seeing the elms, willows, cocks and dogs which he was familiar with, he felt that he found his real self that he had lost for quite a while, and gained his freedom once more. He recited happily in his Returning to the Farm to Dwell: “I was a prisoner in a cage, / And now I have my...
freedom back again." (TYM 50) Here "nature" is a philosophical concept, which means originality, naturalness and freedom, which is a state of life or individual form of existence.

While Wordsworth lived in an industrialized society of the 19th century, and by nature he meant the country as opposed to the town, and referred to the real natural world, including lakes, mountains, flowers, birds, and so on. His concept of nature is influenced by Rousseau (1712 – 1778), who contrasted the freedom and innocence of primitive men with the tyranny and wickedness of civilized society, and he advocated a neo-primitive return to more natural ways for restoring the soul to man. To Wordsworth, nature had a moral value and had its philosophical significance. Nature was for him the embodiment of the Divine Spirit. He believed that God and universe were identical, that God was everything and everything was God. Therefore, nature was the greatest of all teachers, in which he perceived transcendent truth:

A presence that disturbs me with joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.

— Tintern Abbey

Wordsworth received a teaching in this natural world, and he also sensed a magical power in it, which could bring great happiness and comfort to human beings. He told us that he once "walked lonely as a cloud", and when he saw a host of daffodils dancing in the breeze, he stopped and gazed at them. The holy and beautiful scenery touched the numb heart of the poet. And whenever he recalled the happy daffodils in loneliness, they
would cheer him up:

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“ For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heat with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.”

--- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
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Though both Tao and Wordsworth worshipped sincerity and simplicity, they were motivated by different reasons, therefore emphasizing on different aspects. Tao believed that in primitive times, people were not tainted with secular ethical codes, and their sincere and simple nature was most precious, so their life was very joyful. As times passed, people became more and more cunning, deceptive and hypocritical, and lost their sincerity and simplicity, and thus lost the happiness of life. Therefore we might see that Tao yearned for the childhood of mankind:

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悠悠上古，
厥初生民。
傲然自足，
抱朴含真。
——《劝农》
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In the most distant past
When the people first were born,
Proud and self-sufficient
They embraced the plain and held the true.

——An Exhortation to Farmers (TYM 30)
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However, Wordsworth praised highly of children. In his eyes, children still do not have the sense of individuality, and they are a part of nature when they communicate with it, so children are more sensitive to the beauty of nature than adults. In “My Heart Leaps Up”, he wrote:

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My heart leaps up when I behold
   A rainbow in the sky;
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

Wordsworth’s genuine affection for very innocent children is nowhere so effectively shown as in the simple poem “We are Seven”. Here a little cottage girl of eight with no idea of what death means is vividly portrayed in a simple dialogue in which the child with great naïve insists that her dead brother and sister are still with her. Therefore, we may say Tao worshipped the childhood of mankind, while Wordsworth yearned for the childhood of individuality.

Tao and Wordsworth are called rural poets. There are many similarities in their profound love for nature and their pursuit of returning to nature. But if we seek into details of their thinking, we might find the differences caused by different nationalities and ages.

Among Chinese poets and English poets, there are few cases like Tao and Wordsworth, who shared so many similarities. By reading their poems, we are convinced, in a pleasant surprise, that human nature and emotions share radical likenesses despite apparent differences in culture, times or place. Nowadays, cities become more industrialized and the life rhythm more fast, so people yearn for the fields, the hills and lakes, and we need increasingly the comfort of natural beauty. That is why their poetry can arouse a sympathetic chord among readers all over the world.
Notes:

1. Liao Zhong-an 廖仲安, “Shi Dai, Jia Shi, Qing Nian Shi Qi 时代, 家世, 青年时期 (Tao’s Times, His Family Background and His Youth),” Tao Yuan Ming 陶渊明 (Shanghai: Zhong Hua Shu Ju, 1963), p. 8.

2. The English version of Tao’s works quoted here is from The Poetry of Tao Chi’en by James Robert Hightower, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), and here after it has been abbreviated as TYM.

3. Chen Jia 陈嘉, “Romantic Poetry in Early 19th Century England,” A History of English Literature, Vol. III (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1996), p. 6.

4. James Robert Hightower, “Twenty Poems after Drinking Wine,” The Poetry of Tao Chi’en (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 132.

5. Yuan Xing-Pei 元行霈, “Zhong Guo Gu Dian Shi Ge De Yi Xiang 中国古典诗歌的意象 (The Images in Classical Chinese Poetry),” Zhong Guo Shi Ge Yi Shu Yan Jiu 中国诗歌艺术研究 (Studies on the Art of Chinese Poetry) (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1997), p. 65.

6. Charles Yim-tze Kwong, “Spontaneous Symbolism and Visionary Realism,” Tao Qian and the Chinese Poetic Tradition (Michigan: Center for Chinese Studies, 1994), p. 91.

7. Ibid., p. 92.

8. Luo Jing-guo 罗经国, “The Age of Romanticism,” A New Anthology of English Literature (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1996), p. 2.

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