The Open University

The Romantics - Audio

Wordsworth and De Quincy

Nicola Watson

I'm here today with Bill Greenwell who is an academic at The Open University and a poet in his own right, he teaches creative writing, and what I've asked him to do is write a version of Wordsworth's most famous poem, which is sometimes called 'To Daffodils' and is sometimes called 'I wandered lonely as a cloud', but in the voice of Wordsworth's great admirer, Thomas De Quincey. And the reason I've asked him to do this is so we can discuss what he's found out about the congruence of subject matter and the divergence of their styles.

Bill Greenwell

'Reader, then – for I must, if you please, presume further upon your indulgence – I come now to a time when, during a peregrination through that peerless and mountainous wilderness (wilderness, I call it, though its very barrenness bespeaks the solitude beloved alike by the craven and the philosophical) in the Lakeland of the North, I confess I succumbed, upon the shores of Ullswater, to a vision yet more potent than the phantasms of the Opium-Eater. Whether this event was merely incidental, I hardly know – it falls not to me to excogitate the matter: if you please, good reader, I postulate that it had meanings more serendipitous. It was a curative, instantaneous, for the threnodies of melancholy, to which I rarely pay any subscription …'

Nicola Watson

Thank you very much indeed Bill, that was wonderful and extremely impressive. What did you find out about De Quincey's style in doing this?

Bill Greenwell

I think the thing that you find out is De Quincey's writing is a kind of permanent entertainment of digression and its source is in seemingly getting to the point but distracting itself, deliberately, on purpose, into long sentences, sub-clauses, actually changes of subject.

Nicola Watson

I noticed that there's an awful lot of punctuation in this piece, and I assume that that's part and parcel of this business of digression and elaboration?

Bill Greenwell

It also seems to me a kind of stylistic tic of De Quincey's, that he likes this elaborate style. And I think there is an element in De Quincey, of people enjoying De Quincey *because* he rambles and *because* he has this control of sentence structure as much as for what he's actually saying.

Nicola Watson

So the style brands De Quincey as a writer and it sets up a relationship with the reader. Wordsworth's original assumes there's a reader, but isn't very interested in a reader, whereas you have put the reader in, often directly addressed.

Bill Greenwell

Yes, because that's what De Quincey does. I mean what I imagined was that De Quincey, if De Quincey had decided to write about a crowd of daffodils, then what he'd have to do first of all is he'd have to almost apologise for going off the point and then take you to Ullswater, but he'd have to explain where Ullswater was and what lakeland meant. And then he'd get distracted by that and go off into a little digression about lakeland. And then suddenly, eventually, he finally gets to describing the daffodils. And whereas for Wordsworth there is a kind of tranquillity in the way in which he describes, you know, the way they flash upon his inner eye, for De Quincey it's an overwhelming sensation. I think there's another interesting parallel between the two, which is there is a sense in which they're both quite serious as writers in the sense that they take themselves enormously seriously. And sometimes, might be a little heretical to say it, sometimes they verge on the humourless.

Nicola Watson

Well in that case, since your writing does not verge on the humourless, perhaps we could have a look at your other piece where you make Wordsworth return the compliment and Wordsworth rewrites De Quincey. And I gather you've taken 'To the Cuckoo' as your model here?

Bill Greenwell

Yes.

'To Opium
O Opium, when I eat of thee,
Thy twofold states I sense,
Of warmth and sweet serenity,
Yet storm of indolence.
While I am wandering afar
Thy harmonies I hear,

High-spirited beneath the star,
That quells all earthly fear.
Thou bringest to me perfect calm,
A rich and fruitful store.
I know thy Paradise, thy balm,
And mingle with the Poor.
Thrice welcome are thy excitations
That lift me in a trice.
For eating thee, I fill with patience,
As in a paradise.'

Nicola Watson
Thank you very much, Bill. This is an exercise in Wordsworthian style, so what did you find out about Wordsworth's style here?

Bill Greenwell
The thing about Wordsworth is that he's the kind of person who, if he gets involved in telling a story, will tell you the story but then will draw out from that story what he sees as being quite literally the moral of the story or the meaning or the undertow of the story. And I suppose it's a little bit difficult to have him writing about opium, but nevertheless, it seems to me that what he would do is he would deal with first of all he'd deal with the pleasure, but also the pain and then he'd try to kind of resolve the two in some way, which is what I've tried to get him to do.

Nicola Watson
It's certainly a lot shorter isn't it?

Bill Greenwell
Yes. I think that Wordsworth, certainly in this mode, when he is in his shorter poems, is attempting to encapsulate an experience in an intense and yet accessible way. Wordsworth's great claim I think, to strength, for me is in his ability to make a simple observation into an interesting and almost idealistic statement.

Nicola Watson
It's short, it's simple, it's condensed, it's visionary, and it's plain.

Bill Greenwell
It has to be plain and I was quite conscious when I was constructing the parody, that although a parody will always exaggerate a little bit in order to bring out the qualities, that by and large the rhymes were going to be, for the most part, monosyllabic.

Nicola Watson

I think this is fascinating because what really strikes me is how deeply you can get into somebody's style and indeed into their project by trying to replicate it. You discover the sorts of choices that they must have made, or you rediscover their choices, if you like, by trying them out. Thank you so much, Bill. I think it's been very illuminating.

Bill Greenwell

Thank you.