



1982

Wordsworth's daffodils: A recurring motif in contemporary Canadian literature

Diana Brydon

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

Recommended Citation

Brydon, Diana, Wordsworth's daffodils: A recurring motif in contemporary Canadian literature, *Kunapipi*, 4(2), 1982.
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol4/iss2/5>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Wordsworth's daffodils: A recurring motif in contemporary Canadian literature

Abstract

It is a commonplace of criticism in the new literatures in English that colonial writers experienced difficulty in adapting the English language and English literary forms to the very different natural environments they experienced in all parts of the Commonwealth. Anglocentric attitudes dictated the belief that Australia was the antipodes, the reverse of the true and Northern hemisphere, that North America was a wilderness that must be turned into a garden, that India and Africa were heathen to be converted or savage to be tamed. The native inhabitants of these countries were viewed as part of their barbaric landscapes, equally in need of change to meet English standards. Finally, an imported and in the colonial context an ossifying, Romantic tradition prevented immigrants and the native-born alike from seeing their natural environments with native eyes. As the chief representative of this Romantic tradition, Wordsworth looms large.

DIANA BRYDON

Wordsworth's Daffodils: A Recurring Motif in Contemporary Canadian Literature

It is a commonplace of criticism in the new literatures in English that colonial writers experienced difficulty in adapting the English language and English literary forms to the very different natural environments they experienced in all parts of the Commonwealth. Anglocentric attitudes dictated the belief that Australia was the antipodes, the reverse of the true and Northern hemisphere, that North America was a wilderness that must be turned into a garden, that India and Africa were heathen to be converted or savage to be tamed. The native inhabitants of these countries were viewed as part of their barbaric landscapes, equally in need of change to meet English standards. Finally, an imported and in the colonial context an ossifying, Romantic tradition prevented immigrants and the native-born alike from seeing their natural environments with native eyes. As the chief representative of this Romantic tradition, Wordsworth looms large.

The story of Wordsworth's influence could fill several books and is not my concern here. Instead, this paper examines Wordsworth as he is used

by various Canadian writers as a symbol of an Anglocentric poetic tradition and of an Anglocentric educational system which, ironically, are usually mis-interpreted and mis-managed by Canadians, but which nonetheless often function as scapegoats to focus an anti-British animosity. During my reading in Canadian literature, I have been particularly struck by the numerous, specific references to Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' poem, 'I wandered lonely as a cloud', and the ways it has been used as a fictional reference point either to undermine British authority in order to substitute the beginnings of a local tradition or — very rarely — in order to affirm a continuity of traditions.¹

The 'Daffodils' poem represents a belief in Nature's beneficence that is easier to hold in the cultivated, thoroughly humanized landscape of the English Lakes District than it is in Northern British Columbia, the Canadian Prairies, Newfoundland, or Margaret Laurence's Ghana. As Aldous Huxley points out in 'Wordsworth in the Tropics', 'The Wordsworthian who exports this pantheistic worship of Nature to the tropics is liable to have his religious convictions somewhat rudely disturbed'. The jungle, and even the great forests of temperate lands, Huxley suggests, are: 'foreign, appalling, fundamentally and utterly inimical to intruding man.'² He concludes that the Wordsworthian worship of nature is not only inappropriate to the various colonial places, but also to our times, in which a new mythology of evolution and scientific discovery that depends upon recognizing the Otherness of Nature, is replacing the Wordsworthian habit of seeing Nature in man's image.

Margaret Laurence's short story, 'The Rain Child', from *The Tomorrow-Tamer* collection (1963), gives fictional expression to Huxley's criticism of Wordsworth through the thoughts of Violet Nedden, an English school teacher who has spent twenty-two years in Africa:

Once, when we were taking *Daffodils*, Kwaale came to class with her arms full of wild orchids for me. How absurd Wordsworth seemed here then. I spoke instead about Akan poetry, and read them the drum prelude Anyaneanyane in their own tongue as well as the translation. Miss Povey, hearing of it, took decided umbrage.

Here two opposed attitudes to the proper education of African students are embodied in the two expatriate English school teachers. On the one hand, Miss Povey, like President Hastings Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, who has just modelled an élite school in his country on Eton, believes that the British tradition of a classical education must not be deviated from. On the other hand, Miss Nedden appreciates Akan culture and strives to give her students a sense of the best of both worlds. Significantly, Miss

Povey grows 'zinnias and nasturtiums, and spends hours trying to coax an exiled rosebush into bloom' (112), whereas Miss Nedden will have no English flowers, preferring the native jungle lily and poinsettia. In this story, Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' symbolizes the inappropriateness of a traditional British education to African needs, and the blindness of at least some English educators to African worth.

This story about various kinds of exile centres about the image of the uprooted plant that cannot take root in new soil. Dr Quansah uses it explicitly to speak of his African wife's inability to adjust to England (120), and implicitly it refers to his daughter's difficulties in adjusting to her native land after her education in England. To Laurence, Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' appears to be another species of uprooted plant, meaningful in its natural environment but at best meaningless, at worst, insidiously dangerous, when transplanted into the foreign soil of young colonial minds.

Laurence uses this poem even more obviously as a symbol of British imperialism in her most recent novel, *The Diviners* (1974). When Christie glances at Morag's homework, he explodes:

'What in hell is this crap? *I wandered lonely as a cloud*. This Wordsworth, now, he was a pansy, girl, or no, maybe a daffodil? Clouds don't wander lonely, for the good christ's sake. Any man daft enough to write a line like that, he wanted his head looked at, if you ask me. Look here, I'll show you a poem, now, then.'⁴

In context, Christie's outburst clearly carries authorial endorsement, yet it is also ironic that the alternative he offers is another old world poet, Ossian, who provides an equally out-dated rhetoric. Ossian's value for Christie lies in his supposed roots in Gaelic, Christie's lost ancestral language, because Christie himself speaks only the language of his people's conquerors, those 'bloody liars', the English. Morag's struggle in *The Diviners* is of course to find her own voice as a Canadian woman and to write her own fictions. Neither Wordsworth nor Ossian can help her to find that voice. Instead, she turns eventually, only half humourously, to the Canadian pioneer naturalist, Catherine Parr Traill, for guidance in discovering how to name the elements of her own heritage. Wordsworth's daffodils are replaced by butter-and-eggs, goldenrod, 'little pink whatsernames' and Devil's Paintbrush (170).

The political emphasis in Laurence's use of Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' recurs in two of Canada's best plays of the period: George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1970) and Michael Cook's *Jacob's Wake* (1975). In Ryga's play, Wordsworth's romanticism emerges significantly with the teacher's insistence on conformity. As a 'nightmare babble' of voices

assault Rita's troubled mind, she remembers her teacher's voice demanding:

Say after me! 'I wandered lonely as a cloud, that floats on high o'er vales and hills ... when all at once I saw a crowd ... a melting pot ...'⁵

The threat to Rita's own Indian culture is dramatically realized in this conflation of literature and the ideology of British superiority it supports, however unintentionally. This alien British romanticism, whose foreign words and concepts Rita is continually chastised for forgetting, contrasts sharply with the more colloquial and indigenous poetry of Rita's own speech and that of her father, David Joe. When Rita comes into school fresh from the out of doors, she tells her teacher: 'The sun is in my skin, Miss Donahue. The leaves is red and orange, and the wind stopped blowin' an hour ago', only to be brought up short by the teacher's Gradgrindian question: 'Rita! What is a noun?' (63), to which Rita has no answer. Two radically different approaches to life and art are at loggerheads here: ironically, Rita is probably more in tune with the spirit of Wordsworth's poem than her teacher, who sees the poem only as a tool for imposing an alien grammar and detached appreciation of landscape on her recalcitrant students. Miss Donahue makes it clear that she is not interested in Rita's dreams or the poetry of her people, but only in compelling Rita to memorize, without understanding if necessary, the verse of the imperial centre, so that she may disappear into the cultural melting pot. It is a further irony that a teacher with an Irish name should be engaged in such a colonizing role.

In addition to her inability to perceive the potential for a translation into Canadian terms of Wordsworth's vision in 'Daffodils', the teacher damns herself even more definitively by compelling the class to recite from Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat*: 'A jug of wine, a loaf of bread and thou beside me ... singing in the wilderness.' Rita's bawdy common sense shatters her teacher's comfortable sentimentality by reminding her of how much Fitzgerald has left out. Rita reports: 'Jaimie said, «To heck with the wine an' loaf ... Let's have some more of this here thoul!»' (65). *Rita Joe* makes it clear that Fitzgerald's smug Victorian wilderness is as far as it is possible to go from the wilderness Rita knows as someone born and raised in the bush or from the 'wilderness' of the white world's city that finally destroys her.

Rita's deflation of the *Rubaiyat*'s pretensions anticipates the action of *Jacob's Wake*, where the pseudo gentility of Mary and Wayne, who quote Wordsworth back and forth between themselves, clashes against Winston's deliberate crudity. Winston claims: 'I swears because I like it.

It sounds good and it protects me from your kind of literacy.⁶ Their kind of literacy spawns conversations like this:

MARY: If only the child were the father of the man.

WAYNE: Then I could wish my days to be bound each to each by natural piety.

Winston's response? 'Jesus. I've sired a book of sayings' (99).

Earlier, Winston has snatched up one of the student compositions Mary is marking for school in order to mock her work. What he reads there confirms the pattern we have been tracing:

'Daffodils' by William Wordsworth. By Mary Freak for Miss Blackburn, Grade 6.

'Daffodils' is a poem all about yellow flowers called daffodils. The poet is flying in an aeroplane and looking down through the clouds, he sees... (45)

In this harsh Newfoundland world, with its violent snowstorms and crazy fundamentalist guilt, Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' and the inventive criticism of Mary Freak seem out of place. Because the characters speak in their own dialect, the literariness of Wordsworth's language appears more pronounced. It is no longer the language of ordinary men, if it ever was in Canada. His two defenders are, predictably, the spinster school teacher and the politician who has just sold 'the last fifty thousand acres of standing timber' to the newest imperialists, the Japanese (100). Wayne is not at all squeamish about selling his birthright in such a socially acceptable fashion, but he does object to his father's openly bawdy delight in his mother's sexuality. When criticized, Wayne's father comments: 'He allus wor squeamish ... I suppose that's what they calls sensitivity' (29). As in *Rita Joe*, an appreciation of Wordsworth is linked, however unfairly, with puritanism and sexual repression and with traditional authority and political repression. Cook's message seems to be that when the literary culture is not indigenous, it creates ignorant louts of those — like Winston — who instinctively reject it, and hypocrites of those — like Wayne — who accept it. The educational system promoting this literature appears further and further removed from the lives of the people. The choice in Cook's world is a bitter one. I see it in the terms established by Sheila Watson for talking about the vision set forward in *The Double Hook*: both the novel and the play are

about how people are driven, how if they have no art, how if they have no tradition, how if they have no ritual, they are driven in one of two ways, either towards violence or towards insensibility — if they have no mediating rituals which manifest themselves in what I suppose we call art forms.⁷

There are no mediating rituals in Cook's world. There were once in Rita Joe's, but both the traditional ways of her people as embodied in her father, and the traditional ways of the Roman Catholic church as represented by the priest are exposed as ineffectual in contemporary Vancouver.

What remains is little enough, a potential only, in the tough colloquial speech of Jaimie Paul in *Rita Joe* and of the grandfather in *Wake*. The compelling poetry in *Jacob's Wake* in particular comes not from the few remembered Wordsworthian tags shored against the ruins of British respectability, but from the mad Skipper's vision of hell:

But what's mortal man when nature sets her face agin him. Black as hell it wor ...
And the ice buckling and rafting beneath us, laughing, I swear. Laughing ... Hell
isn't fire, boy. It's ice. Black, bitter, cold. Empty. Filled with the frozen breath of
fallen men. (118)

And it comes as well from his rhymes to navigate this hell:

North nor East
And South South West
From the Round Head Isles
To Cape Bonavist
Steer it clear
And steer it true
And the same will take ye
To Baccalieu (137)

Both reveal an understanding and respect for Nature as Other that denies the Wordsworthian tenet that 'Nature never did betray the heart that loved her',⁸ while following his injunction to employ a language actually spoken by men. What stands out, however, is the specific use of Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' to condemn an inappropriate educational system and the poetic orthodoxies it imposes.

We have now seen this motif at work in a short story, a novel, and two plays. What does a poet make of it? In Earle Birney's 'Cartagena de Indias' (1962-63) it appears to reinforce a kind of self-mocking irony. The poet has been walking through this ancient Colombian city in search of a bridge from his 'stupid wish/ to their human acceptance'.⁹ Eventually he finds what he is looking for in a giant pair of concrete shoes, built in the memory of their poet, Luis Lopez, who said of his townsmen that they inspired 'that love a man has/ for his old shoes'. At this moment of achieved communion, Birney says:

I bought the book walked back
sat on the curb happier than Wordsworth
gazing away at his daffodils
Discarded queen I thought I love you too.

Here Birney is placing himself in the romantic tradition of epiphanic vision or 'spots in time', while modifying it to suit changed circumstances. Interestingly, my students have unanimously felt that this comparison serves to make Birney's persona slightly ridiculous. Behind this element of self-mockery, however, I detect a serious revision of the romantic tradition: Birney finds his epiphany not in the natural world but in the heart of a crowded city and in the expression of shared communal values rather than in a lonely wandering away from them. Unfortunately, and here the bitter notes of Laurence, Ryga, and Cook appear again, he cannot find this kind of communal valuing of poetry in Canada. There is a sadness in his envying of Luis Lopez, '— and him I envy/ I who am seldom read by my townsmen', that lingers after the Wordsworthian euphoria of discovery has passed.

My final example follows Birney in incorporating and revising rather than attacking the Wordsworthian model as embodied in 'Daffodils'. Like *Rita Joe*, Hugh Hood's novel, *A New Athens* (1977) connects Wordsworth's poem with memories of schoolroom recitation, but instead of mocking the poem's romanticism, Hood's character-narrator Matt Goderich takes it as the starting point for seeing his own immediate surroundings more clearly and more intensely. Goderich reverses the movement followed by Laurence's Morag Gunn in *The Diviners* by starting in an Ontario field naming the flowers according to their common names — indeed many of the names are the same — and then moving on to see them within the larger British literary tradition.¹⁰ Wondering why he feels so virtuous reciting his list of wildflower names, Matt suddenly thinks

of the shorter poems of Wordsworth and of Sister Matilda making us recite them in piping chorus. 'And then my heart with pleasure fills/ And dances with the daffodils.' (17)

'Aha,' Matt concludes, 'let teacher be your Nature' (17). This reversal of Wordsworth's famous dictum makes the problem we have been tracing instantly clear. If the Canadian or any colonial tries to make Nature his teacher as Wordsworth urges him to do, then he must reject the harmonious and beneficent vision and English literary language of the daffodils poem as false to his own experience, but if he takes European

civilization and tradition as his starting point, he has no trouble accepting 'Daffodils' — precisely because he is no longer essentially Wordsworthian in his sensibilities: teacher has become his nature.

Because Hood believes that culture is continuous, it is the most natural thing in the world for his spokesman, Matt, to learn to see his region of Canada through remembering Wordsworth's lines about seeing the daffodils. Here, the poem represents a living and vital tradition as opposed to the effete and deadening influence it exerted in the drama. Significantly, Hood, like Birney, refers to the final lines of the poem, in which the poet remembers his vision and speaks of its lasting effect on him, whereas Laurence, Ryga and Cook quote from the poem's beginning, where the poet is wandering without direction through the landscape, seeing for the first time with the outer eye rather than remembering, and thus seeing with what Wordsworth calls 'the inner eye'.

As represented by Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' poem, then, the English romantic literary tradition and the Canadian educational system promoting it have been presented as absurd, threatening, effete, falsely genteel, irrelevant, and potentially inspiring. What has interested me in this paper is the frequency of this poem's appearance as the representative of an entire imperial tradition in Canadian literature of the late nineteen sixties and seventies, and the comic associations it usually conveys. It seems to function primarily as a scapegoat for Canadian hostility toward an imposed English vision of the proper relations between man and nature, providing yet another example of the creative mis-readings of one's forebears that are necessary for the continuation of any literary tradition, but perhaps particularly necessary for a colony, which must break old patterns if it is to find its own voice.

NOTES

1. Canadian writers are not of course alone in using the 'Daffodils' poem as symbol of a tradition. Ngugi wa Thiong'o cites this poem as his first piece of evidence in his condemnation of the Eurocentric educational system in Kenya in his collection of essays, *Writers in Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1980), p.4. Several West Indians have remarked to me in conversation that they were given daffodils instead of bougainvillea at school. The use of this motif throughout the Commonwealth suggests that the larger context of new writing in English could be helpful for a consideration of Canadian concerns and trends.
2. Aldous Huxley, 'Wordsworth in the Tropics', *Collected Essays* (Chatto & Windus, 1958), pp.1-10.

3. Margaret Laurence, 'The Rain Child', *The Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories* (1963; Toronto: McClelland & Stewart New Canadian Library, 1970), p.107. Hereafter cited by page.
4. Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (1974; Toronto: Bantam, 1975), p.63. Hereafter cited by page.
5. George Ryga, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1970; Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1976), p.76. Hereafter cited by page.
6. Michael Cook, *Jacob's Wake* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1975), p.98. Hereafter cited by page.
7. Sheila Watson, 'What I'm Going To Do', in *Sheila Watson: A Collection, Open Letter*, 3/1 (Winter 1974-75), p.183.
8. William Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey', *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, New Edition, revised by Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.165.
9. Earle Birney, 'Cartagena de Indias', *Ghost in the Wheels: Selected Poems of Earle Birney* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), p.114.
10. Hugh Hood, *A New Athens* (Toronto: Oberon, 1977), p.16. Hereafter cited by page.