

# Silent Mind, Passionate Mind: On Wordsworth's Silence in *The Prelude*

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**Abstract:** Silence and passion are paradoxical, but there is a unified expression in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. The subtitle of *The Prelude* is *Growth of a Poet's Mind*. As a poet, Wordsworth has a silent mind, which is not closed but passionate. Through the analysis of silence in the Wordsworth's *The Prelude* as well as his positive attitude towards silence, silence could be regarded as an essential part of Wordsworth's method of communication, a positive gathering of inner stillness and an extended power to offer nourishment repeatedly, which is transformed into passion for life in the end.

**Keywords:** *The Prelude*, Wordsworth. Silence, Passion

## 1. Introduction

“Throughout modern philosophy and literature, silence is broached (and, simultaneously, breached) through the work of negation, negations which almost always affirm the limits of language” (Gould, 2018: 2). Yet Wordsworth counters this point of view with his beautiful and abundant language in his poem *Address to Silence*:

Silence! calm, venerable majesty:  
Guardian of contemplation and of love.  
Thy voice, in marvellous words of nature, speaks  
Not to the ear, but to the eye of man; (Wordsworth: 1-4)

In this way, Wordsworth highly praises silence as a kind of power which encourages human being to contemplate, to love and to communicate with nature, not with words, but with eyes. Silence is not the negation of language, but “what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (Wittgenstein, 1974: 74). Thus, for Wordsworth, silence is developed into a state of mind and a method of communication, which shows Wordsworth's initiative selection to see and to feel. This kind of silent mind grows as Wordsworth grows and is centrally demonstrated in his work *The Prelude*. *The Prelude* is composed of fourteen books and records Wordsworth's spiritual world from his childhood to his college years and then to his trip to France. As *The Prelude*'s subtitle *Growth of a Poet's Mind* indicates, Wordsworth grows in silence, fosters a silent mind, yet maintains passionate throughout his mental growth. Wordsworth chooses himself as the theme of this long epic, which shows his attention to inner world. Meanwhile, in his lines, an intense love of nature and a fervent concern with human and then the world are reflected frequently along with the great attentiveness of his own cultivation. Silence as a state of thinking penetrates Wordsworth's writing and his communication with nature, the others as well as himself. By tracing **Wordsworth's** commitment to the power of **silence** through analysis of specific lines in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's positive attitude towards silence and the unification of silence and passion on him could be seen more clearly[1-2].

## 2. Silence: A Positive Gesture of Speech

Wordsworth seeks to communicate. His silence is proper to each reader, yet not every reader could get the message he tries to deliver “for it is the silence that is doing the speaking” (Macherey, 1978: 86, qtd. in Gould: 20). Therefore, everything spoken by Wordsworth is accompanied by silence as his “voice” and as a positive gesture of speech.

### 2.1. Speak to Himself

Starting with a description of “gentle breeze” (Wordsworth, *Prelude*, 1850, Book I: 1), Wordsworth

looks back on his childhood and school time. With the whole world all before him, he hears two kinds of voices that cheers him:

My own voice cheered me, and, far more, the mind's  
Internal echo of the imperfect sound;  
To both I listened, drawing from them both  
A cheerful confidence in things to come. (Book I: 55-58)

From early adolescence, Wordsworth already shows such a tendency to shift from the external world to the internal world. Although cheered by both, he attaches greater importance to his internal voice. Regarding with voices in poems, T.S. Eliot made three classifications, among which “the first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself – or to nobody” (Eliot: 104). Wordsworth spend such a long time to write this epic in order to share with people things already written in his heart. This is not only a conversation between the adult Wordsworth and the younger Wordsworth, but also an immediate feedback from Wordsworth himself. Content with the natural beauty, Wordsworth slackens his thoughts “by choice” (Book I: 63), chooses to look within and hear the mind’s echo. For often, he was immersed in his habitual thoughts:

Sometimes it suits me better to invent  
A tale from my own heart, more near akin  
To my own passions and habitual thoughts;  
Some variegated story, in the main  
Lofty, but the unsubstantial structure melts  
Before the very sun that brightens it,  
Mist into air dissolving! (Book I: 221-227)

These Passionate meditations from deep heart offers Wordsworth a refuge and he speaks to himself that “mellower years will bring a riper mind/ And clearer insight” (Book I: 236-237). Wordsworth’s decision to make himself write himself as the subject of a long poem is one of the most important events in the history of poetry. From here, it could also be seen that he was fully aware of what he was doing as he said:

“I turned my thoughts again to the Poem on my own life... It will be not less than 9,000 lines, not hundred but thousand lines, long; an amazing length! and a thing unprecedented in Literary history that a man should talk so much about himself” (Redher, 1981: 37).

Positioned in the external world, his senses of self-consciousness were firstly attained and his “mind Hath been revived” (Book I: 639-640). Then in his school time, his continued viewing himself with an inward eye, savored every moment he spent alone and absorbed a self-sufficing power through this kind of tranquility:

A tranquillising spirit presses now  
On my corporeal frame, so wide appears  
The vacancy between me and those days  
Which yet have such self-presence in my mind,  
That, musing on them, often do I seem  
Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself  
And of some other Being. (Book II: 27-33)

Self-cultivation is achieved silently. With present tense in his new freedom and energy, he felt blessed and continued his exploration towards bigger unit, the others.

## **2.2. *Speak to the Other***

Wordsworth is often considered to be solitary or even lonely, but he was never a reclusive poet. He was concerned not only about national politics, but also about people from lower class of society. He recorded the society at that time and reflected people’s living conditions with his poetic lines. From education to revolution, from discharged soldier to blind beggar, he observed the others and spoke to them, silently.

While his residence at Cambridge, his distinctiveness from the others was obvious. While other students “studded around, as thick as chairs could stand”, “faithful to their books, / Half-and-half idlers” (Book III: 66-68), Wordsworth was a freeman, in the purest sense. He disliked most of the students’ learning pattern and their way to live, but still he found his own way to get along with them:

And independent musings pleased me so  
 That spells seemed on me when I was alone,  
 Yet could I only cleave to solitude  
 In lonesome places—if a throng was near  
 That way I leaned by nature, for my heart  
 Was social and loved idleness and joy. (Book III: 229-234)

Here, he didn't seek a shared pleasure with all. But he could establish a connection with the others' feelings. Hence, a delicate balance was accomplished. As Wordsworth himself wrote, he muttered "lonesome songs", but at the same time "Companionship, Friendship, acquaintances, were welcome all" (Book III: 237, 247-248).

As the long summer vocation came, Wordsworth seized the opportunity to stop being remote from human life. He labeled himself as a "loiterer", for it was "enough to note / That here in dwarf proportions were expressed / The limbs of the great world" (Book III: 584-586). Among people he observed, the discharged soldier and the old blind beggar were impressive. In a visionary moment, Wordsworth saw this soldier clad in military garb:

Companionless,  
 No dog attending, by no staff sustained,  
 He stood, and in his very dress appeared  
 A desolation, a simplicity,  
 To which the trappings of a gaudy world  
 Make a strange back-ground (Book IV: 401-4-6).

In such visionary moments, unknown modes of being are sensed. At first, Wordsworth stood away and watched the soldier, then heard him telling his story "in demeanour calm" (Book IV: 442). Plain conversation triggered infinite trains of thought. Finally, when the soldier concluded with "My trust is in the God of Heaven, / And in the eye of him that passes me", Wordsworth saw a "ghastly mildness" from him (Book IV: 460-463). Few words really said, but each one softly spoke and well chosen. What affected Wordsworth more permanently was the peaceful flow of mind beneath the words, which left him a quiet heart. This moisture remained and was revealed again when he encountered the blind Beggar later in London. The Soldier's final words influenced him silently. He didn't wish to simply pass by or to be passed by this time. On the contrary, he gazed at "the shape of that unmoving man, His steadfast face and sightless eyes", "As if admonished from another world" (Book VII: 647-649). Voice was sheltered here compared with the description of the soldier. But most importantly, Wordsworth sensed a living part of the world from them. As a result, he witnessed the darkness and solitude of the ordinary and accept his own "solitude" silently. This would be another quiet mind precipitation.

### 2.3. *Speak to Nature*

Nature or the concrete manifestation of nature runs through Wordsworth's work. Nature is a space where no words are needed because nature calls one into a deeper place, beyond words and language. For Wordsworth, it is in nature that men could hear himself more clearly. When he was occupied by restless anxiety in real life, he turned to nature:

Ah! better far than this, to stray about  
 Voluptuously through fields and rural walks,  
 And ask no record of the hours, resigned  
 To vacant musing, unreprieved neglect  
 Of all things, and deliberate holiday. (Book I: 250-254)

With so much wanting in this world, he refused to be trapped in "vain perplexity" (Book I: 266) under the call of nature. He paid full attention to nature, and all his senses were opened in nature. At the very beginning of this poem, Wordsworth started with his feelings of gentle breeze. When he was seventeen, that sweet breeze still attracted him:

The fluttering breezes, fountains that run on  
 Murmuring so sweetly in themselves, obeyed  
 A like dominion, and the midnight storm  
 Grew darker in the presence of my eye:  
 Hence my obeisance, my devotion hence,  
 And hence my transport. (Book II: 376-381)

Taken as an example, the word “breeze” occurred sixteen times totally. It was described as gentle, soft, correspondent, fluttering, rippling, mild, quickening, straggling, etc. From this plain form in nature, an everlasting sensibility of Wordsworth to nature was reflected.

In addition, nature works rarely by signs and wonders, and what it matters in any case are things unsaid. Some timely utterance is offered from within the tacit, natural spectacle. And it requires “a capacity for response in the poet” to decode the utterance of nature (Hartman: 209). In nature, there were numerous sounds and voices exposing to human, but Wordsworth’s silence rendered them. Different from the sounds outside, the contrastive silence inside was the more attractive landscape which gripped the poet’s heart and mind: the moon hanging “naked in a firmament / Of azure without cloud” and “the billowy ocean, as it lay / All meek and silent” (Book XIV: 55-56). While the quietness and the motionless of the atmosphere seemed to deaden the entire landscape, the very silence and inactivity were at the same time accompanied with inaudible sound and lively activity. Silence and dynamics were unified. Enough attention to nature inspired Wordsworth to read nature and get nourishment silently. The silence in mind derived a certain sense of awe in return, which guided him to view nature with an awe. In *The Prelude*, the privileging power of silence is most conclusively articulated in the final climactic fourteenth book of the poem. Recounting his 1791 trip up Mount Snowdon, Wordsworth hinted at his self-silencing poetic ideal by way of depicting what he sees on the top of the mountain:

The Moon hung naked in a firmament  
Of azure without cloud, and at my feet  
Reed a silent sea of hoary mist.  
A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved  
All over this still ocean; and beyond,  
Far, far beyond, the lid vapors stretched,  
In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,  
Into the main Atlantic, that appeared  
To dwindle, and give up his majesty,  
Usurped upon far as the sight could reach. (Book XIV: 40-49)

Seeing this spectacular scene, Wordsworth was silent, not only because he developed a reverence for nature but also because he deeply realized the other side of nature, the destructive side. The calm sea could suddenly become turbulent, and storm might erupt at any time. Nature reflected the possibilities and changes of human existence. This was also approved by his attitude to the failed French Revolution. The connection between the adverse impact of the revolution and the destructive power of nature was narrated as below:

So I fared,  
Dragging all precepts, judgments, maxims. creeds,  
Like culprits to the bar; calling the wind,  
Suspiciously, to establish in plain day  
Her titles and her honours; now believing  
Now disbelieving; endlessly perplexed  
With impulse, motive, right and wrong, the ground  
Of obligation, what the rule and hence  
The sanction; till, demanding formal proof,  
And seeking it in every thing, I lost  
All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,  
Sick, wearied out with contrarities,  
Yielded up moral questions in despair. (Book XI: 295-307)

Here, it seemed that a contradictory feeling took up his mind and a crisis within his mind occurred. But as Gould stated, “silence is not just sensible, but the condition of sense” (Gould: 115). So did Wordsworth captured this kind of intellectual charm and calm delight brought by silence. Wordsworth soon reflected from inside and regained his passion through “a saving intercourse” with his true self and nature itself (Book XI: 343). Therefore, Wordsworth read nature comprehensively and thoroughly. Through quiet communication with nature, nature nourished him, more importantly, educated him and warned him by beauty and by fear[3-5].

### 3. Characteristics of Wordsworth's Silence

#### 3.1. *Silent but Responsive*

Wordsworth's silence is an active choice, not a negative silence which gives up communication. In Gould's opinion, "in the ideal of silence, is at once an ease or lightness of communicability of or by the subject and an ease or levity of communication between subjects: an ideal of relation that language, somehow, lacks" (Gould: 2). However, for Wordsworth, silence does not lead to the lack or loss of language. Instead, what lacks is audiences who really understand him. He is highly responsive and attentive to the outside. Meanwhile, he manages to keep silent in noises with effortful thinking and logic. This comes from the awe of the natural creation, the self-awareness of the limited self, and the courage to place oneself in the universe, which shows both the ambition and humility of the poet. As said by Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zi, the great beauty of heaven and earth is Silence. Wordsworth's silence delivers so much messages to all human being, for he recollects his silence and outputs it into such a great literature. This is also the greatness of his silent mind, which lies in his ability to keep silence and "share silence" simultaneously (Gould: 93).

#### 3.2. *Repetitive but Spiraling*

Each time, silence appears briefly. Sometimes, it is hard to be captured since it is easily lost in the hustle and bustle in the outside world unless silence is treated as an object in lines. But still, an extended impact is left and transformed into extended passion from the inside. It is a spiraling process of converge-diverge-converge, and in the end, "We feel that we are greater than we know" (Wordsworth, 1820, *The River Duddon: After-Thought*: 9).

In the twelfth and thirteenth book, Wordsworth conclude this great work with discussion of how imagination and taste are impaired and restored. In simple childhood, imagination spreads through Wordsworth. But as he enters Cambridge, "imagination slept, And yet not utterly" (Book III: 261-262). But having seen all the darkness in unstable world, imagination and taste is restored for there is always a bright side in his mind:

LONG time have human ignorance and guilt  
 Detained us, on what spectacles of woe  
 Compelled to look, and inwardly oppressed  
 With sorrow, disappointment, vexing thoughts,  
 Confusion of the judgment, zeal decayed,  
 And, lastly, utter loss of hope itself  
 And things to hope for! Not with these began  
 Our song, and not with these our song must end. (Book XII: 1-8)

Finished with profound sense of resolution and optimism, the power of silence will continue "to live, and act, and serve the future hour" (Wordsworth, *The River Duddon: After-Thought*: 11). The power of silence is gently used by Wordsworth and maintains for him as "a secret happiness" which provides him with complacency, peace and tender yearning and saves him from "these distracted times" (Book XII:39-43). If silence has a shape, it is a spiral. When it passes by people, it aids people by gathering up one's inner power, either imagination or taste[6-8].

### 4. Conclusion: Embrace Silence, Reflect in Silence

"Eloquent silence is a silence which says" (Gould: 193). *The Prelude's* ambivalent commitment to silence and passion in a surprising way. In Book III, Wordsworth parallels people with "ruminating creatures" (Book III: 43). In demure habitations, some creatures ruminate and reabsorb nutrients from food stored in the past. Similarly in the pure land of mind, human being, by meditating on the past, can nourish ourselves, obtain new energy through gathering up inner stillness, exploring actively, and in turn nourish our life through silence. Silence is therefore a spirit of stability and resilience, which furnishes human being with ability of reevaluate oneself. For Wordsworth, the essence of silence is consistent with his loyalty to his spontaneous overflow of emotions. To listen to silence is to gather inner stillness and passion, instead of cast silence into the abyss of absence. In the process of listening to silence and embracing silence, just like what Wordsworth has done with his responsive soul, men can dance with nature, talk to the other and get along with themselves even if chained to works and assignments in present days.

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