

Wordsworth as a Proto-Ecologist : With
Reference to 'the Book in Nature' and 'Nature
in the Book' (In Honour of Professor Masaaki
Yoshino On the Occasion of His Retirement)

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<https://doi.org/10.15017/1354664>

出版情報 : 英語英文学論叢. 49, pp.15-35, 1999-02. 九州大学英語英文学研究会
バージョン :
権利関係 :

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and 'Nature in the Book'

Shoichi Yamauchi

The 'Nature' of the English Romantics, especially of Wordsworth, has a dual character: it is, on one hand, nature as a material existence and it is nature as a spiritual existence on the other.

Wordsworth's personal experiences and his poetry as the records of those experiences repeatedly assert the poet's convictions thus: a Soul/Spirit presides over Nature and there is a perpetual intercourse between that Soul/Spirit and the soul/spirit of man through the interventions of spirits living in every natural object. In this sense Nature for Wordsworth is something more than a mere material world.

When we discuss Wordsworth's characteristics as a Proto-Ecologist, we should keep in mind the distinct difference between the poet's way of seeing nature and that of most of the modern ecologists who tend to be heavily biased in favour of scientific / materialistic ways of thinking.

Wordsworth says in the fifth Book of *The Prelude*, 1805, subtitled "Books": "A gracious spirit o'er this earth presides, / And o'er the heart of man: invisibly/It comes, directing those to works of love / Who care not, know not, think not, what they do (ll. 516-19)." These lines imply that "A gracious spirit", according to the poet, keeps its benevolent influence either on the natural world, on the human world, or on the world of books. For Wordsworth the 'true' book, therefore, must contain in it the kind of spiritual power that Nature-God shows in the natural and human worlds.

Just as the communion between the poet and Nature is a spiritual one in essence, so is the intercourse between the poet and the book: for Wordsworth 'reading' means, in the true sense of the word, the commun-

ion between “A deathless spirit” (*The Prelude*, 1805, V, 17) of the reader and the *genius loci* that lives in the book as a *locus*. In this line of the poet’s thinking the book, if it deserves the name of ‘the book’, comes very close to Nature itself. This is what the poet tries to say in such seemingly mysterious lines as: “Visionary power / Attends upon the motions of the winds / Embodied in the mystery of words (*The Prelude*, 1805, V, 519–21).”

It is interesting, and significant as well, that what is essentially the same as Wordsworth’s animistic way of seeing Nature as a spiritual book can be seen in the words of an American Indian, who says: “We Indians live in a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and the commonplace are one. To you symbols are just words, spoken or written in a book. To us they are part of nature, part of ourselves, even little insects like ants and grasshoppers ”(*The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, 1996, p. 256). Thus it is that Wordsworth, as a forerunner of this American Indian shaman, may be called ‘Proto-Ecologist’.