

NEOCLASSICISM AND ROMANTICISM: A READING OF FRENEAU'S "THE WILD HONEY SUCKLE"

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Writing in 1908, Paul Elmer More praised the "unearthly loveliness" of Freneau's "The Wild Honey Suckle" but noted that "even a clever journeyman's hand could alter a word here and there for the better." The poem combines, he said, "something of Wordsworth's moralising love of the less honoured flowers with Keats's relish of fragility" and possesses "the slender brittleness of a costly vase, marred in the burning." To More, Freneau's significance lay in his "hints and anticipations"¹ of the Romantics rather than in the quality of the verse itself. Today, nearly seventy years later, criticism of Freneau's best known lyric has not progressed much beyond such generally evaluative and comparative statements. Lewis Leary, for instance, sees the poem as evidence of its author's rebellion against the style and influence of Pope,² and Hyatt Waggoner concurs. "The Wild Honey Suckle," he says, is "worth reading once if only to get the full impact of its memorable final couplet," which he finds "probably the best lines Freneau ever wrote." In his assessment of Freneau as a transitional poet, "imitative of the old mode, not yet fully aware of, or able to create, the new romantic mode,"³ Waggoner sums up the insights of a century and a half of critical commentary on the best known and most accomplished poet of our early national period.

As a general attitude toward Freneau's poetry, this approach moves toward its logical (or, as I would contend, illogical) specific conclusion in the comments on "The Wild Honey Suckle" provided by the editors of *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, to date the fullest explication of the poem. From neoclassicism, they suggest, Freneau derived a lamentable tendency "toward direct statement, moralizing illustration, and frank didacticism." These tendencies undermine the effectiveness of even his most highly regarded lyric, which they characterize as "a slight poetic fabric" in which "the thinking does not provide a justification for the emotions that Freneau means for his readers to feel"; it is in their view a sentimental poem

exhibiting "a superficial reaction rather than presenting a profound insight." To substantiate this evaluation, they focus upon Freneau's handling of the great Romantic theme of consciousness and conclude that his verses "hardly raise the question of man's peculiar status as a being rooted in nature and yet who also stands outside nature, with his moral being, his power of choice, his sense of the past, and his vision—joyful or foreboding—of what the future may bring."⁴ One part of Freneau's problem they locate in his failure to understand or at least to express his awareness that "Unpitying frosts"⁵ are as much a part of nature as are her "guardian shade" (9) and her "soft waters" (10), a potentially tragic paradox which measures man's consciousness and, in so doing, his intellectual separateness from nature. This sort of knowledge, which the Romantic poet finds it impossible to disavow and out of which "issues his poetry," could have saved "The Wild Honey Suckle." Without it, the poem becomes just another partially successful exercise in "sentiment and gentle melancholy."⁶

One hardly knows how to begin responding to this analysis. To start with a general (and perhaps personal) reaction, one might object to the use of the phrase "profound insight," which seems to confuse the provinces of poetry and philosophy; one hesitates, in any case, to call much great art profound, and certainly it is not profundity of thought that we look for first in literature, although we may occasionally find it. Nor can we separate this consideration from other, specifically literary matters: tone, form, imagery, and so on. If we wish to establish the depth of Freneau's perception, then, we shall first have to deal with these literary questions in more detail than the editors referred to, despite the length of their reading, did.

Of more importance are the implicit assumptions that Freneau inherited only the negative aspects of neoclassicism and that the only merit the poem can possess must be understood in terms of Romantic themes and attitudes. Here we would do well to observe Northrop Frye's *caveat*, written apropos of Freneau's immediate British contemporaries Blake, Chatterton, and Smart, that the labels "transitional Romantic" and "pre-Romantic" commit us to a chronological absurdity at the outset and require us to regard one poet's work as the fulfillment of another's.⁷ Searching for evidence of Romanticism, we may miss the excellence of a work written in another style and according to a different set of artistic assumptions. This, I believe, is what has happened to "The Wild Honey Suckle"; we have both praised and faulted it for the wrong reason, the extent to which it does or does not anticipate Romantic nature poetry. Considered instead in terms of the tradition Freneau inherited rather than the one he could not know was coming

(but which he helped give shape to), the poem possesses merits which have as yet gone undiscerned. That there are neoclassical dimensions to Freneau's poetry is, of course, an old observation, but one that is still productive, as I want to demonstrate, of useful insights into specific works.

Even to a casual reader, certain neoclassical elements of "The Wild Honey Suckle" are immediately apparent. Perhaps most obvious is the diction, which fails to particularize description or to make it integral to the feelings of the speaker as we are accustomed to finding it in romantic poetry. It is not even necessary that the flower be a honeysuckle; it could as easily be a rhodora or a pale violet growing in a "silent, dull retreat" (2) sheltered by a "guardian shade" (9) and watered by a "murmuring" stream (10). Its meaning, too, is universal and generally applicable rather than private and personal. It is a type of all frail beauty and, by implication, of the brevity of life itself.⁸ Indeed, to the extent that Freneau's language is specific, it creates a problem in the poem, for it is not completely clear what the flower's isolation—the theme of stanza one—has to do with the shortness of its life span in stanza four; the two are related but not necessarily inevitably interdependent ideas. As we shall see, Freneau's method of linking them is ingenious and constitutes perhaps the most striking feature of his lyric.

More fundamental, at least for the purposes of the present paper, is the strong sense of literature as product that dominates the poem. In part, this is the result of the speaker's distance from the flower. Only once does he permit emotion to break through the structure of thought, and even then it is associated with an idea: "Smit with those charms that must decay" (13). Intellectual control is quickly regained and distance reestablished through an allusion to the flowers of Eden (15-16), and the honeysuckle becomes again an object to inspire thought rather than sympathetic involvement.

Freneau's rhymes also contribute to our sense of the poem as an artifact, a Grecian Urn, as it were, in its relative permanence set against the perishability of the honeysuckle. According to Northrop Frye, this attitude towards art expresses itself most overtly in poetry in the choice of the heroic couplet, a self-contained thought unit whose latent ideas often inhere in the form itself and whose devices of meaning are primarily functional within a closed structure.⁹ Although one critic has seen the rhymes of "The Wild Honey Suckle" as evidence of Freneau's tendencies toward romanticism,¹⁰ we would do better, I think, to regard them in a neoclassical context. Even though

they pair up across intervening lines (except at the end of each stanza), most of them reveal the same emphasis upon closed thought units and compressed meanings that we find in Pope. Often they work by ironic juxtaposition: "decay" (13) rhymes with "gay" (15), for instance, "doom" (14) with "bloom" (16), and "power" (17) with "flower" (18). Sometimes the contrast depends upon puns or already latent ironies, as when the buried light image of "arrayed" (7) is matched against "shade" (9), itself already suggestive of death.¹¹ Other rhymes intensify ideas: "grow" (1) and "blow" (3), "goes" (11) and "repose" (12), and "hour" (23) and "flower" (24). In addition, when Freneau alters the rhyme scheme, there is as good a reason for it as there is in Pope. Thus he destroys the pattern he has created and flaws his artifact by using identical rhymes for lines 17, 18, 23, and 24; in so doing, he calls attention to the final couplet as an intensification of the thought in the last couplet of stanza three and demonstrates even as he 'pens his concluding lines that beautiful objects, whether man-made or natural, are indeed fragile.

Of course, as Frye points out, romantic poetry is also typically product literature, but "The Wild Honey Suckle" differs from romantic product in two significant ways. One is that it does not assert the primacy of the creative imagination or subordinate external to psychological landscape; image and idea remain distinct realms and are tangent (not intervolved) only at points established by the intellect. The second is that the poem does not possess the circularity which M. H. Abrams identifies as the distinctive structural feature of the greater romantic lyric, a category that includes many of the works we recognize as the great achievements of English romantic poetry.¹² Instead it progresses lineally through a steady accretion of insight to its final poignant couplet, which indirectly but unmistakably relates the honeysuckle's perishability to man's life:

The space between, is but an hour,
The frail duration of a flower. (23-24)

Indeed, in terms of the underlying theme of the death of beautiful things, to have employed a circular structure would have been a mistake, for the circle, emblematic of eternity and of life returning out of death, would have undercut the somber wisdom of this couplet.

To unite the elements of his lyric, Freneau relies upon the developing perception of his speaker or persona, who functions within the self-contained world of the verses without inviting reference to the author's attitudes and is thus an important aspect—perhaps, in fact, the most important aspect—of the poem as product.¹³ In the first

stanza, the speaker seems an intruder into a pre-lapsarian Garden equally remote from the haunts of men and from the domain of time. It is a world of unreal stasis, of negative qualities which implicitly deny the finiteness associated with Lockean sensationalism: "*Untouched* thy honied blossoms blow, / *Unseen* thy little branches greet" (3-4; my italics). Motion and activity, specifically human activity—the "roving foot" (5) and the "busy hand" (6)—are the enemies of beauty, but since these have not been admitted into the Garden, the flower seems safe in a metaphorical world elsewhere. As in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," moreover, time also appears to be motionless and static. All the verbs directly connected with the flower are in the present tense: "grow" (1), "blow" (3), and "greet" (4); the past participles "hid" (2), "untouched" (3), and "unseen" (4) function as adjectives to describe the present condition of the flower, and the future constructions, "shall bruise" (5) and "[shall] provoke" (6), refer to threats of extinction which do not exist in the wild Garden that the speaker has discovered. Since both the participial and the future tense elements of this stanza relate as much to man as to the honeysuckle, the temporary suspension of time that the language creates reflects man's absence rather than a real condition of nature itself.

In this context, we can appreciate an irony which the speaker does not seem to be aware of. If the flower's survival depends upon its remoteness from man, then by trespassing upon its domain the speaker himself undercuts the image of beauty he has created; at the very moment he describes the flower as "unseen" (4), he is reporting the fact of his perception to us. He brings time into the Garden, though he does not yet understand what his presence signifies. At a more explicit level, the predominance of negatives also suggests the unreality of the honeysuckle's beauty, as if it could only endure as an ideal beyond the world of physical sensation. The Garden habitat is defined more by the qualities it lacks than by those it possesses. At best, it represents a partial view of the interconnections among man, time, and nature, one that is gradually enlarged in the succeeding stanzas.

That expansion of vision and understanding commences in the second stanza, in which the past tense predominates as the speaker views the flower as an object of nature subject to natural laws. Although Nature has cared for her offspring by arraying it in white (a color that suggests both purity and death), sheltering it, and watering it, she has also fated it to fade according to the same fundamental laws of life by which she nurtured it. As the speaker's ear becomes more acutely attuned to the sounds of the natural world, he can detect the "murmuring" (10) of the waters, suggestive of the flow of time,¹⁴ in

what he previously thought to be a "silent . . . retreat" (2). Sensation and motion are once again associated with time and death and lead metaphorically to the participial construction in the final line of the verse: "Thy days *declining* to repose" (12; my italics).

The speaker now knows what he did not consider in the initial stanza, that beauty fades and decays. He is "smit" (13) by the knowledge and grieves to see the "future doom" (14) of the honeysuckle. His allusion to the death of the flowers of Eden (15-16) functions both as consolation to himself and the flower and as an explanation for the passing of beautiful things; it brings man, time, and nature together in a cause-effect relationship that was only implicit in the first stanza. Man's busy hands, performing precisely the same act from which the speaker imagined the honeysuckle safe in stanza one, the picking of a plant, brought time and death into the world. When man fell, nature fell with him, and because of this, beauty cannot long exist in a post-lapsarian garden. At this point, we can better perceive the irony latent in the speaker's intrusion into the Garden in the first stanza, for in mythic terms he is Adam arriving in an Eden which he will shortly despoil, even though he does not pick the flower himself. Like Adam, he has come from innocence to a knowledge of death and at least an implicit awareness of his own indirect involvement (mythically, through Adam's Fall) in the demise of the honeysuckle.

This maturation of the speaker's understanding depends upon and is regulated by his consciousness of time, which is in turn measured by the aging of the honeysuckle. His insight grows with the plant, so to speak, though neither he nor it becomes perceptibly older in terms of the actual elapsed time of the poem. He comes upon the flower in springtime, as the verb "blow"—i.e., to bud or to blossom—indicates; its petals emblemize youth as well as beauty. But this first stanza is the only one firmly attached by imagery to the present moment of discovery. By the second stanza, he has projected the flower's "summer" (11) existence ending in decline, and by the third his temporal perspective has expanded to include autumn and winter: "Unpitying frosts and autumn's power, / Shall leave no vestige of this flower" (17-18). As the unreal, timeless world of the first stanza seemed to depend upon the imagination and figurative language to sustain it, so the fullness of the speaker's knowledge is the result of the operation of memory; he has seen other plants perish, and he knows that this one will, too.

Once the mythological and temporal frames of reference have been admitted by the speaker, time and decay move even more rapidly in

his mind than they did in the first three stanzas. The imagery of transience intensifies. No longer a child of generic Mother Nature fading as the seasons pass, the honeysuckle is now the offspring of "morning suns and evening dews" (19), a parentage which diminishes its life span from a year to a day; later, in the famous final couplet, it will shrink to the space of an hour. So, too, the reiterated word "nothing" of line 21 ironically echoes and intensifies the negatives of stanza one. The assertion that the flower came from nothing and will soon return to nothing makes explicit the unreality that was postulated but not recognized by the speaker in the first stanza. His identification of the flower's end as a return to its point of origin seems intended to recall Genesis 3:19, God's pronouncement that Adam and Eve are condemned to a life of labor until they "return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou *art* and unto dust shalt thou return," an oblique allusion which strengthens the Edenic overtones of the poem and underscores the tension between pre- and post-lapsarian gardens.

So delicately woven a fabric of image and allusion, of modulating verbals and meaningful rhymes, inevitably suggests that Freneau's artistic awareness must have been functioning at an unusually high level for him to have woven it. While that raises a question which, in the absence of personal testimony regarding the composition of the piece, cannot be answered definitely, it seems worth pointing out that the three changes the poet made between the first version, printed in the *Columbian Herald* on July 6, 1786, and the final one in *Poems* (1795) tend to support the reading advanced in this paper and to indicate that Freneau fully understood the poetic logic of the lyric he had created. The second line of the poem, originally published as "Hid in this dreary dark retreat," became "Hid in this silent dull retreat" in *Miscellaneous Works* (1788), a change that adds one more negative quality, the absence of sound, to the image of the unreal Garden that controls the initial stanza; "dreary" and "dark" are exchanged for the vaguer "dull," which ominously foreshadows rather than overtly states the contrast between the flower as viewed by man's imagination and as an object of nature. The flower is gay and bright, but the rest of the surrounding landscape, its retreat, is dull. The remainder of the poem develops the speaker's insight into the implications of this dullness for the life of the blossom. The second change in this line, then, seems to have been made in the interests of greater poetic subtlety and of sustaining the speaker's lack of awareness of the irony involved in his descriptive language.

The two remaining alterations seem even more significant. For the 1788 *Miscellaneous Works*, Freneau changed line 12, "Thy life reclining to repose," to its present form, "Thy days declining to repose." The altered alliterative pattern shifts phonetic emphasis from "repose" to "declining," a verbal indicating presentness moving towards pastness, in keeping with the underlying temporal pattern of the poem; similarly, the substitution of the synecdoche "days" for the literal "life" stresses the flower's brevity of existence and looks forward to stanza four and the plant's parentage of "morning suns and evening dews." Despite this early change, the full significance of the temporal movement seems to have dawned only gradually on Freneau, for in the same 1788 text he altered his final line, which initially read "The empty image of a flower," to "The mere idea of a flower," which seems to validate the reading already given of the first stanza but ignores the speaker's consciousness of time and the processes of decay. Between that year and 1795, however, Freneau obviously re-read his lyric with fresh insight, and in his revised line, "The frail duration of a flower," managed to combine a tactile sensation recalling the "untouched" of stanza one with a word indicative of the speaker's temporal awareness.¹⁵

Through the developing consciousness of the speaker, then, the parts of "The Wild Honey Suckle" fit together. Despite its theme and subject matter, it is not a romantic poem: intellect and feeling do not coalesce, image and idea remain essentially separate and discrete. But as neoclassical artifact, the work succeeds quite well, utilizing rhyme and persona to create an object which both contrasts with the frailty of the flower and, in its altered rhyme scheme, underlines the delicacy and the precariousness of any form of beauty. The poem may well be marred, as Paul Elmer More contended, but the flaw appears to be deliberate and is functional in any case. Had Freneau often written at this level or had he even matched his success in a half dozen other lyrics, he would today stand as a respected poet in his own right rather than as a writer possessing mainly historical interest. It can indeed be said that with this poem he brought American (and helped to bring English) poetry to the Romantic point of departure, the sense of loss that inspires reminiscence and makes possible Romantic inter involvement with nature. But we need not search for adumbrations of Romanticism in order to justify our taking "The Wild Honey Suckle" seriously; the lyric is its own excuse for being.

NOTES

¹ "Philip Freneau," *Shelburne Essays*, Fifth Series (New York and London, 1908), pp. 95-97.

² *That Rascal Freneau: A Study in Literary Failure* (Rutgers, 1941), p. 144. For Leary's more recent estimate of "The Wild Honey Suckle" as "an almost flawless evocation of mood," see his "Philip Freneau" in *Major Writers of Early American Literature*, ed. Everett H. Emerson (Madison, 1972), p. 262. All in all, I find Leary's essay the single best critical article yet written on Freneau, one that recognizes the poet's strengths as well as his weaknesses.

³ *American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present* (Boston, 1968), pp. 30-31.

⁴ For a more detailed analysis of this aspect of Romanticism, see M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York, 1965); repr. *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, 1970), pp. 201-29.

⁵ "The Wild Honey Suckle," *The Poems of Philip Freneau: Poet of the American Revolution*, ed. Fred Lewis Pattee (Princeton, 1903), II, 306-07, 1. 17. Further references to Freneau's poem are to this edition and will be indicated by line number only.

⁶ *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, ed. Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren (New York, 1973), I, 206-10.

⁷ "Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility," *ELH*, 23 (June, 1956), 144-52; repr. *Eighteenth-Century English Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. James L. Clifford, Jr. (New York, 1959), p. 311.

⁸ There is, indeed, a sense in which the poem resembles certain seventeenth-century meditative lyrics and emblem poems, although it lacks the concern with salvation of the one and the arbitrary symbolism of the other. For the connection between meditative literature and Romantic poetry, see Abrams, pp. 224-29.

⁹ Frye, p. 313.

¹⁰ V. E. Gibbons, "A Note on Three Lyrics by Philip Freneau," *Modern Language Notes*, 60 (1945), 121-24.

¹¹ Note Freneau's use of shade and shadow imagery to suggest death in "To a Caty-Did," where similar double meanings function.

¹² Abrams, p. 201.

¹³ The persona also functions in Romantic poetry of product, as Frye, pp. 313-15, points out.

¹⁴ Murmuring waters also suggest the passage of time in another of Freneau's poems, "The Vernal Ague."

¹⁵ Leary, "Philip Freneau," notes these changes on p. 263 and suggests that they are significant, though he does not specify their importance.

