

## Wordsworth's Ballad, *The Idiot Boy*

Tadayoshi Kuroiwa

The long poem, *The Idiot Boy* is unmistakably one of Wordsworth's ballad-type poems. This ballad was composed in 1798, the same year to which *The Thorn* belongs. *The Idiot Boy* is full of a highly mirthful buoyant tone as much as *The Thorn* is of a somber tone resonant with mournful cries. This poem under review makes us expect from the very beginning something extraordinary to take place, as the story goes on. The poem begins with these lines which convey to us a feeling of uncertainty and strange suddenness, but the tone of these lines is never heavy and gloomy:

'Tis eight o'clock, — a clear March night,  
The Moon is up — the Sky is blue,  
The Owlet in the moonlight air,  
He shouts from nobody knows where;  
He lengthens out his lonely shout,  
Halloo! halloo! a long halloo!

— Why bustle thus about your door,  
What means this bustle, Betty Foy?  
Why are you in this mighty fret?  
And why on horseback have you set  
Him whom you love, your Idiot Boy?  
Beneath the Moon that shines so bright,  
Till she is tired, let Betty Foy  
With girt and stirrup fiddle-faddle;  
But wherefore set upon a saddle  
Him whom she loves, her Idiot Boy?

(Stanzas 1-3.)<sup>1</sup>

Wordsworth after thus introducing the sedulous mother and her idiot boy whom she dearly loves and entirely trusts goes on to tell next that the boy is going to be sent on horseback by her mother on a mission of importance at midnight along a street where nobody is seen walking under the full moon:

There's scarce a soul that's out of bed;  
Good Betty, put him down again;  
His lips with joy they burr at you;  
But, Betty! what has he to do  
with stirrup, saddle, or with rein?  
The world will say 'tis very idle,  
Bethink you of the time of night;

1. I am following the text of the 1805 edition of *The Lyrical Ballads* in making quotations from *The Idiot Boy*.

There's not a mother, no not one,  
But when she hears what you have done,  
O Betty, she'll be in a fright.

But Betty's bent on her intent;  
For her good neighbour, Susan Gale,  
Old Susan, she who dwells alone,  
Is sick, and makes a piteous moan,  
As if her very life would fail.

There's not a house within a mile,  
No hand to help them in distress;  
Old Susan lies a-bed in pain,  
And sorely puzzled are the twain,  
For what she ails they cannot guess.

(Stanzas 4-7.)

The poor idiot boy's mission is to call for the doctor for the ailing old woman, Susan Gale, the neighbour of Betty Foy, whose husband is away from home working in the wood as a woodman. Betty Foy fully believes in her son, though he is a downright idiot. She has no fears about her son if he might get astray on the road. Here a tragi-comedy of the consequences of the idiot boy's mission is in store as the present story will show. Our poet prepares himself to present this tragi-comical side of the whole story in a slow but steady development of his narrative:

Poor Susan moans, poor Susan groans;  
"As sure as there's a moon in heaven,"  
Cries Betty, "he'll be back again;  
They'll both be here — 'tis almost ten —  
They'll both be here before eleven."

Poor Susan moans, poor Susan groans;  
The clock gives warning for eleven;  
'Tis on the stroke — "If Johnny's near,"  
Quoth Betty, "he will soon be here,  
As sure as there's a moon in heaven."

(Stanzas 31-32.)

Soon the mother's overconfidence in her darling son begins to prove not well founded, because the expected hour for Johnny's return from the Doctor's house is long past but no sight of the idiot boy is on the road under the full winter moon:

The clock is on the stroke of one;  
But neither Doctor nor his Guide  
Appear along the moonlight road;  
There's neither horse nor man abroad,  
And Betty's still at Susan's side.

(Stanza 37.)

The mother's anxiety increases; she is overcome by worry, which drives all

thought of reproach from her. Both she and Susan recognizes despite Susan's illness, that Betty's first duty is to set out to look for Johnny, and therefore off she goes leaving Susan to care for herself:

So, through the moonlight lane she goes  
 And far into the moonlight dale;  
 And how she ran, and how she walked,  
 And all that to herself she talked,  
 Would surely be a tedious tale.

(Stanza 43.)

In telling the tale of how Susan Gale is lying ill moaning, and how the over-confident mother sends out her idiot boy on horseback to call for the Doctor at such a midnight hour, and how the boy who is placed on horseback sets out joyfully, and how the ailing old woman and the anxious mother begin to have fears about the fate of the boy when they find that he does not come back with the Doctor at the expected hour, Wordsworth uses his lively touches that are fit to present the scene: where the joyful boy trots along on his horse under the moon and later the anxious mother is hastening along on foot on the midnight road to find out her maybe straying boy. Such a clever effect of realistically presenting the scenes of the tale was never produced in any old ballads. The boy is just on the horse to set off on his dear mission:

And now that Johnny is just going,  
 Though Betty's in a mighty flurry,  
 She gently pats the Pony's side,  
 On which her Idiot Boy must ride,  
 And seems no longer in a hurry.

But when the Pony moved his legs,  
 Oh! then for the poor Idiot Boy!  
 For joy he cannot hold the bridle,  
 For joy his head and heels are idle,  
 He's idle all for very joy.

And while the pony moves his legs,  
 In Johnny's left hand you may see  
 The green bough's motionless and dead:  
 The Moon that shines above his head  
 Is not more still and mute than he.

(Stanzas 16-18.)

Wordsworth never failed to give the internal workings of the anxious, vexed mother, as she hastens on full of fears about the safety of her poor idiot boy and with her half-angry thoughts at the illness of her neighbour woman:

She's past the bridge that's in the dale,  
 And now the thought torments her sore,  
 Johnny perhaps horse forsook,  
 To hunt the moon that's in the brook.

And never will be heard of more.  
 And how she's high upon the down,  
 alone amid a prospect wide;  
 There's neither Johnny nor his Horse  
 Among the fern or in the gorse;  
 There's neither Doctor nor his Guide.  
 "Oh saints! what is become of him?  
 Perhaps he's climbed into an oak,  
 Where he will stay till he is dead;  
 Or, sadly he has been misled,  
 And joined the wandering gypsey-folk.  
 Or him that wicked Pony's carried  
 To the dark cave, the goblin's hall;  
 Or in the castle he's pursuing,  
 Among the ghosts his own undoing;  
 Or playing with the waterfall."  
 At poor old Susan then she railed,  
 While to the town she posts away;  
 "If Susan had not been so ill,  
 Alas! I should have had him still.  
 My Johnny, till my dying day."

(Stanzas 45-49.)

Betty, after long and frantic searches, comes across her boy on the stolid little pony, not galloping madly across the hilltops, but standing stock still by the waterfall. All Betty's terrors vanish, and with them all ghastly possibilities. She sees at once how foolish her fears had been; the pony was reliable. She should have known that all would be well with her boy on this trusty animal. Wordsworth makes it quite clear that everything is entirely well. He mocks at the tales we read of 'in romances', and says of the idiot boy, 'It is no goblin, 'tis no ghost' — it is only Johnny, sitting here quite unperturbed upon his pony, quite unaware of all the trouble he has caused.

On the way back home, Betty asks her son what he did and saw on his travels. His reply is quite simple. His thoughts are full of the owls and the moon:

"The Cocks did crow to-who, to-who,  
 And the Sun did shine so cold".  
 Thus answered Johnny in his glory,  
 And that was all his travel's story.

(Stanza 95.)

The above two lines are forceful, as they reveal at one stroke the night-time world, seen in terms of the day. When Johnny had hardly seen the night, had probably been ambling on in his day-dream, with the voices of the owls in his ears. In these few lines we have a sudden, clear vision of the innocent idiot boy telling the truth about what he has seen and heard. These lines are the poem's

crowning success. When we come here at the end of the homely ballad, we see that they are the spark that kindles the whole tale. Wordsworth's pen has added the last droll effect to the whole story.

And, the owls and the moonlight, indeed, constitute the saving beauties of this poem. The whole poem is bathed in the moonlight from eight o'clock till five in the night. 'The owls give the vocal accompaniment to the Idiot Boy' tramping horse's sounds. With the owlets in the moonlight air the poem commences and it ends with an elaboration of the half-witted boy's frank remark that "the Cocks did crow and the moon did shine so cold." The lucid scene is set against the background of the oncoming dawn:

By this the stars were almost gone,  
The moon was setting on the hill,  
So pale you scarcely looked at her:  
The little birds began to stir  
Though yet their tongues were still.

(Stanza 83.)

We have seen how the poem fulfils a few of Wordsworth's aims laid down in his 1800 Preface. The poem is carried on in the ballad form. It is in a simple, popular ballad meter, like many of the other poems in the *Lyrical Ballads*, and the rhymes are simple and repetitive, sometimes even crude, like those of a street song. The language too is simple and conversational. The second stanza is a good example in point:

Why bustle thus about your door,  
What means this bustle, Betty Foy?  
Why are you in this mighty fret?  
And why on horseback have you set  
Him whom you love, your Idiot Boy?

(Stanza 2.)

The repetitive phrases consisting of "why" and "what" used in close connection contribute directly to the lightsome atmosphere of the ballad. The same artifice is seen in the following lines too:

There is no need of boot or spur,  
There is no need of whip or wand  
For Johnny has his holly-bough,  
And with a hurly-burly now  
He shakes the green bough in his hand.

(Stanza 12.)

And again,

Poor Susan moans, poor Susan groans;  
"As sure as there's a moon in heaven,"  
Cries Betty, "he'll be back again:  
They'll both be here 'tis almost ten—

They'll both be here before eleven."  
(Stanza 31.)

The present poem may appear easy and even crude, but the easy flow of rhythms is beautiful in some parts.<sup>1</sup> In the 1800 Preface, Wordsworth says that each of his poems is written with a purpose. However trivial a poem may seem, he says it has a moral behind it, which can be found if people care to look. The purpose behind this particular poem is partly at least a desire to make people think and feel more humanely and sympathetically about idiot boys, and to show that they have their place in society, and are a cause of as much joy as sorrow; in expressing these notions, Wordsworth was years ahead of his time, and they do show a superior and more kindly sentiment than that of most people.

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1. In reference to the present poem I may note that some recent writers on Wordsworth have made remarks not so much favourable to the author. For instance, H. M. Margoliouth says in his *Wordsworth and Coleridge* as follows: "It is in *The Idiot Boy*, much the longest of Wordsworth's contributions to the book [Lyrical Ballads], that the strength as well as the weakness of his ballads is most clearly seen. The story is nothing, and Byron, who wrote of 'the idiot mother of an idiot boy' and made other even ruder remarks, was saying what many felt and feel. Yet Wordsworth does get right inside his characters. The ballad does contain 'a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents,' or, to look forward from the 1798 'Advertisement' to the 1800 'Preface,' Wordsworth does make the 'incidents of common life interesting by tracing them ... the primary laws of our nature.'" (H. M. Margoliouth: *Wordsworth and Coleridge 1795-1834*, p. 37. Oxford University Press, 1966.) But I think rather find the poem to be full of humour, a characteristic trait that is lacking in his other major poems. Therefore I am inclined to regard this poem as one of his good poems. Prof. H. Darbishire in his *The Poet Wordsworth* makes a remark implying his appreciation of Wordsworth's range of poetical styles which are both low and high. He says, "As poetic artist Wordsworth was a bold experimenter, and he and his resounding failures as well as his supreme successes; but his skill and range are great, and have not been fully recognized. In diction he moves from the low familiar style of *The Idiot Boy*, where the owls hobnob, and Betty Foy fiddle-faddles, to the majestic Miltonic heights of *The Recluse*." (H. Darbishire: *The Poet Wordsworth*, p. 174. Oxford University Press, 1966.)

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