

# Emotions Recollected in Tranquility: Wordsworth's Concept of Poetic Creation

---

Faria Saeed Khan\*

## Abstract:

*Wordsworth believes that artistic composition is a combination of thought and emotion. During the poetic process, the poet is possessed by powerful passions but he undergoes a period of emotions recollected in tranquility. During this process the influxes of feelings are modified and directed by thoughts. The direction of thought adds a depth of meaning and truth to poetry. For Wordsworth poetry is a method of interpreting reality or the meaning of life.*

## Discussion

The literary historians criticize the Romantics for being too emotional. They quote Wordsworth's famous statement, 'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (Wordsworth,1989:57) as evidence but overlook Wordsworth's entire and integral creative process of which emotions are a part. Wordsworth makes this statement twice in his **Preface to the Lyrical Ballads**, but each time continues the sentence and qualifies it. The first time he continues 'but though this be true, poems to which any value is attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, has also thought long and deep...' (Wordsworth,1989:57) The second time Wordsworth continues: 'Poetry takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears and an emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation is gradually produced and does itself actually exist in the mind' (Wordsworth,1989:73) First in response to nature's beauty or terror an emotion wells up spontaneously, without thought. At this stage the senses are overwhelmed by experience, the powerful feelings leave an individual incapable of articulating the nature and beauty of the event. It is only when this emotion is 'recollected in tranquility' (Wordsworth,1989:73) that the poet can assemble words to do the instance justice. It is necessary for poet to have a certain personal distance from the event or experience being described. With this distance the poet can reconstruct the experience caused within himself. According to D. Nichol Smith, 'all that was vital on Wordsworth's knowledge had been revealed through feelings. They provided the condition in which knowledge would come. Only as the imagination was then brought into play could he see into the life of things. Imagination is the power that leads us to truth. It is at once vision and reconstruction. (Smith,1968: p.16).

---

\* Assistant Prof. Department of English, University of Baluchistan, Quetta.

Wordsworth says that the emotion is allowed to arise and is witnessed along with the sense impressions, while in the open meditative state it is then thought long and deep 'recollected in tranquility' (Wordsworth, 1968:16) and held in mind until its meaning is communicated. On one hand poetry is the product of feelings, but spontaneous feelings will only produce good poetry if they occur in a person of natural genius or sensitivity, and also if that person has thought long and deep, because such thoughts direct and shape our emotions. Wordsworth says in **Preface to the Lyrical Ballads** that our 'continued influxes of feelings are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are the representatives of all our past feelings; and by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other we discover what is really important to men'. (Wordsworth, 1989:57) From Wordsworth's statement it appears that he does not believe in spontaneous composition but in composition undertaken in tranquil contemplation of previously experienced emotion.

This process in which the mind moves from physical sensation to spontaneous emotion and then gradually through contemplation or memory to a second purified emotion, is what Wordsworth calls imagination or imaginative process. For Wordsworth imagination is combination of sensation, memory and thought. The first phase of the imaginative process is passive perceptive of sensation. It is simply stimulation brought about by one's senses. Wordsworth begins the imaginative process through physical sensation as he describes the landscape of the Abbey.

These waters, rolling from their mountain springs with  
A soft inland murmur.

The lines from **Tintern Abbey** draw attention to the poet's perception of the sights and sounds of the scene, they are simple spontaneous observations. In the second stanza Wordsworth recalls his recollection of the landscape:

These beauteous forms  
Through a long absence, have not been to me  
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye ( 23-25).

The above lines suggest that the poet now look upon the scenes with a 'blind man's eye' (cited in Sarker, 2004:24) which would be through memory. Just as a blind man can remember in his mind what he once saw, but cannot rely upon the physical sensation of sight, the poet enters the second stage of imaginative process when sensation disappears and the species of reaction or memory develops. Wordsworth describes this transition from physical sensation to memory in lines 27/31 of **Tintern Abbey**.

.... I have owed to them  
In hours of weariness, sensation sweet.  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart.  
With tranquil restoration....

Wordsworth begins a journey inward through his childhood memory. As a child Wordsworth believes that he was once one with nature. Therefore, by indulging in the memory he hopes to reunite himself with nature which would allow him to create through the process of imagination. As he travels back into his memory, he gradually refines the first emotion into the second. He discovers that the second emotion is when he can '*look on nature not as in the hour/Of thoughtless youth; but hearing often times/The still, sad music of humanity*'. Moreover Wordsworth reaches a zenith of thought:

And now with gleams of half extinguished thought,  
With many recognitions dim and faint.  
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,  
The picture of mind revives again:  
While I stand, not only with the sense  
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts  
That in this moment there is life and food  
For future years.

Wordsworth can foresee the future pleasures, or rather the unification with nature. The thoughts of nature produce a heightened sense of mental stimulation in the poet.

...that blessed mood,  
In which the burthen of the mystery,  
In which the heavy and the weary weight  
Of all this intelligible world,  
Is lightened:

These lines reveal that peace and tranquil restoration are a consequence of an unburdening of the soul by contemplation. Thus consciousness of the wonders of nature produces peace by momentarily relieving the soul of its burdens. The poet has achieved the highest spiritual level to 'see into the life of things'. According to Sunil Sarker's interpretation of the lines, 'in that mood perception or understanding becomes tranquil, that is, we understand things clearly by our realization of the prevailing harmony in nature....and by the intense joy we get in that mood.... then by our tranquil understanding and intense joy we become capable of probing into the essence or meaning of all the objects of the creation.' (Sarker,2003:31)

As the poem moves from past to present, there is a sense of transformation referring to the poet's mind from unconsciousness to consciousness. The poet is now aware of the spiritual as well as physical aspects that constitute nature and affect man's life. According to Betty and Jones, 'it would be possible to read **Tintern Abbey** In the light of Hartleian ideas: Hartley's account of how the mind moves from sensation through perception to thought, is turned into analogy of how the individual passes from childhood through youth to maturity'. (Cited in Day:2004,62)

Wordsworth believed that imagination functions by recreating, revaluating and creating in an effort to perceive and understand life. In his poem '**I Wandered Lonely as**

**a Cloud'** Wordsworth uses his imagination to solve the great issue of Romanticism namely, what happens to the youthful creative spirit when it encounters the real world. A world which resists desires for imaginative order, a world which brings pain, disappointment and boredom. What is the Romantic spirit to do when the imagination gets tired. Wordsworth says;

I wandered lonely as a cloud....  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils; ....  
For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

In the opening lines of the poem we find Wordsworth exploring a memory. In the last stanza we move into the present time and discover the importance of that memory years after the event and in very different circumstances. The poet is in distress questioning his ability to make life joyful and meaningful. He seeks cure for his distress in his memory of a time when the speaker did possess a vital creative spirit, a time when he was much younger. The ability of the mind imaginatively to recall such visionary moments, become an energizing source enabling the individual to cope with distress. Wordsworth's poems insist that the memories of youthful inspiration are the highest curative power for adult distress. The best cure for mental anguish of adult life, is a more energetic imaginative commitment to the restorative powers of memory, especially childhood and adolescent memories when life was joyous. The greatness of Wordsworth's best poems emerge from the energy and emotional conviction the poem expresses about the idea and this conviction is gained from reflection.

Wordsworthian style moves back and forth between a present in which speaker is unhappy, back to a past when he can recall the spontaneous joy of a life full of imaginative energy and then back to present, with the memory providing enough faith to cope with present distress and even hope of the future.

The strength of consciousness wrought by recollection of Wordsworth's earlier education in nature is discussed in **The Prelude** also. According to John F. Danby, 'the most significant thing about Wordsworth's writing in **The Prelude** is the way he integrates the past and the present' ( Danby, 1963:52). Wordsworth's French experience had left him so perturbed with political passions and private cares that for a time he lost his ecstatic love of nature and the visionary power which that love had evoked. He wrote **The Prelude** chiefly in order to rescue from decay his early visiting of imaginative power. Wordsworth revived his flagging energies by evoking past moments of creativeness and as all his deepest emotions have been associated with natural objects, it is through them that he can best recapture what was so fugitive. **The Prelude** is a

record of ‘the growth of a poet’s mind’. In the poem he is not only introspective and self dependent but had a memory of astonishing power. Again and again in **The Prelude** he retraces his steps and calls back those early days, anxious to save his precious memories, the mysterious sources of his visionary power. In **Ode: Intimations of Immortality**, Wordsworth says:

Those shadowy recollections,  
Which, be they what they may,  
Are yet the fountain light of all our days,  
Are yet a master light of all our seeing (150-154).

Throughout **The Prelude**, Wordsworth uses episodes in his past experiences to nurture his identity as a poet. He is powered by memories as they connect him to the eternal. He says:

I would give  
While yet we may, as far as words can give,  
A substance and a life to what I feel:  
I would enshrine the spirit of the past  
For future Restoration ....

Wordsworth’s poetry is a poetry of transcendence, in which the individual soul touches divinity by putting aside the petty needs of ego and material distractions. In **‘Influence Of Natural Objects’**, once again Wordsworth strengthens his imagination in his boyhood days and days of early youth. Wordsworth remembers skating along the surface of an icy stream and then stopping suddenly, only to find that

the solitary cliff  
Wheeled by me even as if the earth had  
rolled  
With visible motion her diurnal round.

Such awareness comes when our eyesight and hearing are lost in a dizzy blur. Once again the sublime is identified with the rolling movement of earth, which is only experienced in a moment when the senses are kept from ordinary perception:

Thou soul, that art Eternity of thought!  
And giv’st forms and images a berth  
And everlasting motion!

In the same way Wordsworth’s spirit freed of perception, feels herself ‘rolled round in earth’s diurnal course’, a situation Wordsworth infuses with a metaphysical joy matured by thought into sober pleasure. David Nichol Smith is of the view that:

Wordsworth’s memories are memories of feelings, to be indulged and examined in a long period of rapt meditative calm..... There were times when in a wise passiveness, he found he could learn more

through the feelings than all the sages could teach him.  
(Smith,1968:12)

Therefore, In **Ode: Intimations of Immortality** we once again find Wordsworth reminiscing his memories of childhood. His memories make him see through the veil of reality. He says just as a person who is standing far away on the shore can hear the sound of waters and the waves of the sea, similarly in calm and reflective moment the poet can catch sight of the sea waters of life, which brought him into the world.

Hence in a season of calm weather  
Though inland far we be,  
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea  
Which brought us hither.

The central idea of the poem is that the memories of our past when recalled in isolation enable us to see into the life of things and beyond. Similarly in **The Solitary Reaper** Wordsworth says:

The music in my heart I bore  
Long after it was heard no more (31-32).

Here also the poet focuses on recollection and the soothing effect of beautiful memories on human thoughts and feeling.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus it can be concluded that for Wordsworth a good poet is not just a thinker or a philosopher, nor is he first of all a sensitive soul pouring forth his own passion. He must unite two qualities of thought and feelings. He is different from other men not in kind but in degree of his qualities and it is this extra gift, this extra sensitive intelligence that make him able to write about things that other men dimly feel. In his view poetry is a philosophical vehicle and meditative activity formed from emotions recollected in tranquility.

Coleridge praising Wordsworth's poetry said: 'It is the union of deep feeling with profound thought, the fine balance of truth of observation, with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed; above all the original gift of spreading the tone, the atmosphere, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents and situations, of which for the common view, customs had bedimmed all the luster, had dried up the sparkle and the dew drops' (Bowra,1980: P 7).

Wordsworth's poetry moves from vivid depiction of a specific scene or object to thoughtful meditation, resulting in profound moral or religious insight – particularly, glimpses into the essence of nature, typically more available to the minds of children or peasants not burdened by worldly concerns, ambitions, love or strife. Wordsworth believed that imagination had a visionary sort of interaction with the living external world and what it perceived, and defined human experience. Imagination paints the

external world in shades that varied according to each individual's power of imagination. The mind both endows objects with qualities and receives sensory impressions from them – the mind 'half creates and half perceives' and if experience is perceived correctly and thought seriously, will automatically evoke appropriate emotion enabling the poet to write truth about human nature which is universal.

## References

- Abrams, M.H. (1969). *English Romantic Poets*. U.S.A: Oxford University Press.
- Bowra, C.M. (1980). *The Romantic Imagination*. (p.17). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Darbishire, H. (1967). *Wordsworth: Prelude Vol- 1&2*. Great Britain: Oxford Clarendon Press.
- Day, Aidan. (2004). *Romanticism*. (p.62). New York: Routledge.
- Hazlitt, William. (1969). *Lectures On English Poets and Spirit Of The Age*. London: J.M.Dent and Sons Ltd.
- Danby, John. F. (1963). *The Prelude And Other Poems*. (p.52). London: Edward Arnold.
- Sarker, Sunil Kumar. (2003). *A Companion To William Wordsworth* (P.p.24-31). New York: Routledge.
- Smith, David Nichol. (1968). *Wordsworth's Poetry And Prose*. (p.16). Great Britain: University Press Oxford.
- Thomson, David. (1950). *England In The 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. Great Britain: Hunt Barnard Printing Ltd.
- William, John. (1996). *William Wordsworth: Literary Life*. Great Britain: Antony Rowe Ltd.
- Wordsworth, William. Coleridge, S.T. (1989). *Preface To The Lyrical Ballads*. (P.p57-73). Lahore: Kitab Mahal.
- Wordsworth, William. Coleridge, S.T. (1967). *Lyrical Ballads*. U.S.A: Clays Ltd
- Wright, David. (1973). *English Romantic Verse: Introduction*. Great Britain: Richard Clay Ltd.