

The Effect of Nature and Imagination upon Wordsworth's Prelude

¹C.Karpagajothi, ²Mrs. Vishalakshi M.A., M.Phil.

¹M.Phil Research Scholar, ²Asst.Professor in English
Department of English, Prist University, Thanjavur, India

Abstract:

William Wordsworth's autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*: Book 3, "Residence at Cambridge, and Book 7, "Residence in London." Book 3 and 7 are often read as interruptions in the poem's narrative of psychological and artistic maturation. "Cambridge" and "London" are often read as impediments to the development of Wordsworth's imagination, a development which is traditionally associated with transcendental epiphany in nature. This thesis offers a re-reading of the Cambridge and London books, emphasizing their affirmative role in the organic structure of the poem, and suggesting that these spaces allow Wordsworth to reflect positively on his imaginative development. Chapter 1 considers the issues involved in a literature review. Chapter 2 looks at the representation of Wordsworth's adjustment to Cambridge. Though the poet considers his imagination to have been dormant during his first year at university, Book 3 depicts a phase in which the mind is opening toward outside influences. In the sheltered groves and level fenland of Cambridge, Wordsworth finds an environment both protective and sufficiently strange to stimulate his sense of inner power. Chapter 3 is concerned with Wordsworth's changing attitudes towards London. The poet was composing Book 7 over a period of time during which he made multiple trips to the city. While it is ostensibly the record of his very first residence in London, Book 7 has a palimpsest quality, layering together different encounters with the city and exhibiting an increasingly affirmative vision of urban life. In particular, this chapter traces the influence of Charles Lamb on Wordsworth's thinking about London. Chapter 4 considers the centrality of the body and the sense of touch in Wordsworth's response to London. Touch in Book 7 is both a source of anxiety and the vehicle for Wordsworth's understanding of the city, its influence of the city, its influence on him and its significance for a poetics of belonging.

Introduction

Critics of Roman poetry are attracted to themes including nature, spirituality, young versus age, patriotism and the individual. One topic to which they are particularly drawn that consistently arises in works by William Wordsworth, Samuel T. Coleridge, John Keats and the other poet of the Romantic era is the imagination. This subject matter is unique in that it varies significantly both in poetry and in literary criticism. The imagination is not a simple concept, and it is more than a motif to trace throughout a poem. It is also an idea that Romantic poets substantially reinterpret: Paul de Man notes that the Romantics conceptualize the imagination as less strictly defined or "formal" than do eighteenth century writers, who focus predominantly on the external world and the associative powers of the imagination. For Romantic poets, the imagination is a process of

the mind that is deeply emotional and nearly indescribable, which is why it is such a prominent theme in their poems. For critics who study Romantic poetry, the definition of imagination is malleable, which makes for an attractive topic and greatly differentiated criticism.

Wordsworth was one of the Romantic poets most intent on interpreting, defining, and exploring the imagination. Terrence Allan Hoagwood writes that in Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* the poet intends to link "thought – forms" with "material forms" of daily living; that is Wordsworth's earlier projects, he is attentive to how one's mind affects one's surroundings. Wordsworth later wrote about the imagination critically in his 1815 preface to *Poems* in which he defines it as the power to mind an image already gone, adding that is "formed by patient observation"(630). In the

1850 version of *The Prelude* Wordsworth laments that language cannot fully incorporate the idea of the imagination, which he adds is name only “Through sad incompetence of human speech”(1850 VI : 593). Hoagwood asserts that wordsworth’s concept of the imagination, which was key to his understanding of the world and of poetry, changed throughout his life.

The imagination is particularly important in Wordsworth’s most famous work, the epic, multi – book poem, *The Prelude*. He originally wrote the poem in two parts in 1799, and then between 1804 and 1805 he wrote and reworked it into thirteen books, though he never published this version. Three months after Wordsworth’s death in 1850, his wife published his transcript of the poem, which had grown to fourteen books. Most critics study the 1805 version and consider it the true *Prelude*, and unless otherwise noted that is the version that I will cite. The imagination is a central theme in every version and nearly every book of *The Prelude*. At times the poet directly refer to “the Imagination “as a power that Wordsworth the character can identify, but if he does not directly name it “the imagination”. For example, after being disappointed by the anticlimactic crossing of the Alps, Wordsworth the character begins to see improbable things such as “Stationary blasts”of waterfalls (IV: 558). The imagination is also present in the reader’s awareness that the poet is using it in order to create the poem. The majority of the life events that Wordsworth refers to in *The Prelude* occurred in the early 1790s, but he did not finish the first full edition of the poem until over a decade later. In this sense, the poet uses the imagination as he defines it in 1815: he calls to mind events long past.

Considering how significant the imagination was to Wordsworth, it is unsurprising that it has remained a central issue for critics who study his greatest work; and given how Wordsworth himself grappled with the concept, it is perhaps also unsurprising that critics’ notions of the imagination have not been consistent. Throughout this study I will examine how critic approaches to the imagination in

Wordsworth’s *Prelude* have changed over time, both in terms of where critics have placed their focus in terms of methodology. I will look at three different schools of criticism: post structuralism, historicism, and the most recent wave of criticism, as yet undefined as a particular school. I aim to better comprehend the changing arguments about the imagination while simultaneously examining the differences in interests and approaches of these three schools through the shared lens of Wordsworth’s imagination.

Each school of criticism handles the imagination in *The Prelude* in a unique way. Post structuralism, the earliest of the three schools I study, concentrates on textual evidence and on the nature of the language. The main topics of post structuralism analysis of *The Prelude* are reference, allegory, the arbitrariness of language and signifiers and signs. Geoffrey H.Hartman, for example focuses on how Wordsworth borrows from scripture and the classics in order to represent the imagination, as well as on how these references and allusions help or hinder the reader’s understanding of the poem. Post structuralism maintains that the meaning of the text can be found in the text in the specific linguistic choices of the author. Historicist critics, however, begin to look outside the text. They use history and biography to inform their arguments and to question how to situate the poem its epoch. As a result, their arguments about the imagination look decidedly different from their predecessors ‘arguments . These differences surface, for instance, in the new importance historicists assign to Napoleon Bonaparte as a tool for analyzing the imagination in *The Prelude*. Alan Liu writes that the imagination is the “haunt of Napoeon” for Wordsworth and that coming to terms with the military reader helped the poet understand the imagination and vice versa. Finally, recent critics have a less definable approach at this time, but they are united in that their concept of the imagination is constantly evolving. These critics bring in information that their antecedent would have discounted, such as maps, letters, psychological information and even seemingly unrelated sources such as Eastern religious

doctrine and neuroscience. There is no prevailing view of the imagination for modern critics, and many of their arguments are unprecedented. Mark. J. Bruhn, for example, uses of MRI scans and other such technologies in order to evaluate how Wordsworth's imagination may have worked and determine why he represents it the way he does in *The Prelude*. This critical movement is substantial because it speaks to the directions in which criticism and academia are moving, or at least have been moving over the last two decades.

When I began this project, I was interested in the dynamic nature of criticism about Wordsworth and the imagination. But ultimately I found that as I read various scholars' writings about imagination, the comparisons and contrasts illuminated the waves of criticism in ways that I did not expect. Though I set out only to compare the different understandings of Wordsworth's imagination, I discovered that the three schools lend themselves to a concurrent study of criticism and theory because they vary in noteworthy ways. In fact, in addition to the central issues of this study – how the critical treatment of Wordsworth's imagination has evolved – other broad changes have occurred that affect criticism both of *The Prelude* and of literature in general.

For instance, in these three schools there is a movement away from critics consciously studying similar aspects of a text and responding directly to one another, which was common in the trends that preceded them. Already in the poststructuralist book *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Hartman's preface defends the inclusion of all the essays in the volume despite the fact that they do not center on the same issues, which suggests that this lack of consensus is novel in criticism (ix). By the time historicism arises there is seemingly no expectation that critics directly engage with each other, and thus they do not defend their range of study. Moreover, in recent criticism writers actively seek areas of analysis that no one else has examined. Additionally, changes in the ways that information is conveyed have affected criticism. With the immediacy of information via the internet, critics and audiences have

instant access to a wider variety of materials and thus literary criticism has grown to include evidence from surprising sources and specialties. Writers who study literature can glean enough information about other disciplines to inform an argument about *The Prelude* from an unexpected angle. Using Wordsworth's imagination as a lens, one can see how much broader critical approaches have become with the shifting focuses of different theories and as they explore the imagination, scholars elucidate their modes of inquiry and exemplify the novel aspects of their school. Although these schools of literary criticism have vastly different methodologies and often – inconsistent conclusions, as the scope of critical materials continues to expand over time one central issue remains: understanding Wordsworth's imagination in *The Prelude*.

Conclusion:

Finally, the third plane on which modern critics study the imagination while reading the poem. As Wordsworth describes place, people, things, events and feelings, readers subsequently use their imaginations to conceptualize his words. According to Thompson, "moments of great imaginative power arise, both for the travelers themselves and also (as seems to be the principal burden of Wordsworth's argument here) for those who subsequently read of these events" (200-1). Of Book VII: Residence in London and Wordsworth's description of the theater and the familiar stock characters, Bruhn says that we imagine in our own minds what Wordsworth is describing and "repeat the process of figural substitution" (165). We picture Wordsworth's suggestion with images we have seen before, or composite images of things with which we are familiar either from real life or from paintings or other visual art. Though our brains must use prior knowledge in order to establish a framework for understanding Wordsworth's description, it is the imagination that then steps in and makes something new out of this old formation in order to comprehend what Wordsworth describes. The poet does not show us his reality or our reality, since that would be impossible, but rather prompts a new and different internal vision that is both

constructed and sustained by the imagination (Bruhn 173). How Wordsworth creatively transfers his imagination from his mind to the minds of his readers is a unique focus of recent criticism.

In Formal Charge, Wolfson describes her method as an “intensive reading of poetic events within a context of questions about poetic form and formalist criticism”(1). While these recent critics may not share a single set of goals, they certainly share a regard for form. Modern critics investigate not just the form that authors use while writing, but also their own forms and their own methodologies. This group of critics varies greatly in themes and sources and only a small selection of current scholars has been discussed in this chapter. Nonetheless, their unique approaches and somewhat interrelated topics of exploration make this sampling of critics interesting to compare to one another. Furthermore, the selected critics aid one in considering the changes that have been occurring in criticism is likely to go in the future.

In the present, these critics have expanded our understanding of the imagination in Wordsworth’s Prelude to include insights about the poet’s development of his personal concept of the imagination and they have placed value on studying one’s own imaginative response to the poem. They bring in entirely new information, which ultimately generates an informed confusion rather than a definitive clarity: the vast scope of recent critics’ approaches suggests that the imagination remains intangible, debatable, open to further study and therefore important in literary criticism and elsewhere.

Reference:-

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