

Contextualizing Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and his Theory of Poetic Creation

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ABSTRACT

The present paper focuses on the critical analyse Wordsworth's *The Prelude* in reference to his theoretical views about poetical creation in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. The reason for consideration of this analysis emerged from Helen Derbyshire's appraisal of *The Prelude*. Wordsworth's confession in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* has supplied the second reason to consider the present analysis because his "Preface" seems to be focusing on a theory for writing poetry. *The Prelude* seems to be following the lines of his theory of poetical creation with references to the ideas stated in the first three paragraphs of this document. However, there is a slight contradictory approach from the critics like, Lewis and there are some defensive arguments from the critics, like Tillyard and Garrod.

Key Words : *The Prelude*, Poetic creation, Wordsworth

INTRODUCTION

The present paper is an attempt to critically analyse Wordsworth's poem, *The Prelude* in reference to his theoretical views about poetical creation in the "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*. The reason for consideration of this analysis emerged from Helen Derbyshire's appraisal of *The Prelude*. Derbyshire (1951) writes that this poem is the best poetical creation by Wordsworth. However, when under the title of *The Prelude*, the poem got published after his death in 1850, it saw the day light. Derbyshire further extends the argument by referring to an ironical situation. The irony of the situation was that Wordsworth, the great poet-priest of Nature ranked this master piece of poetry as a minor portion of his poetical works. The author in all probability never dreamt during his life time to take the poem as holy as a chapel of a Church. Above all the Gothic Church of his dream was never to be completed and the magnificent portico or the ante-chapel for the author still stands supreme, 'towering over so many small or great works of art, to be admired and appreciated by generations to come'. Wordsworth's confession in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* has provided the second reason to endeavour the present analysis. Wordsworth (1802) states that the poem resulted from a purpose to comprise a philosophical poem, comprising views of 'Man, Nature

and Society'. The main subjects of the poem must be 'the sensations and the opinions of the poet living in retirement'. Wordsworth further elaborates his purpose that the foundation of poem is biographical, and it revolves around the history of the Author's mind. The mind of the author has been baffling between and around the point hope and despair. And when he emboldened to the hope that his poetical talents were sufficiently matured for entering upon the gruelling hard-work which he had proposed to himself, as the 'ante-chapel has to the body of a Gothic Church', he embarked on the pious project.

Wordsworth in his "Preface" to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, seems to be focusing on a theory for writing poetry. In the preface Wordsworth (1802) writes that the main focus proposed in these poems was to choose events and circumstances from common life, and to relate or describe them in a range of the language actually used by men. The description and the range of language must have a certain colouring of the imagination, so that the ordinary could be "presented to the mind in an unusual aspect". Wordsworth further extends his thought when he states the reasons for choosing events and incidents from humble and rustic life of people. In the presence of humble and rustic conditions of life, the vital passions of the 'heart find a better soil'. These vital passions in this 'better soil' can achieve maturity. Once this maturity at the emotional level is attained, the expressions of the realism find restraint and speak in a plainer and emphatic language.

The above theoretical context in connection to the creation poetry indicates towards three dimension of producing poetry. The first argument tends to indicate toward the selection of themes and subjects of poetic creation. The suggestion is that for writing poetry, themes should be selected from common life of the humble men and their rustic manners. The second argument directs poets to describe the experiences of these humble people in the language, actually used by them. Thus the suggestion directs poets to avoid pompous and haughty manners of expression, exploited by the poets of the previous century. The third recommendation is that, while describing the experiences of the common rustics in the real language, the ordinary things should be presented unusually with the help of imagination.

In the present paper, these three aspects of writing poetry have been referred to critically observe the poem, *The Prelude*, a master-piece of poetic creation by Wordsworth. In this paper, the focus, with special reference to *The Prelude*, is on the question, whether the poet himself observes these theoretical nuances of poetic creation or not. Another aspect of the analysis is to enquire the reasons, if the findings suggest that the theoretical nuances have been violated by the poet himself. However, in his poems such as, "The World Is Too Much With Us", Wordsworth seems to be adhering to his own theoretical nuances and suggestions. In his preface, he actually claimed, "there neither is nor can be any essential difference between the language of prose and verse". In his poems, like "Solitary Reaper", Wordsworth undoubtably seems to be connecting and cultivating the diction of simplicity imbued with his imagination.

Wordsworth in the introductory lines of *The Prelude* expresses two purposes of the poem. The first one focuses on self-examination to ensure that he himself is a real poet and he has the ability to compose the great poem, which would stand before the trials of time. The second motif is to encode manners of self-expressions, which could represent a new age of gracious nobilities and fresh but simple modes of creating literature, in the form of

poetry.

May my life
Express the image of a better time,
More wise desires and simplest manners.

From these introductory lines, it is evident that in *The Prelude*, the poet addresses his readers and audiences like a renovated being, having a mission of holy services. It seems that he is projecting himself as a priest-poet of Nature, offering sermons to people in the shape of his poems. Garrod (1978) explains, "The purpose of *The Prelude* may, indeed, be said to be to search out, to seize and hold, among the many seemingly alien and incongruous images of self cast up by reflection, the image of the poet's true being, of his slowly self-realising individuality, of that in him in virtue of which he is a 'dedicated spirit'".

While focusing on the thematic aspect and sub-title (*The Growth of a Poet's Mind*) of *The Prelude*, it appears that the poem is not an autobiography in an ordinary sense. The narrative begins from his kindergarten times, journeys to the immature but adventurous adolescence and ends in the mellowed imagination, producing flavour some expressions in the poem. Meandering like a river, this journey is the 'full intense life which he lived through his senses as a child and youth that he first tries to capture and record'. Thus this thematic context seems to be keeping in the line of his own theory about creating poetry - "Poetry takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquillity". The poet has reviewed the changes occurred in his attitudes towards Nature and these patterns emerge in the corresponding lines of *The Prelude*. In the first stage the poet derives plain physical sensuous delight in Nature.

I held unconscious intercourse with beauty
Old as creation, drinking in a pure
Organic pleasure . . . (563-65).

In the second stage, the mind of Wordsworth turns out to be instilled in mystical and spiritual pleasure due to having close contacts with Nature. In connection to the different situations of human mind and modes of creating poetry, Tillyard (2008) argues, "All poetry is about the poet's state of mind." In *The Personal Heresy*, the central issue is, whether a piece of imaginative writing, particularly poetry, is primarily a reflection of the author's personality (Tillyard's position) or is about something external to the author (Lewis's position). The two positions may be summarized briefly as the subjective position (Tillyard) and the objective position (Lewis). In general, Lewis attempts to keep poetry within the scope of the ordinary person, while Tillyard thinks of the poet as a person who is "a cut above the common person."

In the fifth essay of *The Personal Heresy*, Lewis implied that the personal heresy started when the romantic critics, such as Wordsworth, diverted away from the fruitful question, "What kind of composition is a poem?" against the barren question, "What kind of man is a poet?" But various statements from the letters and diary of Lewis show that this position was held for quite some time before the first essay was published, and there is some evidence of the development of this position in Lewis himself. In 1923, Lewis commented

that “I suggest that the object of a work of art is not to be criticized but to be experienced and enjoyed” (*All My Road Before Me*: 197). This statement argues for treating a work of art objectively. Then, in 1923 Lewis addressed that the personal life of an author had little to do with understanding of its works. In 1924, Lewis wrote that a poem was mostly about the author and what “he observed that as he progressed he found his interest in a poem centred more and more round the author. I said this seemed to me inconsistent with real aesthetic experience.” Lewis’s position in this work reflects his conviction that objective values are resident in people, places, events, and things, rejecting the relativistic mindset of that age and subsequent ages. However, in context to *The Prelude*, the love of Nature leads to the love of man and this change brings about a sober attitude along with mystical and spiritual pleasures.

Thence did I drink the visionary power;
And deemed not profitless those fleeting moods
Of shadowy exultation (311-13).

So for as the context of Nature and Imagination in *The Prelude* is concerned, the subtitle, *The Growth of a Poet's Mind* seems to be indicating towards ‘growth of a genius from the influence of natural objects on the imagination’. Wordsworth’s elaboration is, “it is the history of ‘The Making of a Poet’; or we may call it the record of the growth and development of the power of imagination of a poet”. This context suggests that if the mind of a poet is playing a leading role in the development of the poetic personality, then it can be considered that Nature is playing the grand role in this spiritual and autobiographical epic poem. The poem is being produced from the pen of an ambitious, but noble soul, ‘singled out . . . for holy services’.

. . . in this time
Of dereliction and dismay, I yet
Despair not of our nature . . .
. . . and in thee,
For this uneasy heart of ours, I find
A never-falling principle of joy
And purest passion (440-50).

However, Lewis (2008) cites a poem, part of William Wordsworth’s *Prelude*. There is a personality in a poem, says Lewis, but we don’t know whose personality it is. We meet the poet “only in a strained and ambiguous sense”. He suggests, in order to write poetry, the poet must use words to suggest what is public, common, impersonal, and objective. These reasons would enable people to understand his poetry. That is also why the poetry can’t be about the poet’s personality, because the personality of a poet, we have not met is private. Poetry annihilates personality rather than asserts it, because it draws on the common experience of all people (23). And, for Lewis, personality is one’s “daily temper and habitual self” (21). The poet arranges the words, but the experience is a common one. Then Lewis uses three analogies to illustrate his point: the poet is “not a spectacle but a pair of spectacles” (12), the poet is like a scout who brings a report to the commander in a time of war, and the poet is window through which we attend to the landscape (23). The position of a window is equivalent

to the personality of the poet. The reason is that both of them are seen through it, in one instance the outdoors and in the other instance the subject of the poem. In short, Lewis argues for an objective, or impersonal, point of view, that poetry is about something out there, while Tillyard argues for a subjective, or personal, point of view, that poetry is about something inside the poet. From the position of Wordsworth, Nature is never inanimate and She has personality, a life of its own. He claims that only Nature can reveal fundamental truths to us. Therefore, it is not wise to have trust in human intellect.

Our meddling intellect
His shapes the beauteous forms of things
We murder to dissect,

Tillyard seems to be favouring the view-point of Wordsworth while suggesting that the personal heresy is not a sign of modernity, but a bit shop-soiled. It's been around a while, and Lewis later concedes the point. Tillyard's argument is that personality seems to include trivial details about the author rather than the author's mental pattern, his habitual and normal self, but not his "practical and everyday personality" (30). Personality in poetry includes such things as style and rhythm. Tillyard says there is an analogy between the mental pattern in a poet's life and that mental pattern expressed in his art, but Lewis distinguishes between life and art. Tillyard agrees biography and criticism should not be mixed by allowing our knowledge of the author's life to take shortcuts and make hasty conclusions because we think we know the author. He reaffirms his claim that the poet is a cut above the average person, for example, by writing about "the superior penetration of poetic genius" (38); later he will call Wordsworth "a superior person" (68) and Milton one "who is truly virtuous." He will say that Milton "has inhabited heavens and hells unbearable by the ordinary man" (74). Tillyard sees endurance between the life of the artist and the products of the artist's creativity, while Lewis sees discontinuity between them. Tillyard agrees that one can inappropriately mix life and art. Each one sees his own position better than the other person's position and that the two of them are not that far apart. When Tillyard visits a piece of Romanesque architecture, he thinks he shares something with the architect, and he is probably right.

While summarizing this paper, it could be said that *The Prelude* seems to be following the lines of his theory of poetical creation with references to the ideas stated in the first three paragraphs of this document. However, there is a slight contradictory approach from the critics like, Lewis and there are some defensive arguments from the critics, like Tillyard and Garrod. One would find it easier to agree with Bromwich with the suggestions that casting aside idealised visions of Wordsworth as the prophet of nature, and remembering him as a man – 'at times a disagreeable one - who wrote poetry'. If we could remember this, a more realistic picture is possible to gain both of the poet and his poetry. In the contemporary times too, Wordsworth's ideas and poetry are relevant as, the debate is not over yet. While Wordsworth maintains his honoured position in the English canon, he will continue to be a centre of critical activity. For all these reasons, we can agree with Bromwich (2000), "leave no doubt in my mind, that Mr. Wordsworth is fully justified in believing his efforts to have been by no means ineffectual".

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