

Wordsworth's *The Prelude* Book 1: Some Imagist Themes

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Abstract

The exponents of imagism claim to be objective in their poetry, creating images that are detached and free from sentimentality. They do not agree with the narrative "I" that is a connection between the poet and the reader. Nevertheless, with all the impersonal attitude and objectivity that imagist poets proclaim, imagination and Nature both play a vital part in the imagists' poetry, as in Wordsworth's poetry. Similarly, Wordsworth's poetry too, is focused and complex as the imagist poetry.

Keywords: Imagism, Romanticism, Objectivity, Imagination, Nature

Introduction

This paper studies the similarities in theme of both Wordsworth and the imagists, in spite of their different outlook on poetry, of both the Romantics and the imagist poets. The important factor in both is that both explicitly gave a high place to imagination, but the imagists believed in the use of imagination devoid of its mystical and idealistic aspect. The paper also studies how Wordsworth's poetry has some imagist themes, in being precise and unemotional. A comparison of some imagist poets with Wordsworth's *The Prelude* emphasizes that the difference comprised mainly in style not perception.

In his most complete exposition of the aesthetics of Imagism, Pound says that the image may be either objective or subjective, depending upon whether it re-creates a single experience or transforms and fuses elements of disparate experiences (Martin, 1970: p. 203).

Studied from this angle, it is evident that imagination plays a vital role in the formation of our experiences, either single or many. Wordsworth, in fact, all the Romantics, are known to have given a very high place to imagination. For them, it was that faculty which is 'fundamental because, they think without it poetry is impossible'. They believe that the most vital activity of the mind is the imagination. For them, imagination is connected with insight, perception or intuition. This means that when the creative faculty is engaged, they are inspired by the sense of a mystery of things, which they probe with a peculiar insight, to shape their discoveries into imaginative forms (Bowra, 1966: pp. 1-7). For Wordsworth particularly, any sense perception recollected in tranquility formed the essence of poetry.

Similarly, the Imagists hold imagination in great regard, according to T.E Hulme, Taine [also] associates the clear recollection of images with the "precise, intense, colored

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representations attained by the imaginations of great artists.” (Martin, 1970: p. 199) thus the faculty of imagination, and its influence in poetic writing, is a common factor between the Imagists and Wordsworth. Hence, this relationship is seen by certain critics as:

Modernism [including imagism], bore a complicated and ambivalent relation to Romanticism, the dominant aesthetic and cultural ideology of the nineteenth century. And Romanticism in turn evolved out of and against Enlightenment rationalism, which had deepened the skepticism, growing in the West since the Renaissance (Gelpi, 1990: p. 1).

Against this background, with imagination as a common factor, both in Romantics and Imagists, if viewed broad mindedly, then some of the trends prevalent in Imagism can be depicted in Wordsworth’s poetry. The difference of style presents a sharp contrast, but with a closer look, it becomes clear that both advocated the same elements. For, the “[f]ragmentation” advocated by the imagists “impelled imaginative creation” (Gelpi, 1990: p. 2).

The difference between Wordsworth and the Imagists is then a matter of style and subject matter rather than the medium used and its purpose. The Imagists were averse to the “Romantic Imagination with its capital I”, (Gelpi, 1990: p. 2) which, according to Wordsworth, amounted to creating a connection with the reader, and through the imagination creating a convincing situation in his poetry. Wordsworth believed the soul of the Universe and the soul of Man could be united in harmony. This harmony i.e. the oneness of things, he felt and presented those emotions, of the effect of Nature that he imaginatively perceived. Therefore, in *The Prelude* his theme is the revival of his creativity, that occurs only when he comes in contact with Nature. Thus, the presence of the narrative “I”. The following lines from *The Prelude* illustrates how Wordsworth establishes the significance of imaginatively expressed images, he compares the ups and downs of life, with its hopes and fears, to the rise and fall of the sea:

Ye presences of Nature in the sky
 And on the earth! Ye visions of the hills!
 And souls of lonely places! Can I think
 A vulgar hope was yours when Ye employed
 Such ministry, when Ye through many a year
 Haunting me thus among my boyish sports,
 On caves and trees, upon the woods and hills,
 Impressed upon all forms and characters
 Of danger or desire; and thus did make
 The surface of the universal earth
 With triumph and delight, with hope and fear,
 Work like a sea?

In contrast to this, what the Imagists advocated was imagination devoid of all mystical and idealistic claims, the highest human faculty of cognition that empowered the artist to put disordered experience into aesthetic order (Gelpi, 1990: p. 2). In the following lines from Hilda Doolittle's poem *Oread*, we get the idea that, she perceives the sea as a pine and fir forest, thus the use of imagination in a peculiar manner to make a comparison:

Whirl up, sea-
Whirl your pointed pines'
Splash your great pines
On our rocks,
Hurl your green over us,
Cover us with your pools of fir.

Both the images presented by Wordsworth and Doolittle, have the comparison of an object, to the sea. It seem that the only difference here is the emotional exclamation, the 'dominating Wordsworthian narrative or descriptive "I"' (Johnston, 1997: p. 7) which gives Wordsworth's poetry a more intimate touch as compared to the detached image of Doolittle. She keeps her personal feelings away from it. Otherwise, both have employed nature, and the imaginative strain is present in both. Both are addressing the object referred to in the respective poems and both acknowledge it's over whelming power.

Regarding the "I"ness of Wordsworth's poetry, it is evident that, if the Imagists so ardently advocate the freedom of subject matter, then the 'I'ness of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* should not be rejected. For if, he chooses to write about the growth and development of his mind; he is only adhering to that principle of the Imagists in this matter. The freedom of subject matter in turn implies what the poet believes in. In this regard, for Wordsworth, his inspiration came from Nature, and his presence in the natural habitat.

Further if the "I"ness is left out in the Imagist poetry, then, it can be seen in another form in the form of an "intense pressure of a personal consciousness shaping itself into words" (Gelpi, 1990: p. 13). In her introductory epigraph to the *Pythagorean Silence* (1982), Susan Howe makes the point that for her and the Romantics, language creates the link between consciousness and the external world:

We that were wood
When that a wide wood was
In a physical Universe playing with
Words
Bark be my limbs my hair be leaf
Bride be my bow my lyre my quiver

Her being absorbed into the "physical Universe" (Gelpi, 1990: p. 12) shows the subjective way in which she compares herself to the natural elements in the Universe.

Thus, though there is no explicit description of her being influenced by nature, yet her becoming one with nature is imaginatively expressed in these lines.

Further, if images are a means of revealing one's conscious feelings, then they are no doubt subjective. The difference then between the Wordsworth and the Imagists is then, only of subject matter and style. The subject Wordsworth chose is even recognized by him, as unprecedented in literary history, that a man should talk so much about himself. Yet, for Wordsworth "sincerity" is the standard for analyzing poetry (Wellek, 1970: p. 137). According to Bowra, for Wordsworth, Nature was an inspirational force, as he believed that the world is not dead, it possess a soul, distinct from the soul of man. And man's task was to get into communion with it (Bowra, 1966: pp. 19-20). Thus, the subject matter he chose could not be effectively presented in the haiku like detached images of the Imagist poets, if he sincerely wanted to convince the reader of his conviction. And all his poetry were sense perceptions recollected imaginatively in tranquility, the following lines from *The Prelude* depict how sincerely he believed in Nature being an aid to his work:

For I neither seem
To lack that first great gift, the vital soul,
Nor general Truths, which are themselves a sort
Of Elements and Agents, Under-powers,
Subordinate helpers of the living mind:
Nor am I naked of external things,
Forms, images, or numerous other aids
Of less regard thou won perhaps with toil

The same idea is emphasized by the Imagists when they talk of moving "the reader to certitude" (Gage, 1979: p. 165). For the Imagists the self-evident meant the connection of the psychological with the logical. Allowing a passing back and forth between two trends – that is reasoning by sensorial images, as de Gourmont called it. The belief that through the perceptions of things one attains intellectual understanding of ethical values, (Gage, 1979: p. 171) then this is what Wordsworth has attained in *The Prelude*, irrespective of the narrative element.

The Imagists were more concerned about presenting a precise image without any subjective emotionalism and opening up of the poet's psyche. This according to them created sentimentality (Johnston, 1997: p. 4). It was their conviction that no superfluous word should be used, rather the words should portray the comparison, for likeness draws attention to special attributes, and it is this that signifies the poet's judgment. Thus, they believed in creating images in a strict scientific sense, like scientific analogies. However, the contradiction in such statements is evident, if we take a look at the image and comparison drawn in Pounds poem *Alba* the opposite is revealed:

As cool as the pale wet leaves of
Lily-of-the-valley

She lay beside me in the dawn.

Pound has drawn attention to certain qualities of the subject, her stillness, her fragile beauty, her rarity. It is obvious from the comparison to a flower, that Pound intended praise in the poem. Nevertheless, the association of good or bad feelings and qualities is not neutral either for the poet or for the reader. Thus, one values the image subjectively (Gage, 1979: p. 158). Hence, the argument of the Imagists regarding sentimentality does not stand, as the above mentioned lines intuitively depict the poet's sense perception of beauty, revealing his feelings regarding the subject. Regarding objectivity, Albert Gelpi states that, the Romantics and the Modernists [Imagists] have alike ironically admitted that all they could do was to present a subjective view or version of objective reality (Gelpi, 1990: p. 15).

Imagist poets hold that images should be “focused and passionate” (Johnston, 1997: p. 3). By this, they mean combination of words that have a compact and detached meaning that sets one’s thinking. Analyzing Wordsworth’s poetry in the light of this statement it is clear that the different images that he draws in *The Prelude* are not lacking in this quality:

- I. Keen as a Truant or a Fugitive,
But as a Pilgrim resolute
- II. So through the darkness and the cold we flew,
And not a voice was idle; with the din
Smitten, the precipices rang aloud;
The leafless trees and every icy crag
Tinkled like iron; while far distant hills
Into the tumult sent an alien sound
- III. Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
like harmony in music; there is a dark
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements, make them cling together
In one society

Images like these, and so many more in *The Prelude*, prove Wordsworth’s capability of creating complex images, which have comparisons that set the mind thinking. In the first image, the words ‘Truant’, and ‘Fugitive’ draws the picture of someone who has run away from a commitment, whereas the word ‘Pilgrim resolute’ reveals a determination to remain a fugitive and a truant. These words show the poet's sense of freedom to pursue what he will. The second image stresses the loneliness he experienced during his skating expeditions. The scenery of the hills and leafless trees intensifies the emptiness emphasizing the echoing sound, while the movement on the ‘icy crags’ is compared to tinkling of iron. The whole image presents a sense of ecstasy experienced by the poet. The third image elaborates Wordsworth’s belief, that human beings remain insignificant and stagnant in isolation. Man possesses both negative and positive qualities, but the positive qualities can prevail only when he is in company of others. Just as music requires both the high pitched and low-pitched sounds to create a harmonious whole,

similarly Man has to accept the desirable and undesirable within him and others for society to function properly. These images are compact and can be interpreted in a variety of ways, just as is the case with Imagist poetry, e.g. Pounds poem *Alba* cited earlier. Thus, these images both in Wordsworth and the Imagists poetry “represent an intellectual and emotional complex” (Smith, 1983: p. 3).

The only difference is that of narration the images cited from Wordsworth’s poetry are not presented in isolation, but form a part of a whole. Therefore, there is the importance of description and narration. However, according to Ian Johnston, the problem with the Imagists style is that, they eliminate the traditional organizing principle of a poem, which is the narrator’s feeling, the geographic setting or the harmony of the argument. Their whole stress is on the image as the focal point. Nevertheless, how can such a poem do any more than simply depict an image. These images may provide intuition but lack the thought, necessary to enable the reader to be in touch with some coordinating theme or being able to develop some meaning (Johnston, 1997: p. 4), but that of his own experience and knowledge.

Nature was another common theme with which both Wordsworth and the Imagists have worked. Hilda Doolittle’s *Sea Garden*, has images of flowers, oceans, beaches etc. While Amy Lowell has also reflected on nature in her poem *Patterns*, where she visualizes herself walking through a garden, where she notices the patterned garden- path. Actually she concentrates on her grief, during her daily walk. She broods over the loss of her beloved, and like the patterned garden-path noticing different sorrowful patterns in her life:

I walk down the patterned garden-paths
In my stiff brocaded gown.
With my powdered hair and jewelled fan,
I too am a rare
Pattern.

It shows that nature was an attraction for the Imagists too, but they did not recognize a living spirit in nature as Wordsworth nor was there any emotional exclamation that leads to rhetoric and narrative. On the contrary, it served as an instrument that sets the imagination working, and providing a canvass unto which the personal feelings of the poet is painted, nature forms sort of a background. Thus in the Imagists poetry, the “objectivity [is] compromised by the poets internal subject matter” (Gage, 1979: p. 156), like Wordsworth. Another such poem by Hilda Doolittle, is the *Sea Rose*, which is a poem from her *Sea Garden*, in which the imagery is of a rose caught in the wind and dashed to the ground. Roses are usually portrayed as a symbol of love, beauty or eternity, but here she seems to be referring to the dying Romanticism:

Stunted, with small leaf,
you are flung on the sand,
you are lifted

In the crisp sand
 That drives in the wind.
 Can the spice-rose
 Drip such acrid fragrance
 hardened in a leaf?

The sense of place common with Flint, is another shared theme, when it comes to Wordsworth regarding the sense of place, there can be no comparison *The Prelude* was written when Wordsworth had retired to his native mountains in Cumberland, where he had spent his childhood, with all the memories of the woods, mountains and rural areas. Therefore, in *The Prelude*, he also describes that particular vale, to which he would often secretly go, in order to enjoy every aspect of Nature to the fullest. He refers to this place as “the chosen vale” in *The Prelude*. The following lines reflect this theme, when he talks of gaining inspiration necessary for his creativity, after leaving the cities and coming to the rural area:

I breath again!
 Trances of thought and mountings of the mind
 Come fast upon me: It is shaken off
 That burthen of my own unnatural self.

Amongst the Imagists, Flint, lived his whole life in London and was known as the poet of London. He was much familiar with the sound, smells and colour of London and that can be seen in abundance in his poetry. One of his well-known poems was rewritten and named *London*, which was well admired. Place is important for a poet, as he has childhood experiences there, and that is vital for the development of his art.

Ezra Pound has mentioned three modes of poetic presentation of imagist poetry, namely: melopoeia, phanopoeia and logopoeia respectively (Osborne, 1955: p. 281). The first on melopoeia means the beauty of sound, including rhythmic sound in the expression of meaning. Looking at *The Prelude* from this angle, both the elements of rhythm and cadence are prevalent. Rhythm expresses emotions while cadence amounted to a new idea and the stresses placed on words. *The Prelude* somewhat roughly speaks of the different phases in the poet's life and his experiences. It starts with the poet being conscious of the fact that he has to find an appropriate theme for his poetry, and placidly continues in this tone to line no. 301, and then there is an emphasis on the next line:

Fair seed-time had my soul and I grew up
 Fostered alike by beauty and by fear

Here a new idea in the form of his experience comes in, that shows how Nature with its positive/negative aspects develops his personality. Another stress on the words occurs in line 340 when he says, ‘Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows... in one society’. In these lines, the emphasis is on the word ‘Dust’, showing negligible importance of Man, if he is isolated. As an individual’s grooming can only take place in a society, where he

learns and accepts to live with the good and bad within him, and that abroad. Politically it can also be resentment against any stratification in society. Further, when he refers to the way Nature has been grooming him. He says, ‘Wisdom and spirit of the universe!’. This too is a new idea and the words ‘Wisdom and Spirit’ are stressed, as now he talks of how during his visits to his favourite spots, Nature guided and groomed him. Thus, ideas like these bring about a new cadence, as whenever they occur, the voice is stressed, and this creates the rhythm. According to Harold Osborne, rhythm has significance, as the rhythm of the poem can incite mental attitudes of acceptance, repudiation, indignation, respect or contempt. (Osborne, 1955: p.280) Reading *The Prelude* with this point in mind, it seems relevant, there is acceptance of the poets views, with a sense of joy, because of the poets, “mastery of both the transcendent and the immanent, the majestic and the most mundane simplicity” (Wordsworth, 1994: p. viii).

The second mode of poetic presentation according to Pound is phanopoeia that is “throwing a visual image on the mind”, used in the extended sense it can include, the presentation to awareness, of a perceptual or an emotional situation. Visualization of an image varies from person to person, but this does not affect the appreciation, with a confirmed visualizer, past experience will play a great role. The formation of images is inversely proportional to the intensity with which awareness is concentrated upon the literary object. The reader does not become aware of the emotional situation presented by experiencing it, rather he is aware of the emotion imaginatively, as, he is aware of a presented perceptual situation imaginatively. In all literary phanopoeia, an attitude of mind called mood is induced, which is not part of the situation as an external thing, but appears to be fused with it and presented as part of it. The mood is experienced by the reader but not the presented situation. Thus, a reader may experience pity, contempt, or indignation towards a fear-situation, but does not experience the actual fear (Osborne, p. 282).

The images depicted in *The Prelude*, present phanopoeia. The reader can visualize the extent of Wordsworth’s excitement or fear from the images presented in certain situations. For example, when Wordsworth describes his night adventures, the reader accepts the fear he experiences. He says in *The Prelude*, that being over powered by negative thoughts, he steals the birds that were ensnared by others, and when the act is committed:

I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
Of undistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod.

Similarly, the emotions of excitement, too, are presented in images as the following:

happy time
 It was indeed for all of us-for me
 It was a time of rapture! Clear and loud
 The village clock tolled six,- I wheeled about,
 Proud and exulting like an untired horse
 That cares not for his home.

The conviction with which these images are depicted, convince the reader of the emotion presented. These are experiences of his childhood, but the poet visualizes them, and presents them with the same intensity. It is this intensity that the reader absorbs, that leads to his sense of acceptance.

The third mode of poetic presentation according to Pound is logopoeia, which means the presentation of a conceptual situation, or presenting an emotional situation in conceptual terms. In this mode, the artistic use of linguistic communication is distinguished from the non artistic use, only by the fusion of an attitude of mind, with the presentation. So that both are inseparably presented as one. The mood may be intense like horror or exultation (in Wordsworth's case it is exaltation) or an attitude of unusual interest. The logopoeia sequence taken in isolation is not artistic, but forms a part of a larger whole (Osborne, 1955: p. 284).

This is evident in Wordsworth's poetry, he presents the concept of a living universe; the purpose and activity of which resembled that of a teacher. Therefore, in *The Prelude*, he says:

Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!
 Though soul that art the eternity of thought

These words are in themselves are neither artistic nor convincing, but when this line is viewed in relation to the whole poem; where Wordsworth narrates his life experience that verify these lines, then, the prevalent mood of exultation makes it significant. It helps the reader accept his concept that nature is alive and active, and plays a profound part in Wordsworth's life. These lines conceptualize his belief, and when these lines are fused in the scheme of the whole poem, its essence seems to run throughout the poem.

The purpose of this argument was to show thematic similarities between Wordsworth's poetry and that of the Imagists. Romanticism began as a response to the artificiality of Neoclassicism. The Romantics wrote their kind of poetry in order to liberate Man's mind with their poetry. Similarly, Wordsworth concentrated on themes related to the common man. The Imagists in turn tried to re-liberate poetry from "Neoromanticism" (Gelpi, 1990: p. 16) in their own manner, by presenting compact and detached images that for them stressed objectivity. However, what the Imagists relied on in constructing their images was imagination and passion, the same elements that Wordsworth (and all other Romantics) advocated, and employed in their work. Therefore, the sole difference that

remains is the style, which was a result of the different age they lived in. Both Wordsworth and The Imagists presented graphic images that leave an impact on the mind of the reader. The difference is that one is expressed explicitly, with details that are shared with the reader, while the imagists leave it to the reader to decipher.

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