



Research Paper

A Study of *Tintern Abbey* in Relation to Wordsworth's Theory of Poetry

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Abstract: *Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1798, marked a **defined/definite** break from the poetry of the past, especially the artificial poetry of the neoclassical age, and the formal beginning of a new era of Romantic poetry. In place of reason, this new poetry was dominated by emotion. In order to defend this new 'class of Poetry', which Wordsworth claimed it to be, he added the Preface to its second edition. The Preface, meant to introduce the "poems so materially different" from the existing ones, became one of the most famous documents on the theory of poetry. Wordsworth in it defined poetry and put forth his idea of a poet, subject of a poem, the language and diction of poetry and finally the purpose and function of a poem. The present paper attempts to analyse one of his most celebrated poems *Tintern Abbey* in the light of his own poetic postulates.

Key-words : Neo-classical, spontaneous, emotions, tranquility, recollections.

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Publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798 marked the advent of Romanticism in English literature—a movement that had a substantial influence on the "whole area of human activity encompassing religion, politics, philosophy, and art in general." (Kitson 17) In defence of this new school of poetry, Wordsworth added the Preface to its second edition published in 1800. This *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* is considered "as an extremely important declaration of Romantic principles." (Kitson 44) Here, Wordsworth tried to define the new kind of poetry that the poets offered in the book and how it was going to be different from the previous poetry of the Neo-classical tradition. He "denounced the artificial conventions of much eighteenth century writing." (Kitson 23) Instead of being some elevated creation, as the previous poets claimed their poetry to be, this new poetry would be quite unpolished, based on pure human emotion. It would not simply imitate the classic models. Here, Wordsworth proposed his most famous definition of poetry, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind." (Wordsworth 64) There are different stages in the process of 'successful composition'—experience of certain powerful emotion, its recollection in the tranquil mood, contemplation over the same and thus evoking a similar emotion. The time gap between first experience of emotion and the second invocation of the same, the tranquility attained in that gap, helps the poet to purge the emotion of all its excesses. Finally, the poet filters and reevaluates this emotion and then expresses it in the language of the common man. Wordsworth was in opposition to the use of artificial ornate diction. The use of various kinds of stylistic devices stifles the natural flow of a poem and so it has to be avoided. "There neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition." Wordsworth also commented on the purpose of poetry. According to him, the poet should aim at giving pleasure, he should also be able to 'enlighten the reader' through his poetry. The poet considers "man and the objects that surround him as acting and re-acting upon each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure..." (Wordsworth 58) Poet is just "a man speaking to men", but he is certainly a man 'endued with more lively sensibility'. (Wordsworth 55) In the light of the above declarations by the poet-critic Wordsworth, let's analyse one of his best known poems, *Lines(Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the Banks of The Wye During a Tour. July13, 1798)*, to see how true the poet's assertions about the composition of poetry are.

Tintern Abbey is one of Wordsworth's most famous poems and is quite personal in nature, giving a record of his spiritual growth over time. The poem presents a record of different stages of the poet's life in relation with the different roles that nature played in moulding his person at that time. It tells how at every step, the company of nature (by its presence or absence) provided him with a new insight and blessing. In the beginning when nature was an "appetite" to the boy-poet, it gave him coarser pleasures. Later, when he moved away from nature, the memories of the same interfused in him a "sublime sense" and "blessed mood". In the final stage, the poet returns to nature as a worshipper, who knows that it is the "anchor" of his purest thoughts. The composition of the poem follows the creative pattern suggested by Wordsworth in his theory of poetry—emotions invoked through direct experience, recollections of the experience in tranquility and evoking the same level of emotions through these recollections and the final expression. According to Wordsworth, a poem grows out of an "observation or perception to some object, character or event which sets up powerful emotions." *Tintern Abbey* was composed at the poet's visit to the river Wye after a gap of full five years, "five summers, with the length/ Of five long winters!" He observes the calm and serene rural landscape full of harmony "clad in one green hue." The harmony of the scene sets a series of powerful emotions. Here, we find that the "Objects of poet's thoughts are everywhere...he will follow wheresoever he can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings." (Wordsworth 59) The poem is in line with Wordsworth's democratic principle of poetry, the subject here is rural life merged with the natural setting. The poet had visited the place five years before and the memories of these 'beauteous forms' evoked sweet sensations in him during the roughest of times and gave him feelings of pleasure. Along with the sensual pleasure, the company of these beauteous forms of nature helped him reach "that blessed mood,/ In which the burthen of the mystery," and "the heavy and weary weight/ Of all this unintelligible world/ Is lightened." (Wordsworth 236) This is the very mood which can lead one to move deeper from the world of body into the world of soul and the body reaches the stage of complete relaxation with every moment of it suspended. In this state, "We see into the life of things." (Wordsworth 236) Though the poet had been physically absent from there for long, his mind turned again and again to this whenever his heart felt burdened with the worries of the world. Standing again on the banks of the river, the poet reflects upon the blessings of the past memories of the scene and now he is again there to revive the "picture of the mind." Thus we find that most of the poem is about the poet's powerfully flowing feeling of blessedness in the company of nature. He is so deeply moved that he feels himself delving into divinity for the moment. The overflow of powerful emotions can be seen in the exaggerated expression where he says;

"...the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended"

The initial flow of emotions finally gets transformed into a permanent internal source of joy. Nothing was actually lost, but was seen only "...with an eye made quiet by the power of harmony" According to Wordsworth's theory of poetry, after the initial observation and experience of emotion, there has to be time gap when that particular experience penetrates deeper into one's being and the unnecessary parts of the same are removed in that time. What remains is the pure pleasure and learning of the experience. The last stage of composition comes when "emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation is gradually produced." The present visit to the place acts as a catalyst for the recollection of the past boyhood experiences with nature. He remembers the "coarser pleasures of my boyish days,/And their glad animal movements all gone by". Wordsworth claims in his theory of poetry that the primary function of poetry is to "give immediate pleasure" and this feeling of pleasure helps to "educate the reader's emotions and moral understanding."

Central to Wordsworth's theory of poetry is the idea that Nature that surrounds us and our own nature, i.e. our feelings and thoughts are intimately connected. He believes that "the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature." (*Preface to Lyrical Ballads*) In the poem *Tintern Abbey*, the poet admits that his soul has often turned to the river Wye for peace and pleasure. Nature has always a great effect on his very being;

"...And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused"

Here, Wordsworth, through this series of emotions, traces "the primary laws of our nature." This "unintelligible world" burdens us with "heavy and weary weight". The underlying music of humanity is "sad". For Wordsworth, the purpose of poetry is "delight and moral instruction" and the poem fulfils this purpose. The poet glides from present to past and then comes back to create a series of beautiful experiences in nature to counter the dull dreary burdens of the world and instructs the mind of the reader about a spirit that "impels all thinking things", that "...Nature never did betray/ The heart that loved her", and that in hours of solitude, pain or fear, the "sweet sounds and harmonies" of nature shall fill the mind to heal it. Avoiding the ornate artificial diction of the past poets, the poet has used plain conversational language to express the deepest of human

emotions and the highest of human thoughts. He is just a man talking to the one beside him, without any intervention of formalities; "May I behold in thee what I was once"

It can be said that to a great extent, *Tintern Abbey* meets the requirements of the new kind of poetry that Wordsworth proposed in his theory of poetry given in *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. The poem gives expression to intense personal emotions in the simplest of words and expressions. The poet recollects the past experiences and evokes a series of emotions in the present moment, emotions purged and purified in the hours of absence. Now, he can perceive the best of his being, elated and blessed. This brings a pleasure that heals and instructs.

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