

## The Role of Emotions in Wordsworth and Eliot

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### Abstract

The paper deals with the role emotions play in the Romantic and Modernistic approach to art, especially in the work of William Wordsworth and T. S. Eliot. The first part discusses Wordsworth's famous definition of poetry as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" as expressed in the Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Then the attention is paid to the analysis of Wordsworth's poems - "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798" and *The Prelude* as examples of the author's ontological aesthetics in which emotion determines the depth of lyrical subject's involvement with nature – and with the nature of his own being.

The second part of the paper is concerned with the analysis of another crucial critical text regarding the role of emotions in art – T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in which he stressed the principle of "depersonalisation". His critical principles are discussed through the analysis of his masterwork *The Waste Land*.

### Key words

emotion, Romanticism, Wordsworth, nature, T. S. Eliot, modernism

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### Introduction

Literature has always been closely associated with emotion. There is perhaps no other concept that would be more frequently used to explain its unique effect on readers than its emotional impact. Emotion is what we usually expect to experience when we read literature (Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 2008: 108). It is one of the strongest attractors drawing people to reading and appreciating literary works, but also something that can blur the distinction between the world of art and the real world, making naïve readers "get lost" in the fictional world and experience it as if it were real, with instances of people shedding tears for their protagonists, or crying in cinemas proving it.

The close connection between emotion and literature, however, is not the issue only of our times, as one could assume from the proliferation of cheap sentimentality or fear in contemporary popular culture, but, as Mousley has claimed, it "reaches back into classical antiquity and has been subsequently affirmed by innumerable writers, critics, philosophers and theorists" (Mousley, 2013:13). For Aristotle, for example, the effect of the elements of tragedy is "through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of [these] emotions" (*Poetics*). His positive approach to emotion can be contrasted with the negative attitude of Plato who, even though he must have realised the importance emotion played in what he called "divine inspiration", finally considered it just a result of Gods' power over the artists, since they would not tell us what they do if they were in their "right mind" (see *Ion*). While in the Middle Ages literary emotion was very closely associated with Christian doctrine, the Classical appreciation of emotional impact resurfaced in Neoclassicism, e.g. in the work of Philip Sidney for whom the ideal aim of poetry is – to present reality, and human experience with reality, in a vivid (emotional) and persuasive form (*The Defense of Poesy*), and, subsequently, in other writers and critics.

## Emotions and William Wordsworth

Romanticism was a period in which emotions were tackled directly as the constitutive feature of imaginative literature, most importantly in William Wordsworth's Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, often labelled as the "manifesto of Romanticism," in which the author claimed that his poetry was essentially different from what had been written before. As Kowalczykova has observed, "Wordsworth's romantic vision of poetry was that poetry is a spontaneous explosion of feelings, their authenticity, which is subjected only to reflection. He rejected trivial stylistic figures and useless ornaments. He demanded a 'people's language' to be introduced to the poetry. This language would make art similar to truth, nature and natural simplicity" (1995: 42; translated from Polish by A.B.).

Characterising his poems' desired effect on the reader, and contrasting them with the poems of the preceding period, he used words as "sensation", "pleasure", "excitement", "passions", "agitated", ending up with one of the boldest articulations of the nature of poetry and its origin in the poet's subjectivity:

*"I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity. 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, 2013: Kindle Location 4504).

Due to the above definition, the Preface has become almost as famous as the poems it introduced. However, as we have tried to indicate above by referring to Aristotle and Plato, the identification of emotions' importance was not Wordsworth's invention, and definitely not a matter only of this particular venture, that is, his and Coleridge's joint publication of *Lyrical Ballads*. One can find it consistently applied throughout his entire work. For example, in his long poem *The Excursion*, Wordsworth presents "the business of poetry" as follows: it is to "treat of things not as they are, but as they appear; not as they exist in themselves, but as they seem to exist to the senses, and to the passions" (Wolfson, 2009: 413.). But getting back to the Preface, however, one has to point out one more thing, i.e. the fact that despite the Preface's "manifesto air", Wordsworth did not intend to start a completely new approach to poetry, to consciously reject the rationality of the Enlightenment and embrace unreservedly the spontaneity and emotionality of Romanticism. As Barker has it, he was rather urged to write it by Coleridge and "would later claim that he 'never cared a straw about the theory' and that the preface was written 'out of sheer good nature'. 'I recollect the very spot, a deserted Quarry in the Vale of Grasmere where he pressed the thing upon me, & but for that it would never have been thought of'" (Barker, 2009: Kindle Location 4773). Thus in spite of the Preface's enormous influence on the subsequent developments of literary theory, the complexity of the transition from the Enlightenment to Romanticism requires scholars not to take it mechanically, as if it were part of a conscious rejection by the Romantics of a whole and undifferentiated unit and a deliberate introduction of new trends. Instead, one has to emphasise the Day's claim that many features attributed to Romanticism (such as emphasis on nature and feelings) were, in fact, values which were present during the last stage of the Enlightenment. So also "[T]he poems of *Lyrical Ballads* did not mark 'the beginning of a new age'. They were essentially compositions of the late Enlightenment" (Day, 2011: 68).

Wordsworth was aware of the fact that using his own feelings as a base for poetry can be criticised, since they could be associated only with the poet himself and

easily connected with trivial subjects. One of the first attacks on his conception of poetry was the criticism of his contemporary William Hazlitt. As Wolfson has observed, “With a principle of ‘pure nature void of art’, this school (said Hazlitt) had expelled traditions of craft as surely as the French Revolution had expelled the monarchy” (2003, Kindle Location 1721). But she insists that Wordsworth’s method cannot be considered natural: “Even poems seemingly staged to show how ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’ may turn into a ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ give deliberate craft an important role in the drama” (Kindle Location 1752). The same opinion concerning Wordsworth’s “spontaneity” and “emotionality” is held by Robbins who claims “Wordsworth’s nature is, of course, culture” (Robbins 2005: 54). It is this nature-culture relation perhaps what makes Wordsworth’s poems individual as well as national or cultural at the same time, not simply outbursts of irrational emotionality, but expressions of the universality of a human being embedded in the temporality of existence.

One of the best poems in Wordsworth’s canon to demonstrate the centrality of the concept of emotion in his work is Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798 (henceforth as Tintern Abbey). It is full of what one can call “stable poetic concepts,” expressing everything one usually associates with poetry: subjectivity, universality, the present moment, timelessness, objects of nature as well as light of the spirit, and, naturally, emotion. Although one can approach it from several perspectives, all of them finally lead to one result – exploration of humanity through the subjective existential emotionality.

The poet’s humanity emerges into its full meaning through his facing the origination of the transcendental from the lack and fullness of temporary projections (Pokrivčák, 2015). Emotion in this process is of utmost significance, since, together with time as a precondition of the power of imagination which can exist only if the reality has always already been moved from “out there” to our mind’s world made of immaterial images, it changes the thing in itself for a characteristically Romantic thing for myself. It thus serves as the qualifier of Wordsworth’s poetic existence, for as Bloom has observed, “[i]n the renewed presence of a remembered scene, Wordsworth comes to a full understanding of his poetic self” (Bloom, 1971: 132). The temporality of the poetic existence emerges in his reflection on what he saw in the past, during his first visit. “These forms of beauty,” have remained in his mind, and become in the times of “weariness” a source of “sensations sweet”, “feelings too/of unremembered pleasure”. He has realised how the past, seen during his first visit, “may have had no trivial influence/On that best portion of a good man’s life”, how it allowed him to see into “the life of things” through “the deep power of joy” (Wordsworth, 2013: Kindle Location 6056).

As the above quotations from Tintern Abbey suggest, the emotion expressed by Wordsworth is different from what we are used to being aware of the images of contemporary culture full of violence, crime and shallowness of postmodern things. His is “the deep power of joy” seeing into “the life of things”, that is into the objects which are not just senseless objects, but artefacts partaking of the poet’s spirituality and connecting him to the transcendental. What is also important is that these powerful objects are not extraordinary, magical things, but simple facts of nature, which he had seen in the past and passively contemplates at present. This Wordsworth’s ability of “wise passiveness” as an essential quality of the poet’s poetic being was pointed out by Trilling:

*“Much as he loved to affirm the dizzy raptures of sentience, of the ear and the eye and the mind, he also loved to move down the scale of being, to say that when the spirit was sealed by slumber, was without motion and force,*

*when it was like a rock or a stone or a tree, not hearing or seeing and passive in the cosmic motion, that even then, or especially then, existence was blessed.*

*Now nothing could be further from the tendency of our culture than this Wordsworthian attitude or quality of feeling.” (1950: 488-489)*

As Trilling further claims, “Wordsworth taught us to feel” (491), but this feeling does not have to be “affirmed by that which is violent, or by that which is proud: the meanest flower is enough” (493). The uniqueness of Wordsworth’s attitude to feelings, his use of the common rather than the extraordinary, the peaceful rather than the violent, together with his concern for the depth of sense, makes him, according to Trilling the first modern poet, the one who “initiated the attack on the problem that has involved the energies of a main part of modern literature, the problem of affectlessness, of loss of feeling and of humanness, under which we subsume all the details of our modern spiritual plight” (496). And one can add here – not only modern, but postmodern as well. Postmodern with its relativity, indeterminacy, shallowness of playful signifiers and, in many cases, a total lack of ontological rootedness.

The contemplating passivity of Wordsworth’s lyrical subject, drawing on the “renewed presence of a remembered scene,” does not of course occur only in Tintern Abbey, but is a constant of the poet’s poetic world, occurring, for example, in one of his most frequently anthologised poems, I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud, as well as in other poems - most importantly perhaps in his opus vitae The Prelude - which consists of a series of past remembrances and their present re-imaginings.

The Prelude is a poetic autobiography through which the poet wished to express something essential about himself and the history, a kind of philosophical movement from the truth of his ego, his mind, to a larger, overwhelming truth of the universe. As Kryński has observed, it is a “psychological epic poem. Its main character is the mind of the author. The events become important only when they influence and shape Wordsworth’s mind” (1963: xx; translated from Polish by A.B.). However, Kryński also pointed out that it was not only nature that was emotionalised in the Prelude, but also French nation, current political and military events (a danger of war between Britain and Republic of France), everything acquiring a new colouring having gone through the poet’s ego. Wordsworth’s contemporary, the poet John Keats called this concentration on one’s own mind “egotistical sublime” – using feeling and emotion to increase the importance of the treated thing or event. This is instrumental especially in the poet’s revisiting his own past, for only through emotion and feelings the past things, landscapes, actions and perceptions emerge and take up significance in his life:

*I spare to speak, my friend, of what ensued —  
The admiration and the love, the life  
In common things, the endless store of things  
Rare, or at least so seeming, every day  
Found all about me in one neighbourhood,  
The self-congratulations, the complete  
Composure, and the happiness entire.*

(Wordsworth, 2012: Kindle Locations 14930-14933).

“My friend” from the quotation is S. T. Coleridge who had a significant role in the writing of The Prelude, which was, because of its topic – the poet’s lived life, very complex and artistically demanding. In fact, there are several versions of this epic poem since Wordsworth was working on it throughout his entire life. The first is the so-called Two-Part Prelude of 1799, which was begun when both friends were in

Germany. The 1805 Prelude version consists of 13 books covering most important events in Wordsworth's life, and since it appeared at the time when the poet's creative powers were in culmination, it is considered to be most representative of Wordsworth's poetics. The 1850 version of The Prelude was published posthumously and consists of 14 books. What appears in all versions, however, is the sublimation, universalisation of the subjective and the personal. This is achieved, as mentioned several times already, by a peculiar Wordsworthian blending of emotion and time, which results in the assigning of existential relativity to the Enlightenment's objectivity. As Bundock maintains, "Wordsworth's subject, sensitive to the elusive, intangible ground of sensation, is thus sensitive to time's new future, since time has become this very elusiveness" (2010: 385).

### **Emotion and T. S. Eliot**

The role of emotion in Wordsworth's poetic theory, as expressed in the Preface and applied in Tintern Abbey, The Prelude as well as in many other poems, can best be illustrated through the reference to another famous essay in the history of English literature treating the concept of feelings and emotion – the T. S. Eliot's famous Tradition and the Individual Talent. T. S. Eliot cannot be situated farther from William Wordsworth; he differs from him in almost all the important aspects of poetic values. Unlike Wordsworth's obsession with nature, T. S. Eliot preferred the city, while Wordsworth and other Romantics emphasised feelings and emotion, as well as strong lyrical subject who would express them, T. S. Eliot calls for the necessity to abandon feelings, saying that poetry is "not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion" ... "not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (Bartleby.com). Whereas for Wordsworth the human subject, personality, is the ultimate source of aesthetic strivings, T. S. Eliot rejects the importance of personality and locates art in the poet's working just as a medium, not the creator. The emotion expressed in a literary work does not then come from the depth of the poet's individual life, but is a result of self-forgetting. He/she only works as a "transforming catalyst" to which emotion and feelings enter and are changed into artistic emotion having nothing to do with the ordinary ones.

This is what Eliot claims in his most famous critical article. However, one must add immediately, the critical principles were not always followed by Eliot's poetic practice for which personal emotion was not unimportant. A very good example to illustrate it is his poem The Waste Land that, according to Moody, "put an end to English romanticism by taking absolutely seriously the feelings it had soothed" (2001: 243). Moody maintains that the difference between Eliot and Romantic poets lies in the fact that although the Romantics dealt with feelings, it was not enough, they were not able to penetrate under the surface of things they dealt with:

*"Eliot might have thought the same of Wordsworth's always connecting wisdom with gentleness, serenity, tranquillity. It was because he had 'no ghastly shadows at his back, no Eumenides to pursue him that he went droning on the still sad music of infirmity'. In general, from his point of view, the romantic poets had consoled themselves with melancholy ruminations, when only keen and intense suffering could have saved them. They were at once weary of the world and resigned to it; if they could not master it spiritually, they would have been better broken or mined. They should have suffered more, instead of wishing not to suffer."* (243).

This definitely puts Eliot in a different position than what he himself would have imagined his role of the poet to be, judging by his programmatic use in the mentioned essay of the concepts of "depersonalisation", "impersonal", "escape from personality".

The suffering he recommends to the Romantics is not expected to be found in a creative mind, but only in a mind of poet the man who serves only as a catalyst for the mind of poet the artist – the creative mind. That it is very difficult to completely separate them does not have to be stressed, since it is one of the most difficult questions in literary theory. We can see it on his own masterpiece, *The Waste Land*, which is, among other things, also seen as having been “issued, however circuitously, from the unhappiness of Eliot’s first marriage” (Donoghue, 2001: 216).

*The Waste Land* is usually interpreted as expressing the plight of modern civilisation with its loss of meaning, with the shift from the traditional and organic to the uprooted and mechanical, from nature to the city. The poet uses anthropological theme and technique of intertextuality, referring to various mythologies, cultural and literary motifs, to portray “the final uprooting of the immemorial ways of life, of life rooted in the soil” (Leavis, 2001: 174) - unlike Wordsworth who laid us on the lap of earth (Trilling, 1950: 493). We will not go into a detailed analysis of the poem, since the complexity of the interliterary and intercultural motifs would require much more space than we have at our disposal here. Moreover, the analysis of various symbols and putting them into relations may not even be most important for the aesthetic reception of the poem itself, since “[I]t may well be that such rationalization is no more than a scaffolding to be got out of the way before we contemplate the poem itself as a poem” (Brooks, 2001: 185). What would be much more important, in our understanding, is the poetic meaning of all these symbols and archetypal images. And this meaning is no different than what can be found in much simpler poems of William Wordsworth – the expression of human emotion.

But while Wordsworth’s emotion leads us to the perception of the mystery of human existence, of the sad as well as pleasurable state of being human in the midst of nature, Eliot’s emotion shows us the horror of the loss of emotion, of life in a place where there

*is no water but only rock  
Rock and no water and the sandy road  
The road winding above among the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water* (Eliot, 2001: 16)

Or in the “unreal City” amidst “a heap of broken images”.

### **Conclusion**

Emotion is usually claimed to be that what makes literature different from other discourses, since it changes neutral objects into objects for ourselves by means of the positive cathexis (Mousley, 2013: 14, 15). Both poets, though dramatically different and living in different historical periods, succeeded in doing this in a very similar way, one by drawing our attention to the natural world, the other to the world of civilisation, showing its utmost importance for the meaningfulness of human being.

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