Wordsworth’s Views on Imagination and Fancy

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In order to understand Wordsworth’s view on imagination, we have to go to his poems, and to his letter. In ‘The Preface’, the word occur first when Wordsworth tells us that his purpose has been to select incidents and situations from humble and common life and make them look uncommon and unusual by throwing over them a coloring of imagination.

This clarifies that imagination is a transforming and transfiguring power which presents the usual in an unusual light. The poet does not merely present “image of men and nature” but he also shapes, modifies and transfigures that image by the power of his imagination. Thus imagination is creative; it is a shaping or ‘plastic’ power. The poet is half the creator; he is not a mere mechanical reproducer of outward reality, but a specially gifted individual, who, like God, is a creator or maker as he adds something to nature and reality. It is the imagination of the poet which imparts to nature, the ‘glory and freshness of a dream’, the light that never was on land and sea.

In making the poet’s imagination a creative power, Wordsworth goes counter to the ‘associationist’ theories of David Hartley who had considerable influences on the poet. Hartley and other associationist psychologist thought that the human mind receives impressions from the external words, which are therein associated together to form images. In this way, the mind merely reflects the external world. But according to Wordsworth the mind does not merely reflect passively, it actively creates. At least, it is half the creator. Imagination is the active, creative faculty of the mind. As Florence Marsh points out, for Wordsworth imagination is a mental power which alters the external world creatively.

“It is a word of higher import, denoting operations of the human mind upon those objects and processes of creation or composition, governed by certain fixed laws.”

It is through imagination that the poet realizes his kinship with the eternal. Imagination works upon the raw material of sense impressions to illustrate the working of external truths. It makes the poet perceive the essential unity of “man, God and Nature” while “the meddling intellect” of the scientist multiplies diversities.

Again, he tells that the poet is a man who thinks long and deeply, and so he can treat things which are absent as if they were present. In other words, the poet contemplates in tranquility the emotions which he had experienced in the past and through imagination can visualize the objects which gave rise to those emotions initially. Imagination is the mind’s eye through which the poet sees into the ‘heart of things’ as well as into the past, the remote, and the unknown. It is imagination which enables the poet to render emotional experience, which he has not personally experienced, as if, they were personally felt emotions.

The power of imagination enables the poet to universalize the particular and the personal, and arrives at universal truths. Henry Crabbe Robinson describes the process in the following words:

“The poet first conceives the essential nature of his object, and then strips it of all casualties and accidental individual dress, and in this he is a philosopher; … he re-clothes his idea in an individual dress which expresses the essential quality and has also the spirit and life of a sensual object. And this transmutes the philosophic into a poetic exhibition.”

Stressing the importance which Wordsworth attached to the role of imagination in the process of poetic creation, C M. Bowra writes:

“For him, the imagination was the most important gift that a poet can have, and his arrangement of his own poems shows what he meant by it.”

The section which he calls, ‘Poems of the Imagination’, contains poems in which he united creative power and a special visionary insight. He agreed with Coleridge that this activity resembles that of God. It is the divine capacity of the child who fashions his own little world:

For feeling has to him imparted power

That through the growing faculties of sense

Doth like an agent of the one great Mind

Create, creator and receiver both,

Working but in alliance with the works

Which it beholds.

The poet keeps this faculty in his maturity, and through it he is what he is. But Wordsworth was full aware that mere creation is not enough, that it must be accompanied by a special insight. So he explains that the imagination,

Is but another name for absolute power

And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,

And Reason in her most exalted mood.

“Wordsworth did to go so far as the other Romantics in relegating reason to an inferior position. He preferred to give a new dignity to the word and to insist that inspired insight is itself rational.”

It should be noticed that here Wordsworth calls imagination, “reason in her most exalted mood”. It is a higher reason than mere reason. It is that faculty which transforms sense perceptions and makes the poet conscious of human immortality. It makes him have visions of the divine.

Wordsworth deals with imagination at much greater length in his Preface to the 1815 edition of the Lyrical Ballads. There he draws a distinction between Fancy and Imagination. Wordsworth’s distinction between Fancy and Imagination is not so subtle and penetrating as that of Coleridge. According to Wordsworth, both Imagination and Fancy, “evoke and combine, aggregate and associate”. But the material which they evoke and combine is different, and their purpose in evoking and combining is different. They differ not in their natures but in their purpose, and in the material on which they work. The material on which Fancy works is not so susceptible to change or so pliant as the material on which imagination works. Fancy makes things exact and definite, while Imagination leaves everything vague and indefinite

Rene Wellek’s comment in this respect is illuminating and interesting:

“Both Wordsworth and Coleridge make the distinction between Fancy, a faculty which, handles, ‘fixities and definites, and Imagination, a faculty which deals with the ‘plastic, the pliant and the indefinite’. The only important difference between Wordsworth and Coleridge is that Wordsworth does not clearly see Coleridge’s distinction between imagination as a ‘holistic’ and fancy as an ‘associative’ power and does not draw the sharp distinction between transcendentalism and associationism which Coleridge wanted to establish.”

Q1. What is the difference between fancy and imagination?

According to Coleridge, imagination is the faculty associated with creativity and the power to shape and unify, while fancy, dependent on and inferior to imagination, is merely “associative.”

Q2. What does Wordsworth mean by imagination is it comparable to fancy?

Fancy is not a creative power at all. ... It only combines what it perceives into beautiful shapes, but like the imagination it does fuse and unify. The difference between the two is the same as the difference between a mechanical mixture and a chemical compound.

Q3. Discuss how Wordsworth gives importance to imagination.

Wordsworth associates imagination with the creative power or the poetic principle. He selects incidents from humble and rustic life for the themes of his poetry. He throws over them a colouring of imagination to make them appear in an unusual light. Imagination is thus a transforming power. It has the ability to change the usual and the ordinary in an unusual and uncommon way. Poetry is a modified ‘image of man and nature’. The poet is able to impart ‘the glory and freshness of a dream’ to ordinary things of nature. He can present in his poetry the light that never was on land and sea.

He is able to do so through the creative faculty of imagination. It is thus an active power. The poet is not a passive reflector of the images formed from nature.

4. Wordsworth's views on imagination and fancy

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The recollection of emotions enables the poet to ‘see’ the object which evokes the emotions. Imagination enables the poet to look deep into the heart and soul of things. It is through the imaginative faculty that he arrives at the general truths basic to human nature. Through the imaginative power, the poet is able to present emotions which he has not directly experienced. But he presents them in such a way that they seem personally experienced.

Imagination is a faculty which transforms the external world in a creative manner. It is a power that enables the poet to arrive at a realization of the connection between the particular and the eternal. It helps the poet to dig deep into the core of human existence and to get at universal truths. These appeal to us quite instinctively. This is what separates the poetic truth from scientific truth. Imagination transforms the apparent world into a world of higher import. The poet conceives the essential nature of his object and sees it in its basic reality. He is a philosopher.

Wordsworth never ignores the importance of thought and reason. He calls imagination a ‘higher reason’ –’reason in her most exalted mood’. He stresses on the importance of imagination in the process poetic creation. For him, it is the most important gift that a poet can have. Imagination to him is a divine power. It is ‘the vision and the faculty divine’. It transfigures sense impressions. It makes the poet a visionary. To Wordsworth, imagination is inventive, serious and superior. It is active and half-creates the world it perceives. The faculty of mind which creates is the faculty of the imagination. To Wordsworth, the mind has two faculties—the passive fancy and the active imagination. Fancy merely reflects the external world. Imagination has the poetic power to confer, abstract and modify the original impressions in order to give them a fresh significance. True knowledge is obtained through insight. Imagination gives us the unified vision of reality. Wordsworth relates truth and poetry through imagination. It is the mental power that transforms the literal to the figurative.

The Solitary Reaper, Tintern Abbey, the Immortality Ode and To the Cuckoo—all seem to have been composed according to emotions recollected in tranquillity. These are intensely felt and well contemplated poems. The imagination is at its highest. The poet recreates the whole atmosphere and recreates it with the help of his imagination. He can recall his childhood passion for the Cuckoo which was a voice, a mystery and an invisible thing.

‘Thou bringest to me a tale

O visionary hours.

Tintern Abbey has been re-visited after five years but his imagination is so active that it seems:

These beauteous forms,

Through a long absence, have not been to me

As is a landscape to a blind man’s eye.

Wordsworth’s imagination is so powerful that he can remember the vision, the joy and then its loss in his early life.

The vision splendid

On my way was attended.