

Imagination as Education of Feelings and Senses in the Prelude

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Imagination as Education of Feelings and Senses in the Prelude

To read Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is to receive an education of feelings and senses through imagination. Wordsworth articulates this pedagogical intention at the end of the *Prelude*. 2

Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak
A lasting inspiration, sanctified
By reason, blest by faith: what we have loved,
Others will love, and we will teach them how;
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells

(Book XIV, 446-452)¹

As Wordsworth writes about nature in the *Prelude*, he explores the terrain of the human mind and the depth of the human psyche. The human mind produces imagination, and imagination nourishes the human mind in turn. This essay traces the poet's treatment of imagination throughout the poem to explore the relationships of imagination and nature, imagination and the mind, and imagination and the self. The metaphysics of imagination is discussed along the way. 3 4 5

¹All quotations from the *Prelude* in this essay are from the 1850 version unless otherwise noted.

II. Sources of Imagination

As Wordsworth recalls his youth, he brings back memories of episodes of childhood explorations. He calls the episodes "spots of time," which he relies on to connect the consciousness of his past and his present. Describing the sceneries of nature from his past, he narrates from a perspective of how he senses and feels those sceneries in the past and present. The sceneries are often common and ordinary, e.g., a breeze, sunshine, and blue sky, as are the senses and feelings.

OH there is blessing in this gentle breeze,
A visitant that while it fans my cheek
Doth seem half-conscious of the joy it brings
From the green fields, and from yon azure sky.
Whate'er its mission, the soft breeze can come
To none more grateful than to me

(Book I, 1-6)

Feeling of blessing in the gentle breeze as he senses the breeze fanning his cheek, being half-conscious of the joy the breeze brings from the green fields and the azure sky, the poet is grateful for the soft breeze. A common breeze invokes common senses and feelings. If one is transported back in time to sense and feel the same, one may feel a true sense of tranquility no matter the state of mind.

But the mind cannot stay tranquil, as it is how the mind works. Questions of "where do I belong" soon invade the poet. Imagining himself to be a bird, having escaped the city, the poet wonders:

What dwelling shall receive me? in what vale
Shall be my harbour? underneath what grove
Shall I take up my home? and what clear stream
Shall with its murmur lull me into rest?

(Book I, 10-14)

With the unknown, one may be concerned or scared. The poet shows how he copes. Still feeling joyous from the soft breeze, the poet reminds himself that he is not scared of his liberty and the many questions he faces, that he cannot miss his way. The wandering cloud can be his guide. He breathes again and shakes off what is in his mind and the weight on himself. What is described is the beginning of the Prelude - the poet does not miss a beat to start the education of feelings and senses from the very beginning of the poem.

For Wordsworth, imagination is essential, as the human mind, the sense of self, human reason, and rationality all intertwine with imagination. For him, the very foundation of spiritual life, the love from God, cannot exist without imagination. Thus, the poet calls the faculty of imagination the "feeding source of our long labor." He writes:

This spiritual Love acts not nor can exist
Without imagination, which, in truth,
Is but another name for absolute power

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And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
And Reason in her most exalted mood.
This faculty hath been the feeding source
Of our long labour

(Book II, 188-194)

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If imagination is the feeding source for all the richness of the mind and human life, what is the source of imagination? How does one learn to imagine? Or to have the right kind of imagination? For him, the primary source of imagination comes from nature. The poet suggests paying homage to nature as a way to build up the imagination. In the below verses, "fancy" is used in place of imagination.

18

19

A homage frankly offered up, like that
Which I had paid to Nature. Toil and pains
In this recess, by thoughtful Fancy built,
Should spread from heart to heart

(Book III, 379-382)

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Nature plays an indispensable role in the Prelude. Not only is nature present throughout the poem, but it is also the primary topic for Book VIII, titled "Retrospect - Love of Nature Leading to Love of Man." The main reason that loving nature can lead to the love of man is that loving nature causes one to be cheerful and tranquil, and as the cheerfulness and tranquility spread from man to man, so does love. Nature not only can instill in the mind through extrinsic passion - imagination - with "forms sublime or fair," it can lead to an intellectual charm - another form of imagination.

21

22

Nor, sedulous as I have been to trace
How Nature by extrinsic passion first
Peopled the mind with forms sublime or fair,
And made me love them, may I here omit
How other pleasures have been mine, and joys
Of subtler origin; how I have felt,
Not seldom even in that tempestuous time,
Those hallowed and pure motions of the sense
Which seem, in their simplicity, to own
An intellectual charm

(Book I, 549-555)

23

To benefit from nature as the source of imagination, one has to open his heart to the beauty of nature. Nature and the human heart are what the poet turns to when imagination needs repair.

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25

With deep devotion, Nature, did I feel,
In that enormous City's turbulent world
Of men and things, what benefit I owed
To thee, and those domains of rural peace,
Where to the sense of beauty first my heart
Was opened

(Book VIII, 70-75)

26

Imagination also comes from sources other than what nature impresses upon the

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poet. Other minds, books, or music can be sources of delight and imagination. Thus, from Shakespeare to Milton, from books to music, all senses can be hungry and can be fed. Once the senses are fed with a good feeding source, one is delighted, and imagination flows. The works of poetry can be particularly captivating for the poet. He writes:

28

Oftentimes at least
Me hath such strong entrancement overcome,
When I have held a volume in my hand,
Poor earthly casket of immortal verse,
Shakespeare, or Milton, labourers divine!

(Book V, 161-165)

29

The memory from experience is also a source of imagination when one's surroundings trigger the memory. As the poet observes the "parent hen amid her brood" (Book V, 246), the memory of his late mother comes to mind. Like his imagination of nature, the imagination of his mother similarly brings the poet to a state of tranquil contemplation.

31

And spot in which she lived, and through a grace
Of modest meekness, simple-mindedness,
A heart that found benignity and hope,
Being itself benign.

(Book V, 290-293)

32

In short, according to the poet, the primary source of imagination is from nature. Pleasure will come from the meditation of nature, and such pleasure leads to a state of tranquil contemplation. Memory, poetry, music, and anything that nourishes the senses can be a source for imagination. All of these external factors working with the mind mysteriously give rise to the power of imagination. Although there is no sure way to lead to the imagination of the right kind, there are the main factors that can influence the imagination.

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III. The Deeper Source (Metaphysics) of Imagination

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The power of imagination is mysterious, as the object of imagination, i.e., what imagination brings, is mysterious. The poet's imagination of "the boy of Winander" (Book V, 365-398) depicts a boy being in nature, interacting with nature and the beauty of the happening and surrounding, then the solemn imaginary of the boy's death, at the bottom of the lake. The poet stands silent in front of the boy's grave on summer evenings. There is no explanation as to why. It is a mystery. The poet acknowledges imagination as a visionary power. In particular, poetic imagination with the intricate of verses can render glory to otherwise ordinary objects. Imagination is transcendental. He writes at the end of Book V:

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36

Of mighty Poets. Visionary power
Attends the motions of the viewless winds,
Embodied in the mystery of words:
There, darkness makes abode, and all the host
Of shadowy things work endless changes,-there,
As in a mansion like their proper home,
Even forms and substances are circumfused
By that transparent veil with light divine,
And, through the turnings intricate of verse,
Present themselves as objects recognised,
In ashes, and with glory not their own.

(Book V, 597-607)

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In these verses, nature's inspiration of imagination is mysterious. For the poet, the power of imagination reveals itself in verses. Philosophically, imagination's power to give "objects recognized" "glory not their own" goes beyond transcendence. As taught by Kant and Schopenhauer, transcendental idealism makes a distinction between thing-in-itself and appearance, with the latter being existence as we know it. In other words, what exists is what we recognize as a result of our limited intellect and senses. In turn, the thing-in-itself in its completeness lies beyond our limited intellect and senses. For imagination to give "glory not their own" to an object, the object's existence is augmented. Does this augmentation come from the otherwise unreachable part of the thing-in-itself, or does it belong to another dimension, or is it somewhere in between? The transcendental idealism as we know it, therefore, lacks an account of imagination for imagination's mystical power to augment existence. Let us represent the three potential metaphysical options of imagination in its relationship to transcendental idealism in the below figures and call them Options A, B, and C.

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As the poet continues to explore the mystical power of imagination, we examine what he thinks may represent the relationship between imagination and transcendental idealism. He writes in Book VI:

39

40

Imagination-here the Power so called
Through sad incompetence of human speech,
That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss
Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost;
Halted without an effort to break through;

But to my conscious soul I now can say
"I recognise thy glory:" in such strength
Of usurpation, when the light of sense
Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
The invisible world, doth greatness make abode

(Book VI, 594-604)

41

In these verses, the imagination invokes a memory of the poet, an event in the past. From memory, the poet gains a moment of vision to recognize the glory as if a flash has revealed the invisible world. Imagination creates sublimity that cannot be expressed by human language due to the "incompetence" of human language. If imagination only reveals what is invisible, it seems plausible that the invisible world is the thing-in-itself. If each object has its own thing-in-itself that stands apart from each other, there is no reason why imagination should stay within the limit of the thing-in-itself for each object. All imagination can come from the same thing-in-itself. It makes more sense for all objects to come from the same thing-in-itself than for each object to have its own thing-in-itself. The truth has to be something similar to what is described in the Upanishads. The world we live in is one interconnected universe with a single and unifying underlying atman. With objects in existence, each having a different articulation of the atman, each articulation is a brahman. In this sense, imagination and object recognized are different articulations of the same mysterious thing-in-itself. Therefore, we can represent the metaphysical position of imagination in the below figure.

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This figure represents that there is one underlying thing-in-itself for all objects. Each object recognized has its appearance, and imagination is an appearance that can be based on one or more objects recognized. One should also note that while objects can be named and described, imagination can be sublime and fail to be delineated or articulated in language.

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IV. Imagination and the Self

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In the Prelude, the relationship between imagination and the self is also explored. Although nature and other sources can inspire imagination, imagination exists as a form of power that does not follow a formula for its appearance. Imagination intertwines with the self. The poet uses a vivid metaphor to illustrate the relationship.

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46

whate'er
I saw, or heard, or felt, was but a stream
That flowed into a kindred stream; a gale,
Confederate with the current of the soul,
To speed my voyage; every sound or sight,
In its degree of power, administered
To grandeur or to tenderness,-to the one
Directly

(Book VI, 744-748)

47

The poet's metaphor goes like this: the self, i.e., the soul, is like a river. All my experiences from my senses, e.g., what I see, what I hear, and what I feel, are streams flowing into the river. Imagination is like a strong wind working together with the river's current, the self, speeding the river's voyage. Thus, if the river is consciousness, the wind - the mysterious power of imagination - can work on each of the streams of senses flowing into the river and can work on the river itself - the overall consciousness. The power of imagination can be of various quality. Throughout the poem, there are examples of different qualities of imagination being described. "Those bold imaginations in due time/Had vanished, leaving others in their stead" (Book VII, 142-143); "Which on thy young imagination, trained/In the great City, broke like light from far" (Book XIII, 364-365); "In this new life. Imagination slept/And yet not utterly." (Book III, 258-259); "With unchecked fancy ever on the stir" (Book VII, 75). For the poet, imagination is sometimes experienced in solitude. He writes:

48

49

At this day
I smile, in many a mountain solitude
Conjuring up scenes as obsolete in freaks
Of character, in points of wit as broad,
As aught by wooden images performed

(Book III, 572-576)

50

However, supposedly, imagination does not need to be experienced in solitude, as the mind works under all conditions. However, according to the poet, being in solitude, especially when away from the city and with nature, can provide imagination "on more lofty themes."

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For the poet, imagination has played an important role in the growth of his mind. In the three books of the Prelude that describes the poet's residence in France, Wordsworth describes the French Revolution's initial appeal as "the multitude, so long oppressed/Would be oppressed no more" (Book XI, 194-195). He then loses confidence when Frenchmen "become oppressors in their turn" and "lose sight of what they struggle for." He laments, "the dream/Flattered the young, pleased with

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extremes, nor least/With that which makes our Reason's naked self" (Book XI, 234-236). Reason's naked self "build social upon personal Liberty" (Book XI, 242).² During this period, the poet suggests that his imagination becomes impaired.

Books XII and XIII are titled "Imagination and Taste, how impaired and restored." As Wordsworth's political view undergoes a transformation from the French revolution, he feels the need to repair and restore his mind. The restoration and repair of his self are done through the restoration of his imagination and taste. To nourish his mind, he opens his heart to nature and meditates on several "spots of time" from childhood. Upon the repairment, his mind returns to a good state. He writes:

I beheld the emblem of a mind
That feeds upon infinity, that broods
Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
Its voices issuing forth to silent light
In one continuous stream; a mind sustained
By recognitions of transcendent power,
In sense conducting to ideal form,
In soul of more than mortal privilege.

(Book XIV, 70-77)

When the mind is in a glorious state, the mind becomes timeless and limitless. It will "hold fit converse with the spiritual world, /And with the generations of mankind/Spread over time, past, present, and to come, /Age after age, till Time shall be no more." (Book XIV, 108-111).

²Wordsworth says earlier in the poem that reason and rationality also depend on imagination. For him, perhaps reason loses its appeal if divorced from the imagination regardless of reason's origin from imagination.

V. Conclusion

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John Stuart Mill famously credits reading the Prelude for helping him recover from his depression and nervous breakdown. Wordsworth shows us that tranquil contemplation and pleasure through imagination are possible. Repairment and restoration of our minds and our imagination are possible. The Prelude provides education for how to feel and how to sense. As we learn, we are rewarded with imagination and intellectual love.

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59

Of pure imagination, and of love;
And, as the horizon of my mind enlarged,
Again I took the intellectual eye
For my instructor, studious more to see
Great truths, than touch and handle little ones.
Knowledge was given accordingly; my trust
Became more firm in feelings that had stood

(Book XIII, 50-56)

60

Imagination and intellectual love go hand-in-hand. Imagination is a blessing and bliss.

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62

Imagination having been our theme,
So also hath that intellectual Love,
For they are each in each, and cannot stand
Dividually

(Book XIV, 206-209)

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Endnotes