

Cognition and imagination in the poetry of William Wordsworth

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The discourse on cognitive literary studies has been gaining ground in some literary critical and theoretical circles for some time. This comes as no surprise, for current explorations within the cognitive field have been able to highlight some unique insights into many aspects not only of a single literary work of art but into more general aspects of the literary process as well. This paper aims to discuss one of the traditional literary concepts, imagination, first by sketching out its very brief history, up to Romanticism, and then illustrating how its Romantic treatment can be approached from the aspect of cognitive literary studies.

Undoubtedly, imagination is a phenomenon which is frequently associated with the nature of literature, especially with its immaterial worlds “created” from images, or pictures of the real world. Philosophers and scientists (Derrida 1976; Edelman and Tononi 2001) have essentially agreed that it originated with the origin of consciousness, with the ability of the human mind to create mental images of the world out there, and thus situate the individual human conscious being within the external reality. In mythical times, this differentiation was not yet very significant, since the gap between what is outside and the individual “I”, i.e. between reality and its representation, was relatively narrow, as in the case of, for example, origin myths, which freely moved between the natural and the human, between the here and there. Already at that time, it is frequently claimed, imagination was closely tied to creativeness, which, in fact, has continued up to the present. The close proximity of the human to the natural could be best seen in mythical stories – great examples of the synthetic quality of the human mind, before its later fall into the grips of alienation from the natural world.

In the post-mythological periods the synthetic quality of knowledge came to an end. While in the pre-Socratic stages of Greek philosophy the human mind still retained its holistic quality, keeping the human in close proximity to the natural, in its later stages it set on its own course, relegating imagination to a rather non-rational, natural or divine world of unreliable sensations, feelings and images. One can first see this in Plato, for whom imagination, in the form of artistic imitation, is superficial and unreliable, three times removed from the truth which he attributed to ideas. By contrast, in the thought of Plato’s disciple, Aristotle, it acquired a more important position as a phenomenon located somewhere between feelings and reason. In

the following periods Plato's enmity was ultimately not widely shared, and Aristotle's concept of imagination was in turn gradually developed, having been moved from the role of ornamentation, only second to reason, to the role of instrumentality in cognition, especially in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

The mythical guise of imagination emerged again, both in theory as well as in poetic practice, during Romanticism. In theory, a meaning-making and world-constituting principle was ascribed to it by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who in his *Biographia Literaria* subsumed its two historically crystallized faces into the distinction between "imagination", primary and secondary, and "fancy". The primary imagination is for Coleridge a divine power shared with man and opening the world for him, "the living power and prime agent of all human perception ... a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (Coleridge 2012, 97). The secondary imagination is a derivation of the primary one, a human emulation of divine creation in the form of (poetic) creativity:

The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate: or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead (97).

Fancy, on the contrary, "has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites" (98), non-creatively drawing its "ready-made" material from the empirical world. We can see that in Coleridge's ideas appear both historical manifestations of imagination: its original, primary, ontological role as well as the secondary, artistic and creative one.

The same tendency towards essentiality and universality of imagination was expressed by Coleridge's friend, William Wordsworth: "Fancy is given to quicken and to beguile the temporal part of our Nature, Imagination to incite and to support the eternal" (2013). The imagination is not just "images that are merely a faithful copy, existing in the mind, of absent external objects; but [is] a word of higher import, denoting operations of the mind upon those objects and processes of creation or of composition, governed by certain fixed laws" (2013). Again, for Wordsworth imagination structures and organizes the external world through its reference to the perceiving mind, which is thus not only a passive beholder but active creator as well. Of all human beings, the poets are the ones who are most strongly endowed with the ability "to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them" (2013).

Coleridge's and Wordsworth's Romantic theories of imagination and of the role of the poet and poetic expression have their closest counterpart in the theories of American Transcendentalism, especially in Ralph Waldo Emerson's poetic essays. Actually, English Romantic poetry has become accepted by scholars as one of the sources of American Transcendentalism. Even after a superficial reading of Emerson's essay (Emerson 2011) one cannot fail to notice a very similar belief in the poet's vocation as one can find in Wordsworth:

The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre. For the world is not painted, or adorned, but is from the beginning beautiful; and God has not made some beautiful things, but Beauty is the creator of the universe. Therefore the poet is not any permissive potentate, but is emperor in his own right.

The poet is “intoxicate[d]” by imagination which is a special kind of “sharing the path, or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucent to others” (2011). One of the most forceful expressions of the link of the poet’s imagination to the universality of being is the Emerson’s metaphor of an eye-ball: “I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (2011). One can say that here we can witness the culmination of the Romantic fusion with the landscape, a sort of return to the first, original close proximity to the natural, as mentioned above.

Although one cannot deny that, as a period, Romanticism has contributed most significantly to both the theory and practice of imagination, it was also a time when, according to some scholars, “facts hardened, the imagination ran riot, and art and science diverged” (Daston, qtd. in Richardson 2011, 664). In the succeeding periods we have seen their parallel existences, with occasional attempts at interdisciplinary rapprochement. One such attempt is the research carried out in the cognitive sciences and neurosciences, within which “imagination is enjoying its new prominence [in cognitive science] at a time when it has been viewed as all but moribund in discussions of the arts and humanities” (Richardson 2011, 664–665). This divergence between art and science is then strange, since, as Gilbert claims, both sides, i.e. cognitive psychologists, neuroscientists as well as literary scholars, grant basically the same sense to the term, which is the “ability to imagine episodes and objects that do not exist in the realm of the real” (2006, 5).

However, the essential soundness of the above quotation must go hand in hand with a slight reservation, that is, even though the sense is, to some extent, the same, one must say that the ultimate source of human power to imagine, or create in the mind non-existing things, is significantly different for neurosciences and for literary studies. While for traditional literary scholars imagination falls in the area of aesthetics, spirituality and even transcendence, cognitive literary scholars consider human imagination and creativeness as results of processes occurring within the human brain. Given this “slight” difference, the cognitive additions to traditional literary studies then open a new space not only for the study of imagination but for the concept of literary studies as such, claiming to make the study of literature more scientific than ever before. This is very important especially in times when literary theory is still “making fun of itself,” falling into the grips of ideological and poststructural discourses (like deconstruction) with the emphasis on relativity, indeterminacy, the arbitrary nature of meaning production, and, consequently, the essential unknowability of the world.

Such ideologizing cannot be found in cognitive studies, since, as Richardson has pointed out, “[c]onceptual categories, for example, cannot be expected to faithfully reproduce the world ‘out there,’ yet neither are they constructed arbitrarily, as post-structuralist theorists sometimes claim” (Richardson 2010, 4). They occupy a middle

ground (between the aesthetic and ideological theories), since “[t]he brain is at least partly creating the world that the mind perceives” (18). In acknowledging the complexity of the meaning-making process, Richardson in his book *The Neural Sublime* points (often drawing on other new works in the field) to other interesting possibilities one could use in the discussion of the current state of literary studies. One of the most important, for example, is the claim that cognitive literary studies are no longer restricted only to poetics but can be used in the field of literary history as well, since, as he paraphrases the ideas of Ellen Spolsky, what is historical is not only the product of the social, cultural and biological, but “also the biological (including the evolutionary and genetic) and the geophysical (3).” Obviously, after the initial state of uncertainty and suspicion, the current efforts of cognitive literary studies to enter areas previously “unheard of” within the field, prove, among other things, the uncertainty and suspicion as well as the loss of seriousness of poststructural and postcolonial literary studies, which have become either extremely confused and counterproductive in positing extreme relativity, or extremely ideological, serving the purposes of global political struggles, which is also ultimately counterproductive for literature.

Taking into account the above complexities and dangers facing literary studies, we would like to begin the next part of our discussion of the cognitive aspects of Romantic imagination by drawing attention to an essential precondition of any cognitive interest in human imagination, that is, to the importance of the concept of a common humanity, since this is what, in fact, transcends the ethnic, cultural and ideological partialities. One of the essential features of that humanity (and, we would add, absolutely inevitable for imagination) is, according to Mousley, emotion that creates a difference, changing the objects of the real world “for which we might previously have had little care” (2013, 1) into literary objects. He maintains that although in the professional study of literature the “concern for our emotional engagements with texts has not always been considered sufficiently rigorous, objective or historical, ... the affinity between literature and emotion reaches back into classical antiquity and has been subsequently affirmed by innumerable writers, critics, philosophers and theorists (13).” The most significant point to be made here, however, is that despite the long history of emotional engagement, emotion in literature should not be understood only on a purely personal basis of one’s private cries and sorrows, but rather on the ontological level, linked to the concept of imagination and creating something that has long been known as “poetic imagination”, a unique manifestation of the objective in the subjective. With regard to emotion, Mousley explains poetic imagination by referring to Hegel who sees it as something that does not “set before our eyes the thing itself in its external reality (even if that reality be produced by art) but gives us on the contrary an inner vision and feeling of it” (Hegel qtd. in Mousley 2013, 15).

Arriving finally at the discussion of the role of imagination in Wordsworth’s work and its cognitive aspect, one has to acknowledge the fact of “the centrality of the imaginative faculty to the Wordsworth canon” (Trott 2003), even though Coleridge has always been given more attention. Thus, while the aforementioned Coleridge’s definition of imagination – his distinction between imagination and fancy and then between the primary and secondary imagination – has been frequently analysed and

discussed, Wordsworth's opinions have been frequently left aside, maybe because they lack the theoretical sophistication one finds in Coleridge, and thus have been taken only as an ex post explanatory justification of his poetry, such as in the statements from the 1802 "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads" in which he sees imagination as part of poetic creation, giving usual objects "a certain colouring" and thus presenting them to readers "in an unusual aspect" (2013). What's much more important regarding Wordsworth's relation to imagination than these statements is, however, the embodiment of the phenomenon in his poems, where it acquires a uniquely spiritual aesthetic dominance, providing them with something one could call, as McFarland pointed out (1985, 88), a soul. As Gill (2003) claims, the difference between Coleridge and Wordsworth is in the fact that while Coleridge was actively thinking about the relation of thoughts to things (i.e. imagination), Wordsworth's "way of actively thinking about them was through poetry – literally, through writing in metre".

Out of several manifestations of the ultimate role of imagination in his poems, one cannot forget to mention some parts of the unfinished long epic poem about his life, *The Prelude*. The poem is in fact the writer's poetic autobiography on which he worked most of his life. Its un-fixed, un-finished, process-like form is a material parallel to, or expression of, the same qualities in the growth of Wordsworth's imagination. In fact, the poem's frequent subtitle is "Growth of a Poet's Mind: an Autobiographical Poem", and the poet himself referred to it (2013) as "the Poem (title not yet fixed upon)." Not only was the title never "fixed upon", but the work itself exists in three versions – the two-part *Prelude* of 1799, the 14-book version discovered and published after the poet's death by his wife, and the 13-book version published in 1926 by Ernest Sélincourt. Our quotations will be from the 14-book version.

Although the entire poem could be characterized using Abrams's metaphor of "the mirror and the lamp" (Abrams 1971), reflecting and illuminating all the facts of the poet's life, from his childhood up to adult age, scholars usually point to certain passages which are the clearest examples of Wordsworth's ontological imaginary flashes, like the following part of Book VI in which Wordsworth describes his journey to the Alps:

... The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
And in the narrow rent at every turn
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfettered clouds and region of the Heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
Characters of the great Apocalypse,

The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.¹

The lines, written in blank verse, are full of things of nature (woods, waterfalls, rocks, streams, clouds) depicted not in their concreteness of dead and opaque substances, but as if in a still movement (temporally moving and frozen at the same time). According to Paul de Man, what we see here is Wordsworth's "passage from a certain type of nature, earthly and material, to another nature which could be called mental and celestial" (1984, 13). The passage is achieved through the flashes of forms and meanings, contradictions and unities, through the natural attracting the human and the divine in a process of one great creativity.

This proximity, the responsive openness of the human to the natural, de Man sees also in the "Boy of Winander" who "[h]as carried far into his heart the voice / Of mountain torrents" (Wordsworth 2013). In the poem the author shows us that there are deeper levels, questions and meanings that nature can provide us with. They emerge, with various intensity, throughout the whole poem. What the poet perceives from his childhood are constant contacts with natural forms which take on aesthetic, philosophical, social and ethical meanings. Nature is never separated from his mind, but, actually, created by it.

Paul de Man's deconstructive reading of Wordsworth is one of the most celebrated, as well as attacked, interpretations of the ontological aspect of Romantic imagination. It is, in a way, a continuation of Abrams's metaphysical reflections on the Romantic texts in several of his works, even though, in its essence, deconstruction has been frequently taken to be the opposite of any metaphysics, based on deconstructionists' seeing the language through the lens of absolute figurativeness (though, one can say, Paul de Man never shared Derrida's extreme playfulness and indeterminacy but rather searched for the plenitude of meaning through it). It is indeed true to claim that deconstructionism's insistence on subversive allegorical figurativeness makes the objective world absolutely relative, a result of the processes occurring in the mind of the individual subjects. In fact, its interconnectedness, even conditioning, of the outside world with the inside one has been observed by "cognitivists" as well. However, it has to be emphasized that the similarity in method does not in any way mean a similarity in outcomes, since, as Richardson observed, "where cognitive rhetoric celebrated the generative power and conceptual coherence of figurative thought – in a word, its felicity – deconstruction instead stressed the 'catastrophic' effect of figures that render the texts that harbor them 'suspended and unresolved' (2010, 59)".

Thus, Richardson's statement invites us to ask the following question: how is cognitive thought on figuration related to the conflicted world of Wordsworth's poetry? We would like to briefly discuss this issue through the analysis of two more of Wordsworth's poetic texts – the poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" and one of his most spiritual texts, "Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798". Drawing on recent studies in cognitive sciences related to literature, it seems that the best way to approach the writer's imagination would be through the leitmotif of Wordsworth's work, which is according to many scholars (cognitive and non-cognitive) his handling of the concept of time and memory.

They appear in most of Wordsworth's poems as powerful engines driving the poet's imagination. The stuff his "opus magnum" *The Prelude* is made of is also pure time, the poet's remembering of the moments from his life and their re-imagining and later poetic remaking.

In several recent works (Dudai and Carruthers; Suddendorf and Corballis; Schacter and Addis) the concepts of memory and time have been subjected to a close cognitive analysis. Abstracting from highly specific terminology, it could generally be said that cognitivists consider the concepts to be closely related to and play an important role in human creativity, or artistically creative imagination. The past events are remembered in the form of so-called episodic memory and fulfil an important role in the construction of the present and projection to the future. The episodic nature of memory, meaning that we never remember things exactly as they happened, opens space for imaginative re-construction and future prospection. Imagination is thus the re-production of the past with the added elements of invention, originally non-existent. The ability to carry out this shift from the past to the future in one's mind is often called "mental time travel" (Richardson, 670). Mental travelling in time is, naturally, something that is not restricted only to art and literature. There are definitely numerous cases in the life of each of us when we, consciously or subconsciously, have experienced something like this. However, it is especially artistic mental time travel that is able to give such an experience a holistic, ontological quality. Romanticism was perhaps one of the very few periods in which the three-dimensionality of time was exploited to the maximum possible effect.

As we have already indicated, the entire work of William Wordsworth was an attempt to come to terms with the passing of time, and to draw the meaning of truth for him and for humanity as such (since despite his subjective imaginary flights, Wordsworth was always trying to reach for something that transcended his individual subjectivity). However, perhaps the best examples to demonstrate the working of what cognitivists call mental time travel would be his two poems, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" and "Tintern Abbey." In our brief discussion of the poems we will not use the technical terminology of neurosciences, which we would not be able to do properly anyway, since we are not trained in the field of cognitive sciences, but to capitalize on some of the mentioned insights of recent cognitive studies with regard to memory, time and imagination, and attempt to produce an interpretation freely based on them. Let us also note here, however, that for some literary scholars this could even be the only way they might allow cognitive insights to enter literary studies, since going deeper into the neurosciences would be only to further depart from the essence of literary studies.

The first poem could easily be considered to be Wordsworth's most frequently anthologized text – now almost a clichéd example of Romanticism, embodying wandering, solitude, melancholy, quest and hope.² As far as the poem's temporary structure is concerned, it essentially consists of two parts: while the first, more extensive part is a kind of remembering of the lyrical subject's past wandering and finding a delightful place full of daffodils slightly moving in the breeze, the second one is the effect the experience has (and potentially will have) for him at present. The temporary division

is clearly signalled by the grammatical tense – “wandered”, “saw”, “stretched”, “danced”, “out-did”, “gazed” versus “lie”, “flash”, “fill”, “dances”. What is important, however, is that this clear-cut division is not a separation. The past is not the past but becomes the present and potential future for the poet pensively lying and reflecting, which is also signalled by the use of verbs in the simple present tense. The close connection of the past with the present is effected through the verb “to dance” used in both tenses, connecting the recollection of past movement with the present one in the poet’s mind. In addition to this, the time-span could also be proved by the words “gay” and “pleasure”, non-temporary in themselves, but expressing a very similar concept stretching from the past to the present. The final effect of the poem is then the mind’s re-capturing of the moments of the past in order to construct a reflexively pleasing present.

The second poem is philosophically more complex, with a stronger power of “beholding”. According to Mousley, “[t]o behold something is to attend closely to that something. It is to dwell on it intensely enough and feelingly enough and deeply enough to reveal its actual or potential significance for human life” (2013, 139). What the poet dwells on (beholds) here, are the things of nature “waters, rolling from their mountain-springs”, “steep and lofty cliffs,” “These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,” – which are invested with aesthetic, moral and spiritual significance – “sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart, / And passing even into my purer mind”, “feelings too / Of unremembered pleasure;”, “unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love.”

The effect of beholding is made possible by the temporary structure of the poem, which, however, becomes more complicated than in the “daffodils” poem. We have again two parts, two times, which represent two visits that the author made to Tintern Abbey. The point of departure is the present in which the poet recollects his first visit:

Five years have passed; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a sweet inland murmur.

But the recollection is neither complete nor clear – “[t]he picture of the mind revives again” ... “with gleams of half-extinguish’d thought, / With many recognitions dim and faint,” making the poet different than he was in the past when

The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite: a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,

Now he stands “not only with the sense / Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts / That in this moment there is life and food / For future years.” The pleasure was not perceived in the past (or it may have been a different kind of pleasure), but emerged only after the poet’s mental travel to a time five years past. The future is constructed in the form of a potential third visit, this time by the poet’s sister (with the poet most probably not alive any more) travelling mentally in time

to their second visit and establishing a spiritual connection with her brother. As in “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”, the past, or rather its selected elements (waters, mountain-springs, lofty cliffs), are then selectively re-imagined to build an ethically and spiritually charged present and future, making the final effect of the poem the wholeness of the poet’s life.

While far from exhaustive, this brief analysis of the temporary aspects of artistic imagination and creativity clearly shows that the increasing attention paid to cognitive processes can point to new and interesting dimensions of even relatively traditional and frequently discussed phenomena. It can shed a more natural and realistic light on phenomena which have long carried a metaphysical or transcendental aura, or have been given ethnic, ideological, or political justification. However, it must also be said that cognitive analysis cannot aim to occupy a central place within literary critical and theoretical thinking, which should perhaps be reserved for more intrinsic approaches to the study of literature. But even in a position of complementarity, cognitive literary studies can contribute significantly to the fuller understanding of the literary process.

NOTES

¹ All our quotations of Wordsworth’s texts are from *William Wordsworth*. Delphi Complete Works of William Wordsworth (Illustrated): Delphi Poets Series. Delphi Classics. Kindle edition.

² For one of the best cognitivist readings of the effect its dynamic images are able to produce in the human mind see Elaine Scarry *Dreaming by the Book*, 2001.

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Imagination. Mental time travel. Present. Past. Romantic. Cognitive literary studies.
William Wordsworth.

Work on cognitive literary studies has been one of the approaches revealing new aspects of literary phenomena for some time. The article attempts to use a cognitive terminological framework to discuss the concept of imagination, which is perhaps the phenomenon most frequently associated with the nature of literature. It sets out some basic features of the imagination developed throughout history, ending in Romanticism, i.e. in the period during which imagination saw its greatest flourishing, first in the theoretical work of T. S. Coleridge, and then in the poetry of William Wordsworth and the other Romantic poets. Wordsworth's imagination is characterized as greatly determined by the temporality of his poetic seeing of the world, and is illuminated through the concept of the episodic memory and its role in the construction of the present and the future. It is claimed that the poet selectively re-imagined elements of the past to build an ethically and spiritually charged present and future resulting in the creation of the wholeness of his life. Cognitive analysis of Wordsworth's poems can thus show the author in a more realistic light, free of the transcendental aura that has often been attributed to him.

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