

The Act of Memory In Wordsworth's "The Prelude"

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الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على دور الذاكرة في الشعر وتتقفي هذا الدور فيما تبقى من الأعمال الأدبية الأولى وتركز على فعل الذاكرة المتمظهر في قصيدة وردزورث "برليود" والذي يمكن أن يلاحظ من خلال تعامل الشاعر مع "بقع الزمن" والتي تستوقف الشاعر وتساهم في خلق عالمه الشعري، كما أنها تركز أيضا على دور هذا الفعل في بعض "صور الماء" التي تتناثر في القصيدة. وتقوم بمحاولة تفسير هذه الأدوار اعتمادا على بعض نظريات علم النفس.

Abstract

This study aims at shedding light on the role of memory in poetry. It traces back this role in the first survival literary works. It concentrates on the act of memory as it appears in Wordsworth's "The Prelude" which can easily be touched in the poet's treatment of certain spots of time. These spots stop the poet and help him decorate his faculty in some water images which scatter in the poem. These roles are scientifically studied and interpreted according to some psychological theories.

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I - Introduction

Memory played a vital role in the history of poetics and in the clashing theories of poetic creation. The ancient Greek paid a lot of attention to its role in composing poetry. They regarded it, though indirectly, as a main source of poetic inspiration which was thought to be divine at that dim eras of man's civilization. The ancient Greek myth tells us some indirect information concerning this subject. In the course of its investigation of the origin of the Muses which are the goddesses of poetry, the ancient myth supplies a narrative about their mother "Mnemosyne" who shared Zeus bed for nine successive nights and gave birth to nine daughters who were later on called the Muses⁽¹⁾. The name of this mother is significant for it means memory⁽²⁾. Hence, memory has its deepest roots in the process of composing poetry, without its aid, poets seem to be helpless when they enter the foggy, illusive world of this phenomenon.

However, memory helps retain past knowledge in the present. In this respect, it has to deal with the past and the present at the same time. It is "the capacity to bring to mind an event from one's past experience (or) a fact about the past beyond one's own experience"⁽³⁾. The first survival literary works do not neglect this matter and Homer was quite aware of a fact that some past events and names cannot be remembered easily and they are subject to

forgetfulness. Consequently, he invokes the Muses in The Iliad to tell him the names of the leaders of armies:

*Tell me now, you Muses who have
your homes on Olympus
Who then of those were the chief men
And the lords of the Dardanas⁽⁴⁾*

In another invocation he asks the Muses to tell him the name of the first warrior who matched Agamemnon:

*Tell me now, you Muses... who was
the first to come forth and stand
against Agamemnon⁽⁵⁾*

The above invocations to the Muses assert two facts: the first, which the expression "Tell me now" shows, is concerned with the problem of how present knowledge of the past is acquired and the second is that the act of remembrance is not always ready in Homer, therefore; he invokes the Muses to help him in his mission. This denotes that poetic creation is something related to the past and it is that which pushed some modern critics to take the role of memory in the process of composing poetry into account. We, now and then, fall in with some poems or lines of verse where the verb "remember" is

the core of the matter in so far as memory succeeds in bringing back past events where life seems to be completely different from the present of man:

Faithful, indeed, is the spirit that remembers

After such years of changes and suffering⁽⁶⁾

Though Emily Brontë concentrates on her present which is characterized by change and suffering, she indirectly alludes to the past without memory.

William Morris also finds in remembering some by-gone days a province of his poetic material and a shelter from the present confusion:

So, I will sit, and think and think of the days gone by,

Never moving my chair for fear of the dogs should cry⁽⁷⁾

The act of remembering is shown as mystical moments which should be meditated upon far from the crowded world and which provide the poet with his poetic material in the desired moments.

2. The Spots of Time and Water Images

Since past represents a very important source of William Wordsworth's poetry and since memory is closely related to the past, it is quite acceptable to talk about the role of this faculty in the act of his poetic creation. The poet used to allude to some past events. Some of these events are specifically referred to and remembered in tranquility. Hence, "the spots of time" play a vital role in colouring some of Wordsworth's poems. In "The Prelude", which is "an autobiography, ... and by no means a narrative of the first twenty seven years of its authors life"⁽⁸⁾, the poet usually talks about spots of time. In Book Nine we read:

- - - - - each bright spot
That could be found in all recorded time,
Of truth preserv'd and error pass'd away. (ix, 373 – 75)

What is preserved in the poet's mind are certain events which represent spots that can never be canceled. Memory spots by those spots and meditates the time and place which have no existence but in the store of his memory. These spots may be associated with some certain images and remembrances which refuse to leave the poet's mind. Hence, the importance of association springs. Psychologists agree that there are two poles which participate in making memory act

in a proper way: association and recollection. An educated memory depends on associations which should be organized; and its goodness depends on two of their peculiarities: First, "on the persisting of associations; and second on their number"^{*(9)}. Thus "memory is no reader ultimate explanation; for it is itself explained as a result of the association of ideas"^{*(10)}. The secret of a good memory is thus the secret of forming diverse and multiple associations with every fact we care to retain. In this respect, associations have to delve in past and pass through different spots of time till they are stopped by and concentrate on a certain spot where memory has to work with the other pole which is recollection. Memory contains different items which cannot easily be remembered or recalled^{*(11)}. However, if memory catches a desired event, recollection will help add and modify till it portrays the picture, which a person or a poet looks for. In a like manner the meditative memory works.

In "The Prelude", the poet recalls how, from his house on summer afternoons in childhood, a "sparkling patch of diamond light" could be seen in neighbouring wood where probably the reflection of a wet rock burnished shield over the tomb of a knight buried in a wood, sometimes as a magic cave or place:

*Nor would I, though not certain whence the clause
Of the effulgence, thither have repair'd
Without a precious bribe, and day by day
And month by month I saw the spectacle,
Nor ever once have visited the spot
Unto this hour. (XII, 257 – 62).*

That spot which he used to see when he was a child is stored in his memory and he later described it as a poet. The poet's memory, with the aid of associations, wanders in past and catches some spots which stirred his imagination once. These spots of time are meditated by the poet and offer him some of poetic materials.

Precisely this concern governs Wordsworth's meditation upon one of the spots of time in Book XII of "The Prelude":

*The days gone by
Return upon me almost from the dawn
Of life: the hiding places of man's power
Open; I would approach them, but they close,
I see by glimpse now; when come on,
May scarcely see at all; and I would give;
While yet we may, as far as words can give
Substance and life to what I feel enshrining,
Such in my hope, the spirit of the past,
For further restoration. (XII, 277 – 86).*

The above lines which indirectly talk about a spot of time indicate three facts concerning memory and its work: the first is that memory is, sometimes, evoked by an impulse which is enriched by associations and then recollection works:

In each of us, "Marcel Proust asserts there is a fathomless pool in which there are many things we have long forgotten, but a chance perfume, a combination of sounds or things, a casual word can evoke one of these forgotten experiences in such way as to make the evoked experience more vivid than the original itself^{(12)}"*

According to what Proust asserts, there must be an external factor which urges associations to work a matter which nourishes memory and paves the way to recollection to work. At any rate, the backbone of these processes in memory, lies between associations and recollections, works as a mediator that connects them in order to work as a group in a proper way. What is worth mentioning here is that the remembered events are in a constant modification; they are interpreted and relieved in the light of the demands of the present and the apprehensions of the past and the expectations of the future. The second fact is concerned with the cut of memory and the difficulty to remember some past events. This problem leads us to the overwhelming question which we have began this section with; does

memory provide the poem whole and at once. The creative powers of the poet's unconsciousness come to aid his memory^{*(13)}. On this Freud asks "what is one to do when thoughts cease to flow and the proper words won't come"?^{*(14)} Robert Cohen answers this question convincingly. He says that "the best chance of success was to gently stalk and lie and wait"^{*(15)}. The fact of waiting is very important during the course of carrying out any artistic work. From this point one can make full use of Arthur Koestler's theory concerning creativity. He says that in the course of scientist's or poet's work, in which he notices close similarity, the poet or scientist enters a special state of mind which Koestler names 'matrix'. This matrix isolates him from other interests that his thoughts would flow properly towards achieving his mission. These thoughts, sometimes, cease to flow and the artist finds himself incapable of avoiding anything concerning the matter he works on. In such a case all that he can do is to wait till the solution comes through flashes as inspiration^{*(16)}. The third fact is about the decline of the ability of memory (by age) to investigate some past days and places. The poet cannot see as clearly as once he could.

On more than occasion Wordsworth expresses how memory works in providing him with some poetic material through images. Most of these images in this subject are water images. He compares his memory to fountain, pool and river which all refer to past and continuity. The fountain which represents the source or the beginning

of the river may also stand for the beginning of his thoughts and the continuity of the river stands for the continuity of them and for the meditations of things or events which are no longer present. This refers to the close relationship between past and present in the act of remembrance. Past becomes an inseparable part of the present and the past event or moment is relived again by memory. The constant extent of time across present includes elements of memory and recognition and when these elements are remembered or expected they are mixed together in the experience of specious present:

*Who knows the individual hour in which
His habits were first sown, even as a seed
Who that shall points as with a ward and say
The portion of the river of my mind
Came from yon fountain. (I-i 245 – 249)*

The river which is given a start by a fountain continues its flow to cover past, present and future. What the poet wants to say is that his memory brings back some certain events and recollection continues its investigations, meditations and modifications. The poet is proud of this ability where from time to time the fountain, pool image returns especially when the poet talks about the involuntary action of his heart or memory at the moments of writing poetry:

*Ah! Need I say, dear friend, that to the brim
My heart was full (IV, 340 – 341).*

This involuntariness, however, results from necessity for sometimes poetry becomes a necessity where poets are forced to express themselves poetically.

But a shy spirit in the heart

Returning, like a ghost unladen
Until the debt I owe be paid (IV, 209 – 15)

This necessity is linked to a ghost who never rests in his grave till he is satisfied by his family or relatives as the ancient sages tell us about the nature of ghosts.

In the opening lines of Book Nine the river – image is given full rein:

As often times a River, it might seem,
Yielding in part to old remembrances,
Past saw I'd by fear to read an onward road
That leads direct to the devouring sea
Turns, and will measure back his course, for back,
Towards the very regions which he crossed
In the first outside; so have we long time
Made motions retrograde, in like pursuit detained. (ix 1 – 8).

Though the proper flow of the river may, sometimes, be hindered and converted to 'the devouring sea' which definitely puts an end to its flow, this river "turns" back to its course and continues its endless journey. This image, however, asserts the continuity of memory and the impossibility of its dryness and fade. It also indicates that memory, now and then, returns to its fountain to start a new cyclic journey.

Conclusion

From what has been said, one can conclude that memory plays an active role in providing Wordsworth with different material of his poetry. It does not work alone. It cooperates with associations and recollections. It digs in past and concentrates on certain events and scenes on which the poet builds the world of some of his poems. In order to carry out this mission, the poet depends on some images like those of fountain, pole and river to express the continuity of time and the emergence of past with present a matter which memory always looks for.

Notes:

- 1- Graves (ed): New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1968), P. 19.
- 2- K. N. Chadwick: Poetry and Prophecy, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1952), P. 2.
- 3- Antony Flew: A Dictionary of Philosophy, (London University of Reading, 1979), P. 211.
- 4- Richmond Lattimor (Trans): The Iliad of Homer, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), P. 89.
- 5- Lattimor, P. 240.
- 6- Jerome Hamelton Burcley and George Benjamin Woods, (eds): Poetry of the Victorian Period (U. S. A.: Scott Foresman Company, 1965), P. 399.
- 7- The Poetry of the Victorian Period, P. 634.
- 8- Raymond Dexter Havens: The Mind of A Poet, (Baltimore, The John Hokins Press, 1967), P. 275.
- 9- Williams James: "Talks to Teacher"[www.document] URL,<http://www.william.htm%20james,2006page2of8>.
- 10- James, page 1 of 8.
- 11- James, page 1 of 8.
- 12- Paul West: The Modern Novel Vol. I, (London, Hutchinson University Library, 1967), P. 19.
- 13- Gruneberg Michael: Practical Aspects of Memory, (London, New Fetter Lane, 1978), P. 17.

- 14- S. Burshaw: The Seamless Web: Language, Thinking, Creature Knowledge, Art Experience, (New York, George, Brazilar, 1965), P. 260.
- 15- Burshaw, p. 61.
- 16- Arthur Kostler: The Act of Creation, (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1964), P. 105 – 108.

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