

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/244995566>

Tintern Abbey Revisited: a New Critical Journey of Spontaneous Overflow

Article · July 2013

CITATIONS

0

READS

603

1 author:



[Kee-Man Chuah](#)

University Malaysia Sarawak

55 PUBLICATIONS 161 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



AiSayz - AI-based Augmented Reading App for the Blind [View project](#)



Verbal Aggression in the Intercultural Internet Trolling of Malaysian Social Network Users: A Forensic Linguistic Analysis [View project](#)

***Tintern Abbey* Revisited: a New Critical Journey of Spontaneous Overflow**

By Chuah Kee Man

William Wordsworth asserted his celebrated claim in *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1802), that “for all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”—a claim that has marked the identity of English Romantics. This “spontaneous overflow” is a call of the conscience and an intuitive pursuit, which not everyone is capable of committing oneself to. While it is an accepted characteristic for romantic poems to utilise language of “common man”, it is undeniable that most romantic poems are often distinct and privileged forms of thought (Selden 3). Wordsworth seemed to realise this by further stating that a poem “to which any value can be attached” is produced by a man who “possessed more than usual organic sensibility”. Such view implies poetic creation as an autonomous practice, in which a great poet like Wordsworth creates an aesthetic experience that could only be expressed by the poem’s unique linguistic form. It is thus through the careful tracing of the poem’s form and structure that even by solely depending on the text and the text alone, the poet’s experience can be preserved (Selden 3).

Wordsworth’s famous poem *Tintern Abbey* (1798), upon close reading, reveals to its readers instances of how linguistic forms (word choice and syntax) and literary devices (tone and paradox) lead to the central theme or unity. These linguistic and literary forms

help to bring forth the tension or conflict that existed within the poem, which eventually unearths the central unity. More than any of the *Lyrical Ballads*, this poem tries to highlight the tensions between the landscape (nature) and the human memory (man) as well as between past and present (innocent and maturity). Traces of such oppositions existed throughout the poem.

The conflict between the landscape and human memory is clearly revealed from the opening lines in the first stanza, which are full of repetitive words that show the meaning of interval. Such interval signifies the struggle of the poet-speaker to activate his memory in order to restore the "beauteous form" (23) that nature has given him. The opening two lines of the poem "Five years have past; five summers, with the length/ Of five long winters! and again I hear"(1-2), for example, showed the repetition of the word "five" which suggest the spatial distance between his past experience and at the same time set the overall setting of the poem. This time setting shaped the poem with a sense of recollection of past experience. Apart from that, the word "again" is also repeated several times throughout the poem. The repetition of "again" not only represents his revisit to the landscape, but also showed the unwillingness of the poet-speaker's memory to accept the changes. This is especially true in the line "the picture of the mind revives again" (61), which implies that the poet-speaker is recreating the images of past rather than accepting the changes in the present landscape.

The conflict between landscape and human memory is further strengthened by the ambiguity that lies within the poem. The poet-speaker's impression of unnoticed pleasure is a paradox that his recollections of his time on the banks of the Wye seem to lift his spirits and restore him. He points to what might seem to be impossible by calling his

past as “unremembered pleasure” (31). Readers are made to ponder, “How can it make sense to recall an unremembered pleasure so vividly?” This phrase can either mean a vague recall of some pleasant experiences in the past or it can also mean the poet-speaker could “now” recall the pleasure that was unnoticed in the past. Such ambiguity reflects the uncertainties that lie within the poet-speaker in accepting the changes that has happened to the landscape. Another contradiction is shown when the poet-speaker admits that the landscape has “changed, no doubt, from what I was when first/ I came among these hills (66-67). This “self-realisation” contradicts the lively portrayal of “beauteous forms” (23) that constantly recurring in his mind, the “forms” that could bring him “sensations sweet” (27) even in “hours of weariness” (27). This implies that the poet-speaker has no choice but to accept the changed landscape even if his memory is trying hard to convince him that it is still the same as used to be five years ago.

The syntactic movements of the lines in the stanza four of the poem also highlight the conflict between past and present. As memories can never be similar to the real experience, the poet speaker brings his readers back into the past, and then brought them into the present, trying to weave images of past and present to form his ideal landscape. The syntax within a few lines underlines the complexity of past and present experience of the poet-speaker. Within stanza four, it can be noted that there are three main transitions of the poet speaker’s growth which starts from his childhood to his youth and later to his adulthood. The poet-speaker starts off by describing his “coarser pleasures” of his “boyish days” (73) as to resemble his naive and unconscious reaction towards the landscape (67-75). In the following line, the poet-speaker “transformed” from childhood to his youth and inform the readers that how his direct emotional responses towards the landscape, as to

him it was "An appetite; a feeling and a love,/ That had no need of a remoter charm" (76). However, an abrupt response of "That time is past" (83), again highlights the conflict between past and present. Then, the poet-speaker moves into adulthood by stating that he "has learned/ To look on nature, not as in the hour/ Of thoughtless youth" (88-90). Realising the reality that the experience of the past will never be experienced, the poet-speaker had to rely on his memory to "half-create" (106) the images of past that pleases him. He mourns the loss of that passionate attachment to nature he used to possess in the past. These transitions showed the changes that have happened to the landscape as well as to the poet-speaker.

In addition to that, the shift of tone throughout the poem also brings forth the conflict between the picturesque landscape and human memory as well as the tension between past and present. From the opening lines of the poems, readers could sense a tone of extreme joy that indicate the warm return of the poet-speaker to his favourite secluded landscape. The poet-speaker in a positive tone then showers the readers with the detailed descriptions of the landscape that he often turns to, in time of loneliness and tranquillity. However, in the third stanza, the shortest in the poem, comes the shift of the poet-speaker's tone:

In darkness, and amid he many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of the heart,
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer through the woods,

How often has my spirit turned to thee!

(51-57)

The hesitant recognition that he might be wrong shows a change to a less convincing tone and foreshadows the sense of loss that he describes later in the poem. The repetition of the similar lines "how often has my spirit turned to thee" (57), shows that he is in a state of uncertainties, as to whether he can recall the past that he used to admire. Again, the shift of tone discloses the conflict of landscape and human memory which is illustrated with the poet-speaker attempts to rely on the "gleams of half-extinguished thought" (58) in recapturing his past. Nonetheless, another shift of tone can be noted in the last stanza, when the poet-speaker is addressing to his sister. The tone, at first note, may seem positive but on careful reading, it seems to be more of a disappointment as he exclaim that it is from his sister's "shooting light wild eyes" that he could behold his "former pleasures" (being able to have close relationship with nature) (115-120). Clearly, the poet-speaker's tone has now changed to sombre yet hopeful. The constant change of tone reveals the "movement" from past to present as a form a conflict that needs to be resolve in understanding the poem's central unity.

As such, the linguistic forms and literary devices used in *Tintern Abbey*, has shown the tensions between past and present as well as between the landscape (nature) and human memory (man). These tensions have shaped the overall theme of maturity that the poet-speaker has gone through. His conflict with the landscape is resolved by him realising that the past cannot be restored and the landscape that used to be appealing to his ears and eyes will only live on in his memory. The constant shifting of the poet-speaker

attention from one period of time to another portrays the experiences and recognitions that are central to the poem.

Work Cited

Selden, Raman. *Practicing Theory and reading literature: an introduction*. Britain: Longman, 1989

PBT4233 Comparative Literature Compilation

Wordsworth, William. *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, 1798

Wordsworth, William. *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, 1802