

Anticipations of Jungian Imagination in Wordsworth's Poetry

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Regarding the poet, Carl Jung eloquently states, "he entralls and overpowers, while at the same time he lifts the idea he is seeking to express out of the occasional and the transitory into the realm of the ever-enduring" (*Portable Jung* 321). Such an understanding of poetry reveals the personal conscious and unconscious images of the poet's mind as well as the collective unconscious images universal to the human race. The possibility then arises of "seeing into a mirror darkly" the image of self transposed onto past, present, and future ages; the destiny of the individual becomes entwined with the destiny of mankind; the primordial images conjured up by the poet bring contemporary meaning to human psychology.

Certain images and notions transcend time and can be recognized in a flow of ideas from Plato to Descartes to Spinoza to Kant to Wordsworth to Jung. In reading the poetry of William Wordsworth, it becomes evident that he anticipates some of the key ideas later formulated by Jung for psychoanalytical purposes. Exploring the psychoanalytical concepts of Carl Jung in the poetry of William Wordsworth creates a more complete understanding of *The Prelude*, promotes a deeper self-awareness, and generates a universal connection to nature and humankind.

Although *The Prelude* was not published until after Wordsworth's death in 1850 at the age of eighty, he began writing it in 1799, completed it in 1805, and continued to make revisions to it throughout most of his life. In this epic poem, he chronicles what seems to be an idyllic childhood spent in the rapture of nature in spite of the death of his mother when he was eight years old and the sudden

death of his father only five years later. Wordsworth's freedom to explore the countryside as well as his avid love of books informs his proclivity for poetry. Poetic memories and images drawn from his childhood seem to encourage the foundation for psychic mending and sustenance after his self-admitted breakdown, which was caused in part by his disillusionment with the French Revolution.

Wordsworth displays a great capacity for childlike imagination (a practice Jung encourages for tapping into the unconscious), as a means for freeing a mind "wearied out with contrarities" (*Prelude* 11.304). In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth not only recounts childhood images, but also tracks his years at Cambridge, his many physical journeys through the countryside of England and France, and his spiritual dreams and visions, all while including imaginative tales of history and mythology.

Wordsworth is a master poet adept at combining his personal experiences with a universal vision. In *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth declares, "the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time...it is as immortal as the heart of man" (271). His poetry, specifically *The Prelude*, does just what he declares — it ties together the passion and knowledge that informs and influences Wordsworth's system of philosophy, and Wordsworth is influenced by an eclectic group of philosophers and poets.

From his fellow poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he explores the ways to transcend grief and suffering through mankind's spiritual connection to nature; his politics are shaped by Locke's liberal theory of man's

natural rights, Rousseau's republicanism in *The Social Contract*, and William Godwin's rationalism in *Political Justice*; his poetic style, while remaining uniquely creative, borrows from a host of poets including Alexander Pope and John Milton; his philosophy of religion, spirituality and psychology draws from Plato's ideas of knowledge and belief, mind and soul, Baruch Spinoza's pantheism, David Hartley's associationism, and Kant's ideas of the sublime, all of which blend to form his unique brand of Christianity. In the mingling of all these different thoughts and beliefs, Wordsworth reaches back in knowledge and looks forward in faith and imagination.

Seeing the way these influences span centuries of thought, Wordsworth believes there must be a thread connecting the human race, a thread that surpasses time and place. In this respect, ideas incorporated into Wordsworth's poetry offer a rich opportunity for exploring some of the analytical notions operating in Jungian psychoanalysis. Wordsworth's autobiographical poem *The Prelude* chronicles physical journeys that coalesce as metaphors of his spiritual journey, encompassing his mental crisis and recovery. Wordsworth refers to *The Prelude* as "the poem on the growth of my own mind." As such, the poem reveals the godlike powers of the human mind as it interacts with nature, spontaneous imagination, and the influences of the past (Wordsworth 322).

Viewing *The Prelude* through a Jungian lens can provide interesting insight into the extraordinary creative forces shaping the poetry of Wordsworth. Although William Wordsworth was born nearly 100 years prior to Carl Jung, one can discern a startling correspondence between the dreams and images of Wordsworth's poetry and the psychoanalytic concepts of Jung.

In terms reminiscent of Wordsworth, Jung believes in what he calls "primordial images" or the "collective unconscious,"

which he defines as "a certain psychic disposition shaped by the forces of heredity" (*Modern Man* 165). In a letter to Isabella Fenwick, Wordsworth terms this disposition "a prior state of existence" (307). While he is not claiming to believe in reincarnation, he does have in mind a pre-existence of the soul that explains common human experience.

Although Wordsworth's beliefs do not necessarily prove a correspondence to Jung's belief in the collective unconscious, they do provide an area of interest for possible links between the two notions. Regarding Wordsworth's opinion of pre-existence, Solomon Francis Gingerich writes in *Essays in the Romantic Poets* that, "The use that he makes of the Platonic 'shadowy recollections' as a poet is that they suggest a connection, a continuous existence of the soul, from the past to the present through that mysterious period we call birth" (149).

While Gingerich supposes Wordsworth only uses this "shadowy recollection" as a literary device to convey to the reader a sense of epic imagination, I would argue that Wordsworth has incorporated this Platonic element into his epistemological hypothesis. Wordsworth makes this Platonic reference in "Ode," a deeply personal and emotional poem he calls "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." The title itself professes his belief in immortality, an idea he broadens when he writes:

Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realised,
High instincts before which our mortal
Nature
Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised:
But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
Are yet a master light of all our seeing.
(9.144-152)

Wordsworth's language frequently presupposes an eternal guide instinctual to

our very nature in phrases such as “nature yet remembers,” “first affections,” “high instincts,” “primal sympathy,” “man’s unconquerable mind,” or “eternity of thought” and “everlasting motion.” His language is not simply a device, but a means of healing for himself and for humanity. For Wordsworth, expression through language is a form of self-analysis much like the psychoanalysis Jung practiced with his patients by means of dream interpretation and talk therapy. Addressing Fenwick, Wordsworth writes: “I took hold of the notion of pre-existence as having sufficient foundation in humanity for authorizing me to make for my purpose the best use of it I could as a Poet” (307).

Jung echoes these words of Wordsworth when he says that a work of art “should rise far above the realm of personal life and speak from the spirit and heart of the poet as man to the spirit and heart of mankind” (*Modern Man* 168). Wordsworth and Coleridge both viewed their poetry in autobiographical terms. Wordsworth in particular hoped to find a way to improve the human condition by creating and sharing the imaginative process by fulfilling his calling as a poet. In *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* Jung claims that “what is of particular importance for the study of literature in these manifestations of the collective unconscious is that they are compensatory to the conscious attitude” (165).

In the visions and imaginations of Wordsworth’s poetry an equilibrium or balance can be achieved to compensate for any present or momentary deficiencies that occurred during his mental crisis. Tapping into the collective unconscious helps facilitate Wordsworth’s recovery through manifestations of his imagination, and may also promote a healing in the psyche of individual readers. Jung further states, “Whenever the collective unconscious becomes a living experience and is brought

to bear upon the conscious outlook of an age, this event is a creative act which is of importance to everyone living in that age” (166). I would extend this point to include readers from any period, not just the poet’s contemporary readers.

To define and illustrate Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious, it is necessary to consider the Jungian archetypes that may also be found in Wordsworth’s poetry. The collective unconscious, where the archetypes or mythological images are contained, can be further defined as a psychic inheritance; it is the collection of experiences and knowledge that Jung believes all humans are born with.

These archetypes are unlearned instincts that are not immediately accessed by the conscious mind, although they do influence the individual’s conduct and experiences, especially those emotional encounters that transcend the physical. The child is a Jungian archetype that Wordsworth consistently portrays in *The Prelude*. By introducing autobiographical resonances into *The Prelude*, Wordsworth attempts to capture the hope, promise and innocence of his childhood. His mythological pursuit of the child who possesses the simplicity of youth, while yet attaining the wisdom of a sage, is poignantly rendered in the following lines from *Book Second*:

Ah! Is there One who ever has been young
Nor needs a warning voice to tame the
 pride
Of intellect, and virtue’s self-esteem?
One is there, though the wisest and the best
Of all mankind, who covets not at times
Union that cannot be; who would not give,
If so he might, to duty and to truth
The eagerness of infantine desire?
A tranquillizing spirit presses now
On my corporeal frame, so wide appears
The vacancy between me and those days,
Which yet have such self-presence in my
 mind,
That, musing on them, often do I seem
Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
And of some other Being. (2.19-33)

As reflected in this passage, Wordsworth's archetypal child captures the essence of both his past self and his present self. The child becomes nearly god-like as "some other Being" providing a sense of freedom from the chains of adulthood. While retaining childlike innocence, the adult can experience a rebirth that allows the knowledge of age to mingle with the purity of youth. Wordsworth calls on the "Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe! / Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought" who in childhood taught "The passions that build up our human Soul, / Not with the mean and vulgar works of man, / But with high objects, with enduring things, / With life and nature" (1.401-402, 407-410).

The valuable lessons learned in childhood become "doomed to sleep / Until maturer seasons called them forth / To impregnate and to elevate the mind," and to offer hope for the future when "I might fetch / Invigorating thought from former years; / Might fix the wavering balance of my mind, / And haply meet reproaches too" (1.594-596, 621-624). In this respect, Wordsworth's self-analysis encourages both his unconscious and his sleeping memories to bubble up into his conscious mind, which in turn helps to create a balanced mind at peace with the present.

Wordsworth's attempt at self-healing leads him to further explore the connection he feels with nature and humankind. In *The Prelude, Book Third* he expresses the collective inherent points and memories that each person shares:

It lies far hidden from the reach of words,
Points have we, all of us, within our Souls,
Where all stand single: this I feel, and make
Breathings for incommunicable powers.
But is not each a memory to himself?
And, therefore, now that we must quit this
theme,
I am not heartless; for there's not a man
That lives who hath not known his god-like
hours,

And feels not what an empire we inherit,
As natural Beings, in the strength of
Nature. (3.187-196)

The "empire we inherit" is internal as well as external. Wordsworth found healing "in the strength of Nature," and in the unconscious images common to all.

In addition to prefiguring Jung's notions of the collective unconscious (reflecting similar ideas regarding genetic memory), Wordsworth also seeks, in his own words, to "engage the response of the whole man" utilizing what Jung will later refer to as the four functions of *thinking, feeling, sensation, and intuition*. Wordsworth utilizes these four functions in his poetry.

Jung's four functions are said to provide a complete approach to the psychology of man. On his view, *thinking* supplies the rational reflection needed to make reasonable conclusions—as "...a Power / That is the visible quality and shape / And image of right reason" (Prelude 13.20-22). *Feeling* furnishes hope and regret, which in turn enables discriminating value judgments—facilitated by Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Preface 273). *Sensation* provides the awareness of conscious sensory perception—"Those hallowed and pure motions of the sense" (Prelude 1.551). And *intuition* provides the needed perception of unconscious contents and connections—or what Wordsworth terms the mind's "native instincts" (Prelude 3.99).

When Wordsworth describes the instincts of the poet, he declares the principle of pleasure to be that "by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves" (Preface 270). Wordsworth often refers in his poems to the motions of the mind, to the feelings associated with time and memory, to the sensations experienced during communion with nature, and to the confidence in man's intuitive convictions. In this way, he attempts to address the complete psychology of man in a manner that effectively mirrors

(and clearly anticipates) Jung's four functions.

Although Jung's four functions were developed as a way to classify psychological types, each of the four characteristics are co-present in each individual in varying degrees. Balance and wholeness can be achieved only when each function is developed to the individual's full potential. Similarly, in his exploration of the mind and how it develops, Wordsworth considers how reason and science and experience and feeling affect a person. In the following passage, Wordsworth discusses boundaries and distinctions that arise as a result of reception and perception:

And thou wilt doubt with me, less aptly
skilled
Than many are to range the faculties
In scale and order, class the cabinet
Of their sensations, and in voluble phrase
Run through the history and birth of each
As of a single independent thing.
Hard task, vain hope, to analyse the mind,
If each most obvious and particular
thought,
Not in a mystical and idle sense,
But in the words of reason deeply weighed,
Hath no beginning. (2.222-232)

Here, Wordsworth realizes the difficulty in analyzing the mind, but he understands that thinking, feeling, sensation, and intuition all have their place in the development of the intellect. As the four functions work together, they produce "gentle agitations of the mind" that can activate "the visionary power" (2.299, 312). Because of the different influences on Wordsworth's philosophy, he pursues the blending of reason and sensation within himself. He offers this as a lofty goal for the individual to pursue as a way of connecting with "that universal power." This connection is "one continuous stream; a mind sustained / By recognitions of transcendent power/In sense, conducting to ideal form; / In soul, of more than mortal privilege" (14.74-77). The

pursuit of knowledge, both inward and outward, becomes an "endless occupation for the Soul,/Whether discursive or intuitive" (14.119-120). Wordsworth believes the powers of reason, whether human or divine, intuitive or rational, enable the individual to set in motion the active imagination.

In order to access the motions of the mind, the memories of the individual, and the collective unconscious, Jung presents the concept of "active imagination." Jung recognizes the value of the individual's imagination, and believes it to be a means of psychological recovery. According to Jung, "Every good idea and all creative work are the offspring of the imagination.... The debt we owe to the play of imagination is incalculable" (*Active Imagination* 5). "Active imagination" is the means by which an individual can access forgotten childhood memories, the symbols and images from the collective unconscious enabling these "pictures ... to function in harmony with our ... conscious mind" (*Active Imagination* 95).

Wordsworth describes this phenomenon as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings...from emotion recollected in tranquility" (*Preface* 273). Jung believes this mood of contemplation is the point when "successful composition generally begins" (*Preface* 273). Wordsworth's poetic reverie reflects this method of contemplation by allowing his own "spots of time" to mingle with the collective unconscious and ascend into his dreams and visions.

Wordsworth's recollections of these "spots of time" are apparent throughout the fourteen books of *The Prelude*. Viewing Wordsworth as an educator, Gordon Kent Thomas proposes that these "spots of time" "are meant chiefly as examples and encouragement to us to come up with our own bases of mental repair and nourishment" (153). Some of Wordsworth's most vivid recollections are of his childhood, such as the passage where he recounts his "act of stealth

/ And troubled pleasure” when he steals “a little Boat tied to a Willow-tree” (1.358, 361-362). Soon after he starts “heaving through the Water like a swan,” a “craggy Steep...black and huge” looms large in his vision “with purpose of its own / And measured motion, like a living Thing/Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned” (1.377-385).

Wordsworth’s active imagination conjures up Kant’s terrifying sublime as he recalls the encounter with the mountain that leaves him trembling and “in grave / And serious mood” (1.389-390). In *Time and Mind in Wordsworth’s Poetry*, Jeffrey Baker describes “The real power of Wordsworth’s moments is not their frozenness or their solidity, but the immense energy within them, their power to make the reader’s imagination work backward and forward in an instant” (145). This “spot of time” in Wordsworth’s childhood becomes a fluid moment reminding him of the power of nature and the role of nature as a teacher. From this terrifying episode Wordsworth experiences the consequences of his actions, and in this very manner nature continues to be a reminder throughout his lifetime.

Jung believes the ability to listen to this inner voice allows the unconscious to *come up through* the active imagination. He tells us “The years when I was pursuing my inner images were the most important in my life—in them everything essential was decided” (*Active Imagination* 41). Wordsworth’s capacity to listen to his inner voice, together with his communion with nature, serves to inspire and lift his “visionary power.” He recalls how “in those moments such a holy calm / Would overspread my soul, that bodily eyes / Were utterly forgotten, and what I saw / Appeared like something in myself, a dream, / A prospect in the mind” (2.349-353). For Wordsworth, and for others willing to look inward, contemplating the

inner man is a therapeutic exercise that can lead to catharsis.

In addition to self-reflection, the imagination’s interplay with the forces of nature also leads to self-discovery. *The Prelude* tells the story of Wordsworth’s penultimate experience at Mt. Snowdon where he feels “a balance, an ennobling interchange / Of action from without, and from within” (13.374-375). In *Wordsworth and the Motions of the Mind*, Gordon Kent Thomas says of the Mt. Snowdon experience, “it was a vision given not only for the poet’s personal education and edification but for his poetry, for that greater purpose of enabling him to be, on the subject of this vision, a man speaking to men” (149).

Wordsworth shares the extraordinary impact of the vision, recalling the “spot of time” where “I beheld the emblem of a Mind/That feeds upon infinity...a mind sustained/By recognitions of transcendent power...that glorious faculty/That higher minds bear with them as their own” (14.70-90). For Wordsworth, this moment not only becomes an important step in his own mental and emotional development, but it also becomes a tool to share with the reader “a world...that was fit / To be transmitted and to other eyes / Made visible” (13.369-371).

Wordsworth’s desire for community causes him to search for a path of connection to others, “to hold fit converse with the spiritual world, / and with the generations of mankind / Spread over time, past, present, and to come” (14.108-110). His “glorious faculty” is the essence of Jung’s creative imagination that enables readers to search for their own “spots of time.”

In *A Jungian Approach to Literature*, Bettina Knapp aims to demonstrate the universal characteristic of Jungian archetypal analysis and criticism. She offers a revealing description of the broad range of these encounters in the following passage:

Such encounters may be painful or joyous, terrifying or serene; hopefully, they will prove enlightening, involve the readers in the writings discussed so that they may understand how and why certain creative works speak and reach them today and why others do not. Energized in this manner, readers might go a step further and explore the literary work in question and through association relate their discoveries to aspects of their own personalities. Self-awareness may then be increased; and the understanding of the individual's function and role in society may be broadened. Reading now becomes not merely an intellectual adventure but an excitingly helpful living experience. (xi)

For Wordsworth, these encounters with his imagination work in conjunction with nature to aid him in the recovery of his "...true self...A Poet...my office upon earth" (*Prelude* 11.342-347). In *Time and Mind in Wordsworth's Poetry*, Jeffrey Baker claims that Wordsworth's imagination is influenced by the doctrine of associationism, which serves to motivate his "notion that a life lived in daily presence of natural beauty must inevitably predispose the mind to serenity and benevolence" (20). Wordsworth hints at his interest in the doctrine of associationism when summarizing the purpose of his poetry in *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*: "I have also informed my reader what this purpose will be found principally to be: namely, to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement" (265). Examples of Wordsworth's own experiences recollected in a state of excitement, a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," are associated with childhood events, encounters with nature, and political upheavals.

Associationism is a psychological theory developed by David Hartley (1705-1757), and it is quite possible Wordsworth became acquainted with the psychologist's ideas during his close friendship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a one-time proponent of

the theory. Associationism began as a theory that all consciousness is associated with sense experiences that combine in the mind, eventually producing memories and imaginations. There are conflicting versions of this philosophy ranging from empirical association to rational association. John Locke (1632-1704) believes the conscious is without any innate capabilities which conflicts with Jung's idea of genetic intuition and memory; Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) claims that knowledge is God-given and based on reason; and David Hume (1711-1776) calls it "experimental psychology" believing the mind made sense of the world by mirroring nature.

This last idea seems to closely coincide with the Wordsworthian idea of accepting nature as the teacher of ethics and morality, as the path to spiritual enlightenment, and as the guide to imagination and intuitive understanding. Regardless of his influences, Wordsworth presents his poetry in a subjunctive voice, allowing readers to explore their own questions and theories concerning the notions presented, which encompass Kant's philosophy of rationalism as well as Hume's sense empiricism.

Wordsworth repeatedly links ideas and feelings with memories and imaginings throughout *The Prelude*. Baker claims in this regard that Wordsworth's "notions of the nature of imagination, the relation of sense to soul, and the origin of mystical vision...and of the contrast between intuitive wisdom and scientific reason" include all motions of the mind (63). If accurate, such a claim would support the idea that Wordsworth engages Jung's four functions in his poetry, and in the process provides a view on all aspects of the mind of man. Wordsworth's method of teaching through his poetry is inclusive of the whole man. He does not deny the spiritual in favor of the material; he does not deny feelings in favor of rational thought; and he does not deny intuition in favor of

scientific knowledge. Instead, Wordsworth builds “up a Work that shall endure,” and as a “Prophet of Nature” he becomes “A lasting inspiration, sanctified/By reason, blest by faith” (Prelude 14.311, 446-448). In this

way, William Wordsworth reaches back in time in search of collective experiences that will enlighten and inspire the imagination of future generations.

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