



The Nature of ‘Perception’ in Wordsworth’s Poetry: Highlighting the Dissonance Between ‘Perception’ and ‘Conception’

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The period of Enlightenment is understood both as a historical moment and a conceptual framework. It was an 18th century movement that held rational certainty to be determinant in setting the ground for self - knowledge. This conviction was equally held by both Rationalists and Empiricists during that period. Despite the unifying principle, variance lies in their designated ‘source’ of knowledge of the subject as well as the world. While Descartes (1596 - 1650) as a Rationalist philosopher places emphasizes on certain innate ideas and the doubting faculty or the mind of man, Locke (1632 - 1704) through his concept of ‘Tabula Rasa’ emphasizes primarily on the role of the senses in acquiring knowledge. In agreement with Cathy Caruth’s assertion that, “With...empiricism as a starting point, we might consider new ways of reading the self - meditations of Romantic texts”¹, the aim of this paper is to study the nature of ‘Perception’ in William Wordsworth, beginning with Lockean empiricism. The paper will include John Locke’s text ‘*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*’ along with Wordsworth’s poems ‘Resolution and Independence’, Book I and Book II from ‘The Prelude’.

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* published in 1690, Locke elaborates over the processes which are responsible for human knowledge. At the beginning of the essay he proclaims that “by the use of their natural faculties [men] may attain to all the knowledge they have, without the help of any innate impressions.” (*Essay*, 27) Hence, the fallacy of innate ideas can be premised within the principle of rational comprehension. Anything that can be ‘experienced’ within the physical world as well as reasoned through mental observation is considered to be the source of human knowledge. The word ‘experience’ holds central importance within Locke’s terminology, as it covers the entire scope of the possibility of gaining knowledge. ‘Experience’ has double origin for Locke i.e. in “Sensation or Reflection”. (*Essay*, 87) As the name suggests, sensation is the power of the senses through which man is capable of gaining primary impressions from the physical world which cause the initiation of his sensory experience. Further on, reflection absorbs the material supplied by sensation and acts upon the knowledge assimilated by sense experience through which one attains understanding. Thus, if the first set of experience comes from the external world, he calls the secondary set of ideas “internal sense” which does not has its

¹ Cathy Caruth, *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions* (John Hopkins UP, 1991), 4.

source in without but in the internal mechanism of the mind. The three pointers necessary to be studied separately in Lockean system are Experience, Understanding and Ideas. Ideas can be understood as perception or the perceived knowledge, which has its source in the sensuous experience. The human eye employed in gaining impressions from the appearances in the external world acts as the agent in production of 'Simple Ideas.' But they also have their origin in 'understanding', which acts as an analogue of the human eye. The ideas furnished in the mind, when one reflects upon the impressions gained from the outer world are termed as 'Complex Ideas.'

In the *Essay* Locke asserts that "the other fountain from which experience furnisheth the understanding with ideas is, - the perception of the operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got."² Thus the nature of perception in Locke, is primarily the operation of the senses and further of the mind, for enriching the understanding with a different set of ideas than gained through the senses. But, the formation of 'Experience' presupposes a certain coherence in sensuous perception and mental reflection. Hence the point of enquiry is, what accounts for the experiences that stand outside this coordinated interaction within conceptual frameworks. Both Enlightenment and Romanticism put forth the "representation of the origins, or the conditions, of self knowledge; of the mind facing itself."³ But, Wordsworth's poetry engages differently with sensation and reflection by presenting a disjunction in their united function.

In 1798, Wordsworth and Coleridge together produced *Lyrical Ballads* that comprises a set of poems by both the poets, along with a Preface that is seminal in understanding Wordsworth's style, intent and purpose of writing poetry. In the advertisement, Wordsworth calls for a break from conventional ways of 'looking' for experiencing the pleasure of novelty among familiar forms. He admits his subject to be "materially different from those, upon which general approbation is at present bestowed"⁴ and regards this collection as an 'experiment'. In the Preface he emphasizes on forming impassioned relationship with nature, by cultivating the ability to communicate with it. The Preface also focuses on the development of a language that is distanced from Neoclassicism's artificial and strict poetic conventions. His poetry does not seek for grander subjects but the simple events of life, infused with vivid sensation for perceiving beauty. Within the *Preface*, he elaborates on the design of his poetry that germinates both from "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (*Lyrical Ballads*, 252) and meditation upon the imaginative recollections. His purpose is thus to write poetry that reflects an "organic sensibility" (*Lyrical Ballads*, 238) through an integration of feeling with thought.

The prominence of feeling in recounted experiences is ineluctably evident in the language of the poems. But, the point at which Wordsworth stands distinct from empirical methods of gaining knowledge and certainty can be broadly investigated in the poem '*Resolution and Independence*'. '*Resolution and Independence*', published in 1807 sets forth another idea of the mind of a man in dialogue with itself. The poet is oscillating between the present moment and the past joys while he recollects the childhood days and acknowledges a faded rigor in the present moment. "Even while he tries to seize a present joy, an understanding grows in him of the role of the involuntary memory, and he is led to

² John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Pennsylvania State University, 1999), 87.

³ Cathy Caruth, *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), Preface.

⁴ Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* (Routledge, 1968), 235.

introspection.”⁵ He recollects the memories of gallivanting in nature and realizes a lack of communion with it in the present moment. The sense of fear, commonly associated with childhood experiences of the poet, are also a part of his mature experience, when thoughts become empty of perceived knowledge, “And fears and fancies thick upon me came; / Dim sadness—and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor could name.” (*Resolution and Independence*, 27 - 28)

In the poem, the poet perceives the external delights of nature and attempts to participate in its gay spirit, but the poem progresses towards the moment when the poet experiences a lack in formulating a concrete understanding of the external world. When he sees the Leech Gatherer, the poet speculates that, “the oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs.” (*Resolution and Independence*, 56) By designating him as the ‘oldest man’, the poet showcases his improbability in perceiving the figure of the Leech Gatherer, as the epithet ‘oldest man’ keeps the Leech Gatherer out of a definite temporal and spatial framework. The attempt to perceive the one visible to the poet further complicates when he apprehends the figure just “as a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie.” (*Resolution and Independence*, 57 - 58) Inability of the poet in subsuming the figure of Leech Gatherer within decidedly known proportions highlights a rift between his perception and the consequent act of conception. In spite of observing the man, when the poet utters that, “such seemed this man, not all alive nor dead” (*Resolution and Independence*, 64) it becomes the basis of a shift from the empirical understanding of the world.

Locke, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* assigns sense perceptions as the source of all knowledge. Subsequently, reflection upon gained perceptions leads to understanding. Therefore, the unity between perception and reflection is seemingly presupposed in his argument, without providing a rationale over the assured production of an idea in the process. But in this poem, the data assimilated by the senses does not obviate a rational comprehension or reflection. The poet engages his senses in understanding the figure of Leech Gatherer, but fails to establish its coherence with the conception of the same. Hence, the poem exemplifies the distinct nature of perception in Wordsworth's poetry where the immediate engagement with the external world through senses, does not obviate reflection. It accounts for those experiences of the disruptive stimuli which lend a vision that is beyond conceptual frameworks and defeat the logic of rationality in gaining the sense of the world.

In the beginning of the poem, the poet is experiencing a conjugal bliss in nature, “all things that love the sun are out of doors; / The sky rejoices in the morning's birth”. (*Resolution and Independence* 8 - 9) But soon the poet is unable to reciprocate that joy and sinks into despair, “To me that morning did it happen so; / And fears and fancies thick upon me came; / Dim sadness—and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor could name.” And it is in the same mood he first encounters the Leech Gatherer. The feelings of a lost communication with nature causes indeterminacy in perceiving anything outside, including the Leech Gatherer. According to Geoffrey Hartman, the categories of time or subject enter his poetry “like the power of thought itself.”⁶ The fluidity between perception and conception of the outer reality also becomes fractured when the poet himself is decentered from his agency of a perceiving subject, as he finds the encounter “a leading from above, a something given” (*Resolution and Independence* 50). Further, a constant refiguration of what is real abandons the certainty of

⁵ Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry* (Yale UP, 1971) 163.

⁶ Geoffrey Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), ix.

every predetermined coordinate. "Perplexed, and longing to be comforted, / My question eagerly did I renew, / "How is it that you live, and what is it you do?" (117 - 119) As the poet is not directly reaching to any conclusive understanding of the Leech Gatherer, rather takes successive steps in the form of assumptions, relooking and questioning, the knowledge received from the senses becomes insufficient in comprehending the Leech Gatherer in the mind of the poet, despite their participation in the act of perception.

Enlightenment, worked with the binary of subject and object, where an individual was the subject who casts his/her own understanding for the knowledge of the outer world. But, with respect to Wordsworth's poetry, he does not necessarily look at nature to make sense of it, rather to connect with it and shape the sense of self by respecting the mutual effect of inspiration from nature and his own gift of rejuvenating the creative imagination by writing poetry. Fracture between the subject and the object is healed when each of the constituents engage in enhancing the aspect of self - awareness. "A natural object liberates Wordsworth's imagination only when it both ceases to be purely external and fades out its object status."⁷

According to Harold Bloom in *The Visionary Company*, spots of time in Wordsworth's poetry are "to enshrine the spirit of the past for future restoration." (161) The event of poet meeting the Leech Gatherer in the poem can be seen as a spot in time of this nature. Leech Gatherer here is the exemplar of a satisfied commuter in the natural environment. His stay in nature is harmonized for having accepted the reality as it comes to him and has learnt to "persevere". However, the economic conditions may change or leeches may "have dwindled long with slow decay" (*Resolution and Independence*, 125) but his presence in nature is not affected by this sense of loss. "The failure of communication between him and Wordsworth...which is the substance of the remainder of the poem, is due to his being a part of the solitude around him while Wordsworth, with his anxieties, is a trouble to the place."⁸ But, this intercourse with the Leech Gatherer renews his engagement with nature. The idea of new found unity results in poet's renovated affinities and instills a hope of sharing similar communion with nature.

With regard to Wordsworth, Geoffrey Hartman asserts that, "It is perhaps the first time a poet has kept his eye so steadily on the object...and attempted a direct transcription of his personal response to nature."⁹ *The Prelude* is subtitled as 'Growth of a poet's mind' that has been conditioned both by nature and poet's own creative abilities. In the book, Wordsworth is registering a personal response to nature, time, memory and imagination through poetry. It encompasses both immediate and remembered pleasures that corroborate in the making of a creative self. According to the *Preface*, "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" is poetry but the recollections in tranquility fashion the mind which makes the poetry. Hence, in the *Prelude* the poet introspects about the experiences, gifts and growth of his mind. Through this understanding, the paper will develop a study on Book I and Book II of *The Prelude* to question the validity of sense experience in producing the knowledge of the objective world. It attempts to throw light on the instances where indeterminacy can be located within perception through senses and subsequent conception by the mind.

⁷ Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (Cornell UP, 2006), 142.

⁸ Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (Cornell UP, 2006), 168.

⁹ Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry* (Yale UP, 1971), 163.

Wordsworth calls *The Prelude* "a tale from my heart, more near akin/ To my own passions and habitual thoughts." (Book I 222 - 223) In Book I, Wordsworth begins by addressing his communion with nature. As an experienced traveler he has learnt to participate as well as distance himself from it. He acknowledges nature and imagination as congenial powers, feeding his mind with creative instincts. Basil Willey promotes a similar view when he maintains that with "the bond between nature and the soul of man, this dead world may be brought to life by the modifying colours of the 'imagination'"¹⁰ But the poet is not designating sensory stimuli as the absolute source or starting point of his primal powers. Rather, he mentions his 'vital soul' as the first gift which connects with the external world and initiates the creative process. Hence the poet is coming to understand his independence from nature and immediate sense stimuli. Poetry is written after refiguring what is real and is often an account of incongruity, experienced while configuring the immediate data collected by the senses.

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth expresses the value of nature in transforming his experience, "sedulous as I have been to trace/ How Nature by extrinsic passion first peopled the mind with forms of sublime and fair". (Book I 544 - 546) In the beginning of Book I the poet revels in his youthful affinities with nature. The joy felt in nature incorporates active sensations. But in his poetry there are no absolute parameters of perception relevant in all situations. It is in the 'boat stealing episode' that an easy participation with nature seems eschewed and he realizes a presence beyond the realm of sensations. During the boat stealing episode, the poet encounters a different aspect of nature where the comfort of familiar forms is replaced by a haunting vision which intimates of a separateness from nature. While recounting the episode in the poem, the poet is unsure of what he perceived through his senses. The spectacle robs his sense of 'familiar shapes' and his understanding experiences a "dim and undetermined sense/ of unknown modes of being." (Book I 392 - 393) During such experiences, bodily senses refuse to lend an explanation and the firm grounds of sensual perception are surpassed in the moment of a spectacle that results in "blank desertion" (Book I 395). The poet here is devoid of a familiarity with external forms. The presupposed unity between sensuous perception and conception in Locke's system gets dissolved and the supremacy of perception through the senses is questioned. The poet experiences a dissonance between the data he perceives through his senses and the empty ideas he receives while reflecting upon the same. The mind therefore outgrows its dependence on nature and revives images of the scene through its own creative abilities. As the incident gets 'imaginatively reconstructed' in his poetic composition, the perception of nature may not be the primal power that gives him epistemological certainty, and it can be his own mind with the power to act as the agent of gaining knowledge that becomes central in the process of meaning making. Therefore, the "mind must 'figure' the materials which are to hand into redisposed forms, providing whatever degree of activity or passivity nature seems not to provide."¹¹

In the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth proclaims that "feeling therein developed gives importance to action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling." (*Lyrical Ballads*, 239) Spots of time in Wordsworth's poetry are the moments wherein the poet is engaged with more than usual emotional intensity. They tell of "memories by which the mind, 'especially the imaginative power' is nourished and made

¹⁰ M.H. Abrams, *English Romantic Poets* (Oxford UP, 1975), 116.

¹¹ David Simpson, *Wordsworth and the Figurings of the Real* (Macmillan Press Ltd. 1982), 61.

fruitful by its own self - generated power.”¹² Spots of time do not refer to ‘still’ moments in time but a process through which a poet learns to feel. Boat stealing episode is one such spot of time in past which modulates the present of the poet. Within the orbit of the moment in the past, the poet is unable to articulate the specificities of the scene and feels a ‘darkness’ surrounding him. The ‘moment’ refuses to be incorporated in language or any signification, for which the poet revisits its memory to renew it via imagination. Hence the clear perception of ‘objective reality’ is no less than an enigma for the poet. The ‘real’ appears to be an unstable entity for being shaped and metamorphosed by the mind concentrating upon it. The presumption of a commonly understood world gets challenged in this instance as the outer world seems lost and can only be revived through a process of meditations and imaginative reconstructions.

In book II of *The Prelude*, the poet discusses his solitary walks during his school days in Hawkshead. The feeling of calm and delight makes him ponder, “How shall I seek the origin?/ where find faith in the marvelous things which then I felt.” (Book II, 346 - 347) Nature nurtures his transformative experience but at the same time an ambiguity envelops him. The underlying thought highlights the indeterminacy of the poet in pronouncing the formative aspect of his experiences. He further describes that,

“Oft in these moments such a holy calm
Would over spread my soul, that bodily eyes
Were utterly forgotten, and what I saw
Appeared like something in myself, a dream,
A prospect in the mind.” (Book II, 348 - 352)

Here, the sensory perception gets subordinated to the power of the mind, as such instances do not signify it as the seeding ground of his communion with nature and the self. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke’s purpose is to formulate a theory that is concerned with the evaluation of certainty in gaining knowledge. It conceptualizes perception in a systematic manner where “the senses at first let in particular ideas...and the mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the memory...In this manner the mind comes to be furnished with ideas and language, the materials about which to exercise its discursive faculty.”¹³ He is limited to sense - perception for determining the existence of objective world and our understanding of it. But in Book II, Wordsworth presents a critique of this process, denying any particular beginning to an idea. He also presents a critique of Enlightenment rationality by discouraging the processes that “range the faculties/ In scale and order, class the cabinet/ Of their sensations,...Run through the history and birth of each.” (Book II 223 - 226) Hence, he doesn’t ascribe a significant power to classified sensual perception, rather abstracts his notion of the birth of an idea by putting forth an intuitive understanding.

Critics such as Cathy Caruth, Paul Hamilton, Marshall Brown and various others find Wordsworth’s poetry as representative of a “historical moment in sensibility when Romanticism is born out of the Enlightenment’s confidence in generating human experience.”¹⁴ Their study traces Wordsworth’s perception of nature as relying upon sensory ground. Moreover, their study supposes his creative imagination to have its roots in the realm of the senses. But the instances where the poet recounts “seeking the visible world,

¹² Jonathan Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth* (Infobase Publishing 2007), 199.

¹³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Pennsylvania State University, 1999), 35.

¹⁴ Stephen Gill, *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth* (Cambridge UP, 2003), 221.

nor knowing why" (*Book II*, 278) he is unaware of the objective world affecting his senses. According to Locke, 'simple ideas' when gained through sensory perception "the understanding can no more refuse to have, nor alter when they imprinted." (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 101) But, in Wordsworth's experience, perception is selective. Objects are not static while providing ideas to the mind, rather, they are modified by imagination. Perception of reality is open to multiple figurings and thus is seen in a new light. In his childhood, nature housed his sense of harmony along with a vision of dread. It escalated poet's joy but also destroyed the comfort of familiar shapes. Hence, the kind of experience fostered by nature also engendered something contrary to empirical claims of perception.

The frame of Wordsworth's experience incorporates communication between poet's mind and nature. In the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* he acknowledges the principle role of nature in nurturing his passions by revealing itself in unprecedented glory. He also recognizes his own agency as the one whose mind has been weaned by nature itself to grow beyond it,

Difference
Perceived in things, where, to the unwatchful eye,
No difference is, and hence, from the same source,
Sublimier joy; for I walk alone (*Book II* 299 - 302)

Geoffrey Hartman in *Wordsworth's Poetry* maintains that in Wordsworth's poetry "imagination flowed with nature's aid back into nature."¹⁵ Hence, instead of denouncing the role of sense perception in Wordsworth's poetry, the paper is presenting a study of those moments where rationality submits its attempts of furnishing ideas. The images supplied from outside have ambiguous impact upon the poet and get refracted by poet's imaginative reconstructions. Claims of empirical certainty cannot be withheld as the language in Wordsworth's poetry is not constitutive of reality rather expressive of it. In book I and II of *The Prelude* empirical starting point of Wordsworth's perception continually gets decentered as the sensuous stimuli is unable to supply a concrete knowledge of the object. Hence, it is axiomatic that Wordsworth's poetry surpasses the 'categorized' understanding of perception in Locke. Nature and human mind are 'correspondent' powers but the first impressions afforded by nature remain displaced, denying the correspondence between 'perception' and 'understanding'. A stable description of perception in Wordsworth is difficult to propose but it certainly exemplifies "the capacity of the mind to co-operate with this 'active universe', to contribute something of its own in perceiving it."¹⁶

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¹⁵ Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry* (Yale UP, 1971), 29.

¹⁶ M.H. Abrams, *English Romantic Poets* (Oxford UP, 1975), 115.

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