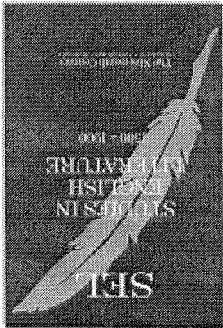


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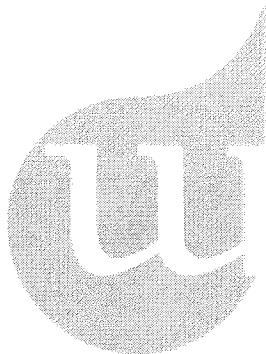


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## Wordsworth and Current Memory Research

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# Wordsworth and Current Memory Research

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In the last twenty years, important developments have occurred in the study of memory among researchers from different fields of psychology, including cognitive psychology, neuroscience, clinical, personality, and social psychology, among others. Recent advances in memory research can be attributed largely to the fact that these various subdisciplines, which formerly operated in relative isolation, are now communicating and sharing discoveries, methods, and theories in what Jefferson A. Singer and Peter Salovey call "a healthy and blossoming cross-fertilization."<sup>1</sup> Not only do many of the new memory researchers embrace an interdisciplinary collaboration among fellow psychologists, but they also draw upon the work of writers and artists who have anticipated scientific findings about the operation of memory and who, in the words of Daniel Schacter, can illuminate more effectively than scientists "the personal, experiential aspects of memory" and its "impact . . . in our day-to-day lives."<sup>2</sup> One writer who is unquestionably an appropriate candidate for interdisciplinary memory study is William Wordsworth, whose poetry is preoccupied with the role of memory in individual life. As Christopher Salvesen argues, the modern sense of the self in time, which gave new priority to memory as a foundation for individual identity, was "first given clear and powerful expression, and turned to poetry, by Wordsworth." "One of Wordsworth's innovations, Salvesen notes, was to turn "remembered incident"

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into "poetic event."<sup>3</sup> Even the briefest survey of Wordsworth's oeuvre will document the importance of memory for this writer. Many of his best-known poems, such as "Tintern Abbey" and the "Intimations Ode," directly explore the workings of memory as the speaker in each compares his present self to an earlier self and struggles to come to terms with what has been lost and what gained with the passage of time. Wordsworth famously characterized poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity," making clear that he believed memory to play an essential role in the creative process.<sup>4</sup> In addition, in *The Prelude* Wordsworth redefines the epic for his era as the story of his own life, in which "spots of time" or core, emotionally charged memories form the climaxes of the work as well as its organizing principle.

Several prominent memory researchers recognize Wordsworth's relevance to their studies and quote from his poetry.<sup>5</sup> Literary scholars, however, have neglected the work of these psychologists. Most psychological interpretations of Wordsworth have followed a Freudian model, applying concepts such as repression and screen memories to the poet's treatment of the past.<sup>6</sup> Recent memory research has challenged many of Freud's notions and offers new and, I would suggest, more fitting theories for understanding the nature and function of memory in Wordsworth's poetry. Applying many of the new findings about memory's operation to a study of Wordsworth's poetry can open up fresh avenues of interpretation and clear up some misconceptions that have prevailed in Wordsworth criticism.

One of the chief points established by current research is that memory does not operate according to the models that have often been used to characterize its workings. It is not like a computer that stores and retrieves data, nor is it like a video camera that plays back tapes of recorded scenes from the past.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary researchers also would reject Thomas De Quincey's well-known metaphor of the brain as a palimpsest, in which memories accumulate in successive layers over time but remain permanently engraved and accessible under appropriate conditions.<sup>8</sup> In fact, there is no such thing as an immutable, comprehensive, or objective memory. To begin with, we do not remember everything we experience. Instead, we remember only what we encode of any given scene or event. To ensure vivid memories, we must first of all pay attention to what is going on around us and encode specific details and nuances of our daily lives. As Schacter says: "If we operate on automatic pilot much of the time . . . we may pay a price by retaining only sketchy memories of where we

encoding specificity

have been and what we have done.<sup>9</sup> Research has shown that depressed people tend to have overly general memories, in part because they are not very attentive to their surroundings and tend to encode experiences in a global manner.<sup>10</sup> No one encodes every detail of a scene or incident, however; instead, what we encode is determined by our interests, needs, and established system of knowledge. This is why several people who have shared the same experience or witnessed the same event often remember it differently, each person having focused on the elements most meaningful to him or her.<sup>11</sup>

Besides being dependent on the past and on the encoding process, memories are affected by the cues that evoke them and the environment in which they are recalled. If an appropriate cue is not provided, an encoded memory can be inaccessible indefinitely.<sup>12</sup> In addition, a person's beliefs, concerns, and expectations in the present can influence or alter memories, a phenomenon known as "retrospective bias." Greg Markus conducted an experiment in which people in 1973 were asked their opinions on controversial social issues such as aid to minorities, legalization of marijuana, and women's rights. When these people were interviewed again in 1982 and asked to state what their opinions had been nine years previously, it was discovered that their recollections were much more reflective of their current views than of their past beliefs.<sup>13</sup> In addition, a phenomenon termed "mood congruent retrieval" or recall operates whereby our present moods evoke memories consistent with that mood and also color past memories, making them more in keeping with the present emotional state. For example, one study revealed that when people are depressed they tend to recall their parents as having been harsh to them in childhood, but when the same people are not depressed they remember their childhood relationships with their parents more positively. A similar effect has been observed in chronic pain patients. Their memories of the intensity of past pain are affected by how much pain they are experiencing in the present.<sup>14</sup> These examples of the ways in which a person's present state of mind shapes recollections of the past demonstrate that memories are not snapshots retrieved from the brain's storage file but subjective, imaginative constructions that combine past and present.

Other kinds of memory distortions commonly occur. Memories of similar experiences can blend, so that we combine in one memory elements from various different episodes. Danish psychologist Steen F. Larsen wrote down his circumstances when he first heard the news that the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme

had been assassinated. Larsen had heard the news on the radio early in the morning. When he later recalled this memory, he included his wife in the scene, even though as his written account made clear he had been alone at the time. Many experts of spending the morning with his wife had merged with this one specific incident and caused Larsen to insert his absent wife into his memory.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, memories can fade and become less accessible, especially if the memory is not often rehearsed, either in personal meditation or in narration to others. We simply do not remember everything we have experienced; some impressions and events are never encoded and therefore not available for retrieval, and other recollections grow dim with the passage of time.<sup>16</sup>

Wordsworth reflects an awareness of many of these aspects of memory's operation. The idea that our past experiences shape our present perceptions, so that what we pay attention to and encode is largely determined by our established personalities, is central to Wordsworth's outlook, most succinctly and memorably expressed in his claim that "The Child is father of the Man."<sup>17</sup> Wordsworth also conveys an understanding of the importance of effective encoding for vivid and long-lasting memories. The purpose of the *Lyrical Ballads* poems, according to Wordsworth's 1800 Preface, is to promote the cultivation of alert attention to subtle details of everyday life.<sup>18</sup> In Coleridge's well-known account, Wordsworth's "object" in his *Lyrical Ballads* poems was "to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us."<sup>19</sup> Wordsworth's concern to "look steadily at [his] subject," to practice himself and encourage in others a habit of close attention to the world around us, parallels Schacter's point that people who are not very alert to or focused on their surroundings will "be left with impoverished recollections."<sup>20</sup>

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A passage that reveals Wordsworth's awareness of the selectivity of the encoding process occurs in *The Prelude*, book 7, where Wordsworth describes a beautiful boy who arrested his attention at the theater in London. "The mother, too," he notes,

Was present, but of her I know no more  
Than hath been said, and scarcely at this time  
Do I remember her; but I behold  
The lovely boy as I beheld him then.<sup>21</sup>

As Wordsworth makes clear, it was the child who mattered to him and on whom he focused his attention at the theater. The boy's mother was also part of the scene, but since he did not encode her appearance, he did not remember her later with the vividness with which he recalled her son.

Wordsworth also conveys an awareness of the retrieval process and of the ways in which present moods and circumstances can alter memories. His habit of consulting his sister's journal accounts of scenes and incidents they experienced together attests to his recognition that appropriate cues can activate memories. Even if Dorothy Wordsworth, with her own personal interests and history, did not encode all the same details as her brother did (as is reflected by differences in descriptions of the same episode in her journal and his poems), her entries would still be specific and effective retrieval cues for William.<sup>22</sup> In "Tintern Abbey," the sister's "wild eyes" (line 119) also serve as a cue to redirect the speaker's memory of his earlier response to the landscape. The scene itself is also a powerful cue that activates the speaker's memory of his visit there five years earlier. As Stuart M. Sperry Jr. remarks, even though the speaker has often rehearsed the landscape's "beauteous forms" in his memory during the intervening five years, "it is only when he is able to reexperience the scene directly and immediately that they begin to assume a heightened vitality and significance."<sup>23</sup>

Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, lamenting Samuel Taylor Coleridge's absence in Malta, tells his friend:

the lordly Alps themselves  
.....  
are not now  
Since thy migration and departure, friend,  
The glad some image in my memory  
Which they were used to be.

(10.990-5)

This passage records an experience of mood congruent retrieval, in which Wordsworth's present sorrow alters a previously happy memory. "Elegiac Stanzas" is the most extreme example of this phenomenon; in that poem, Wordsworth's grief over his brother's death in a shipwreck causes him to reject as invalid all of his youthful memories of a benign natural world. Several passages in *The Prelude* speak to the overall sense of the subjective quality of memory, in particular the way in which

subsequent experience and reflection alter one's impression of the past. In the midst of an account of his life at Cambridge, Wordsworth interrupts his narrative with this disclaimer:

Of these and other kindred notices  
 I cannot say what portion is in truth  
 The naked recollection of that time,  
 And what may rather have been called to life  
 By after-meditation.

(3.644-8)

In book 7, Wordsworth questions whether or not he should describe the London sights he witnessed during his first residence there in 1791, wondering,

Shall I give way,  
 Copying the impression of the memory—  
 Though things remembered idly do half seem  
 The work of fancy.

(lines 145-8)

Finally, in the most striking passage of this kind, Wordsworth near the beginning of book 4 (lines 247-64) develops an extended metaphor comparing the review of his past life to the effect of gazing in a still lake, in which the objects under the water cannot easily be distinguished from the reflections on its surface. In the same way as a person looking at the lake "often is perplexed, and cannot part / The shadow from the substance" (lines 254-5), so the person engaged in reminiscence has trouble distinguishing original impressions from subsequent emotions, experiences, and meditations that have shaped and altered them.

Wordsworth notes other kinds of memory distortion. In a passage describing the happy period of roaming the countryside around Penrith with Dorothy and Mary Hutchinson in 1787, Wordsworth is inclined to include Coleridge in the scene, even though he had not met Coleridge at the time. "O friend, we had not seen thee at that time," Wordsworth writes, struggling with the images his mind presents to him, "And yet a power is on me and a strong / Confusion, and I seem to plant thee there" (6.246-8). Like Larsen who inserted his wife into his memory of hearing the news of the Swedish prime minister's assassination, Wordsworth "plants" Coleridge in his memory from the summer

of 1787. No doubt later experiences of similar happy outdoor walks with Coleridge, Dorothy, and Mary Hutchinson had merged with the earlier memory.

Wordsworth's poetry contains many eloquent statements on the fading of memory. Unlike De Quincey, Wordsworth was acutely aware of the fact that all memories are not retained indelibly in the mind and available for retrieval under appropriate circumstances. Probably the most explicit and moving expression of Wordsworth's apprehension of the steady and irrevocable deterioration of early memories is the "Intimations Ode," where growing older is characterized as a relentless march away from the light of childhood recollection and into the darkness of forgetting. *The Prelude* contains the poignant passage:

The days gone by  
 Come back upon me from the dawn almost  
 Of life; the hiding-places of my power  
 Seem open, I approach, and then they close;  
 I see by glimpses now, when age comes on  
 May scarcely see at all; and I would give  
 While yet we may, as far as words can give,  
 A substance and a life to what I feel:  
 I would enshrine the spirit of the past  
 For future restoration.

(11.333-42)

One of the initial impulses behind Wordsworth's desire to commence work on a major poem, moreover, was

Reading or thinking, either to lay up  
 New stores, or rescue from decay the old  
 By timely interference.

(1.125-7)

Wordsworth was aware of the fact that memories decay, and his writing in many ways functioned as a means of suspending that process of deterioration.

Despite the fading and the many distortions to which memory is susceptible, Schacter emphasizes that "our memories for the broad contours of our lives are fundamentally accurate."<sup>24</sup> If autobiographical memories cannot be considered wholly accurate, objective snapshots of the past, they are not total fabrications



either. "There is a fundamental integrity to one's autobiographical recollections," cognitive psychologist Craig Barclay insists.<sup>25</sup> Memory loss can even be shown to have some advantages. Individuals would be overwhelmed by a chaos of impressions if they remembered everything.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the loss or consolidation of specific details into more generalized memories is necessary for many higher level thinking abilities. Case studies of people with phenomenal memory recall reveal that such people have trouble generalizing from their experience or grasping abstract concepts.<sup>27</sup>

Another benefit of memory loss or distortion has been proposed. A number of psychologists argue that these are useful mental strategies that permit individuals to develop and retain a unified identity that confirms their implicit assumptions about themselves. No coherent sense of self would emerge from a mass of remembered details, and we therefore encode, rehearse, and recall the information that fits certain themes and reinforces our self-images and preferred interpretations of our lives. In addition, if memories from the past are not consistent with our self-conceptions, these memories may be altered or adjusted to allow for a unified identity. Most people's self-images are positive, but they can also be negative; for psychic well being, human beings require a consistent sense of self and a coherent life story, even if they see themselves and their lives as flawed and tragic.<sup>28</sup> According to Freudian psychoanalysis, memory loss and distortions are signs of neurosis, and the goal of therapy is to help patients resurrect buried memories or purge inaccurate ones of defensive distortions. Current memory research challenges the ideas that all memories are recoverable and that objectively true memories are stored intact in the brain's archives. Many psychologists today also believe that memory loss and distortions are consistent with and even necessary for mental health. Shelley F. Taylor, for example, argues that normal human perception and memory are biased in a way that "promotes benign fictions about the self, the world, and the future" and that such positive illusions, far from hampering our ability to function effectively, actually help us adapt to stress and traumatic life events.<sup>29</sup> A healthy, functioning individual is one who is in command of a coherent life story and sense of identity, even if that story and identity involve omissions or deviations from the historical record.<sup>30</sup>

Once again, these points about positive aspects of memory loss and distortion have corollaries in Wordsworth's poetry. In the "Intimations Ode," the speaker recognizes that, though his

memories of childhood have suffered significant deterioration, some traces or "embers" remain (line 129); the memories do not disappear altogether, and

Those shadowy recollections

. . . be they what they may,

Are yet the fountain light of all of our day,

Are yet a master light of all our seeing.

(lines 149-52)

As Schacter and others note, there is a core reliability or integrity to our memories that we can trust and on which we can anchor our identities. In both "Tintern Abbey" and the "Intimations Ode," Wordsworth struggles to come to terms with his increasing distance from his youthful self and to find "[a]bundant recompense" in his present condition ("Tintern Abbey," line 88). In both poems, he declares that with age he has gained greater intellectual abilities or a "philosophic mind" ("Intimations Ode," line 186). He recognizes that, with the loss of the immediacy of his youthful impressions or the fading and blurring of his recollections of that vivid state, he has gained a greater ability to abstract and generalize from his experience. He now sees not only how his youthful experiences can be subsumed in a broader, more complex sense of himself, but he also regards his own experience as representatively human, as he relates his personal feelings to "the still, sad music of humanity," to his sister Dorothy ("Tintern Abbey," lines 91, 111-59), and to "human suffering," "man's mortality," and "the human heart" ("Intimations Ode," lines 184, 198, 200).

Finally, in both "Tintern Abbey" and the "Intimations Ode," Wordsworth strives to retain a connection to his earlier self. In the first poem, he insists despite evidence to the contrary that he is "still / A lover of the meadows and the woods, / And mountains" as he was in his youth, and that he in fact now worships nature "With warmer love" than he did five years ago (lines 102-4, 154). Similarly, despite the fact that the "Intimations Ode" is all about a profound change in the speaker's response to the natural world, he eventually rejects "any severing" of the intimate relationship with nature he experienced in his childhood and claims that his losses are minor, as he has "only . . . relinquished one delight / To live beneath [nature's] more habitual sway" (lines 188, 190-1). In "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth also reexperiences his youthful self momentarily through Dorothy and at the end of the poem commands her to keep him alive in her

memory. Clearly Wordsworth strives to retain a sense of continuity in his identity. He recoils from a "severing" or stark separation from his youthful self and clings to memory, his own or other people's, or even distorts the record of the past or of his present experience to allow for that desired consistency. Whereas this tendency has sometimes been deployed as a sign of weakness or pathology, however, we can see it in the light of current psychological theory as a typical, even healthy human impulse.<sup>31</sup>

The phrase Schacter uses repeatedly to characterize memory is "fragile power." As he explains in his introduction: "This important duality—memory's many limitations on the one hand and its pervasive influence on the other—is at the heart of [his] book."<sup>32</sup> A recognition of the "fragile power" of memory could be considered a central theme in Wordsworth's poetry as well. *The Prelude* is filled with moments in which a powerful memory from the past flashes into the present, as when Mary of Buttermere's image rises vividly in Wordsworth's mind and prevents him from returning to his argument (7.347-51); or when the recollection of French republican soldiers going off to battle brings tears into the present-day Wordsworth's eyes (9.273-80); or when, after narrating childhood pastimes, he exclaims:

Unfading recollections—at this hour  
The heart is almost mine with which I felt  
From some hill-top on sunny afternoons  
The kite, high up among the fleecy clouds,  
Pull at its rein like an impatient courser.

(1.517-21)

At the same time, as we have seen, the poem contains poignant statements about the erosion of memory. Another well-known passage expresses a feeling of radical separation from, rather than unity with, the youthful self whose experiences Wordsworth is narrating in the poem.

A tranquilizing 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 sometimes when I think of them I seem  
Two consciousnesses—conscious of myself,  
And of some other being.

(2.27-33)

As previously discussed, "Tintern Abbey" and the "Intimations Ode" also speak to both a sense of alienation from one's past as memories fade and an ongoing sense of continuity through memory. The myth of a preexistent state incorporated into the "Intimations Ode" also captures the paradoxical nature of memory's fragile power for Wordsworth. In his claim that we are born with memories of a former life Wordsworth reveals his inability to conceive of human consciousness without memory. Our "first affections" in the poem are already "recollections" (lines 148-9). On the other hand, as Sperry argues, the poem characterizes birth as "a sleep and a forgetting" (line 58), and one's earliest recollections are "shadowy" (line 149); the dreary process of memory loss begins with birth itself, simultaneous with the period of memory's greatest vividness and accuracy.<sup>33</sup>

Besides providing insights into particular Wordsworth poems, recent memory research can also shed light on a number of controversies in Wordsworth criticism. A great deal of debate has occurred over Wordsworth's revisions to *The Prelude* and the question of which version of the poem should be considered the best. Many of the most virulent attacks on the 1850 *Prelude* focus on revisions that alter beliefs expressed in earlier versions of the poem. For example, the 1850 *Prelude* contains a passage praising Edmund Burke (7.512-43), which did not exist in the 1805 text. As the editors of the Norton Critical Edition note, these lines, first added in 1832, "record an admiration certainly not felt by the younger, republican Wordsworth for Edmund Burke."<sup>34</sup> Critics also complain about revisions that introduce a more explicitly Christian belief system into the poem than prevailed in the pantheistic early versions. For example, the lines "I worshipped then among the depths of things / As my soul bade me" in 1805 (11.233-4) becomes in 1850, "Worshipping then among the depth of things, / As piety ordained" (12.184-5). Critics have charged that such changes in belief introduced by later revisions constitute "a betrayal of the Wordsworth who wrote 1805." he is betraying his earlier self, which wasn't like that."<sup>35</sup> Norman Aruman states that "In later years Wordsworth's opinions and feelings did change, about many things, from politics to religion to the proper language, technique, and subjects of poetry. And the consequence of these deep changes in feeling and thought was to impose upon the 1805 *Prelude* another consciousness." Aruman also complains several times that the 1850 *Prelude* deviates from the truth. "Whatever else *The Prelude* is," he asserts, "it purports to tell the truth about the growth of the poet's mind.