Research paper

Linguistics with a Small 'I': Toward a Deictic Shift Theory in the Exploration of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality"

Linguistics

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Abstract

The interpretation of Wordsworth's Ode: Intimations of Immortality has been a moot point for several decades and is still notoriously a battleground of interpretative disagreement. Although the poem has been analyzed many times over in accordance with the tenets of different critical approaches, it continues to provide room for controversy. An ancillary to this debate has been the need to re-examine the poem according to the premises and linguistic tools offered by the New Stylistics. The present paper explores the poem from a literary point of view with an attempt to consider the contributions of Humanist Criticism. Then the poem is discussed from a linguistic point of view with a Coup d'essai to explore the contributions of Critical Linguistics. Using linguistics as a slave to criticism rather than its master, the paper proposes a tentative strategy for tackling the poem through deictic shift theory and an examination of relevant linguistic tools, namely: deixis, tense, and aspect and semantic agentivity.

1. Introduction

A considerable amount of controversy has consistently plagued the interpretation of Wordsworth's 'Ode'. Even now, the poem still provokes a great deal of disagreement over whether Wordsworth's poem centers around feelings of loss and death or celebrates immortality and the poet's victory over time and death. On the one hand, a humanist literary critic would focus on interpreting strategies leading to a final act of interpretation or appreciation (Benamou,1971). A critical linguist, on the other hand, would wish to look upon the poem as discourse that can be studied with a view towards unveiling the processes whereby its author has encoded meaning (Short, 1989; Widdowson, 1975).

This paper adopts the point of view of a literary man concerned with such linguistic processes and recommends that the deictic shift theory be used to maximize reading efficiency and construct meaning from a poem. It attempts to show how the solid theoretical premises and the set of tools of analysis offered by Critical Linguistics are likely to yield interesting clues useful in interpreting Wordsworth's poem. The main argument is that in order to extinguish all traces of disagreement, the perspective of the linguist is needed to provide fresh inferences by pointing to potentially seminal areas in the poem (Fowler, 1986). Thus the paper first explores the tenets, aims, and processes of Humanist Criticism. Concepts such as intuitive response, intrinsic interpretation, intentionality, illocution, and perlocution are discussed. Critical Linguistics is then introduced with a special focus on Deixis, namely: Person deixis, spatial deixis, temporal deixis, syntactic transitivity, semantic agentivity, and tense and aspect. Through this discussion, illustrative passages from Wordsworth's 'Ode' are scrutinized.

1.1. A Literary Analysis of the Poem Based on the Humanist Critical Approach

Humanist Criticism highlights the importance of the author as a completely autonomous being in full control of his language. The reader simply undergoes the manipulations of the writer and the poem is anchored in an individual's intention. To have access to the poet's illocutionary act, the reader needs to know more about the writer's individual autobiography. Since the author has only one illocutionary act, there is no room for the plurality of perlocutionary effects. Hence, the "right" interpretation, according to the tenets of humanist criticism lies in obtaining a match between illocution and perlocution. Moreover, in humanist criticism, a poem cannot be objectively described; it is the creation of the critic's interpretive strategies and principles. Accordingly, the meaning of a poem is always produced or created in a process of reading in relation to the supposed intentions, principles, and personality of the author. In other words, humanist criticism accepts the notion of the author as unquestionable and pre-given in order to define how a poem should be read.

This assumption entails that there is no way one can read without having such strategies and principles and that one cannot have access to a text independent of them. Stanley Fish's (1980) arguments, in this respect, are representative of this assumption:

> *In the analysis of a literary text I did what critics always do: I "saw" what my interpretive principles permitted or directed me to see, and then I turned around and attributed what I had "seen" to a text and an intention. (p. 163)*

Since the profusion of rival interpretations Wordsworth's poem has generated, it has not been possible to offer a final response to the question of whether the *'Ode'* is a poem about death or eternal life. Whereas some traditional critics argue that the poem is centered on the theme of immortality, other humanist scholars contend that the poem's main object is loss and death.

Among the leading advocates of the former position are Perkins(1959), Shakir (1969), Stelzig (1975), and Beer (1979), all of whom argue that Wordsworth's real concern is not mortality because the poet shows no lamentation for those who die.

In contrast to the aforementioned position of some humanist critics, other traditional scholars take a different view of Wordsworth's *'Ode'*. Thus, in discussing the poem, they tend to argue that the poet is concerned only with feelings of regret, sorrow, loss, and death.

Some of the literary critics who counter the argument for immortality are Clarke(1950), Salvesen (1965), Lincoln (1972), and Bowra (1980), who read the *'Ode'* as Wordsworth's conscious farewell to his art. They disagree with the critics who yield to the popular notion that the poem confirms the soul's immortality. At the core of the *'Ode'*, they insist, lies the conceptual inverse of immortality—the theme of mortality.

It seems clear from the above discussion that there have been two main opposing tendencies in the interpretation of Wordsworth's *'Ode'*. Such readings of the poem are, in my view, open to attack on several grounds. Most obviously, they can be criticized for being arbitrary and intuitive. Another essential objection to such interpretations is that they are based on pre-formulated literary theses and selected statements rather than arising from a process of engagement with the details of the text.

In addition, each reading seems to be true only for one reader or a group of readers who share values and interpretative strategies. In a sense, all the interpretations above tend to relegate the importance of textual and linguistic details in the analysis of the poem.

As such, in order to come to a final, more convincing interpretation and seek an answer to the question that still rears its head, I propose an exploration of the contributions of critical linguistics, which is likely to yield useful clues in interpreting the *'Ode'* and extinguishing the traces of controversy. It should be pointed out, however, that the following analysis is not, in the interest of space, an exhaustive interpretation of the poem in the literary critical sense. What this study attempts is rather a description of how such an interpretation may be produced.

2. Critical Linguistics and the Analysis of Wordsworth's 'Ode'

2.1. Critical Linguistics: Tenets, Aims, and Processes

Critical Linguistics is an independent discipline, quite distinct from literary criticism. It has its own goals, criteria, and properties—mainly comprehensiveness and systematicity.

The main contribution of critical linguistics is in demonstrating the inseparability of language and ideology (Fowler, 1986; Simpson, 1993). *Linguistic Criticism* lies in deconstructing what the dominant ideology has constructed through language. Any literary enunciation, therefore, is seen by the linguist as a discourse that encodes a particular ideological view of society and the world.

The outstanding goal of critical linguistics is to relate linguistic description to interpretation and help us to argue for one interpretation over another. Another purpose of critical linguistics is to put criticism on a scientific basis and use linguistic methods and tools to achieve a proper and detailed analysis of literary texts. In a basic sense, linguistic criticism firmly advocates close attention to the evidence the text itself has to offer and grants priority to language. The linguist M.A.K. Halliday (1967) expresses this position very clearly:

> *In talking therefore of the linguistic study of literary texts, we mean not merely the study of the language, but rather the study of such texts by the methods of linguistics.* (p. 218)

This assumption, however, in no way entails that linguistic competence is the only ingredient of literary competence. Linguists acknowledge that intrinsic reading and intuitive responses to a text are central to the process of analyzing a literary text. Yet they also argue that, in addition to critical sensitivity acquired through literary conventions, the technical analysis and the focus on linguistic details can add to our comprehension and appreciation of a literary text by pointing out significant features that have not been noted in humanist criticism. The need for such an interplay between intuitive responses to the text and the close attention to linguistic facts is summarized in a typical remark by Jakobson (1960):

> *If there are some critics who still doubt the competence of linguistics to embrace the field of poetics, I privately believe that the poetic incompetence of some bigoted linguists has been mistaken for an inadequacy of the linguistic science itself. All of us here, however, definitely realize that a linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and un-conversant with linguistic methods are equally flagrant anachronisms.* (p. 19)

As a method of analysis, critical linguistics is much more objective and efficient than the strategy of humanist literary criticism. Rather than seeking to justify a pre-formulated literary thesis, critical linguistics recommends an interplay between thesis and analysis. In other words, linguistic criticism is neither a discovery nor a critical procedure. It follows that in linguistic analysis of literary texts, the linguist is guided by some working hypotheses that s/he will check against the linguistic evidence, and progressively modify or confirm said hypotheses as the analysis proceeds.

3. A Linguistic Analysis of Wordsworth's 'Ode' Based on the Deictic Shift Theory

In this section of the paper, the above model of analysis proposed by critical linguistics is applied to Wordsworth's poem. The focus of the present analysis rests on three linguistic devices, namely: deixis, semantic agentivity, and tense and aspect. The paper attempts to show how an examination of linguistic elements will help elucidate the mystery of the poem and finally argue for one interpretation over another.

3.1. The Deictic Configuration

To begin with, it is of interest to see how the various scenes in the poem are described and from which perspective the incidents are reported or ventriloquised.

3.1.1 Person deixis

A close look at the poem reveals the presence of second person pronouns (one use of "you," eight uses of "thou," seven uses of "ye," one use of "thee," together with seven embedded occurrences of "your" and "thy"). Going further, we also notice the presence of third person

pronouns (three uses of "he," two uses of "she," and fourteen embedded occurrences of "his" and "her"). All the remaining pronouns in the poem are first person (nineteen uses of "I," four uses of "we"). Other indicators of the first person pronoun include embedded occurrences as follows: (six uses of "me," three uses of "my," nine uses of "our," and two uses of "us"). It is thus apparent we have a personal rendering of scenes in the first person.

The implication is that the narrator, who has not withdrawn from the text, is not deictically detached at the person level. The narrator does not distance himself from the state of affairs that he describes.

3.1.2 Spatial deixis

The spatial coordinates in the poem are arranged into two different deictic spheres, namely: the narrator's implied "here" as a latent axis of reference and an embedded axis of reference within the reported scenes and events. With respect to the narrator's here, the locations given are perceived as indefinite—"brought us hither," on a starry night," "round me," and "round the setting sun"—where the definite article does not help in specifying the exact location. Moreover, the locations "that immortal sea," "travel thither," and "whence he came," are perceived as "not here," that is to say, distant from the narrator's place of anchorage.

The implication is that there is a significant lack of coordinates and precision casting referents away from the narrator's here as a distancing ploy that does not enhance the effect noted at the person deictic level. It could be stated thus that whilst the narrator professes lack of certainty at the descriptive level, he distances himself at the spatial deictic level in order to pass his ideological judgments on the reported state of affairs.

3.1.3 Temporal deixis

A brief look at the temporal deixis in the poem shows that the past tense in the narrative— "there was," "what was," and the deictic adverb "of yore"—is defined as "not now" from the vantage point of the narrator's foregrounded "now." Moreover, the markers of discourse, that is, of narratorial intervention, are by and large more numerous in the poem.

Thus the present tense appears in: "it is not now," "I know," and "lovely is the rose." To these are added the generalizing ideological statements: "I know," "To me alone," "not for these," "But for those," "did seem," and "no more shall," which emanate from the subjective consciousness of the narrator.

The implication is that the shift from past to present tense is a movement from an objective reporting point of view to a subjective and conceptual standpoint.

3.2. Syntactic Transitivity versus Semantic Agentivity

Representing agentivity in the poem aims at accounting for verbal and nominal forms in the text that express some understanding of agentivity (who is doing what to whom in what manner?). The aim of such an endeavor is to determine what the speaker is trying to do by portraying events from this particular angle. It follows, then, that the representation of agentivity is never innocent and that it always reflects the speaker's mediation of what happened and thus his ideological stand.

In some stanzas of the poem—stanza four in particular—a certain passivity of the speaker is expressed. The syntactic use of the passive in "something that is gone," and "whither is fled" has, as a consequence, the semantic obscuring of the agent and reveals the perceiver's own passivity. This information on the speaker is a significant clue since it indicates that this perceiver or perceptual experiential center is the observing and narrated child. But the syntactic use of the active in "I only have relinquished one delight," "I love the brooks," "I tripped lightly as they" (stanza XI) in the first person means that the deictic center is that of the feeling and narrating adult.

3.3. Tense and Aspect

Tense is the linguistic (syntactic) realisation of the speaker's perception of the location of the reported event with respect to a given deictic center. Tenses could be either canonical (Lyons, 1977) where there is a total matching between the deictic center and the "here" and "now" of the speaker, or displaced where these two axes of reference do not overlap. Similarly, tenses can be ambiguous in a piece of narrative discourse since there can be more than one deictic center with respect to how they are defined. Consider, for instance, the opening stanza of Wordsworth's *'Ode'*:

> There was a time when meadow, grove
> and stream,
> The earth and every common sight,
> To me did seem
> Apparalled in celestial light,
> The glory and the freshness of a dream.
> It is not now as it hath been of fore;-
> Turn wheresoe'er I may,
> By night or day,
> The things which I have seen I now can
> see no more.
>
> (II. 1-9)

The emergence of the present tense in "it is not" and "I now can see" in a past narrative should be seized upon as a major clue indicating a shift in focus from a reporting point of view to

an experiential perspective. In other words, the reader is suddenly being given access to the consciousness of the narrator.

On the other hand, *aspect* realizes linguistically the speaker's perception of how a particular event takes place. It provides the topic—the point of view chosen with respect to reality. The presence or absence of aspectualized tenses in a text must be taken as providing significant information on the speaker's orientation. The simple non-aspectualized forms indicate an objective point of view, whereas the aspectualized forms indicate a subjective point of view on the part of the speaker (Johnstone, 1987).

In stanza two of the poem, the speaker uses tenses in their simple and aspectualized forms:

> The Rainbow comes and goes,
> And lovely is the rose,
> The moon doth with delight
> Look round her when the heavens are
> bare,
> Waters on a starry night
> Are beautiful and fair;
> The sunshine is a glorious birth;
> But yet I know, where'er I go,
> That there hath past away a glory from
> the earth!
> (II. 10-18)

The perfect or perfective aspect in "there hath past" as opposed to a non-aspectualized form should be taken as a clue signaling an experiential report of what happened as experienced directly by the speaker. However, the tense signals distance from the speaker's "here" and "now," and thus belongs to a different deictic center, namely the narrator's. This mixing of involved perception and distanced report is typical of the *Free Indirect Style* technique (Leech, 1981).

4. Conclusion

In view of the above discussion and in conjunction with the other linguistic facts already presented, it could be pointed out that Wordsworth has created and authenticated two voices in the poem, namely: the poetic and the human. In this light, he has blended the author's *histoire* and a speaker's *discourse*, a mode known as *Style Indirect Libre* (Leech, 1969). Thus Wordsworth's technique in the *'Ode'* shifts between two modes of description: the experiential, perceptive, natural and observing self of the narrated child on the one hand; and the poetic, conceptual, visionary, and feeling self of the narrating adult on the other hand. Within this frame whereby Wordsworth ventriloquises rather than reports, the memory is revivified, the past comes alive again and intimations of immortality are regained in a narrative vignette of the moment.

In conclusion, it is my belief that while Wordsworth's *'Ode'* tells of a crisis of death and mortality, the poem exposes above all the poet's feeling of immortality. While subscribing to individualism as a creed, Wordsworth is proposing his mode of regaining moments of immortality. Meanwhile, Wordsworth draws the reader's attention to the fact that such experience of feeling can be narrated but not re-entered. He therefore narrates his experience in words which can make it conceptually available, hints at its "possible sublimity," and attempts to preserve its mystery by refusing to give it concrete realization. What Wordsworth suggests in the *Ode*, then, is that the problem (mortality) and its solution (feeling/intimations of immortality) lie with the individual, in individual struggle, consciousness, and choice as he confirms it in the following lines of *The Prelude*:

.... I feel,

That from thyself it is that thou must give,

Else never canst receive.

(XI, II. 329-334)

In other words, if the reader or narratee wishes to feel intimations of immortality, s/he must reconstruct it for him/herself from the raw materials of a landscape that is given to him/her in the experiential mode.

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