EXPLORING TIME-BINDING FORMULATIONS WITH WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

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During this past winter break, fortified with my portable MP3 player and a disk of Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar radio serials, I took a leisurely hike around the lake at Tyler State Park in deep East Texas. During this walk, while listening to an episode called the Sealegs Matter (originally broadcast on August 8, 1956), I experienced a vivid burst of memory in which my visual, audio, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory sensations became dramatically activated. I clearly heard my grandmother’s distinctive laugh as one of the characters on the radio (Parley Baer playing a lovable, but unscrupulous Nicaraguan travel guide) said something very amusing. I remembered the tartness of the rhubarb pie we were eating as we listened to the program on the Philco console radio. I remembered the pleasant aromas emanating from the kitchen as Grandma was putting up preserves for the winter. These sights, sounds, smells, and tastes flooded from my memory as vividly as though I had been miraculously transported in a time warp back to that very happy summer in 1956, when as a twelve-year-old, I had spent a joyously happy time on my grandparents’ farm.

I reflected that the stimuli embedded electronically on this MP3 disk had dislodged a dormant time-deposit or epiphany, or perhaps what William

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Wordsworth would have described as a “spot of time” in book twelve of The Prelude:

There are in our existence spots of time,
That with distinct pre-eminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence—our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired;

(Wordsworth, The Prelude, lines 208-215, p.369)

Alfred Korzybski has identified the chief measurable characteristic that separates human beings from other forms of life as the ability to bind time, to freeze experience, so to speak, thus enabling older generations to pass down the cumulative cultural experience to younger generations. With this remarkable ability, we have the capability of freezing or “canning” “time-preserves” much the way my late mother and grandmother prepared bottled preserves from summer fruit and vegetables, enabling us to have a taste of summer in the freezing cold of a Minnesota January.

In many of his works, Wordsworth anticipates a number of fundamental general semantics formulations, including consciousness of abstraction, the dating and indexing extensional devices, as well as the relative invariance under transformation, a formulation we can perhaps perceive in his Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey as a convergence of the indexing and dating coordinates. (See diagram at conclusion of this article.)

Wordsworth gives us a remarkable testimony for the practical value of time-binding (or abstracting “time-preserves”) in his recollection of those many times when his restful, sylvan, bucolic images of the Wye River Valley had fortified and sustained him during the five preceding years when he had dwelled in a seemingly cacophonous and relatively drab urban setting. Through time-binding, Wordsworth can “vacuum seal” those precious experiences, bringing “canned” joy and tranquility to other places and situations generally lacking in these qualities. (Note: my use of the term “canned” does not involve negative suggestions, such as one might attach to such terms as “canned laughter.”)

As he returns to the Wye River Valley with his younger sister, Wordsworth again realizes that he does not intend to merely enjoy the present, he also wants to allow his nervous system to absorb these experiences in his memory, preserving them for future times of emotional famine when his surroundings would not evoke positive emotional responses such as joy, tranquility, or peace.

Wordsworth, in his awareness of changes in his own responses to nature, anticipates what we would call the extensional device of dating, suggesting that Wordsworth’s love for (or response to) nature 1775 is not Wordsworth’s love for
(or response to) nature \textsuperscript{1786} is not Wordsworth’s love for (or response to) nature \textsuperscript{1798}. He uses the same terms descriptive of emotion such as joy or exhilaration, but the experiences make them qualitatively different.

The young boy Wordsworth, perhaps Wordsworth \textsuperscript{1775}, responds to nature with the descriptors in lines 65-75 suggesting the abstractions of a child:

Like a roe bounding over the mountains  
More like running from what he dreads than seeking what he loves  
\textit{Coarser pleasures of my boyish days}  
\textit{Glad animal movements}  
To me was all in all (like a child makes no distinction between himself and surroundings)

The young adult Wordsworth, perhaps Wordsworth \textsuperscript{1786}, abstracts an entirely different set of characteristics from a similar (though slightly different) event, yet he experiences the same generalized feeling of joy (lines 75-85):

\begin{itemize}
  \item Haunted me like a \textit{passion}
  \item Colors and forms like an \textit{appetite}
  \item \textit{Feeling} and \textit{love} having no need of a remoter charm
  \item Aching joys
  \item Dizzy rapture
\end{itemize}

The mature adult Wordsworth, perhaps Wordsworth \textsuperscript{1798}, abstracts from a similar but different point event an entirely different set of characteristics (lines 86-96):

\begin{itemize}
  \item Still \textit{sad music}
  \item Not grating or harsh
  \item \textit{Elevated} thoughts
  \item Sense of \textit{sublime}
\end{itemize}

The mature Wordsworth still experiences a profound sense of joy, but without the impulsiveness of youth or the appetite-driven aching joy of a young adult, he now feels a tranquil sense of the sublime, cultivated by the honed skills of meditation and contemplation.

We can see evidence of Wordsworth’s consciousness of abstraction, although he didn’t call it by that name, by using the general semantics formulation called dating. In his self-conscious observations about changes over the years in his own responses to nature, he reveals his profound observation that Wordsworth \textsuperscript{1775}
is not Wordsworth_1786_ is not Wordsworth_1798_ and that Joy_1_ is not Joy_2_ is not Joy_3_. In his series of abstractions, he could see a “relative invariance under transformation.”

Wordsworth felt a strong need to bind time, “canning” it, “freezing” it, and “storing” it for a future when the events in his life would not yield as much joy or exhilaration as his excursions in the Lake District and the bucolic Wye River Valley. The time “preserves” which he “cans” for his long intervals away from the Wye Valley would perhaps have to last him for another five years—or longer. Reflecting upon his “time-preserves,” Wordsworth ruminates:

These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man’s eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and ’mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration

(Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*, lines 22-30, p.235)

Equally as delightful as my grandmother’s strawberry preserves in the dark and cold Minnesota winters were the “time-preserves” Wordsworth had “canned” during his delightful visits to the Wye River Valley. Consider how the flavorful “time-preserves” had sustained Wordsworth’s flagging spirit in the dead of a drab joyless urban winter:

In darkness and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart—
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro’ the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!

(Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*, lines 51-58, p.236)

“Canning time” helps Wordsworth maintain emotional health, sustaining him in lean times. Aware of the possibility of long gaps between emotional re-nourishment, Wordsworth feels a compulsion to create “time-preserves” that will sustain him for months and years to come:
While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years.

(Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*, lines 61-64, p.236)

Wordsworth anticipates a formulation similar to Kurt Lewin’s *Cognitive Field Life Space* construct, and J. Samuel Bois’ *Semantic Transactor* construct. Wordsworth concludes that even though certain percepts and experiences seem to remain relatively stable, the interaction between the object of perception and the event changes both the evaluator and the event. Wordsworth describes a series of such transactions that Kurt Lewin would characterize as *Simultaneous Mutual Interaction* between the perceiver and the perceived:

Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

(Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*, lines 102-111, p.237)

Wordsworth understood that what he now perceived in the pleasant event he had partially created from memories of similar, but not identical, events. Morris Bigge sheds some light on this process as he describes a corollary of Kurt Lewin’s *Cognitive Field Life Space* construct referred to as *Simultaneous Mutual Interaction* [of event and object of perception]:

The *Simultaneous Mutual Interaction* [SMI] concept implies a continuity of experience. Every experience both extracts something from experiences which have gone before and modifies in some way experiences that follow. Furthermore, to some degree every experience influences the conditions under which future experiences may be had. Thus, in the case of a reasonable normal person, successive perceptual fields or life spaces tend to be similar to, though not identical with, one another. (p.314)

Students of general semantics realize that the Lewinian SMI concept shares striking parallels or characteristics with the formulation known as *Relative Invariance Under Transformation*. Milton Dawes in his article *Speaking Meta-*
phorically: *This, is Like That* gives a succinct paraphrase of Korzybski’s R.I.U.T. principle:

In a world of diversity and change, when we discover something that seems to remain relatively invariant, (relatively unchanged), then we are onto something of great significance and importance to us in understanding ourselves-in-our-world. (See Chapter XIX of *Science and Sanity.*)

(Dawes, p.1)

Dawes, in the same article, gives a more user-friendly definition of the same formulation:

You could think of relative invariance under transformation as a fancy way of saying some thing-process or happening “A” is structurally similar to, or is like, some other thing-process or happening “B.” Put in other words, we could say: Although “A” has changed, broadly speaking, there are some features we can abstract from “A” that have remained relatively unchanged. In brief we are saying “a this”—whatever this happens to be, is like “a that”—some other thing or happening at some other place and time.

(Dawes, p.1)

Wordsworth shows a keen awareness that his nervous system has significantly changed over the years, but the trace memories from former events have kept the original evaluations fresh and vivid. Many of us who have impaired or diminished tactile, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, or visual capacity because of aging or perhaps an accident can relate to the frustration of knowing how we used to experience these stimuli and how they no longer register the same way. Fortunately time-binding enables us to have continuity while perhaps enjoying something vicariously, as Wordsworth had done in seeing himself, or seeing his earlier reactions, in his sister Dorothy’s eyes:

and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
*My former pleasures* in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I was once,
My dear, dear Sister!

(Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*, lines 116-121, p.237)

As he witnesses the youthful perceptions of his young sister, he contemplates that time and maturity alter most of our higher order abstractions such as
nature or joy. They are altered yet they retain a certain *Relative Invariance Under Transformation*:

Through all the years of this our life, to lead  
From joy to joy: — When these wild ecstasies shall be matured  
Into a sober pleasure

( Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*, lines 124-139, p.237)

We could visualize Wordsworth’s experience with *Relative Invariance Under Transformation* with the following diagram, showing the progressive change as an intersection of dating and indexing coordinates:

**Relative Invariance Under Transformation**

- **Love for Nature**
  - Joy
- **Joy**

Still *sad music*  
*Elevated* thoughts  
Sense of *sublime*

Haunted me like a *passion*  
Colors and forms like an *appetite*  
*Feeling* and *love* having no need of a remoter charm  
*Aching* joys  
*Dizzy rapture*

*Coarser pleasures* of my boyish days  
*Glad animal movements*

- **Wordsworth**
  - 1775  
  - 1786  
  - 1798

The trajectory describing the relative invariance under transformation emerges out of our memories. We continually make comparisons to similar things that have happened to us before, mixing our current evaluations or responses with stored memories. Our past experiences guide us how to respond

As Thomas Wolfe has cautioned, “You Can’t Go Home Again,” but our supply of “time-preserves” can make our present perceptions more enjoyable. I experience joy contemplating the lakefront at Tyler State Park by ruminating upon my childhood home on Lake Emily back in Minnesota. Although the two stored experiences differ somewhat, they blend together and enrich both experiences synergistically. As radio host Chuck Cecil has often said about sentimental melodies from the Swinging Years, “if they were worth listening to then, then they are worth listening to one more time, when we can listen to them more objectively.”

**REFERENCES**


