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Wordsworth and the Workings of the Mind

Jonathan Wordsworth

“My young master in London is dead!, said Obadiah.” The sentence is intended – both by Obadiah, and by Sterne as author of *Tristram Shandy* – to have a dramatic effect. News of the death of Tristram’s elder brother, Bobby, is being relayed to the servant’s hall:

“My young master in London is dead!” said Obadiah. A green sattin night-gown of my mother’s, which had been twice scoured, was the first idea which Obadiah’s exclamation brought into Susannah’s head. Well might Locke write a chapter upon the imperfections of words! “Then,” quoth Susannah, “we must all go into mourning.” But note a second time: the word *mourning*, notwithstanding Susannah made use of it herself – failed also of doing its office; it excited not one single idea, tinged either with grey or black – all was green. The green sattin night-gown hung there still.

One can see it, hanging there in space; but the next association in Susannah’s greedy mind still comes as a surprise:

“O! ‘twill be the death of my poor mistress,” cried Susannah. My mother’s whole wardrobe followed. What a procession! Her red damask, her orange-tawny, her white and yellow lustrings, her brown taffata, her bone-laced caps, her bed-gowns and comfortable under-petticoats. Not a rag was left behind. “No, *she will never look up again*,” said Susannah.

We had a fat, foolish scullion – my father, I think, kept her for her simplicity; she had been all autumn struggling with a dropsy. “He is dead!” said Obadiah, “he is certainly dead!” “So am not I,” said the foolish scullion.¹

When confronted by associationism, Wordsworthians tend to mutter the name of David Hartley, whose *Observations on Man* was published in 1749. They then turn their minds resolutely to some other subject. It is a tendency that Sterne and Wordsworth would both have understood. They are

¹ *Tristram Shandy*, vol. V, chap. vii, opening.

observers of human behaviour, as well as associationists, and are fascinated by the power that words (and names) can exert. To put Wordsworth's solemn warnings on the subject next to the tender comedy of Sterne may seem disproportionate, yet both the scene at Shandy Hall and Wordsworth's now famous paragraph from the third *Essay on Epitaphs* are about the capacity of language to take on a life of its own, work against intended meanings:

If words be not ... an incarnation of the thought, but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift – such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had a power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on. Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, so lay waste, to vitiate and to dissolve.²

Sterne had made his similar point in a beautiful piece of comic writing. *Tristram Shandy* is an extended comment – sometimes funny, sometimes sad, often both at once – on Lockean associationism. And Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* does indeed have a chapter on “The Imperfection of Words.” From our point of view it may be a disappointing chapter: assuming that truth will consist in exactitude, Locke merely tabulates the causes of inaccuracy. He is not a creative writer and doesn't ask himself how language may be used imaginatively. Yet Tristram's reference to the *Essay* is an important one. Locke's premise that if words depend on personal associations they cannot mean the same to two different people provides Sterne with the incongruities on which his narrative depends (death, which has a terrible immediacy for the scullion, seems to Susannah merely the chance of gain), but like Wordsworth he is concerned above all with the implication for himself as writer, using the untrustworthy medium of language, and at the same time discussing, evoking, exemplifying, its untrustworthiness.

Hartley is not in the same way interested either in linguistic meanings or in the workings of the mind. His dual standpoint of theologian and doctor leaves out the middle-ground of human emotion that Sterne and Wordsworth inhabit. As theologian, he assumes the mind to be reaching inevitably towards God; as physician, he speculates on the mechanics of the brain, basing his own brand of Lockean associationism on a complex system of vibrations and “vibratiuncles” (laughed at for their unfortunate name by

² *Prose Works* ii, 84-5.

many who have never taken the trouble to follow the author's hypothesis). In each case Hartley's thought is necessitarian – deals in terms of what must happen, rather than what may or will. It was too abstract a way of thinking to appeal to Wordsworth directly, but its optimism coincided with his own, and, like so many of his contemporaries in this post-Revolutionary moment, he was drawn to a necessitarian view.

Wordsworth wished – and in some of his poetry tried very hard – to see the future in terms of Hartley's "final Happiness of all Mankind."³ His own tendency, however, was backward-looking. For Hartley memory was a process of gaining knowledge that would lead the individual to God and the species to happiness; for Wordsworth it was more often a link to the primal feeling that he associated with imagination. Growing up for him was a growing away, a learning the language of adulthood that displaced the original language of spontaneity, the "self-born carol" of *To H.C. 6 Years Old*:

Oh thou, whose fancies from afar are brought,
And of thy words dost make a mock apparel,
And fittest to unutterable thought
The breeze-like motion and the self-born carol ...⁴

Language, as Sterne and Wordsworth are both aware, is not merely what people think with, it is how they think – or how they come to think. The writer can no more get across to a reader who interposes his own associations, than Walter Shandy can be understood by Uncle Toby, or than the blackness of Bobby's death can overcome the green within the greedy mind of Susannah. Yet for both writers there is the potential "to uphold and feed and leave in quiet." Language may go directly to the heart with a simplicity that defies random association. In the eyes of the world, the fat, foolish scullion is about as prepossessing as Wordsworth's beggars and old men travelling. But like them, and like the "babes and sucklings" out of whose mouths wisdom comes in *Lyrical Ballads* (Edward in *Anecdote for Fathers*, the cottage-girl of *We are Seven*), Sterne's scullion is in touch with truth that is denied to others. Her language too is perfect – pared down to four bare monosyllables that take on a certain dignity in their inversion, but hardly permit of false association: "So am not I."

Wordsworth once commented that he wished to be considered "either as a teacher, or as nothing" – he wished to render the minds of his readers

³ *Observations on Man* (reissued 3 vols 1791), heading to final section, vol ii, 419-37.

⁴ Ll. 1-4; see *Borders of Vision*, 93-5.

“more sane, pure and permanent, in short more consonant to Nature, that is, to eternal Nature, and the great moving spirit of things.”⁵ “Permanent” is the key word. As the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* makes clear, his quest is to give expression to that which is permanent in human emotion, in a language that is equally abiding. Which of course is why those who apply to his work one of the critical fads of the last forty years (Marxism, structuralism, feminism, deconstruction, New Historicism with its new distortions) never manage to say anything of lasting importance. They may get away with it with other poets, but Wordsworth convicts them at once of talking fashionable nonsense. As Keats says, Wordsworth “thinks into the human heart,” and in that sense is a greater poet even than Milton.⁶ To use Wordsworth’s own phrase, from the Preface, critics who apply their own systems to his poetry of the human heart are not “in a healthful state of association” (*Prose* i, 126). They are furthering their own ends (like Susannah), demonstrating their own cleverness when they should be patiently seeking to understand and help.

Among the greatest of Wordsworth’s contributions (one that marks him out as psychologist and thinker) is his insistence on

the curious links
With which the perishable hours of life
Are bound together, and the world of thought
Exists and is sustained. (*Pedlar*, 78-81)

“All these were spectacles and sounds,” he writes, as he brings the “spots of time” sequence to an end, in Part One of the 1799 *Prelude*, “to which / I often would repair, and thence would drink / As at a fountain.” To draw sustenance quite so deliberately from the past seems an odd thing to do, but the statement that follows has the force almost of a creed:

And I do not doubt
That in this later time, when storm and rain
Beat on my roof at midnight, or by day
When I am in the woods, unknown to me
the *workings* of my spirit thence are brought.
(1799 i, 368-74)

⁵ To John Wilson, 7 June 1802 (*Letters* i, 355).

⁶ To John Hamilton Reynolds, 3 May 1818.

Presumably we have a rough idea of what the “workings of [the] spirit” means, but the question as to how Wordsworth thinks the mind works is not a simple one.

As a metaphor of the sea, “workings” takes us back to *Was It For This*, the first *Prelude* draft (or version), composed in *MS. JJ* of autumn 1798. Wordsworth is addressing the spirit-world that presides over his education in the early texts of the poem:

I may not think,
A vulgar hope was yours when ye employed
Such ministry – when, ye through many a year,
Thus by the agency of boyish sports
Impressed upon the streams, the woods and hills–
Impressed upon all forms – the characters
Of danger or desire, and thus did make
the Surface of the universal earth
With meanings of delight, of hope and fear,
*Work like a sea.*⁷

The poetry will bear looking at in detail. “Characters” (letters, handwriting), expressive of “danger or desire” (effectively the Burkean dichotomy of the sublime and beautiful), are printed (“impressed”) by ministering spirits onto the “forms” (shapes) of the landscape, causing the surface of the earth to heave (“work”) with “meanings” that consist in the basic human emotions of delight, hope and fear.

Shortly after writing this account of the heaving sea of the landscape, Wordsworth created the episode of the stolen boat. “For many days,” he writes in the concluding lines,

my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being. (1799 i, 120-2)

This time the swell of the sea is internal, as the mind is invaded by avenging mountain-forms “that do not live / Like living men,” but have power nonetheless to “stride” through thoughts and through dreams. Mood and context are very different from those in which the sea returns five years later to evoke the workings of imagination in the torch-lit Cave of Yordas. Connections are important, though. Holding up his torch, the visitor sees above him

⁷ Norton *Prelude*, 488; soon to be available as edited text in Penguin.

a canopy
 Of shapes, and forms, and tendencies to shape,
 That shift and vanish, change and interchange,
 Like spectres – ferment quiet and sublime,
 Which, after short space, *works* less and less ...

(1805 viii, 720-4)

Like Marvell before him –

The Mind, that Ocean where each kind
 Doth streight its own resemblance find ...

(*Garden*, 43-4)

– Wordsworth is using a traditional association of mind and sea. In addition, we see in these quotations the ramifying of a pattern of imagery, and we see various aspects of the “enobling interchange / Of action from within and from without” (1805 ii, 376-7). How much closer can we get to a Wordsworthian theory of mind? It is an area in which Hartley, as philosopher and associationist, ought surely to be a help. To some extent he is, but the sense in which he is concerned with the interaction of the mind and external world is radically different from Wordsworth’s. Even in *Tintern Abbey*, by common consent among the poet’s most Hartleian works, there is no evidence of direct influence. What we find is not Hartley himself, but Wordsworth modifying Coleridge, who has himself very greatly modified Hartley:

Though absent long,
 These forms of beauty 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 ...

(ll. 23-31)

The origins of this famous passage are to be found in a letter of 10 March 1795 where Coleridge (without saying he is doing so) presents to George Dyer his own modification of Hartley:

It is melancholy to think, that the best of us are liable to be shaped and coloured by surrounding Objects – and a demonstrative proof, that Man was not made to live in Great Cities! ... The pleasures, which we receive from rural beauties, are of little Consequence compared with the Moral Effect of these pleasures –

beholding constantly the Best possible, we at last become ourselves the best possible.

It is the letter in which Coleridge writes of images “miniatured on the mind of the beholder, as a Landscape on a Convex Mirror,” and adds:

Thomson in that most lovely Poem, the *Castle of Indolence*, says

I care not, Fortune, what you me deny,
 You cannot rob me of free Nature's grace;
 You cannot shut the windows of the sky,
 Through which the Morning shows her dewy face;
 You cannot bar my constant feet to rove
 Through wood and vale, by living stream, at eve ...

Alas, alas! she *can* deny us all this – and can force us fettered and handcuffed by our Dependencies and Wants to *wish* and *wish* away the bitter Little of Life in the felon-crowded Dungeon of a great City!⁸

Though we may be tempted to read it as Wordsworth's this is the voice of Coleridge. Wordsworth's attacks on city life came much later, notably in 1800, after he had settled in Grasmere. In November 1794, four months before Coleridge's letter, he had commented to Matthews, “I begin to wish much to be in town; cataracts and mountains are good occasional society, but they will not do for constant companions” (*EY*, 136). The sense in which Coleridge's words do, and do not, reflect the thinking of Hartley is more difficult to define. Hartley was no ordinary philosopher. *Observations on Man* was the corner-stone of Coleridge's Unitarian faith, singled out by its founder, Joseph Priestley, as “without exception the most valuable production of the mind of man.”⁹ Dyer too was a Unitarian, and it is clear that Coleridge's letter has to be read within this theological context. Hartley takes what might be termed a direct associationist route to God:

Since God is the source of all good, and consequently must at last appear to be so – i.e. be associated with all our pleasures – it seems to follow even from this proposition that the idea of God, and of the ways by which his goodness and happiness are made manifest, must at last take the place of, and absorb, all other ideas, and HE Himself become, according to the language of the Scriptures, *all in all*.
 (*Observations* i, 114)

⁸ *Letters*, ed. E.L. Griggs i, 154-5.

⁹ *Institute of Natural and Revealed Religion*, 2nd ed. (2 vols, 1772) ii, 161.

As is well known, Hartley's words are quoted by Coleridge in a note of 1797, as the basis of his own claim in *Religious Musings* about the loss of self, and human merging into the Godhead

Till by exclusive Consciousness of God
 All self-annihilated it [the soul] shall make
 God its Identity: God all in all!
 We and our Father ONE! (Poems 1797, 122, ll. 42-6)

It is not difficult to get from this Hartleian position to the characteristic losing and finding of self that we see in *Tintern Abbey* as a moment of intense personal response. But this all-important extension is made by Coleridge, not by Hartley himself. The first "Wordsworthian" moment of communion with the God in Nature occurs as Coleridge, in *Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement* (spring 1796), climbs "The bare bleak Mountain speckled thin with sheep" and looks out over the Bristol Channel:

It seem'd like Omnipresence! God, methought
 Had built him there a Temple: the whole World
 Seem'd *imag'd* in its vast circumference.
 No wish profan'd my overwhelmed Heart.
 Blest hour! It was a Luxury – to be! (Poems 1797, ll. 38-42)

The mention of "Omnipresence" is important. Though the image of temple-building is conventional, Coleridge's God is not the distant God the Father of Trinitarian orthodoxy, whose dealings on earth are by proxy, but the pervasive life-force of Unitarianism.

The hill-top vision in *Reflections* is far from being great poetry, yet it is the prototype of the Wordsworthian mystical experience that will culminate with the Climbing of Snowdon in Book Thirteen of *The Prelude*. When Wordsworth, in *The Pedlar* (February 1798) first attempts to write his own version, he is unmistakably imitating Coleridge's lines:

He looked
 The ocean and the earth beneath him lay
 In gladness and deep joy ...
 Such hour by prayer or praise was unprofaned;
 He neither prayed, nor offered thanks or praise;
 His mind was a thanksgiving to the power
 That made him. It was blessedness and love.

(ll. 97-7, 111-14)

Wordsworth, who will create in July the eloquence and beauty of *Tintern Abbey*, fumbles in this first attempt to evoke “the one life within us and abroad,” just as Coleridge had fumbled in *Reflections*. Neither poet can get beyond a wooden assertiveness: “No wish profan’d my overwhelmed Heart!” (Coleridge) / “Such hour by prayer or praise was unprofaned” (Wordsworth). It is a strange thought that outside his poetry we have no evidence of Wordsworth’s experiencing an epiphany of this kind, and that within the poetry he shows no signs of having done so until he has been exposed for six months at Alfoxden to Coleridge’s Unitarian pantheism. It seems that Coleridge’s bringing of Hartley within reach of the imagination – his redefinition of Unitarianism in terms of direct personal response to the life-force in Nature – caused Wordsworth to perceive his own natural responsiveness as a form of religious experience, Unitarian in all but name. Feelings that had before been inchoate were heightened and refined. At a considerable remove, he became Hartley’s disciple.

To judge from the 1794 revised version of *An Evening Walk*, Wordsworth first heard of Hartley through Samuel Rogers’ *Pleasures of Memory*.¹⁰ Not a lot can be made of this (*Observations on Man* has no bearing on Wordsworth’s poetry of 1795-7), but memory continues to be the area of Hartley’s thinking in which he is chiefly interested. As elsewhere, Coleridge is the link and the inspiration, providing in *Frost at Midnight* of February 1798 the pure associationist poem, founded in adult musing and childhood memories. Eight months later, as Wordsworth works on the inspired drafts of *Was It For This*, an allusion in line eight to “my sweet birthplace” shows that thoughts of his own childhood have called up, by association, Coleridge’s tender lines:

already had I dreamt
Of my sweet birthplace, and the old church-tower,
Whose bells, the poor man’s only music, rang
From morn to evening, all the hot fair-day,
So sweetly, that they stirr’d and haunted me
With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear
Most like articulate sounds of things to come.¹¹

Coleridge’s lines are the germ of *The Prelude* – an undeveloped yet beautifully suggestive “spot of time,” linking past and future in a numinous bond that cannot be explained. We can no more tell what message the bells

¹⁰ Cornell *Evening Walk*, ed. James Averill, 132 ff.

¹¹ 1798 *Frost at Midnight* (Woodstock Facsimile), ll. 32-8.

had for the child Coleridge than we can interpret the “meanings of delight, of hope and fear” with which the sea of “the universal earth” will heave as Wordsworth develops his draft.

Was It For This is a poem of 150 lines that is tightly argued and deliberately shaped. Like the Two-Part *Prelude* of 1799, in which it is speedily merged, it has a structure that is taken apart at the next stage of composition, but which has its own special importance. Associationism is central. Four months after writing *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth is asking himself why memories of the more distant past hold for him such power, and seem to be so vital in their connections. Hartley would have said that vibratiuncles, stirring within the brain, made a predictable sequence of associations – not a “world of thought,” but a *train* of thought. Wordsworth, though his metaphor of links shows that he too seeks a chain of cause and effect, is not interested in physiology. Unlike De Quincey, whose opium-dreams lead him to the astonishing conclusion, “no such thing as forgetting is possible to the human mind,”¹² he feels that most of the connections are lost:

so wide appears
The vacancy between me and those days,
Which yet have such self-presence in my heart,
That sometimes when I think of them I seem
Two consciousnesses – conscious of myself,
And of some other being. (1799 ii, 26-31)

Wordsworth’s ideal, as poet of the mind, and as poet of *The Recluse*, is to bring the past into the present, take the present into the future. The Pedlar – first spokesman of *The Recluse* – could say in Margaret’s desolate garden, “I see around me here / Things which you cannot see” (*Ruined Cottage* 67-8). He had an eye,

which, under brows
Of hoary grey, had meanings which it brought
From years of youth, which, like a being made
Of many beings, he had wondrous skill
To blend with meanings of the years to come,
Human, or such as lie beyond the grave. (Pedlar, 306-11)

As “a being made / Of many beings,” Wordsworth examines memory, examines association, questions the roles of consciousness and imagination,

¹² De Quincey, ed. Aileen Ward, 91.

seeking always the “meanings” that will make connections. “Working” in the sea of his mind, “the streams, the woods, the hills” of his boyhood appear to be stamped with “characters / Of danger and desire.” For the Coleridge of *Frost at Midnight* (drawing on Akenside and Berkeley, rather than Hartley) such lettering would be the “alphabet” of God, sign-language through which the “Great Universal Teacher” reveals “Himself in all, and all things in Himself” (ll. 68-9). For Wordsworth it is the language of personal association, but scarcely less important. The “meanings of delight, of hope and fear” are a distillation of experience – imaginative experience – which the child did not know was taking place. Intent upon his “boyish sports,” as the Boy of Winander is intent upon blowing mimic hootings to the owls, he permits “the visible scene” to enter “unawares” into his mind. In so doing he stores, unwittingly, “life and food / For future years” (*Tintern Abbey*, 65-6).

The process involves what is perhaps Wordsworth’s major extension of the thinking of Hartley and Coleridge – his strange insistence on the “inward eye.” Coleridge in his letter to Dyer refers to images of divine benevolence in the countryside as being “miniatured on the mind of the beholder” like a landscape in a mirror. He lays no stress, however, on their being carried away (the mirror, or “Claude-glass,” concentrates the landscape to achieve a momentary picturesque view; it is not a camera). Wordsworth too, of course, believes in the direct influence of natural scenes:

To his mind
The mountain’s outline and its steady form
Gave simple grandeur ...¹³
Nor less I deem that there are powers
Which of themselves our minds impress,
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness. (*Expostulation and Reply*, 21-4)

but the more extraordinary effects that he claims for Nature come from a storing up of visual memories. At (or near) Tintern Abbey in 1793 he experiences nothing that is worthy of note: it is “mid the din / Of towns and cities” (ll. 36-7) in the years that follow that the Wye Valley has its effect.

As the famous lines of *Daffodils* make clear, visual memory was in the first place a source of joy:

For oft when on my couch I lie,
In vacant or in pensive mood,

¹³ Pedlar *Fragment* (Feb 1798), ll. 23-5; revised 1804 to form 1805 vii, 722-4.

They flash upon that inward eye
 Which is the bliss of solitude,
 And then my heart with pleasure fills
 And dances with the daffodils! (Poems 1807, ll. 13-18)

At the age of twenty, in September 1790, Wordsworth is to be seen deliberately storing up mental pictures of the Alps, reflecting as he does so that “scarce a day of [his] life will pass in which [he does] not derive some happiness from these images” (*EY*, 36). Proximity to Coleridge (and Hartley) led Wordsworth at Alfoxden in 1798 to examine this habit, and relate it to the growth of imagination. In *The Pedlar*, what is termed the “active power to fasten images / Upon his brain” (ll. 40-1) comes at a secondary stage. First there is an all-important period of unconscious association, in which scenes are pictured on the mind as the result of the child’s intense emotional experience:

He many an evening to his distant home
 In solitude returning saw the hills
 Grow larger in the darkness, all alone
 Beheld the stars come out above his head,
 And travelled through the wood, no comrade near
 To whom he might confess the things he saw.
 So the foundation of his mind were laid.
 In such communion, not from terror free,
 While yet a child, and long before his time,
 He had perceived the presence and the power
 Of greatness, and deep feelings had impressed
 Great objects on his mind with portraiture
 And colour so distinct that on his mind
 They lay like substances, and almost seemed
 To haunt the bodily sense. (ll. 20-34)

So the foundations of *The Prelude* are laid. And yet there is a major difference. *The Pedlar* is designed to be part of *The Recluse*; Wordsworth at this stage is using autobiography to portray an ideal. The memories are his own, the philosophy of memory is such as will inform his early drafts in *The Prelude*, but the child is a fiction. The “deep feelings” which “impress” on his mind “Great objects” of the natural world derive from an adult ability to perceive “the presence and the power / Of greatness.” Moving on into *The Prelude*, Wordsworth will offer us a child who cannot perceive things “long before his time” – whose memories of landscape are stored up during “boyish sports” that have no connection with the greatness which they will

one day enable him to perceive. It is the adult later self, not the boy, who reads the “characters / Of danger and desire.” Looking back to his own distant childhood Wordsworth’s follower, De Quincey, comments brilliantly on the mysterious handwriting of the past which it is the task of the adult to decypher:

I ... did not, as a child, *consciously* read in my own deep feelings these ideas. No, not all; nor was it possible for a child to do so. I, the child, had the feelings; I, the man, decypher them. In the child lay the handwriting, mysterious to *him*, in me the interpretation and the comment. (Ward, 139)

No doubt *The Prelude* too represents an ideal, but it is one that the poet feels himself to have lived. As in *The Pedlar*, his theme is education, but there is a new urgency as he seeks for personal reasons to understand the past, link himself back to it, find that his different selves are one. To the poet in this mood it seems that forces governing his childhood (a spirit-world, if we take at face-value his epic-machinery) chose from the first (“to interweave [his] passions”)

with eternal things,
With life and Nature, purifying thus,
the elements of feeling and of thought,
And sanctifying by such discipline
Both pain and fear, until we recognize
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.

(*Was It For This*, 53-8)

The interweaving of emotion with “life and Nature” – both, it appears, classed as “eternal things” – has been shown already in the episode of the raven’s nest:

While on the perilous edge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ears. ... (ibid, 43-5)

The grandeur of a beating heart will be seen almost at once in the furtive pleasure of the Woodcock-snaring:

When scudding on from snare to snare I plied
My anxious visitation, hurrying on,
Still hurrying, hurrying onward, how my heart
Panted! Among the lonely yew-trees and the crags

That looked upon me, how my bosom beat
 With hope and fear! (ibid, 85-90)

Wordsworth's has been an education through the Burkean sublime, in which pain, fear, guilt, take on a retrospective grandeur from their association with the eternal forms and processes of Nature. Emotions are purified, disciplined, and, by implication, then passed down to the adult poet, who values them as the justification of his life and work. "So feeling," he writes in Book XI of the 1805 *Prelude*,

comes in aid
 Of feeling, and diversity of strength
 Attends us if but once we have been strong. (ll. 325-7)

Was It For This does not merely test this former strength, it asks the questions about its source. It is a highly important working-through of the poet's beliefs – an enquiry as to whether the poet is fitted to write *The Recluse*. After 94 lines Wordsworth makes a total in the margin, assesses what has been achieved, and introduces what might be termed his myth of origins:

Nor while, though doubting yet not lost, I tread
 The mazes of this argument, and paint
 How Nature by collateral interest
 And by extrinsic passion peopled first
 My mind with beauteous objects, may I well
 Forget what might demand a loftier song,
 How oft the Eternal Spirit – he that has
 His life in unimaginable things,
 And he who, painting what he is in all
 The visible imagery of all the worlds,
 Is yet apparent chiefly as the soul
 Of our first sympathies ... (Was It For This, 98-109)

Unlike the fallen angels of *Paradise Lost*, Book II, "in wandering mazes lost" as they attempt to reason of fate and foreknowledge (ll. 557-61), Wordsworth has considerable confidence. He does not underestimate the difficulties of his Miltonic "argument," but is impressively clear about where he stands. He has been writing an associationist poem about the "peopling" of his mind through "collateral" (sideways) interest, "extrinsic passion" (emotions that have no bearing on Nature's higher purpose). He wishes to celebrate the influence of a pantheist "eternal spirit," which for

Berkeley or Coleridge would be associated with the sign-language of God ("the visible imagery of all the worlds"), but whom he himself sees in a stranger, more Wordsworthian, role, as "the soul / Of our first sympathies."

Hartley had regarded the mind as being "peopled," over the course of a life-time, with associations that bring the individual closer to God. Pleasurable associations, he argued, increasingly take the place of painful ones, and will naturally be accompanied by the idea of God's goodness. At a final stage that idea alone will remain. Wordsworth too saw associationism as the process of education, tending to good; but the instinct expressed so powerfully four years later in *Intimations* made it impossible for him to think of a child's mind as anything so negative as a *tabula rasa*. For Locke and Hartley, to be without associations is to be ignorant, unable to cope with the world about one; for Wordsworth (as for Blake), it is the state of innocence, primal responsiveness:

A child, I held unconscious intercourse
With the Eternal Beauty, drinking in
A pure organic pleasure from the lines
Of curling mist, or from the smooth expanse
Of waters coloured by the cloudless moon.

(*Was It For This*, 127-31)

As in the beautiful lines of *Tintern Abbey* –

The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion; the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms were then to me
An appetite ... (ll. 77-81)

– Wordsworth looks back to a period when landscape had been experienced in and for itself:

a feeling and a love
That had no need of a remoter charm
By thought supplied ... (*ibid*, 813)

In each case it is clear that he values unthinking joy above any gains that might be claimed for education.

In *Was It For This*, however, the poet's mood is neither wistful, nor elegiac; he is writing of continuities. As he brings the poem to a conclusion

– and it *is* a carefully wrought conclusion¹⁴ – Wordsworth asserts his faith in innocent vision against the valuing-by-comparison that associationism implies. It is a small point, but in doing so he uses in his verbs the auxiliary “have” (“I *have* stood,” in place of the finite “I stood”) to bring the experience of a distant past through into the present:

The sands of Westmorland, the creeks and bays
 Of Cumbria’s rocky limits, they can tell
 How when the sea threw off his evening shade
 And to the shepherd’s hut beneath the crags
 Did send sweet notice of the rising moon,
 How I have stood, to images like this
 A stranger, *linking with the spectacle*
No body of associated forms,
 And bearing with me no peculiar sense
 Of quietness or peace – yet I have stood
 Even while my eye has moved o’er three long leagues
 Of shining water, gathering, as it seemed,
 New pleasure like a bee among the flowers.

“Nor unsubservient even to noblest ends,” Wordsworth concludes,

Are these primordial feelings. How serene,
 How calm, these seem amid the swell
 Of human passion – even yet I feel
 Their tranquillizing power. (ll. 132-50)

No associations are brought to the scene, and none, it seems, are taken away: the eye simply gathers “New pleasure.” By the same token, “primordial feelings” exercise their later “tranquillizing power,” not through the expected associative process, but because they persist *as* feelings. Distinctions of this kind are not entirely logical (the remembered scene is itself an association), but persistence of an innocent vision is nonetheless felt to by-pass the processes of education. In such a context, “human passion” – adult passion, that is – will seem too troubled beside the primal calm to carry its usual positive implications. The “swell” of its sea would drown “primordial” meanings.

Holding “unconscious intercourse / With the *eternal beauty*” is an ideal that Wordsworth no doubt recognizes as Platonic. His phrase is associated with the “Eternal spirit” of the previous passage, and with the “motion and

¹⁴ See especially, in the lines quoted below, the return to the present tense (as implied in the opening lines by the reiterated “his”).

... spirit" of *Tintern Abbey*; it is a way of presenting the One Life that has a special appropriateness to the child's vision of a world "Apparalled in celestial light." *Was It For This* is particularly interesting in its anticipations of the *Ode* because already Wordsworth is struggling to believe in a "primal sympathy, / Which having been, must ever be" (*Intimations*, 184-5). Given that the child's pleasure was as purely organic as the lines of mist themselves, could his vision be wholly lost with the onset of experience? Would not kinship with "the soul / Of our first sympathies" survive as a principle of renewal:

oh, bounteous power,
 In childhood, in rememberable days,
 How often did thy love renew for me
 Those naked feelings which, when thou wouldst form
 A living thing, thou sendest like a breeze
 Into its infant being! Soul of things,
 How often did thy love renew for me
 Those hallowed and pure motions of the sense
 Which seem in their simplicity to own
 An intellectual charm – that calm delight
 Which, if I err not, surely must belong
 To those first-born affinities which fit
 Our new existence to existing things,
 And in our dawn of being constitute
 The bond of union betwixt life and joy! (ll. 109-23)

The child's "naked feelings" somewhat resemble the Lockean *tabula rasa*, but are glossed in a way that gives them at once holiness and activity:

Those hallowed and pure motions of the sense
 Which seem in their simplicity to own
 An intellectual charm ...

As in Shelley's Platonic *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, we may safely read "spiritual" for "intellectual." The phrase, "motions of the sense" has a Coleridgean air ("I go farther than Hartley, and believe [in] the corporeality of thought, namely that it is *motion*," Griggs i, 137), and is probably associated by Wordsworth with a Priestleyan union of matter and spirit in the form of energy. The child's primal awareness – defined in terms of the senses, because his "new existence" is separate – is a link with divine power that is innate within him as the "soul / Of our first sympathies." The "hallowed ... motions" are renewed, and have in the first place been

activated, by the “Soul of things,” which (as “A motion and ... spirit”) had impelled “All thinking things” in *Tintern Abbey* (ll. 101-2).

Was It For This is not simply expanded to form Part One of the 1799 *Prelude*, it is reorganized at least twice – before and after Christmas 1798. Wordsworth’s thought seems to be taking a more secular turn. Still preoccupied with the mind and its continuities, he discards the “Eternal Spirit,” whose connective implication depends on something akin to the Coleridgean One Life, in favour of an unprecedented concept (taken by modern readers happily for granted) of imaginative self-nourishment. Drawing merely on the resources of its own past, and using merely its own human powers, the mind renders itself creative, repairs whatever damage it may have sustained in the “fretful stir / Unprofitable, and the fever of the world”:

There are in our existence spots of time
That with distinct pre-eminence retain
A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed
By trivial occupations and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds,
Especially the imaginative power,
Are nourished and invisibly repaired. (1799 i, 288-94)

“Such moments chiefly seem to have their date / In our first childhood,” Wordsworth continues, in his most factual tones, and moves promptly into the two central “spots” that are to exemplify his theory.

The poetry that he offers is eccentric, quite unlike anything that had ever been written. We yield to its power, not because we accept the assertion that has just been made, but because instinctively we trust Wordsworth’s sense of the workings of the mind. His early memories, though so different from our own, in some strange way feel like the ones we have. They are similarly odd, depend similarly on “perplexed combinations of concrete objects” (De Quincey), to which the mind has given arbitrary importance. Each of the major “spots” contains a triple grouping of this kind, set in a desolate mountain-landscape: the first, a naked pool, a stone signalling-beacon and a woman, “her garments vexed and tossed / By the strong wind,” the second, a naked wall, a sheep and a whistling hawthorn-bush. De Quincey’s concept of “involutees” is brilliantly to the point:

I have been struck with the important truth that far more of our deepest thoughts and feelings pass to us through perplexed combinations of concrete objects, pass to us as *involutees* (if I may coin that word) in compound experiences incapable

of being disentangled, than ever reach us directly and in their own abstract shapes. (Ward, 130)

The greatness of Wordsworth, as of De Quincey, is that he intuits the nature of the “compound experiences incapable of being disentangled,” perceives how it is that the concrete objects in their perplexed combinations have come to be significant. To the poet looking back, they do not in an ordinary sense “stand for” his past experience. Nor are they representative, but if so, it is the sense in which the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* claims that our thoughts are “representatives of all our past feelings.” Involutes are the mind’s appointed carriers of past emotion into the present and future. In the passage of time (as Wordsworth recognized), they are freed from whatever there was of pain and confusion in the original uncompounded experience. Though not strictly products of the imagination, they become infused with imaginative power. As the mind for its own obsessional reasons revisits them over the years, they come to be valued, and finally to be a source of strength.¹⁵

It is as features in a landscape associated with guilt and remorse that the wall, the sheep and the hawthorn-bush at first take on importance. The poet knows that as a child he created the punishing God who “corrected [his] desires” by decreeing the death of his father. He knows that the mind’s revisitings of the spot of time that is also a spot of place have been obsessional. And yet (until the pettifogging changes in the 1850 *Prelude*) he is categorical in stating that all has come to good. The mind, for all its confusions, has proved capable of “self-created sustenance.” A benevolent determinism is at work, now wholly secular, yet still owing a distant allegiance to Hartley:

All these were spectacles and sounds to which
I often would repair, and thence would drink
As at a fountain. And I do not doubt
That in this later time, when storm and rain
Beat on my roof at midnight, or by day
When I am in the woods, unknown to me
The working of my spirit thence are brought.

(1799 i, 341-74)

Rain beating on the roof of the poet aged 28 brings to him associations of the “wind and sleety rain” that he endured aged 13, ten days before his

¹⁵ See *Borders of Vision*, 61-3.

father's death at Christmas 1783. Memory takes him back to the particular landscape where he waited on that occasion above Hawkshead. But it is brooding, not memory, that has created the workings of the spirit. The process is beautifully evoked by Wordsworth in describing the Pedlar, spokesman for *The Recluse*, a year before the "spots" were composed:

He had discoursed
Like one who in the slow and silent works,
The manifold conclusions of his thought,
Had brooded till imagination's power
Condensed them to a passion whence she drew
Herself new energies, resistless force.

(*Not Useless Do I Deem*, 105-10)¹⁶

Passion has been the key from first to last. Bowing low to God, uncomprehendingly ("with trite reflections of morality"), "yet with the deepest passion," the child stimulates a mental process that creates a "spot of time." As a result, new energies are finally released, but only because imagination (brooding like the Holy Spirit over Chaos), has "condensed" once more to passion the originally passionate activities of the mind.

The "spots of time" take us back to "The twilight of rememberable life" in order to cast forward, but Wordsworth has not lost his preoccupation with remoter origins. Part Two of the 1799 *Prelude*, written nine months after the "spots," brings back the Eternal Spirit who had been "apparent chiefly as the soul / Of our first sympathies." We may not at first recognize him, as he is clothed now in flesh and blood, and has indeed had a sex change as well as becoming mortal. "Oh bounteous power," Wordsworth had written in *Was It For This*,

In childhood, in rememberable days,
How often did thy love renew for me
Those naked feelings which when thou wouldst form
A living thing thou sendest like a breeze
Into its infant being. (ll. 109-14)

Now, in 1799 Part Two, we are introduced to an "infant being" at the breast,

¹⁶ See Cornell *Ruined Cottage*, ed. James Butler, 375.

who, when his soul
 Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul,
 Doth gather passion from his mother's eye.

“Such feelings,” Wordsworth continues, “pass into his torpid life / Like an awakening breeze” (ii, 271-5).

It is not impossible to read “Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul” in terms of forming a relationship with the soul of another human being (I did so myself in a note to the Norton *Prelude*). Probably, though, it is not what Wordsworth intended. Probably we should think in terms of a pre-existent soul claiming its human birthright, becoming “manifest” or “incarnate,” just as Christ in the words of the hymn is “God in man made manifest.” “Gather[ing] passion from his mother’s eye,” the child receives into his “torpid life” an “awakening breeze” that is akin to life itself. In the circumstances it could hardly be more than “akin”: the child is patently alive already. Yet so highly did Wordsworth value the mother’s loving influence that in his first draft he conferred on her the power of the Eternal Spirit, permitting himself to write: “This passion *is* the awakening breeze of life.”¹⁷

As in *Was It For This*, Wordsworth is concerned with “those first-born affinities which fit / Our new existence to existing things” (ll. 120-1). In this case, however, affinities are perceived by a mind that is from the first developing the power of association:

day by day,
 Subjected to the discipline of love,
 His organs and recipient faculties
 Are quickened, are more vigorous, his mind spreads,
 Tenacious of the forms which it receives.

(1799 ii, 280-4)

Like the “forms of beauty” stored by the poet himself at Tintern Abbey, these forms “work” in the mind. But this time there seems scarcely to be a delay. It is as if the child is innately creative as well as perceptive:

From Nature largely he receives, nor so
 Is satisfied, but largely gives again;
 For feeling has to him imparted strength ... (ii, 297-9)

¹⁷ See Comell 1799 *Prelude*, ed. Stephen Parrish, 188-9.

In addition to making an inspired psychological guess at the sources of human strength, Wordsworth has found a suitably near-ordinary way to embody in his expanding autobiography his sense of the specialness of innocent vision.

The Infant Babe is not, of course, entirely ordinary. Despite being “Nursed in his mother’s arms,” he is a type of the adult poet (“Such verily is the first / Poetic spirit of our human life,” ll. 305-6) and “powerful in all sentiments of grief, / Of exultation, fear and joy” (ll. 300-1). But nor does he openly belong to the realm of myth. If there is a borderline between the symbolic and the natural, he is just about on the side of actuality: an infant whose unlikely powers prefigure later workings of the mind, rather than an abstraction dressed in swaddling-bands. Initially at least, the child of *Ode, Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* belongs to the other side of the border:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The soul that rises with us, our life’s star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting
And cometh from afar.
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home. (ll. 58-65)

Wordsworth, it seems, has taken leave of his senses. In the very month of February 1804, in which he is reworking his autobiography, turning the Two-Part *Prelude* into a poem in five Books, he portrays a new-born child entering the earth’s atmosphere like a comet. Or, more precisely, like a sun that has set in the celestial world of pre-existence, to rise again on earth. That Vaughan, or Marvell, should write like this is one thing, but Wordsworth, of all people! There are yet stranger things to follow. The comet-child, though he has been some time on earth, his effulgence dwindling like Lucifer’s, is addressed in stanza eight as a philosopher, a prophet in possession of hidden truths:

Thou whose exterior semblance doth belie
Thy soul’s immensity,
Thou best philosopher, who yet doth keep
Thy heritage – thou eye among the blind
That, deaf and silent, readst the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind;
Mighty prophet, seer blest,

On whom those truths do rest
Which we are toiling all our years to find! (ll. 108-18)

No wonder that Francis Jeffrey regarded the *Ode* as “beyond doubt the most illegible and unintelligible part” of *Poems* 1807.¹⁸ Or that Coleridge should grumble forth his indignant questions in *Biographia*, chapter 22:

In what sense is a child of that age a *philosopher*? In what sense does he *read* “the eternal deep”? In what sense is he declared to be “*for ever haunted*” by the Supreme Being? or so inspired as to deserve the splendid titles of a *mighty prophet*, a *blessed seer*? By reflection? by knowledge? by conscious intuition? or by *any* form or modification of consciousness? ... at what time were we dipped in the Lethe, which has produced such utter oblivion of a state so godlike? There are many of us that still possess some remembrances, more or less distinct, respecting themselves at six years old. ...

This time it is Coleridge “clinging to the palpable.”¹⁹ Leaving aside its beauty and grandeur and astonishing melody, what makes the *Ode* by a long way the greatest of English lyric poems is the fusion it achieves of real and unreal, naturalism with myth and symbol. *Tintern Abbey* presents optimism, with an undertow of loss; the *Ode*, loss, with counter-movement of reassurance. The myth of pre-existence is not merely a structure; it has, as Wordsworth says in the Fenwick Note, “sufficient foundation in humanity” for him to make use of it for his purposes as a poet. It offers a logic for the dwindling of power that is so impersonal as to be almost consoling:

Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing boy,
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature’s priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the man perceives it die away
And fade into the light of common day.

(ll. 67-76)

¹⁸ *Edinburgh Review* xi, October 1807.

¹⁹ Hazlitt, *My First Acquaintance with Poets* (Woodstock Facsimile), 39: Coleridge “lamented that ... there was something corporeal, a *matter-of-factness*, a clinging to the palpable, or often to the petty, in [Wordsworth’s] poetry.”

Loss so complete, so inevitable, gave to memory the quality of a rearguard action. Wordsworth marks the turning-point in his poem with four short lines that draw attention to themselves, ushering in a newly personal quality to the poetry:

Oh joy that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive! (ll. 132-5)

Moving on into this great ninth stanza of the *Ode*, we hear (more solemnly) of “perpetual benedictions” arising from “The thought of our past years,” we watch as “the simple creed of childhood” is dismissed, and we reach “those first affections, / Those shadowy recollections” for which Wordsworth alone knew to give thanks. Childhood as innocence (delight, liberty, hope) remains “that which is most worthy to be blessed,” but the poet’s own preparation for adult vision has been sterner:

Not for these I raise
The song of thanks and praise
But for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings,
Blank misgivings of a creature
Moving about in worlds not realized,
High instincts, before which our mortal nature
Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised ... (ll. 142-50)

Hamlet Senior, as we read this final line, obtrudes himself in full armour into the poetry, and into our minds, standing there as palpably and unhelpfully as the green satin nightgown of Mrs. Shandy. Is he merely trembling and guilty, or does he come as the murdered father asking revenge? What cock must crow before he fades? Wordsworth has loosed into a passage already powerfully evocative of confusion, literary and psychic associations that he cannot hope to control.²⁰ And yet he is at this moment claiming for the mind a “fructifying virtue” that depends on its ability to give and receive messages that

²⁰ See *Borders of Vision*, 63-5.

Uphold us, cherish us, and make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal silence ... (ll. 156-8)

What a time to risk the alienating power of language “to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate and to dissolve”! Perhaps, however, King Hamlet, ghost though he be, is “an incarnation of the thought,” giving us momentarily amid the necessary imprecision of “Fallings from us, vanishings” a sense of what it is to move about in the “worlds unrealized” of a mind burdened by guilt and aspiration.

Through such poetry we may recall the child within us whose brain “Worked with a dim and undetermined sense / Of unknown modes of being.” We can see dimly why, drinking from the fountain of childhood memory, the poet does “not doubt the workings of [his] spirit thence are brought.” And, though we no more understand them than he does, we can give thanks with him

for those first affections
Those shadowy recollections
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,
Are yet the master-light of all our seeing.