

WORDSWORTH'S PHILOSOPHY

of

NATURE AND MIND

by

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Preface

Although not designedly schematic Wordsworth's poems composed between 1798 and 1807 reveal certain principles and ideas which, when taken together, may be said to constitute a definite philosophy concerning nature and the mind of man. It is my purpose to examine these principles and ideas under four general topics, with relevant material which might be classified as sub-topics used to develop the general topics. An outline of the treatment might be presented as follows:

I---Wordsworth, First the Poet

- (1) Susceptibility to environment
- (2) His philosophy a by-product
- (3) The personal equation
- (4) Poetic method
- (5) Period of his best work
- (6) His originality
- (7) His philosophic system
- (8) The surprise element in his poetry

II---Influences and Modern Critics

- (I) Racial characteristics and temperament

- (2) Warning concerning The Prelude as autobiographical
- (3) Wordsworth favored in youth
- (4) An epochal experience in the Alps followed by various influences
- (5) The pre-existence idea declared alien to Wordsworth's mind

III---Nature and the Mind of Man

- (1) Wordsworth's view of nature both realistic and mystic
- (2) Why he loved the "visible world"
- (3) Inter-relationship between nature and mind regarded as beneficent
- (4) The three ages, revealing ideas of growth, joy, sacredness of childhood and faith in intuition
- (5) What kept Wordsworth from sentimentality
- (6) "The invisible world" denied — and proved
- (7) Wordsworth's pantheism

VI---Joy and Harmony

- (1) Wordsworth as idealist
- (2) His basic principles and ideas consistent and inter-dependent
- (3) Erroneous interpretations answered
- (4) His theory of "thought felt"
- (5) His theory of poetic diction analysed

(6) His influence on modern poetry

If the material presented under the suggested sub-topics appears at times to overlap and to be repeated, I can only plead in defence that the inter-dependence and dovetailing of the ideas and principles which are presented in Wordsworth's poems preclude a strict adherence to any set form of outline. There will necessarily be some repetition.

In my efforts to refute certain opinions expressed by Professor George McLean Harper and Mr. Herbert Read appear over-bold, I trust that my readers will not attribute it to any lack of respect or esteem on my part. To Professor Harper the world is indebted for the most complete and most scholarly biography of Wordsworth yet published; and Mr. Read's critical analysis of Wordsworth's work in the Clark Lectures of 1929-1930 is probably the high water mark of Wordsworthian criticism in recent years. I am deeply indebted to both of these works. My rashness, if it be so interpreted, is due solely to a sincere desire to refute what seems to me to be a denial of fundamental principles and ideas expressed in Wordsworth's best poems.

I shall not undertake in this thesis to discuss Wordsworth's political and social ideas. However, I should like to mention them, or so many of them as I have garnered, acknowledging at the same time my indebtedness for their clear presentation to Professor Ernest Bernbaum's splendid little hand-book entitled, "Guide Through The Romantic Movement". The ideas may be grouped as follows: (1) will-power should overcome environment; (2) self-restraint instead of restraint by force; (3) governmental freedom to citizens consistent with the stage of their mental and moral development; (4) the strength of a nation lies in its moral character, rather than in its military power; (5) the State should prevent such social or economic conditions as may reduce men to standardized cogs in an industrial machine; and (6), genuine freedom can only be understood and safely exercised by an educated citizenry. Therefore, the State should support a system of public schools.

I cannot close these remarks without recording my appreciation of the clear vision, the beautiful character, and the genuine scholarship of one whose life's work was ended at Washington and Lee University only a few days ago. The spirit of Dr. Edgar F. Shannon leans over me now as I

write these words, and I can see him smile his friendly welcome as I rush in with thoughts, which, in my enthusiasm, seem to have the "dew on them". To him more than any other I owe the inspiration of this thesis, and whatever light there is in it is the light from his spirit.

Leigh Hanes

May, 1938

Chapter I

First The Poet

William Hazlitt once remarked that had Wordsworth lived in any other period of the world he would never have been heard of. He regarded the poet as a "pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age".¹ Such an opinion is no doubt sound, but what Hazlitt failed to remark is that most poets who are socially minded are in some degree an emanation of the spirit of the age in which they live. With the exception of Milton, English literature presents no poet more socially minded, more interested in the doings of men, than William Wordsworth for the first forty years of his life. Like all true poets he was by temperament and emotional sensibility peculiarly susceptible to environment, a poetic characteristic upon which the vitality of poetry seems to depend. From Chaucer to Robert Frost, it has been the poet most susceptible to environment, most sensitive to the world about him, most intensely aware of its beauty or its terror, who has given us the greatest poetry. Wordsworth was no exception to the general rule.

1 William Hazlitt, Mr. Wordsworth, London, 1825, P. 1.

The conception of the poet as a bowed, pondering philosopher has always seemed to me to be erroneous. In his poetic prime he was first the poet, "simple, sensuous and passionate". "Feeling came in aid of feeling", and he must first feel before he could think. His philosophy is a by-product of his poetry, filtrated, as it were, through his own sound poetic theories which he put into actual practice, and which were consistent with his high conception of the mission of a poet. These theories, and his conception of the true poet, grew out of his environment. For example, one has only to glance at his early life to understand not only his deep love of nature, but to perceive the motivating influences behind many of the theories expressed in the famous Preface to Lyrical Ballads. Professor George McLean Harper, in his monumental biography of Wordsworth, has said that if the poet's sojourn in France in 1791 "had been spent at Cambridge or in London or in the Lake country, he would probably not have written The Prelude, which without the ninth, tenth and eleventh books would be like a play in which the hero should never face his problem; there would have been no Excursion, no fragment of a Recluse".²

² Geo. McLean Harper, William Wordsworth, (Chas. Scribner's) N. Y. 1916, Vol 1, P. 126.

Though extremely reticent in the first half of his life about his experiences, Wordsworth himself would probably have been the last person to deny his indebtedness to those influences that contributed to his poetic development. In The Prelude he records them expressly, and they are reflected in nearly every other poem which he composed. But inconsistent as it may seem, he would probably have denied us a look-in on the actual experiences. In referring to biography and authors he once said: "Our business is with their books -- to understand and to enjoy them, and, of poets more especially, it is true -- that if their works be good, they contain within themselves all that is necessary to their being comprehended and relished".³ This statement may be true in regard to poets who do not project their personality into their work. But the poetry of Wordsworth is so heavily charged with the personal equation, so meshed in a network of personal experiences and incidents, that there is no way of arriving at a full and adequate appreciation of his work without a glance at the biographical background. His

³ Herbert Read, Wordsworth, (Cape and Smith) N. Y. 1931, P. 12.

own theories of poetry "imply a direct link between emotion and experience, and between poetic composition and experience".⁴

The poetic method which the poet adopted, however, was not that of the pure lyricist. It was not spontaneous or immediate. It was the method of the philosophic lyricist, a recollecting "in tranquility", until, as in the Tintern Abbey poem,

"The picture of the mind revives again".

We recognize it today in the suggestion to submerge one's self in the emotional experience and then detach. But the philosophic lyricist must guard against his being too near or too far from his experience. If too near, the perspective may fail to reveal the true meanings; if too far, the true "picture of the mind" will not be revived, and without the true picture there can be no true emotion. This is the secret, it seems to me, of the success of the philosophic lyric. It is the means by which ideas are distilled as well as the means by which the depth and the sincerity of the emotion are really tested. It took Wordsworth six years to react poetically to his experiences

⁴ Ibid. P. 218.

in France and to the French Revolution. Even in the most lyrical of the short poems, as we learn from his sister Dorothy's journal, the experiences which inspired the poet did not flower into poetry immediately. That "host of golden daffodils" in I Wandered Lonely As A Cloud did not flash upon the "inward eye" until two years after the daffodils were first seen. The Tintern Abbey poem would probably never have been composed had the poet not visited the "sylvan Wye" five years before in a period of storm and stress.

It is generally agreed among critics and scholars that Wordsworth's best work was produced between 1798 and 1807. During these years Wordsworth was at his best -- vigorous, vital, radical, revolutionary. In the poems composed in this period, and in the theories set forth in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, we find the true Wordsworthian philosophy. Professor Harper has said that throughout the rest of the poet's life (1807-1850) "except for a few instances when the spirit of his youth revived, his observation was oblique and his reflective powers were dominated by principles not formerly his own. Of the immense number of poems which he wrote in these last forty years, nearly all are upon a high level of attainment; but

standing alone they would not suffice to justify a claim of great superiority, except in one kind of work, that is, in the historical and political sonnet".⁵ It shall be my purpose to concentrate on the poems produced between 1798 and 1807, devoting especial attention to three great poems of this period, namely, Tintern Abbey, Ode on the Intimations of Immortality, and The Prelude. These three poems are not only autobiographical, certainly in an emotional sense, but they seem to me to contain Wordsworth's entire philosophy.

Coleridge once said that Wordsworth derived his ideas not from books but from observation and meditation, that they were "fresh and had the dew on them".⁶ However true this may have seemed to Coleridge, who himself acted as a sort of generator of ideas for Wordsworth, we have learned in recent years that the "dew" had been on the ideas before. Wordsworth was not an original thinker in the sense that his ideas were new. They may have been original with him, but for us his originality consists chiefly in his conquering and assimilating the ideas of others. We are almost able to "spot" the philosopher under whom he labored consciously or

⁵ Harper, Op. Cit. Vol. II, P. 153.

⁶ Ibid. Vol. II, PP. 126-127.

subconsciously. Matthew Arnold perhaps had been doing some spotting when, in 1879, he advised that "in Wordsworth's case we cannot do him justice until we dismiss his formal philosophy". Arnold was trying to stem the tide against Wordsworth which had set in about 1842. He succeeded admirably, but he threw overboard, or thought he did, the poet's philosophy. He based the greatness of Wordsworth's poetry, not on its ideas, as Leslie Stephen had done, but on the extraordinary power with which the poet "felt the joy offered in nature, the joy offered to us in the simple primary affections and duties", and on the extraordinary power with which he imparted this joy to us.⁷ Arnold's opinions can never be lightly set aside. They have an uncanny way of bobbing up unexpectedly in the very opinions of those who consider him out of date. There is not much difference between Arnold's opinion and that of Herbert Read as expressed in the Clark Lectures of 1930. Mr. Read thinks that Wordsworth's chief claim to originality is that he was able to make thought felt.⁸ Professor Harper has said that the poet's real genius was in his living imaginatively and intuitively

7 Read, Op. Cit. PP. 30-36; 172-173.

8 Ibid. P. 173.

what others thought and felt. Arnold may have been further from the central truth than Mr. Read or Professor Harper, but even Arnold was within striking distance. One cannot impart the joy felt in nature without living it imaginatively. But joy itself is worthy of philosophic consideration. And it must be accorded a very definite place in any discussion of Wordsworth's philosophy, especially since the Wordsworthian joy is unique in its abiding qualities. Arnold seems to ignore the fact that such a joy could not exist without some solid philosophic basis. Thought may be joyously felt, as Wordsworth himself implied in his discussion in the Preface of the pleasure that comes to the man of pure science. Thinking and feeling are inseparable, and Arnold no doubt erred in trying to separate the two in the poet's work.

Wordsworth in his prime, when he was at his best in making thought felt, does not premeditatedly present his ideas in any definite philosophic system. It is true that in his greatest poems we can follow his thinking step by step. Ideas emerge, evolve, develop and grow into each other. But this concatenation is due, it seems to me, more to his thinking chronologically than to any definite plan to present a systematic philosophy. His method was a common-sense

adherence to the principles of coherence, unity and clearness, in so far as they did not conflict with poetic genius. If he had been a true, schematic philosopher he would not have repeated so many of his ideas. Furthermore, he probably would have devoted his entire life to that projected, long "philosophical poem", The Recluse. Here was really a plan: to embody in one long poem the results of all his experience and thinking. The idea had presented itself before the first two books of The Prelude were composed. There were to be three parts to the poem. The Excursion was the second number of the projected whole. The Prelude was to be considered as a sort of introduction. But what happened to this great philosophic scheme? Only a fragment of the first part was ever composed; The Excursion appears as an independent poem; and of the third part nothing was ever written, and there is not even a trace of an outline. How The Excursion was to be related to Parts I and III has never been known. Finally, Wordsworth announced in 1814 that The Prelude, which was then completed and was also an independent poem, would be to The Recluse what the antechapel is to the body of a Gothic cathedral, and that his minor pieces, which had been long before the public, when properly arranged, be like "the little cells, oratories

and sepulchral recesses ordinarily included in those edifices". Wordsworth was too much of a poet, too dependent on imagination and intuition and too subject to their sway, to be rigidly confined in any philosophic system. Constructive power, so necessary to the systematic philosopher, was not his strongest faculty, as Professor Harper has pointed out.⁹ "Nor had he the gift", says that great Wordsworthian, "of seeing his own works as if through the eyes of other people. When we observe the cunning devices by which Virgil and Dante have varied the progress of their long poems, while at the same time bringing into ever clearer relief the one grand idea in each, we cannot help smiling at Wordsworth's confidence that human nature would tolerate a poem so loosely knit and yet so monotonous as apparently his was planned to be. Yet in all his works, verse or prose, he shows the true artist's instinct for design, keeping one purpose always in view, isolating his subject, and giving to every production a definite, inevitable, and foreseen end".¹⁰ Professor Harper might have added that the fact that

⁹ Harper, Op. Cit. Vol. II, PP. 219-220.

¹⁰ Ibid. Vol. II, PP. 220-221.

Wordsworth excelled in the sonnet form is proof of his "instinct for design". There is no form of verse that serves as a greater test for the true artist or requires a keener instinct for design than the sonnet. But that "definite, inevitable, and foreseen end" which Professor Harper mentions as characteristic of Wordsworth's productions is not so clear to this writer.

We cannot always predict the end in Wordsworth's poems. The surprise element is continually asserting itself. However, if we may judge from Michael, Ruth, and numerous other poems, including a tragedy, Wordsworth did possess that ability of the writer of tragedy to point his subject toward an inevitable end. And one cannot see in one's imagination old Michael sitting by the unfinished sheep-fold without feeling that "there, but for the grace of God, sit I". But no matter how much the poet may point toward the end, the end itself nevertheless remains unpredictable. Wordsworth never forgot life's unpredictable variations. His method was ready for them, a method that kept his eye always on his subject, a method which may too, for the surprising modernity of his views in regard to science and its passing on into the future hand in hand

with poetry. It was this eye, always on the subject and seeing the variations as well as the symmetry, that was so often "surprised by joy", and that gave us such vivid reality. Who could foresee the end of the ode on Immortality, or see the "mansions for all lovely forms" early in the Tintern Abbey poem? Who could guess the conclusion in the last stanza of I Wandered Lonely, or To The Cuckoo, or predict the outburst in Strange Fits of Passion:

"O mercy" to myself I cried
If Lucy should be dead!" ?

It is this surprise element, I think, more than anything else that distinguishes the poetic genius from the genius of tragedy. Poetry and tragedy have too long been confused. A great writer of tragedy is sometimes a great poet, as, for example, Ibsen in Peer Gynt and in Brand. But a great poet is seldom a writer of great tragedy. He is too full of surprises. And Wordsworth again is no exception to the general rule. He was first the poet.

Chapter II

Influences and Modern Critics

Mr. Herbert Read closes the introduction to his Clark Lectures on Wordsworth (1929-1930) with the following remark: "Wordsworth was born in 1770. He was a youth of nineteen when the French Revolution shook the world. He had an instinct for his time; his spirit and his mind sprang up to the challenge of momentous events; he was swept away and lost his bearings. Then he began to find himself again; to educate his feelings; to reconstruct his faith. In that process his greatest poetry was written."¹¹

Wordsworth's early environment, his poetically sensitive nature, and his racial characteristics, no doubt contributed more to his poetic philosophy than any other factors. Born on July 17, 1770, at the little town of Cocker-mouth, Cumberland, England, the poet tells us that he was "of a stiff, moody and violent temper." One of his earliest recollections was an attempt to hang himself at the age of seven in his grandfather's attic. He had been thwarted, blocked in his desires, and, highly indignant at

¹¹ Read, Op. Cit. P. 36.

being reprimanded by his elders, he had decided to end it all by taking his own life. But evidently the attic was too dark, or the rope felt ominously cold and deathlike. At any rate, William was thwarted again -- this time by the failure of his own courage. "I took the foil in hand", he related years afterwards, "but my heart failed me".¹²

Biographers pass over the incident but to me it is almost witch-like in its uncanny foreshadowing of the future. Displayed as if in dumb show are the mood and temper of a man who, in his prime, was "to bear himself high in all affairs and seldom take counsel of other men", -- a man who was to emerge from a period of storm and stress to produce in ten years a group of poems that would make him immortal; and then, with ideals crushed, frustrated in an early love affair, a man who was to smother his own vital, revolutionary spirit, turn his back on his love of man and nature, and yielding again to his environment and the influence of new friends, sink into the tragic torpor of a conservative old Tory. His heart failed him in his grandfather's attic when he was a child of seven, and as a result he lived to be one of the world's greatest poets; but his spirit began to fail him when he had just turned the critical age of forty, and

¹² Harper, Op. Cit. Vol. I, PP. 18-21.

if recent psychoanalysts are right the last forty years of his life present the material for one of the most poignant tragedies in all literature.

The "stiff, moody and violent-tempered" Wordsworth was typical of the race from which he sprang. On both sides of his family the stock was of the pure northern English type. They were Angles at first, later mixed with Norse strain, and they were proud of the Viking blood which flowed in their veins.¹³ Perhaps it was this Viking strain that kept the poet forever a roamer in the first half of his life, a fact which is often overlooked by biographers who picture Wordsworth as an "old man of the mountain." It would be nearer the truth to say that he was a man of many mountains, including the Alps. Certainly there was not a mountain in northern England, Wales or Scotland, with which he was not familiar. But his racial type is even more clearly revealed in his hardihood, pertinacity and fundamental seriousness, characteristics which we recognize in such personages as Captain Cook, John Wycliff, Roger Ascham, and, last but not never least, that mythical hero of self-reliance, Robinson Crusoe. They were all of the same stock as William

¹³ Read, Op. Cit. PP. 41-46.

Wordsworth: Imaginative, but possessing a matter-of-factness, a strong sense of objectivity, and a faculty for vivid visualization which kept them realists in their actions and canny in their reckonings. Add to these characteristics the capacity for masking the emotions, and we have the Wordsworthian stock as well as a great deal of the Wordsworthian poetry.¹⁴ No poet was ever truer to his racial type.

In The Prelude we have a record of the chief events of Wordsworth's life during childhood, adolescence and early maturity. The poem is intended as an autobiographical account of the growth of the poet's mind under the influences of nature, but the authenticity of the work as an autobiography is now seriously doubted and any consideration of it from an autobiographical point of view must be made with great caution and many qualifications. The poem was addressed to Coleridge, and is thought to have been begun about 1799. It was not completed until 1805, and it was not published until after Wordsworth's death in 1850. From 1805 until his death the poet continually tinkered with it, deleting, revising, amending, until some of the final drafts of passages

¹⁴ Ibid. P. 43.

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bear hardly any resemblance to the first drafts. It will be noted that the work was begun in the most vitally poetic period of Wordsworth's life. The influences of the French Revolution, a serious love affair in France, the teachings of Rousseau and of democratic doctrines alien to the mind and spirit of England -- all these and other influences had combined to lift Wordsworth out of a medieval outlook, integrate his personality, vitalize his poetry, and kindle his spirit with a love of man, nature, freedom, and liberty, which set him apart in the eyes of Tory England as a dangerous radical and revolutionist. But by the time that the poem was completed in 1805 the scene had already undergone many changes. The poet's first and most serious love affair had been first frustrated by war and then cooled by long separation, leaving him, as Mr. Read thinks, with only the "stings of viperous remorse". His high hopes in France had begun to totter, and his faith in the pure ideals of the French Revolution was fast disintegrating.¹⁵ Volcanic changes without had begun to produce volcanic changes within. Wordsworth was, according to his nature, reacting to his environment. He had married, and by 1807 was a settled, conservative property owner. New friends with conservative

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 201-219.

views had begun to influence him. He was turning Tory himself. Professor Harper, in referring to Wordsworth's withholding The Prelude from publication, says: "I am inclined to think that what restrained him from printing it was a sense that it might do harm in a period when he thought that the higher interests of civilization were threatened by a leveling tendency from which he was in duty bound to withhold even such encouragement as might be derived from his pictures of the Revolution."¹⁶ Mr. Read sees in the many changes made in The Prelude a progress from poetic paganism to philosophic pantheism, a progress, he might have added but fails to mention, which in itself reveals the purpose of The Prelude, namely, to show the growth of the poet's mind. He seems to believe that Wordsworth was faking the "visible scene of infancy and the evolving consciousness of childhood." I quote Mr. Read's opinion, in which quotation I think it can be shown that he has entangled himself in his own argument. "Wordsworth did not become conscious of the intimate link that existed between his character and his surroundings until that link was broken by his departure for Cambridge in 1787. Even then the full realization of the significance of his early mode of life did

¹⁶ Harper, Op. Cit. Vol. II, P. 144.

not come to him. What trace of that passionate intensity of feeling for nature do we find in An Evening Walk and Descriptive Sketches, his first published poems? Scarcely any. . . The realization did not come, in my opinion, until some time after his second visit to France. It came as an aftermath, as an issue from the emotional storm that descended upon him in France. As that storm subsided, the outraged feelings sought compensation in memories; and then, at first slowly, then riotously, the treasury of his unconscious mind, so richly stored in childhood, was opened and given forth in the poetry of one wonderful decade."¹⁷

In answer to Mr. Read one might say that when "feelings seek compensation in memories" the memories are usually found to have been grounded in actual experience, otherwise they would not be "memories." Furthermore, Wordsworth's mind could not have been "so richly stored in childhood" without conscious experiences with which to store it. I make the point in deference to Mr. Read's opinions, for which I have a very high regard. To deny Wordsworth the evolving consciousness of his childhood experiences would ignore the fundamental principles upon which his greatest poems are constructed. The ideas of growth, joy, the poet's

¹⁷ Read, Op. Cit. PP. 54-60.

faith in intuition, and his belief in the sacredness of childhood, are so fundamental to an appreciation of his poetry and an understanding of his philosophy that to ignore or to deny them is to choke the stream at its source. That source was the early experiences of his childhood. The experiences themselves are too vividly portrayed, too exact in details, not to have had some foundation in actuality. It may be that the poet idealized this early childhood, it may be that he exaggerated the influence of nature upon his mind.¹⁸ Poetry is always a heightened exaggeration, part reality, part illusion. But there must be some sort of reality in experience before the illusion. At thirty-five Wordsworth, beginning to react to a new environment, was looking back on his childhood. It is quite natural that he should have idealized the events of that period. It should be remembered that The Prelude is a poetic autobiography, with all the implications that the word "poetic" may connote. Wordsworth himself was concerned about its autobiographical accuracy. Nor does he overlook the adult's tendency to idealize childhood experiences:

¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 46-53.

I began
My story early -- not misled, I trust,
By an infirmity of love for days
Disowned by memory -- ere the breath of spring
Planting my snowdrops among winter snows:

.....
..... need I dread from thee
Harsh judgments, if the song be loth to quit
Those recollected hours that have the charm
Of visionary things, those lovely forms
And sweet sensations that throw back our life,
And almost make remotest infancy
A visible scene, on which the sun is shining?

(The Prelude I)

"Visionary things," suddenly made visible in memory-images by the sunlight of his affection -- should not such an admission disarm the severest critic? Wordsworth's images are nearly always memory-images. There are few created images in his work. This is because his imagination was plastic, constructing nearly always in subservience to the dictates of objective reality, the demands of sanity. Only when he soars to unusual heights does his imagination become emotional, and his images, like those of Shelley, dissolve all that they touch, re-creating new worlds until memory itself becomes a "dwelling place for all sweet sounds and harmonies."

Just how much Wordsworth would have been influenced by nature or how deeply he would have responded to nature had he been born and reared in the slums of London or New York or Paris has always been a tantalizing question.

Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up
Fostered alike by beauty, and by fear;
Much favored in my birthplace.
(Prelude I)

No poet ever uttered a more pleasant truth. Born in one of the most beautiful sections of the world, surrounded by woodlands and meadows and mountains and lakes in all their rugged wildness and grandeur, companioned by a folk who was of his own race and stock, plain, sturdy, courageous, in whom the true principles of democracy had been inherent for centuries, Wordsworth was indeed

"Much favored in his birthplace."

For the first twenty years of his life nearly everything seems to have been in his favor, with the exception of the early loss of his parents. If we can trust The Prelude his response to nature began before he was out of his nurse's arms. The river blended its murmurs with her song. His school years at Hawkshead were ideal for one of a "stiff, moody and violent temper." The important events of these

years are recorded in The Prelude; and in the Matthew Lyrics his headmaster, William Taylor, is affectionately immortalized. At Cambridge the poet was less fortunate in his surroundings, if we are to judge from the record in the third book of The Prelude. The poet tells us that "imagination slept," and he

..... let the stars
Come forth, perhaps without one quiet thought.

But I cannot find enough evidence in the third book of The Prelude to justify Mr. Read's assertion that Wordsworth was not willing to take the blame upon himself for his vacillating attitude and his indecision.¹⁹ On the contrary, line after line points to an opposite conclusion:

"..... Empty thoughts!
I am ashamed of them: and that great Bard,
And thou, O Friend! who in thy ample mind
Hast placed me high above my best deserts,
Ye will forgive the weakness of that hour,
In some of its unworthy varieties,
Brother to many more."

The "great Bard" was Milton; the "friend" was Coleridge. These lines do not sound like Wordsworth was trying to shift the blame for his idleness and indecision. He asks forgiveness of the great Bard and of his friend. Wordsworth was

¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 64-69.

always deeply affected by greatness and nobility.²⁰ He tells us that at Cambridge

..... I could not print
Ground where the grass had yielded to the steps
Of generations of illustrious men,
Unmoved.

(The Prelude III)

But Wordsworth could not pin himself down to books. He liked romance, adventure, action, but books with ideas never appealed to the poet, either in youth or in maturity. In the last year of his Cambridge course, instead of settling down to his examinations and distinguishing himself and pleasing his relatives, he yielded to that Viking strain, swung a knapsack over his shoulder, and, with a fellow-collegian, Robert Jones, set out for France, Switzerland, the Alps, down the Rhine to Cologne and across country to Calais. The French Revolution was brewing, but it was not the Revolution at that time which held his attention. It was nature. Professor Harper tells us that he was willing to pass within a day's march of "Amiens and Rheims without breaking his bird-like flight to see their cathedrals."²¹ The experiences of this journey afforded the data for the poet's second book of verse, Descriptive Sketches, and are

²⁰ Harper, Op. Cit. Vol. I, PP. 67-68.

²¹ Ibid. Vol. I, PP. 90-95.

recorded in the sixth book of The Prelude. One of these experiences as recorded in The Prelude is especially significant in throwing light on his evolving philosophy of nature and mind. Professor Harper tells us that the "travellers suddenly learned, from the downward dropping of a stream, that they had crossed the Alps ... But what struck Wordsworth was the fact that in this moment when nature seemed very real, his own mind seemed equally real, and distinct from nature. At first, he says, he was lost, 'halted without an effort to break through' the mystery of this abrupt estrangement from nature, who had been his intimate comrade and apparently of the same stuff with him. The first moment of bewilderment over, his soul rose triumphant in self-consciousness. He recognized her glory. She was not then, after all, dependent on sense and subject to time and space; and assured of this he sang:

Our destiny, our being's heart and home,
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.

The road, having reached the summit of the Alpine pass, cannot go higher. The stream must flow into Italy. North must remain North, and South be ever South; but no limit is decreed to the human soul. With this thought of the

transcendency of mind, there flashed upon him a new
conception of the meaning of visible things. The grand
and terrible features of the gorge through which he des-
cended

Were all like workings of one mind, the
Features of the same face, blossoms upon one tree
Characters of the great Apolcalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end."

Professor Harper thinks that this day was an epoch in
Wordsworth's life, and that the passage in the sixth book of
The Prelude, wherein the experience is recorded, is one of
the most significant in all his works.²² One must agree
that the passage is indeed one of the most significant in
all of Wordsworth's works. But there are several questions
that an inquisitive mind may ponder in connection with it.
The first is that the experience occurred in 1790, and that
it is not recorded in The Prelude until eleven years later.
The mention of it in Descriptive Sketches, published in 1793,
is pale beyond recognition as compared with the record in
The Prelude. At the time of the experience Wordsworth was
not twenty-one years old. He had already begun to write
verse but none of any value. His life had on the whole been

22 Ibid. Vol. I, PP. 101-104.

pleasant, without any great character-making experiences. A few months after this experience, upon graduating from Cambridge, January 21, 1791, we find him a disorganized and unstable personality, full of contradictions, and temporarily incapable of adjusting himself to his environment.²³ All this, in spite of his experience in the Alps. Indeed, it seems to have had very little effect. The question is was Wordsworth far enough advanced, intellectually and spiritually, in 1790, to have really felt and believed the ideas and emotions expressed in these ten great lines of poetry. In the first five lines we find a Platonic influence, an influence to which, for some strange reason, Professor Harper, Mr. Read and other biographers and critics of Wordsworth seem to have a violent aversion.²⁴ And yet they tell us that Coleridge was Platonic; and Coleridge and Wordsworth, at the time this famous passage was composed, in 1801, were the closest of friends and were in daily communication with each other.²⁵ Could Coleridge have put those terrible Platonic ideas into Wordsworth's mind? The last five lines are full of Spinoza, and Spinoza at his deepest -- Spinoza in "The Critique of Pure Reason." Whence came this influence? Again we may suspect Coleridge, especially

²³ Ibid. Chapt. 5, Vol. I, "London-Adrift."

²⁴ Harper, Op. Cit. Vol. I, P. 4.

²⁵ Ibid. Vol. II, P. 126.

since Coleridge and Wordsworth had nearly fallen into the hands of a Government secret-service man because of their radical opinions. They were saved by the gentleman's overhearing them discuss one, "Spy-Nosy." He then considered them harmless unless they were referring to him.²⁶ The fact is that none of the influences reflected in the famous lines above quoted had entered into Wordsworth's life at the time that he had the experience in the Alps. Nor had any of the French experiences which were to integrate his personality and vitalize his poetry. The lines are too far advanced in emotional conviction as well as in philosophy to have been felt or thought by Wordsworth in 1790. It is one of the striking illustrations of the unreliability of The Prelude as a strictly biographical account of the development and growth of the poet's mind under the influence of nature. The passage is Wordsworth at his best, at the peak of his poetic power, not Wordsworth in 1790. Professor Harper, it seems to me, misses this point completely. Mr. Read has overlooked it.

But Professor Harper has done worse. After devoting two pages in his biography to Wordsworth's Alpine experience, and after proclaiming the day an "epoch in Wordsworth's life

26 George Brandes, Main Currents in 19th Century Lit.
N. Y. 1905, Sec. on Wordsworth. PP. 1-3.

and the passage recording the experience one of the most significant in all the poet's works", he states in Volume II of his biography that the idea of a "previous and presumably superior existence", as expressed by Wordsworth in the Immortality ode, was "altogether derivative, extrinsic, and novel to him ... connected with no other of his writings ... alien to his mind."²⁷

I may be reading too much into Wordsworth's lines, but it seems to me that the first five lines of the Alpine experience, beginning "Our destiny" and ending "about to be," contain the identical idea expressed in the Immortality ode. Professor Harper seems to imply that the idea came from Coleridge.²⁸ If so it was one of those ideas made original with Wordsworth by assimilation. Furthermore, despite Professor Harper's statement that the idea appears only in the Immortality ode, one finds it in one form or another in many other parts of The Prelude, as well as in many of the short poems. For example,

.... that calm delight
Which, if I err not, surely must belong
To those first-born affinities that fit
Our new existence to existing things..

(Prelude I; 229-306)

The idea seems to be implied in such lines in Book I as,

27 Harper, Op. Cit. Vol. II, PP. 124-125-126.

28 Ibid. Vol. II, P. 126.

I held unconscious intercourse with beauty
Old as creation...

in "gleams like the flashing of a shield"; in those "visible scenes of "remotest infancy"; and in the second book, in the "two consciousnesses", lines 30-33; in the famous "Dust as we are" passage; in the "Wisdom and Spirit" passage; and in the lines

Thence did I drink the visionary power;
And deem not profitless those fleeting moods
Of shadowy exultation; not for this,
That they are kindred to our purer mind
And intellectual life; but that the soul,
Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
Remembering not, retains an obscure sense
Of possible sublime"

(Prelude Book II)

Again in Book II, lines 349-353:

"And what I saw
Appeared like something in myself, a dream
A prospect in the mind

In the short poem "To H. C." (Coleridge's little boy), composed in 1802, a whole year before the Immortality ode was begun, the entire first stanza is devoted to the idea of pre-existence. This stanza seems almost a first draft of the famous ode. Again the idea appears in the poet's

poem addressed to his daughter Dora in 1804. The ode on Immortality was begun in 1803 but was not completed until 1806.

If I seem to have made a mountain out of the proverbial mole hill in regard to Professor Harper's statement it is because I believe that the idea of pre-existence expressed in the Immortality ode is one of the basic ideas of Wordsworth's entire philosophy of nature and mind. It appears not only in the ode but, as I have shown, in many other poems. Furthermore, it is fundamental to an adequate conception of the sacredness of childhood as conceived by the poet. And from it, stems the poet's faith in intuition, without which his philosophy of nature and mind would be seriously affected if not rendered wholly ineffectual.

Chapter III

Nature and the Mind of Man

From the foregoing survey of important influences in Wordsworth's early life, the warning in regard to The Prelude, and the critical examination of certain opinions advanced by Professor Harper and Mr. Read, we are now in position to examine more closely Wordsworth's philosophy of nature and mind. The word nature for Wordsworth meant the natural phenomena of the external world. He saw these phenomena as clear-cut concrete realities, but from the very beginning of his experiences as recorded in The Prelude, the Tintern Abbey poem and the ode on Immortality, these phenomena were at times "appareled in celestial light". I am aware that the latter part of this statement is in contradiction to the opinions of Mr. Read and of Professor Harper as well as the opinions of other critics and biographers of Wordsworth.²⁹⁻³⁰ But I have a deep faith in the sincerity and in the fundamental honesty of Wordsworth for the first forty years of his life, and I think I have found enough evidence in his poems to

29 Read, P. Cit. PP. 59-63

30 Harper, Op. Cit. Vol. I, PP. 3-4.

substantiate my statement as well as vindicate my faith. Professor Ernest Bernbaum, in his "Guide Through the Romantic Movement", has reminded us that Wordsworth was opposed to poetry or art that depicted nature in a false idyllic Arcadian manner, shedding upon it

The light that never was on land or sea.

Wordsworth would "paint with fidelity and face with fortitude"

31

The sea in anger, and the dismal shore.

This is quite true. It is Wordsworth's conception of the mission of poetry. It embodies the ideal that motivated his revolt against the so-called classical school of Pope. In the Preface he tells us himself that "poetry is truth, general truth, carried alive into the heart by passion", and he further reminds us that he always "looked steadily at his subject".³² But it is one thing to paint falsely the light that never was, and another thing to see it, truly and vividly, and present it to us as a halo around the concrete reality. Both were to Wordsworth equally true, the concrete

31 Ernest Bernbaum, Guide Through The Romantic Movement, Nelson's & Sons, N. Y. 1930, pp. 133-134.

32 Wm. Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads, London, 1800.

reality and the halo, or "light that never was". And it was his special genius to be able to burn them both "into our hearts by passion". Professor Harper, who denies that Wordsworth was a true mystic, has said: "Things in themselves interested him, apart from their possible connection with the mind of man or their share in the great soul of nature. He enjoys them and finds it worth while to describe them, for the sake of their inherent attractiveness, quite apart from their ulterior significance".³³ This is true in part, but only in part. Why should he not love the thing in itself? In it he discerned "a dark inscrutable workmanship that reconciles discordant elements", and it helped

..... in making up
The calm existence that is mine when I
Am worthy of myself.

(The Prelude)

It was a means which "nature designed to employ"; it was the "high object" that helped to build up his human soul; by mere extrinsic passion it "peopled his mind with forms sublime or fair" and made him love them; it caused him to feel "gleams like the flashing of a shield", and from its common face it spoke to him "rememberable things"; it enlarged his sympathies, and drew him to his fellow man until

³³ Harper, Op. Cit. PP. 3-4, Vol. I.

he recognized "a grandeur in the beatings of the heart". Why should Wordsworth not love the thing itself when it could do so much for him? I have quoted only from the first two books of The Prelude. The whole Tintern Abbey poem could be quoted as well as the ode on Immortality to show why Wordsworth loved so dearly the concrete, visible world, why it was "habitually dear". And he will continue to love it -- why?

..... 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 recognize
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.

(Tintern Abbey)

Who would not love such a "nurse", such a "guide", such a "guardian"? With such a potent reason for Wordsworth's love, how can Professor Harper be certain that "things in themselves interested Wordsworth, apart from their possible connection with the mind of man or their share in the great soul of nature"? Wordsworth himself said: "There is scarcely any one of my poems which does not aim to direct the attention to some moral sentiment, or to some general

principle or law of thought, or of our intellectual constitution". And in the Preface he tells us that every poem has a purpose, adding, however: "Not that I mean to say I always began to write with a distinct purpose formally conceived; but my habits of meditation have so formed my feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a purpose". He then explains the psychological process by which the true poet discovers "what is really important to men".³⁴

Professor Harper may have had in mind some of the short poems when he made his extravagant statement about Wordsworth's love of things in themselves. But even in the short lyrics we find that Wordsworth loved the thing in itself for what it did to his mind and heart. For example, the cuckoo becomes a "wandering voice" that makes the earth again appear as an "unsubstantial, faery place"; the daffodils are but an instrument — how dear the instrument! — that remind the poet of what the "inward eye" can do; the sky-lark is

"Type of the wise who soar but never roam".

³⁴ Wordsworth, Op. Cit. PP. 2-3.

In almost every poem we find this linking of mind and nature, like Longfellow's man and woman, "useless each without the other". Mr. Read has stated it admirably: "For Wordsworth nature had her own life, which was independent of ours, though a part of the same Godhead. Man and nature, mind and the external world, are geared together and in unison complete the motive principle of the universe. They act and react upon each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure. The exquisite functioning of this interlocking universe of mind and nature is for Wordsworth the highest theme of poetry".³⁵ Professor Bernbaum has warned: "Students and critics of Wordsworth are prone to see only one of the two parts of his philosophy; either his doctrine about nature or his doctrine about the human spirit. But what was to him the most important was the beneficent inter-relationship possible between the two, and man's deep need of steadily cultivating that inter-relationship.....what conduces to happiness, virtue and wisdom is the establishing and habitual maintenance of a mutually enriching interchange between the natural and the human".³⁶

³⁵ Read, Op. Cit. P. 184.

³⁶ Bernbaum, Op. Cit. PP. 137-138.

Wordsworth traces this inter-relationship between mind and nature through the stages of childhood, adolescence and maturity. I have dwelt on the importance of childhood to Wordsworth. It was sacred. It formed the basis of his faith in those "primal instincts" and intuition. It was the first link with the external world, and the whole outlook and life of the future man depended to a great extent on the proper adjustment in that period. It accounts for Wordsworth's interest in children, and his many poems in which children are important figures. However, it should be noted that childhood shades into adolescence, and adolescence into maturity. In other words, the stages represent not a static but a developing relationship, a growth in mental and spiritual adjustment.³⁷ This idea of development, or growth, is a basic idea in nearly all of Wordsworth's poems. The whole Prelude illustrates how, almost unconsciously, the idea guided Wordsworth's thinking. We find it permeating the ode on Immortality; and in the Tintern Abbey poem nature leads from "joy to joy", until the wild "ecstasies shall be matured into a sober pleasure".

But lest the idea of joy lead us astray, it is well to remember Wordsworth's realistic eye. He seldom saw

³⁷ Ibid. P. 138.

nature in a crystal globe of wishful thinking. It was not a mere rose-garden filled with perpetual moonlight. He saw the rose-garden, true, and the rainbow and the rose, and he loved them --

The rainbow comes and goes
And lovely is the rose ...

But he saw more; he saw the storm and the flood and the hurricane; he saw the old Leech-gatherer, hungry and lonely and deserted, trying to gather a mouthful of food from a mud puddle; he saw old Michael at the sheepfold, in a green peaceful valley, brokenhearted and grieving over his lost son; he saw Ruth wasting away against a background of luxuriant nature; and he cried out (as he too seldom did) in lyric anguish and despair when he realized with intense awareness that the mysterious Lucy, gone forever,

..... neither hears nor sees,
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course
With rocks and stones and trees.

Nature and the actualities of life were very real to Wordsworth. He saw the world always first with the eye of a realist, and it was this realistic eye that kept him from being sentimental and from falling into the false type of

"pathetic fallacy". It is wholesome realism that forms the foundation of The Prelude, leads to the sublime, mystical conclusion in Tintern Abbey, and constitutes one of the basic principles in the Immortality ode. But from this realism, as a foundation, the poet grew into idealism and mysticism. The growth would have been impossible had not the tendency been inherent in the poet's mind and temperament. This inherent tendency is proved, I think, by the strange light that haloed mere things in themselves, even in earliest childhood. In the Immortality ode it is only by experiencing the tenderness, joys, fears, grief and human suffering of the external world, this "prison-house", that the poet grows into "that faith that looks through death". Is it too bold to conjecture that when Wordsworth, past forty, deliberately shut his eyes to the strange "light that never was" that he killed poetic feeling at its root and began to decay in spirit and in truth?

Let us examine more closely several passages in three great poems, noting not only Wordsworth's faith in primal instincts and in intuition and the ideas of joy and growth throughout the three stages, but also observing that strange light that haloed mere things in themselves. It will be