

10. WORDSWORTH - NATURE'S PRIEST OR NATURE'S PRISONER?

In 1798, at the age of 28, Wordsworth claimed that he had long been a 'worshipper of Nature'. For many readers he became, and for some is still, its high priest. There was nothing new at that time in writing poems about nature; but, as Jonathan Bate has shown, there was something very new in the way Wordsworth wrote about it. He rejected the appropriation of nature into the realm of the aesthetic, the reduction of it to the merely picturesque. He transformed our experience of Nature into a religious experience. Moreover, he communicated that experience in terms which are strikingly in accord with our current language of deep ecology, of holistic thinking and biocentric consciousness.

Given his priority and centrality in this, and the body of fine poetry it generated, it is perhaps not surprising that so many readers have not questioned Wordsworth's description of himself, despite the fact that he did not long remain a worshipper of nature after 1798, and by 1802 was committed to the attempt to repudiate it, which lasted the rest of his long life. He continued, of course, to write about nature, but without the inwardness of the early work. His attitude to it became more and more ambivalent and selective, culminating in his reluctant recognition of it as a prison preventing the soul's access to higher things. I shall argue in later chapters that Wordsworth's influence on later English nature poets was not beneficial, and that a great deal of the effort of such poets as Lawrence and R.S. Thomas and Ted Hughes was part of the struggle to escape from its distortions and limitations.

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The history of our civilization can be written as the history of our idea of and attitude towards nature; that is, nature considered not just as landscape, flora and fauna, but as all the phenomena, substances, energies, processes, of the universe, including, therefore, all the sciences, human nature, life and death. It is a short step to say that nature is everything. But the fact that we have uses for the word 'unnatural' acknowledges the possibility of repudiating nature in favour of something else, or violating it, or becoming alienated from it. Much religion has involved a rejection of the physical in favour of the metaphysical, of the finite in favour of the infinite, of the temporal in favour of the eternal. Much philosophy has involved a rejection of the real in favour of

the ideal. Much scientific and rationalistic thinking has denied spirit, replacing the sacred with the mechanistic. Dualism has become not just one very strange way of looking at the world, but, in the West, the only way. Not only cultural tradition but language itself forces us to think in dualistic and atomistic terms.

Christianity has taught that nature exists for man's exploitation and profit. It has therefore gone hand in glove with materialism and industrialism. The whole drive of our civilization has been based on the assumption that civilization itself is an alternative to nature and superior to it, that mind and technology offer us an alternative method of shaping the world, as though humanity were autonomous. The self-contained consciousness looks out as through windows on a wholly external world full of separate and competing things. It takes a huge effort now to apprehend interrelationships, continuities and wholes, to see the whole of nature as a tree on which humanity is a leaf.

Things got much worse in the eighteenth century with the rise of rationalism and mechanistic science, the start of the industrial revolution and the consequent crowding of people, servants of the machines, factory-fodder, in cities. Blake made his eloquent protest, but not on behalf of nature. His vision was as anthropocentric as it is possible to be: 'All deities reside in the human breast'. According to Crabb Robinson:

His delight in W[ordsworth]'s poetry was intense. Nor did it seem less notwithstanding by the reproaches he continually cast on W. for his imputed worship of nature, wh. in the mind of Blake constituted Atheism.
[Wilson 333]

Wordsworth's protest was on other grounds. He tried to make men aware of their whole environment, of their dependence on it for health, sanity and ultimate sanctions. And this, as Alfred North Whitehead saw, was the most important and enduring aspect of Romanticism. Here is an extract from Edmund Wilson's summary of Whitehead's argument in *Science and the Modern World*:

What had really taken place, says Whitehead, is a philosophical revolution. The scientists of the seventeenth century who presented the universe as a mechanism had caused people to draw the conclusion that man was something apart from nature, something introduced into the universe from the outside and remaining alien to all that he found. But a romantic poet like Wordsworth has come to feel the falsity of this assumption: he has perceived that the world is an organism, that nature

includes planets, mountains, vegetation and people alike, that what we are and what we see, what we hear, what we feel and what we smell, are inextricably related, that all are involved in the same great entity. Those who make fun of the Romantics are mistaken in supposing that there is no intimate connection between the landscape and the poet's emotions. There is no real dualism, says Whitehead, between external lakes and hills, on the one hand, and personal feelings, on the other: human feelings and inanimate objects are interdependent and developing together in some fashion of which our traditional notions of laws of cause and effect, of dualities of mind and matter or of body and soul, can give us no true idea. The Romantic poet, then, with his turbid or opalescent language, his sympathies and passions which cause him to seem to merge with his surroundings, is the prophet of a new insight into nature: he is describing things as they really are; and a revolution in the imagery of poetry is in reality a revolution in metaphysics. [5-6]

If Wordsworth's sympathies were not atheistic, they were certainly pagan:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The Winds that will be howling at all hours
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not - Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus coming from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

This is no mere nostalgia for an Arcadian past, an imaginary golden age when man, nature and the gods were at one; it is a heartfelt plea for a recovery of man's birthright, the squandered blessing of a sacred natural environment in tune with which man can exercise his powers creatively:

Paradise, and groves
Elysian, Fortunate Fields - like those of old
Sought in the Atlantic Main, why should they be
A history only of departed things,
Or a mere fiction of what never was?
For the discerning intellect of Man,
When wedded to this goodly universe
In love and holy passion, shall find these
A simple produce of the common day.

Here, in the early Preface to 'The Excursion', Wordsworth chants 'the spousal
verse / Of this great consummation':

How exquisitely the individual Mind
(And the progressive powers perhaps no less
Of the whole species) to the external World
Is fitted: - and how exquisitely, too,
Theme this but little heard of among Men,
The external World is fitted to the Mind;
And the creation (by no lower name
Can it be called) which they with blended might
Accomplish: this is our high argument.

There has been general critical agreement that Wordsworth's finest
poetry is not 'argument', however high and rhetorically stirring, but those
poems or passages which record faithfully, without intrusive interpretation,
vivid instances of his relationship with nature before that relationship had been
processed into a metaphysic. And at that time Wordsworth had been as guilty
as any other boy of crimes against nature, for example his rape of the virgin
hazel copse:

The silent trees and Then up I rose
And dragg'd to earth both branch and bough, with crash
And merciless ravage; and the shady nook
Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower
Deform'd and sullied, patiently gave up
Their quiet being: and unless I now
Confound my present feelings with the past,
Even then, when from the bower I turn'd away,

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.

It is precisely this attachment to and high valuation of 'nature and the language of the sense' which both Blake and Coleridge found most objectionable in Wordsworth. In his annotations to Wordsworth, Blake wrote: 'W. must know that what he writes valuable is not to be found in Nature'. Blake's favourite Wordsworth poem was 'Intimations of Immortality', Wordsworth's valediction to nature. Imagination, for Blake, was degraded by any attachment to nature: 'Imagination is the divine vision not of the World, or of Man, nor from Man as he is a natural man, but only as he is a spiritual Man'. It is precisely Blake's refusal to ground his imagination in nature, in this world, which makes the bulk of the later prophetic books the worst poetry written by any major English poet. Blake's career proved that myths and symbols which are not grounded 'in nature and the language of the sense' are dead and become poetic lumber.

But Blake's note was right. It soon became clear that what Wordsworth was worshipping was not nature. Though he continued to use the word, its meaning drifting further and further from the green earth and the world perceived by the senses until it reached a private meaning which specifically excluded these. Reluctant to write off something in which he had invested so much, Wordsworth unconsciously extended and extended the meaning of the word nature to make it cover whatever he now wished to 'write valuable'.

There are several famous passages in book I of *The Prelude* which are usually praised, deservedly, for the immediate, concrete and sensuous manner in which Wordsworth renders his childhood experiences in the natural world. I suggest, however, that it is always the same few passages which critics select because they are, in fact, untypical of Wordsworth, who only 'realizes' experience in this way in order to have its apparent reality displaced by the numinous Powers and Presences he detects behind it. If one reads on, the effect of each of these wonderful passages is immediately dissipated into grandiose misty rhetoric and banal moralizing. Wordsworth is, for the most part, the most insubstantial and unsensuous of poets. Touch, taste and smell are virtually absent from his work. His preferred sights are (and were already in childhood) distant, misty, atmospheric, quickly dissolving into moods:

Oft in these moments such a holy calm
Did overspread my soul, that I forgot
That I had bodily eyes, and what I saw
Appear'd like something in myself, a dream,
A prospect in my mind.

[II, 367-71]

The ear is even more important than the eye because sounds are already divorced from substance (or, to use his own perfect word, 'ghostly'); but he could hear the universal song of joy best when his 'fleshly ear ... slept undisturb'd' [432-4].

The tendency for Wordsworth's attention to drift spontaneously from the material world towards the numinous and subjective seems to have been a matter of temperament rather than adult choice:

I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or a tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to reality. [Moorman, vol.I 41-2]

A concomitant of this idealism is a tendency to lapse from his early sense of nature as something deeply interfused and unified into Platonic or Cartesian dualism, assuming the old artificial division between internal and external, mind and senses, spirit and substance.

The relationship with nature which in 'Tintern Abbey' and some of the other *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth claims he still has, figures in *The Prelude* as something specific to childhood. The past tense is conspicuous in such lines as 'That spirit of religious love in which / I walked with Nature' [II, 376-7]. This is later to be replaced by a quite different spirit no longer 'Subservient strictly to the external things / With which it commun'd [II, 386-7].

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The 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from recollections of early Childhood' spans the crucial years 1802-1804 and contains the whole crisis in little. It is Wordsworth's valediction to Nature. Not that Wordsworth himself saw it in those terms. Its greatness stems in part from the dramatic tension which arises between what he is trying to say, and what insists, despite the counter-insistence of the exclamation marks, on being said. It is very untypical

of Wordsworth in its emotionalism, its wild swings of mood, its lack of tranquility. It is the poem in which Wordsworth most gives himself away.

Wordsworth began the Ode in 1802 as a consolation to Coleridge, an answer to 'The Mad Monk' (1800), where Coleridge had written:

There was a time when earth, and sea, and skies,
The bright green vale, and forest's dark recess,
With all things, lay before mine eyes
In steady loveliness:
But now I feel, on earth's uneasy scene,
Such sorrows as will never cease; -
I only ask for peace;
If I must live to know that such a time has been!

Wordsworth felt that his own sense of loss was even stronger than Coleridge's, yet that he had found a way to turn the fact that 'such a time had been' to good account, and had found a source of strength in 'what remained behind'. But, perhaps needing all his time and energy for 'The Prelude', he completed at that time only the first four stanzas, evoking the sense of loss but stopping short of the 'abundant recompense'. Before Wordsworth completed the Ode in 1804, Coleridge had plunged even further into dejection and written his own Ode to it:

There was a time when, though my path was rough,
This joy within me dallied with distress,
And all misfortunes were but as the stuff
Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:
For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,
And fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine.
But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;
But oh! each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
My shaping spirit of Imagination.

Wordsworth was stimulated to finish the 'Immortality Ode' as an antidote to this.

The Ode is badly named. Nowhere, not even in this poem, does Wordsworth show the slightest interest in the idea of survival after death. The

Ode is not about immortality, but about the Platonic notion of pre-existence. Yet Wordsworth never really committed himself to a belief in pre-existence either. He wrote to Miss Fenwick:

I took hold of the notion of pre-existence as having sufficient foundation in humanity for authorizing me to make for my purpose the best use of it I could as a poet.

By this he means, I take it, that everyone can bear testimony to 'that dream-like vividness and splendour which invest objects of sight in childhood'. But he invests this seeming with such transcendental permanent reality that life itself becomes, in comparison, the dream, the unreality.

The opening of the poem might seem at first glance to be simple praise of nature:

There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparell'd in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.

But 'apparell'd in celestial light' suggests that the light is not a property of things, but borrowed from heaven. The second stanza confirms that Wordsworth is *not* talking about nature's own beauty, but what he calls in *The Prelude* 'a superadded soul / A virtue not its own', an 'auxiliar light' from the mind, which seemed to transfigure common sights, as in a dream. In the 'Elegiac Stanzas' he calls it 'The light that never was, on sea or land, / The consecration, and the Poet's dream'. When the dreamer wakes, the 'visionary gleam' fades 'into the light of common day', and that light, whatever concessions are made to nature's beauties and pleasures, is not enough to live by. Once the 'vision splendid' has been lost, the ordinary sight which remains is no better than blindness. Hence to be 'Nature's Priest' is possible only to 'the Youth' still attended by the 'vision splendid'. The whole poem is about the source and status of that vision, and what can be done about its apparently inevitable loss.

Why should the moon look round her with particular delight when the heavens are bare? The point is that the moon does not depend on objects for her delight, is not subservient to external things. She delights in her capacity to illuminate the heavens with her own radiance; that radiance *is* her delight. The

Child of Joy does the same in his world. He can transfigure every 'common sight' with the radiance of his own joy: 'To unorganic natures I transferr'd / My own enjoyments' [*Prelude* II 410-11]. The radiant world delights him: it is irradiated by his delight. The process is circular, unless we postulate a source of that joy beyond both child and nature (as the moon must borrow her light from the sun). This applied to almost all Wordsworth's poetry. But in the early years he gave nature at least half the credit for what she merely reflected from his own mind. Coleridge saw that much more clearly than Wordsworth himself:

thy soul received
The light reflected, as a light bestowed. ['To William Wordsworth']

The poem is organized primarily around images of light and darkness, sight and blindness. It opens with a real sunrise. The sun is associated with spring, flowers, birdsong, warmth, love, vitality; nevertheless, it cannot draw the narrator into its festival because he is no longer capable of spontaneous joy. He strains towards a second-hand joy through the shouts of the shepherd boy. But all the songs of joy being sung around him merely serve to remind him of what is lost. He tries to listen to them, but what he hears is cataracts, and mountain echoes, and night winds. He has become much more receptive to sounds than sights, particularly those 'sounds that are / The ghostly language of the ancient earth / Or make their dim abode in distant winds'. Such sounds are closely related to pre-natal experience, not in heaven, but in the womb. Wordsworth's heaven is always described as a tranquillity at the centre of a fostering, nurturing universe whose heartbeat is indistinguishable from his own. Psychologists call this the 'oceanic' experience. It follows naturally enough that when he returns to his heaven at the end of the Ode it is no longer rendered in terms of light, but as a sea. Children, having not yet begun their long trek inland towards alienation in a harsh world, still playing on the shore, can 'hear the mighty waters rolling evermore'.

In the first four stanzas there had been no mention of pre-existence. When he continued the poem in 1804 he plunged straight into the subject with a startling paradox:

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,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.

This is stated as a categorical fact - no metaphor. Given this datum, the child's vision is the only reality. Life is a dream. In the early books of *The Prelude* birth was a release of creativity and access of vision consequent upon the marriage of the soul with nature. Now it is an exile into blindness and sterility. In the second book of *The Prelude* the 'Presence' which irradiated and exalted for the infant Babe 'all objects through all intercourse of sense' was the earthly Mother:

No outcast he, bewilder'd and depress'd;
Along his infant veins are interfus'd
The gravitation and the filial bond
Of nature, that connect him with the world. [260-3]

By 1804 the early metaphors of marriage and motherhood have been replaced by those of alienation and adoption:

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
And, even with something of a Mother's mind,
And no unworthy aim,
The homely Nurse doth all she can
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came.

Nature is thus relegated to a side-show, a box of toys.

In 'The Prelude', to call the infant 'an inmate of this *active* universe' meant simply that he, like Lucy, dwelt with Nature. Now the word 'Inmate', following the 'shades of the prison-house' in the previous stanza, suggests rather that Earth is no more than an orphanage. Even parental love is now part of the conspiracy to lull the child into a 'dream of human life', the world of false appearances, noise, mad endeavour and role-playing. The child, of course, has no means of knowing that he is Philosopher, Prophet and Seer. He blindly strives to become as blind as adults, imitating the behaviour of all the other actors in the human comedy until custom lies upon him 'with a weight / Heavy

as frost, and deep almost as life!' The shades of the prison-house now modulate into the darkness of the grave. Life is no longer even a dream; it is a death.

Having sunk to this nadir of dejection, Wordsworth now attempts to pull himself up by his own bootstraps. The saving grace is memory. The adult can still remember and interpret his childhood experiences, not for the sake of recapturing the lost joys, rather

those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realiz'd ...

This tentative, exploratory 'creature' sounds like Ted Hughes' 'wodwo', except that Wordsworth arbitrarily attributes these questionings not to a natural curiosity about the world and openness to experience but to supernatural 'recollections' of 'that immortal sea / Which brought us hither'. Wordsworth can no longer possess the deepest truths as his birthright, or augment the sunrise with his own joy, but he can, as his own sun sets, send out from his eye the sober colouring of 'soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering'.

The Ode contains some of the most memorable lines in English poetry. They are all lines about what is lost. There is no point in claiming that

Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind

if all the vitality of the poem, all the *poetic* power, is in the grief, and none in the supposedly surviving strength. The attempt in the last stanza to claim that only one delight has been relinquished, is desperate, and the compensation, that the years will bring 'the philosophic mind', hollow.

Coleridge did not like the poem. He felt that the idea of pre-existence was merely fanciful, and yet the whole argument of the poem rested on it; otherwise the vast claims made for the child would be absurd.

It is a pity that Yeats' notion of the world soul, or Jung's of the collective unconscious, was not available to Wordsworth. Some such notion would have enabled him to account for the lost vision without dualism, without the assumption that the vision must derive from somewhere elsewhere, somewhere

outside and superior to nature. According to Jung, the collective unconscious could be described as

a collective human being combining the characteristics of both sexes, transcending youth and age, birth and death, and, from having at its command a human experience of one or two million years, practically immortal. If such a being existed, it would be exalted above all temporal change; the present would mean neither more nor less to it than any year in the hundredth millenium before Christ; it would be a dreamer of age-old dreams and, owing to its limitless experience, an incomparable prognosticator. It would have lived countless times over again the life of the individual, the family, the tribe, and the nation, and it would possess a living sense of the rhythm of growth, flowering and decay.

[quoted in Baring 42]

Baring and Cashford argue that in Neolithic times 'this vision was still a living reality and had not yet become a memory and a dream':

Jung, striving to restore to the psyche this forgotten knowledge of the unity and sacrality of all life, knew that the Neolithic experience is not dead and gone, but still lives on in us as the archaic ground of the twentieth-century psyche. It is found, for instance, in the spontaneous world of the child, which is lost with the adaptation to a desacralized society.

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Wordsworth tried to have it both ways. Both the Ode and *The Prelude* oscillate between two poles, a belief that this world - 'the very world which is the world / Of all of us' is 'the place in which, in the end, / We find our happiness, or not at all' [Book X 726-8], and the equally strong belief that

Our destiny, our nature, and our home
Is with infinitude, and only there.

[Book VI 538-9]

It is when the tension between these two is lost, when all is subsumed in the one 'great thought / By which we live, Infinity and God', that the great years end and the long decline begins.

By the time we get to book XI the 'glorying' in Nature celebrated in 'Tintern Abbey' has been replaced by a devastating sense of loss, a dejection almost as guilt-ridden as Coleridge's, and for much the same reasons. This book records a war within, as the new Wordsworth in the name of Reason repudiates history, passion and poetry:

Thus strangely did I war against myself;
A Bigot to a new Idolatry
Did like a Monk who hath forsworn the world
Zealously labour to cut off my heart
From all the sources of her former strength. [74-8]

Reason ('logic and minute analysis') came between Wordsworth and the 'soul of Nature':

'Tis true that earth with all her appanage
Of elements and organs, storm and sunshine,
With its pure forms and colours, pomp of clouds
Rivers and mountains, objects among which
It might be thought that no dislike or blame,
No sense of weakness or infirmity
Or ought amiss could possibly have come,
Yea, even the visible Universe, was scanned
With something of a kindred spirit, fell
Beneath the domination of a taste
Less elevated, which did in my mind
With its more noble influence interfere,
Its animation and its deeper sway. [108-120]

He can find no justification or extenuation for his presumption in 'sitting thus in judgement' over nature, for these 'barren intermeddling subtleties', unless it be 'inherent in the Creature ... A twofold Frame of body and of mind' [168-70]. Wordsworth was subsequently able to shake off this habit. But he could no longer tap the sources of his former strength: 'the hiding-places of my power / Seem open; I approach, and then they close' [336-7]. He comes very close to Coleridge when he speaks of 'this later time, when storm and rain / Beat on my roof at midnight', and of himself as 'thus restored / Or otherwise'. The ending of book XI is very subdued and chastened, his vision of nature purged of all joy, glamour and rhetoric:

And afterwards, the wind and sleety rain
And all the business of the elements,
The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,
And the bleak music of that old stone wall,
The noise of wood and water, and the mist
Which on the line of each of those two Roads
Advanced in such indisputable shapes,
All these were spectacles and sounds to which
I often would repair and thence would drink,
As at a fountain.

[376-85]

Though Wordsworth claimed to have been able to shake off the habit of analytical and judgemental reasoning, he continued to define Nature (and, for that matter, God) as more and more to be identified with 'the mind of man'.

The final book of *The Prelude* expands on the ending of the Ode. There much larger claims are made for these 'philosophic minds':

By sensible impressions not enthrall'd,
But quicken'd, rous'd, and made thereby more apt
To hold communion with the invisible world.
Such minds are truly from the Deity,
For they are Powers; and hence the highest bliss
That can be known is theirs, the consciousness
Of whom they are habitually infused
Through every image, and through every thought,
And all impressions; hence religion, faith,
And endless occupation for the soul
Whether discursive or intuitive;
Hence sovereignty within and peace at will.

[103-14]

Hence the growing preference for those impressions which most lend themselves to conversion into images of the ideal and infinite. The wonderfully rendered vision of the 'huge sea of mist' seen from the top of Snowdon by moonlight has to be reduced to 'the perfect image of a mighty mind, / Of one that feeds upon infinity' [69-70], and further reduced in the 1850 version to a mere reflection, 'emblem' or 'type / Of a majestic intellect' [66-7]

a mind sustained

By recognitions of transcendent power,
In sense conducting to ideal form,
In soul of more than mortal privilege. [74-7]

The closing lines of *The Prelude* are addressed to 'Prophets of Nature'.
Wordsworth offers to

Instruct them how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this Frame of things
...
In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of substance and of fabric more divine.

'The earth', 'this Frame of things', what we normally mean by nature, may be beautiful, but it can lull the senses into a sleep of death unless 'sanctified / By reason and by truth', products exclusively of 'the mind of man'.

About the time he finished *The Prelude* Wordsworth translated three sonnets by Michaelangelo which he found full of 'excellent' meaning. One of them contains the lines:

Heav'n born, the Soul a heav'n-ward course must hold;
Beyond the visible world She soars to seek,
For what delights the sense is false and weak,
Ideal Form, the universal mould.

It seems that by 1805 Wordsworth could have found excellent meaning in St. Augustine:

And men go forth and admire lofty mountains and broad seas, and roaring torrents, and the ocean, and the course of the stars, and turn away from themselves while doing so.

In 1906 Wordsworth wrote 'The White Doe of Rylstone'. Nature is now of interest to him only in so far as it can be purified and spiritualized out of all recognition. He later claimed that the poem was the 'highest' he had ever produced, culminating in 'nothing less than the Apotheosis of the Animal':

Throughout, objects derive their influence not from properties inherent in themselves ... but from such as are *bestowed* upon them by the minds of those who are conversant with or affected by those objects. ...The mere physical action was all unsuccessful; but the true action of the poem was spiritual - the subduing of the will and all inferior passions, to the perfect purifying and spiritualizing of the intellectual nature; while the Doe, by connection with Emily is raised, as it were, from its mere animal nature into something mysterious and saintlike. [Moorman, II, 113]

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In the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth had described the human mind as the 'mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature'. Now the relationship is reversed, nature being of interest only when it mirrors the fairest properties of the human mind, the highest aspects of his own nature - grandeur, permanence, tranquillity. He admitted, in 'Ruth' that an 'irregular' nature could equally well find in the natural world images of kindred irregularity - images of tumult, impetuosity and voluptuousness. The values, therefore, come first, from a source other than nature. Whence?

I had been taught to reverence a Power
That is the very quality and shape
And image of right reason ...

The argument is circular, since by 'right reason' Wordsworth means what he has been 'taught to reverence', conditioned to believe at his mother's knee. Leavis speaks of his 'upbringing in a congenial social environment, with its wholesome simple pieties and the traditional sanity of its moral culture, which to him were nature' [*Revaluation*, 171]. They were, indeed, second nature. But in the poems they become Nature, a source of unquestionable moral absolutes with a vaguely supernatural sanction. Terrific encounters with Nature are reduced to messages he could have got from any commonplace book. One of the fearful 'visitations' ('low breathings coming after me') is not to chastise the young Wordsworth for being a 'fell destroyer' of woodcocks, but for stealing 'the bird / Which was the captive of another's toils'. Nature deploys its fearful powers to enforce the law of property. This unquestioning assurance of certain certainties for no better reason than that he learned them as a blessed Babe is surely disabling in a major poet, especially when they are supported by an unscrupulous manipulation of 'the external world'.

Wilson Knight had less admiration than Leavis for 'simple pieties' and 'traditional sanity':

Ethically, Wordsworth never breaks new ground. The established values remain intact, whereas poetry's more normal business is to *reclaim* territory from evil possession, to redeem rather than reject, seizing on essential good: of which the great prophet is Nietzsche.

[*The Starlit Dome*, 82]

In *The Will to Power* Nietzsche wrote:

The insipid and cowardly concept 'nature' devised by nature enthusiasts (- without any instinct for what is fearful, implacable and cynical in even the 'most beautiful' aspects), a kind of attempt to read moral Christian 'humanity' into nature - Rousseau's concept of nature, as if 'nature' were freedom, goodness, innocence, fairness, justice, an idyll - still a cult of Christian morality fundamentally. - Collect together passages to see what the poets really admired in, e.g., high mountains, etc. Complete ignorance the presupposition for this cult -

Wordsworth wanted Nature to confirm for him that love, joy, beauty and goodness were not just fragile human values but cosmic absolutes:

For the man
Who, in this spirit, communes with the Forms
Of Nature, who with understanding heart
Both knows and loves such objects as excite
No morbid passions, no disquietude,
No vengeance and no hatred - needs must feel
The joy of that pure principle of love
So deeply, that, unsatisfied with ought
Less pure and exquisite, he cannot choose
But seek for objects of a kindred love
In fellow creatures and a kindred joy.
...he looks round
And seeks for good; and finds the good he seeks.

Of course, if you resolutely turns a blind eye to everything potentially morbid or disquieting, and seek out that which confirms your pre-existing optimistic metaphysic, that is what you find. What value can we attach to an optimism

which refuses to acknowledge anything which does not support it? Wordsworth casts Nature in the role of cosmic parent, priest and Sunday School teacher, and what is being taught is perilously close to 'all's right with the world'. It is not surprising that the book Wordsworth most hated was Voltaire's *Candide*, which had already demolished that position.

In 1879 Leslie Stephen wrote:

He seems at times to have overlooked that dark side of nature which is recognized in theological doctrines of corruption, or in the scientific theories about the fierce struggle for existence. ... Is there not a teaching of nature very apt to suggest horror and despair rather than a complacent brooding over soothing thoughts? [Wordsworth's Ethics']

Stephen's phraseology betrays the influence of Darwin, but of course it had not needed Darwin or 'scientific theories' to reveal the 'fierce struggle for existence' in Nature. Nine years before the appearance of *The Origin of Species* (1859) Tennyson published *In Memoriam*:

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life.

.....

'So careful of the type?' but no.
From scarpèd cliff and quarried stone
She cries, 'A thousand types are gone:
I care for nothing, all shall go.

'Thou makest thine appeal to me:
I bring to life, I bring to death:
The spirit does but mean the breath:
I know no more.' And he, shall he,

Man, her last work, who seemed so fair,
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,
Who rolled the psalm to wintry skies,
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,

Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law -
Though Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shrieked against his creed -

Who loved, who suffered countless ills,
Who battled for the True, the Just,
Be blown about the desert dust,
Or sealed within the iron hills?

In the very year in which Keats and Wordsworth met, Keats wrote:

I was at home
And should have been most happy, - but I saw
Too far into the sea, where every maw
The greater on the less feeds evermore. -
But I saw too distinct into the core
Of an eternal fierce destruction, ...
The Shark at savage prey, - the Hawk at pounce, -
The gentle Robin, like a Pard or Ounce,
Ravening a worm. [Epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds']

Blake was well aware of 'the image of Eternal Death' in nature:

The Spider sits in his labour'd Web, eager watching for the Fly.
Presently comes a famish'd Bird & takes away the Spider.
[*Vala*, Night the First]

Exactly a century before Stephen's book, David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* had been published. There Hume's spokesman, looking at the 'immense Profusion of Beings' in the Universe, concludes:

How hostile and destructive to each other! How insufficient all of them
for their own Happiness! How contemptible or odious to the Spectator!
The whole presents nothing but the Idea of a blind Nature, impregnated by
a great vivifying Principle, and pouring forth from her Lap, without
discernment or parental Care, her maim'd and abortive Children.

Shakespeare acknowledged the 'dark side of nature', those 'monsters of the deep' that prey on each other. In *The Book of Job* the young eagles 'suck up blood'. Wordsworth seems blankly unaware of the case made so irresistibly there that the mind of man is totally unfitted to comprehend those monstrous powers of the natural world, Behemoth and Leviathan. Hesiod, eight centuries B.C., was well aware that

Fish, fowl, and savage beasts, (whose law is power)
Jove lets each other mutually devour.

The purpose of Aldous Huxley's rather heavy-handed essay 'Wordsworth in the Tropics' was to suggest that there it might have been more difficult for him to avoid the seamy side of Nature:

A few months in the jungle would have convinced him that the diversity and utter strangeness of Nature are at least as real and significant as its intellectually discovered unity. Nor would he have felt certain, in the damp and stifling darkness, among the leeches and the malevolently tangled rattans, of the divinely Anglican character of that fundamental unity.

But Wordsworth did not need to go to the tropics to see savage nature. He saw hawks every day, and turned a blind eye, as Hopkins was to do, to their natures, to that Nature of which the hawk is symbol, and to the God of hawks.

Yet despite frequent attacks of this kind Wordsworth's influence in this respect has been so pernicious and long-lasting that it was still possible even after the second world war for a poet (R.S. Thomas in poems like 'The Welsh Hill Country' or Ted Hughes in poems like 'Thrushes', 'Pike' and 'Hawk Roosting', for example) to shock English readers simply by refusing to look at nature in a Wordsworthian way.

* * *

Wordsworth eventually came to realize that his earlier confidence 'that Nature never did betray the heart that loved her' was no more than 'the Poet's dream'. He 'could have fancied that the mighty Deep / Was even the gentlest of all gentle Things' ['Elegiac Stanzas'] until it took his brother in 1805. That 'deep distress', he claimed, humanized his soul. Though no longer a worshipper of

Nature, he continued to write about it, and when the deep religious feeling is removed, what is left is often mawkish sentimentality.

It would obviously be absurd to suggest that Wordsworth was ignorant of nature, especially of high mountains. But extraordinarily little of the knowledge he had about nature gets into the poems. There are very few animals in Wordsworth, and hardly any of those are predators. In 'The Fountain', for example, is the amazing assertion that all birds die of old age, and a 'beautiful and free' old age at that. Wordsworth is interested, for poetic purposes, in flowers and butterflies, because they are conventionally beautiful, and in songbirds for the sake of their pretty songs. Because of its pleasant nostalgic, romantic or literary associations, the murderous cuckoo is a 'blessed Bird'. No major poet has written sillier poems than Wordsworth, for example 'The Redbreast and the Butterfly':

What ail'd thee Robin that thou could'st pursue
A beautiful Creature,
That is gentle by nature?
Beneath the summer sky
From flower to flower let him fly;
'Tis all that he wishes to do.
The Cheerer Thou of our in-door sadness,
He is the Friend of our summer gladness:
What hinders, then, that ye should be
Playmates in the sunny weather,
And fly about in the air together?
Like the hues of thy breast
His beautiful wings in crimson are drest,
A brother he seems of thine own:
If thou wouldst be happy in thy nest,
O pious Bird! whom Man loves best,
Love him, or leave him alone!

Wordsworth would have had less objection, presumably, had the butterfly been still a caterpillar. This is surely what Nietzsche means by ignorance. Wordsworth seems not to realize that there are forces dictating behaviour in the natural world other than sentimental human notions of beauty and love. There is a lack of respect for the animal world implied by the relentless anthropomorphism.

An almost permanent slumber sealed Wordsworth's spirit to prevent him giving due recognition to the fact that other creatures, including other people, have life-modes of their own which have nothing to do with human morality or aesthetics or the growth of his own mind. He cannot allow anything to have a life of its own. If we think of poets as conjurors able to pull rabbits (lumps of energy alive and kicking) out of their hats, Wordsworth's unusual trick is to make them disappear into his. We think of him as a man of wide and deep sympathies until we realize how many of his experiences are valued only as visitations from Nature in the process of framing 'a favor'd Being', how many of his characters are of interest to him only in so far as they have something to teach him. Their *raison-d'être* is precisely to enlarge his own sympathies. The leech-gatherer, for example, is described, with astonishing solipsism, as 'Like a man from some far region sent / To give me human strength, by apt admonishment'. If Wordsworth had not happened along at that moment, the leech-gatherer's whole life would have been wasted. It is this aspect of the poem that Lewis Carroll seized on in his brilliant parody 'Upon the Lonely Moor'.

Shelley also wrote a parody of Wordsworth which constitutes (as all the best parodies do) perceptive criticism:

He had a mind which was somehow
At once circumference and centre
Of all he might feel or know;
Nothing ever went out, although
Something did ever enter.

He had as much imagination
As a pint pot; - he never could
Fancy another situation
From which to dart his contemplation
Than that wherein he stood. ['Peter Bell the Third']

It is very shocking to hear Wordsworth, of all poets, accused of lacking imagination. But if imagination is indeed, as Shelley implies, the means whereby the mind escapes from the tyranny of the ego, enters situations not its own, encounters and admits the not-self, then Wordsworth is indeed lacking in it. His 'spots of time' are all moments of increased awareness of self.

Lawrence also wrote a parody of 'Peter Bell'. The lines which had particularly provoked him were those in which Wordsworth mocks Peter's soullessness:

A primrose by a river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more.

Here is Lawrence's parody, which is little known:

A primrose by the river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him
 And a great deal more -

A primrose by the river's brim
Lit up its pallid yellow glim
 Upon the floor -

And watched old Father William trim
His course beside the river's brim
 And trembled sore -

The yokel, going for a swim
Had very nearly trod on him
 An hour before.

And now the poet's fingers slim
Were reaching out to pluck at him
 And hurt him more.

Oh gentlemen, hark to my hymn!
To be a primrose is my whim
 Upon the floor,
 And nothing more.

The sky is with me, and the dim
Earth clasps my roots. Your shadows skim
 My face once more
 Leave me therefore

Upon the floor;
Say *au revoir*

Ah William! The 'something more' that the primrose was to you, was yourself in the mirror. And if the yokel actually got as far as beholding a 'yellow primrose', he got far enough. You see it is not so easy even for a poet to equilibrate himself even with a mere primrose. He didn't leave it with a soul of its own. It had to have his soul. And nature had to be sweet and pure, Williamish. Sweet-Williamish at that!

[*Phoenix II*, 448-9]

What Lawrence means by 'equilibrate himself' he explains in another essay:

How marvellous is the living relationship between man and his object! be it man or woman, bird, beast, flower or rock or rain: the exquisite frail moment of pure conjunction, which, in the fourth dimension, is timeless. If it is to be life, then it is fifty per cent. me, fifty per cent. thee: and the third thing, the spark, which springs from out of the balance, is timeless.

[*Phoenix II*, 434-5]

A splendid example of such a living relationship would be that between Lawrence and the pine tree outside his New Mexico ranch:

I think no man could live near a pine tree and remain quite suave and supple and compliant. Something fierce and bristling is communicated. The piny sweetness is rousing and defiant, like turpentine, the noise of the needles is keen with aeons of sharpness. In the volleys of wind from the western desert, the tree hisses and resists. It does not lean eastward at all. It resists with a vast force of resistance, from within itself, and its column is a ribbed, magnificent assertion. ... I am conscious that it helps to change me, vitally. I am even conscious that shivers of energy cross my living plasm, from the tree, and I become a degree more like unto the tree, more bristling and turpentiney, in Pan.

[*Phoenix 25*]

This is a far cry from

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,

Than all the sages can.

['The Tables Turned']

Lawrence's pine tree has nothing to teach, least of all of moral good and evil. Wordsworth cannot see the trees for the moralized wood. Even in the finest poems and passages about his encounters with nature, the impulses Wordsworth receives are all too often rendered as moral teachings rather than strange emanations not reducible to human terms. Even in 'Nutting', with its lovely sense of the 'quiet being' of the unravaged copse, there is no attempt to relate to the hazels other than morally, or to render their unique nature, and we are fobbed off with the hackneyed poetic diction of 'shady nook' and 'mossy bower'.

Wordsworth, too, had begun by defining the Lawrencean balance as 'the first / Poetic spirit of our human life'. The mind of the child, like that of the true poet

Creates, creator and receiver both,
Working but in alliance with the works
Which it beholds.

[*Prelude* II 273-5]

It was a balance which, as we have seen, he could not sustain against the internal pressure to make the creating mind 'lord and master', both centre and circumference of the external universe:

I had a world about me; 'twas my own,
I made it; for it only liv'd to me,
And to the God who look'd into my mind.

[III 142-4]

Since this God seems to have little else to do but look into Wordsworth's mind, he becomes no more than an attribute and apotheosis of that mind. What Wordsworth more and more 'writes Valuable' and seems to be worshipping is the capacity of his own mind to experience a sense of sublimity and transcendence (what Keats called 'the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime').

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