

WORDSWORTH AND THE ABSOLUTE

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I begin with the first four stanzas from *Last Lines* by Emily Bronte:

No coward soul is mine,
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere:
I see Heaven's glories shine
And faith shines equal, arming me from fear.

O God within my breast,
Almighty, ever-present Deity!
Life- that in me has rest,
As I - undying Life - have power in Thee!

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men's hearts: unalterably vain;
Worthless as wither'd weeds
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main,

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by Thine infinity;
So surely anchor'd on
The steadfast rock of immortality.

If Emily Bronte knew she was facing death when she wrote these lines, it might be possible to take them as a form of self-consolation couched in more or less conventional Christian terms. But this would be to turn a blind eye to what many people have found in them - an unusual power and an unflinching expression of beliefs that many may accept the logic of, but few have ever found as the truth of their hearts. What struck me as a particularly courageous - and unusual - declaration, is that what the faithful person holds fast by is not God's justice, or mercy, or love or forgiveness, or any other of those qualities habitually attributed to the Christian God, none of these, but his infinity - and that alone. And the two lines 'Life-that in me has rest,/ As I - undying life- have power in Thee' present us with a blissful confidence that life in its absolute form has found its home in her being, that in itself it is immortal, yet unlike Tithonus, immortal but powerless, this unrestricted life derives its power from an immediate relationship with God. In fact we can safely say that, whatever else they are, these lines are not a conventional Christian declaration of the means to salvation - which normally speaks of a broken spirit, a contrite heart and of Christ's service as perfect freedom. There is

no service here, no broken spirit, no sorrow over a mismanaged life, no sense of anything to regret. There is rather a jubilation, an exultation. And those of us who vacillate between a belief in power and a belief in repentance must constantly wonder at such boldness of spirit.

But that said and done, there is a ruthlessness here, perhaps most marked in the sixth of the seven verses. And this rigour of spirit can hardly be said to have anything to give to *this* life, our life in time, which has to be endured or enjoyed on a day to day basis; and where ordinary human kindnesses- such as the rooting out of Simon Lee's old stump- suffice as the mark and symbol of what we are.

That said, the question I have gone on to ask myself is whether Heathcliff is a figuration of spiritual rigour, whether he represents a particular embodiment of this kind of ruthlessness. The last chapter of *Wuthering Heights* describes the manner in which he dies, and from Nelly Dean's mundane point of view, it is very disturbing. He hardly eats, spends most days and several nights out of doors, and at least at one point seems to have a vision of Cathy in front of him. It might be said that all his actions in the book are prompted by an attempt to gain her, or in seeking revenge upon those who have prevented him from doing so - in the terms of Last Lines - a casting aside of any worldly interference with his vision. Under this sleepless and foodless regime, his appearance becomes so unearthly that even Nelly Dean, who has reared him since he was a child, is frightened by his smile. And equally odd to her is the disappearance of his habitual fierce moroseness to be replaced by occasional fits of affability. At the very moment when he is in a position to complete his revenge, he renounces his purpose as pointless, and later declares of his property, 'I wish I could annihilate it from the face of the earth.' When he hints that he may die soon, and Nelly suggests that he should eat, live and so repent of his injustices while he can, he replies, 'It is not my fault, that I cannot eat or rest. I'll do both as soon as I possibly can. But you might as well bid a man struggling in the water, rest within arm's length of the shore... as to repenting of my injustices, I've done no injustice, and I repent of nothing - I'm too happy, and yet I'm not happy enough. My soul's bliss kills my body, but does not satisfy itself.' (Penguin ed. 1965 pp.362 -3) He dies in the panel bed, and Nelly tries unsuccessfully to close his eyes in order to extinguish 'that frightful, life-like gaze of exultation.'

I am tempted to think that Emily Bronte's poem could quite happily be attributed to Heathcliff, did the scansion permit the substitution of Catherine for God. But this begs the more interesting question, Is Heathcliff's relentless pursuit of Catherine through life and through death in some respect a symbol of our spiritual life unfettered? 'My soul's bliss kills my body.' Is this salvation as Emily Bronte understood it? Heathcliff's most intense happiness seems to come when he abjures all things earthly. Or in terms which I hope will be relevant to our reading of Wordsworth, must the light of sense and the temporal order be extinguished in

order to achieve a vision of the absolute and infinite? Whatever we make of Heathcliff and his fate - and Charlotte said of him that he stands unredeemed, never once swerving in his arrow-straight course to perdition -. (op. cit. p.40) my feeling is that he is as near as we are ever likely to get to a figuration of the absolute — to the portrayal of a power seeking a vision of infinite life - and though such a figure as Heathcliff is, I accept, not the necessary consequence of the state of mind revealed in *Last Lines*, it is fully consistent with it.

Quid Ingeld cum Christo? What has Heathcliff to do with Wordsworth? Or, more generally, what has Emily Brontë's vision in common with that of the older poet? In a sentence it is this: they both believe, in his words, that 'Our destiny, our nature, and our home,/ Is with infinitude — and only there.' (1805 *Prelude* VI 539-40) And Wordsworth did not make this statement and others of the same kind while brushing a Christian gloss over his more pantheistic sentiments, but at moments when his imagination was most deeply engaged: those two lines come from Book VI of *The Prelude*, at that moment when he discovers that he has crossed the Alps unwittingly, and so has been fundamentally deceived by his senses. Geoffrey Hartman, whose book underpins this paper, thinks that this, the Simplon pass episode, might be the most significant in *The Prelude*; and only the ascent of Snowdon, placed as the climax and conclusion of the whole work, can be regarded as of equivalent importance. And if we turn to that for a moment, we find Wordsworth reflecting on what he has seen as he walked up through a layer of cloud into the clear moonlight:

A meditation rose in me that night
Upon the lonely mountain when the scene
Had passed away, and it appeared to me
The perfect image of a mighty mind,
Of one that feeds upon infinity,
That is exalted by an under—presence,
The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim
Or vast in its own being....(1805 XIII 66-73)

That image derived from nature represents a power which, as he says a few lines later, 'higher minds bear with them as their own' and with which 'they deal/ With all the objects of the universe.' Later in this the last book of *The Prelude* he writes of the imagination as but another name 'for reason in her most exalted mood' which has been 'the moving soul of our long labour...And lastly from its progress we have drawn/The feeling of life endless, the great thought/By which we live, Infinity and God.' (11.166-84)

A distinctive feature of these moments, and one other I shall examine shortly, is the reduction of the importance of sense impressions, of the outward and visible

world. Thus in Book VI of *The Prelude*, immediately after he discovers that he has unknowingly crossed the Alps, he writes

I was lost;
Halted without an effort to break through;
But to my conscious soul I now can say -
"I recognise thy glory": in such strength
Of usurpation, when the light of sense
Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
There harbours, whether we be young or old.
(1850 VI 596-603)

The glory of the soul becomes visible when the impressions of sense are forcefully usurped by an upsurge of power. And by the invisible world, Wordsworth means something definite, not merely a term to characterize anything we find inexplicable in the world of sense. His revision of *The Prelude* between 1805 and 1850 makes clear that 'invisible' is a synonym for 'spiritual'. And he uses the same word in the same context when reflecting on the image of the mighty mind presented to him while ascending Snowdon: that image is the spirit with which higher minds deal with the objects of the universe, and

in a world of life they live
By sensible impressions not enthralled,
But quickened, roused, and made thereby more fit
To hold communion with the invisible world.
Such minds are truly from the Deity,
For they are powers... (1805 XIII 102—107)

Wordsworth's discovery, as I think it is, that our highest powers have their home and origin in infinity, cannot be confined to his mature poetry; it is a feeling or a mood probably haunting him from his late teens onwards. Even in his childhood he was much more conscious of the reality of his own being than he was of the external world:

Nothing was more difficult for me in childhood
than to admit the notion of death as a state
applicable to my own being... I was often unable
to think of external things as having external
existence... Many times while going to school
have I grasped at a wall or a tree to recall
myself from this abyss of idealism. At that time
I was afraid of such processes. In later periods
of life I have deplored, as we all have reason

to do, a subjugation of an opposite character...
(Fenwick notes)

He was no more than 20 when he underwent the experience of the Simplon pass, and only 21 when he climbed Snowdon, both events taking place before he had written any mature poetry. And it is probable that Coleridge's conversation and poetry - particularly three or four of the so-called Conversation poems — enabled him to find a language suitable to the powerful images by which, in Hartman's word, he had been 'arrested' in France and Wales. In the earliest of those poems recording his *Prelude* -like development, *Tintern Abbey*, the word 'infinity' is not used, but we can hear Wordsworth working towards a comparable notion:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Here we might say is a sense more of a unifying force behind all the forms of life rather than a sense of infinity: and perhaps this is the consequence of Wordsworth having been influenced by an early version of *The Eolian Harp*, or by certain lines from *Frost at Midnight*. And though it is the most pantheistic of his expressions of 'a mighty mind', it is also the one which lingers longest over the suppression of the senses: 'Though absent long', he writes of the scenes he remembers, 'These forms of beauty have not been to me/ As is the landscape to a blind man's eye' but to them he owes another gift 'of aspect more sublime':

that serene and blessed mood
In which the affections gently lead us on,
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

It is difficult to determine exactly what Coleridge and Wordsworth gave to each other during their Quantock days, but no one doubts that Wordsworth's

creativity flourished, enabling him, among other things, to complete the short, two-book version of *The Prelude* by 1799, and probably also carrying him forward to finish the first full-length version in 1805. My own suspicion, and it is little more than that, is that Coleridge, as a result of his philosophical reading, was more conscious than Wordsworth of his own innate drive to find a unity in disparate experience - it is a feature of poems he wrote before he knew Wordsworth, as well as after: that this is a feature of all creative minds is of course true, and true of Wordsworth at the time; but Coleridge might have been able to help Wordsworth find some kind of meaning or unity of intent in the various images that dominated his consciousness - in other words, I suspect that Coleridge guided Wordsworth towards the realization of a vision. The lines from *Tintern Abbey* I have just quoted bear comparison with some from *This Lime-tree Bower*, in which Coleridge invokes nature to bring joy into the calamity-stricken heart of Charles Lamb:

Ah! slowly sink
Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!
Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
Ye purple heath—flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
And kindle, thou blue Ocean! So my friend
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes
Spirits perceive his presence.

In both poems the presence of powerful images leads to their usurpation, and then to a joy, expressed as a ‘deep joy’ by Coleridge, and ‘the deep power of joy’ by Wordsworth, which is spiritual — ‘less gross than bodily’, (Coleridge), ‘laid asleep in body’, (Wordsworth) — and so finally permitting a vision of universal life.

What I am suggesting is that Wordsworth’s imagination working at the full overleaps all intermediate meaning and association and alights on an absolute to describe which he uses the words Reason, imagination, God, infinity and immortality as very closely related terms; this activity is associated with a suppression of the senses and a corresponding awakening of an inner power. I have also suggested that this is a tendency of his mind even when not consciously struggling to define that particular intuition or experience. In Hartman’s words, ‘he continually anticipates a frequently conceives himself to be alone in his intensest movement of transcendence.’ (Hartman p.36) And *The Solitary Reaper* supplies some evidence of this. Wordsworth moments, though in fact he seldom was: the highland girl is solitary, reaping by herself; her song, like his inward intuitions,

fills up the whole of consciousness, for the Highland Valley 'Is overflowing with the sound'. Her song seems to symbolize rest after an arduous journey, or the end of an arduous season - 'No Nightingale did ever chaunt/ More welcome notes to weary bands/ Of travellers in some shady haunt,/ Among Arabian sands'. What she sings is much less important than its effect upon the poet: 'Whate'er the theme, the maiden sang/ As if her song could have no ending'. It is of course this seeming endlessness of her song which ties it to the idea of infinity, and which notion Wordsworth takes away with him from the scene: 'The music in my heart I bore,/ Long after it was heard no more.' It lives on in him as some kind of power, not unlike that of the remembered daffodils. The haunting beauty of the poem is partly due to the poet deliberately avoiding any attribution of meaning to the reaper's song- which thus enables it to be something like the spirit of music itself.

This tendency of Wordsworth's imagination to take its power from and express a sense of the endless, the external and the infinite has been characterised by Hartman as 'apocalyptic'; and he has defined his word as 'an inner necessity to cast out nature, to extirpate everything apparently external to salvation, everything that might stand between the naked self and God, whatever the risk in this to the self.' (p.49) Wordsworth's experiences of nature point to a power beyond nature, which is the very substance of our being. And as he says in Book XI of *The Prelude*, such 'passages of life' give us the 'deepest feeling that the mind/Is lord and master, and that outward sense/Is but the obedient servant of her will.' (1805 11.270-2) I hope it is clearer now why I think his vision and that of Emily Bronte have a common ground.

However Hartman thinks that Wordsworth drew back from his pursuit of the infinite, and sought in nature a mediation of the vision which he had reached by going beyond nature. His overall view of Wordsworth's development can be seen in his description of one of the "great arguments" of *The Prelude*: 'In early youth the external world satisfied the poet's senses unforgettably'. (Op.cit.p.113) This is well illustrated by lines from *Tintern Abbey*: when speaking of the coarser pleasures of his boyish days, Wordsworth says that nature was all in all to him; but immediately following this he writes: 'That time is past,/ And all its aching joys are now no more,/ And all its dizzy raptures.' Hartman then suggests that this loss (apparently overcome in *Tintern Abbey*, but reappearing in *The Prelude*) precipitates the discovery of imagination as a power separate from Nature. To this point Hartman's analysis is convincing. What he then suggests is less so. Imagination considered as transcendent precipitates a crisis which is overcome only 'when it is seen that Nature itself taught the mind to be free of nature and now teaches the mind to be free of mind and mingle with nature once more.' (Op. cit. p.135)

This supposes that Nature is the ultimate source of truth and power. It is easy enough to draw this proposition out of Wordsworth's poetry, and it cannot be

lightly dismissed. What we can see, however, is that Wordsworth is much more enraptured by his apocalyptic moments than Hartman is willing to admit. If Wordsworth does turn away from them, it is not because they are teaching him a truth that he is not willing to encounter, but because, being what they are, he cannot do anything else. I will come back to that remark in a moment; but first let us take a look at what the poet himself says of these critical moments — the Simplon pass first: the soul co-opted by such an experience, ‘under such banners militant’, as he puts it,

Seeks for no trophies, struggles for no spoils
That may attest her prowess, blest in thoughts
That are their own perfection and reward,
Strong in herself and in beatitude
That hides her... (1850 VII 610-614)

That is, the soul becomes completely self-sufficient, and needs nothing from the material world to prove its power; what is more, it is creative, like the Nile ‘Poured from his fount of Abyssinian clouds’ (could that be a deliberate echo of the ‘mighty fountain’ of Kubla Khan?) and it fertilizes ‘the whole Egyptian plain’ - every aspect of our being. This is not the language of a man willing to fudge his experience of the mind as transcendent.

His reflection on the Snowdon experience is even more explicit on this last point, as is appropriate to someone winding up their intellectual history: those higher minds able to deal with all the objects of the universe are not enthralled by sensible impressions, but live in the invisible or spiritual world and thus

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.
(1805 XIII 107-112)

We may hesitate at his drawing all this so quickly out of one moment’s experience, but nonetheless what Wordsworth is representing here is the substance of a distinctly *human* life. These are not the words of a man turning away from his vision, or referring his power back to a source from which it has been emancipated.

It is Hartman’s theory that Wordsworth cannot permit himself to contemplate his apocalyptic experience until he has found a way of integrating it into a steady and progressive method of education by nature. He thus tends to read all Wordsworth’s poems as some form of struggle with this problem. He says

of *Salisbury Plain*, for example, that Wordsworth ‘invents for the first time a human machinery to express what is an essentially nonhuman landscape feeling.’ (op.cit.p.124) Such a comment is hardly born out by a reading of the poem, or by Wordsworth’s preface, in which he declares that his primary motivation is a description of ‘the calamities, principally those consequent upon war, to which, more than other classes of men, the poor are subject.’ Before suggesting ways in which we might group Wordsworth’s poems in order to obtain a different interpretation of his development, I would like to put forward one or two reasons as to why Wordsworth did little more with his ‘spots of time’ than to record them, and why, as a consequence, we can hardly help reading *The Prelude* as a series of loosely linked episodes.

In declaring that our being has its home in infinitude, and that imagination is the power that can make this discovery, Wordsworth takes us out of this, our present world of time and space; however temporarily, we are removed from the world which has given us our being. It is this world that has given us language, and this world that has given us history. The imagination, working in the context of language and narrative, enables the possibility of what we call the possibility of story-telling, whether personal, mythical or meaningful. And in any story that ‘finds’ us, Coleridge’s word, we may feel the meaning growing closer and closer to the heart of our being, ever approaching that point at which any one meaning becomes all meaning. Anyone who has read Coleridge’s remarkable analysis of Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*, or who has found themselves involved with a good production of *The Tempest*, will have some idea of what I am saying. Story-telling confines us to time and place — but perhaps the end of all stories is out of time and out of place.

Here I think is the essence of Wordsworth’s dilemma. He has had a vision of the end of all stories; but he has no story which might create a context for his vision — no journey to the Chapel Perilous to find the Holy Grail. He can describe those moments when the unity of life, or the infinity of being, come upon him. But not being of this world, what can we say of the absolute and the infinite, except ‘I saw the image of a mighty mind’, ‘I saw eternity the other night, / a bright ring of endless light’? It is an experience beyond form, which is either the very end of narrative, or quite beyond narrative. So if such a vision is placed within some kind of narrative context, it appears dislocated from it, and will seem an exception to it. Thus when Hartman accuses Wordsworth after the Simplon pass episode of lapsing back ‘to the pedestrian attitude of 1790, when the external world and not imagination seems to be his guide’, (op. cit. p.48) he is merely observing the inevitable return of the poet to his narrative context, the framework by means of which Wordsworth has decided to tell the story of his intellectual development.

However, although Coleridge would remind us that infinity cannot be rendered finite, God is incomprehensible, and Reason is powerless without the

Understanding, no poet can rest satisfied with the assertion that there is a complete disjunction between ultimate ends and intermediate being. That is, in all power form is latent. Wordsworth's poetry at its best has a manifest power, and contains what I would like to call the latent mystery of being.

Tintern Abbey might provide an example of this. just before making his declaration of the unity of life, but in a passage preparing us for it, Wordsworth states that he has learned

To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue.

(II. 88 -93)

There are, I suppose, very few of us to whom these lines are not familiar, very few of us who do not find them rising into our consciousness now and then as we go about our lives; and I imagine that the phrase 'the still sad music of humanity' is familiar to many who are largely unfamiliar with Wordsworth. It is one of those magical phrases which haunt our consciousness, but which never quite finds its certain home in our hearts.

How such a phrase or such a mood might find a precise narrative context, a distinct meaning, can be illustrated by a poet similarly conscious of nature — Gerard Hopkins. His *Spring and Fall* observes the melancholy of a young child watching the trees unleave in autumn - a mood we have all known perhaps. With delicacy, Hopkins moves from the particular scene to his central insight — that all sorrow has a common source — 'Now no matter, child, the name:/Sorrows springs are the same.' And having begun with the tender observation, 'Margaret, are you grieving/ Over Goldengrove unleaving?' ends by returning to her situation and reminding her that her sorrow 'is the blight man was born for/It is Margaret you mourn for.'

Here is a delicate poem made of the still sad music of humanity, with ample power to chasten and subdue. But we trade a distinct and unmistakeable meaning in Hopkins, based on an idea of what human beings are, for the richness of possible meanings never realised in Wordsworth. And this I think is the way it will always be. Power or energy, and form or meaning, are in a continuum, each capable of becoming the other. But the necessary catalyst or mediator between the two is an idea: without the idea of original sin, Hopkins could not have written *Spring and Fall* - but his use of it is tactful enough to prevent it intruding on our consciousness separately from the experience of the poem. We might say that whenever the springs or fountains of our being are re-opened after being closed from some time,

then it is inevitable that the sacred river will issue forth with much more energy than form. And so I think it is with Wordsworth. He is a poet who has put us back in touch with the proper objects of our consciousness - God, heaven, immortality, infinitude. He rightly celebrated the wonder and power which is invested in the mind by its discovery of its own source or home. The great moments of his poetry are deep drafts of undifferentiated experience, experience which has hardly flown into formal channels, and which retain the purity of their originality - a mighty fountain indeed - and which are, in his own words, 'the fountain-light of all our day' eventually fertilizing 'the whole Egyptian plain.' (1850 VI 616)

But what prevented Wordsworth moving from an experience of moments of infinity, to a poetry able to grow steadily out of those fertile sources? It is at this point that I think a comparison with Coleridge's development is instructive, and we might typify the difference between the two men by comparing some features of *Frost at Midnight* with *Tintern Abbey*. Coleridge's poem moves quickly from its setting in nature, 'The frost performs its secret ministry/ Unhelped by any wind', to the silentness of the village around him — 'all the numberless goings-on of life,/ Inaudible as dreams!' - to the film on the grate; because this 'stranger' is 'the sole unquiet thing' in Coleridge's presence, it makes a 'companionable form' for the poet, whose 'abstruser musings' 'freak and flap' in the same way, thus making a toy of thought. The solitude designed to foster philosophic thought has rather produced, in the language of *The Eolian Harp*, 'many idle flitting phantasies... Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break/ On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.' The tendency of Coleridge's mind to search for a companion, to find someone to relieve his solitude, is evident in his discovery of some fellowship with the film on the grate; and it is perhaps equally evident that without a proper companion, his thought becomes mere 'shapings of the unregenerate mind'.

The presence of the 'stranger' in his fire reminds Coleridge of his schooldays in London, his frequent dreams then of his 'sweet birth-place' in Ottery St. Mary, and his longing for someone from his family or village to appear at the schoolroom door. The memory of his reaching out towards real companions in the past, now seems to precipitate his turning towards the one other person also present - Hartley - sleeping in a cot beside him. It is interesting to note that in contrast to the 'puny flaps and freaks' of the 'stranger' on the grate, Hartley's breathings 'fill up the interspersed vacancies / And momentary pauses of the thought'. This is something more positive than we have previously heard - it is as if Hartley's breathings are in someway assisting the progress of Coleridge's thought. And having once turned to Hartley, having found him as a companion, he becomes both the focus of the rest of the poem, well over half its total length, and the focus for a declaration of the images of nature as the language of God - 'The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible/ Of that eternal language, which thy God/ Utters, who from eternity doth teach/Himself in all, and all things in himself.' And so through Coleridge's

consciousness of Hartley the poem returns to its starting point, the secret ministry of frost that hangs up 'the silent icicles/ Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.'

In the assertion that the images of nature are the language of God, we can see that there is no real disjunction between Coleridge's thought at this stage of his career and that of Wordsworth. There is however a fundamental difference of context and expression. Only when he has found a companion can Coleridge contemplate the significance of nature. This points down the path his intellectual development soon took. Having found the companion of his heart in Sara Hutchinson, through whom he often declared he 'saw' nature, he will eventually affirm that 'the final introduction to thought takes place in the transfer of person from the senses to the invisible.' (*Opus Magnum* II f.79) This leads to the discovery of the human being in ideal form, the infant Christ in our souls, and *thus* to ideas, because the being of Christ, Coleridge declared, contains 'all possible ideas.' (*Marginalia* I 573) This is one path out of the absolute back into time, and a method of establishing a connection between the two.

There is something in Wordsworth's personality, though, that militates against a development of this kind - and it seems to be a sense of self-sufficiency, of a relation with Nature, perhaps even with the absolute, which does not require the mediation of another. Thus Wordsworth once declared that he had no need of a redeemer- a view quite consistent with someone believing that their experience has been derived directly from infinity. He visited the Wye above Tintern Abbey in the lively presence of Dorothy whom, it is well recognised, was at certain times the eyes and ears of his vision. But her presence is not noted until the conclusion of the poem. Unlike Coleridge, Wordsworth's solitude was much more a state of mind than a fact of life. But whereas Coleridge's assertion that nature is the intelligible language of God is little more than a graceful bow towards a sympathetic concept, Wordsworth's 'I have felt/ A presence that disturbs me with the joy/ Of elevated thoughts', and what follows, is a passionate declaration of faith. Therefore, although Coleridge will very easily be able to emancipate himself from the notion of nature as active and acting, Wordsworth will not, and never does — despite asserting that he is no mere pensioner on outward forms, and that 'From worlds not quickened by the sun/ A portion of the gift is won.' Wordsworth always seems to assume that the world not quickened by the sun, the invisible or spiritual world, is an immediate possibility, as it had seemed to be almost too much there in his childhood, and that it does not require mediation through another being for his apprehension. Thus other people, in his poetry, if not his life, have no function in bringing his vision to him, and are rarely attributed the power of achieving such a vision themselves. At the end of *Tintern Abbey*, Dorothy is an exception to this: in her delights at the scene before him he reads his 'former pleasures in the shooting lights/ Of thy wild eyes' -his appreciation of her rests to some extent on his ability to see his past self in her; and his prayer for her future is

that she shall be blessed as he has been by the delights of nature: so echoing his own experience he writes,

Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk
And let the misty mountain winds be free
To blow against thee.

Her solitary walk- what, as William's companion! Poor Dorothy; I wonder what she felt as she read these lines — committed indeed to a kind of solitude by being her brother's closest companion; and one cannot help feeling that concentrating too closely on his own experience, Wordsworth has been unwittingly unkind to his sister. And in this way the poem ends, for he can but wish that nature will provide her with what it has provided him. As Hartman observes, it is clear 'that Wordsworth's master tendency is to bypass the *Person...*' (p.288).

The one last question I will briefly address is this: if we disagree with Hartman's reading of Wordsworth's development as a struggle to avoid the apocalyptic moment, and that all his poems in some measure reflect this effort, what other form of organization can we find? My view is that Wordsworth, where he dealt with them, did not downplay his moments in and out of time. But he did not always deal with them. Like anyone who has been given a gift of this kind, he must have felt 'the waste, sad time/ Stretching before and after', the truth that getting a spending we lay waste our lives. Most human beings I imagine, and many otherwise gifted people, do not have that moment they can look back to as a bulwark against the general futility of life. Most of us just have to trudge on. And Wordsworth, because he was never able to incorporate these moments into a steady vision, knew what it was to be unsupported in this way. In the later part of his life, a visitor reported him as sociable and cheerful, but his despondency still uncorrected. His imagination, at the level of daily life, responded powerfully to the difficulties and calamities facing individuals, and the stoicism with which, by and large, they encountered them. One of the lyrical ballads *Animal Tranquility and Decay* sets the tone for a whole series of poems in which individuals face life without the benefit of vision. Into this large class of poems I would put, by way of example, *Resolution and Independence*, *Salisbury Plain*, *Michael*, *The Last of the Flock*, *The Brothers*, *The Female Vagrant* and perhaps *The Ruined Cottage*. Whether we can draw any spiritual consolation from the resilience portrayed in many of these characters I am not sure. What is certain is that what is offered is different in kind from Wordsworth's own moments of vision. It is perhaps a rather more compassionate view of Eliot's 'strained time- ridden faces... Driven on the wind that sweeps the gloomy hills of London'; or in other words, what the person with a vision makes of life without a vision.

That seems to be one aspect of Wordsworth's genius. Another, and appearing chiefly in the *Lyrical Ballads*, is a perception of the almost spiritual power of strong and often unreasonable feeling. Of this kind is *The Idiot Boy*. Here the contrast between the idiocy of the boy and the frantic love his mother has for him is shown to produce the end everyone was after, the cure of Susan Gale, but in ways quite different from those planned. Although the jollity of the metre gives the whole poem a comic touch, it seems to me essentially profound, demonstrating the almost supernatural power of strong feeling. And in such a poem we can see why Wordsworth objected to the supernatural machinery of *The Ancient Mariner*. In the human heart, under the ordinary conditions of human life, the supernatural is present, and only wanting a sympathetic observer: thus *Goody Blake and Harry Gill*, in which Harry Gill remains icy-cold for the rest of his life, after Goody Blake curses him for preventing her collecting kindling from his hedges to keep herself warm. The preface to the 1798 edition states that this story 'is founded on a well-authenticated fact' so reinforcing the view that everyday life will supply evidence of the supernatural. What Wordsworth fails to do, however, is go beyond the observation he makes and reduce his experience to a precept or an idea, and so to organize his understanding of human beings into systematic form. *We Are Seven* is a good example of this: the young girl with two siblings in the grave, still asserts that 'We are seven' despite the poet's insistence that if two are dead, then they are only five. But what are we to make of this experience? Despite Wordsworth telling us that he could not imagine his own death as a child, we do not know whether the girl is simply unable to comprehend the notion of death as something too painful or too far from her consciousness to be a reality - although her vivid description of 'little Jane/In bed she moaning lay/Till God released her of her pain' belies that; or whether she is conscious that her brother and sister have trailed their glory back to God, and that they are no less alive, no less people, for having returned to heaven. I myself have always presumed the latter, but that is mere preference on my part: it is not the only possible reading of the poem. My conclusion is that we can see at least three distinct strands in Wordsworth's genius - but which are not woven together in one work. His great visions remain separate from his contemplations of man's mundane destiny, and from his insights into the psychology of the individual. Because, unlike Coleridge, he was unable to put a person at the centre of his vision, the absolute, which is beyond form and beyond meaning, never became adequately incorporated into his poetry. And to some measure this was the cause of his failure to develop as a poet after the completion of *The Prelude* in 1805; because an experience of the absolute dominated his consciousness, other forms of experience remained vestigial. That was both his triumph and his tragedy. And in this respect we might compare his poetic death to Heathcliff's self-destruction. Both found a vision that they felt to be at one with their being, but neither knew how that vision might become the beating heart of their life or poetry.

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