The Mind of a Poet

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Havens, Raymond Dexter. The Mind of a Poet: A Study of Wordsworth's Thought with Particular Reference to "The Prelude".


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INTRODUCTION

Some justification may well be expected for entering into a prolonged study of the mind of William Wordsworth. His was not, it may be objected, a great, unusually comprehensive, or even brilliant mind. He was not a Leonardo, a Bacon, a Newton, or a Kant; he had none of Shakespeare's breadth of sympathy and understanding, none of Dante's or Goethe's mastery of many fields; he could not have written the *Comédie Humaine* or the Dramatic Monologues. Furthermore, if we were to attempt the impossible task of selecting from British writers a typical poet we should choose Spenser, Shelley, or Keats rather than Wordsworth. The reason for singling out the author of *The Prelude* as the person in whom to study the mind of a poet is that *The Prelude* reveals with unusual fullness a mind that is fundamentally poetic. Even its peculiarities, its numerous limitations, and its unusual emphases are in the main those of a poet. Besides, poetry—not, as with many other writers, religious or social problems, humanitarianism, science, politics, economics, metaphysics, or literary criticism—was the chief concern of his creative years.

There is one other important reason for choosing Wordsworth as the subject of a study of this kind—the amount of material available. Shakespeare's mind would be a more rewarding subject but we cannot get at it. With Wordsworth, on the other hand, we have a large body of verse, a considerable amount of criticism, over a thousand letters, and the journals and letters of his sister Dorothy. But most of all, we have his chief long poem, which is devoted to the "growth of a poet's mind," and in the unrevised manuscripts, the later omissions, additions, and other changes made in this autobiographical and psychological study we have a wealth of material for the subject of our investigation. His treatment of the poet's mind is, furthermore, of unusual value in that it is not only written from the inside but is an intimate and detailed account of what really matters. It tells us what no one else could have told: it describes incidents and feelings and records opinions, im-
pressions, and beliefs of which no other human being knew anything. In it a person endowed with a powerful imagination describes a youth and early manhood unusually rich in imaginative experiences. Then again it touches, often directly (especially in the early manuscripts), and everywhere indirectly and by implication and suggestion, on matters of the greatest importance for understanding the mind of a poet but of which most persons are scarcely conscious and about which they almost never speak. It is in these matters,—his belief in the ministry of fear, wonder, and mystery, of silence, solitude, and loneliness, in his animism and mysticism, his fundamental and pervading anti-rationalism,—that the sources of Wordsworth’s strength and the core of what is distinctive in his thought will be found; and it is in these dimly understood feelings and beliefs, of the force of which he was but partly conscious, that he reveals most strikingly the poet’s outlook. Accordingly the following pages will stress rather than minimize the transcendental in Wordsworth and will try to show that the unusual aspects of his mind are not isolated and did not seem to him fanciful or merely personal, but so many paths, difficult, hard to find and harder to follow, leading to the great central truth which is the goal of all man’s loftier strivings. This truth has two aspects, the divine and the human: God and “the hiding-places of man’s power.”

Being a religious man Wordsworth felt deeply the truth of the words Saint Augustine addressed to the Deity: “Fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te.”

Man can rest only in the conception of a supreme Reality, unconditioned and absolute, free from all imperfections and limitations:

Our destiny, our being’s heart and home,
Is with infinitude, and only there.

Wordsworth “looked for universal things”; he sought the one behind the many, the real behind the appearance, the abiding behind the flux, the eternal behind the transitory, the changeless behind the mutable, the perfect behind the incomplete. Even in nature it was the simple, the abiding, and the changeless for which he cared most deeply; and he valued silence, solitude, and lonely places because they intensified his
consciousness of the enduring in the external world, and of the Eternal, the One, which lies behind it. He thought of the "best Philosopher," the child, as one "who ... read'st the eternal deep," who is "haunted for ever by the eternal mind"; he spoke of "the great thought By which we live, Infinity and God," and of a "mighty Mind" as one "that feeds upon infinity"; he declared "the highest bliss That flesh can know" is the consciousness of being habitually infused by the One; and he recorded the "bliss ineffable" that came to him as a young man when "in all things" he "saw one life."  

I have said that the second part of what was for Wordsworth the central truth of life was implied in his phrase, "the hiding-places of man's power." What he meant by this was probably much the same thing as William James meant when he wrote:

The deepest thing in our nature is this _Binnenleben_ (as a German doctor lately has called it), this dumb region of the heart in which we dwell alone with our willingnesses and unwillingnesses, our faiths and fears. As through the cracks and crannies of caverns those waters exude from the earth's bosom which then form the fountain-heads of springs, so in these crepuscular depths of personality the sources of all our outer deeds and decisions take their rise. Here is our deepest organ of communication with the nature of things; and compared with these concrete movements of our soul all abstract statements and scientific arguments—the veto, for example, which the strict positivist pronounces upon our faith—sound to us like mere chatterings of the teeth.

It was this _Binnenleben_ that Wordsworth wished to reach, these stores of power and wisdom hidden in the depths of the subconscious that he essayed to explore and to make available to man. It was the moments when he had tapped reservoirs of peace and strength, had seen into the life of things, that he wished to record.

Of genius, power,
Creation and divinity itself
I have been speaking, for my theme has been
What passed within me. Not of outward things
Done visibly for other minds, words, signs,
Symbols or actions, but of my own heart
Have I been speaking, and my youthful mind.
O Heavens! how awful is the might of souls.  

(iii. 173-80)
This two-fold truth, the one interior life that lives in all things and the hiding-places of power, is, ultimately, the subject of the greater part of Wordsworth's more thoughtful poetry. Nature, the immediate subject of much of his verse, is connected with the more fundamental topic through nature's being a chief means of entering into communion with the One and of discovering and drawing upon the sources of power. It is not itself primarily a source of power but a means of reaching such a source. So with the imagination, which is the subject of *The Prelude*: it is important not merely because it is the life of poetry but because through it we commune with the One and become conscious of all nature as permeated by the One, because spiritual love cannot exist without it, and because through it alone we enter into the hiding-places of power. It is the doorway to the life of the spirit. The wedding of the mind to nature by the imagination converts fear, wonder, mystery, passion, and solitude into means of apprehending "the great thought By which we live, Infinity and God." Wordsworth's poetry, he tells us, is "the spousal verse Of this great consummation"; that is, he wished that it should bring about this marriage in the minds of its readers and through this marriage and through otherwise awakening men to a sense of wonder and mystery, to the ministry of fear and of loneliness, he hoped to rouse them from lethargy, to bring them to the highest bliss and to the unfailing sources of spiritual power.

To many persons all this will be mere words, emotional expansiveness, sentimental self-delusion, the reading into nature and into vague feelings of something that is not there. Wordsworth's emphasis upon infinitude, for example, will impress them as a complacent sense of being "in tune with the infinite" which means no more than being out of tune with the definite, the feeling of freedom and exaltation which accompanies escape from the actual into the limitless. They will remind us that such a feeling may be produced by alcohol or drugs and that romantically-inclined persons have usually shown an impatience of social restrictions and physical limitations together with a love of the boundless like that expressed in Thomson's "Infinite splendour! wide-investing all," or in Byron's address to the ocean as "boundless, endless, and
sublime—The image of Eternity." 10 Man, we shall be told, cannot hold infinity in the palm of his hand; "immeasurable thoughts" and "far-stretching views into eternity" are mere self-delusion; such phrases and the description of a mighty mind as "one that feeds upon infinity, That is exalted by... whatso'e'er is dim Or vast in its own being" conceal under vague suggestiveness and apparent profundity their emptiness of real meaning. Their author and his admirers should consider the "Discourse upon the Word Vast" in which St. Evremond pointed out to the French Academy in 1677 that "a Genius Vast and Immoderate, was a Genius that lost it self in rambling Thoughts, in fine, but vain Ideas, in Designs too great, and not at all proportioned to the means that might make them succeed," that "a just and regulated Extent makes the Great; an immoderate Grandeur makes the Vast." 11 Such seems to have been the Greek point of view whereas the Egyptians, the builders of San Sophia and Chartres, Michelangelo, Milton, Byron, and many romantics sought to give the impression of vastness.

Now the broad and not uncommon assumption (in part a reaction from Victorian sentimentalism) that romanticism represents disease and classicism, health rests upon a conception of classicism which overlooks important aspects of Greek and Roman life and thought and likewise ignores certain needs of the human spirit which romanticism satisfies but classicism does not. It was to meet these needs that romantic art arose and it is because no other art has met them that it persists.12 The emphasis of the classicist on order, self-control, the acceptance of reality, the recognition of one's limitations and learning to live within them, and the romantic dissatisfaction with reality, the emphasis on freedom, living dangerously, aspiration for the seemingly impossible,—these contrasting attitudes are examples of the "standing antagonisms of practical life" which, for the good of mankind, must ever be repeatedly and vigorously presented.13 Each is incomplete, each may be, and when it is in the ascendent usually is, carried too far, but each is essential.

A penetrating criticism of the love of losing one's self in a mystery and pursuing reason to an *altitudo* is to be found in what Mr. A. O. Lovejoy has to say of "metaphysical pathos":
'Metaphysical pathos' is exemplified in any description of the nature of things, any characterization of the world to which one belongs, in terms which, like the words of a poem, awaken through their associations, and through a sort of empathy which they engender, a congenial mood or tone of feeling on the part of the philosopher or his readers. For many people—for most of the laity, I suspect—the reading of a philosophical book is usually nothing but a form of aesthetic experience, even in the case of writings which seem destitute of all outward aesthetic charms; voluminous emotional reverberations, of one or another sort, are aroused in the reader without the intervention of any definite imagery. Now of metaphysical pathos there are a good many kinds; and people differ in their degree of susceptibility to any one kind. There is, in the first place, the pathos of sheer obscurity, the loveliness of the incomprehensible... The reader doesn't know exactly what they [certain philosophies] mean, but they have all the more on that account an air of sublimity; an agreeable feeling at once of awe and of exaltation comes over him as he contemplates thoughts of so immeasurable a profundity.¹⁴

No doubt "metaphysical pathos" explains much of the appeal which Wordsworth's more vague and lofty passages have for the average reader. It may likewise have entered into the poet's own predilection for wonder, infinity, and the mysteries of being. Yet Wordsworth would never have said with Sir Thomas Browne, "Where I cannot satisfy my reason, I love to humour my fancy"; he was not a rhapsodic, vague, expansive person; though passionate he was not what is usually meant by "emotional," not a sentimentalist but a hard-headed, keen-eyed, matter-of-fact man, impatient of inaccuracy in observation or expression. In his more philosophic and rapt utterances, to be sure, he was frequently vague and obscure, but this not willingly or through lack of thought or lack of effort to be clear. He was making his way alone, save for Coleridge's help, through the tangled undergrowth which conceals the "Bin-nenleben." He was exploring the deep well of the unconscious and he sought to tell all that he saw, or all that seemed significant. He explained it as best he could; what baffled him and what he understood only in part he at least put down; what he felt dimly but could not express he tried to suggest, convinced that
INTRODUCTION

the soul,
Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
Remembering not, retains an obscure sense
Of possible sublimity, whereto
With growing faculties she doth aspire. (ii. 315-19).

Vagueness and confusion, he felt, were better than silence; inconsistency and irrelevance than omission. Often he was unable to think his ideas through, to separate them from related ideas, to arrange them in effective order, and to express them clearly. Sometimes he misinterpreted his experiences and impressions, sometimes he did not interpret them at all, but at least he recorded them—honestly, it would seem, and little colored by theory. He did his best, for example, to describe what happened to him when he first entered London, but broke off with the despairing exclamation:

alas! I feel
That I am trifling: 'twas a moment's pause.
All that took place within me, came and went
As in a moment, and I only now
Remember that it was a thing divine. (viii. A 705-9)

This is but one of several occasions on which he confessed his inability to understand what was going on within him or to expound the nature and the sources of spiritual power.10

Wordsworth's preoccupation with the mysterious, the elusive, and the vague cannot, therefore, be dismissed as mere romanticism; we must seek the reasons for such preoccupation. To this search the present study is devoted. It will give special attention to those incidents in his life which seemed to him most important and will try to discover wherein lay the significance of such apparently trivial events. In order to do this it will bring together what he says about God, nature, reason, fear, passion, solitude, the imagination, and the like and will interpret the incidents in the light of the comments and the comments in the light of the incidents and of other comments. Although it is impossible to separate William Wordsworth, the individual, from those incidents in his life and elements in his thought which are of significance in the study of the poetic mind, it is upon the latter that the emphasis will be placed.
Fortunately for us, Wordsworth himself endeavored in his autobiography to minimize the merely personal and to dwell on what seemed important in his development as a poet. We shall see that in *The Prelude* he was really engaged in exploring the subconscious and certain aspects of consciousness to which little attention had been paid, and that he carried out this exploration in the dimly-apprehended belief that in these neglected and hidden fields lay the source of man’s true happiness and strength. We shall see that his animism, his exaltation of childhood and of the imagination, his emphasis on fear, wonder, and loneliness are only divers paths to the central point of all his thinking, the two-fold subject of the greater part of his significant verse: the immanent Spirit and the hiding-places of man’s power.

The unity of Wordsworth’s thought becomes increasingly apparent the more closely his poetry is studied. Many passages which seem to have no connection with one another will prove to be mutually illuminating. To point out such inter-relations, to explain Wordsworth by himself, and to demonstrate the fundamental unity of his thought is one of the purposes of this study. This very unity gives rise, however, to a serious difficulty of presentation. The subjects of the various chapters are so closely connected that an adequate presentation of one is impossible without a consideration of all. Nature, animism, and the mystic experience are essential elements in Wordsworth’s religion and likewise of his anti-rationalism; yet they cannot all be studied at the same time, and opinion as to the order in which they should be considered will probably vary with different individuals. Accordingly each chapter has been made as nearly independent of the others as was possible, in order that the reader may pass over the subjects in which he is least interested and may take up the various chapters in whatever sequence he prefers. This method has involved some repetition in addition to the repetition which is inevitable in presenting a body of thought so closely unified as Wordsworth’s. For, as the subjects of many of the chapters are but different aspects of a single point of view and as there are a few passages and incidents which strikingly present or illustrate this point of view, these must be repeatedly quoted or referred
to. Since the more important topics—anism, the mystic experience, anti-rationalism, nature, religion, and the imagination—are also the more difficult, chapters dealing with them have been put after those which treat of more obvious themes. Last of all comes the subject to which all the others lead up: the imagination, the most essential attribute of the poetic mind. It has seemed well to begin with the unpoetic side of Wordsworth's nature, the side that steadied him, held him to reality, to "the very world... where, in the end, We find our happiness, or not at all." So much must be said of unusual feelings, of transcendental beliefs, and "fleeting moods Of shadowy exultation" that there is danger of our mistaking them for the vaporings of a vague rhapsodist instead of the firm convictions of the most hard-headed and matter-of-fact of great poets.

NOTES

2 xii. 279.
3 St. Augustine, Confessions, i. i.
4 vi. 604-5. Even Irving Babbitt, in spite of his distrust of romantic expansiveness, agreed: "It is perfectly true that there is something in man that is not satisfied with the finite and that, if he becomes stationary, he is at once haunted by the spectre of ennui. Man may indeed be defined as 'the insatiable animal; and the more imaginative he is the more insatiable he is likely to become'" (Rousseau and Romanticism, Boston, 1919, p. 251).
5 iii. 109.
7 See pp. 233-6 below.
8 The Will to Believe, New York, 1897, pp. 61-2.
9 See pp. 233-6 below.
11 The Seasons, Autumn, 1210; Childe Harold, iv. clxxxiii.
12 Works, Translated from the French, 1700, i, 368.
13 Cf. George Santayana (The Genteel Tradition at Bay, New York, 1931, p. 16): "Romance is evidently a potent ingredient in the ethos of the modern world; and I confess that I can hardly imagine in the near future any poetry, morality, or religion not deeply romantic."
14 See J. S. Mill, On Liberty, near the end of chapter 2.
15 The Great Chain of Being, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1936, p. 11. Irving Babbitt's Rousseau and Romanticism, Boston, 1919, pp. 250-1, contains a vigorous denunciation of "the outer infinite of expansion."
16 Religio Medici, section x. See pp. 141-6 below.
17 For example, ii. 272-81, 346-52, 386-95; iii. 180-90; vi. 592-7; xii. 273-86. See also iii. 116-24, iv. 333-8.