

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON AN ENGLISH POET

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH 1770-1969

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IT is tempting to say that there has been a Wordsworth for every period, and then go on to define what he stands for now; but in fact it would be wholly unjustified to do so. Wordsworth is, and always has been, a poet about whom people radically disagree. It is not just that some can't abide him, but that at all periods his admirers have liked him for widely differing reasons. Nineteenth-century disputes (notably, of course, that of Stephen and Arnold) are very well known, and more recent criticism has come no closer to agreement. There is no other major poet, except perhaps Tennyson, who can be usefully discussed from such varying points of view. It is partly that the work itself is more varied, but more that Wordsworth deals with subjects to which a personal response is almost inevitable. Either they are genuinely part of common experience, or else they are treated as if they were—'that serene and blessed mood . . .' The result is that the reader is involved at a level, or in a way, that is oddly less literary (more immediate) than with most other poets—certainly with most other predominantly non-lyric poets—and feels he has a right to more violent responses.

No doubt this is all very obvious, but it does explain why, despite the opportunity that a bicentenary provides, I don't propose to make grandiose claims and sweeping reassessments. I wish instead to suggest a way of looking at Wordsworth which has I am sure no more validity than many others. My concern is with what might pompously be called Wordsworth's reconciling vision, the tendency of his poetry to bring together apparently conflicting ways of thought, states of mind, modes or stages of existence: 'Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting',

And, in the meadows and the lower grounds,
Was all the glory of a common dawn . . .

(*Prelude* IV. 336-7)¹

¹ *Prelude* quotations are from the 1805 text ed. E. de Selincourt, 2nd ed. revised H. Darbishire (Oxford, 1959) unless a manuscript is specified, in

that sweet mood when happy thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind . . .

(‘Lines Written in Early Spring’, 3-4)

It is a little difficult to know where to begin, but there is a passage in MS. W of *The Prelude*, belonging to spring 1804, that has certain advantages. It did not get into MS. A, from which de Selincourt printed the 1805 version of *The Prelude*, but was originally written as a sequel to the Climbing of Snowdon, further evidence that Nature can exert a power that ‘moulds . . . endues, abstracts, combines’ as does the human Imagination:

One evening, walking in the public way,
A Peasant of the valley where I dwelt
Being my chance Companion, he stopp’d short
And pointed to an object full in view
At a small distance. ’Twas a horse, that stood
Alone upon a little breast of ground
With a clear silver moonlight sky behind.
With one leg from the ground the creature stood
Insensible and still,—breath, motion gone,
Hairs, colour, all but shape and substance gone,
Mane, ears, and tail, as lifeless as the trunk
That had no stir of breath; we paused awhile
In pleasure of the sight, and left him there
With all his functions silently sealed up,
Like an amphibious work of Nature’s hand,
A Borderer dwelling betwixt life and death,
A living Statue or a statued Life.

(*Prelude*, Notes, p. 624, ll. 31-47)

It is a very characteristic piece of work. No one else could have written it—perhaps no one else could have wished to write it. The faults are Wordsworth, and the virtues are Wordsworth. It is even typically Wordsworthian that the faults should be most noticeable at the beginning and the end—in the lame (in this case positively ungrammatical) introduction and the uneasy concluding line—and the virtues in the central development of the paragraph. For want of a better word, the passage is a ‘spot of time’, showing the expected progression from an opening, detailed and quite ordinary description, through the

which case references are given where appropriate to Miss Darbishire’s *apparatus criticus* or Notes. Quotations of poems that Wordsworth himself published are from the earliest printed versions.

poet's heightened and heightening response, to a new, odder, and more general vision: the closest parallel is probably the account of the blind London beggar of *Prelude* Book VII.

Perhaps what one notices first about the poetry is its sense of wonderment:

—breath, motion gone,
Hairs, colour, all but shape and substance gone,
Mane, ears, and tail, as lifeless as the trunk
That had no stir of breath . . .

The reiteration of 'gone' at the end of two consecutive lines, and the insistent return of the poet's mind to the absence of breath, convey a feeling almost of awe at the utter stillness of the animal. All the individually striking features and details—'hairs' is so much more impressive in this context than 'hair'—have been resolved into the essential facts of stillness, shape, and substance. It is a case if ever there was one of Wordsworth giving us eyes, enabling us to see what we might normally have missed, or passed; but one can overstress the ordinariness of what is happening. What the Grasmere peasant points out to the poet is a horse in the moonlight, sleeping as horses often do sleep, on three feet: what Wordsworth points out to us is something quite different. We are not, in this case at least, laid afresh on the cool flowery lap of earth, shown an object sparkling anew with the dew-drops of childhood. We are offered an odd, personal vision, child-like only in its intensity.

As 'an amphibious work of Nature's hand', the horse takes one back two years to the spring of 1802 and the most famous amphibian of Wordsworth's poetry, part sea-beast and part stone. It is embarrassing to have to quote lines that are so very well known, but detailed resemblances are important:

As a huge Stone is sometimes seen to lie
Couch'd on the bald top of an eminence;
Wonder to all who do the same espy
By what means it could thither come, and whence;
So that it seems a thing endued with sense:
Like a Sea-beast crawl'd forth, which on a shelf
Of rock or sand reposeeth, there to sun itself.

Such seem'd this Man, not all alive nor dead,
Nor all asleep; in his extreme old age . . .

('Resolution and Independence', 64-72)

When first sighted the old man is exactly like the horse, just standing 'With all his functions silently sealed up'. The two

of them inhabit a hinter-world, the Leech Gatherer 'not all alive nor dead,/Nor all asleep' and the horse specifically 'A Borderer dwelling betwixt life and death'. One could, of course, say that Wordsworth was being whimsical, and really just meant that the man and horse were standing unusually still. But the Preface of 1815, though written long after the poetry it describes, suggests that at least the earlier of these two Borderers was created with considerable care—

The stone is endowed with something of the power of life to approximate it to the sea-beast; and the sea-beast stripped of some of its vital qualities to assimilate it to the stone; which intermediate image is thus treated for the purpose of bringing the original image, that of the stone, to a nearer resemblance to the figure and condition of the aged Man; who is divested of so much of the indications of life and motion as to bring him to the point where the two objects unite and coalesce in just comparison.¹

—and there are in fact many other examples in Wordsworth's poetry of this preoccupation with border-states.

I should like at this stage to mention just one more, this time not a horse, not an aged man, but a butterfly:

I've watch'd you now a full half-hour,
Self-pois'd upon that yellow flower;
And little Butterfly! indeed
I know not if you sleep, or feed.
How motionless!—not frozen seas
More motionless! and then
What joy awaits you, when the breeze
Hath found you out among the trees,
And calls you forth again.

(*'To a Butterfly'*, 1-9)

'not frozen seas/More motionless'—Coleridge might well have used the comparison in *Biographia Literaria* to exemplify 'Mental bombast', 'thoughts and images too great for the subject';² but this image of latent power, though ludicrous when applied to an insect, has interesting general implications. The butterfly makes especially clear that these figures are enviable, not just for their peacefulness, but because in their extreme passivity they approach, or seem to approach, a border-line which is the entrance

¹ *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. A. B. Grosart (3 vols., London, 1876), ii. 138.

² S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (2 vols., Oxford, 1907), ii. 109—Coleridge's italics.

to another world. The analogy of Wordsworth himself is obvious. Clearly there is a sense in which the joy that awaits the butterfly among the trees is the same as the joy that enables the poet of *Tintern Abbey*, after being similarly 'laid asleep in body', to 'see into the life of things'. But it is important to notice that these Borderers emerge in Wordsworth's poetry only when he has himself lost the power—or lost the faith that he has the power—of which they are symbolic.

There are, of course, figures from the earlier period who can broadly be described as Borderers, the Old Cumberland Beggar, for instance, and closely related Old Man Travelling (both going back to 1797), or, in a very different genre, the Idiot Boy of spring 1798. But these are essentially distinct from the fully symbolic figures that I have been discussing. The point can be quickly made by placing the Old Man Travelling beside the London Beggar of 1804:

He travels on, and in his face, his step,
 His gait, is one expression: every limb,
 His look and bending figure, all bespeak
 A man who does not move with pain, but moves
 With thought—He is insensibly subdued
 To settled quiet: he is one by whom
 All effort seems forgotten, one to whom
 Long patience has such mild composure given,
 That patience now doth seem a thing, of which
 He hath no need. He is by nature led
 To peace so perfect, that the young behold
 With envy, what the Old Man hardly feels.

(‘Old Man Travelling’, 3-14)

Pain has gone, effort has gone, patience—the most passive of virtues—is no longer needed; and in the last enigmatic lines it seems that even the peace, so enviable to others, is hardly felt by the man himself. And yet, despite this whittling away, what remains is a human-being, not a symbol. The poet, one feels, is emotionally concerned; and the poem seeks to understand, not merely to define, the old man's state of mind. By 1804 all this is changed. Silent, propped and blind, the London beggar is completely an object, save that a label attached to his chest claims for him human attributes—a story and a name:

lost

Amid the moving pageant, 'twas my chance
 Abruptly to be smitten with the view

Of a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,
 Stood propp'd against a Wall, upon his Chest
 Wearing a written paper, to explain
 The story of the Man, and who he was.

(*Prelude VII. 608-14*)

The beggar exists not for himself, but for his impact on the poet. 'My mind', Wordsworth writes, 'did at this spectacle turn round/As with the might of waters' (ibid. 615-16). We are back in the world where butterflies can be compared to frozen seas, where sleeping horses become 'amphibious works of Nature's hand', or where—to use the case of 'mental bombast' that did irritate Coleridge especially—a child can be the 'best Philosopher', a 'Mighty Prophet, Seer blest'.

What the Borderers of these different periods do have in common is that they offer a way of talking in specific terms about Wordsworth's general vision. I wish to suggest—paradoxically perhaps—that the Borderers change because the vision they reflect remains the same. At this point it is necessary to insist on dates. 'Old Man Travelling' and the first drafts of 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' go back to the early summer of 1797. Wordsworth and his sister were still at Racedown in Dorset. He had not yet come under the influence of Coleridge; and, in particular, had not yet taken over from him his Unitarian belief in 'the one life within us and abroad'.¹ Thinking backwards from the summer of 1798, or indeed looking at the poem in its context of *Lyrical Ballads*, one can easily read 'Old Man Travelling' in terms of the One Life; but it is not relevant to do so. The 'peace so perfect' which the old man achieves is enviable and admirable, the result of approaching, if not transcending, the limits of ordinary existence; but it does not consist, as does the joy of *Tintern Abbey*, in the presence of a shared life-force. Already there is the Wordsworthian instinct that for those who can reach beyond everyday needs and emotions a harmony is to be found; but as yet there is no doctrinal basis for the poet's intuitions.

For much of Wordsworth's poetry, of course, no such basis was needed. Poems continued to depend on the instinct that had supported 'Old Man Travelling', and required no philosophical justification. 'The Idiot Boy', for instance, was written at the height of Wordsworth's belief in the One Life, yet Johnny

¹ Cf. my discussion of Coleridge's early influence on Wordsworth in *The Music of Humanity* (London, 1969), especially pp. 190-201.

is a Borderer who has no need of its support. It is not difficult to think of him in pantheist terms as he sits on his horse, holly-bough in hand, and 'idle all for very joy'—

while the pony moves his legs,
In Johnny's left hand you may see,
The green bough's motionless and dead;
The moon that shines above his head
Is not more still and mute than he.

('The Idiot Boy', 87-91)

—or again, when Betty finds him towards the end of the poem at the waterfall, totally unaware of the human situation that surrounds him, totally involved in the natural scene; but whether one does think in these terms or not is a matter of personal choice. And yet, however easily and naturally it took place, however small the effect it had on certain kinds of poetry, the acceptance of pantheism is the one major intellectual event in Wordsworth's life. Beside it even the early commitment to the French Revolution is insignificant, and later changes, religious and political, are of no consequence at all. Perhaps one should be more specific. It was not so much the fact as the quality of Wordsworth's belief that had such far-reaching effects and implications. For a brief period he not only believed that 'There [was] an active principal alive/In all things'—a view that would have been accepted by many in the 1790s¹—but went on from this quite ordinary position to assert a universe of blessedness and love, based on the assumption that the individual could perceive as well as share 'the life of things'. For Wordsworth himself, as well as for the Pedlar who tells the story of *The Ruined Cottage*, it was true in February 1798 to say that

in all things
He saw one life, and felt that it was joy.²

¹ 'In his fundamental belief that the physical world is a "world of feeling and of life" Wordsworth was neither isolated nor eccentric.' H. W. Piper, *The Active Universe* (London, 1962), p. 115. Piper holds that Wordsworth was the dominant influence on Coleridge at this period, when it is quite clear that the reverse is true, but his discussion of the beliefs current in the 1790s is extremely valuable. Wordsworth's blank verse Fragment 'There is an active principal . . .' is found in MS. Verse 18A of 1799-1800 but was composed in February-March 1798. In an adapted form it finally became part of *Excursion IX*: see *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and H. Darbishire (5 vols., Oxford, 1940-9), v. 286-7, 290-1 and *app. crit.*

² *Poetical Works*, v. 385, ll. 251-2—my italics.

By the beginning of 1799 all this has changed. There is an entirely new Wordsworth, the Wordsworth of the *Lucy Poems* and *Prelude* Book I. Five months only have passed since *Tintern Abbey* and its great affirmation of his faith in the One Life, but pantheism in any full sense of the word has almost disappeared from his writing, and with it the characteristic optimism of 1798, the 'cheerful faith that all which we behold/Is full of blessings' (*Tintern Abbey*, 134-5). There are no more trances, moments of exaltation in which the individual enters into direct contact with the principle of being. And yet curiously, obstinately the reconciling vision remains:

A slumber did my spirit seal,
I had no human fears:
She seem'd a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.
No motion has she now, no force
She neither hears nor sees
Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks and stones and trees!

The poem suffers from being so famous that it is difficult to think about, but it shows very clearly the change that has taken place. As David Ferry puts it in *The Limits of Mortality*, the *Lucy Poems* symbolize Wordsworth's relation to the eternal.¹ It is this move into a world of symbols that I wish to stress. 'A Slumber . . .' in fact opens with an actual loss of bodily awareness, but the poem then goes on to present what is, or can be seen as, a re-enactment of the process in symbolic terms. In her death *Lucy* achieves the harmony to which the poet himself had once attained.² Or perhaps one should say she

¹ David Ferry, *The Limits of Mortality* (Middletown, 1959), p. 79.

² Hugh Sykes Davies has put forward the view that the poem is not about *Lucy* at all. No girl is named, of course, and the pronoun 'She' in line 3 could well refer back to the poet's spirit in line 1. ('Another New Poem by Wordsworth', Hugh Sykes Davies, *Essays in Criticism* XV (1965), 135-61.) There are objections to such a reading (Wordsworth might have attributed feeling, hearing and sight to his spirit, but more probably didn't), but what is interesting is that there should be so little opposition between what would appear at first to be two radically different ways of looking at the poem. As regards *meaning* they come to the same thing: one's concern is merely as to whether the poet is talking directly or in symbolic terms about his own experience. In fact, I suspect that the eight lines of 'A Slumber . . .' originally comprised stanzas four and five of 'She dwelt among th'untrodden ways', the poem being split in two for publication in *Lyrical Ballads* 1800 as was 'Lines Written near Richmond' at the same date. 'She' in line 3 of 'A Slumber . . .' would then refer back naturally to 'Lucy' in line 10 of 'She dwelt . . .'

achieves a state which is essentially like his in one respect, essentially distinct in another. To claim that Wordsworth's insight is now into a world of death would be too literal-minded—after all he had used the metaphor of dying in *Tintern Abbey* ('laid asleep/In body, and become a living soul')—but the poem has lost its immediate relevance to life. The Wordsworth of *Tintern Abbey* had been, or assumed himself to be, firmly anchored in the ordinary world. His seeing 'into the life of things' had been 'that serene and blessed mood', a mood which others would know about too, and from which he had returned with a message of optimism applicable to all. Now, by contrast, he has moved very obviously into the realm of wish-fulfilment.

It is the same with the companion-poem, 'Three years she grew', though in this case Lucy is an active rather than a passive Borderer—or, to be more precise, she crosses the border into an active rather than a passive harmony. She dies, in fact, into a life that she could perfectly well have lived:

She shall be sportive as the fawn
That wild with glee across the lawn
Or up the mountain springs,
And hers shall be the breathing balm,
And hers the silence and the calm
Of mute insensate things.

And vital feelings of delight
Shall rear her form to stately height,
Her virgin bosom swell,
Such thoughts to Lucy I will give
While she and I together live
Here in this happy dell.

('Three years she grew', 13-18, 31-6)

It is not, of course, a lover with whom Lucy will share 'this happy dell', but Nature, in effect Death:

Thus Nature spake—The work was done—
How soon my Lucy's race was run!
She died, and left to me
This heath, this calm and quiet scene,
The memory of what has been,
And never more will be.

(Ibid. 37-42)

What put it into Wordsworth's head to write these beautiful, elegiac love-poems one will never know, but the answer is probably not love. Just as Hopkins's Margaret grieves for herself

not Goldengrove, so one feels that there is a sense in which Wordsworth is the subject of his own lament. Less than a year before he had believed passionately in a harmony accessible to all: now he could envisage it only in a private other-world of abstraction. He had known what it was to share, or to believe he shared, 'the breathing balm . . . the silence and the calm/Of mute insensate things' and was now left with 'The memory of what [had] been/And never more [would] be'. But it would be wrong to overstress the feeling of personal loss. More remarkable as one reads is the delicacy of the imaginative harmony that has replaced the actuality of the previous year. Wordsworth's beliefs have changed, or certainly are no longer felt with the same immediacy, but the intuition of order, the reconciling vision, is as powerful as before. Indeed it is perhaps more impressive now that it stands on its own, the support of dogma gone.

If one moves across to the other great poetry of this moment, the beginnings of *The Prelude*, it is to find a very similar process taking place. Wordsworth is not creating symbol-worlds, but he is none the less making acceptable patterns out of the past. In *The Pedlar*,¹ of March 1798, Wordsworth had used childhood recollections to form an exemplum of the One Life, of course radically changing the facts and time-sequence of his past experience in order to do so. Now, instead of forcing childhood to illustrate an ideal, he is seen returning to it for more personal reasons. His mood is partly one of self-reproach for his present failure to get down to work—

Was it for this
That one, the fairest of all Rivers, lov'd
To blend his murmers with my Nurse's song . . . ?
For this, didst Thou,
O Derwent . . . ?

(*Prelude* I. 271 ff.)

—but what Wordsworth really seems to be asking is why the memories of childhood should hold such special attraction and power. In the early manuscripts one sees him trying to construct from his experiences the over-all pattern which intuitively he

¹ I use the name to indicate the expansion of *The Ruined Cottage* which deals with the background of the narrator, as opposed to the central story of Margaret, the bulk of which belongs to the summer of 1797. In MS. Verse 18A Wordsworth himself divided the two halves, though it is not clear how long they remained separate in his mind. A text of *The Pedlar* is offered in *The Music of Humanity*, pp. 169–83.

feels must exist. The new pattern has to find room for all the conflicting, un-ideal moods which *The Pedlar* had excluded, for stealth and guilt (the stealing of boats and birds) and also for unthinking normality (skating, even noughts and crosses).

Two reconciling principles are invoked, the first being an incongruous literary pantheism (I quote from MS. U, which contains the two-Part *Prelude* of 1799):

Ye Powers of earth! ye Genii of the springs!
And ye that have your voices in the clouds
And ye that are Familiars of the lakes
And of the standing pools, I may not think
A vulgar hope was yours when ye employed
Such ministry . . .

(Ibid. 49q-4 *app. crit.*)¹

Wordsworth has retreated from the single pervasive life-force of *The Pedlar* and *Tintern Abbey* to a fragmented, sub-classical pantheism of river-gods and geniuses. To what extent this stood for the One Life in his own mind it is impossible to say, but one suspects a weakening of conviction as well as the evident new desire to be conventionally acceptable. The process of breaking the One Life down into tutelary spirits is at its most obvious when early in the poem Wordsworth is faced with explaining why so many of his memories should be disturbing, unharmonious. At this stage he makes a distinction between the 'quiet Powers / Retired and seldom recognized' with whom he himself had rarely held communion, and others

who use,
Yet haply aiming at the self-same end,
Severer interventions, ministry
More palpable . . .

(Ibid. 362-71 *app. crit.*)

adding in conclusion, 'and of their school was I'. In effect the lines perform a double function. Locally they are a means of stringing together the birdnesting episode and that of the stolen boat: in general terms, they justify the inclusion of any memory that happens to have survived (or that Wordsworth happens recently to have written about), on the grounds that the poem will reflect the order inherent in the divinely favoured childhood it describes. *The Pedlar* and *Tintern Abbey*

¹ I am grateful to Stephen Gill for the use of his transcript of MS. U, and to the Trustees of Dove Cottage for permission to quote material preserved at the Wordsworth Library, Grasmere.

are religious poems, poems inspired and sustained by the belief they record: the early *Prelude* is much more subdued in its religious affirmation, and uses it at least partly as a structural device to connect different blocks of poetry and kinds of past experience. The linking-sections record Wordsworth's sense of a total well-being, but despite the categorical tone—'I believe that there are spirits . . .'—they are a long way from having the passionate conviction of 1798.

Not that Wordsworth puts all his emphasis on the ministrations of a spirit-world. Alongside comes the assertion of a new, purely humanist, reconciling principle—not yet Imagination, but memory. The moments recalled have a vividness which the Wordsworth of 1804–5 would certainly have regarded as imaginative; his concern for the present, however, is with their effect upon the mind, not the creative processes they imply. The early *Prelude* stands between the two dogmatisms of the One Life and the Imagination, both originating in Coleridge. For a moment Wordsworth is seen working—one might almost say, muddling—on his own towards the over-all pattern which he and his poetry so obviously need. He arrives, of course, at the famous statement, 'There are in our existence spots of time . . .' Though later exiled to Book XI, in 1799 this is found towards the end of Part One, after the snaring, nesting, boat-stealing and skating episodes, and between the discovery of the drowned man (later used to pad out Book V) and the two 'spots of time' that we associate with Book XI (the murderer's gibbet and the waiting for the horses). In its early form the passage is far less inflated than it becomes in 1805 and 1850, and says what it has to say in nine lines instead of nineteen:

There are in our existence spots of time
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A fructifying virtue, whence depressed
By trivial occupations, and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
(Especially the imaginative power)
Are nourished and invisibly repaired:
Such moments seem to have their date
In our first childhood.¹

In *Tintern Abbey* passing responses had similarly been held to contain potential for the future, but the poet's memories had been

¹ Quoted from MS. U. The lines became *Prelude* XI, 258–77, but Miss Darbishire does not see fit to incorporate the early version in her *apparatus criticus* at this point.

of a landscape beautiful in itself and permeated by the One Life. Now it seems that not only pleasant, but also painful experiences can be fruitful, and even those which at the time seem to hold no significance at all. In returning over the years to a specific moment, the mind both establishes it in the memory and guarantees its future importance. Wordsworth is in effect re-writing *Tintern Abbey* in untranscendental terms. As before, it is the memory that lightens

the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world . . .

(*Tintern Abbey*, 40-1)

but the process has been secularized. The pantheist claims have gone, and what is more, there has been no attempt to replace them. Wordsworth asserts that his early memories have a restorative power, but offers no reason why this should be so—in the context of this lecture I trust that the reason is sufficiently clear. Though varying in mood from the tranquillity achieved in ‘There was a Boy’ and the skating episode, to the guilty apprehension of ‘unknown modes of being’ or the sense of ‘visionary dreariness’ (the boat-stealing and murderer’s gibbet), the ‘spots of time’ have the power to strengthen and reassure because they stand in the poet’s mind for the ability of the individual to transcend the limits of ordinary experience. Wordsworth is plainly craving for the certainty felt by the Borderer of *The Pedlar* and *Tintern Abbey* whom he had briefly thought himself to be.

So much for 1799: the later pattern shows Wordsworth looking for harmony, intuitively believing in it, occasionally asserting its existence, but never able to re-enter the *Tintern Abbey* world of conviction. One way of seeing how far he has moved in terms of belief, and how little his instincts have changed, is to compare ‘The Simplon Pass’ of 1804 with the very different evocation of a border state of mind in *The Pedlar* of 1798:

The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decay’d,
The stationary blasts of water-falls,
And every where along the hollow rent
Winds thwarting winds, bewilderd and forlorn,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that mutter’d close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,

The unfetter'd clouds, and region of the Heavens,
 Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
 Were all like workings of one mind, the features
 Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
 Characters of the great Apocalypse,
 The types and symbols of Eternity,
 Of first and last, and midst, and without end.

(*Prelude VI.* 556–72)

It is unquestionably great poetry, perhaps the most impressive example of what I have called Wordsworth's reconciling vision, and yet the claims it makes amount to very little. The landscape is treated in animist terms (torrents shoot, rocks mutter, crags speak), but this is mere poeticism beside the living and sharing world of *The Pedlar*:

The ocean and the earth beneath him lay
 In gladness and deep joy. The clouds were touched,
 And in their silent faces did he read
 Unutterable love. Sound needed none,
 Nor any voice of joy: his spirit drank
 The spectacle. Sensation, soul and form
 All melted into him. They swallowed up
 His animal being. In them did he live,
 And by them did he live. They were his life.
 In such access of mind, in such high hour
 Of visitation from the living God,
 He did not feel the God, he felt his works.
 Thought was not: in enjoyment it expired.
 Such hour by prayer or praise was unprofaned;
 He neither prayed, nor offered thanks or praise;
 His mind was a thanksgiving to the power
 That made him. It was blessedness and love.¹

Coleridge puts his finger (undeliberately, of course) on the difference between these two passages in his letter to William Sotheby of 10 September 1802:

Nature has her proper interest; & he will know what it is, who believes & feels, that every Thing has a Life of it's own, & that we are all *one Life*. A Poet's *Heart & Intellect* should be *combined, intimately combined & unified*, with the great appearances in Nature—& not merely held in solution & loose mixture with them, in the shape of formal Similies.²

¹ *Poetical Works*, v. 382, ll. 125–41. (*The Music of Humanity*, pp. 175–6, ll. 98–114.)

² *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs (2 vols., Oxford, 1956), ii. 864—Coleridge's italics.

At the time of *The Pedlar* and *Tintern Abbey* Wordsworth's heart and intellect had been intimately combined and unified with Nature: by 1804, though still instinctively reaching towards a total harmony, he is reduced to the level of formal simile. The different parts of the landscape are 'like workings of one mind', and the clauses that follow are all in apposition. One may forget as the poetry mounts through 'Characters of the great Apocalypse' to its climax in 'The types and symbols of Eternity', but however impressive are Wordsworth's analogies, analogy they remain.

In *Prelude* Book VI 'The Simplon Pass' comes, of course, immediately after the famous apostrophe to Imagination. I have no time this evening to discuss the part that Imagination came to play in Wordsworth's thought; but in the years 1804-5, as he expanded *The Prelude* first to five and then to thirteen Books, it was the reconciling principle on which he increasingly pinned his hopes. In the apostrophe Wordsworth restates, not for the first time, the central experience of *Tintern Abbey*:

in such strength
Of usurpation, in such visitings
Of awful promise, when the light of sense
Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
The invisible world, doth Greatness make abode,
There harbours whether we be young or old.
Our destiny, our nature, and our home
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.

(*Prelude* VI. 532-42)

'The invisible world', 'destiny', 'infinitude', 'hope', 'expectation', Wordsworth's language cries out for a transcendental interpretation, but at this period he has none to offer; and the less quoted lines that follow make it clear that in this border-state 'The mind . . . is blest in thoughts/That are their own perfection and reward' (*ibid.* 543-46), that the sense of 'something evermore about to be' is infinitely valuable, but not a religious experience. A year later, when the death of his favourite brother, John, has made it necessary for him to accept an after-life and orthodox Christian views,¹ Wordsworth permits

¹ Cf. the agonized rationalizing in Wordsworth's letter to Sir George Beaumont of 12 March, 1805, a month after his brother was drowned: 'Why have we a choice and a will, and a notion of justice and injustice, enabling

himself a good deal more wishful-thinking. Understandably looking for some means of pulling together his long and rambling poem, he seizes on Imagination, calling it by a series of highly inconsequential names—'absolute strength', 'clearest insight', 'amplitude of mind', 'reason in her most exalted mood'—claiming that it has been at once the subject and the guide of his 'long labour', and using it to lead up to a final Christian affirmation:

And lastly, from its progress have we drawn
The feeling of life endless, the great thought
By which we live, Infinity and God.

(*Prelude XIII*. 182-4)

For the second time—the third, if one takes into account the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*—Coleridge has become the dominant influence. In 1798 Wordsworth had taken over the *One Life*, now he takes over a conveniently, if rather vaguely, transcendentalized Imagination, defining it in terms which not only anticipate *Biographia Literaria* in detail, but emphasize once again how much he needed a shared philosophical basis to explain and support his personal vision.

But as I said—too long ago—there is no time to discuss Imagination.¹ Instead, one last Borderer, the child of the *Immortality Ode* who so offended Coleridge. In the two-part *Prelude* Wordsworth had returned to childhood as the period of his most vital memories. These had seemed to him to be

us to be moral agents? Why have we sympathies that make the best of us so afraid of inflicting pain and sorrow, which yet we see dealt about so lavishly by the supreme governor? Why should our notions of right towards each other, and to all sentient beings within our influence differ so widely from what appears to be his notion and rule, if every thing were to end here? Would it be blasphemy to say that upon the supposition of the thinking principle being destroyed by death, however inferior we may be to the great Cause and ruler of things, we have *more of love* in our Nature than he has? The thought is monstrous; and yet how to get rid of it except upon the supposition of *another* and a *better world* I do not see. As to my departed Brother who leads our minds at present to these reflections, he walked all his life pure among many impure . . . So good must be better; so high must be destined to be higher.' (*The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt, 2nd ed. *The Early Years 1787-1805*, revised by Chester L. Shaver, Oxford, 1967, 556)—Wordsworth's italics.

¹ I have discussed some of the more far-fetched recent claims about Imagination in an essay on 'The Climbing of Snowdon' (*Prelude XIII*. 1-119) in the forthcoming *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies in Memory of John Alban Finch*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Ithaca, 1970).

inherently 'fructuifying' (his later word was 'vivifying', life-giving), and the fact that they had brought out his poetic inspiration had appeared to prove them so. Childhood came to stand in his mind for creative power as well as lost, unattainable, innocent vision, until, in a final desperate assertion, Wordsworth contradicted the credible Jungian babe who in 1799 had drawn strength from his mother's love,¹ and went back to pre-existence. It was logical, but crazy, and left the child as the ultimate Borderer, of whom too high claims could not be made:

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie
 Thy Soul's immensity;
 Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
 Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
 That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
 Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,—
 Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
 On whom those truths do rest,
 Which we are toiling all our lives to find . . .

(*Ode*, 108-16)

On the face of it, 'Mental bombast' seems a fair assessment: beautiful as much of the poem is, one can scarcely deny that in this central passage the thoughts and images are 'too great for the subject'. But Coleridge's analysis is absurdly literal-minded ('Children at this age give us no such information . . .') and, its suggestion of pantheism seems deliberately obtuse: 'In what sense can the magnificent attributes, above quoted, be appropriated to a *child*, which would not make them equally suitable to a *bee*, or a *dog*, or a *field of corn* . . .?'² It is fine writing, but not very sympathetic criticism. The child has no reference to ordinary experience,³ and the time had long since passed when

¹ the Babe who sleeps
 Upon his Mother's breast, who, when his soul
 Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul,
 Doth gather passion from his Mother's eye!

day by day,
 Subjected to the discipline of love,
 His organs and recipient faculties
 Are quicken'd, are more vigorous, his mind spreads . . .

(*Prelude* II. 240-3, 250-3)

² *Biographia Literaria*, ed. cit. ii. 112-13—Coleridge's italics.

³ He can have very little even to the poet's own not at all ordinary 'recollections of early childhood'—cf. Wordsworth's note on the *Ode*, dictated to

the One Life would have been invoked in his support. He is simply the most far-fetched of all Wordsworth's symbols of the possibility for which he longed, and in which he had once briefly believed, of direct contact with another world of truth.

For Wordsworth the man, these tensions were soon to be relieved by his acceptance of orthodox Christian thought: for Wordsworth the poet, of course, the tensions—the 'Effort, and expectation, and desire'—had been all to the good.

Isabella Fenwick in 1843 (Grosart, *ed. cit.* iii. 194-5). It is one thing to remember being unable to admit the idea of death, or recall grasping at walls to escape the 'abyss of idealism', and another to portray a child as burdened by eternal truths.