

WORDSWORTH'S *PRELUDE* : THREE

1. Were there, below, a spot of holy ground,
By Pain and her sad family unfound,
Sure, Nature's GOD that spot to man had giv'n,
Where murmuring rivers join the song of ev'n;
Where falls the purple morning far and wide 5
In flakes of light upon the mountain-side;
Where summer Suns in ocean sink to rest,
Or moonlight Upland lifts her hoary breast;
Where Silence, on her wing of night, o'erbroods
Unfathom'd dells and undiscover'd woods; 10
Where rocks and groves the power of waters shakes
In cataracts, or sleeps in quiet lakes.

William Wordsworth, *Descriptive Sketches. In Verse. Taken during a Pedestrian Tour in the Italian, Grison, Swiss, and Savoyard Alps* (London, 1793), lines 1-12. Text from *Descriptive Sketches*, ed. Eric Birdsall and Paul M. Zall (Ithaca, N.Y., 1984), p. 38. Compare *Analytic Review* for 15th March 1793, 294-96, and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (2 vols, Princeton, 1983), I, p. 77. Even this early composition was subject to a protracted series of revisions, culminating in the major reworking of 1836. And see also the rather insistently pressed argument of Alan Liu, *Wordsworth; The Sense of History* (Stanford, 1989), pp. 167 and ff.

2. --And sure there is a secret Power that reigns
Here, where no trace of man the spot profanes, 425
Nought but the herds that pasturing upward creep,
Hung dim-discover'd from the dangerous steep,
Or summer hamlet, flat and bare, on high
Suspended, mid the quiet of the sky.
How still! no irreligious sound or sight 430
Rouzes the soul from her severe delight.
An idle voice the sabbath region fills
Of Deep that calls to Deep across the hills,
Broke only by the melancholy sound
Of drowsy bells for ever tinkling round; 435
Faint wail of eagle melting into blue
Beneath the cliffs, and pine-woods steady sugh;
The solitary heifer's deepen'd low;
Or rumbling heard remote of falling snow.
Save that, the stranger seen below, the boy 440
Shouts from the echoing hills with savage joy.

William Wordsworth, *Descriptive Sketches. In Verse. Taken during a Pedestrian*

Was a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapour,
 A deep and gloomy breathing-place thro' which
 Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams
 Innumerable, roaring with one voice.

William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805-6), XIII, 29-59; text from Mark L. Reed (ed.), *The Thirteen-Book Prelude* (2 vols, Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), I, pp. 314-5; compare also the text in Jonathan Wordsworth (ed.), *The Prelude; The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)* (London, 1995). This reworking of the account first composed as 'A Night-Piece', and expanded in this form in spring 1804 to narrate the climb of Snowdon made when Wordsworth was 21, is thus out of chronological sequence in Wordsworth's life story; but is finally placed here as a moment of visionary or even providential culmination, at the climax of the entire poem. In the grandest imaginable pedigree, the 'dusky backs upheaved' quote from *Paradise Lost* (VII, 286), where Milton himself borrows from the account of God's world-creation in *Genesis* (I, 9), maybe also *Psalms*, CIV, 6-8. For discussion see Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* (New Haven, 1964), pp. 60-67, 184-9, 256-7; *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (London, 1987), pp. 172-8; M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism; Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York, 1971), pp. 76-80; also David Ellis, *Wordsworth, Freud and the Spots of Time; Interpretation in 'The Prelude'* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 143-53, and Howard Erskine-Hill, *Poetry of Opposition and Revolution; Dryden to Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 246-9; Karen Mills-Courts, *Poetry as Epitaph; Representation and Poetic Language* (Baton Rouge, La, 1990), pp. 167-70, and Forest Pyle, *The Ideology of Imagination; Subject and Society in the Discourse of Romanticism* (Stanford, 1995), pp. 68-77. The initial rough-draft version of c. February 1804 is carefully re-transcribed in Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth; An Inner Life* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 194-205 (pp. 197-8). For visionary transformation of the visible in comparison with Turner, see James Heffernan, *The Re-Creation of Landscape; A Study of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Constable, and Turner* (Hanover and London, 1984), pp. 154-63; for the complex question of successive revision see Jack Stillinger, 'Multiple "Consciousnesses" in Wordsworth's *Prelude*', in his *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (New York, 1991), Chap. 4 (pp. 69-95), pp. 90-4.

(1805-6); see Mark L. Reed (ed.), *The Thirteen-Book Prelude* (2 vols, Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), I, pp. 171-2; Oxford ed. (1959), pp. 546-7.

The 'long halloos' of territorial owls are also part of the moonlit scene at the start of 'The Idiot Boy' (1798), and later in his travel the half-wit boy Johnny makes his own babbled reply fortuitously echoing their calls, which persist all through Betty's journey and his, right through to the story's end. But the Winander boy's power of conscious mimicry is in instructive contrast with Johnny's abjection; what is carried far into Johnny's idiot heart cannot overtly be told. See also Wordsworth's own note on 'There Was a Boy' in his Preface to the *Poems in Two Volumes* (1815), given in *The Prose Works*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and J.W. Smyser (Oxford, 1974), III, pp. 39 & 48-9, and also Butler and Green (eds), *Lyrical Ballads*, (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992), p. 379; quoted in the Oxford ed. (1959), p. 547. Jeffrey comments, predictably and unfavourably, in 'On Crabbe's *Poems*', *Edinburgh Review* (April, 1808); for fuller discussion, see Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* (New Haven, 1964), pp. 19-22, and his 'The Wordsworthian Enlightenment', in Elam (Helen Regueiro) and Ferguson (Frances), *The Wordsworthian Enlightenment; Romantic Poetry and the Ecology of Reading* (Baltimore, Md, 2005), esp. pp. 35-41, also 299-308; David Ellis, *Wordsworth, Freud and the Spots of Time; Interpretation in 'The Prelude'* (Cambridge, 1985), 'The Winander Boy' (pp. 114-21); Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism; Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 106-8; and J. Douglas Kneale, *Romantic Aversions; Aftermaths of Classicism in Wordsworth and Coleridge* (Liverpool, 1999), pp. 20-7 (also p. 159, n. 21 for further citations); Michael O'Neill, 'Lyrical Ballads and "Pre-Established Codes of Decision"', in Nicola Trott and Seamus Perry (eds), *1800: The New 'Lyrical Ballads'* (Houndmills, 2001), pp. 123-40. Further discussion (passim) in J.H. Prynne, *Field Notes: 'The Solitary Reaper' and Others* (Cambridge, 2007). Paul de Man's essay, 'Time and History in Wordsworth', *Diacritics*, 17 (1987), 4-17, is also somewhat well-known.

7. In the series of Poems placed under the head of Imagination, I have begun with one of the earliest processes of Nature in the development of this faculty. Guided by one of my own primary consciousnesses, I have represented a commutation and transfer of internal feelings, co-operating with external accidents, to plant, for immortality, images of sound and sight, in the celestial soil of the Imagination. The Boy, there introduced, is listening, with something of a feverish and restless anxiety, for the recurrence of the riotous sounds which he had previously excited; and, at the moment when the intenseness of his mind is beginning to remit, he is surprised into a perception of the solemn and tranquillizing images which the Poem describes.

William Wordsworth, 'Preface' to the Edition of 1815 [this section excluded after 1836]; *Prose Works*, III, p. 35, see also p. 48: the poem referred to is 'There Was a Boy'; in the 1836 revision, 'images of sound and sight' is changed to 'conjoined impressions of sound and sight'; and compare Jared R. Curtis, *Wordsworth's Experiments with Tradition; The Lyric Poems of 1802*,

with Texts of the Poems Based on Early Manuscripts (Ithaca, N.Y., 1971), pp. 14-18).

8. Friend of the Wise! and Teacher of the Good!
 Into my heart have I received that Lay
 More than historic, that prophetic Lay
 Wherein (high theme by thee first sung aright) 5
 Of the foundations and the building up
 Of the Human Spirit, thou hast dared to tell
 What may be told, to th'understanding mind
 Revealable; and what within the mind
 By vital Breathings, like the secret soul
 Of vernal growth, oft quickens in the Heart 10
 Thoughts all to deep for words!--
- Theme hard as high!
- Of smiles spontaneous, and mysterious fears
 (The first-born they of Reason and twin-birth)
 Of tides obedient to external force,
 And currents self-determined, as might seem, 15
 Or by some inner Power; of moments awful,
 Now in thy inner life, and now abroad,
 When Power stream'd from thee, and thy soul received
 The light reflected, as a light bestow'd--
 Of Fancies fair, and milder hours of youth, 20
 Hyblean murmurs of Poetic Thought
 Industrious in its Joy, in Vales and Glens
 Native or outland, Lakes and famous Hills!
 Or on the lonely High-road, when the Stars
 Were rising; or by secret Mountain-streams, 25
 The Guides and the Companions of thy way!

S.T. Coleridge, from 'To a Gentleman. Composed on the Night after his recitation of a Poem on the Growth of an Individual Mind' (the first 26 lines). Published in this revised form in Coleridge's *Sibylline Leaves* (1817); but a much earlier unrevised MS draft gives the title as: 'To W. Wordsworth; Lines Composed, for the Greater Part on the Night, on which he finished the recitation of his Poem (in thirteen Books) concerning the growth and history of his own Mind. Jan^{ry}, 1807. Cole-orton, near Ashby de la Zouch'. Text (1817 version) from *Poems*, ed. John Beer (London 1993), p. 393; for full text-history with variants see Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. J.C.C. Mays (3 vols in 6, Princeton, 2001), II pt 2, pp. 1028-36. For comment on the closeness in idea and style of Wordsworth and Coleridge at this point see Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin; Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 59-60, 87-90.

9. LAKE REMINISCENCES; BY THE ENGLISH OPIUM-EATER

It was in the course of these pursuits, by an indirect effect growing gradually upon him, that Wordsworth became a passionate lover of nature, at the time when the growth of his intellectual faculties made it possible that he should combine those thoughtful passions with the experience of the eye and the ear. There is, amongst the poems of Wordsworth, one most ludicrously misconstrued by his critics, which offers a philosophical hint upon this subject, of great instruction. I will preface it with the little incident which first led Wordsworth into a commentary upon his own meaning. One night, as often enough happened, during the Peninsular war, he and I had walked up Dunmail Raise, from Grasmere, about midnight, in order to meet the carrier who brought the London newspapers, by a circuitous course from Keswick. The case was this:--Coleridge, for many years, received a copy of the *Courier*, as a mark of esteem, and in acknowledgment of his many contributions to it, from one of the proprietors, Mr Daniel Stewart. This went up in any case, let Coleridge be where he might, to Mrs Coleridge; for a single day, it staid at Keswick, for the use of Southey; and, on the next, it came on to Wordsworth, by the slow conveyance of a carrier, plying with a long train of carts between Whitehaven and Kendal. Many a time the force of storms or floods would compel the carrier to stop on his route, five miles short of Grasmere, at Wythburn, or even eight miles short, at Legberthwaite. But, as there was always hope until one or two o'clock in the morning, often and often it would happen that, in the deadly impatience for earlier intelligence, Wordsworth and I would walk off to meet him about midnight, to a distance of three or four miles. Upon one of these occasions, when some great crisis in Spain was daily apprehended, we had waited for an hour or more, sitting upon one of the many huge blocks of stone which lie scattered over that narrow field of battle on the desolate frontier of Cumberland and Westmoreland, where King Dun Mail, with all his peerage, fell, more than a thousand years ago. The time had arrived, at length, that all hope for that night had left us: no sound came up through the winding valleys that stretched to the north; and the few cottage lights, gleaming, at wide distances, from recesses amidst the rocky hills, had long been extinct. At intervals, Wordsworth had stretched himself at length on the high road, applying his ear to the ground, so as to catch any sound of wheels that might be groaning along at a distance. Once, when he was slowly rising from this effort, his eye caught a bright star that was glittering between the brow of Seat Sandal and of the mighty Helvellyn. He gazed upon it for a minute or so; and then, upon turning away to descend into Grasmere, he made the following explanation:--"I have remarked, from my earliest days, that, if under any circumstances, the attention is energetically braced up to an act of steady observation, or of steady expectation, then, if this intense condition of vigilance should suddenly relax, at that moment any beautiful, any impressive visual object, or collection of objects, falling upon the eye, is carried to the heart with a power not known under other circumstances. Just now, my ear was placed upon the stretch, in order to catch any sound of wheels that might come down upon the lake of Wythburn from the Keswick road; at the very instant when I raised my head from the ground, in final abandonment of hope for this night, at the very

instant when the organs of attention were all at once relaxing from their tension, the bright star hanging in the air above those outlines of massy blackness fell suddenly upon my eye, and penetrated my capacity of apprehension with a pathos and a sense of the infinite, that would not have arrested me under other circumstances." He then went on to illustrate the same psychological principle from another instance; it was an instance derived from that exquisite poem in which he describes a mountain boy planting himself at twilight on the margin of some solitary bay of Windermere, and provoking the owls to a contest with himself, by "mimic hootings" blown through his hands; which of itself becomes an impressive scene to any one able to realize to his fancy the various elements of the solitary woods and waters, the solemn vesper hour, the solitary bird, the solitary boy. Afterwards, the poem goes on to describe the boy as waiting, amidst "the pauses of his skill," for the answers of the birds--waiting with intensity of expectation--and then, at length, when, after waiting to no purpose, his attention began to relax--that is, in other words, under the giving way of one exclusive direction of his senses, began suddenly to allow an admission to other objects--then, in that instant, the scene actually before him, the visible scene, would enter unawares--

"With all its solemn imagery"--

This complex scenery was--What?

"Was carried *far* into his heart,
With all its pomp, and that uncertain heav'n received
Into the bosom of the steady lake."

This very expression, "far," by which space and its infinities are attributed to the human heart, and to its capacities of re-echoing the sublimities of nature, has always struck me as with a flash of sublime revelation. On this, however, Wordsworth did not say anything in his commentary; nor did he notice the conclusion, which is this. After describing the efforts of the boy, and next the passive state which succeeded, under his disappointment, (in which condition it was that the solemn spectacle entered the boy's mind with effectual power, and with a semi-conscious sense of its beauty that would not be denied,) the poet goes on to say--

"And I suppose that I have stood
A full half-hour beside his quiet grave,
Mute--for he died when he was ten years old."

Wherefore, then, did the poet stand in the village churchyard of Hawkshead, wrapt in a trance of reverie, over the grave of this particular boy? "It was," says Lord Jeffrey, "for that single accomplishment"--viz., the accomplishment of mimicking the Windermere owls so well that not men only--Coleridge, for instance, or Professor Wilson, or other connoisseurs of owl-music--might have been hoaxed, but actually the old birds themselves, grave as they seem, were effectually humbugged into entering upon a sentimental correspondence of love or friendship--almost regularly "duplying," "replying," and "quadruplying," (as Scotch law has it,) to the boy's original theme. But here, in this solution of Lord Jeffrey's, there is, at all events, a dismal oversight; for it is evident to the most careless reader that the very object of the poem is not the first or initial stage of the boy's history--the exercise of skill which led him, as an occasion, into a rigid and tense effort of attention--not this, but the second stage, the consequence of that attention.

Even the attention was an effect, a derivative state; but the second stage, upon which the poet fixes his object, is an effect of that effect; and it is clear that the original notice of the boy's talent is introduced only as a *conditio sine qua non*--a notice without which a particular result (namely, the tense attention of expectation) could not have been made intelligible; as, again, without this result being noticed, the reaction of that action could quite as little have been made intelligible. Else, and but for this conditional and derivative necessity, but for this dependency of the essential circumstance upon the boy's power of mimicry, it is evident that the "accomplishment"--which Lord Jeffrey so strangely supposes to have been the main object of the poet in recording the boy, and the main subject of his reverie by the side of his grave--never would have been noticed. It is difficult, indeed, to conceive a stronger evidence of that incoherency of thought under which Lord Jeffrey must have allowed himself to read Wordsworth than this very blunder. But, leaving his Lordship, what *was* the subject of the poet's reverie? some reader may say. A poem ought to explain itself; and we cannot for a moment admit, as a justifying subject for reverie, any private knowledge which the poet might happen to have of the boy's character, or of the expectations he had chanced to raise amongst his friends. I will endeavour to say a word on this question; but, that I may not too much interrupt the narration, in a note. At the same time, let me remind the reader of one great and undeniable truth: It is a fact which cannot be controverted, except by the very thoughtless and the very unobserving, that scarcely one in a thousand of impassioned cases, scarcely one effect in a thousand of all the memorable effects produced by poets, can, upon any theories yet received amongst us, be even imperfectly explained. And, especially, this is true of original poetry. The cases are past numbering in which the understanding says, or seems to say, one thing, impassioned nature another; and, in poetry, at least, Cicero's great rule will be found to fail--that "*nunquam aliud natura, aliud sapientia dicit*;" if, at least, we understand *sapientia* to mean dispassionate good sense. How, for instance, could plain good sense--how could the very finest understanding--have told any man, beforehand, that love in excess, amongst its other modes of waywardness, was capable of prompting such appellations as that of "wretch" to the beloved object? Yet, as a fact, as an absolute fact of the experience, it is undeniable that it is among the impulses of love, in extremity, to clothe itself in the language of disparagement--*why*, is yet to be explained.

"Perhaps 'tis pretty
 To mutter and mock a broken charm;
 To dally with wrong that does no harm;
 Perhaps 'tis pretty to tie together
 Thoughts so all unlike each other;
 To feel, at each wild word, within,
 A sweet recoil of love and pity.
 And what if, in a world of sin"--&c. &c.

That is Coleridge's solution; and the amount of it is--first, that it is delightful to call up what we know to be a mere mimicry of evil, in order to feel its non-reality; to dally with phantoms of pain that do not exist: secondly, that such language acts by way of *contrast*, making the love more prominent by the contradictoriness of its expression: thirdly, that in a world of sin, where evil passions are so often called into action, and have thus matured the

language of violence in a service of malignity, naturally enough the feeling of violence and excess stumbles into its old forms of expression, even when the excess happens to lie in the very opposite direction. All this seems specious, and is undoubtedly some part of the solution; and the verses are so fancifully beautiful, that they would recommend even a worse philosophy. But, after all, I doubt if the whole philosophy be given: and, in a similar attempt of Charles Lamb's, the case is not so much solved as further illustrated and amplified. Finally, if solved completely, this case is but one of multitudes which are furnished by the English drama: but (and I would desire no better test of the essential inferiority attaching to the French drama--no better argument of its having grown out of a radically lower nature) there is not, from first to last, throughout that vaunted field of the French literature, one case of what I may denominate the antinomies of passion--cases of self-conflict, in which the understanding says one thing, the impassioned nature of man says another thing. This is a great theme, however, and I dismiss it to a separate discussion.

So far, however, as I have here noticed it, this question has arisen naturally out of the account, as I was endeavouring to sketch it, of Wordsworth's attachment to nature in her grandest forms. It grew out of solitude and the character of his own mind; but the mode of its growth was indirect and unconscious, and in the midst of other more boyish or more worldly pursuits; and that which happened to the boy in mimicking the owls happened also to him.

[Thomas de Quincey], 'Lake Reminiscences, from 1807 to 1830. By the English Opium-Eater. William Wordsworth--Continued,' *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, VI (1839), pp. 92-93. Most of this passage is omitted from the revised version printed in de Quincey's *Works*, Vol. II but is given in full in David Wright's edition of the *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 159-64. See also Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, III, p. 48; Denis Devlin, *De Quincey, Wordsworth and the Art of Prose* (London, 1983), esp. Chap. 4: 'Power and Knowledge', together with J.B. Beer, 'De Quincey and the Dark Sublime: The Wordsworth-Coleridge Ethos', in Robert Lance Snyder (ed.), *Thomas De Quincey; Bicentenary Studies* (London, 1985), and Jonathan Bate, 'The Literature of Power: Coleridge and De Quincey', in Tim Fulford and Morton Paley (eds), *Coleridge's Visionary Languages: Essays in Honour of J.B. Beer* (Cambridge, 1993). And then further: David Ellis, *Wordsworth, Freud and the Spots of Time; Interpretation in 'The Prelude'* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 64-7; 190, n. 34; Richard Bourke, *Romantic Discourse and Political Modernity; Wordsworth, The Intellectual and Cultural Critique* (Hemel Hempstead, 1993), pp. 210-13; and Charles Rzepka, *Sacramental Commodities; Gift, Text, and the Sublime in De Quincey* (Amherst, Mass., 1995).

Of the two great Wordsworthian themes broached here, of attachment to nature and of thoughtful human passion, it is necessary to recognise the evolutionary complexity of these concepts; see e.g. Malcolm Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature* (Oxford, 2004), and Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions; The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category*

(Cambridge, 2004).

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