

WORDSWORTH'S *PRELUDE* : SEVEN

1. A familiar incident may elucidate this contrast in the operations of Nature, may render plain the manner in which a process of intellectual improvements, the reverse of that which Nature pursues[,] is by Reason introduced: There never perhaps existed a School-boy who, having when her retired to rest, carelessly blown out his candle, and having chanced to notice as he lay upon his bed in the ensuing darkness, the sullen light which had survived the extinguished flame, did not, at some time or other, watch that light as if his mind were bound to it by a spell. It fades and revives--gathers to a point--seems as if it would go out in a moment--again recovers it's strength, nay becomes brighter than before: it continues to shine with an endurance, which in its apparent weakness is a mystery--it protracts its existence so long, clinging to the power which supports it, that the Observer, who has laid down in his bed so easy-minded, becomes sad and melancholy: his sympathies are touched--it is to him an intimation and an image of departing human life,--the thought comes nearer to him--it is the life of a venerated Parent, of a beloved Brother or Sister, or of an aged Domestic; who are gone to the grave, or whose destiny it soon may be thus to linger, thus to hang upon the last point of mortal existence, thus finally to depart and be seen no more--This is Nature teaching seriously and sweetly through the affections--melting the heart, and, through that instinct of tenderness, developing the understanding.--In this instance the object of solicitude is the bodily life of another. Let us accompany this same Boy to that period between Youth and Manhood, when a solicitude may be awakened for the moral life of himself.--Are there any powers by which, beginning with a sense of inward decay that affects not however the natural life, he could call up to mind the same image and hang over it with an equal interest as a visible type of his own perishing Spirit?--Oh! surely, if the being of the individual be under his own care--if it be his first care--if duty begin from the point of accountableness to our Conscience, and, through that, to God and human Nature;--if without such primary sense of duty, all secondary care of Teacher, of Friend, or Parent, must be baseless and fruitless; if, lastly, the motions of the Soul transcend in worth those of the animal functions, nay give to them their sole value; then truly are there such powers: and the image of the dying taper may be recalled and contemplated, though with no sadness in the nerves, no disposition to tears, no unconquerable sighs, yet with a melancholy in the soul, a sinking inward into ourselves from thought to thought, a steady remonstrance, and a high resolve.--Let then the Youth go back, as occasion will permit, to Nature and to Solitude, thus admonished by Reason, and relying upon this newly-acquired support. A world of fresh sensations will gradually open upon him as his mind puts off its infirmities, and as instead of being propelled restlessly towards others in admiration, or too hasty love, he makes it his prime business to understand himself. New sensations, I affirm, will be

opened out--pure, and sanctioned by that reason which is their original Author; and precious feelings of disinterested, that is self-disregarding joy and love may be regenerated and restored:--and, in this sense, he may be said to measure back the track of life he has trod.

M.M. [William Wordsworth], from [Reply to 'Mathetes'], *The Friend*, ed. S.T. Coleridge, N° 20, January 4, 1810; text from B.E. Rooke (ed.), *The Friend* (2 vols, London, 1969), II, pp. 264-5; for the revised text of 1818 see I, pp. 398-9; see also *Prose Works*, ed. Owen and Smyser (Oxford, 1974), II, pp. 17-18, 38-9; Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth; A Life* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 277-9; and for brief context and background, Kenneth Johnston, *Wordsworth and 'The Recluse'* (New Haven, 1984), pp. 266-7. Compare also the unused passage of *The Prelude* in MS Y, drafted in autumn 1804 for Book VIII; detailed transcription in *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed (Ithaca & London, 1991), pp. 378-88, also given in *The Prelude*, ed. de Selincourt and Darbishire (Oxford, 1959), pp. 569-578.

The flickering dashes here which constantly intervene to avert the final snuffing out of the sentence, and to maintain precarious connection of image and reflection beyond the sentence-end, dramatise this focus upon the mystery of intimation. The acute suggestiveness of the taper reminiscence was very observantly noted by the Victorian critic R.H. Hutton; see his 'William Wordsworth', *National Review*, IV (1857), 1-30, later collected in his *Essays Theological and Literary* and *Literary Essays* (in each with slightly altered title). For a (somewhat schematic) account in Freudian context of introjection and phantasy, see Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 120-29; for the portent of death and deep transition marked by the moment of most intense consciousness in another Wordsworthian context, the climax of 'There Was a Boy', see Paul de Man, 'Wordsworth and Hölderlin', in his *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), pp. 53-4; and for the relations between memory and image see Paul Ricoeur, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago, 2004), pp. 44-55. An instructive further comparison is with [William Hazlitt], *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805), who analyses a physiological imagination by taking the example of a child that has been burnt by the fire and who consequently conceives a dread of it: 'He remembers being burnt himself as an actual sensation, and he does not remember the actual sensations of any one but himself: therefore being able to trace back his present feelings to his past impressions, and struck with the extreme faintness of the one compared with the other, he gives way to his immediate apprehensions and imaginary fears only as he is conscious of, and dreads, the possibility of their returning into the same state of actual sensation again' (p. 57). On this incident of self-burning see also David Bromwich, *Hazlitt; The Mind of a Critic* (New York, 1983), pp. 51-2.

2. The most successful evocative experiment can only project the echo of a past sensation, because, being an act of intellection, it is conditioned by the prejudices of the intelligence which abstracts from any given sensation, as being illogical and insignificant, a discordant and frivolous intruder, whatever word or gesture, sound or perfume, cannot be fitted into the puzzle of a concept. But the essence of any new experience is contained precisely in this mysterious element that the vigilant will rejects as an anachronism. It is the axis about which the sensation pivots, the centre of gravity of its coherence. So that no amount of voluntary manipulation can reconstitute in its integrity an impression that the will has--so to speak--buckled into incoherence. But if, *by accident*, and given favourable circumstances (a relaxation of the subject's habit of thought and a reduction of the radius of his memory, a generally diminished tension of consciousness following upon a phase of extreme discouragement), if by some miracle of analogy the central impression of a past sensation recurs as an immediate stimulus which can be instinctively identified by the subject with the model of duplication (*whose integral purity has been retained because it has been forgotten*), then the total past sensation, not its echo nor its copy, but the sensation itself, annihilating every spatial and temporal restriction, comes in a rush to engulf the subject in all the beauty of its infallible proportion. Thus the sound produced by a spoon struck against a plate is subconsciously identified by the narrator with the sound of a hammer struck by a mechanic against the wheel of a train drawn up before a wood, a sound that his will had rejected as extraneous to its immediate activity. But a subconscious and disinterested act of perception has reduced the object--the wood--to its immaterial and spiritually digestible equivalent, and the record of this pure act of cognition has not merely been associated with this sound of a hammer struck against a wheel, but centralised about it. The mood, as usual, has no importance. The point of departure of the Proustian exposition is not the crystalline agglomeration but its kernel--the crystallised. The most trivial experience--he says in effect--is encrusted with elements that logically are not related to it and have consequently been rejected by our intelligence: it is imprisoned in a vase filled with a certain perfume and a certain colour and raised to a certain temperature. These vases are suspended along the height of our years, and, not being accessible to our intelligent memory, are in a sense immune, the purity of their climatic content is guaranteed by forgetfulness, each one is kept at its distance, at its date. So that when the imprisoned microcosm is besieged in the manner described, we are flooded by a new air and a new perfume (new precisely because already experienced), and we breathe the true air of Paradise, of the only Paradise that is not the dream of a madman, the Paradise that has been lost.

The identification of immediate with past experience, the recurrence of past action or reaction in the present, amounts to a participation between the ideal and the real, imagination and direct apprehension, symbol and substance. Such participation frees the essential reality that is denied to the contemplative as to the active life.

What is common to present and past is more essential than either taken separately. Reality, whether approached imaginatively or empirically, remains a surface, hermetic. Imagination, applied--a priori--to what is absent, is exercised in vacuo and cannot tolerate the limits of the real. Nor is any direct and purely experimental contact possible between subject and object, because they are automatically separated by the subject's consciousness of perception, and the object loses its purity and becomes a mere intellectual pretext or motive. But, thanks to this reduplication, the experience is at once imaginative and empirical, at once an evocation and a direct perception, real without being merely actual, ideal without being merely abstract, the ideal real, the essential, the extra-temporal.

Samuel Beckett, 'Proust' [1931], in Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit, *Proust; Three Dialogues* (London, 1965), pp. 71-5; italics original. On Beckett and Proust see Leslie Hill, *Beckett's Fiction, in Different Words* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 1-7, 164-5 (n. 2). For a view of the temporality of narrative structures in Proust, non-linear in text-memory and in the syntax of sentences and paragraphs, see Malcolm Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars* (London, 1998), Chap. II: 'Time' (pp. 30-67). On the proximate origins of Proustian ideas about involuntary memory see Julia Kristeva, *Time & Sense; Proust and the Experience of Literature*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York, 1996), pp. 170-3, 251-59, 262-4, and esp. her Chap. 8: 'The Proustian Sentence' (pp. 279-304). See further Wollheim, *The Thread of Life*, pp. 99-109, 117; Esther Salaman, *A Collection of Moments; A Study of Involuntary Memories* (London, 1970); Dorte Berntsen, 'Voluntary and Involuntary Access to Autobiographical Memory', *Memory*, 6 (1998), 113-141; and (maybe also) Robyn Fivush and Jessica Sales, 'Children's Memories of Emotional Events', in Daniel Reisberg and Oauka Hertel (eds), *Memory and Emotion* (Oxford, 2004).

3. Thus have I look'd, nor ceas'd to look, oppress'd
 By thoughts of what, and whither, when and how, 600
 Until the shapes before my eyes became
 A second-sight procession, such as glides
 Over still mountains, or appears in dreams;
 And all the ballast of familiar life,
 The present, and the past; hope, fear; all stays, 605
 All laws of acting, thinking, speaking man
 Went from me, neither knowing me nor known.
 And once, far travell'd in such mood, beyond
 The reach of common indications, lost
 Amid the moving pageant, 'twas my chance 610
 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. 615

Of life: the hiding-places of my power
 Seem open: I approach, and then they close;
 I see by glimpses now; when age comes on
 May scarcely see at all, and I would give, 320
 While yet we may, as far as words can give,
 A substance and a life to what I feel:
 I would enshrine the spirit of the past
 For future restoration.

William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805-6), XI, 326-343; text from *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed (2 vols, Ithaca & London, 1991), I, pp. 302-3. The lineation here is complicated by revisions, and in Jonathan Wordsworth's *Four Texts* edition these lines are XI (1805-6), 325-342 (and see also his annotations, p. 648). For comment see Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry*, pp. 217-9; Kenneth Johnston, *Wordsworth and 'The Recluse'* (New Haven, 1984), p. 121; also James K. Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature; A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 214-5, and especially Thomas McFarland, *William Wordsworth; Intensity and Achievement* (Oxford, 1992), Chap. 6.

5. I was in my twenty-fourth year, when I had the happiness of knowing Mr. Wordsworth personally, and while memory lasts, I shall hardly forget the sudden effect produced on my mind, by his recitation of a manuscript poem, which still remains unpublished There was here, no mark of strained thought, or forced diction, no crowd or turbulence of imagery, and, as the poet hath himself well described in his lines "on re-visiting the Wye", manly reflection, and human associations had given both variety, and an additional interest to natural objects, which in the passion and appetite of the first love they had seemed to him neither to need or permit.

. . . It was not however the freedom from false taste, whether as to common defects, or to those more properly his own, which made so unusual an impression on my feelings immediately, and subsequently on my judgement. It was the union of deep feeling with profound thought; the fine balance of truth in observing with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed; and above all the original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere*, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations, of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle and the dew drops. . . . And therefore it is the prime merit of genius and its most unequivocal mode of manifestation, so to represent familiar objects as to awaken in the minds of others a kindred feeling concerning them and that freshness of sensation which is the constant accompaniment of mental, no less than of bodily, convalescence. . . . "In poems, equally as in philosophic disquisitions, genius produces the strongest impressions of novelty, while it rescues the most admitted truths from the impotence caused by the very

circumstance of their universal admission".

S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), ed. J. Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton and London, 1983), Vol. I, pp. 78-82. Coleridge and Wordsworth first met on or about 1st September 1795. The lines 'on re-visiting the Wye' are of course 'Tintern Abbey'. In the final sentence above, Coleridge quotes from himself in a passage from *The Friend*.

6. Nor less do I remember to have felt 235
 Distinctly manifested at this time
 A dawning, even as of another sense,
 A human-heartedness about my love
 For objects, hitherto the gladsome air
 Of my own private being, and no more; 240
 Which I had loved, even as a blessed Spirit,
 Or Angel, if he were to dwell on earth,
 Might love, in individual happiness.
 But now there open'd on me other thoughts,
 Of change, congratulation, and regret, 245
 A new-born feeling. It spread far and wide;
 The trees, the mountains shared it, and the brooks.

William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805-6), IV, 235-247; text from *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed (2 vols, Ithaca & London, 1991), I, p. 156. For 'dawning' compare the passage from Book XI, above: 'The days gone by / Come back upon me from the dawn almost / Of life'. Johnson in his *Dictionary* defines 'congratulation' as 'The act of professing joy for the happiness or success of another'.

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