

## REVALUATIONS (VI)

## WORDSWORTH

WORDSWORTH'S greatness and its nature seem to be, in a general way, pretty justly recognized in current acceptance, the established habit of many years. Clear critical recognition, however, explicit in critical statement, is another matter, and those who really read him to-day—who read him as they read contemporary literature—will agree that, in spite of the number of distinguished critics who have written on him, satisfactory statement is still something to be attempted. And to attempt it with any measure of success would be to revalue Wordsworth, to achieve a clearer insight and a fresh realization.

There is—a time-honoured critical blur or indecision—the question of Wordsworth's 'thought.' 'I think Wordsworth possessed more of the genius of a great philosophic poet than any man I ever knew, or, as I believe, has existed in England since Milton,' said Coleridge. With this pronouncement, standing by itself, no one need be concerned to quarrel; most Wordsworthians, probably, see in it something for positive acclaim. But under the same date<sup>1</sup> in *Table Talk* Coleridge has already been more explicit: 'Then the plan laid out and, I believe, partly suggested by me, was, that Wordsworth should assume the station of a man in mental repose, one whose principles were made up, and so prepared to deliver upon authority a system of philosophy . . . It is in substance what I have been all my life doing in my system of philosophy.' 'System of philosophy,' it might still be contended (in spite, perhaps, of the concluding reference to Coleridge's own system), is an expression susceptible of more than one value, but it is generally agreed that Coleridge here proposes for Wordsworth an ambition that proved unmistakably to be far beyond Wordsworth's powers. If the great design fell so far short of realization, that was not for lack of time or will. This there is no need to

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<sup>1</sup>July 21, 1832.

argue. What does seem worth insisting on is the felicitous accuracy (unconscious, no doubt) of Arnold's word when he says that the 'philosophy' is an 'illusion.'

For Wordsworth's 'philosophy' certainly appears, as such, to invite discussion and there is a general belief that we all know, or could know by re-reading *The Prelude*, what his doctrines concerning the growth of the mind and relation of Man to Nature are. His philosophic verse has a convincingly expository tone and manner, and it is difficult not to believe, after reading, say, Book II of *The Prelude*, that one has been reading a paraphrasable argument—difficult not to believe, though the paraphrase, if resolutely attempted, would turn out to be impossible. Few readers, it would seem, have ever made the attempt, and, in fact, to make it resolutely is the real difficulty—if 'difficulty' can describe the effect of a subtle, pervasive and almost irresistible dissuasion from effort.

This, at any rate, describes fairly the working of Wordsworth's philosophic verse. His triumph is to command the kind of attention he requires and to permit no other. To demonstrate this conclusively is much easier in spoken discussion before an open text than in writing: one really needs to go through some hundreds of lines of *The Prelude*, Book II, analysing and commenting. Here a few illustrations must suffice, as indeed, to point the attention effectively, they should: that once done, the demonstration is the reading, as anyone who cares to open his Wordsworth may see; the facts, to the adverted eye, are obvious.

Consider, to start with, a representative improvement as revealed in Professor de Selincourt's admirable edition of *The Prelude*. A key passage runs, in the version of 1805-6 (ll. 238-266):

Bless'd the infant Babe,  
(For with my best conjectures I would trace  
The progress of our Being) blest the Babe,  
Nurs'd in his Mother's arms, 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!  
Such feelings pass into his torpid life  
Like an awakening breeze, and hence his mind

Even [in the first trial of its powers]  
 Is prompt and watchful, eager to combine  
 In one appearance all the elements  
 And parts of the same object, else detach'd  
 And loth to coalesce. Thus day by day,  
 Subjected to the discipline of love,  
 His organs and recipient faculties  
 Are quicken'd, are more vigorous, his mind spreads,  
 Tenacious of the forms which it receives.  
 In one beloved presence, nay and more,  
 In that most apprehensive habitude  
 And those sensations which have been deriv'd  
 From this beloved Presence, there exists  
 A virtue which irradiates and exalts  
 All objects through all intercourse of sense.  
 No outcast he, bewilder'd and depress'd ;  
 Along his infant veins are interfus'd  
 The gravitation and the filial bond  
 Of nature, that connect him with the world.  
 Emphatically such a Being lives,  
 An inmate of this *active* universe . . .

In the version of 1850 we read (ll. 233-254) :

Blest the infant Babe,  
 (For with my best conjecture I would trace  
 Our Being's earthly progress) blest the Babe,  
 Nursed in his Mother's arms, who sinks to sleep  
 Rocked on his Mother's breast ; who with his soul  
 Drinks in the feelings of his Mother's eye!  
 For him, in one dear Presence, there exists  
 A virtue which irradiates and exalts  
 Objects through widest intercourse of sense.  
 No outcast he, bewildered and depressed :  
 Along his infant veins are interfused  
 The gravitation and the filial bond  
 Of nature that connect him with the world.  
 Is there a flower, to which he points with hand  
 Too weak to gather it, already love  
 Drawn from love's purest earthly fount for him

Hath beautified that flower ; already shades  
 Of pity cast from inward tenderness  
 Do fall around him upon aught that bears  
 Unsightly marks of violence or harm.  
 Emphatically such a Being lives  
 Frail creature as he is, helpless as frail,  
 An inmate of this active universe . . .

No one is likely to dispute that the later version is decidedly the more satisfactory. But it is worth asking in what way. The earlier, it will be noticed, is by very much the more explicit. More important, it calls for a different kind of attention—the kind of attention one gives to a philosophical or psychological argument.

. . . eager to combine  
 In one appearance, all the elements  
 And parts of the same object, else detached  
 And loth to coalesce.  
  
 In one beloved presence, nay and more,  
 In that most apprehensive habitude  
 And those sensations which have been deriv'd  
 From this beloved Presence . . .

—The phraseology is technical, and we are reminded of that close study of Hartley, and of Wordsworth's belief (as a philosopher) that associationism explained his own experience. (That belief itself suggests pretty forcibly how external in Wordsworth was the relation between systematic philosopher and poet ; and a comment on his debt to Hartley is the exasperating classification, on Hartleian principles, of the collected Poems). Actually, the earlier version does not explain anything any more satisfactorily than the later: the parts afterwards omitted merely incite to an attention that the argument will not bear. Not that Wordsworth is likely to have given himself this reason for the change ; guided by his poet's touch, he was reducing recalcitrant elements to the general mode in which the best parts of *The Prelude* are written.

That mode is one examined by Mr. Empson (from his own special approach) in an analysis of the central passage of *Tintern Abbey* (see *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, pp. 191-194). His analysis, though he misquotes and seriously mispunctuates, is in general

effect sound enough: he is exhibiting in a particular instance, which could be very easily matched, what many readers of Wordsworth besides the present one must have known as an essential Wordsworthian habit. Wordsworth in such passages as are in question produces the mood, feeling or experience and at the same time appears to be giving an explanation of it. The expository effect sorts well with—blends into—the characteristic meditative gravity of the emotional presentment ('emotion recollected in tranquillity'), and in the key passages, where significance seems specially to reside, the convincing success of the poetry covers the argument: it is only by the most resolute and sustained effort (once it occurs to one that effort is needed) that one can pay to the argument, as such, the attention it appears to have invited and satisfied. And when one does pay the necessary attention one always finds the kind of thing illustrated in Mr. Empson's analysis.

How difficult it is to attend to the argument Mr. Empson, earlier in his book, perhaps illustrates unwittingly: 'Wordsworth frankly had no inspiration other than his use, when a boy, of the mountains as a totem or father-substitute . . . ' (*Ambiguity*, p. 26). Mr. Empson, of course, may be able to give some good reason for his remark, and one can think of passages he might cite. But the principal document is Book II of *The Prelude*, and Wordsworth there stresses the mother: he explicitly and at length relates the mode of experience celebrated in the famous central passage of *Tintern Abbey* (that analysed by Mr. Empson) to the experience of the child in its mother's arms.

In the passage quoted above (in both versions) it is plain enough. Yet I myself must confess to having been long familiar, if that is the word, with Book II before I really took note of what the passage was about—realized its relation to the passage in *Tintern Abbey*. Then reading it one day (in the earlier version) I found myself halting at:

In one beloved presence, nay and more,  
 In that most apprehensive habitude  
 And those sensations which have been deriv'd  
 From this beloved Presence, there exists  
 A virtue which irradiates and exalts  
 All objects through all intercourse of sense.

Partly it was that 'Presence' (the mother's), recalling the common Wordsworthian use of the word: 'A Presence which is not to be put by'—'A presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts.' But more still it was the feeling that the full stop came too soon—that a final phrase was missing. And then the phrase offered itself:

And rolls through all things.

Plainly, what had arrested me was the suggestion of the lines in *Tintern Abbey*:

A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

For the first time I recognized with full attention and complete realization what is quite explicit: that Wordsworth here is explaining how he comes to have the kind of experience he describes in *Tintern Abbey*. Or, lest I should be misunderstood, let me say that for the first time it occurred to me to put it in this way, for the meaning must be in some sense clear at first reading. So hard is it (for I have established by experiment and inquiry that I am not, in this matter, exceptionally obtuse) to read Wordsworth with the kind of attention that the argument, if it were what it appears to be, would demand. Actually, of course, no real explaining is done in either version, and in the later Wordsworth removes all incitement to the inquiry whether or not what he offers would be accepted as an explanation if it were rendered in prose. The poetry, uninterrupted in the amended version, is complete and satisfactory; it defines convincingly—presents in such a way that no further explanation seems necessary—the sense of 'belonging' in the universe, of a kinship known inwardly though the rising springs of life and consciousness and outwardly in an interplay of recognition and response:

No outcast he, bewilder'd and depress'd ;  
Along his infant veins are interfus'd  
The gravitation and the filial bond  
Of nature, that connect him with the world.

—'Thank God I am not free, any more than a rooted tree is free.' The play of varied metaphorical implications (the imagery

is complex—'interfus'd,' 'gravitation,' 'filial bond') does what a Hartleian commentary can only weaken.

Even if there were not so much poetry to hold the mind in a subtly incompatible mode of attention, it would still be difficult to continue attending to the philosophic argument, because of the way in which the verse, evenly meditative in tone and movement, goes on and on, without dialectical suspense and crisis or rise and fall. By an innocently insidious trick Wordsworth, in this calm ruminative progression, will appear to be preoccupied with a scrupulous nicety of statement, with a judicial weighing of alternative possibilities, while actually making it more difficult to check the argument from which he will emerge, as it were inevitably, with a far from inevitable conclusion. Examine, for instance, what leads up to the 'Thus' of line 415 in Book II (1805-6; l. 396 in the 1850 version):

Thus did my days pass on, and now at length  
From Nature and her overflowing soul  
I had received so much that all my thoughts  
Were steep'd in feeling . . .

Nowhere does *The Prelude* yield a more satisfactory presentation of the 'thought,' though the orthodox doctrinal passages of *The Excursion*—at the beginning of Book IV, for instance—are plain enough.

Yet the burden of *The Prelude* is, nevertheless, not essentially ambiguous, and Wordsworth's didactic offer was not mere empty self-delusion. It was not for nothing that men like Mill and Leslie Stephen could count Wordsworth an influence in their lives, and there was more to be derived from him than mere emotional refreshment

(He laid us, as we lay at birth,  
On the cool flowery lap of earth).

He had, if not a philosophy, a wisdom to communicate. The mistake encouraged by Coleridge is understandable, and we can see how *The Recluse* should have come to be projected—see, too, that the petering out of the enterprise in that long life does not prove essential failure (though it proves the enterprise misconceived). It may be said, fairly, that Wordsworth went on tinkering

with *The Prelude* through his life instead of completing the great 'philosophic poem' because, as he had in the end tacitly to recognize, his resources weren't adequate to the ambition—he very obviously hadn't enough material. But it must also be said that in letting the ambition lapse he was equally recognizing its superfluity: his real business was achieved. His wisdom is sufficiently presented in the body of his living work.

What he had for presentment was a type and a standard of human normality, a way of life; his preoccupation with sanity and spontaneity working at a level and in a spirit that it seems appropriate to call religious. His philosophizing (in the sense of the Hartleian studies and applications) hadn't the value he meant it to have; but it is an expression of his intense moral seriousness and a mode of the essential discipline of contemplation that gave consistency and stability to his experience. Wordsworth, we know, is the 'poet of Nature,' and the associations of the term 'Nature' here are unfortunate, suggesting as it does a vaguely pantheistic religion-substitute. If this is all Wordsworth has to offer, or if, as Mr. Empson, expressing (apparently) very much this notion of him, states, he 'had no inspiration other than his use when a boy of the mountains as a totem or father-substitute,' then (the world being what it is) one may save one's irony for other things than his supersession, as the presiding genius of Lakeland, by Mr. Hugh Walpole. But Wordsworth himself, in the famous passage that, 'taken from the conclusion of the first book of *The Recluse*' he offers 'as a kind of *Prospectus* of the design and scope of the whole Poem,' proposes something decidedly different when he stresses 'the Mind of Man' as

My haunt, and the main region of my song.

And Wordsworth here, as a matter of fact, is critically justified. Creative power in him, as in most great poets, was accompanied by a high degree of critical consciousness in the use of it. His critical writings give a good view of his creative pre-occupations; and both his main preoccupation and his achievement are fairly intimated by this passage from the *Letter to John Wilson*:

'You have given me praise for having reflected faithfully in my Poems the feelings of human nature. I would fain hope



that I have done so. But a great Poet ought to do more than this ; he ought, to a certain degree, to rectify men's feelings, to give them new compositions of feelings, to render their feelings more sane, pure, and permanent, in short, more consonant to nature, that is, to eternal nature, and the great moving spirit of things. He ought to travel before men occasionally as well as at their sides.'

' Nature ' in the phrase ' poet of Nature ' can hardly be made to take on the force suggested here ; that is why the description is so unacceptable. Wordsworth's preoccupation was with a distinctively human naturalness, with sanity and spiritual health, and his interest in mountains was subsidiary. His mode of preoccupation, it is true, was that of a mind intent always upon ultimate sanctions, and upon the living connexions between man and the extra-human universe ; it was, that is, in the same sense as Lawrence's was, religious.

If the association of Wordsworth's name with Lawrence's seems incongruous, as it may reasonably do, the following passage, nevertheless, is very well-known :

For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink  
 Deep—and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds  
 To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.  
 All strength—all terror, single or in bands,  
 That ever was put forth in personal form—  
 Jehovah—with his thunder, and the choir  
 Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones—  
 I pass them unalarmed. Not Chaos, not  
 The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,  
 Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out  
 By help of dreams—can breed such fear and awe  
 As fall upon us often when we look  
 Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man—  
 My haunt, and the main region of my song.

This, perhaps, may not extravagantly be allowed to recall Lawrence's preoccupation with the deep levels, the springs, of life, the illimitable mystery that wells up into consciousness (*cf.* ' This is the innermost symbol of man: alone in the darkness

of the cavern of himself, listening to the soundlessness of inflowing fate'). It is possible, at any rate, to rest too easily satisfied with the sense one commonly has of Wordsworth as of a tranquil surface reflecting the sky. How little a 'wise passiveness' (the purpose of which being in Lawrence's words—and there is point in applying words of Lawrence here—'so that that which is perfectly ourselves can take place in us') is mere passiveness the lines quoted above from *The Recluse* sufficiently convey.

But the main effect of bringing Wordsworth and Lawrence together must, of course, be contrast. And the contrast that is proposed by Lawrence's notoriety is a violent one. His pre-occupation with sex is vulgarly both misconceived and over-emphasized; nevertheless, no one would dispute that it is an essential characteristic. Wordsworth's poetry, on the other hand, is remarkable for exhibiting the very opposite of such a pre-occupation—for that is perhaps the best way of putting the case, which may be very easily misrepresented or misapprehended. Shelley, for instance, in *Peter Bell the Third*, says:

But from the first 'twas Peter's drift  
To be a kind of moral eunuch;  
He touched the hem of Nature's shift,  
Felt faint—and never dared uplift  
The closest, all-concealing tunic.

*Peter Bell the Third* contains some very good criticism of Wordsworth, but this stanza tells us more about Shelley—it is of him that that kind of 'feeling faint' is characteristic. Shelley, indeed, is unwittingly illustrating the difference between himself and Wordsworth that he intends to be commenting on.

It is the difference constituting so large an element in the contrast felt, at a glance, when passages of Wordsworth and Shelley are juxtaposed. There is an obvious contrast in movement; or rather, of Shelley's eager, breathless hurry—his verse always seems to lean forward, so that it must run in order not to fall—with Wordsworth's static contemplation ('I gazed and gazed . . .'). But the immediately relevant prompting is to description in terms of temperature: if Wordsworth, as Shelley says, is 'cold' (which is truer in suggestion than 'felt faint,' and hardly congruous with it), Shelley himself seems fevered. And the effect of warmth

derives very largely from the pervasiveness in Shelley's verse of caressing, cherishing, fondling, and, in general, sensuously tender, suggestions, explicit and implicit, more and less subtle. To bring these under the general head of the 'erotic' may seem arbitrary, yet an examination of Shelley's work will show the relation between the 'gentle odours' of this first stanza of *The Question* and the subsequent image of embracing, so significantly inappropriate, to be representative:

I dreamed that, as I wandered by the way,  
 Bare Winter suddenly was changed to Spring,  
 And gentle odours led my steps astray,  
 Mixed with a sound of waters murmuring  
 Along a shelving bank of turf, which lay  
 Under a copse, and hardly dared to fling  
 Its green arms round the bosom of the stream,  
 But kissed it and then fled, as thou mightest in dream.

At any rate, one of the most remarkable facts about Wordsworth's poetry is the virtual absence from it of this whole set of associations and suggestions, and it is this absence that Shelley, when he calls Wordsworth 'cold,' is remarking upon; this is the fact, however perceived, that evokes that 'moral eunuch.' The nature of the fact neither Shelley nor, in his psycho-analytics about Wordsworth's poetic decline, Mr. Herbert Read recognizes. The pathological efficacy that Mr. Read ascribes to the episode of Annette Vallon is discredited by the peculiarity just noted: such an absence of the erotic element hardly suggests repression. It suggests that, whatever reason Wordsworth may have had for choosing not to deal in 'animated description of the pleasures of love,' he had no need of subconscious relief and covert outlets.

There are, in fact, no signs of morbid repression anywhere in Wordsworth's poetry. And his various prose remarks about love plainly come from a mind that is completely free from timidity or uneasiness. The phrase just quoted may be found in the *Letter to John Wilson* (1800). Discussing there the limiting bents and prepossessions that disqualify different readers, 'some,' says Wordsworth, 'cannot tolerate a poem with a ghost or any supernatural agency in it; others would shrink from an animated description of the pleasures of love, as from a thing carnal and libidinous;

some cannot bear to see delicate and refined feelings ascribed to men in low conditions of society . . . ' To take an illustration from a later period of his life, in the *Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns* he pronounces: ' The poet, trusting to primary instincts, luxuriates among the felicities of love and wine ; nor does he shrink from the company of the passion of love, though immoderate . . . '

Sex, nevertheless, in spite of this pronouncement, is virtually absent from Wordsworth's poetry. The absence no doubt constitutes a limitation, a restriction of interest ; but it constitutes at the same time an aspect of Wordsworth's importance. The point of this remark depends on another striking difference between Wordsworth and both Lawrence and Shelley—on the characteristic of his own poetry that Wordsworth indicates here: ' I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity . . . ' Wordsworth here describes the withdrawn, contemplative collectedness of his poetry—' Thus devoted, concentrated in purpose,' and the double description has been elucidated earlier in the *Preface*:

' Not that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formally conceived ; but habits of meditation have, I trust, so prompted and regulated my feelings, that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a *purpose*. If this opinion be erroneous, I can have little right to the name of a Poet. For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings ; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so . . . ' etc.

Spontaneity, that is, as Wordsworth seeks it, involves no cult of the instinctive and primitive at the expense of the rational and civilized ; it is the spontaneity supervening upon complex

development, a spontaneity engaging an advanced and delicate organization. He stands for a distinctly human naturalness ; one, that is, consummating a discipline, moral and other. A poet who can bring home to us the possibility of such a naturalness should to-day be found important. In Wordsworth's poetry the possibility is offered us realized—realized in a mode central and compelling enough to enforce the bearing of poetry upon life, the significance of this poetry for actual living. The absence both of the specifically sexual in any recognizable form and of any sign of repression serves to emphasize this significance, the significance of this achieved naturalness, spontaneous, and yet the expression of an order and the product of an emotional and moral training.

No one should, after what has been said, find it necessary to impute to the critic at this point, or to suppose him to be applauding in Wordsworth, a puritanic warp. Wordsworth was, on the showing of his poetry and everything else, normally and robustly human. The selectiveness and the habit of decorum involved in 'recollection in tranquillity' were normal and, in a wholly laudatory sense of the word, conventional ; that is, so endorsed by common usage as to be natural. The poetic process engaged an organization that had, by his own account, been determined by an upbringing in a congenial social environment, with its wholesome simple pieties and the traditional sanity of its moral culture, which to him were nature. He may have been a 'romantic,' but it would be misleading to think of him as an individualist. The implicit social and moral preoccupation of his self-cummunings in solitude, his recollecting in tranquillity, is fairly suggested by this, from the *Letter to John Wilson* :

' I return then to the question, please whom? or what? I answer, human nature as it has been and ever will be. But, where are we to find the best measure of this? I answer, from within ; by stripping our own hearts naked, and by looking out of ourselves towards men who lead the simplest lives, and most according to nature ; men who have never known false refinements, wayward and artificial desires, false criticisms, effeminate habits of thinking and feeling, or who having known these things have outgrown them. This latter class is the most to be depended upon, but it is very small in number.'

This, of course, is in a sense commonplace about Wordsworth. Yet it would appear to be very easy, in a confusion of anecdote and criticism, biography and poetry, to slip into giving the observation that he was self-centred a wholly uncritical and misleading effect.

He had as much imagination  
As a pint-pot ;—he never could  
Fancy another situation  
From which to dart his contemplation  
Than that wherein he stood.

Shelley here again notes a striking difference between himself and Wordsworth. He could hardly be expected to note—what is not the commonplace it ought to be—that the self-projecting and ardently altruistic Shelley is, in the comparison, the narrowly limited and the egoist (which term, it may be added, applies with less injustice to Milton than to Wordsworth). Wordsworth, it is true, has no dramatic gift, and compared with Shakespeare's, the range of interests he exhibits is narrow. But he exhibits also in his poetry, as an essential characteristic, an impersonality unknown to Shelley.

This characteristic (consider the capacity and the habit it implies) is closely associated with the social-moral centrality insisted on above. The insistence will no doubt be challenged ; it is at any rate time to take account of the aspect of Wordsworth stressed by Dr. Bradley in the well-known essay (see *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*). Wordsworth is often spoken of as a ' mystic,' and the current valuation would appear to rest his greatness largely upon the ' visionary moments ' and ' spots of time.' Wordsworth himself undoubtedly valued the ' visionary ' element in his experience very highly, and it is important to determine what significance he attributes to it. In this passage from Book II of *The Prelude* he is as explicit as he ever is :

and, at that time,  
Have felt whate'er there is of power in sound  
To breathe an elevated mood, by form  
Or image unprofaned ; and I would stand,  
Beneath some rock, listening to sounds that are  
The ghostly language of the ancient earth,

Or make their dim abode in distant winds.  
 Thence did I drink the visionary power.  
 I deem not profitless these fleeting moods  
 Of shadowy exultation: not for this,  
 That they are kindred to our purer mind  
 And intellectual life; but that the soul,  
 Remembering how she felt, but what she felt  
 Remembering not, retains an obscure sense  
 Of possible sublimity, to which,  
 With growing faculties she doth aspire,  
 With faculties still growing, feeling still  
 That whatsoever point they gain, they still  
 Have something to pursue.

It would be difficult to suggest anything more elusive than this possibility which the soul glimpses in 'visionary' moments and,

Remembering how she felt, but what she felt  
 Remembering not,

retains an 'obscure sense' of.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it will be agreed that, though Wordsworth no doubt was right in feeling that he had something to pursue, the critic here is in a different case. If these 'moments' have any significance for the critic (whose business it is to define the significance of Wordsworth's poetry), it will be established, not by dwelling upon or in them, in the hope of exploring something that lies hidden in or behind their vagueness, but by holding firmly on to that sober verse in which they are presented.

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<sup>1</sup> cf.

. . . in such strength  
 Of usurpation, when the light of sense  
 Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed  
 The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,  
 There harbours; whether we be young or old,  
 Our destiny, our being's heart and 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.

*The Prelude*, Book VI, ll. 599-608 (1805-6).

How strong are the eighteenth century affinities of this verse Mr. Nichol Smith brings out when, in his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Eighteenth Verse*, he quotes a piece of Akenside and suggests rightly that it might have passed for Wordsworth. Wordsworth's roots were deep in the eighteenth century. To say this is to lay the stress again—where it ought to rest—on his essential sanity and normality.

But though he is so surely and centrally poised, the sureness has nothing of complacency about it. It rests consciously over unsounded depths and among mysteries, itself a mystery. This recognition has its value in the greater validity of the poise—in a kind of sanction resulting. So, too, Wordsworth's firm hold upon the world of common perception is the more notable in one who knows of 'fallings from us, vanishings, blank misgivings' ('when the light of sense goes out'), and is capable of recording such moments as when

I forgot,  
That I had bodily eyes, and what I saw  
Appear'd like something in myself, a dream,  
A prospect in my mind.<sup>1</sup>

The point of stressing Wordsworth's normality and sanity in dealing with such passages as this comes out when we turn from it to, say, Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, or compare *Mont Blanc* with Wordsworth's *Simplon Pass*.

If anyone demands a more positive valuation of the 'visionary moments' in Wordsworth (disputing, perhaps, the complete representativeness of the 'shadowy' passage quoted above) it may be granted that they sometimes clearly signify a revitalizing relaxation of purpose, of moral and intellectual effort, in a surrender to

The gravitation and the filial bond  
Of nature, that connect him with the world.

For if Wordsworth was too inveterately human and moral for the 'Dark Gods' (how incongruous a phrase in connexion with him!)

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<sup>1</sup>*The Prelude*, Book II, ll. 342-352 (1805-6).



to be invoked here, he none the less drew strength from his sense of communion with the non-human universe.

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'Dark Gods,' some readers will have commented, is indeed an incongruous phrase in connexion with Wordsworth. And it is now time to qualify the present account of him, as it stands now, by taking note of criticisms that it will have provoked from a quarter opposite to that saluted in the last paragraph. Doesn't, for instance, the formula, 'recollection in tranquillity,' apply to Wordsworth's poetry with a limiting effect that has as yet not been recognized? Is the tranquillity of this wisdom really at all close to any 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'? Are the feelings, as recollected, so very powerful?

It has to be admitted that the present of this poetry is, for the most part, decidedly tranquil and that the emotion—anything in the nature of strong excitement or disturbance—seems to belong decidedly to the past. If, as might be said, the strength of the poetry is that it brings maturity and youth into relation, the weakness is that the experience from which it draws life is confined mainly to youth, and lies at a distance. What, an intelligent contemporary reader might have asked at the creative period, will happen as youth recedes? What did happen we know, in any case, and the fact of the decline may reasonably be held to have a bearing on the due estimate of Wordsworth's wisdom.

In the discussion above of the distinctive characteristics of his poetry 'poise' has received some emphasis; further inquiry is necessary in the direction that the term suggests. There is, relevant to this inquiry, a significant passage in Book I of *The Excursion*:

From his native hills  
He wandered far; much did he see of men,  
Their manners, their enjoyments, and pursuits,  
Their passions and their feelings; chiefly those  
Essential and eternal in the heart,  
That, 'mid the simpler forms of rural life,  
Exist more simple in their elements,  
And speak a plainer language. In the woods,  
A lone Enthusiast, and among the fields,

Itinerant in this labour, he had passed  
The better portion of his time ; and there  
Spontaneously had his affections thriven  
Amid the bounties of the year, the peace  
And liberty of nature ; there he kept  
In solitude and solitary thought  
His mind in a just equipoise of love.  
Serene it was, unclouded by the cares  
Of ordinary life ; unvexed, unwarped  
By partial bondage. In his steady course,  
No piteous revolutions had he felt,  
No wild varieties of joy and grief.  
Unoccupied by sorrow of its own,  
His heart lay open ; and by nature tuned  
And constant disposition of his thoughts  
To sympathy with man, he was alive  
To all that was enjoyed where'er he went,  
And all that was endured ; for in himself  
Happy and quiet in his cheerfulness,  
He had no painful pressure from without  
That made him turn aside from wretchedness  
With coward fears. He could *afford* to suffer  
With those whom he saw suffer.

The Wanderer as described here would seem to be very much what the intelligent reader imagined above might have expected Wordsworth to become. Indeed, the description is, fairly obviously, very much in the nature of an idealized self-portrait. If Wordsworth, even when well embarked on *The Excursion*, was not quite this, this clearly is what he would have liked to be. That he should have wished to be this is significant. That he should have needed to wish it is the great difference between himself and the Wanderer. For Wordsworth's course had not been steady ; he sought the Wanderer's ' equipoise ' just because of the ' piteous revolutions ' and the wild varieties of joy and grief, that he had, so disturbingly, known. The Wanderer could not have written Wordsworth's poetry ; it emerges out of Wordsworth's urgent personal problem ; it is the answer to the question : ' How, in a world that has shown itself to be like this, is it possible to go on living? '

Behind, then, the impersonality of Wordsworth's wisdom there is an immediately personal urgency. Impelling him back to childhood and youth—to their recovery in a present of tranquil seclusion—there are the emotional storms and disasters of the intervening period, and these are also implicitly remembered, if not 'recollected,' in the tranquillity of his best poetry. In so far as his eyes may fairly be said to 'avert their ken from half of human fate,' extremely painful awareness of this half is his excuse. For if his problem was personal, it was not selfishly so, not merely self-regarding; and it is also a general one: if (and how shall they not?) the sensitive and imaginative freely let their 'hearts lie open' to the suffering of the world, how are they to retain any health or faith for living? Conflicting duties seem to be imposed (for it is no mere blind instinct of self-preservation that is in question). Wordsworth is not one of the few great tragic artists, but probably not many readers will care to censure him for weakness or cowardice. His heart was far from 'unoccupied by sorrow of its own,' and his sense of responsibility for human distress and his generously active sympathies had involved him in emotional disasters that threatened his hold on life. A disciplined limiting of contemplation to the endurable, and, consequently, a withdrawal to a reassuring environment, became terrible necessities for him.

It is significant that (whatever reason Wordsworth may have had for putting it there) the story of Margaret should also appear in Book I of *The Excursion*, following, as it does, close upon the description of the Wanderer. It seems to me the finest thing that Wordsworth wrote, and it is certainly the most disturbingly poignant. The poignancy assures us with great force that the Wanderer, for all his familiarity with the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, is not Wordsworth—not, at any rate, the poet; and it clearly bears a significant relation to the early date of composition: Wordsworth began *Margaret*; or, *The Ruined Cottage*—the substance of this part of Book I of *The Excursion*—in 1795 and finished in 1797. At this period he was, we have reason to believe, striving towards his 'equipoise' with great difficulty; striving, because of his great need.

The difficulty does not merely appear in the poignancy of the poetry, which contrasts so with the surrounding verse; it gets

its implicit comment in the by-play between Wordsworth and the Wanderer. At a painful point in the story 'the Wanderer paused' (l. 592):

'Why should we thus, with an untoward mind,  
And in the weakness of humanity,  
From natural wisdom turn our hearts away;  
To natural comfort shut our eyes and ears;  
And, feeding on disquiet, thus disturb  
The calm of nature with our restless thoughts?'

Wordsworth gladly acquiesced:

That simple tale  
Passed from my mind like a forgotten sound.

But it refused to be dismissed; it rose insistently up through the distracting idle talk:

In my own despite  
I thought of that poor Woman as of one  
Whom I had known and loved.

No doubt the particular memory of Annette asserts itself here, but that recognition (or guess) makes it all the more important to give due weight to the corrective hint thrown out by the Wanderer a little later:

'Tis a common tale,  
An ordinary sorrow of man's life . . .'

—Wordsworth at this date cannot easily afford to suffer with those whom he sees suffer.

That is very apparent in the way 'that Woman's sufferings' (which had 'seemed present') are, at the end of the story, distanced. Wordsworth, 'in the impotence of grief,' turns to trace, around the Cottage, the 'secret spirit of humanity' that 'still survives'

'mid the calm oblivious tendencies  
Of nature, 'mid her plants, and weeds, and flowers  
And silent overgrowings . . .

The 'old Man,' with consummate poetic skill, endorses those tendencies:

Why then should we read  
The forms of things with an unworthy eye?  
She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.  
I well remember that those very plumes,  
Those weeds, and the high spear-grass on that wall,  
By mist and silent rain-drops silvered o'er,  
As once I passed, into my heart conveyed  
So still an image of tranquillity,  
So calm and still, and looked so beautiful  
Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind,  
That what we feel of sorrow and despair  
From ruin and from change, and all the grief  
That passing shows of Being leave behind,  
Appeared an idle dream . . .

*Michael* was written in 1800—three years later. Wordsworth here has no need to withdraw his mind from the theme to a present 'image of tranquillity.' The things of which he speaks never 'seem present' in this story; they are seen always as belonging, in their moving dignity, to the past. 'Recollection' holds them at such a distance that serenity, for all the pathos, never falters; and an idealizing process, making subtle use of the mountain background, gives to 'human suffering' a reconciling grandeur. *Michael*, of course, is only one poem (and an exceptionally fine one), but the implied representative significance of this comparison with *Margaret* is justly implied. When in the characteristic good poetry of Wordsworth painful things are dealt with we find them presented in modes, more and less subtle, that are fairly intimated by his own phrase (the context<sup>1</sup> of which is very relevant):

Remov'd and to a distance that was fit.

In *Michael* Wordsworth is very much more like the Wanderer. What, the contemporary reader already invoked may be imagined as asking, will be the next phase in the development? What will happen as youth, where lie the emotional sources of his poetry—

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<sup>1</sup>*The Prelude*, VIII, l. 305 (1850).

'the hiding-places of my power'—and young manhood, which, in the way suggested, provides the creative pressure and incitement, recede further and further into the past, and the 'equipoise' became a settled habit? The answer appears plainly enough in the description of the Wanderer—in that complacent 'partial bondage' and in that curiously italicized '*afford*': one may come to afford too easily. The equipoise settles towards inertness:

I long for a repose that ever is the same.

The *Ode to Duty* (1805) from which this line comes would of course, be cited by many as going with the patriotic sonnets of these years to prove that Wordsworth, so far from subsiding in the way suggested, had acquired a new 'inspiration,' a new source of energy. The Ode, no doubt, is an impressive performance; but it may be ventured that few to whom Wordsworth matters would grieve much if some very inferior bard were proved to have written it. As for the sonnets, their quality is a comment on the value to the poet of his new inspiration: the worst of them (look, for instance, at 'It is not to be thought of . . .') are lamentable clap-trap, and the best, even if they are distinguished declamation, are hardly distinguished poetry. And the association in general of these patriotic-moral habits with a settled addiction to Miltonizing has to be noted as (in the poet of the *Lyrical Ballads*) significant.

It is not that these new attitudes, and the process by which he settled into them, are not wholly respectable. There was never anything incompatible between the 'natural piety' that his poetry cherishes and celebrates and the immemorial pieties and loyalties centring in the village church (see his reference to the 'Village Steeple' in Book X of *The Prelude*, 1805-6; l. 268). The transition was easy. But when he made it his days ceased to be 'bound each to each' back to childhood. No longer could he say:

The days gone by  
Come back upon me from the dawn almost  
Of life: the hiding-places of my power  
Seem open . . .

The Wordsworth who in the *Ode to Duty* spoke of the 'genial sense of youth' as something he happily surrendered had seen

the hiding places of his power close. The 'equipoise' had lost its vitality; the exquisitely fine and sensitive organization of the poet no longer informed and controlled his pen. The energy of the new patriotic-moral interests, far from bringing the poet new life, took the place of creative sensibility, and confirmed and ensured its loss.

In fact, the new power belongs, it might be said, not to the 'hiding places'—it has no connexion with them—but to the public platform (a metaphor applying obviously to the patriotic development, with which, it should be noted, the religious is not accidentally associated): the public voice is a substitute for the inner voice, and engenders an insensitiveness to this—to its remembered (or, at least, to its recorded) burden and tone. For the sentiments and attitudes of the patriotic and Anglican Wordsworth do not come as the intimately and particularly realized experience of an unusually and finely conscious individual; they are external, general and conventional; their quality is that of the medium they are professed in, which is insensitively Miltonic, a medium not felt into from within as something at the nerve-tips, but handled from outside. This is to question, not their sincerity, but their value and interest; their representativeness is not of the important kind. Their relation to poetry may be gathered from the process to which, at their dictation, Wordsworth subjected *The Prelude*: in the pursuit of formal orthodoxy he freely falsified and blunted the record of experience.

This process is forecast in the *Immortality Ode*, the essential purpose of which is to justify it. Criticism of stanza VIII ('Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!') has been permissible, even correct, since Coleridge's time. But the empty grandiosity apparent there is merely the local manifestation of a general strain, a general factitiousness. The Ode (1803-6) belongs to the transition at its critical phase and contains decided elements of the living. But these do not lessen the dissatisfaction that one feels with the movement—the movement that makes the piece an ode in the Grand Style; for, as one reads, it is in terms of the movement that the strain, the falsity, first asserts itself. The manipulations by which the changes of mood are indicated have, by the end of the third stanza, produced an effect that, in protest, one describes as rhythmic vulgarity (for Dryden to do this kind of thing is quite another

matter). The effort towards the formal ode is, clearly, the effort towards the formal attitude (Wordsworth himself being the public in view), and the strain revealed in technique has an obvious significance. What this is it hardly needs stanza VI to proclaim:

. . . even with something of a Mother's mind  
And no unworthy aim,  
The homely Nurse doth all she can  
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,  
Forget the glories he hath known,  
And that imperial palace whence he came.

There is no suggestion of 'that imperial palace' in the relevant parts of *The Prelude*, and 'Foster child' patently falsifies the feeling towards 'Earth' ('the gravitation and the filial bond') recorded there.

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The bearing of Wordsworth's decline on the evaluation of his poetry hardly needs to be explicitly formulated. The poetry remains what it is; an understanding of the decline makes us more aware, perhaps, of limitations—of conditions limiting the value, but it also brings a heightened sense of the representative human significance.

What is reflected upon by the poetic decline is not so much the essential 'wisdom' spoken of earlier, as the degree of fulness and immediacy with which the poetry grasps and realizes what it offers—with which Wordsworth grasped and realized what he perceived. To say this, of course, is not to say anything precise; it is merely a way of pointing, of attempting a justly suggestive emphasis.

F. R. LEAVIS.



## THE NOVELS OF JEAN GIONO

I NEED hardly beg to be excused for what may seem a rather uncritical approach to the works of Jean Giono. Indeed, it is premature and preposterous, at the present stage of his literary career, to examine them with a view to definitive conclusions. That is not our aim. Though he has already written a good half-dozen novels, many short stories, two or three plays and some poetry, yet he is so constantly developing, and, in spite of external appearances, so unlike to-day what he was yesterday, that it would be unwise to pin him down with assumptions that he is this or that. He never ceases to astonish his critics, and never will. But, in spite of a wide audience in France and in many foreign countries, he does not seem to have received in England the recognition he deserves. In some way this essay is a kind of introduction to Jean Giono for the English reader.

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The first thing one must say about him, and it will explain a lot, is that he is a native of and has always lived in the *Basses-Alpes*. Let us see what that means. Not much fuss has ever been made about that 'département,' one of the poorest and most self-effacing of the ninety which constitute France. It lies outside Provence properly so-called, and has only the mean honour of bordering on the great Alps—a situation to be nearly ashamed of. It is despised by the tourist and unknown on the literary map, except for Gassendi, who is darkly remembered as a Cartesian controversialist, and Elimir Bourges. I forget Paul Arène, who follows in the rear of Alphonse Daudet, a dwarfish and pale figure. The Marseillais consider the Basses-Alpes as a kind of distant suburb, with a few goats capering on barren hillsides. But this is sheer ignorance and prepossession.

In fact, the 'département' of the Basses-Alpes is, geographically, one of the most diverse of France, and, spiritually, its