

## THE MYSTICAL POETRY OF WORDSWORTH

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William Wordsworth was born on April 17, 1770 and died on April 23, 1850. He lived through one of the most crucial periods of modern European culture when there was an increasing conflict between traditional Christianity and the skeptical rationalism of the Enlightenment. In the course of this conflict the religious establishment became at once more dogmatic and rigid in its orthodoxy and more vulnerable to the attack of aggressive science.

It was in this crisis of culture that there grew in England and on the Continent a movement of poetry known as the Romantic Movement. It attained its most lyrical expression in England in the two centuries from 1780 to 1950 in the work of William Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and their distinguished modern follower W. B. Yeats in our time. Of these Wordsworth was the most outstanding poet and thinker.

Literary historians describe it as the Romantic Movement to distinguish it from the classical tradition. This label is both inadequate and misleading. In its essentials the movement is a return to the experience of the mystical side of "Ancient Wisdom." It was a reaction against popular dogmatic and sectarian Christianity; it was a protest against the growing materialism of science, and the negative rationalism of the philosophies of Locke and Hume. It rejected the mechanistic conception of the universe. On its positive side it was a rediscovery of the hidden truths and symbolism of mythology both Western and Eastern. In religion it was a syncretic movement emphasizing the common ground of the religions of man.

It was inspired by the revival of Neo-Platonism in England through the translations and commentaries of Thomas Taylor on Plotinus, Porphyry and their successors. Almost at the same time by a happy coincidence there appeared the translations of ancient Hindu scriptures by orientalist like Sir William Jones. It is this confluence of Neo-Platonism and Vedanta that flows through the poetry of these two centuries. Indeed Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* could be considered an integral part of this movement of thought and feeling. It is no wonder that W. B. Yeats as a young poet read them with admiration. He was also a member of the TS and knew HPB well.

If we examine the works of the Romantic poets comparatively, we find in them certain fundamental ideas of Theosophy based on their independent intuitive insight. Among these are five. The first is that of the One Cosmic Spirit both transcendental and

immanent as the ground of all being. The second, the essential kinship of the human soul to this Divine. The third is that of cyclical time and of reincarnation. The fourth, a belief in the innate capacity of the human mind through imagination or intuition to know of and unite with the Divine; and the fifth, a sense of the boundless joy or bliss accessible to those endowed with philosophical enthusiasm or what Plato called divine madness.

These poets are truly theosophical in their vision. They are also theosophical in their commitment to the ideal of world brotherhood. They all have an imaginative interest in science and in religion, and their poetry often represents a fine fusion of the two. They were introspective men and sensitive observers of Nature; the hidden laws of man and nature were the subject of their constant meditation. We can describe them as poets of a true theosophical quest both in theory and practice.

Among these Wordsworth occupies the position of a venerable bard; he is unique in the depth of his contemplative experience, his anxiety concerning the human condition and its complexities of birth, death and suffering; and he is also unique in his power to communicate all this to us in a voice of true feeling.

Four aspects of his thought are theosophically interesting: his idea of the divine mind; of its relation to the human mind, of mortal life on earth; of suffering and its spiritual value in our growth of becoming; and his idea of our journey through life or time as only a portion of our journey through eternity or beyond birth and death.

Almost from boyhood Wordsworth was a very serious-minded person. The occupation of a poet was his chosen calling, and he brought to it a truly religious devotion. He lived among mountains most of the time, and in his contemplation they became symbols of the permanence of the cosmos, or the most sublime expression or emanation of the divine spirit. Early in life, one morning as he walked among them, he underwent a spiritual conversion after a night spent in gaiety and dancing. This is how he describes the moment of conversion: he is narrating it to his friend Coleridge to whom he wrote a long epic verse letter on the growth of his own mind called the *Prelude* published posthumously:

...Magnificent  
The morning rose, a memorable pomp,  
Glorious as e'er I had beheld—in front,  
The sea lay laughing at a distance; near,  
The solid mountains shone, bright as the clouds,  
Grain-tinctured, drenched in empyrean light;  
And in the meadows and the lower grounds  
Was all the sweetness of a common dawn—  
Dews, vapours, and the melody of birds,  
And labourers going forth to till the fields.

Ah! need I say, dear Friend! that to the brim  
My heart was full; I made no vows, but vows  
Were then made for me; bond unknown to me  
Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,  
A dedicated Spirit. On I walked  
In thankful blessedness, which yet survives.

*The Prelude*, bk. iv, 323–37

Wordsworth is pre-eminently the poet of solitude. We may recall that Plotinus describes the moment of the union of the human soul with the divine as the one in which that which is Alone turns to the Alone. No other poet of the world sought these moments so eagerly as Wordsworth did among these mountain solitudes. In them he saw a certain power of cosmic wisdom taking charge of his spiritual education and guiding and shaping him; expressing his gratitude for this fostering spirit he says:

Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!  
Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought!  
That givest to forms and images a breath  
And everlasting motion, not in vain  
By day or star-light thus from my first dawn  
Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me  
The passions that build up our human soul;  
Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,  
But with high objects, with enduring things—  
With life and nature—purifying thus  
The elements of feeling and of thought,  
And sanctifying by such discipline,  
Both pain and fear, until we recognize  
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.

*Ib.*, bk. i, 401–14

It is through such education that he rose to the peak moments of his vision of an almighty universal spirit. To cite one such moment, it came to him when as an undergraduate he went on a walking tour of the Alpine country. As he saw in the Alpine scene the union of opposites—an imponderable oxymoron of all Nature—life and death, beauty and terror, change and permanence, he felt the same dread with which Moses beheld the paradoxical vision of the burning bush forever burning and forever remaining unconsumed: Wordsworth matches his rhythm to his simultaneous sense of the awesome dynamism of the visible scene, and the sheer repose transcending all this dynamic action:

. . . The immeasurable height  
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,  
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,

And in the narrow rent at every turn  
 Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,  
 The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky.  
 The rocks that muttered close upon our ears  
 Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside  
 As if a voice were in them, the sick sight  
 And giddy prospect of the raving stream,  
 The unfettered clouds and region of the Heavens,  
 Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—  
 Were all like workings of one mind, the features  
 Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;  
 Characters of the great Apocalypse,  
 The types and symbols of Eternity,  
 Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

*Ib.*, bk. vi, 624–40

Wordsworth is commonly described as a poet of Nature. It does not mean he is a poet of Nature's appearances or her landscapes only; in his most inspired moments he saw them as symbols of the Divine consciousness, of what he calls the wisdom and spirit of the universe, and the Soul "that art the eternity of thought," or the central peace that subsists at the heart of endless agitation, or the sentiment of Being spread over all things. "The meanest flower that blows can give thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

Wordsworth is not only a poet of this mystic vision of the divine mind. He is at the same time a poet of man, and of man's deep mind and heart. Under the influence of Hobbes the enlightenment had seen man as "selfish, stunted and brutish." Wordsworth's perception is its direct antithesis. Seeing man often in solitude among the mountains, his imagination perceived him as "a lord, and master, or a power, or genius, under Nature, under God, presiding." "Severest solitude had more commanding looks when he was there." He seemed Adam in Paradise or Christ.

Beyond the boundary line of some hill shadow,  
 His Form hath flashed upon me, glorified  
 By the deep radiance of the setting sun:  
 Or him have I descried in distant sky,  
 A solitary object and sublime,  
 Above all height! like an aerial cross stationed alone  
     upon a spiry Rock  
 Of the Chartreuse, for worship. Thus was man  
 Ennobled outwardly before my sight,  
 And thus my heart was early introduced  
 To an unconscious love and reverence

Of human nature; hence the human form  
To me became an index of delight,  
Of grace and honour, power and worthiness.

*Ib.*, bk. viii, 268–281

It was not only this Hellenistic vision of the human form divine that fascinated him. He is the first great poet of depth psychology. Truly he said, “the Child is father of the Man.” It is the mind of Man—he called it “the main region” of his song—that struck him as most awesome in its depth and range. All the fantastic fictions of mythology of Heaven and Hell, seemed to him to be not so profound as man’s mind and its mysteries.

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, in the Mind of Man—  
My haunt, and the main region of my song.

*Recluse*, 788–794

Locke and Hume had seen in their skepticism an unbridgeable gulf between Reality and the mind of man. Wordsworth intuitively felt that there was no such gulf, that the mind of man was “wedded” to the “goodly universe,” that our faculties and the external world were exquisitely fitted for each other. He called his poetry “the spousal chant of this great consummation.”

The principal faculty that unites us to the cosmic spirit is imagination—what we call today intuitive insight, or feeling. Locke had poured scorn on imagination as a misleading false light in elevating reason. But for Wordsworth it is “but another name for absolute power and clearest insight, amplitude of mind and reason in her most exalted mood.”

This gift of insight is inherent in the mind of all men. There is a great danger of its being suppressed by the tyranny of worldly conventions, by the regimentation of the mind which passes among men for education and civilized living. We have only to be receptive and open for the light is waiting for us:

. . .there are Powers  
Which of themselves our minds impress;  
. . .we can feed this mind of ours  
In a wise passiveness  
In this wise passiveness, he says:  
  
One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,

Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.

*The Tables Turned, 21–4*

Wordsworth has a profound distrust of our so-called education in conventional schools, and its emphasis on reason and analysis rather than imagination; it seemed to him our greatest obstacle to knowledge: it gives us bitter broken fragments instead of the whole:

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings:  
Our meddling intellect  
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—  
We murder to dissect.

*The Tables Turned, 25–8*

This wise passiveness or receptivity is the native endowment of every man. Between him and the great mystics or sages the difference is only one of degree. The higher minds who have fostered this gift are truly creative:

. . .they build up greatest things  
From least suggestions; ever on the watch,  
Willing to work and to be wrought upon,  
They need not extraordinary calls  
To rouse them: in a world of life they live,  
By sensible impressions not enthralled,  
But by their quickening impulse made more prompt  
To hold fit converse with the spiritual world  
And with the generations of mankind  
Spread over time, past, present and to come,  
Age after age, till Time shall be no more.  
Such minds are truly from the Deity,  
For they are Powers; and hence the highest bliss  
That flesh can know is theirs—the consciousness  
Of whom they are, habitually infused  
Through every image and through every thought,  
And all affections by communion raised  
From earth to heaven, from human to divine.

*Prelude, bk. xiv, 100–18*

I have indicated so far two main trends of Wordsworth's thinking on the Cosmic Spirit, and the human mind. Let us now turn to consider Wordsworth's understanding of the meaning or value of our life from birth to death, and the experiences of the joys and sorrows we pass through. His own life was by no means an easy one. He had an unhappy childhood and boyhood, having lost both his parents at a very early age. His university education at Cambridge was largely a depressing and uncongenial academic

routine. Financially it was an anxious time till his middle age. A beloved brother died in the prime of his life. More than all this was the purgatorial turmoil and suffering he underwent because of the French Revolution. He was twenty-two when it broke out; an idealist, he was carried away by the great hopes held out by the Revolution of a new world of fraternity, liberty and equality. It had an intoxicating effect. Speaking of the time he says:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
And to be young was very heaven.

He went over to Paris intending to volunteer as a soldier in the Revolutionary army. He stayed there for a few years till he was completely disenchanted when the Revolution became a military adventure in which the original vision had been lost. It was a time of confusion, anguish and despair for him. He badly needed to find some ground for hope and joy. It was in this need that he turned once again to Nature's beauty, and returning to the scenes he had loved he was like a prodigal son. In a great poem—one of the greatest in the English language and in mystical literature—called "Tintern Abbey" he celebrates his return to the Wye valley after five years of inner turmoil, "five summers with the length of five long winters"—a long and heavy time. A sadder and a wiser man, he looks around and into himself with far greater understanding of the heavy time he has passed through, and of human suffering in general. In retrospect he perceives the necessity for that suffering for deepening his sensitivity to life and things and to his insight. He says that even during the troubled time he was in France, a subconscious memory of the Wye valley's beauty had often restored him to his purer mind in tranquil restoration. He also recognizes the part his love of Nature has played in making his own nature mature. The best portion of a good man's life is "his little nameless unremembered acts of kindness and of love." His suffering had also deepened both his need and capacity for mystic vision. He had attained a state akin to what we call samadhi:

. . .that blessed mood,  
In which the burthen of the mystery,  
In which the heavy and the weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world,  
Is lightened—that serene and blessed mood,  
In which the affections gently lead us on—  
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame  
And even the motion of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul:  
While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,

We see into the life of things.

*Tintern Abbey, 40–9*

This consciousness of the dark side of life, the burden of the mystery, has mellowed him, and brought some ripeness:

For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity,  
Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue.  
And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

*T.A. x, 88–102*

A spontaneous and unconquerable love of Nature implanted in our souls is our armor against all the evil of the world:

. . . Nature never did betray  
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,  
Through all the years of this our life, to lead  
From joy to joy; for she can so inform  
The mind that is within us, so impress  
With quietness and beauty, and so feed  
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,  
Rash judgements, nor the sneers of selfish men,  
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all  
The dreary intercourse of daily life,  
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb  
Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold  
Is full of blessings.

*T.A. 122–134*

This journey through mortal life from the point of view of eternity does not begin with our birth nor does it end with our death. It begins elsewhere, and its ultimate destination is in the world of immortality beyond time. Both our joys and sorrows

spring from this permanent soul that dwells in us indestructibly. In the famous "Immortality Ode" Wordsworth draws both from Plato's idea of pre-existence and his own understanding of life and death:

Our birth is but sleep and a forgetting;  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar.

Though much of our former antenatal life is forgotten, some vestigial recollection remains. This may be eclipsed as we grow older, and the complexities of worldly adult life overwhelm us like the shades of a prison house. Nevertheless it remains deep within us, a buried but abiding power. And all men at some time or other in varying degrees of frequency can and do return to it as to the source of life. It comes home to us in our obstinate questionings of sense and outward things.

There are times when the external world suddenly disappears as it were, and we feel lost in a dream-like state:

fallings from us, vanishings;  
Blank misgivings of a creature  
Moving about in worlds not realized.

When we contact this buried immortal self within us our "noisy years seem moments in the being of the eternal Silence." We can in contemplative moods return to this primordial reality within and have a vision of eternity:

. . .in a season of calm weather  
Though inland far we be,  
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea  
Which brought us hither,  
Can in a moment travel thither,  
And see the Children sport upon the shore,  
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

The course of mortal life will mean the loss of much that our youth knew; but the clouds round the setting sun are tinged with a sober coloring that the morning clouds though more radiant did not have:

We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind:  
In the primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be;  
In the soothing thoughts that spring  
Out of human suffering;  
In the faith that looks through death,

In years that bring the philosophic mind.

I have tried to convey to you some idea of the depth of Wordsworth's thought and feeling, and also the unique gift of expression he brings to the four most imperative questions we face as thinking human beings in regard to the Cosmic Spirit, our power to know it and feel its presence, the meaning of our life, its complexity in time, and the timeless existence that is ours beyond birth and death.

No other poet in world literature was so dedicated to the contemplative life, and to the idea of the need to share its joy and inspiration with mankind in his concern for its spiritual well-being. The concluding lines of *The Prelude* addressed to his friend and collaborator Coleridge admirably sum up his vocation and its value:

Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak  
A lasting inspiration, sanctified  
By reason, blest by faith: what we have loved,  
Others will love, and we will teach them how;  
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes  
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth  
On which he dwells, above this frame of things  
(Which 'mid all revolution in the hopes and fears  
    of men doth still remain unchanged)  
In beauty exalted, as it is itself  
Of quality and fabric more divine.

*The Prelude*, bk. xiv, 444-54

Wordsworth had spoken of the joy of Nature in "widest commonality spread," and his belief that every flower enjoyed the air it breathed. Within the decade following his death Charles Darwin presented an antithetical view of Nature "red in tooth and claw." Matthew Arnold who was twenty-eight when Wordsworth died in 1850 wrote an elegy on him. His death seemed to Arnold the end of a saga of hope and joy, and in deep anguish he asked, "Where will Europe's latter hour again find Wordsworth's healing power?"

Ideas have mysterious ways of traveling across time and space. An Englishman teaching Wordsworth to an undergraduate class in the Scottish Mission College at Calcutta read out to his students the following lines from Wordsworth's *Excursion*:

In such access of mind, in such high hour  
Of visitation from the living God,  
Thought was not; in enjoyment it expired.  
No thanks he breathed, proffered no request;  
Rapt into still communion that transcends  
The imperfect offices of prayer and praise,  
His mind was a thanksgiving to the power

That made him: it was blessedness and love.

Explaining the passage, he mentioned Sri Ramakrishna as a man of such mystic vision. Young Naren, later Swami Vivekananda, who was in the class rushed to the feet of his Master the next day!

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