

combine a candour so absolute with so much dignity; who could treat their personal history so impartially as a means of conveying lessons of general truth; or who, while chronicling such small things, could remain so great. The *Prelude* is a book of good augury for human nature. We feel in reading it as if the stock of mankind were sound. The soul seems going on from strength to strength by the mere development of her inborn power. And the scene with which the poem at once opens and concludes—the return to the Lake country as to a permanent and satisfying home—places the poet at last amid his true surroundings, and leaves us to contemplate him as completed by a harmony without him, which he of all men most needed to evoke the harmony within.

—F.W.H. MYERS, *Wordsworth*, 1881, pp. 36–37

ODE: INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY

Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* is a profoundly philosophical poem. Written in the most formal of lyric genres, the ode (the word derives from a Greek word meaning to "sing" or "chant"), it was originally intended for formal occasions and state functions. Here, Wordsworth addresses Plato's belief in the immortal soul that exists before and after death and replaces it with his own conviction that children have a divine wisdom that adults no longer possess. Wordsworth differs fundamentally from Plato in that the ancient Greek philosopher believed that when the soul begins its earthly journey, all knowledge of eternal ideas are forgotten and must be recollected through philosophical discipline, while Wordsworth believed that the newborn child enters the world "trailing clouds of glory," with a vision of its celestial origins that gradually "fade into the light of common day" as the child grows. For Wordsworth, the loss of celestial vision is compensated for in later years when man achieves transcendental faith.

GEORGE MCLEAN HARPER "THE 'INTIMATIONS ODE'" (1916)

Harper's commentary concerns the journey of the soul from the joy of childhood, a consecrated time when the young possess an innate goodness completely unencumbered by the "blunted and decaying faculties" of adult life, to the consolation of later years when a person finds reward and comfort in the exercise of reason and "the philosophic mind." Equally important to Harper is his clarification on the meaning of immortality in

the ode, which here is a “surmise” that the privileged state of childhood emanates from some prior existence. Harper maintains that this notion was unique to Wordsworth.



The great “Intimations” ode is a stumbling block to prosaic and a temptation to over-speculative minds. To the former it seems a mass of disconnected though splendid beauties, and when they try to find its indwelling idea they either despise what they think they have discovered, as too thin and vague to be of much consequence, or condemn it as a profanely audacious attempt to meddle with things divinely hidden from human sight. To minds that love “those wingy mysteries in divinity, and airy subtleties in religion, which have unhinged the brains of better heads,” the poem offers congenial employment. Wordsworth himself, in a most regrettable Fenwick note, made an unnecessary and almost humiliating concession to pragmatical and timid readers. “I think it right,” he says, “to protest against a conclusion, which has given pain to some good and pious persons, that I meant to inculcate such a belief”—*i.e.*, belief in a prior state of existence. “It is,” he continues, “far too shadowy a notion to be recommended to faith, as more than an element in our instincts of immortality. But let us bear in mind that, though the idea is not advanced in revelation, there is nothing there to contradict it, and the fall of man presents an analogy in its favour.” This deprecation of popular judgment is unfortunate in several ways. Historically it misrepresents the author as he was when he wrote the ode, for there is no evidence that he then believed in a written “revelation,” and every evidence that he did not believe in “the fall of man.” And, furthermore, it has diverted attention from the central idea of the poem, an idea supported by his own experience and that of thousands, and has brought into undue prominence, even by denying his intention to do so, a subsidiary and purely speculative notion.

The ode was probably conceived in the spring of 1802, immediately after he had written the nine lines which are its germ, and of which he used the last three as its motto:

My heart leaps up when I behold
 A rainbow in the sky:
 So was it when my life began;
 So is it now I am a man;
 So be it when I shall grow old,
 Or let me die!
 The Child is father of the Man;

And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

On March 26, 1802, Dorothy records in her Journal: "William wrote to Annette, then worked at 'The Cuckoo,'" and, listening to the cuckoo's song, we remember, he could beget again the golden time of childhood. In the evening of the same day, she adds, "he wrote 'The Rainbow,'" and next day "William wrote part of an ode." On June 17, she says, "William added a little to the Ode he is writing." The poem was continued at intervals during the next four years, and appeared in the edition of 1807, after which it was never much altered. There is no reason to doubt the accuracy of Wordsworth's statement in the Fenwick note that "two years at least passed between the writing of the first four stanzas and the remaining part."

In these stanzas, with an exquisitely light touch, the poet describes an experience which perhaps is rare—I have known many persons to disclaim it for themselves—but which has startled many sensitively organized youths, observant of their mental states. It is an experience that vindicates for childhood a superior delicacy of perception, a superior impressibility as compared with later years. So vivid are these sensations, so deep these emotions, that long afterwards, in favourable moments, they flash into consciousness. Science would probably say that some hidden coil of the brain unrolls. The person to whom these forgotten memories recur connects them rather with some object or incident which appears to have occasioned them, and they are called "recognitions." We seem to perceive again something perceived long ago, and never since. It is like the repetition of a dream. To certain minds these flashes come not seldom, but chiefly before middle life. They illumine and measure the distance the soul has travelled, for they recall and place side by side with blunted and decaying faculties the fresh and glorious powers of unworn childhood. The momentary joy is succeeded by a sense of depression, as we realize that the years, our busy servants, have robbed us of life itself. This is the theme of those first four stanzas.

A natural deduction, and one, as we have seen, which Wordsworth would regard as highly significant, is that the perceptions and feelings of childhood have peculiar value. Compared with them, the testimony of later years is dull and confused. The moral instincts of childhood have a similar directness and vigour, and should be obeyed. The child, by his acute perceptions, his tense grasp of reality, and his unsophisticated habits of mind, is closer to truth than the man, and finds in nature an all-sufficient teacher. But here the poet checks himself, and he puts this inference to a test in the tenth and eleventh stanzas. The result marks a great change in his philosophy. Though acknowledging

almost all that he had claimed for childhood, he remembers that there have been gains as well as losses, and sings:

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.

Mankind claims him, and the sway of reason. But while thus extending his allegiance, he repeats his vows to nature:

And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,
 Forebode not any severing of our loves!
 Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;
 I only have relinquished one delight
 To live beneath your more habitual sway.

The whole of "The Prelude" does not say more, as to the central principle that had governed Wordsworth's early life, and had lately been broadened, but not abandoned. A favoured childhood close to nature, the acceptance of Rousseau's doctrine of original goodness, a tempering due to rich experience of human love and reverent admission of painful duty—this is the history of Wordsworth's soul hitherto. The golden record runs through six great poems: "Wisdom and Spirit of the universe," "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," the "Ode to Duty," the "Happy Warrior," "The Prelude," and the "Intimations." A final great document in support of Wordsworth's creed is his "Answer to the Letter of Mathetes," published in *The Friend*, in 1809. Though I shall have more to say of it in its place, I cannot forbear quoting a glorious passage which restates the main theme of the "Intimations" ode. Speaking of the Generous Young Man, he says: "Granted that the sacred light of childhood is and must be for him no more than a remembrance. He may, notwithstanding, be remanded to nature, and with trustworthy hopes, founded less upon his sentient than upon his intellectual being; to nature, as leading on insensibly to the society of reason, but to reason and will, as leading back to the wisdom of nature. A reunion, in this order accomplished, will bring reformation and timely support; and the two powers of reason and nature, thus reciprocally teacher and taught, may advance together in a track to which there is no limit." And, again, he speaks of nature as "a teacher of

truth through joy and through gladness, and as a creatress of the faculties by a process of smoothness and delight." Diffidence and veneration, he says, "are the sacred attributes of youth; its appropriate calling is not to distinguish in the fear of being deceived or degraded, not to analyze with scrupulous minuteness, but to accumulate in genial confidence; its instinct, its safety, its benefit, its glory, is to love, to admire, to feel, and to labour." As there are two types of mind, the synthetic and the analytic, the one that is impressed by resemblances and the one that feels differences, so in the individual are there creative as distinguished from critical faculties, and the former are most alert in childhood.

That the central theme of the ode is the magisterial sanctity of childhood is further indicated by the three lines from "The Rainbow" which the poet prefixed to it:

The Child is Father of the Man.
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

"Piety" is here used in its original sense, of reverence for filial obligation. The Man is to respect the Child surviving in him, to obey its monitions, to work upon its plan. What, then, is the subsidiary idea, which the Fenwick note unduly emphasizes, upon which commentators have spent themselves, and which, to be sure, is elaborately indicated in the title of the ode? It is a surmise, nothing more, that the excellence of childhood may be an inheritance from a previous and presumably superior state of existence. This is not, like the other idea, original with Wordsworth, in the only senses in which any such thought can be original—that is to say, either inborn or something conquered and assimilated. It was altogether derivative, extrinsic, and novel to him. It is connected with no other of his writings. It is alien to his mind. He habitually poetizes the facts of nature and human experience, shunning equally the cloudland of metaphysics and the light mists of fancy. But he had, as his soul's companion, the greatest speculative genius our race ever produced; and a dream of a prenatal state of the soul, superior in happiness and wisdom, had been embodied by Coleridge in a poem several years before. It is the "Sonnet composed on a journey homeward, the author having received intelligence of the birth of a son, Sept. 20, 1796":

Of t' o'er my brain does that strange fancy roll
Which makes the present (while the flash doth last)
Seem a mere semblance of some unknown past.
Mixed with such feelings, as perplex the soul

Self-questioned in her sleep; and some have said
 We lived, ere yet this robe of flesh we wore.
 O my sweet baby, when I reach my door
 If heavy looks should tell me thou art dead,
 (As, sometimes, through excess of hope, I fear)
 I think that I should struggle to believe
 Thou wert a spirit, to this nether sphere
 Sentenced for some more venial crime to grieve;
 Did'st scream, then spring to meet Heaven's quick reprieve.
 While we wept idly o'er thy little bier.

In his note to this sonnet, in the edition of 1797, Coleridge acknowledged his indebtedness to Plato's "Phaedo." Plato's argument, or perhaps we should call it his poetical suggestion, is that "if there is an absolute beauty, and goodness, and an absolute essence of all things; and if to this, which is now discovered to have existed in our former state, we refer all our sensations, and with this compare them, finding these ideas to be pre-existent and our inborn possession—then our souls must have had a prior existence."¹

In Wordsworth this conception seems to have been merely derivative,—how different, therefore, from most of his ideas, to which the praise in Coleridge's "Biographia Literaria" so justly belongs, when he says (Chapter XXII.) that a characteristic excellence of Wordsworth's is "a weight and sanity of the thoughts and sentiments, won, not from books, but from the poet's own meditative observation." "They are *fresh*," he adds, "and have the dew upon them."

As one who habitually rises late can hardly believe his senses when he sees yesterday's commonplace world transformed by dawn into an enchanted garden of trembling roseate mysteries, so we wonder and so we doubt in reading the "Intimations" ode. Its radiance comes and goes through a shimmering veil. Yet, when we look close, we find nothing unreal or unfinished. This beauty, though supernal, is not evanescent. It bides our return, and whoever comes to seek it as a little child will find it. The imagery, though changing at every turn, is fresh and simple. The language, though connected with thoughts so serious that they impart to it a classic dignity, is natural and for the most part plain. The metrical changes are swift, and follow the sense as a melody by Schubert or Brahms is moulded to the text. Nevertheless, a peculiar glamour surrounds the poem. It is the supreme example of what I may venture to term the romance of philosophic thought.

If we bear in mind what is the important and profoundly Wordsworthian idea of the ode, and what the secondary and less characteristic notion appended to this, we shall find few difficulties of detail.²

Notes

1. Jowett's translation.
2. Dowden's interpretation of line 199.

Another race hath been, and other palms are won

—namely, that “the sun, like a strong man going forth to his race,” has now reached the goal and won the palm; and so with the life of man when death comes “—appears to me at fault. The palms for which the child strove were instinctive joys; the man has aimed at love and duty. The human heart has been disciplined by tenderness and fear, as well as by gladness, till now

The meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

I must confess that for many years I could not understand the fourth and fifth lines of the eleventh stanza. Several Wordsworthians whom I have consulted, among them Miss Arnold of Fox How, Mr. Gordon Wordsworth, and Mr. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, agree in the following interpretation, as expressed by the last-named gentleman: “I have relinquished *one* delight—*i.e.*, the glory and the dream—with the result that I am living under Nature's more habitual sway, exchanging the spontaneous, intuitive response to Nature for a conscious and voluntary submission.” Mr. Gordon Wordsworth says: “Perhaps the choice of the word ‘relinquish’ is unfortunate; we generally use it of a wholly voluntary act, and in this case it seems rather the inevitable result of the passing of time.”

—GEORGE MCLEAN HARPER,
“The ‘Intimations Ode,’” from *William
Wordsworth: His Life, Works, and Influence*, vol.
II, London: John Murray, 1916, pp. 121–127

H.W. GARROD “THE ‘IMMORTAL ODE’” (1923)

H.W. Garrod discusses the evolution of the ode, begun in the spring of 1802, and emphasizes the significance of the fact that in that year the poem ended at the fourth stanza with an epigram he believes is the key to understanding the work: “days . . . bound each to each by natural piety.” For Garrod, the fact that the poem was not completed until 1806 is evidence that Wordsworth underwent a crisis wherein the “glory and the freshness” of sensation had faded in his later years, signaling a significant shift in the poem from sensibility to the poet's adoption of “the

philosophic mind." When Wordsworth returned to the poem four years later, stanzas v-viii, according to Garrod, supply the answer to the poem in the form of the doctrine of anamnesis or reminiscence, the ultimate source derived from Plato and the neo-Platonists. However, the immediate source is linked to Coleridge and a sonnet he wrote in 1796 on learning of the birth of his son Hartley. The "four years' darling" in the Ode refers to the young boy.

Garrod's essay is preoccupied with correcting the notion that Wordsworth is not espousing the Platonic idea of pre-existence but, rather, is expressing an innermost feeling to which time and place are not applicable. In other words, Garrod is pointing to the transcendental element. Furthermore, he points out that in Wordsworth's later years, the poet would have been concerned that the doctrine of pre-existence ran counter to the teachings of the church and could possibly be misconstrued. Contrary to Plato, Garrod points out that Wordsworth's notion of pre-existence "is, in fact, not a theory of knowledge, but a romance of sensation" and that ultimately this extraordinary vision is used up, the result being that Wordsworth is trying to console both himself and the reader that the vision has been replaced with "the philosophic mind."



It is worth while first to reconstruct the circumstances in which the *Ode* was written. It was begun in the spring of 1802. Wordsworth was at Dove Cottage, with his sister. Coleridge had just returned to the Lake Country and had paid them a visit at Grasmere. That was on 18–20th March. The importance of Coleridge's presence will appear shortly. On 22nd March Dorothy Wordsworth records in her journal that, on a mild morning, William 'worked at the Cuckoo poem'; and again on 25th March 'A beautiful morning. W. worked at the Cuckoo'. Then on the next day: 'William wrote to Annette, then worked at the Cuckoo . . . ' in the evening 'he wrote the *Rainbow*'. I will try and indicate in a moment the significance of these poems in relation to the *Ode*. On the day following, 27th March, 'Wm. wrote part of an Ode'—this was *the Ode*. Later, 17th June, 'Wm. added a little to the Ode he is writing'.

First the *Cuckoo*. This is the poem placed second among the *Poems of the Imagination*.¹ The voice of the cuckoo brings to Wordsworth 'a tale Of visionary hours'—a tale of days of childhood when the cuckoo was 'an invisible thing, a voice, a mystery'. As he hears him now again, once more suddenly the earth 'appears to be An unsubstantial faery place That is meet home for thee'. He is back in the world of those visionary experiences of childhood which he regarded as the source of the deepest illumination.

He had no sooner finished the *Cuckoo* than he began upon the *Rainbow*. The sight of the rainbow still brings to him the old 'leaping up of the heart' which he had as a boy. He prays that it may always continue to be so:

The child is father of the man
 And I could wish my days to be
 Bound each to each by natural piety.

In the edition of 1815 these lines are prefixed as a motto to the *Ode*. There is the external link, that they were composed contemporaneously with it. But there is an inner connexion, the significance of which has, I think, not been fully apprehended. In the first place it has, I fancy, not been pointed out that, when in lines 22–3 of the *Ode* Wordsworth says

To me alone there came a thought of grief:
 A timely utterance gave that thought relief,

the timely utterance may very well be the *Rainbow* poem itself. Secondly, the conception of human days bound together by natural piety is the clue to the interpretation of the *Ode* in its entirety. I shall try to make this clear as we proceed.

The *Ode*, so far as it was carried at this time, ended with the fourth stanza; and was not completed in its entirety until 1806. This we know from Wordsworth's own statement in the Fenwick Notes—though we must not necessarily suppose, I think, that fragments and scraps of the later stanzas had not taken at least inchoate form at the earlier date. But so far as it was a complete piece in 1802, it ended with lines 56–7:

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
 Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

It is not, I think, accident that the poem broke off thus at this unanswered question: that between the question and the answer there intervenes a period of no less than four years. We are here, I am inclined to suppose, brought up against a crisis, a turning-point, in Wordsworth's intellectual development. Until now he has lived in 'the glory and the freshness' of the senses, in the immediate report given by the senses of a 'principle of joy' in the world. But with advancing years this report comes to be fitful and dim. 'The things that I have seen I now can see no more.'

What does that mean? How does that happen? And, if it happens, as it does, what is the meaning and value, as against the early gift of vision, of the 'years which bring the philosophic mind'?

Wordsworth, as I have said, undoubtedly had these visionary experiences in great intensity both of number and quality. Undoubtedly they were to him the most real and valuable thing in life. We may shrug our shoulders, but so it was; and we must start out from that. We shall not understand him unless we attune ourselves to his mood, which is, for him, one of philosophy and not fancy. Examples of a fanciful expression of the same mood occur of course in many places in literature.

Sing me a song of a lad that is gone,
 Say, could that lad be I?
 Merry of soul he sailed on a day,
 Over the sea to Skye.
 Give me again all that was there,
 Give me the sun that shone!
 Give me the eyes, give me the soul,
 Give me the lad that's gone!

But Stevenson's pretty poem takes us to, and keeps us in, a wholly different world. Wordsworth is propounding to us with all the seriousness of which he is capable a question which has not merely crossed his fancy but which is for him the central question of the imaginative life.

The first four stanzas of the *Ode* put the fact: 'There hath passed a glory from the earth'; and in the last two lines of them, ask the explanation of it. Stanzas vi–viii give the explanation in the form of the doctrine of *anamnesis* or Reminiscence. Stanzas ix–xi are an attempt to vindicate the value of a life from which 'vision' has fled.

The ultimate source of the doctrine of reminiscence is, of course, Plato and the Neo-Platonists. The immediate source, however, upon which Wordsworth drew can hardly be in doubt. It was not Plato, but Coleridge. Here are the opening lines of a sonnet written by Coleridge, in 1796, on receiving intelligence of the birth of a son (the son was Hartley Coleridge):

Oft o'er my brain does that strong fancy roll
 Which makes the present (while the flash doth last)
 Seem a mere semblance of some unknown past,
 Mixed with such feelings as perplex the soul
 Self-questioned in her sleep; and some have said
 We lived ere yet this robe of flesh we wore.

In a note appended to this sonnet Coleridge refers merely to Plato. In a letter, however, to his friend Poole, he seems to indicate Fénelon as his nearest source. 'Almost all the followers,' he says, 'of Fénelon believe that men are

degraded intelligences, who had all once lived together in a paradisiacal, or perhaps heavenly, state. The first four lines express a feeling which I have often had—the present has appeared like a vivid dream or exact similitude of some past circumstances.’ That Wordsworth drew upon Coleridge is indicated, not only by the general consideration of his philosophic indebtedness to Coleridge, but also by the fact that the first hint in him of the reminiscence doctrine occurs (as it occurs in Coleridge) in connexion with Hartley Coleridge—in the opening line of the verses *To H. C., Six Years Old*:

O thou whose fancies from afar are brought.

These verses are usually said to have been composed in 1802. But they are quoted by Coleridge in *Anima Poetae* (p. 15) under the date 1801, at a time when Hartley was only four years old. Look now at lines 85–6 of the *Immortality Ode*:

Behold the child among his new-born blisses,
A six years’ darling of a pigmy size.

The first edition has ‘a four years’ darling.’ I cannot help thinking that the child depicted in the *Ode* is actually Hartley Coleridge; that there is a close connexion between the two poems, and that in both Wordsworth, at a later date, altered ‘four’ to ‘six’, as more suited to the habits and disposition ascribed to the child. In any case we may, I think, without improbability regard Coleridge as the source from which the reminiscence doctrine took rise in Wordsworth’s imagination. That being so, it is interesting to find Coleridge, in that part of the *Biographia Literaria* where he speaks of the *Ode on Immortality*, warning the reader against taking Wordsworth’s doctrine of preexistence in the literal and ‘ordinary interpretation.’ ‘The Ode’, he says,

‘was intended for such readers only as had been accustomed to watch the flux and reflux of their inmost nature, to venture at times into the twilight realms of consciousness, and to feel a deep interest in modes of inmost being, to which they know that the attributes of time and space are inapplicable and alien, but which can yet not be conveyed, save in symbols of time and space. For such readers the sense is sufficiently plain, and they will be as little disposed to charge Mr. Wordsworth with believing the Platonic pre-existence in the ordinary interpretation of the words, as I am to believe that Plato himself ever meant or taught it!’

Wordsworth himself in later life was somewhat concerned as to the use to which he had put the doctrine. Yet what he is concerned about is, not that

the doctrine may not be true, but that it may be intrusive; that it is not a part of the teaching of the Church, and may be misconceived as qualifying, or superseding, that teaching.² Nothing that he says anywhere suggests that he entertained the doctrine otherwise than seriously; and this is only another of the cases where, as I have said, we shall not understand him unless we believe what he tells us. I am no more in doubt that Wordsworth believed the doctrine than I doubt that Plato did—Coleridge's scepticism, it will be noticed, extends even to Plato.³

But for Wordsworth, it should be made clear, the doctrine has both a different foundation and a different significance from that which it has in Plato. Wordsworth, as I have said, is a pure sensationalist. Plato, on the other hand, is a pure intellectualist. To Plato the doctrine of reminiscence is a theory of knowledge: an explanation of how we get to know and think. The senses are the source of all error. The world of 'Ideas' alone has truth. It is only by escape from the contamination of the senses, only by getting away from eyes and ears, that we are able truly to see and hear, and to come to the truth of things. The process is a long and painful labour of abstraction. But to Wordsworth the truth of things comes in flashes, in gleams of sense-perception; and in abstraction the truth dies. Wordsworth's doctrine is, in fact, not a theory of knowledge, but a romance of sensation. The absorbing interest of Plato is in the logical meanings of things; to Wordsworth logical meanings are precisely that part of things which has no value. There is some degree of delusion, therefore, in speaking of the Platonism of Wordsworth; and if we are to read the *Ode* rightly we shall do well to begin by putting Plato out of our minds.

Our pre-natal existence is guaranteed for Plato by the fact that we can reason at all; by the power in us to form class-conceptions. It is guaranteed to Wordsworth by a passivity of response to sense-impressions; and in this connexion I feel obliged to reiterate what I have already said in another connexion. In considering the character of the impressions made upon Wordsworth by Nature, we must conceive ourselves always, I believe, to be dealing with impressions made upon a consciousness highly abnormal. The flashes thrown by sense on the invisible world came to him with a frequency and fullness of illumination not given to ordinary men. And just as his experience here is not ordinary, so I conceive it to be not ordinary in respect of that phenomenon which is the main theme of the *Ode*—in respect of the manner in which, as we pass from childhood to youth, and from youth to manhood, the flashes of vision become ever more and more faint and intermittent.

That this is what happened in Wordsworth's own case it is not possible to doubt. He tells us so; he reiterates it; we may even say that it is a chief trouble of

his soul—for the things that are thus passing from him are precisely the things which he regards as more precious than anything else in life. Yet so far as we can judge, so far as general report can be trusted, Wordsworth's experience in this particular is not that of ordinary men. One is tempted to the conjecture that the extraordinary force and frequency of the visionary experiences of his earlier years exhausted prematurely—actually wore out by over-use—the faculty of vision itself. In the *Ode*, and elsewhere, Wordsworth endeavours to persuade himself—and us—that he has replaced this visionary gift by some other gift or gifts; that he still draws upon sources of experience not inferior in depth and clearness. But *does* he? In all that matters to us, that is to say in his poetry, does he? The great *Ode* closes the two volumes of 1807. Why is it that thereafter we pass into the dark, or, at any rate, out of the fullness of light, that we are conscious that, 'where e'er we go,' 'there hath passed a glory' from his poetry, and that the things which we have seen with his eyes, we 'now can see no more'? In this early decay of a faculty abnormally developed and abnormally employed I am inclined (leaving the faculty itself unexplained in its origin and nature) to seek at least a partial explanation of the extraordinary decline in poetic power which begins with the ending of the *Ode*. Wordsworth did cease to see things.

This is not, of course, an explanation which will satisfy any one who supposes that Wordsworth was like other people; that 'inspiration' is a metaphor, and the epithet 'seer' a courtesy title. For myself, when poets tell me that they are inspired, I am disposed to believe them—I have found it always the shortest way, not only of placating them, but of understanding them. It may even be that it is the only way.

There are two passages of Wordsworth which should always be read in connexion with the *Ode*; and in both of which we have a somewhat pathetic expression of his sense of lost vision. Of these the first is to be found in the concluding portion of the twelfth book of the *Prelude*—I have already quoted the opening lines of it:

O mystery of man, from what a depth
 Proceed thy honours. I am lost, but see
 In simple childhood something of the base
 On which thy greatness stands; but this I feel
 That from thyself it comes, that thou must give,
 Else never canst receive. The days gone by
 Return upon me almost from the dawn
 Of life: the hiding-places of man's power
 Open: *I would approach them, but they close.*
I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,

*May scarcely see at all; and I would give,
While yet we may, as far as words can give,
Substance and life to what I feel, enshrining,
Such is my hope, the spirit of the past
For future restoration. (xii. 272–86.)*

The words which I have put into italics are sufficiently significant to stand without comment. The passage was composed about the time at which the *Ode* was brought to completion. By the side of it may be set a stanza of the *Ode composed upon an Evening of extraordinary Splendour and Beauty*: a poem written in 1818:⁴

Such hues from their celestial urn
Were wont to stream before mine eye,
Where'er it wandered in the morn
Of blissful infancy.
This glimpse of glory, why renewed?
Nay, rather speak with gratitude;
For if a vestige of those gleams
Survived, 'twas only in my dreams.
Dread Power, whom peace and calmness serve
No less than Nature's threatening voice,
From THEE if I would swerve;
O, let thy grace remind me of the light
Full early lost, and fruitlessly deplored;
Which at this moment on my waking sight
Appears to shine, by miracle restored;
My soul, though yet confined to earth,
Rejoices in a second birth!
'Tis past, the visionary splendour fades;
And night approaches with her shades. (61–80.)

When Wordsworth speaks here of

the light

Full early lost, and fruitlessly deplored,

it is the same light as that of which he speaks in the *Ode on Immortality* as 'the fountain-light of all our day' and 'the master-light of all our seeing'. And when he speaks of this light as 'fruitlessly deplored', it can hardly be but that the reference in those words is to the great *Ode* itself; and we must suppose Wordsworth to have had the sense that the *Ode*, great as it is, was

great in a somewhat 'fruitless' fashion; that, philosophically, it failed; that it did not answer adequately the questions which it set out to solve. When I say 'adequately', I mean adequately from the point of view which Wordsworth had reached in 1818. By that date he had reached a theistic position which the *Evening Voluntaries*, as a whole, reflect. Nature is no longer identified with God or the divine; but God is conceived in an external relation, as the creator of Nature; and our perception of Nature and its glory we owe, no longer to the free senses, but to 'Grace'. Grace 'reminds us of the light'. Similarly in the fourth of the *Evening Voluntaries*, By grace divine, he says,

By grace divine,
Not otherwise, O Nature, we are thine,
Through good and evil, thine. (16–18.)

To such a mood the great *Ode* must necessarily appear a 'fruitless' achievement.

But if we get away from the Wordsworth of 1818, and look at the *Ode* from the point of view of the Wordsworth of 1797–1807, we have still to ask, Whether it achieves its end, whether it is, in fact, successful in vindicating a life no longer, or only rarely, visited by these 'visionary gleams' which belong to the fullness and purity of the free senses. The vindication of such a life is attempted in the last three stanzas of the poem. The ninth stanza begins, or purports to begin, on a note of gladness:

O joy, that in our embers
Is something that doth live!

Even so, it is not a very auspicious beginning. The fire of joy seems, after all, to be no more than a spark among the smouldering embers of a dying life. It is just 'something that doth live', a something better than nothing in a decolorated and fringescent world. Nor is this living *something*, in the dying embers of Wordsworth's imagination, readily or easily apprehensible. At first sight, he would appear to tell us no more than that the loss of light is adequately compensated by the recollection of it. That is certainly something not consistent with ordinary human experience—we were happy indeed were it possible for us in the lean years of life to fill the empty granaries of the heart by thinking upon more kindly summers. But neither is it possible, nor is it likely that it appeared so to Wordsworth.

What, then, is he really trying to say to us in the last three stanzas of the *Ode*?

In order to answer this question satisfactorily, it is necessary that, in conjunction with Wordsworth's speculations upon nature and the goodness

of Nature, we should consider to some extent also his view of certain aspects of the moral life. I have said that the lines from the Rainbow poem, prefixed to the *Ode*, were intended to serve, as I thought, as a clue to the poem. The child is father of the man, Wordsworth there says,

And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

The idea here put to us is illustrated, rather unexpectedly, in a poem of a quite different character—the *Happy Warrior*. The Happy Warrior is described as one who,

when brought
Among the tasks of real life, hath wrought
Upon the plan that pleased his childish thought.

The Happy Warrior is, in fact, one who has bound his days together. He has so bound up his life that the pure and free impressions of childhood, its visionary experiences, are the inspiration of his mature age. The poem takes us from the natural to the moral world; but the principle at issue is the same, nor does Wordsworth part these two worlds so sharply, as we do. The principle is further illustrated, in its purely moral aspect, in the *Ode to Duty*:

There are who ask not if thine eye
Be on them; who in love and truth,
Where no misgiving is, rely
Upon the genial strength of youth:
Glad hearts without reproach or blot,
Who do thy work and know it not.
Long may the kindly influence last;
But thou, if they should totter, teach them to stand fast!

I doubt whether Wordsworth, in his best period, ever abandoned the doctrine that the highest moral achievement is that which presents itself as an inspiration, that which is part of our natural life, that which is bound up with childhood and its unthinking 'vision'. Duty is a second-best; we seek support from that power when higher and freer powers fail us. The purer moral life is that which so binds together our days that the vision of childhood suffices to later years.⁵

Notes

1. I mention that because the poem is in form somewhat slight and fanciful. Wordsworth placed it where it is because to him it was neither.

2. Grosart, iii, pp. 194–5.
3. Coleridge, in a late piece, *Phantom or Fact*, draws again on the doctrine.
4. No. ix of the *Evening Voluntaries*; but not an original part of that series (which dates as a whole from 1833: Grosart. iii. 145).
5. We may profitably conceive the *Prelude*, accordingly, as a self-examination directed towards binding together the poet's own days, his different periods, and moments, of inspired consciousness.

—H.W. GARROD, "The 'Immortal Ode,'"
from *Wordsworth: Lectures and Essays*,
Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1st ed.,
1923, pp. 112–124

THE WHITE DOE OF RHYLSTONE

The White Doe of Rhylstone, or The Fate of the Nortons is based on the ballad "The Rising of the North," which had appeared in Thomas Percy's *Reliques*. The story concerns a brief rebellion in 1569–70 by members of the conservative Roman Catholic Church in northern England, who were protesting against the Protestant Elizabeth I. Wordsworth's poem is an imaginative reworking of that legend, displaying the influence of Sir Walter Scott's romantic vision of medieval England. The historical figure the legend appropriates is Richard Norton, the master of Rylstone Hall, and his eight sons, who joined the Percys and Nevilles, two esteemed, long-standing northern families, in the revolt. Norton's other children, Francis and Emily, remained neutral. Francis is killed in an effort to save the Banner of the Five Wounds, which was carried by his father and bore an image of the cross along with the five wounds of Christ. Thus, Emily is left as the lone survivor and finds consolation in the company of a white doe. Though *The White Doe of Rhylstone* is meant to be an account of historical events, Wordsworth wrote himself into it, for he, too, was mourning the death of his brother John and was attempting to convey his own deep sense that suffering must be accepted and that it can enhance the imagination. In *The White Doe*, salvation comes from enduring the hardships of being the lone survivor. Though Wordsworth wrote the poem in 1808, he did not publish it until 1815.

JOHN WILSON (1815)

The *White Doe* is not in season; venison is not liked in Edinburgh. It wants flavor; a good Ettrick wether is preferable. Wordsworth has more of the