



Wordsworth re-visited - Audio

Contemporary influences

Numerous literary sources are echoed in Wordsworth's own verse.

His literary conception of nature can, in fact, be seen to develop from a particular strain of writing on the subject that evolved during the Enlightenment period. The neoclassical emphasis of this strain on universality, reason, formal balance and simplicity, all elements which would be picked up by Wordsworth, was typically Enlightenment in form. Its movement towards less conscious quasi-romantic forms of response to the spiritual and the sublime in nature would also be highly influential.

Three 18th century poets out of many influences are particularly significant in this respect. They are James Thomson, James Beatty, and William Cowper. Noticeably absent, though, is the long-established dialect tradition of Lakes vernacular writing.

Thomson is perhaps the greatest nature poet of the 18th century, *The Seasons* representing, as Wordsworth held, his highest genius as an imaginative poet. Indeed, Wordsworth held that Thomson was responsible for bringing nature back to poetry after nearly a century. The poem, with each of its four long sections devoted to a season, was first published between 1726 and 1730. Its appeal to Wordsworth lay in Thomson's vision of the unity of the natural and the human world, the so-called 'one life'. In the 1780s and 90s Wordsworth would also have shared Thomson's view that the natural view was vitalised by God, a sentiment which pervades *Descriptive Sketches*. Both poets would displace spiritual experience into the natural world.

Listen to the following reading from *Spring*, dealing with the vital effect of the season on the natural world. This is a passage at which, Wordsworth remarked, any well used copy of *The Seasons* generally opens of itself.

'Inspiring God, who banded this spirit all and unremitting energy pervades, adjusts, sustains and agitates the whole, he's ceaseless, works alone, and yet alone seems not to work with such perfection framed as this complex, stupendous scheme of things. But though concealed to every purer eye the informing author in his works appears. Chief lovely spring in thee and thy soft scenes the smiling god is seen, while water, earth and air test his bounty which exalts the brute creation to this finer thought, and annual melts their undesigning hearts profusely thus in tenderness and joy. Still let my song and nobler note assume, and sing the infusive

force of spring on man when heaven and earth, as if contending, vie to raise his being and serene his soul. Can he forebear to join the general smile of nature?’

The elevated rhetoric of the lines compacts religious enthusiasm with a sense of the cyclical power of the natural sublime. God is seen actively working through spring. Likewise, in *The Prelude* and other works from the late 1790s onwards, Wordsworth celebrates the existence of a vital spirit that underlies all creative life. It will be his task to extend Thomson to make nature poetry reflect the active part the imagination plays in shaping the world. The evolution would be from Thomson’s mechanical universal soul to what he called the wisdom and spirit of the universe, which would actively intertwine nature and thought.

If Thomson’s *The Seasons* gave Wordsworth a poetic view of nature from the outside, then James Beattie’s *The Minstrel*, dating from the early 1770s, gave him a poetic persona structured from within nature. Dorothy Wordsworth’s comment on the similarity of Edwin, the youthful hero of *The Minstrel*, to her young brother is instructive. Both figures actively sought out nature and solitude, both also discover something more than just aesthetic value in nature. There is no doubt anyway that Beattie’s Scottish creation provided an inspirational model for Wordsworth in the fraught years that followed his return from France in 1792. The link between nature and autobiography in *The Minstrel* is a prominent one. Beattie made no secret of the fact that Edwin had been created from his own experiences and represented his developing poetic sensibilities. You may remember that the subtitle of *The Prelude* is ‘The Growth of a Poet’s Mind’. Beattie’s *The Minstrel* is sub-titled ‘The Progress of Genius’, making the two works very similar, in intention at least. Each contains a self-exploratory impulse, frequently linked to a passionate commitment to the value of natural scenery. Here is a reading of three stanzas from Book 1 of *The Minstrel*.

‘Lo, where the stripling wrapped in wonder rose beneath the precipice o’erhung with pine, and seas on high amidst the encircling grows, from cliff to cliff the foaming torrents shine, while waters, woods and winds in concert join, and echo swells the chorus to the skies. Would Edwin this majestic scene resign for ought the huntsman’s puny craft supplies? Ah no, he better knows great nature’s charms to prize. And oft he traced the uplands to survey when o’er the sky advanced the kindling dawn, the crimson cloud, blue mane and mountain grey, and lake dim gleaming on the smoky lawn. Far to the west the long, long veil withdrawn, where twilight loves to linger for a while. And now he faintly kens the bounding fawn and villager abroad at early toil. But lo the sun appears, and heaven, earth, oceans smile. And oft the craggy cliff he loved to climb, when all in mist the world below was lost. What dreadful pleasure there to stand sublime, like shipwrecked mariner on desert coast, and view the enormous waste of vapour, tossed in billows lengthening to the horizon round. Now scooped in gulfs with mountains now embossed, and hear the voice of mirth and song rebound, flocks, herds and waterfalls along the hoar profound.’

There are direct picturesque similarities between this last stanza and a similar scene in Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches* where, in a lengthy passage we read, that 'a mighty waste of mist the valley fills, a solemn sea whose veils and mountains round stand motionless'. Neither poet draws any philosophical conclusion from the scene. It remains just that: a scene, with distinct overtones of the biblical deluge.

However, in Book 13 of the 1805 *Prelude* the image appears yet again, this time in Wordsworth's description of a night ascent of Snowdon. Here 'a huge sea of mist', as he describes it, is an animated present. It represents,

'the perfect image of a mighty mind, of one that feeds upon infinity, that is exalted by an under-presence, the sense of God, or whatsoever is dim or vast in its own being, above all one function of such a mind had nature there exhibited by putting forth, and that with circumstance most awful and sublime'.

This is typically Wordsworthian, a visible scene has become saturated in non-objective meaning. Arguably though, without Beattie, the narrator here might have been a very different presence in the landscape.

In the stanzas we have just heard from *The Minstrel*, for example, it is evident that Edwin is responding instinctively to a moral force that runs through the visible scene. Such a force was quite new in the poetry of the time. For one thing it contrasted directly the positive educative value of natural scenes with the vanity and superficiality of the modern world. Running through *The Minstrel* and linked to this last point is Beattie's belief that rural life affords its population greater moral and social benefits than urban existence. 'Nature forms a rustic taste so nice', he writes in his poem. Often held to be a tenet of the romantics, this was in fact part of a wider Enlightenment cult of simplicity. Such a doctrine was firmly held by Wordsworth and forms the ideological framework to his lyrical ballads. He maintains in a prose preface to the poems that in 'rustic life', as he phrases it, 'the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature'.

Finally, in this survey of influences that have shaped Wordsworth's response to the natural world, we will turn to William Cowper.

Wordsworth's Cowper is the poet of *The Task* of 1785, rather than that of the earlier Olney Hymns, but one of the tasks would be an early and abiding influence on Wordsworth. In this book Cowper outlines his boyhood experiences of the natural world and his growing love of nature. He also meditates at length on the value of these experiences, showing Wordsworth how a certain form of autobiography involving nature could feed poetry. This is something that would bear on much of Wordsworth's mature writing.

There are obvious differences between the gentle southern English landscapes of *The Task*, and the sublimities of Wordsworth's Lake District Mountains. Both poets, however, use a powerful form of naturalising discourse; both foreground the importance of nature and memory in developing self consciousness, and both stress the importance of individual perception.

Here is a reading from Book 1 of *The Task*. The first section refers to boyhood, the second to the more recent present, and to walks Cowper would take with his friend Mary Unwin near the River Ouse. Note the change of tone after the pause which separates these two sections.

'For I have loved the rural walk through lanes of grassy swarth, close cropped by nibbling sheep and skirted thick with intertexture firm of thorny boughs, have loved the rural walk o'er hills, through valleys and by rivers' brink. E'er since a truant boy I passed my bounds to enjoy a ramble on the banks of Thames, and still remember, nor without regret, of hours that sorrow since has much endeared how oft my slice of pocket store consumed, still hungering, penniless and far from home. I fed on scarlet hips and stony haws, or blushing crabs, or berries that embossed the bramble, black as jet, or sloes austere. How oft upon yon eminence are paces slackened to a pause, and we have borne the ruffling winds, scarce conscious that it blew, while admiration feeding at the eye and still unsated dwelt upon the scene. Thence with what pleasure have we just discerned the distant plough slow moving, and beside his labouring team that swerved not from the track the sturdy swain diminished to a boy.'

The second section, even though it used a scene from a present perspective, is contemplative in the way it links landscape and memory. You might have noted throughout correspondences with *An Evening Walk*. The focus on boyhood and memory, even down to the tone of the narrative voice, is similar. Parallels might also be seen in the way the Cowper lays out his landscape in the poem, especially the latter passage. The formal arrangement accords with the scenic organisation of the picturesque. It is ordered, balanced and highly visual.

There is, though, a much stronger narrative presence in the landscape of Cowper's poem than in *An Evening Walk*, something that would undergo dramatic change before Wordsworth came to write *There Was a Boy*. In fact, *The Task* contains a central tension between idealised picturesque landscapes and the mind of the poet. Wordsworth would ultimately reconcile the two. What Coleridge called the 'divine chit-chat' of Cowper would eventually become in Wordsworth a heightened perception of everyday experience of the sublime in nature.

It is perhaps evident from this discussion that with Wordsworth nature would play a functional role in human development. Intensely felt experiences of the natural world would, he maintained, crystallise his spiritually regenerating memories, what he called 'spots of time' in *The Prelude*. The poet's role would be to 'redeem', as he phrases it, 'the beauty and dignity of the human mind which lies latent in these episodes'.

Drawing on external nature the poet would stand as a defender of all that was best in human nature. How exquisitely Wordsworth writes in *Home at Grasmere*, the individual line to the external world is fitted, and how exquisitely, too, the external world is fitted to the mind.