



Wordsworth re-visited - Audio

Wordsworth's eye and ear

Late one night in the autumn of 1808 Wordsworth set off for the head of Dunmail Raise, a pass four miles north of his Grasmere home. The year was a crucial one in the Peninsular War against Napoleon's armies. Wordsworth was anxious to receive intelligence from the London papers and was heading north to meet the night carrier who would be conveying copies down from Keswick. With him was his young disciple and friend, Thomas de Quincey who, much later, recounted the following story.

During the long wait in the silent darkness Wordsworth would periodically stretch himself full length on the high road and press his ear to the ground. He was trying to pick up the sound of wheels as the distant cart approached them from the north. Once, de Quincey recorded, when Wordsworth was slowly rising from this effort, his eye caught a bright star that was glittering between the brow of Seat Sandal and of the mighty Helvellyn. He gazed upon it for a minute or so and then, upon turning away to descend again into Grasmere, he made the following explanation:

'I have remarked from my earliest days that if the attention is energetically braced up to an act of steady observation or of steady expectation, then if this intense condition of vigilance should suddenly relax, at that moment any beautiful, any impressive visual object or collection of objects falling upon the eye is carried to the heart with a power not known under other circumstances. Just now my ear was placed upon the stretch in order to catch any sound of wheels that might come down upon the Lake of Wythburn from the Keswick road. At the very instant when I raised my head from the ground in final abandonment of hope for this night, at the very instant when the organs of attention were all at once relaxing from their tension, the bright star hanging in the air above those outlines of massy blackness fell suddenly upon my eye, and penetrated my capacity of apprehension with a pathos and a sense of the infinite that would not have arrested me under other circumstances.'

Much of the language here, if not the sensibility itself, could be drawn from Edmund Burke's treatise on the Sublime and Beautiful. The physical object of vision, a star, is in fact directly referred to the beautiful. The internalised experience on the other hand, the massy blackness, the apprehension, the intimations of the infinite, fit squarely into the category of the sublime. Perception then is inwards and moves away from any observation of the concrete visual scene towards introspective subjective involvement.

This concern with how it actually feels to observe landscape or aspects of nature, rather than with the way that they are configured by the observing mind, moves us away from picturesque manipulation towards a more fluid and aesthetically open form of romantic sensibility. In fact, the intimate dramatised scene offers a microcosm of the creative process.

Interestingly for us, after recording Wordsworth's response to the star of Dunmail Raise, de Quincey goes on to note that on the walk back to Grasmere the poet offered another illustration of the same psychological principle. This related to a schoolboy incident where, waiting for an owl to respond to his own mimic hootings, as he put it, the surrounding lake scenery entered his mind in startlingly unbidden fashion.

You might like to remember the connection since a poem that Wordsworth wrote on the incident, *There Was a Boy*, is the one we will be looking at next.

For Wordsworth, then, creative immediacy was almost habitual. It could be refined to the point where the imagination could, in his words, see into the life of things. Sometimes the young Wordsworth literally lost sight of the external and found himself looking at the inner workings of his own creative processes of perception.

On his way to and from Hawkshead School, for example, he records how he would be forced to grasp a wall or a tree to recall himself from this hallucinatory state. Such experiences led Wordsworth to conclude that there was an active principle in the natural world coincident with the needs of the human spirit. In many ways the poems are an exploration of such an intuition, something that, strictly speaking, cannot be bodied out rationally.

In the long work on the growth of his poetic sensibilities, *The Prelude*, Wordsworth records a number of distinct stages in his developing attitude to nature during his boyhood in the Lake District. Firstly, there was the unselfconscious enjoyment of the Lakes' landscape, simply as an adjunct to boyhood pursuits.

Here is how the poet himself describes the feelings of his ten-year-old self in Book 1 of *The Prelude*.

'The sands of Westmoreland, the creeks and bays of Cumbria's rocky limits, they can tell how when the sea threw off his evening shade, and to the shepherds' huts beneath the crags did send sweet notice of the rising moon. How I have stood to fancies such as these, engrafted in the tenderness of thought, a stranger linking with the spectacle no conscious memory of a kindred sight, and bringing with me no peculiar sense of quietness or peace.'

In the next phase the Lakes' scenery is consciously sought out in the knowledge that it can give pleasure. Perception of the beauty and the mystery latent in landscape, however, is still only incidental for the young boy's pursuit of sport and adventure.

Turning to Book 2 of *The Prelude* we can see Wordsworth relate this once again to his Hawkshead schooldays.

'We ran a boisterous race; the year span round with giddy motion. But the time approach'd that brought with it a regular desire for calmer pleasures, when the beautiful forms of nature were collaterally attach'd to every scheme of holiday delight, and every boyish sport, less grateful else, and languidly pursued.'

Finally, the supporting structure of thoughtless pleasure is removed, and nature is sought for itself alone. Here is an extract from Book 2 of *The Prelude*, the point at which, as a fourteen year old schoolboy, Wordsworth experiences his deepest empathy with the natural world, and sees nature as a semi-autonomous living power.

Note the conflation of the sacramental and the sensuous.

'I was left alone, seeking the visible world, nor knowing why. The props of my affections were remov'd, and yet the building stood, as if sustain'd by its own spirit! All that I beheld was dear to me, and from this cause it came, that now to nature's finer influxes my mind lay open, to that more exact and intimate communion which our hearts maintain with the minuter properties of objects which already are belov'd and of those only.'

The experiences as schoolboys, the valuation very much the adults. It was only when Wordsworth later came to meditate on his earlier Lakes' experiences that the full significance in the evolution of his poetic growth lay fully revealed. Visionary bliss, visionary power, an obscure sense of possible sublimity, a dream, a prospect in my mind, these are just a few of the approaches to defining the nature of these exalted states of perception that Wordsworth attempts in *The Prelude*.

All this is absent from *An Evening Walk*. That early poem inhabits very different cultural and aesthetic ground from *The Prelude*. As we will see, the very premise of *There Was a Boy*, itself to be absorbed into *The Prelude*, is that external nature embodies a living mind open, Wordsworth believed, to a creative relationship with the human mind. 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.