PRIMITIVISM IN WORDSWORTH'S EARLY POETRY

Thesis for the Degree of M. A.

MICHIGAN STATE COLLEGE

Norma Byrd Smith

1949

This is to certify that the

thesis entitled

PRIMITIVISM IN WORDSWORTH'S EARLY POETRY

presented by

Norma Byrd Smith

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

M. A. degree in English

Claude M. Newlin
Major professor

Date August 26, 1949

PRIMITIVISM IN WORDSWORTH'S EARLY POETRY

By

Norma Byrd Smith

A THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate School of Michigan State College of Agriculture and Applied Science in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

1949

THESIS

PREFACE

Since my first acquaintance with English literature, Wordsworth has been my favorite poet. Because I had lived in the country for the first thirteen years of my life, when I became a student in the city high school, I felt that I, of all the students, "understood" Wordsworth, for I had lived close to Nature and was familiar with the things he talked about. As years go by, I am glad for my early interest in this poet, although now I realize that it was only interest and not true appreciation and understanding. Since that time, I have tried more and more to understand his poetry.

The purpose of this study is only another of many attempts at understanding more of Wordsworth's poetry. Here, I shall attempt to show that a part of the philosophy he held during his most formative years--1797-1807--can be considered as primitivism.

Although many authors intimate the possibility of linking some of Wordsworth's ideas to primitivism, Irving Babbitt is the only one I have found who has written specifically on the subject, and that only a short article in a periodical.

Therefore, it was necessary first to study primitivism in general, and the great many good works which have been done on this subject--by Lovejoy and Boas, Whitney, and Fitzgerald especially. Then I searched all the poetry of Wordsworth written before 1807 for evidences of the different

types of primitivism. It is possible that Wordsworth himself would not have considered his ideas primitivistic, even in the early period. I can only show that portions of his poetry may display evidences of primitivism, as the term is now used.

I shall also attempt to show the ideas which Wordsworth and Rousseau had in common. Again, I shall not attempt to trace a direct stream of influence from the eighteenth century French writer. It is, nevertheless, interesting to speculate about this influence.

With a few exceptions, this study is limited to the works and the life of Wordsworth up to 1807. Students of the poet will realize the reason for this--the great change in ideas and beliefs which was manifested in the poet in the ensuing years. This study is not concerned with biographical facts, however, except as they influence the poetry.

The French Revolution, it is supposed, made Wordsworth a great poet; and he continued to be a great poet so long as he drew inspiration from the Revolutionary Idea. It is perhaps a question whether critics of Wordsworth have not become somewhat too habituated to seeing all things in the French Revolution, and perhaps too much habituated to interpreting literature generally by political and social environment. Undoubtedly, Wordsworth was deeply influenced by the French Revolution. And to understand the nature of this influence is a primary duty of the student of Wordsworth. But, since

I feel that the many books on the subject have more than taken care of it sufficiently, I shall take for granted a knowledge of this period in his life and touch on it only in passing.

I do not feel that it is necessary to give the exact reference for the famous quotations which are familiar to all readers of Wordsworth. However, the specific reference is given for most excerpts. Also, in this specific reference, wherever the letter A appears before the lines, this reference is taken from the 1805 edition of The Prelude, as edited by Ernest de Selincourt, with which most students of Wordsworth are familiar.

I do not intend that this should be an entirely original piece of work. Moreover, I am indeed grateful for the many interesting and helpful studies of Wordsworth from which I have been able to draw. And, although I have done much intensive work with the poetry itself, I do not present this as an exhaustive study.

I wish to express my appreciation and gratitude to the following people: to Dr, Branford P. Millar, my major professor, for his invaluable suggestions and criticisms; to Dr. Anders Orbeck, for his continued inspiration; to Dr. C. C. Hamilton and Dr. Claude Newlin, for their suggestions and help; and to Dr. William L. Watson and my family for their faith in my ability to complete the work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Problem of Wordsworth Scholarship

"An acquaintance with the mental and spiritual development of a poet is necessary for the fullest understanding and appreciation of his work. This is doubtless true of all poets, but it is pre-eminently true of Wordsworth."[1] No one familiar with his poetry will deny its subjective quality. His poetry is a mirror of his personal experiences, and his feelings, imaginings, and thoughts reflected there. Appreciation commonly follows understanding, and Wordsworth is not an easy poet to understand. "No poet, perhaps, can be easy who is so essentially and pervasively subjective."[2] At best, one can only try to understand certain portions of his best work.

Wordsworth began writing poetry, like most other good poets, at the age of fourteen. But, unlike most poets, he continued the practice of it for no less than sixty-six years afterwards. In so doing, he set for the world one of the greatest problems of any poet, for he was not only a poet of great scope and diversity, but a poet in which there is extreme conflict in thought between the early and the

---

[1] E. H. Sneath, Wordsworth: Poet of Nature and Poet of Man, p.1.

[2] H. W. Garrod, Wordsworth, p.11.

later years. Since most of his poetry is subjective, this conflict of thought and change in ideas appears in his poetry.

Any attempt to force all of Wordsworth's poetry into a consistent whole is, according to Melvin Rader, "simply an effort at Mutilation. Once we have recognized the diversity of his poetry, we can more readily correlate his growth."[3]

Yet, "nearly everything by which Wordsworth is supreme was written in a single decade of his life, in the period between 1797 and 1807. Outside these limits he wrote, of course, much that was interesting; but almost nothing that could bring him into the very first rank of poets, almost nothing that was of a piece with the splendid achievement of the decas mirabilis."[4]

In this study, therefore, I am interested primarily in that poetry written before 1807, and moreover, only in that part of his philosophy during those years which can be defined as primitivism.[5]

---

[3] Melvin Rader, The Presiding Ideas in Wordsworth's Poetry, p.128.

[4] Garrod, Wordsworth, p.11.

[5] This idea is held by Irving Babbitt in "The Primitivism of Wordsworth," Bookman (U. S. A.) , LXXIV, (1931), 3.

Primitivism

"Primitivism is the exaltation of a state of life in which man depends on his natural powers exerted in a simple society and an uncomplicated environment, rather than on a high degree of training and on an environment greatly modified by civilization. Primitivism thus presupposes some form of the theory of man's natural goodness, whether this be taken to reside in instinct, common sense, spontaneous feeling, or in some or all these."[6] To be primitivistic, such a view of human nature must be connected with a stage or phase of human life different from that in which the person lives--whether in the past or in some contemporary society.

"From Hesiod to Miniver Cheevey many men have thought or have pretended to think, that their happiest days were in the past."[7] The man in the street calls that longing, "regret for the good old days," the philosopher terms it "chronological primitivism," a name first given to it by A. O. Lovejoy in his Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas.[8] But named or unnamed, the tendency is a constant one in human nature.

---

[6] A. D. McKillop, English Literature from Dryden to Burns, p. 361.

[7] Margaret Fitzgerald, First Follow Nature, p. 3.

[8] Vol. I: Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity, p. 1.

Any form of primitivism implies that man may, must or does grow worse. In chronological primitivism, while man as originally created with all his faculties unimpaired and uncorrupted was capable of knowing divine truth and naturally inclined to follow it, "he has now so degenerated as to need either intellectual regeneration or, according to the orthodox opponents of deism, the special help of revelation."[9]

The poets' additions to the long tradition of primitivism blend easily into its venerable conventionality. "They dreamed, as generations of writers before them had dreamed, of the Classical Golden Age and of the lost beauty of Eden."[10] Life and literature prompted their reminiscent lingings. Memories of classical readings, recollections of journeys to Virgil's tomb and Horace's vine-crowned hills, the horrors of men in England and of their generation for the degenerate state of continental Europe--all these were powerful motives for lamenting the vanishing grandeur of Rome and Greece.

Of all regrets of by-gone days, the poets' longing for past times of good government at home were most frequent and most impassioned. But at least occasionally they meditated also on the lost delights of Eden, regretted the joys of the patriarchal age, and criticized the evils of modern

---

[9] Lois Whitney, Primitivism and the Idea of Progress, p.18.

[10] Fitzgerald, op. cit., p.3.

Christianity. They looked back to Eden, not so much to deplore man's sins as to survey his pristine powers of intellect. "Man exiled from Paradise had lost his perfect balance of reason and passion and had become a depraved creature, a fugitive from the Creator, bereft of perfect love and of heaven on earth."[11] Some shadow of Eden's peace remained with him in rural life, but most of the pleasures of that vanished garden were delights never to return.

Among those lost blessings, man's superior mental endowments seem to have impresses the poets most. They remarked the clarity of vision and calm of passion which Adam had possessed before the fall--his simplicity, his innocence, his intuitive knowledge. But that early perfection of humanity had changed: in man's altered state his runaway passions rushed the individual and society toward ruin.

A far stronger strain of chronological primitivism finds expression in the poets' admiration for the classical past. "The Golden Age of antiquity had been a sunshiny era wherein war was not, nor trade, nor commerce, nor wealth--a halcyon period that had degenerated all too soon into an iron age of avarice, cruelty, and conflict."[12] Poets of all times loved the Arcadian innocence and gentle unworldliness of the Golden Age. They liked to recount its virtues, to

---

[11] Ibid., p. 4.

[12] Ibid., p. 9.

remember that innocence and unselfish love marked the age "when time was young," that then "swains had no guile, and nymphs no greed, and mankind no ambition."[13]

Nor did the poets confine their longing to legendary ages: for purposes of rousing degenerate moderns, memories of the historically great served even better than regrets for Arcadia. It was natural and conventional for such poets to contrast their fellowmen with the giants of ancient times, and to find their contemporaries wanting. Beyond question, the ancients seemed wiser, sturdier, better than their modern descendants. Reflections on the poor estate of modern Greece and Rome inspired the most eloquent poetic laments for the passing of ancient grandeur. Whether the plaint was a melancholy sic transit, or whether it was a warning to Britain to guard her greatness, the theme was always one of solemn import. Luxury and its attendant evils had ruined both Greece and Rome. Was this to happen to England?

Stronger than aesthetic interest in a nebulous Golden Age, more persistent than academic interest in the faded days of Rome, was the poets' devotion to the glories of England's past. "Ranging the centuries from Boadicea to Queen Anne, the writers held up to contemporary English manners, morals, politics, and literature the overpowering example of Britain's former greatness."[14]

---

[13] Ibid., p.10.

[14] Ibid., p.21.

Modern learning and literature were decayed: men must look to earlier days for examples of wisdom and genius. Not only learning in general, but poetry in particular had become debased.

On questions of manners, morals, and politics, "nostalgia for earlier, simpler, homespun times underlay their impatience with the pretty race of contemporary coxcombs, and their resentment of the pert patter of contemporary manners."[15] Not in manners alone had Britain failed: her moral decline was sadder than her fall from courtesy. Noblemen were wicked, churchmen proud, all men avaricious: the virtue of former days had given way to knavery and stupidity. The poets who turned backward in their dreaming were but trying, as men of every generation have tried, to forget present griefs in visions of a golden past. Whether they looked to the vales of Arcadia or to the England of Queen Anne, they sought the same blessings--harmony, peace, virtue.

The impulse underlying primitivism is either the desire to escape from a corrupt and sophisticated society, or the desire to reform such an existing civilization by bringing it into conformity with an ideal of virtuous simplicity. When the poets began to look for harmony, peace, and virtue, not in an earlier era, but in a different way of living, their search for the good life among noble savages, rural

---

[15] Ibid., p.23.

swains, and country gentlemen added to the ever-widening stream of primitivism another current--the current of cultural primitivism.

Cultural Primitivism

"Cultural primitivism is the discontent of the civilized with civilization, or with some conspicuous and characteristic feature of it. It is the belief of men living in a relatively highly evolved and complex cultural condition that a life far simpler and less sophisticated in some or all respects is a more desirable life."[16] The cultural primitivist has almost invariably believed that the simpler life of which he has dreamed has been somewhere, at some time, actually lived by human beings. When these have been conceived as having existed at the beginning of history, or in a cycle of history, cultural primitivism fuses with one of the forms of chronological primitivism. But the former may be, and fairly often has been, disassociated from the latter. In cultural primitivism, society deteriorstes as it grows more complex. "Contemporary primitive peoples may be taken to illustrate an early and desirable stage in the life of the race."[17] Above all, "the cultural primitivist's

---

[16] A. O. Lovejoy, op. cit., p.7.

[17] McKillop, op. cit., p.361.

model of human excellence and happiness is sought in the present, in the mode of life of existing primitive, or so-called 'savage,' peoples."[18]

Man's desire to "get away from it all" motivates his cultural primitivism. "Periodically tiring of the complexities of civilization, he dreams of a simpler way of life."[19] The adventurous spirit longs for the pioneer days of rugged frontiersmen, the timid soul for the sunlit safety of a South Sea isle. One and all are attempting to accomplish the same end--that is, to find a less intricate design for living.

"The early poets in English literature have little to say about the noble savage or about hard and soft extremes of life on foreign shores: they are content with such stock themes as pastoral life, rural retirement, and the innate superiority of the man of humble means."[20] But when they went far afield for their ideal modes of life, the poets were torn between the delights of tropic paradises and the vigorous virtues of hardy arctic lands--down through a long list of heroic qualities. The Laplanders' industry, simplicity, honesty, and courage were typical of the virtues which made men feel that a harsh and primitive life might be an enviable one.

---

[18] Lovejoy, op. cit., p.8.

[19] Fitzgerald, op. cit., p.28.

[20] Loc. cit.

Every urban society that becomes tired of its own sophistication turns longingly towards some ideal country of peace and simplicity and natural beauty. "Eighteenth-century poets, writing from the noisy, smoke-filled London that enchanted and exhausted them, deafened by the street cries without, and the coffee-club chatter within, fled for mental quiet to pictures of pleasant pastoral scenes that had no counterpart in the reality of English rural life. The country swain of their pieces had an ideal existence. He watched the progress of the spring, enjoyed the fragrant breezes, and filled the country glades with his music."[21] He had health and innocence, a clear conscience, and a contented life. The joyous life of the shepherd was typical of the happiness of other rural workers. And, in the poets' description, at least, the country girl spent her days admiring the "smooth mirror of the crystal stream," and the ploughman spent his whistling duets with the nightingales.

While noble savages, tropic paradises, arctic wastes, and pastoral scenes might afford early eighteenth-century poets glimpses of better ways of life, their favorite concept of living was embodied in the ideal of rural retirement. The poets had nothing to add to the classic theme that wisdom and virtue are the fruits of a retired life.

---

[21] Ibid., p. 41.

The noise of the city was only an external source of annoyance. More serious still was the threat of urban living to the virtuous life. Avarice, ambition, the pride of courts, the scorn of the great, possessed the town. Town life was a hurricane wherein conscience and peace were exchanged for doubtful successes in society or statecraft. It was the haunt of scandal and pride and hypocrisy.

"Of all the virtues which the town dwellers sought in country shades, perhaps the most eagerly looked for was peace."[22] A sensible man sought solitude himself and invited his friends to share it. He was conscious of the tranquillity and the security of country life.

Some poets went to the country for inspiration as well as for comfort. "The poets' aesthetic appreciation of the woodlands as the abode of the muses was far overshadowed by their practical approval of the country as a refuge from the discomforts of town life. They had not, most of them, any intimate knowledge of the country life they praised, but they had a varied and lengthy acquaintance with the urban inconveniences they bewailed."[23]

"Country gentlemen and retired sages led relatively unpretentious lives, but for a real model of day-to-day

---

[22] Ibid., p.46.

[23] Ibid., p.52.

simplicity, the poets turned to their fellow-citizens--the poor. Poverty (at least in theory) seemed admirable in its freedom from inordinate desires, while wealth (again in theory) seemed a burden, a heavy load of complex affairs and overweening ambitions."[24] If the poets were to be believed, all virtuous poor folk were to be found in the country. Except for the comparative lowliness of their station, there was little to distinguish them from gentlemen in rural retirement: they were peaceful and innocent--their virtues were a lesson to the pride, ambition, and double dealing of city people.

Of all types of praiseworthy poor, the country girl easily "won the palm" for popularity. She was practical, thrifty, prudent, wholesome. "She spun, refrained from cards and scandal, and loved sincerely without mercenary motives."[25] She is born of honest parents, and though she has no portion, she has a great deal of virtue--the natural sweetness and innocence of her behavior, the freshness of her complexion, the unaffected turn of her shape and person.

While the impulse to primitivism always finds some expression in any age, several causes make it a prominent part of modern literature. A growing philosophical emphasis on self-evident common sense or reason, the "light of nature,"

---

[24] Ibid., p.73.

[25] Ibid., p.80.

weakened esteem for traditional authority and established institutions. "And the great literature of travel which developed in the age of discovery often described happy peoples in distant climes, so that cultural primitivism was encouraged and richly illustrated."[26]

With higher standards of living and increased prosperity, the propaganda against luxury often took a primitivistic form. This might be just a heightening of the impulse that leads people to praise the simpler life of their forefathers, or it might be extended to an attack on civilized society.

Primitivism had thus won a decisive victory in the eighteenth century. The earlier rationalism was found to be unsatisfying: "above all, it did not satisfy man's deep-seated craving for immediacy: so that presently he began to turn for this immediacy and also, as he hoped, for wisdom, to the region of impulse and emotion that lies beyond the rational level."[27]

What this primitivistic tendency--to look for one's illumination backwards and up--meant in the case of Wordsworth has been excellently put by M. Legouis: "Forth step the ignorant and illiterate, whose senses, not yet distorted

---

[26] McKillop, op. cit., p.362.

[27] Irving Babbitt, "The Primitivism of Wordsworth," Bookman (U. S. A.), LXXIV, (1931), p.3.

by analysis, yield them immediate perception of the world . . . ; above all, children, still half enveloped in the mystery which is the origin of every creature. . . But the train of those restored to honor is not yet ended. There follow those in whom all purely intellectual light appears extinct--the crazy and the idiotic, to whom the common people, perhaps not wrongly, attribute inspiration, and from whom even the wise may learn much, for none can say beforehand what phrase will issue from their lips; and since the utter impotence of so-called rational beings is admitted, may it not be that these will presently let fall words not less profound than mysterious? . . . Shall the multitudes which the philosophy of a Descartes would proscribe, the animals which cannot reason, be set aside on account of so insignificant a deficiency? They possess instinct. . . Nor is even this enough. Plants also have their joys and sorrows; they live and feel; they speak a language which the poet should strive to understand and interpret."[28]

Wordsworth, I believe, often combined the two types of primitivism. He felt that man, in his day of science, intellectualism, and industrialism, had degenerated from some previously happy state, and, also, that it was in the man closest to nature, the rustic folk, that one finds the real man.

---

28 Emile Legouis, The Early Life of William Wordsworth, pp. 401-402.

CHAPTER II

CHRONOLOGICAL PRIMITIVISM IN WORDSWORTH

There can be no doubt that Wordsworth believed that man had degenerated down through the years--that he was no longer as good as he once was--and often

> much it grieved my heart to think
> What man has made of man.[1]

In a letter written to Robert Southey in 1805, he said:

> Oh! it makes the heart groan, that, with such a beautiful world as this to live in, and such a soul as that of Man's is by nature and by gift of God, we should go about on such errands as we do, destroying and laying waste; and ninety-nine of us in a hundred never easy in any road that travels toward peace and quietness.[2]

From 1802-1807 especially he wrote poems which evince a deep interest in the political and social events of his time. And not only political, but social, conditions disturbed him, especially as they existed in England. In the famous sonnet "The world is too much with us," he enters a protest against the preoccupation with social and business cares, and the indifference to the resources which Nature offers to the human spirit:

> The world is too much with us; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
> Little we see in Nature that is ours;
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

---

[1] "Lines Written in Early Spring," ll.8-10.

[2] The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, ed. by de Selincourt, p.448.

> This sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
> The winds that will be howling at all hours,
> And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
> For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
> It moves us not.--Great God! I'd rather be
> A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
> So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
> Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
> Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
> Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.[3]

Here is a primitivistic yearning for the classical past.

The increase of wealth had been attended by an increase in the complexity of life and by a commercializing and materializing frame of mind. This mental state gave rise to two other well-known sonnets, which are among his best. In one, written in London in 1802, the vanity and parade of his country is lamented, and a feeling expressed that the march of wealth is productive of mischief:

> O Friend! I know not which way I must look
> For comfort, being, as I am, opprest,
> To think that now our life is only drest
> For show; mean handy-work of craftsman, cook,
> Or groom!--We must run glittering like a brook
> In the open sunshine, or we are unblest:
> The wealthiest man among us is the best:
> No grandeur now in nature or in book
> Delights us. Rapine, avarice, expense,
> This is idolatry; and these we adore:
> Plain living and high thinking are no more:
> The homely beauty of the good old cause
> Is gone; our peace, our fearful innocence,
> And pure religion breathing household laws.

Man has forgotten the simple things, and now he worships material things, and has set them up for gods. Simplicity is gone, and the poet is saddened by

---

[3] 1806.

all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy.[4]

The famous sonnet on Milton, the greater of the two, shows him in despair over the conditions of things in England at that time:

> Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour:
> England hath need of thee: she is a fen
> Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
> Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
> Have forfeited their ancient dower
> Of inward happiness. We are selfish men.

On the question of manners and morals, he offers further reproof:

> Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
> And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.[5]

He looks with reverence to this man, one of the glories of England's past, and shows that he thinks that England had better men then; and he continues in the sonnet on Milton:

> Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart:
> Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
> Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
> So didst thou travel on life's common way,
> In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
> The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

He also admires Milton's poetry, for in a letter to an unknown correspondent in 1802, he says:

> Milton's sonnets...I think manly and dignified compositions, distinguished by simplicity and unity of object and aim, and undisfigured by false or vicious ornaments...upon the whole, I

---

[4] "Resolution and Independence," l.21.

[5] 1802.

> think the music exceedingly well suited to its end, that is, it has an energetic and varied flow of sound crowding into narrow room more of the combined effect of rhyme and blank verse than can be done by any other kind of verse I know of.[6]

It is true that such words of reverence for the past and the degeneracy of the modern world are often supplanted by others which breathe a stronger faith and hope in the present, especially with reference to politics, as the sonnet,"It is not to be thought of that the Flood,"[7] in which he says that it is impossible to think of Britain's freedom perishing in "bogs and sands," and that it should "to evil and to good be lost forever." And yet, even here he glorifies the England of the past:

> In our halls is hung
> Armoury of the invincible Knights of old:
> We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
> That Shakspeare spake; the faith and morals hold
> Which Milton held.--In everything we are sprung
> Of Earth's first blood, have titles manifold.

Likewise, in the sonnet, "When I have borne in memory what has tamed Great Nations,"[8] he expresses shame for his "unfilial fears," and shows his appreciation of England as "a bulwark for the cause of men." "Anxious moods, however, seem to predominate, as they often will with a patriotic

---

[6] The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, ed. by de Selincourt, p.312.

[7] 1802.

[8] 1802.

observer of events, and especially with the patriotic poet whose sensitive soul is full of a strong love of freedom."[9]

In contrasting his country with another, Wordsworth felt that England was superior to France:

> Great men have been among us; hands that penned
> And tongues that uttered wisdom--better none:
> . . . . . .
> France, 'tis strange,
> Hath brought forth no such souls as we had then.
> Perpetual emptiness! unceasing change!
> No single volume paramount, no code,
> No master spirit, no determined road;
> But equally a want of books and men![10]

This is in contrasting his own country with another, but in contrasting the England of his day with the England of yesterday, he could not feel the same superiority, for he says, "Great men <u>have been</u> among us, and "no such souls as we <u>had then</u>." This is not an unconscious use of the past tense! He names some whom he considers great, and then whom there are "better none:"

> The later Sidney, Marvel, Harrington,
> Young Vane, and others who called Milton friend.

And he felt that they were superior, because

> These moralists could act and comprehend:
> They knew how genuine glory was put on;
> Taught us how rightfully a nation shone
> In splendour: what strength was, that would
> not bend
> But in magnanimous meekness.

---

[9] Sneath, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 49.

[10] 1802.

The sympathy which he felt with the supposed restoration of an idyllic order (in France) disappeared when it took the form of social disintegration. Likewise, the growth of pauperism in his own England, the factory system, and the decay of the old simple society, intensified the impression. In a letter to Charles James Fox in 1801, he says:

> It appears to me that the most calamitous effect, which has followed the measures which have lately been pursued in this country, is a rapid decay of the domestic affections among the lower orders of society...For many years past, the tendency of society amongst almost all the nations of Europe has been to produce it. But recently by the spreading of manufactures through every part of the country, by the heavy taxes upon postage, by workhouses, Houses of Industry, and the invention of Soup-shops &c. &c. superadded to the increasing disproportion between the price of labour and that of the necessaries of life, the bonds of domestic feeling among the poor, as far as the influence of these things has extended, have been weakened, and in innumerable instances entirely destroyed...In the mean time parents are seperated from their children, and children from their parents.[11]

In the two poems, "The Brothers" and "Michael," he says that he has attempted to draw a picture of the domestic affections as he knows them to exist among a certain class in the North of England. Wordsworth hopes that these two poems

> may excite profitable sympathies in many kind and good hearts, and may in some small degree enlarge our feelings of reverence for our species, and our knowledge of human nature, by shewing that our best qualities are possessed by men whom we are too apt to consider, not

---

[11] The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, ed. by de Selincourt, p.260.

> with reference to the points in which they resemble us, but to those in which they manifestly differ from us.[12]

Now, in these days of degeneration, he hopes that these two poems might help "to stem this and other evils with which the country is labouring."[13]

In a letter to Thomas Poole in 1798, he laments the fact that

> Money, money is the god of universal worship, and rapacity and extortion among the lower classes, and the classes immediately above them; and just sufficiently common to be a matter of glory and exultation.[14]

Likewise, in a letter to George Beaumont in 1804, he longs for more unselfishness in men of genius:

> It is such an animating sight to see a man of genius, regardless of temporary gains--whether of money or praise, fixing his attention solely upon what is intrinsically interesting and permanent, and finding his happiness in an entire devotion of himself to such pursuits as shall most enable human nature.[15]

This disapproval of existing conditions can be found frequently in his poetry of this period. Further, his poem "Guilt and Sorrow," as originally drafted, was without doubt "intended to embody a protest against the criminal law generally, and the doctrine of capital punishment in particular;"[16] for in a letter to Wrangham in 1795, Wordsworth said:

---

[12] Ibid., p. 262.

[13] Loc. cit.

[14] Ibid., p. 200.

[15] DeSelincourt ed., I, 402.

[16] Garrod, op. cit., p. 84.

> I have a poem which I should wish to dispose of, provided I could get anything for it. . .Its object is partly to expose the vices of the penal laws, and the calamities of war as they affect individuals.[17]

The poem was not published until 1842, however, and its published form shows many corrections, for Words worth had in the meanwhile undergone many changes of ideas. But, originally, "Guilt and Sorrow" was a distinctively morbid attack upon the whole social order.[18] This poem, written during Wordsworth's worst period of gloom, is "one of the very few pieces in which Wordsworth has had courage to express the full depth of his sadness: a noble sadness withal, arising not from any trouble of his own, but from those of his fellow-men."[19] As Harper states, "The ravages of war among the poor, raising prices, unsettling employment, causing the horrors of forced conscription, with the breaking up of families and impelling of innocent people towards legalized murder, are portrayed in a startling light. There is no relief, no suggestion that the glory of England or the elevation of great captains furnishes compensation for these wars"[20] Many have said that this poem is only a reflection of Wordsworth's own grief. It is not fair to accept this, for "it seems that he wrote as he did for the noble reason that his mind was filled with sorrow for others, that he had no thought of self, that he was not blinded by false appear-

---

[17] Cited in G.M. Harper, William Wordsworth, his Life, Works, and Influence, I, 286.

[18] Garrod, op. cit., p. 85.

[19] Legouis, op. cit., p. 241.

[20] Harper, op. cit., I, 227.

ances of national splendour."[21]

Nor did his disapproval of existing conditions appear only in his poetry, for in the pamphlet he wrote for the Convention of Cintra, his one great political pamphlet, he continues his attack on existing evils; he taxes the British leaders with "an utter want of intellectual courage--of that higher quality which is never found without one or other of the three accompaniments, talents, genius, or principle."[22] We are reminded of the self-complacent attendants of political machines in our time, their narrowness of view, their cynicism, their contempt for persons who are frank enough not to deny their own honesty and good intentions.[23] He attacks the selfishness and the ulterior motives that many have for promoting war.

He shows again his distrust of industrialism which was to be one of the dominant instincts of his later life. Referring to Spain, he says:

> Manufactures and commerce have there in far less degree than elsewhere, by unnaturally clustering the people together, enfeebled their bodies, inflamed their passions by intemperance, vitiated from childhood their moral affections, and destroyed their imaginations.[24]

In regard to his own country, with its near-sightedness, and its loss of simplicity, he continues the theory of chronological primitivism and the progressive degeneration of man:

---

[21] Ibid.

[22] As cited in Harper, II, 178.

[23] Ibid., 179.

[24] Ibid., 180.

> In many parts of Europe (and especially in our own country) men have been pressing forward for some time in a path which has betrayed by its fruitfulness; furnishing them constant employment for picking up things about their feet, when thoughts were perishing in their minds.

They have become dazzled by materialism:

> While Mechanic Arts, Manufacturing, Agriculture, Commerce, and all those products of knowledge which are confined to gross, definite, and tangible objects, have, with the aid of Experimental Philosophy, been every day putting on more brilliant colors;

They have lost the true virtues:

> the splendour of the Imagination has been fading; Sensibility, which was formerly a generous nursling of rude Nature, has been chased from its ancient range in the wide domain of patriotism and religion with the weapons of derision, by a shadow calling itself good sense; calculations of presumptuous expediency--groping its way among partial and temporary consequences--have been substituted for the dictates of paramount and infallible conscience, the supreme embracer of consequences; lifeless and circumspect Decencies have banished the graceful negligence and unsuspicious dignity of virtue.[25]

Then for a time even Wordsworth took to writing satires on people of the times, together with his friend Wrangham.[26] In a letter to Wrangham from Racedown in 1795, the following satirical passage on the Prince Regent appeared:

> The nation's hope shall show the present time
> As rich in folly as the past in crime,
> Do arts like these a royal mind evince?
> Are these the studies that beseem a prince?
> Wedged in with blacklegs at a boxers' show,
> To shout with trans port at a knock-down blow--
> Mid knots of grooms, the council of his state,
> To scheme and counter-scheme for purse and plate.

---

[25] Cited in E.P. Hood, William Wordsworth, p. 395-6.

[26] Harper, op. cit., I, 286-7.

> Thy ancient honours when shalt thou resume?
> Oh shame, is this thy service' boastful plume?--[27]

In the other satires, only fragments of which are left, the most vivid picture is that of a subservient Parliament and the mad King:

> So patient Senates quibble by the hour
> And prove with endless tongues a monarch's power,
> Or whet his kingly faculties to chase
> Legions of devils through a keyhole's space.[28]

But Wordsworth soon found a more congenial mode of expression and suppressed his satire forever.

There were times when he had great doubts about the world and its people which sometimes led him to some doubt about himself:

> I have asked myself more than once lately,
> if my affections can be in the right place,
> caring as I do so little about what the world
> seems to care so much for.[29]

These moods were the exception rather than the rule, for he decided that if he could not change society by political revolution, he would try to see what poetry can do to change people's hearts and to enlarge their sympathy for men as men. "He will not write heroics for the amusement of a corrupt Society; he will write of simple folk in simple language."[30] For, with his Republicanism, Wordsworth had shed his rationalism, and had come to recognize

---

[27] Ibid., 285.

[28] Ibid., 287.

[29] Letter to George Beaumont, 1805. DeSelincourt ed., I, 496.

[30] Sneath, op. cit., p. 56.

> that there are powers in human nature, primary instincts and emotions, more august and authoritative than the logical reason. Now it is the mark of democracy that it lays stress on the things men have in common, not on those in which they differ. And these primary instincts and emotions are precisely what men have in common, and so are the proper themes for a democratic poet.[31]

And so Wordsworth seeks his subjects, not among the ones of the Golden Age, not among classical antiquity, not among the England of the past; but in the present, not among Godwinian intellectuals, but among forsaken women, old men in distress, children, peasants, and crazy people, in whom these instincts and emotions show themselves in their simplest and most recognizable form.

Most people who have any hope for the future will not long remain chronological primitivists. This was true of Wordsworth. He felt that man had degenerated down through the ages, but that there was some hope. And that hope was to be found in the country, among those close to nature. This was the life that Wordsworth himself preferred.

---

[31] Letter to George Beaumont, 1802. DeSelincourt ed., I, 326.

CHAPTER III

CULTURAL PRIMITIVISM IN WORDSWORTH

His Preference of Country Life to City Life

Most critics are agreed that Wordsworth was primarily a citizen of the country. And although many of them discuss at length his residence in London in 1791, they admit that the country was his real home, that it was the real molder of the poet. Beach says:

> Wordsworth's preference of country to town, like that of many eighteenth-century poets, is probably somewhat colored by the romantic legend of a Golden Age, in which man's heart and manners were still natural, uncorrupted by institutions and ideas which had swerved from the simplicity of nature.[1]

Wordsworth had much to say of men as citizens. Of men and women as individuals he had also much to say, within a certain range. "The city proletariat lay beyond his ken."[2] It was not for him to sing

> the fierce confederate storm
> Of sorrow barricaded evermore
> Within the walls of cities;[3]

but rather

> To hear humanity in woods and groves
> Pipe solitary anguish.[4]

---

[1] Beach, Concept of Nature in Nineteenth Century English Poetry, p. 202-3.

[2] H.J.C. Grierson, A Critical History of English Literature, p. 326.

[3] The Recluse, 749-853.

[4] Ibid., 76-7.

The primary instincts and affections which are common to all mankind, these were his chosen subjects, and he looked for them in the humble, rural life, where they

> Exist more simple in their elements.
> And speak a plainer language--

plainer, but more dignified from association with the grandeur of Nature.

In Book VII of The Prelude, Wordsworth gives an account of the three and a half months he spent in London in 1791. This time and his second visit to Paris in 1792, when he was absorbed in political event, were the only periods in which he had his home in a large city; "hence he makes his first brief residence in London the occasion for considering the contribution of city life to the development of the poet."[5]

"The seventh and eighth books of the poem contain many passages reflecting, after an interval of at least fourteen years, some of the impressions made upon him by the sights of the city, but all carefully chosen to illustrate 'the growth of a poet's mind,' and particularly to show how the love of nature, by which he means, in this connection, country scenes and sounds, remained supreme."[6] The incidents are important only as Wordsworth tries to show the effect on his poetic faculties. Their influence could scarcely have been comparable to that of Hawkshead and Cambridge,

---

[5] R.D. Havens, The Mind of a Poet, p. 435.

[6] Harper, op. cit., p. 105.

"they were purely external and fleeting, the things every fairly observant country-bred youth would notice in the streets and public haunts of town."[7]

Except for two or three short visits from Cambridge, Wordsworth had apparently never visited London until this time. From childhood the thought of the great city had held him by a chain "of wonder and obscure delight."[8] He recalled a time in his life when the conception he had formed of London, in his foolish simplicity, surpassed all the pictures of airy palaces and enchanted gardens invented by poets, and all the accounts given by historians of Rome, Cairo, Babylon, or Persepolis.

Now, far from that distant period, Wordsworth had the opportunity of comparing his dream with the reality. "Though he did not acknowledge it, he was astonished to find the splendours he had trusted to behold, so few and far between."[9] And he admits that "oftentimes, in spite of strongest disappointment," he was pleased merely

> Through courteous self-submission, as a tax
> Paid to the object by prescriptive right.[10]

In his first year at Cambridge he had gone up to London on a stage-coach, and could scarcely believe it possible that "mere external things had power so to elevate and depress the spirit as the roar and movements of the town alternately raised and crushed his,"[11] when he

---

[7] Ibid., p. 106.

[8] The Prelude, vii, 87.

[9] Legouis, op. cit., p. 174.

[10] The Prelude, vii, 144-44.

[11] Harper, op. cit., I, 107.

felt in heart and soul the shock
Of a huge town's first presence.[12]

It is impossible to distinguish the impressions received during this short visit and those of 1791. According to Legouis,[13] these impressions, as recorded later, may even have been influenced by Lamb's descriptions of London. Wordsworth gives a catalog of details, but they "are wanting in that which constitutes the charm of the humorist, and is the source of Wordsworth's own power in his pictures of rustic life--a love of the things he describes."[14]

He glanced at the examples of folly, vice, and extravagance, which made London their domain, and he

hears, and for the first time in my life,
The voice of woman utter blasphemy---[15]

But he lingered over sights of courage and of tenderness, rendered more touching by contrast. And he

ranged at large, through London's wide domain,
Month after month. Obscurely did I live,
Not seeking frequent intercourse with men,
By literature, or elegance, or rank,
Distinguished.[16]

Yet even in the city, his thoughts were often of the country, and to their "beauteous forms,"

oft in lonely rooms, and mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,

---

[12] Ibid., 65-68.

[13] Op. cit., p. 172.

[14] Ibid., p. 174.

[15] The Prelude, vii, 375-6.

[16] The Prelude, ix, 23-27.

> Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
> And passing even into my purer mind,
> With Tranquil restoration.[17]

and

> With deep devotion, Nature, did I feel,
> In that enormous City's turbulent world
> Of men and things, what benefit I owed
> To thee, and those domains of rural peace,
> Where to the sense of beauty first my heart
> Was opened.[18]

For perhaps

> To one having had little experience with the world, and with lofty conceptions of the dignity of human nature, and its essential divineness, the revelations of a sojourn in the heart of such a great center as London, presenting all forms of physical and moral evil, might cause a violent shock; his preconceptions and ideals might require a decided alteration.[19]

But in "That huge fermenting mass of human-kind,"[20] Wordsworth says:

> having been brought up in such a grand
> And lovely region, I had forms distinct
> To steady me . . .
> At all times had a real solid world
> Of images about me; did not pine
> As one in cities bred might do.[21]

For under the guidance of Nature, long ago among the hills, he had formed his ideal of man, and it did not fail him when he beheld him under less pleasing and less promising aspects. And

> when he came in contact with human ignorance and vice, with crime and misery, although they weighed heavily upon his soul, his confidence in Man and in his destiny was not shaken.[22]

---

17 "Tintern Abbey," 25-27.

18 The Prelude, viii, 70-4.

19 Sneath, op. cit., p. 48.

20 The Prelude, vii, 621.

21 Ibid., A viii, 595-605.

22 Sneath, op. cit., p. 48.

Neither did he believe that all his previous conceptions were wrong: that he had merely been dreaming the solitary's dream; that far away from the busy haunts of men, he had framed an ideal in ignorance of man's real nature.

> Heart-sick though he was at times, he could gaze upon the dark and dismal human picture and see it in touches of the divine, and its divinity shone all the brighter by virtue of its striking contrast with the earthliness of the human.[23]

But, although he may not have detested towns like Cowper, or Lamartine, "he certainly was not altogether happy in towns, and considered them from the point of view, not of a citizen, but of a provincial who is by turns dazzled and deceived, charmed and scandalized."[24]

Independent as he was of any society but his own, he nevertheless suffered at times from the protracted solitude of his life in London. "He contrasted his painful loneliness among the crowd where

> men lived
> Even next-door neighbours, as we say, yet still
> Strangers, not knowing each the other's name,[25]

with the sweet solitude of the country, and with village life, in which each knows and is known by all the rest."[26] And it is not his descriptions of the "monstrous ant-hill"[27] and

> Blank confusion! true epitome
> Of what the might City is herself[28]

where

---

[23] Loc. cit.

[24] Legouis, op. cit., p. 174.

[25] The Prelude, vii, 115-18.

[26] Legouis, op. cit., p. 174.

[27] The Prelude, vii, 149.

[28] Ibid., 722-723.

folly, vice,
Extravagance in gesture, mien, and dress,
And all the strife of singularity,
Lies to the ear, and lies to every sense--[29]

have no end--it is not these descriptions which are important, but rather in the lines "wherein he glorifies London as a great and mysterious being which influences the spectator with a power resembling, if not equivalent to, that of sea or mountain."[30]

Although he was often revolted by the scenes displayed before him, and sickened by the coarseness and brutality characteristic of the great popular festivals, such as the fair of St. Bartholomew, he was never insensible to the mighty forces revealed in these brutal aspects of the

vast metropolis,
Fount of my country's destiny and the world's;
That great emporium, chronicle at once
And burial place of passions, and their home
Imperial, their chief living residence.[31]

What he has to say about London seems to Mr. Harper to be a "little forced." And apparently Wordsworth himself was not completely satisfied with it, for, although he wrote of it at undue length in this book (vii), he returned to it again in Books viii and ix. Havens says that "It looks as if, although conscious of the inadequacy of what he had written, he could not bring himself to revise it radically."[32] One difficulty lay, perhaps, in his inability throughout his later years to do justice to city life. This was not only

---

29 Ibid., 578-581.

30 Legouis, op. cit., p. 179.

31 Ibid., p. 179.

32 Havens, op. cit., p. 436.

because of his love of nature and plain living, but because he believed life in the city to be destructive of individuality:

> Living amid the same perpetual whirl
> Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
> To one identity, by differences
> That have no law, no meaning, and no end--[33]

and numbing to the creative powers:

> A work completed to our hands, that lays,
> If any spectacle on earth can do,
> The whole creative powers of man asleep!--[34]

and because "in his own case, it had meant separation from those he loved, and wandering in the deserts of God-winian rationalism."[35]

Yet, according to M. Legouis:

> The future poet of the lakes was really the first, if not to feel, at any rate to attempt to render in verse worthy of the theme, and without satirical design, the grandeur of London and the intensity of its life. Strange as this fact may appear at first sight, it is less surprising when we reflect that the requisite striking impression could only be felt by a man fresh from the world outside of London, capable of new and vivid sensations, and sufficiently open in mind and independent of classical authorities to venture on a frank description of his novel impressions.[36]

But even M. Legouis admits that Wordsworth felt the grandeur of the great city most of all "in hours of peace and solitude. He loved to wander through the streets when the city was wrapped in slumber,"[37] and he enjoyed most

---

[33] The Prelude, vii, 725-8.

[34] Ibid., 679-81

[35] Havens, op. cit., p. 436.

[36] Op. cit., p. 170.

[37] Ibid., p. 179.

> the peace
> That comes with night; the deep solemnity
> Of nature's intermediate hours of rest,
> When the great tide of human life stands still;
> The business of the day to come, unborn,
> Of that gone by, locked up, as in the grave;
> The blended calmness of the heavens and earth,
> Moonlight and stars, and empty streets, and sounds
> Unfrequent as in deserts.[38]

It was only at moments like these, and like the impression of the dawn from Westminster Bridge in a coach in 1802, that London could equal the beauty of nature, and could induce in him who contemplates it a state of reverie:

> As the black storm upon the mountain-top
> Sets off the sunbeam in the valley, so
> That huge fermenting mass of human-kind
> Serves as a solemn background, or relief,
> To single forms and objects,[39]

which thus acquire more "liveliness and power" than they would possess in reality.

"The flaunting vanity and the sumptuous extravagance of London served also to throw into relief the simple touches of courage and affection, the acts of heroism or of modest kindness which Lamb, and afterwards Dickens, loved to point out among the humblest inhabitants of the great city."[40] And Wordsworth says

> still I craved
> An intermingling of distinct regards
> And truths of individual sympathy
> Nearer ourselves. Such often might be gleaned
> From the great City, else it must have proved
> To me a heart depressing wilderness.[41]

---

[38] The Prelude, vii, 649-61.

[39] Ibid., 619-23.

[40] Legouis, op. cit., p. 181.

[41] The Prelude, xiii, 110-15.

He was glad

> and now most thankful that my walk
> Was guarded from too early intercourse
> With the deformities of crowded life,
> And those ensuing laughters and contempts,
> Self-pleasing.[42]

And he could not help feeling that

> blessed be the God
> Of Nature and of Man that this was so;
> That men before my inexperienced eyes
> Did first present themselves thus purified,
> Removed, and to a distance that was fit:
> And so we all of us in some degree
> Are led to knowledge, wheresoever led,
> And howsoever; were it otherwise,
> And we found evil fast as we find good
> In our first years, or think that it is found,
> How could the innocent heart bear up and live![43]

He felt that he was indeed fortunate to have first looked

> At Man through objects that were great or fair;
> First communed with him by their help. And thus
> Was founded a sure safeguard and defence
> Against the weight of meanness, selfish cares,
> Coarse manners, vulgar passions, that beat in
> On all sides from the ordinary world
> In which we traffic.[44]

In later days, Wordsworth seems to take some delight in telling about the survival of a love for the country in those who have been born there, yet whose lot it is to be exiled in the great city, as with poor Susan:

> 'Tis a note of enchantment; what ails her? She sees
> A mountain ascending, a vision of trees;
> Bright volumes of vapour through Lothbury glide,
> And a river flows on through the vale of Cheapside.

---

[42] Ibid., viii, 329-33.

[43] Ibid., 301-311.

[44] Ibid., 315-22.

> Green pastures she views in the midst of the dale,
> Down which she so often has tripped with her pail;
> And a single small cottage, a nest like a dove's,
> The one only dwelling on earth that she loves.
>
> She looks, and her heart is in heaven: but they fade,
> The mist and the river, the hill and the shade:
> The stream will not flow, and the hill will not rise,
> And the colours have all passed away from her eyes.[45]

Then there is the old farmer of Tilsbury Vale, who, exiled in London, cannot help handling and smelling the withered grass on a passing wagon loaded with hay. In his leisure time he is always trying to get into contact with country life, and whenever he has a moment to spare makes his way to Smithfield --but "his heart all the while is in Tilsbury Vale."[46]

And, although in the later books of The Prelude, Wordsworth tries to mitigate his resentment of the town which found expression in The Recluse,[47] there is little suggestion of glamor in the only contemporary account of his first long stay in the city:

> I quitted London about three weeks ago, where my time passed in a strange manner; sometimes whirled about by the vortex of its strenua inertia, and sometimes thrown by the eddy into a corner of the stream, where I lay in almost motionless indolence.
>
> Think not, however, that I had not many very pleasant hours; a man must be unfortunate indeed who resides four months in Town without some of his time being disposed of in such a manner, as he would forget with reluctance.[48]

---

[45] "The Reverie of Poor Susan" (1800?).

[46] "The Farmer of Tilsbury Vale (1803).

[47] See notes 3 and 4 above.

[48] Letter to Wm. Matthews, 1791. deSelincourt ed., p. 48.

Wouldn't we be inclined to put more stock in an account of his feeling written nearer the time of his sojourn there, than one written fourteen years later in retrospect? Even so, Wordsworth admits, finally, in The Prelude that

> much was wanting; therefore did I turn
> To you, ye pathways, and ye lonely roads.[49]

He turned away from the sources to which he had looked for knowledge concerning Man, to other sources--to modest paths and lonely roads--seeking them enriched with everything he prized, "with human kindnesses and simple joys."[50] It was in the lowly, simple-hearted people whom he met here that he found the elements of human nature in their naturalness. In minds largely untutored by the formal methods of education, but developed by intercourse with Nature and the simple life, he found what he deemed to be the universal passions, and heard words expressive of noblest sentiment and truth. All this filled him with hope and peace. His faith in Man returned, and he saw in his fundamental nature much that promised good and fair.

---

[49] The Prelude, xiii, 116-118.

[50] Ibid., 119.

Evidences of Wordsworth's acceptance of the theory of progressive degeneration, which has been an inherent part of primitivism from the time of the first fables of the Golden Age to the present, have been discussed in Chapter Two. Man has degenerated down through the ages. Is there, therefore, any possibility of his improving or of his returning to that better state? Society cannot go backwards. It must go forwards. If progress is inevitable, then, will it be progress toward good or evil? God has endowed all men, so runs the reasoning, with intelligence sufficient to find out the uniform and eternal laws of nature; if civilized man has failed to discover and follow the laws of nature as perfectly as primitive man, it is because his mind and heart have become corrupted by the vices of civilization.

Is there in the present any people who come near to finding out the uniform and universal laws of nature? "The idea that virtue and happiness inevitably accompany the austerities of primitive life, a corollary of classical denunciation of luxury, was to be found in the earliest sixteenth-century travel-literature and comes down uninterruptedly into the eighteenth century."[51] What this discussion of luxury in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries--together with actual economic and social dissatisfactions--helped to

---

[51] Lois Whitney, Primitivism and the Idea of Progress, p. 51.

bring about, by forcing the mind into a re-evaluation of cultural refinement, was a renewed burst of enthusiasm for simplicity, the simplicity of life according to nature.

Wordsworth believed that the supreme lesson of Nature was obvious to the lowliest as well as the highest and was written plain for all to read:

> The primal duties shine aloft--like stars,
> The charities that soothe, and heal, and bless
> Are scattered at the feet of Man--like flowers.[52]

And when he had the left the great city and turned

> To you, ye pathways, and ye lonely roads[53]

to seek the "human kindnesses and simple joys," he had learned that kindliness of heart abounded most where Nature dictated the tasks of men--where the complexities of social, industrial, and commercial conditions had not entered to destroy the simplicity of life.

Among such vocations was that of the shepherd, and this class of men early appealed to Wordsworth's imagination. They were close to nature--so close, indeed, as to hear her very heart beat. Their lives were simple, natural, artless.

These shepherds, however, were not the ones we read of in ancient lore, nor in Shakespeare and Spenser, "nor such, indeed, as Wordsworth himself had seen living in a

---

[52] The Excursion, ix, 238-40.

[53] The Prelude, xiii, 117.

veritable pleasure ground on the vast plains at the foot of the Harz mountains. These were neither heroic nor hardy enough."[54] Wordsworth's shepherds were of a different type, a more hardy and heroic type, the shepherd of his native hills and mountains. This man, with his giant frame and simple mien, with his consciousness of freedom in his vast domain, appealed to Wordsworth. He believed that the Lake Country shepherd was, on the whole, the simplest, the happiest, and the best of men. Nature had given him a sanctity. He had been glorified "by the deep radiance of the setting sun." He descried in the distant sky, "a solitary object and sublime, above all height."[55]

Although by no means perfect, these were the least corrupted people he knew, and their virtues showed what nature intended man to be. Hence he dedicated himself to the task of studying these simple folk, and of writing about them and the environment that has made them what they are:

> Of these, said I, shall be my song; of these,
> If future years mature me for the task,
> Will I record the praises, making verse
> Deal boldly with substantial things; in truth
> And sanctity of passion, speak of these,
> And justice may be done, obeisance paid
> Where it is due: thus haply shall I teach,
> Inspire, through unadulterated ears
> Pour rapture, tenderness, and hope,--my theme
> No other than the very heart of man,
> As found among the best of those who live,

---

54 Sneath, op. cit., p. 29.

55 The Prelude, viii, 269-271.

> Not unexalted by religious faith,
> Not uninformed by books, good books, though few,
> In Nature's presence: thence may I select
> Sorrow, that is not sorrow, but delight;
> And miserable love, that is not pain
> To hear of, for the glory that redounds
> Therefrom to humankind, and what we are.[56]

This promise is fulfilled in the "Lyrical Ballads" and in "Michael," and in many other poems.

Later, as he journeyed from France to Switzerland, he was greatly impressed by the peaceful homes of the peasants. To what extent the simplicity and contentment of their lives appealed to him is made known to us in his own words:

> Oh! sorrow for the youth who could have seen
> Unchastened, unsubdued, unawed, unraised
> To patriarchal dignity of mind,
> And pure simplicity of wish and will,
> Those sanctified abodes of peaceful man
> Pleased (though to hardship born, and compassed round
> With danger, varying as the seasons change),
> Contented, from the moment that the dawn
> (Ah! surely not without attendant gleams
> Of soul-illumination) calls him forth
> To industry, by glistenings flung on rocks,
> Whose evening shadows lead him to repose.[57]

In "Descriptive Sketches," he speaks of him who was born and dwelt among the Alps as one who

> all superior but his God disdained,
> Walked none, restraining, and by none restrained:
> Confessed no law but what his reason taught,
> Did all he wished, and wished but what he ought.[58]

Comparison is made here between the "brute creation" that, guided by instinct and natural desire, has happiness; and

---

[56] The Prelude, xiii, 232-40.

[57] Ibid., vi, 504-16.

[58] Lines 434-8.

civilized man, who "anxious to be unhappy, industrious to multiply woe, and ingenious in contriving new plagues, new torments, to embitter life, and sour every present enjoyment, has inverted the order of things, has created wishes that have no connection with his natural wants, and wants that have no connection with his happiness."[59]

These "dalesmen" lead a life very different from that of the dwellers in the city:

> Immense
> Is The recess, the circumambient world
> Magnificent, by which they are embraced:
> They move about upon the soft green turf:
> How little they, they and their doings, seem,
> And all that they can further or obstruct!
> Through utter weakness pitiably dear,
> As tender infants are: and yet how great!
> Loves, as it glistens on the silent rocks;
> And them the silent rocks, which now from high
> Look down upon them; the reposing clouds;
> The wild brooks prattling from invisible haunts;
> And old Helvellyn, conscious of the stir
> Which animates this day their calm abode.[60]

The pastoral life everywhere had a fascination for him. He was impressed by the simplicity and the strength of the natives. And read from them

> Lessons of genuine brotherhood, the plain
> And universal reason of mankind,
> The truths of young and old.[61]

He began to talk with strangers whom he met in his wanderings, and to learn from them important lessons. His intercourse with these lowly people began in Racedown, and was

---

[59] Lois Whitney, op. cit., p. 47.

[60] The Prelude, viii, 55-69.

[61] The Prelude, vi, 545-7.

continued in Alfoxden, where he loved to

> Converse with men, where if we meet a face
> We almost meet a friend, on naked heaths
> With long long ways before, by cottage bench,
> Or well-spring where the weary traveller rests.[62]

"The lonely roads," he says

> Were open schools in which I daily read
> With most delight the passions of mankind,
> Whether by words, looks, sighs, or tears, revealed.[63]

He was both astonished and gratified at the amount of native intelligence and virtuous sentiment his conversations with such men revealed, and this knowledge brought peace and steadiness, healing and repose to his ruffled passions. These men were a direct contradiction of his Godwinian teaching, which maintained that virtue belonged to the wise, and that vice was the offspring of ignorance. Godwin taught that we owe everything to education. Here Wordsworth feels how little it has to do with genuine feeling and just sentiment. It was a pleasant surprise to this former disciple of Godwin to discover evidence of sound judgment and characteristics of true uprightness in the poor and despised. And he delighted to see

> into the depth of human souls,
> Souls that appear to have no depth at all
> To careless eyes.[64]

---

[62] Ibid., xiii, 157-41.

[63] Ibid., xiii, 162-65.

[64] Ibid., 166-168.

His talks with these people proved to be a revelation to him, and he heard

> From mouths of men obscure and lowly, truths
> Replete with honour, sounds in unison
> With loftiest promises of good and fair.[65]

Now Wordsworth perceived that abstract philosophers, in order to make themselves better understood, or perhaps because they knew no better, had levelled "down the truth To certain general notions,"[66] and had set forth only the outward marks

> Whereby society has parted man
> From man[67]

and had neglected the "universal heart." Now, enlightened by his personal observations, he now saw men as they are within themselves

> How oft high service is performed within,
> When all the external man is rude in show,--
> Not like a temple rich with pomp and gold,
> But a mere mountain-chapel, that protects
> Its simple worshippers from sun and shower.[68]

Here, too, are things such as Love that cannot

> thrive with ease,
> Among the close and overcrowded haunts
> Of cities, where the human heart is sick,
> And the eye feeds it not, and cannot feed.[69]

For to Wordsworth, Nature's highest are not her strivers,

---

[65] Ibid., 182-85.

[66] Ibid., 213.

[67] Ibid., 219.

[68] Ibid., 227-31.

[69] Ibid., 203-5.

but her simple and silent seers, those who, by much musing on her processes, see deep into her heart. These he contrasts with the eloquent worldlings:

> men for contemplation framed,
> Shy and unpractised in the strife of phrase;
> Meek men, whose very souls perhaps would sink
> Beneath them, summoned to such intercourse:
> Theirs is the language of the heavens, the power,
> The thought, the image, and the silent joy:
> Words are but under-agents in their souls;[70]

These were men who could not borrow their ideas and phrases from books or from society, men who lived in loneliness, bringing their experiences to independent utterance. Such men have an occasional power of expression, for their words and thoughts are carved out of life lived.

This simple life is not "without attendant gleams of soul-illumination." And these accounts are all in harmony with what seems to be fundamental in Wordsworth's thinking -- that Man and Nature are not far apart. "The nearer that social conditions approach those of primitive or patriarchal man, the more accurately does Man hear Nature's voice, and the more fully does she reveal herself to him."[71]

After giving an account of the peasants' virtues, which arise from their closeness to nature, Wordsworth tells of the growth of his feeling for these simple folk. As a boy, he had seen the "dalesman" against the back-ground of his majestic surroundings. Hence in Wordsworth's youthful imagination, the peasant took on something of the majesty of the hills:

---

[70] Ibid., 271-73.

[71] Sneath, op. cit., p. 44.

> A rambling school-boy, thus
> I felt his presence in his own domain,
> As of a lord and master, or a power,
> Or genius, under Nature, under God,
> Presiding; and severest solitude
> Had more commanding looks when he was there.
> When up the lonely brooks on rainy days
> Angling I went, or trod the trackless hills
> By mists bewildered, suddenly mine eyes
> Have glanced upon him distant a few steps,
> In size a giant, stalking through thick fog,
> His sheep like Greenland bears; or, as he stepped
> 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.[72]

And now, once again, Wordsworth had come to feel "that the goodness of the natural impulses of man, unhampered by conventions and institutions, the human perfectibility for whose sake he had hoped in the French Revolution, was here to be met with in real life."[73] The outcome of all this subsequently had a most vital bearing on his poetry, for he was led to a firm determination to make Man the chief subject of his song, for

> Thus was Man
> Ennobled outwardlybefore 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.[74]

If this ideal view of man was an illusion, says

---

[72] The Prelude, viii, 256-275.

[73] R.E. Powell, op. cit., p. 132.

[74] The Prelude, viii, 276-81.

Wordsworth, it was at least a beneficent one. "He scorns the literal-minded rationalist who would wish to deprive him of it, and thanks God that the good in man was magnified by his boyish imagination before he became aware of the evil; this type of man later served as an ideal which accompanied him, and was present with him in forming his judgments of Man under far different conditions, when he came in contact with the coarseness, vulgarity, and bodily and spiritual degradation of the world which was manifested on his visit to London. "He had learned his lesson concerning Man so well among the hills and mountains, through the ministry of Nature, that he was able to carry it with him into life, and his spirit did not fail as he beheld the sorrowful human spectacle which the great city presents."[75] And it is, then, by looking at humanity in relation to objects which are "great or fair" that love of nature leads to love of man.

Especially in the romantic writers of Wordsworth's generation, according to Fairchild, you will find a strong sympathy for all sorts of simple rural folk, "and you will often justly infer that these lowly ones are lofty because of their very lowliness--because they are close to that light of nature from which the learned and sophisticated have turned away."[76] The naive and primitive souls admired by the romanticist are above logic precisely because they are

---

[75] Sneath, op. cit., p. 29.

[76] H.N. Fairchild, The Romantic Quest, p. 155.

below it. In being close to Nature, they are close to the supernatural, and partake of that "sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused" which can never be attained through "That false secondary power by which we multiply distinctions."

It was this faith in the "natural man" which led him to study "men who lead the simplest lives, and those 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,"[77] to observe children and animals; and to seek to render men's feelings "more sane, pure and permanent, in short, more consonant to Nature, that is, to eternal nature, and the great moving spirit of things."[78] Furthermore, he would sing of Man, not as judged by externals, but as he really is within himself. He would sing, too, of Man, not as found in high places, in the elegant and refined classes, but of men, of everyday life, of "the walks of homely life," for it is here, according to Wordsworth, that we find the fundamentally human. He would deal with men in the simplicity of their being, and in the simple everyday circumstances and situations, and in the ordinary language of men instead of in a diction foreign to

---

[77] Letter to John Wilson, 1802. DeSelincourt ed., 293.

[78] Ibid.

common life and belonging to a particular class of men, whom we call poets.[79]

And so the Lyrical Ballads and the poems of the same group are a series of moral analyses, of a rich intrinsic value, "discreetly guided by an edifying and utilitarian purpose."[80] Herein lies then a certain conception of "Nature," one in all her products. She has always, for Wordsworth, one disposition--always except when he thought of the sea which took his brother's life. He felt a benefit from the presence of such a life of simplicity. "There was in it a kind of absolute rightness and sanity, which had the power to regulate his being when he had strained and distorted it by an artificial existence."[81]

This realism of Wordsworth's is a complex product, in which, along with the desire for truth, "a love of Nature and simplicity, and a reaction against false nobleness, commingle with a social faith in the dignity of the humblest lives."[82]

---

[80] Legouis, op. cit., p. 36.

[81] Powell, op. cit., p. 132.

[82] Legouis, op. cit., p. 36.

Idiots and Crazy People

It was Wordsworth's intention to sing of men in the simplicity of their being, and in simple everyday circumstances and situations. This he did in depicting the peasants. He carried it one step farther in dealing with abnormal folk.

No one can doubt the sincerity and courage of Wordsworth in dealing with the group of characters which he picked for his poems, especially in those poems in The Lyrical Ballads which deal with human characters. In Book Thirteenth of The Prelude, he tells something of his selection:

> Long time in search of knowledge did I range
> The field of human life, in heart and mind
> Benighted; but, the dawn beginning now
> To reappear, 'twas proved that not in vain
> I had been taught to reverence a Power
> That is the visible quality and shape
> And image of right reason.[83]

And this power taught him

> To look with feelings of fraternal love
> Upon the unassuming things that hold
> A silent station in this beautous world.[84]

Thus he found in humble man "an object of delight, of pure imagination, and of love." And it is thus that in the Lyrical Ballads, we are led into the closest spiritual fellowship with the lowliest and the most forsaken of the earth. A far-reaching charity, neither sentimental nor condescending,

---

[83] Lines 16-22.

[84] Lines 45-47.

embraces them all--the old Cumberland Beggar, Alice Fell, the Idiot Boy--deprived by age, poverty, or misfortune of all romantic charm. And, so that his purpose might not be overlooked, the figures are presented in the most naked simplicity possible.

In "The Idiot Boy," an extreme case, Wordsworth shows the courage of his convictions. This he supports by prose commentaries which reveal the ultimate and spiritual foundation of his purpose:

> You begin what you say upon "The Idiot Boy" with this observation, that nothing is a fit subject for poetry which does not please. But here follows a question, "Does not please whom?" .....People in our rank in life are perpetually falling into one sad mistake, namely, that of supposing that human nature and the persons they associate with are one and the same thing . . . .These persons are, it is true, a part of human existence. And yet few ever consider books but with reference to their power of pleasing these persons and men of a higher rank; few descend lower, among cottages and fields, and among children. A man must have done this habitually before his judgment upon "The Idiot Boy" would be in any way decisive with me.[85]

Madness is not a special feature of rustic life, and the intensity achieved by a forceful representation of such an abnormal passion cannot obviously be laid down to the credit of such life. Yet there is in the rustic life more sympathy toward the idiot:

> . . . . the loathing and disgust which many people have at the sight of an idiot, is a feeling which

---

[85] Letter to George Beaumont (1805). De Selincourt ed., p. 435.

> though having some foundation in human nature, is not necessarily attached to it in any virtuous degree, but it owing in a great measure to the false delicacy, and, if I may say it without rudeness, a certain want of comprehensiveness of thinking and feeling. Persons in the Lower Class of society have little or nothing of this: if an idiot is born in a poor man's house, it must be taken care of, and cannot be boarded out, as it would be by gentlefolks, or sent to a public or private asylum for such unfortunate geings. Poor people. . . have therefore a sane state, so that without pain or suffering they perform their duties toward them.[86]

He goes even further and says

> I have often applied to idiots, in my own mind, that sublime expression of Scripture, that "their life is hidden with God." They are worshipped, in several parts of the East. . . . I have often, indeed, looked upon the conduct of fathers and mothers of the lower classes of society towards idiots as the great triumph of the human heart. It is there that we see the strength, disinterestedness, and grandeur of love; nor have I ever been able to contemplate an object that calls out so many excellent and virtuous sentiments without finding it hallowed thereby, and having something in me which bears down before aversion.[87]

And in "The Idiot Boy," he depicts the joy, pride, and moral good that may be developed by an irrational affection.

Wordsworth is always struck by the pathos of unreasoning affection, whether manifested by the insane, or bestowed on an object devoid of reason, and consequently, in either case, useless. He depicts the love of Betty, the peasant woman, for her idiot boy, her admiration of him in spite of his affliction, the pride with which she hears and tells to

---

86 Loc. cit.

87 Loc. cit.

others his least phrase which contains a glimmering of sense, and the happiness with which the poor idiot's existence fills her life.

Wordsworth shows his ultimate purpose in writing the poem:

> This poem has, I know, frequently produced the same effect it did upon you and your friends; but there are many also to whom it affords exquisite delight, and who, indeed, prefer it to any other of my poems. This proves that the feelings there delineated are such as men may sympathise with. This is enough for my purpose. It is not enough for me as a Poet, to delineate merely such feelings as all men do sympathise with; but it is also highly desirable to add to these others, such as all men may sympathise with.[88]

In another instance, in "The Mad Mother," he takes a delight in describing a crazy mother's fondness for her child, her alternate thrills of joy and fits of madness. "As Wordsworth had penetrated through the show of outward things to the primal impulses of Nature, so he cleaved through the accidental and secondary elements in man to those primary qualities essential and common to all human beings."[89] The grand elemental principle of love works deeply in the heart of the mother in moments of startling sanity and wandering. Her achievement in motherhood of something normal and natural, purging insanity itself of all that is fearful, and bringing with it a vein of wholesomeness to cleanse and

---

[88] Loc. cit.

[89] Gingerich, op. cit., 124.

sweeten her delirium, is a simple and passionate expression of the calm of a great natural feeling:

> Oh! press me with thy little hand;
> It loosens something at my chest;
> About that tight and deadly band
> I feel thy little fingers prest.

She is entirely oblivious of the other interests of men, and this is the only passion left her by her madness; "she shows it pure, absorbing and transforming all Nature to its own expression, with wild streaks of the fellow child."[90] In both these poems, Wordsworth opens up a vista of an altogether different kind, and he suggests that the person whose deficiency in ordinary common sense in the index of a closer approach to the inner fountains of Divine Wisdom is himself something of the divine, which cannot be seen by those with "meddling intellects":

> Oh; there is life that breathes not; Powers
> there are
> That touch each other to the quick in modes
> Which the gross world no sense hath to perceive,
> No soul to dream of.[91]

---

[90] Powell, op. cit., p. 159.

[91] "Address to Kilchurn Castle."

Childhood and the Child of Nature

We have seen how Wordsworth, with his specific, concrete reality, felt that a man in a state of nature, living in the present, can have some of the pre-civilization qualities of goodness and truth. For him, this same goodness and truth could be found in the child.

Wordsworth, a poet who never intended to write for children, was more than any other eminent English man of letters, a poet of childhood. "His heart was attuned to childhood in all its manifestations."[92]

To him, childhood is a sublime and sacred thing. Despite his later attempts to find philosophic insight in maturity, he constantly looks back to the warm, fresh perceptions of his own boyhood, and associates that warmth and freshness with the heaven from which, "trailing clouds of glory," the child has newly come.

Nowhere is the divine more concentratedly inherent than in the heart of a child. This conviction seems gradually to have deepened in Wordsworth's mind. In "We Are Seven" and "Anecdote for Fathers," both written in 1798, he "expresses the bold surmise that a child's intuitions may be a most important part of spiritual wisdom,"[93] and he suggests that there is much that adults could learn from chil-

---

92 A. C. Babenroth, English Childhood, p. 299.

93 S. F. Gingerich, Essays in the Romantic Poets, p. 136.

dren:

> O dearest, dearest boy! my heart
> For better lore would seldom yearn,
> Could I but teach the hundredth part
> Of what from thee I learn.[94]

This is Wordsworth in one of his most characteristic moods, and in these two poems one cannot fail to be impressed "by the vain hammering of the literal-minded adult's sense of fact against the child's intuitive sense of truth."[95]

In "Lucy Gray" (1799) he spiritualized the little girl as a permanent mystic presence of the lonesome wild. In "The Fountain" and "Two April Mornings" (1799) he suggests that no substitution can be made of one child's personality for another, and that there remains something intact and inviolable at the center of each.

In "Characteristics of a Child Three Years Old" (1811), Wordsworth reflects on the innocence and the fleeting moods of a young child living in her own company.

> Loving she is, and tractable, though wild;
> And Innocence hath privilege in her
> To dignify arch looks and laughing eyes;
> And feats of cunning; and the pretty round
> Of trespasses, affected to provoke
> Mock-chastisement and partnership in play.
> And, as a faggot sparkles on the hearth,
> Not less if unattended and alone
> Than when both young and old sit gathered round
> To take delight in its activity;
> Even so this happy Creature of herself
> Is all-sufficient, solitude to her
> Is blithe society, who fills the air
> With gladness and involuntary songs.
> Light are her sallies as the tripping fawn's

---

94 "Anecdote for Fathers," 57-60.

95 Fairchild, The Romantic Quest, p. 157.

> Forth-startled from the fern where she lay couched;
> Un thought-of, unexpected, as the stir
> Of the soft breeze ruffling the meadow-flowers,
> Or from before it chasing wantonly
> The many-coloured images imprest
> Upon the bosom of a placid lake.

In "Michael" (1800) he strikes a deeper note, "where the boy's heart is the source, not of ideas compounded out of the senses, but of mysterious spiritual influences that regenerate the father's mind."[96] And the poet feels that it is only to be expected

> That from the boy there came
> Feelings and emanations--things which were
> Light to the sun and music to the wind;
> And that the old Man's heart seened born again.[97]

In the sonnet "It is a Beauteous Evening Calm and Free" (1802), the principle of the indwelling of Deity in children and its regenerative influence becomes fully articulate. A child may be mischievous or show fits of temper, out there is beneath such moodiness always a deeper self, not tainted with original sin but made up of heavenly attributes. So that if one is looking for a living resemblance of God and a close touch of him in this world, "one can as readily see it and feel it in the face and heart of a child as anywhere."[98] Although the child in the sonnet appears untouched by the solemn feeling of spirituality which fills the mind of the adult, she is nevertheless divine:

---

[96] Gingerich, op. cit., p. 136.

[97] Lines 200-204.

[98] Gingerich, op. cit., p. 137.

> Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
> If your appear untouched by solemn thought,
> Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
> Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
> And worship'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
> God being with thee when we know it not.

And in "Maternal Grief" (1810), he reiterates the same belief in the divinity of childhood:

> The Child she mourned had overstepped the pale
> Of Infancy, but still did breathe the air
> That sanctifies its confines, and partook
> Reflected beams of that celestial light
> To all the Little-ones on sinful earth
> Not unvouchsafed--[99]

And in the epitaph for his son Thomas (1812?), he speaks of

> Six months to six years added he remained
> Upon this sinful earth, by sin unstained.

There is in Wordsworth a gradual growth of sympathy for childhood, a gradual fusion of this sympathy with the cult of nature, and a gradually growing primitivistic belief that "the child's innocence and intuitiveness are precious as showing what a rich heritage we bring into the world, and how sinfully we squander it."[100] And he says

> The thought of our past years in me doth breed
> Perpetual benediction. . . .
> For those first affections
> Those shadowy recollections,
> Which, be they what they may,
> Are yet the fountain-light of all or day,
> Are yet a master light of all our seeing.[101]

Perhaps, Wordsworth's greatest tribute to the child is in stanza viii of the "Intimations Ode," in which he addresses

---

[99] Lines 14-19.

[100] Fairchild, The Romantic Quest, p. 157.

[101] "Intimations Ode," IX.

the child as the seer of truths which adults search all their lives to find:

> Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie
> Thy Soul's immensity;
> Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep,
> Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
> That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
> Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,--
> Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
> On whom those truths do rest,
> Which we are toiling all our lives to find,
> In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;[102]

And yet he knows that soon the child will lose this insight and will be weighed down by the weight of years:

> Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might
> Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,
> Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke
> The years to bring the inevitable yoke,
> Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?
> Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
> And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
> Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life![103]

In The Prelude, too, Wordsworth has written of the sanctity of childhood:

> Our childhood side,
> Our simple childhood, sits upon a throne
> That hath more power than all the elements.
> I guess not what this tells of Being past,
> Nor what it augurs of the life to come;
> But so it is.[104]

And he feels that there is

> In simple childhood, something of the base
> On which man's greatness stands.[105]

---

[102] Lines 109-117.

[103] Lines 123-132.

[104] v, 507-12.

[105] XII, 274-5.

And he employs the language of religion to reflect the sacredness of childhood:

> Ah! why in age
> Do we revert so fondly to the walks
> Of childhood--but that there the Soul discerns
> The dear memorial footsteps unimpaired
> Of her own native vigour; thence can hear
> Reverberations; and a choral song,
> Commingling with the incense that ascends,
> Undaunted, toward the imperishable heavens,
> From her own lonely altar?[106]

It is a surmise, nothing more, that the excellence of childhood may be an inheritance from a previous and presumably superior state of existence.

Children trust to their vivid sense impressions, their feelings, their instincts, as had Wordsworth:

> I felt and nothing else; I did not judge,
> I never thought of judging, with the gift,
> Of all this glory fill'd and satisfi'd.[107]

But most adults are excluded from such complete acceptance of life by their critical, analyzing intellects:

> We, who now
> Walk in the light of day, pertain full surely
> To alchilled age, most pitiably shut out
> From that which <u>is</u> and actuates, by forms,
> Abstractions, and by lifeless fact to fact
> Minutely linked with diligence uninspired. . .
> By godlike insight.[108]

"One reason for this glorification of childhood is that childhood is preeminently the age of wonder."[109]

---

[106] <u>The Excursion</u>, IX, 36-44.

[107] <u>The Prelude</u>, Xii, A 234-40.

[108] "Musings Near Aguapendente", 323-30.

[109] Havens, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 483.

The rainbow, the glowworm, the cuckoo, and the echo all haunt Wordsworth's poetry as they did his mind from childhood. "This is also true of poets," he might have added, for he no doubt agreed with Coleridge that

> The poet is one who carries the simplicity of childhood into the powers of manhood; who, with a soul unsubdued by habit, unshackled by custom, contemplates all things with the freshness and the wonder of a child. . . What is old and worn out, not in itself, but from the dimness of the intellectual eye, produced by worldly passions and pursuits, he (the poet) makes new.[110]

This sense of wonder gradually fades until

> At length the man perceives it die away
> And fade into the light of common day.[111]

And then only by the use of the Imagination, can the man recollect these feelings of wonder experienced before, for Wordsworth was far more deeply aware than most "how much of the stock of knowledge we possess is due to the native activity of our senses from infancy onward."[112]

Many of Wordsworth's contacts with nature are valued not so much in themselves as because they bring back more intense and delightful childhood experiences of the same sort, and now it is not the Golden Age of legend but the golden age of childhood which can be recaptured, sometimes just by the singing of a cuckoo:

---

[110] As quoted in Havens, op. cit., p. 483.

[111] "Intimations Ode," 75-76.

[112] Gingerich, op. cit., p. 111.

And I could listen to thee yet;
Can lie upon the plain
And listen, till I do beget
That golden time again.[113]

"In their endeavor to win men back to the simple life, poets instinctively held up the child as an ideal example of simple, if not divine, contentment."[114] Wordsworth's wide observation of children in the Lake District provided him with a rich fund of experience. And "he never ceased to draw upon this in order to give point to the plea that, he intended, should win men by the contemplation of innocent childhood which spontaneously found its rich enjoyments in the presence of nature."[115]

Although he preferred to write of children in rural areas, Wordsworth, nevertheless, more fully than any poet of the preceding century, had observed children in the crowded surroundings of the metropolis, and many portions of books Seventh and Eighth of The Prelude deal with accounts of children in town--at the fair, with the fiddler, at the raree-show.

By a "faithful adherence to the truth of nature," Wordsworth tries to reawaken civilized man from the "lethargy of custom" by reference to powers to which any "feeling mind" may awaken itself if man will only be as simple

---

113 "To the Cuckoo", ("O blithe newcomer").

114 Babenroth, op. cit., p. 313.

115 Loc. cit.

116 The Excursion, IV, 786-793.

and natural as a child. But, like Blake, it was in the child unspoiled by man that Wordsworth found the most satisfying illustration of the simple life:

> Poor men's children, they and they alone,
> By their condition taught, can understand
> The wisdom of the prayer that daily asks
> For daily bread. A consciousness is yours
> How feelingly religion may be learned
> In smoky cabins, from a mother's tongue--
> Heard while the dwelling vibrates to the din
> Of the contiuous torrent.[116]

And so there is a gradual fusion of his interest in childhood with his love of nature, which results in the child of nature. The child of nature--most often a girl--grows up in a rural region more or less uncorrupted by society. "From the spirit of goodness immanent in the scenery she draws beauty, innocence, and instinctive moral sense, and often, an intuitive insight into the heart of things.[117] The most famous example of the child of nature in Wordsworth is the Lucy poems:

> She dwelt among the untrodden ways
> Beside the springs of Dove
> A Maid whom there were none to praise
> And very few to love:
>
> A violet by a mossy stone
> Half hidden from the eye!
> Fair as a star, when only one
> Is shining in the sky.[118]

---

[116] The Excursion, IV, 786-793.

[117] Fairchild, The Romantic Quest, p. 158.

[118] "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways," (1799).

And in "Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower," nature recognizes that

> a lovelier flower
> On earth was never sown.[119]

And nature shall take her and raise her and

> will to my darling be
> Both law and impulse: and with me
> This Girl, in rock and plain,
> In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
> Shall feel an overseeing power
> To kindle or restrain.[120]

And Lucy was to be free to enjoy nature and thus learn by the beauty of the visible world:

> "She shall be sportive as the fawn
> That wild with glee across the lawn,
> Or up the mountain springs;
> And hers shall be the breathing balm,
> And hers the silence and the calm
> Of mute insensate things.
>
> "The floating clouds their state shall lend
> To her; for her the willow bend;
> Nor shall she fail to see
> Even in the motions of the Storm
> Grace that shall mould the Maiden's form
> By silent sympathy.
>
> "The stars of midnight shall be dear
> To her; and she shall lean her ear
> In many a secret place
> Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
> And beauty born of murmuring sound
> Shall pass into her face.
>
> "And vital feelings of delight
> Shall rear her form to stately height,
> Her virgin bosom swell;
> Such thoughts to Lucy I will give
> While she and I together live
> Here in this happy dell."[121]

---

[119] Lines 2-4.

[120] Lines 7-12.

[121] 1799

And Lucy Gray no mate, no comrade knew

> She dwelt on a wide moor,
> The sweetest thing that ever grew
> Beside a human door.[122]

But Lucy is not the only example in Wordsworth of the child of nature; we need only glance at Ruth, who

> Had built a bower upon the green
> As if she from her birth had been
> An infant of the woods.[123]

And "To a Young Lady":

> Dear Child of Nature, let them rail!
> --There is a nest in a green dale,
> A harbour and a hold;
> Where thou, a Wife and Friend, shalt see
> Thy own heart-stirring days, and be
> A light to young and old.
>
> There, healthy as a shepherd boy,
> And treading among flowers of joy
> Which at no season fade,
> Thou, while thy babes around thee cling,
> Shalt show us how divine a thing
> A Woman may be made.[124]

"The Westmoreland Girl," too, was

> Left among her native mountains
> With wild Nature to run wild.[125]

Wordsworth by this time, however, had lost his faith in the disciplinary power of nature, and the Westmoreland Girl is "as much a weed as a flower, and needs moral and intellectual cultivation."[126]

---

[122] 1800.

[123] Lines 10-13, 1799.

[124] 1802.

[125] 1845.

[126] H. N. Fairchild, The Noble Savage, p. 367.

But in the early period, communion with nature was beneficial, and the child of nature in "We Are Seven" was beautiful to behold:

> She had a rustic, woodland air,
> And she was wildly clad:
> Her eyes were fair, and very fair;
> --Her beauty made one glad.[127]

This benign influence continues as the child grows, and in "To a Highland Girl" he says

> For never saw I mien, or face,
> In which more plainly I could trace
> Benignity and home-bred sense
> Ripening in perfect innocence.
> Here, scattered, like a random seed,
> Remote from man, Thou dost not need
> The embarrassed look of shy distress,
> And maidenly shamefacedness:[128]

This influence even reaches adults such as Michael, whose fields and hills "had laid strong hold on his affections." And so, the poet who longs for

> Summer days, when we were young;
> Sweet childish days, that were as long
> As twenty years are now.[129]

feels that it would be well for him, as for mankind,

> here to dwell
> Beside thee in some healthy dell;
> Adopt your homely ways, your dress.[130]

Thus Wordsworth had at first placed emphasis on the divine in Nature; and gradually he was led to the divine

---

[127] 1798.

[128] Lines 24-31.

[129] "To a Butterfly," 1802.

[130] "To a Highland Girl."

in Man. In the broadest sense, the earth is a sacred dwelling and all visible objects are somehow charged with revelations of spiritual truths. Or, to put it otherwise, "the Presence at the heart of all things, working through natural objects, childhood intuitions, memory, and human character and human conduct, has a redemptive and re-creative influence on all who, with reverence, heed its power, like Wordsworth who felt that

> Love had he found in huts where poor men lie;
> His daily teachers had been woods and rills,
> The silence that is in the starry sky,
> The sleep that is among the lonely hills.[131]

And in his poetry, the peasant, the idiot, and the child imply a desire to rise above the trammels of the man-made world of sophistication and intellectualism toward the purer realm of spiritual intuition and the simplicity of sense experience. Nature as a whole has her own mighty and indefinable voice, the sum of all these separate voices-- the rustic, the idiot, and the child. "It is this and no other, which, were it understood, would reveal the great secret."[132]

---

131 "Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle," 161-165.

132 Legouis, op. cit., p. 403.

Anti-Intellectualism

In view of Wordsworth's views on the evil results of industry in its interference with the inborn right of children to a free, open-air childhood, and in view of his attitude on the native ability of the ideal peasant who enjoyed true freedom, it is only to be expected that he would be out of sympathy "with the cramping and cramming systems that failed to catch the spirit of freedom essential to his philosophy of life with respect to children."[133]

He was inclined to be hostile to bookishness in the early years, and apparently held mere learning in light esteem. "The outstanding characteristic of his conception of education is his minimizing the intellectual side and insisting that books and formal teaching are less important than play, association with other boys and with nature."[134]

But Wordsworth's anti-intellectualism was different from most. He was free from that form which insists that learning encumbers poetic genius, that the true poet does not need books and derives little from the study of his predecessors. And, indeed, in the conclusion of The Prelude, he regrets that he has not said more about the influence of books--good books--on his development.

Yet for bookishness he had a great distrust. "Books," he complained, "mislead us."

---

[133] Babenroth, op. cit., p. 348.

[134] Havens, op. cit., p. 128.

> seeking their reward
> From judgments of the wealthy Few, who see
> By artificial lights; how they debase
> The many for the pleasure of those Few.[135]

Wordsworth's boyhood and youth seem less marked by intellectual interests than those of most men who later show considerable intellectual power. He lived chiefly by his instincts and emotions.

At Cambridge, he says

> I did not love,
> Judging not ill perhaps, the timid course
> Of our scholastic studies . . .[136]

The fact that he inserted the "judging not ill perhaps," in the revision of The Prelude shows that he had no regret for his earlier attitude. He was convinced that he was right in believing the course of study uninspired.

As he grows older, he is more and more convinced that such curricula are lacking:

> And--now convinced at heart
> How little those formalities, to which
> With overweening trust alone we give
> The name of Education, have to do
> With real feeling and just sense.[137]

"Although he is quite sure that the scope of formal education should be broadened, he wearily gives up when it comes to discussing such details as the value of examinations."[138] Of them he says

---

[135] The Prelude, xiii, 208-211.

[136] Ibid., iii, 493-6.

[137] Ibid., xiii, 168-72.

[138] Mary Burton, The One Wordsworth, p. 86.

> things they were which then
> I did not love, nor do I love them now.[139]

He believed that the presidents and deans may as well still their bells

> till the spirit
> Of ancient times revive, and youth be trained
> At home in pious service.[140]

The cramming process then in vogue produced infant prodigies, who in his eyes were little monstrosities. And in speaking of the model child, which he abhors, he says:

> Briefly, the moral part
> Is perfect, and in learning and in books
> He is a prodigy. His discourse moves slow,
> Massy and ponderous as a prison door,
> Tremendously embossed with terms of art;
> Rank growth of propositions overruns
> The Stripling's brain; the path in which he treads
> Is chok'd with grammars; cushion of Divine
> Was never such a type of thought profound
> As is the pillow where he rests his head.
> The Ensigns of the Empire which he holds,
> The Globe and sceptre of his royalties,
> Are telescopes, and crucibles, and maps.[141]

This long passage is later summarized in "a miracle of scientific love." Another passage with strong language, also later deleted, concerns education:

> Now this is hollow, 'tis a life of lies
> From the beginning, and in lies must end.
> Forth bring him to the air of common sense,
> And, fresh and shewy as it is, the Corpse
> Slips from us into powder. Vanity
> That is his soul, there lives he, and there moves;
> It is the soul of everything he seeks;
> That gone, nothing is left which he can love.[142]

---

[139] The Prelude, iii, A 69-70.

[140] Ibid., iii, 410-12.

[141] Ibid., v, A 318-30.

[142] Ibid., 350-63.

Wordsworth's heart goes out to the child, who is not to be blamed:

> For this unnatural growth the trainer blame.
> Pity the tree.[143]

For the poet felt that books were

> a dull and endless strife:
> Come, hear the woodland linnet,
> How sweet his music! on my life,
> There's more of wisdom in it.[144]

Although Wordsworth was not specifically a follower of Rousseau, his doctrine of the minimum of interference, restraint, and guidance for the child is in fact very much like Rousseau's belief that with the child, one should not gain time but lose it. Like Rousseau, Wordsworth did not want to make a man out of a child as soon as possible. Like Blake, he recognized the individuality of the period of childhood, and respected it; and he felt that childhood should be appreciated for what it is, rather than for what it promises for the future.

The child should be allowed to play and to roam with nature, for Wordsworth "believed that the true normal man is shaped only by the sensations originally ordained for him"[145]--those which he receives from Nature with her form unchanged, "save by the simplest work of human hands." The child has no freedom in the systems used for his education:

---

143 Ibid., v, 328.

144 "The Tables Turned," (1798).

145 Powell, op. cit., p. 136.

> For, even as a thought of purer birth
> Rises to lead him toward a better clime,
> Some intermeddler still is on the watch
> To drive him back, pound him, like a stray,
> Within the pinfold of his own conceit.[146]

As in Blake's conception, all knowledge should be delight, "which in Wordsworth's interpretation is to be found in the presence of enduring things in nature,"[147] where infant sensibility might be augmented and sustained in freedom.

Although Wordsworth did not definitely suggest correlating play and study in the curriculum, he did insist on the right to freedom from supervision and control in order to liberate the child for the natural guidance of woods and streams. And it is significant to Babenroth that Wordsworth named the first two books of The Prelude not "School" but "School-time."[148]

And Wordsworth never forgets the good influence on growing minds of woods and streams:

> Nor have I tracked their course for scanty gains;
> They taught me random cares and truant joys,
> That shield from mischief and preserve from stains
> Vague minds, while men are growing out of boys.[149]

This is in harmony with his belief that the child's mind

---

[146] The Prelude, v, 332-336.

[147] Babenroth, op. cit., p. 353.

[148] Loc. cit.

[149] "The River Duddon," xxvi.

should not show too many traces of man's handwork, "whose meddling and sympathizing would straighten the windings of the Duddon and Derwent.[150] For he believed,

> Sweet is the love which Nature brings;
> Our meddling intellect
> Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:--
> We murder to dissect.[151]

And he contrasts nature ("the image of right reason") with the false, analytical power. Nature

> matures
> Her processes by steadfast laws; gives birth
> To no impatient or fallacious hopes,
> No heat of passion or excessive zeal,
> No vain conceits.[152]

"He came to realize that truth is found only through the activity of the whole man; the affections, the will, and the senses are as necessary as the intellect."[153] Analysis tends to bring out the differences in men rather than their fundamental likenesses, which the heart reveals. And because education was directed mainly toward development of "real feeling and just sense," it had little relation to life and was, therefore, almost futile.

Wordsworth now feels that "'tis the heart that magnifies this life,"[154]

---

[150] Babenroth, op. cit., p. 355.

[151] "The Tables Turned."

[152] The Prelude, xiii, 226.

[153] Havens, op. cit., p. 130.

[154] "Enough of Climbing Toil," 12.

Vain is the glory of the sky,
The beauty vain of field and grove,
Unless, while with admiring eye
We gaze, we also learn to love--[155]

that is, to love mankind. And if we have learned to love, one moment of communion with nature

now may give us more
Than years of toiling reason.

There can be no better illustration of Wordsworth's anti-intellectualism than his turning to his humble neighbor for guidance. Godwin had said that such people could know little of virtue or of happiness. "Of theory, logical subtlety, and analysis they had scarcely heard; yet Wordsworth found them rich in wisdom."[156] But he was not helped by the affections and man and nature, but rather by the affections wedded to nature and men, "by nature bound through the affections to men and to himself, and by men living close to nature in their 'natural abodes,' where the affections flourish."[157]

The method of analytical reason, the deliberate activity of the conscious mind, was responsible for its limitations. "Only little truths are to be reached in this way; great truths are not found, they are given."[158] Our part is to wait in quiet, to meditate, to receive:

---

[155] "Great Sight," 5-8.

[156] Havens, op. cit., p. 133.

[157] Loc. cit.

[158] Loc. cit.

> Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum
> Of things forever speaking,
> That nothing of itself will come
> But we must still be seeking?[159]

and

> Nor less I deem that there are Powers
> Which of themselves our minds impress;
> That we can feed this mind of ours
> In a wise passiveness.[160]

Intuitive truths are the deepest and best. And he urges us to leave "our meddling intellect" and bring with us "a heart that watches and receives."[161]

"Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned" have been called the most primitivistic poems of English literature,[162] for in the former, power comes to man from all the mighty sum of things forever speaking, while in the latter, a companion piece, Nature, blessing us with spontaneous truth, is the wisest teacher of mankind. Thus Wordsworth says that man preserves his strength only so long as he keeps his feet on the earth; that vivid life of the senses, close contact with fields and streams, is necessary if one's reasoning is not to go astray. And these two poems are devoted to the contrast between the wisdom derived through the senses and the mis-shapen conceptions furnished by the intellect. Wordsworth wishes to make three points: (1) that the true end of

---

159 "Expostulation and Reply."

160 Loc. cit.

161 "The Tables Turned."

162 Babbitt, "The Primitivism of Wordsworth," Bookman (U. S. A.), LXXIV, (1931) p. 5.

education is the acquisition of "real feeling and just sense;" (2) that this end is achieved, not in schools and books, but (3) in the "open schools" in which tillers of the soil work.[163] And by so doing, he is striking persistently at the cool, logical, analytical, eighteenth-century kind of reason--"that false secondary power by which we multiply distinctions," as he called it.

"And the prevalent shrinking away from the vices of town toward rural innocence has as a corollary the notion that some causal relation exists between virtue and ignorance on the one hand, and between vice and learning on the other."[164] And, if Wordsworth did not believe this when he wrote the last of the Excursion, we can feel sure that this was a fundamental tenet of his poetry before 1805.

---

163 Havens, op. cit., p. 593.

164 Fairchild, The Romantic Quest, p. 113.

CHAPTER FOUR

WORDSWORTH AND ROUSSEAU

There has been, and still is, a great deal of controversy about the influence of Rousseau upon Wordsworth. Many writers are largely contradictory in their development of this theme.[1]

Legouis maintains that Wordsworth's work might be described as an English variety of Rousseauism. The following passage gives it more clearly:

> In Wordsworth, we find Rousseau's well-known fundamental tenets: he has the same semi-mystical faith in the goodness of nature as well as in the excellence of the Child; his ideas on education are almost identical; there are apparent a similar diffidence in respect of the merely intellectual processes of the mind, and an equal trust in the good that may accrue to man from the cultivation of his senses and feelings. The difference between the two, mainly occasional and of a political nature, seem secondary by the side of these profound analogies. For this reason, Wordsworth must be placed by the general historian among the numerous "sons of Rousseau," who form the main battalion of romanticism.[2]

"The world into which Wordsworth was born was one deeply influenced by Rousseau: and that the young poet should have been influenced deeply by Rousseauistic influences was absolutely inevitable."[3] His teachings were per-

---

[1] For example, Irving Babbitt and Emile Legouis.

[2] Emile Legouis, "William Wordsworth," Cambridge History of English Literature, XI, p. 103.

[3] Arthur Beatty, William Wordsworth: His Doctrine and Art in Their Historical Relations, p. 18.

vasive throughout Europe. The age was one in which the desirability of a return to nature was proclaimed as a gospel. The atmosphere was more or less charged with it, and Wordsworth was undoubtedly affected by it--"all the more because it was in harmony with his own predispositions and likings."[4]

But, after all, Wordsworth's profound interest in nature, and his fundamental faiths concerning her, were largely due to his own mystical endowment[5] and to his personal relations with her during many years in an environment remarkable for its physical beauty and grandeur. This is a side of Wordsworth that is not Rousseauistic, and it is that part of him which gives him originality and distinctness. For he spoke out of his own rich experience.

Yet, it has generally been assumed "even by the soberest scholars that the poet was deeply influenced by the thought of Rousseau."[6] Professor Harper declares: "Rousseau it is, far more than any other man of letters, either of antiquity or of modern times, whose works have left their trace in Wordsworth's poetry."[7] Yet, without the aid of Rousseau, we can imagine that Wordsworth, with his environment of nature, might well have become just what he did become. Nevertheless, to Harper, the points of agree-

---

[4] Sneath, op. cit., p. 306.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Beach op.cit., p. 572.

[7] Harper, op.cit., p. 128.

ment are too numerous to be the result of mere coincidence.[8]

An examination of Rousseau's language shows a distinct preference for the diction of common speech. Wordsworth's earliest poems, composed before he had read Rousseau, show little of this tendency. "It is quite possible that he owed more in this respect to Rousseau than has yet been acknowledged."[9]

There is evidence that Wordsworth was acquainted with Rousseau. When he went to France, he met Captain Michel Beaupuy, a disciple of Rousseau, confident in the belief that the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity would emerge triumphant from the tide of political change. "Under Beaupy's guidance, he read Rousseau and much propaganda besides; after his death there was found in his library a bundle of 'French pamphlets and ephemera' testifying to his studies at Blois."[10] It is also known that a copy of Emile and Rousseau's Confessions were among the books in his library at his death.[11] And Joseph Fawcett, whom Wordsworth knew and heard personally in 1793-95, was an enthusiastic admirer of Rousseau. But the most striking example of his acquaintance with the French author is the paragraph in the pamphlet on The Convention of Cintra, in which he speaks of

---

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Malcolm Elwin, The First Romantics, p. 36.

[11] Beach, op. cit., p. 138.

"the paradoxical reveries of Rousseau,"[12] along with similar disparaging remarks on Voltaire and Condillac. This attitude in 1809 does not make it impossible, especially in a man like Wordsworth, that in 1791 or 1798 he was more sympathetic toward his views and sentiments.

It is doubtless true that in "Descriptive Sketches," published in 1793, "he is influenced by Raymond, with whose account of the Alps he was acquainted, and also by Rousseau, so that there is a lack of spontaneous and original feeling aroused by the memory of his visit."[13]

Rousseau's doctrine was that man, good, but corrupted by bad laws and customs, should be freed from these and left to the guidance of his own personality. "Tout est bien, sortant des mains de l'auteur des choses; tout dégénère entre les mains de l'homme": so says Rousseau in the first sentence of Emile. And Wordsworth talks of "that false secondary power by which we multiply distinctions." "This was no sudden manifestation of a spirit of revolt; it had been swelling in volume for many years."[14] Granting, then, that this anti-intellectualism and anti-sophistication is too greatly pervasive in English literature from about the middle of the eighteenth century to justify ascribing the whole tradition to Rousseau, nevertheless, "if we allow

---

[12] Cited in Beach, p. 118.

[13] Sneath, op. cit., p. 43.

[14] A. C. Baugh, A Literary History of England, p. 1124.

Godwin and Rousseau to stand for two rather markedly different tendencies in the thought of the period, Wordsworth's movement from the former to the latter between 1796 and 1798 is evident."[15] For there are many ideas that Wordsworth had in common with Rousseau, whether or not he was directly influenced by him. There can be no doubt that Wordsworth shared Rousseau's belief in impulse and creative energy as against law and discipline; in vision as against scientific analysis; and in imaginative as against reasoned comprehension.[16]

"L'homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers": so begins the Contrat Social. And in "Descriptive Sketches," Wordsworth says:

> Once Man entirely free, alone and wild,
> Was bless'd as free--for he was Nature's child.
> He, all superior but his God disdain'd
> Walk'd none restraining, and by none restrain'd,
> Confess'd no law but what his reason taught,
> Did all he wish'd, and wish'd but what he ought.[17]

Later, in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth takes as his model and ideal the utterances which passion wrings from life in the living:

> But whatever portion of this faculty we may suppose even the greatest Poet to possess, there cannot be a doubt that the language which it will suggest to him, must often, in liveliness and truth, falls short of that which is uttered by men in real life, under the actual pressure of those

---

15 Fairchild, The Romantic Quest, p. 113.

16 Powell, op. cit., p. 53.

17 Lines 433-438.

> passions, certain shadows of which the Poet thus produces, or feels to be produced, in himself.[18]

This is, almost, the ideal of style which Rousseau puts forth in the second Preface to La Nouvelle Héloise:

> Croyez-vous que les gens vraiment passionés ayent ces manières de parler vives, fortes, colorieés que vous admirez dans vos Drames et dans vos Romans? Non; la passion, pleine d'elle-même, s'exprime avec plus d'abondance que de force; elle ne songe pas même à persuader; elle ne soupçonne pas qu'on puisse douter d'elle. Quand elle dit ce qu'elle sent, c'est moins pour l'exposer aux autres que pour se soulager. . .

Wordsworth finds a kinship with Rousseau in his high esteem for reverie as a mode of thought. "Reverie is an inactive, unsystematic kind of meditation, distinguished from logical processes of discourses by the absence of consciously perceived steps."[19] It evolves a more complete merging of the thinker in his thought. It discloses to the mind what the mind already contains, but discovers no new subjects of thought. "It arouses, arranges, unifies, the elements of one's soul, and the dreamer may emerge from his dream with a truer knowledge of himself and a more definite purpose."[20] Wordsworth's "Poetry is emotion recollected in tranquillity"[21] has its counterpart in Rousseau's Les Reveries du Promeneur Solitaire:

---

[18] 1800 Preface.

[19] Harper, op. cit., I, p. 129.

[20] Ibid.

[21] 1800 Preface.

> Delivré de toutes les passions terrestres qu'engendre le tumulte de la vie sociale, mon âme s'élancerait frequémment au-dessus de cette atmosphere. . . de m'y transporter chaque jour sur les ailes de l'imagination, et d'y goûter durant quelques heures le même plaisir que si je l'habitais encore. Ce que j'y ferais de plus doux serait d'y rever à mon aise. En revant que j'y suis, ne fais-je pas la même chose? Je fais même plus: à l'attrait d'une rêverie abstraite et monotone, je joins des images charmantes qui la vivifient. Leurs objets échappaient souvent à mes sens dans mes extases; et maintenant, plus ma reverie est profonde, plus elle me les peint vivement. Je suis souvent plus au milieu d'eux, et plus agréablement encore, que quand j'y étais réelement.[22]

This mood and idea have been immortalized by Wordsworth in speaking of the daffodils:

> I gazed--and gazed--but little thought
> What wealth the show to me had brought:
>
> For oft, when on my couch I lie
> In vacant or in pensive mood,
> They flash upon that inward eye
> Which is the bliss of solitude;
> And then my heart with pleasure fills,
> And dances with the daffodils.[23]

A second element in Wordsworth which is evidenced in Rousseau is his desire to simplify: to reduce the number and conplexity of experiences and ideals. He extols a simpler and more primitive state of society before the division of labor withe its attendant capitalistic evils had corrupted the natural goodness of man. And he says

> Ce qu'il y a de plus cruel encore c'est que tous les progres de l'espèce humaine l'éloignant

---

[22] "Cinquième promenade."

[23] "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (1804).

> sans cesse de son état primitif plus nous accumulons de nouvelles connaissances, et plus nous nous ôtons les moyens d'acquerir la plus importante de toutes.[24]

And

> la plupart de nos maux sont notre propre ouvrage, et que nous les aurions presque tous évites en conservant la manière de vivre simple, uniforme et solitaire qui nous était prescrite par la nature.[25]

Through the long march of civilization, the life of man, as Rousseau saw it, has become muffled in systems of knowledge, systems of government, conventions of society. "He lives mechanically, among artificially created custom, and the real man seldom breaks through to find expression."[26] Rousseau bids us strip off these lifeless encumbrances which the ages have accumulated and get back to what is elemental, natural, and therefore essential in man. Similarly Wordsworth:

> Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated.[27]

"Tout est bien, sortant des mains de l'auteur des

---

[24] Preface, Discours sur l'Origine de l'Inégalité (1755).

[25] Discours sur l'Origine de l'Inégalité, Première partie.

[26] Powell, op. cit., p. 10.

[27] 1800 Preface to Lyrical Ballads.

choses; tout dégénère entre les mains de l'homme." Leave man's meddling, then and get back to things as they came from God's hands: return to Nature. What did Rousseau mean by nature? He meant different things at different times, for he is full of contraditions. But, in the first place, like Wordsworth, and perhaps even stronger than Wordsworth, he meant the country as opposed to the town. A child's education should begin with the education of his senses: Emile's senses should be trained not in the smoke and din of Paris, but among the pure sights and sounds of the country, for Rousseau believed like Cowper: "God made the country, and man made the town." In the second place, Rousseau meant what we call the simple life. Parisian society is corrupt; but virtue still exists among the herdsmen of the Alps. Both these ideas are familiar to us from Wordsworth, although Wordsworth invested nature with a mystical significance that was his own.

In Rousseau, Wordsworth may have found a doctrine similar to his on the natural goodness of man. The doctrine is asserted over and over again in Emile. Man has a natural sense of right and wrong implanted in him by his conscience. Likewise, Wordsworth believes throughout that man has a choice between good and evil. In La Nouvelle Héloïse, Rousseau speaks of "la douce voix de la Nature, qui réclame au fond de tous les coeurs contre une orgueilleuse philoso-

phie."[28] In Emile, he says that he finds his ethical principles "au fond de mon coeur écrites par la Nature en caracteres eneffacables." According to Rousseau, moral goodness is conformable to our nature:

> Si la bonté morale est conformé à notre nature, l'homme ne saurait être sain d'esprit ne bien consitué, qu'autant qu'il est bon. Si elle ne l'est pas et que l'homme soit méchant naturellement, il ne peut cesser de l'être sans se corrompre, et la bonté n'est en lui qu'un vice contre Nature.[29]

Wordsworth held with Rousseau "a love of primitive simplicity and vegetative felicity."[30]

"Rousseau recognezed that his own generation was not fit to remodel institutions in which it had itself grown up."[31] We must look to the children for that. Therefore in Emile, he sets forth a scheme of education which might in time produce citizens to build the New Jerusalem and worthy to dwell there.[32] Like Wordsworth, Rousseau believed that we should be interested in the child for what he is now--a fresh, natural being--rather than for what he may become through training, and we must respect childhood as an individual period:

> L'humanité a sa place dans l'ordre des choses; l'enfance a la sienne dans l'ordre de la vie

---

28 Cited in Beach, op. cit., p. 162.

29 Ibid.

30 Babenroth, op. cit., p. 250.

31 Grierson, op. cit., p. 288.

32 Ibid.

> humaine; il faut considérer l'homme dans l'homme et l'enfant dans l'enfant. Assigner à chacun sa place et l'y fixer.[33]

All through the second book of Emile, Rousseau dwells on the value for young children of the knowledge that comes to them through the senses in the course of mere animal play. Wordsworth is in accord with him on this. And, he would certainly agree with Rousseau's advice to the tutor of Mme. d'Epinay's son:

> "a child's character should not be changed; besides, one could not do it if one would, and the greatest success you could achieve would be to make a hypocrite of him. . . No, sir, you must make the best of the character Nature gave him; that is all that is required of you."[34]

He would agree with Rousseau's theory of knowledge based on direct observation and with his idea that the child must be free as nature made him: man must not interfere. For that purpose, we may try the following rules: 1. Let him use the little strength he has, in the assurance that he will find no way to abuse it; 2. Aid him by supplying all the strength he needs to satisfy his true wants; 3. Stop short with the true wants and ignore all whim and fantasy; 4. Use all care to make sure which are true wants and which are fanciful.[35] And it is here, perhaps, that Wordsworth deviates from Rousseau, for the English poet suggests no such

---

[33] Emile, Livre II.

[34] From a translation of Jules Lemaitre, Jean-Jacques Rousseau by Jeanne Mairet, p. 218, as cited in Babenroth, op. cit., p. 261.

[35] E. H. Wright, The Meaning of Rousseau, p. 42.

restraints. And in Rousseau's system, the child, though apparently free, is "followed, hourly watched, and [Wordsworth may have felt] noosed."[36] He no doubt would agree with Rousseau that:

> Comme tout ce qui entre dans l'entendement humain y vient par les sens, la première raison de l'homme est une raison sensitive; c'est elle qui sert de base à la raison intellectuelle: nos premiers maîtres de philosophie sont nos pieds, nos mains, nos yeux.

But Rousseau goes even farther and says:

> Substituer des livres à tout cela, ce n'est pas nous apprendre à raisonner, c'est nous apprendre à nous servir de la raison d'autrui; c'est nous apprendre à beaucoup croire, et à ne jamais rien savoir.[37]

Wordsworth did not believe that books could be substituted for other necessary parts of learning but he felt that they, too, had a place. For he sees that whatever contributes to the child's development on any side is education, yet that the acquisition of book-learning constitutes but a small part of this development, and that an education mainly bookish or intellectual is wrong.[38] And the main thing was that the child should not be "a dwarf Man"[39] or "a miracle of scientific lore,"[40] but a normal boy; and yet

---

[36] The Prelude, v, 232-9

[37] Emile, Livre II.

[38] Havens, op. cit., pp. 376-7.

[39] The Prelude, v, A 295.

[40] Ibid., v, 315.

some systematic intellectual training he obviously took for granted. To Wordsworth, education was "everything that draws out the human being, of which tuition, the teaching of schools especially, however important,[41] is comparatively an insignificant part."[42] And more and more he felt that

> The present bend of the public mind is to sacrifice the greater power to the less; all that life and nature teach, to the little that can be learned from books and a master. . . The wisest of us expect far too much from school teaching.[43]

Near the end of his life, in commenting upon an educational report, he asked if

> too little value is not set upon the occupations of Children out of doors. . . comparatively with what they do or acquire in school? Is not the Knowledge inculcated by the teacher, or derived under his management, from books, too exclusively dwelt upon, so as almost to put out of sight that which comes, without being sought for, from intercourse with nature and from experience in the actual employment and duties which a child's situation in the Country, however unfavorable, will lead him to or impose upon him.[44]

He never felt that they should be "noosed," but left free to wander

---

41 My italics.

42 Letter to H. J. Rose (1828). Cited in Havens, op. cit., p. 378.

43 Ibid.

44 Letter to Seymour Tremenheere (1845) as cited in Harper, op. cit., p. 348.

> Through heights and hollows, and bye-spots
> of tales
> Rich with indigenous produce, open ground
> Of Fancy, happy pastures rang'd at will![45]

And to both Wordsworth and Rousseau, the evils of the age were a result of industrialism. In his Discourse on the Moral Effect of the Sciences and Arts, Rousseau regards the evils of the age as the result of our deserting "that happy state of ignorance in which the wisdom of providence has placed us":

> Let men learn for once that nature would have preserved them from science, as a mother snatches a dangerous weapon from the hands of her child. Let them know that all the secrets she hides are so many evils from which she protects them, and that the very difficulty they find in acquiring knowledge is not the least of her bounty towards them. Men are perverse; but they would have been far worse, if they had had the misfortune to be born learned. . . . . Virtue! sublime science of simple minds, are such industry and preparation needed if we are to know you? Are not your principles graven on every heart? Need we do more, to learn your laws, than examine ourselves, and listen to the voice of conscience, when the passions are silent?[46]

Another quality of Rousseau is his intense individualism. The political views of Rousseau, as stated, for example, in Le Contrat Social are extremely individualistic, yet considering his origins, it is easy to understand "his restiveness under restraint, his horror of patronage, his association of human strength, not with union among men,

---

[45] The Prelude, v, A 235-7.

[46] Cited in Fairchild, The Romantic Quest, p. 112.

but with the wild and stern aspects of nature."[47] Wordsworth never went to the individualistic extreme in his love of liberty. "And even when he was most rebellious against the spirit of his bringing-up and his environment, he still felt that social ties had something of the naturalness and permanence of the external world."[48]

Wordsworth, as became a poet, did not separate his mental processes. His reverie was more like reflection, "it had more of the rational discursive quality than Rousseau's; and his reasoning was less abstract, it never lost touch with things and events."[49]

Yet he who believes that tillers of the soil and those in walks of life but little removed from them--that is, the majority of mankind--are leading natural and therefore rational lives, and that their social laws are relatively permanent, and therefore not wanting in authority, is not likely to be made unhappy by the outbreak of a revolution which promises to restore the artificially disturbed balance of human powers and happiness. "Rousseau's message, not withstanding the final gloom of his life, was one of gladness. More than any other feature of the Revolution, Wordsworth, too, felt its joy."[50]

---

47 Harper, op. cit., I, p. 133.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., p. 134.

50 Ibid.

CHAPTER FIVE

WORDSWORTH AND THE NOBLE SAVAGE TRADITION

In his book The Noble Savage, H. N. Fairchild defines the Noble Savage as "any free and wild being who draws directly from nature virtues which raise doubts as to the value of civilization."[1] He suggests also that the term may even be applied metaphorically to romantic peasants and children when a comparison of their innocent greatness and that of the savage illumines the thought of the period. The Noble Savage represents a protest against the evil incidental to human progress and looks yearningly back from the corruptions of civilization to an imaginary primeval innocence. The idea of the Noble Savage depends upon belief in nature as a norm of innocence, simplicity, and spontaneity, and upon belief in the instinctive goodness of man. According to Fairchild, the earliest use of the term appeared in Part One of Dryden's Conquest of Granada, where Almanzor declares:

> I am as free as Nature first made man,
> Ere the base laws of servitude began,
> When wild in woods the noble savage ran.[2]

In the whole body of eighteenth-century literature before the French Revolution, one discerns a fairly steady

---

[1] Page 2.

[2] As quoted in Fairchild, The Noble Savage, p. 29.

growth of the attitude that civilization had strayed too far from the simple rules which nature plants in the hearts of all mankind. And the "noble savage" frequently appears as an embodiment of this attitude. But the real importance of these confrontations of savage and civilized humanity lies in the fact that they indirectly stimulated reflection upon "what man has made of man."

The first example in Wordsworth of what may be considered as an off shoot of the noble savage is in "Descriptive Sketches":

> As man in his primeval dower arrayed
> The image of his glorious Sire displayed,
> Even so, by faithful Nature guarded, here
> The traces of primeval man appear;
> The simple dignity no forms debase;
> The eye sublime, the surly lion-grace.[3]

(Yet we are convinced from a letter he wrote to Dorothy during the tour that this was merely the use of a literary fad.)

"The complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman" was suggested by the reading of Hearne's Journey from Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean. It is a poem about a sick squaw who has been left to die in the snow. From his own note, we know that he read Hearne's Journal "with interest." Notwithstanding the fact that Wordsworth must have given some thought to Indians in the writing of this poem, it certainly cannot be considered as a glorification of savage life.

In "Her Eyes Are Wild" an "Indian bower" is mentioned;

---

[3] Lines 439-444.

in "A Farewell," an "Indian shed." In The Prelude, he speaks again of Indians in urging the reader to

> Think, how the everlasting streams and woods,
> Stretched and still stretching far and wide exalt
> The roving Indian, on his desert sands.[4]

And the Lake County woodman sleeps on the ground in his cabin, like an Indian.[5] In a late poem, "Presentiments," Wordsworth addresses the spirit of prophetic intuition and says

> The naked Indian of the wild,
> And haply too the cradled child,
> Are pupils of your school.[6]

To Fairchild, such fragments of evidence show that Wordsworth was mildly curious about Indians, and that he had obtained some knowledge of their customs from travelers' accounts.[7] This does not, however, establish him as an ardent admirer of the savage.

For the natural impulses of a primitive people had little to offer Wordsworth. He feared and distrusted the

---

[4] vii, 745-47. It is interesting to note that the reference to the Indian does not occur in the 1805 edition. One may guess, however, that it was added not long after, for the thought is certainly more characteristic of the earlier than the later Wordsworth.

[5] viii, 437.

[6] Lines 34-36.

[7] The Noble Savage, p. 179.

sudden and violent in feeling:

> The depth, and not the tumult, the Gods approve
> of the soul.[8]

And although his view of the child and the peasant as being particularly close to Nature and sharing in her wisdom is analogous to the romantic view of the savage, or primitive man, Wordsworth does not seem to have taken much stock himself in this conception of the noble savage.[9] Even Fairchild admits that "whether the Lake County shepherd admired by Wordsworth can be spoken of as a noble savage even in a loose and figurative sense is doubtful."[10] For Wordsworth was never a lover of actual wildness in men or institutions.

But fairchild is tempted to compare the noble savage and the noble peasant. They are similarly motivated; both reflect a revulsion against "what man has made of man." Both preach the gospel of nature worship, innocent simplicity, and anti-intellectualism. "They are related also in that Wordsworth's conception of the shepherd is influenced by Rousseau's conception of natural man, which in turn owes something to the noble savage tradition."[11]

As the eighteenth century progressed, the conventional pastoral gave place more and more to sympathetic portrayals

---

8 "Laodamia," lines 73-75.

9 Beach, op. cit., pp. 202-3.

10 The Romantic Quest, p. 152.

11 Ibid., p. 153.

of English country life. Even in Wordsworth, the peasant is idealized as well as realized. "The simple shepherd is made the vehicle for the increasingly popular notions about the wickedness of cities and the desirability of innocent contentment in the lap of nature."[12] But there is a striking difference. Wordsworth's noble peasant is far more than mere ignorance of civilized complexities. His direct contact with the "wisdom and spirit of the universe" gives him a positive happiness and a positive goodness.[13] Far from being free, his spirit is constantly chastened by the discipline of nature. And "far from being in sentimental quest of some Utopia, turning away from the reality that disciplines by constraint and limitation, it was precisely from the contemplation of nature that he drew a sense of the necessity of constraint and limitations."[14] But Michael is more like a wise old sachem than like any figure of the pastoral tradition.[15]

The child of nature might be considered another offshoot of the noble savage tradition. And in the early period, the beauty of the little cottage girl, who was "wildly clad," made Wordsworth glad.[16] And he saw fit sub-

---

[12] Ibid., p. 152.

[13] Fairchild, The Noble Savage, p. 181.

[14] Joseph Beach, "Reason and Nature in Wordsworth," Journal of the History of Ideas, I, p. 341.

[15] Fairchild, The Romantic Quest, p. 180.

[16] "We Are Seven".

jects for poetry in the child of nature who "dwelt among the untrodden ways."

The child of nature is perhaps harmoniously related to the Noble Savage. The influence of scenery sometimes operates on the savage as it does on the child. Moreover, boys and girls who, in poetry or in actual life, grow up among natural objects, are frequently likened to little savages. To both types, simplicity, instinctive goodness and seclusion from evil influences are common. "We may at least say, then, that the Noble Savage gives something to the child of nature, and that the child of nature gives something to the Noble Savage."[17]

The savage, the peasant, and the child were all introduced as examples of the good of a purer realm. This something higher is best reached by lying close to the heart of nature in the wigwam, the sheephold or the cradle--so close in Wordsworth that the happy savage or dalesman or child "feels the divine impulse which sets the heart of nature throbbing with love and beauty."[18]

But like many other romantic writers, Wordsworth drew both from tradition and from travelers' narratives information which he found in agreement with his beliefs in the benefits of a natural life. In "A Morning Exercise" he mentions "naked Indians," and cites in a footnote Waterton's

---

[17] Fairchild, The Noble Savage, p. 385.

[18] Fairchild, The Romantic Quest, p. 164.

Wanderings in South America. In the Excursion, certain mountain plants are compared to "Indian mats."[19] And in the poem "To a Young Lady," he says that

> an old age serene and bright,
> And lovely as a Lapland night,
> Shall lead thee to thy grave.[20]

Most of his illustrations were gathered from sources nearer at hand, but he recognized to some extent the value of more exotic evidence. "When the fervor of his naturalism chilled, he yet retained a saddened longing for simplicity and occasionally thought of the savage as an example of the mind's lost innocence."[21]

---

19 Fairchild, The Noble Savage, p. 190.

20 Lines 16-18.

21 Ibid., p. 191.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

There can be no doubt that Wordsworth was a philosophical poet. There are many parts to his philosophy, many of them at times at variance with other parts. And, although I do not believe that Wordsworth would ever have considered his poetry primitivistic, there are many ideas present in his poetry, especially in the early period, that smack of primitivism.

"Primitivism is the exaltation of a state of life in which man depends on his natural powers exerted in a simple society and an uncomplicated environment, rather than on a high degree of training and on an environment greatly modified by civilization. Primitivism thus presupposes some form of the theory of man's natural goodness, whether this be taken to reside in instinct, common sense, spontaneous feeling, or in some or all of these."[1]

"Wordsworth held the romantic faith that in spontaneous feeling the essential qualities of man were revealed."[2] He shared the eighteenth-century tendency to regard sensibility as an evidence of virtue. His praise of Shaftesbury is characteristic of this attitude. His preoccupa-

---

[1] A. D. Mc Killop, English Literature from Dryden to Burns, p. 361.

[2] Powell, op. cit., p. 149.

tion with emotions inspired by and sometimes identified with natural beauty, his cultivation of the rapture and enthusiasm of the nature-lover, is a less stilted and formalized edition of Shaftesbury. Both Wordsworth and Shaftesbury would agree that inspiration is a real feeling of the divine presence and that this presence is most readily felt in the "retired places" of Nature. "And Wordsworth's faith in human nature is at least partially founded upon the belief, which he holds throughout his greatest period, that human impulses are trustworthy, if only they are enlightened so that the full consequences of their realization are manifest to the agent who entertains them."[3] He firmly believed in man's natural goodness.

And yet it is perfectly clear in many of Wordsworth's poems that he does not believe that the modern man is being "natural." Political and social conditions of England disturbed him a great deal. He was against the commercializing, materializing tendency of his day. He felt that a shadow calling itself "good sense" had chased away sensibility, and he lamented this.[4] The Lyrical Ballads have this philosophical undercurrent. "It is now admitted that they hold a protest against the out-and-out rationalism of the day, and more particularly against the form it had assumed

---

[3] Stallknecht, Strange Seas of Thought, p.11.

[4] See Ch. II, pamphlet on The Convention of Cintra.

in Godwin's Political Justice."[5] That many poems of the collection are so directed can scarcely be questioned, and this protest was and remains the chief inner novelty of the book. "Guilt and Sorrow" was a distinctively morbid attack on the whole social order, and especially against the criminal law and capital punishment. "The Female Vagrant," later incorporated into "Guilt and Sorrow," shows much of Wordsworth's reforming spirit with its fierce denunciation of war and warriors:

> That lap (their very nourishment!) their brother's the brood
> blood.[6]

or of the iniquitous distribution of wealth in society:

> And homeless near a thousand homes I stood,
> And near a thousand tables pined, and wanted
> food.[7]

More charity is to be found among robbers than among the rich:

> The wild brood saw me weep, my fate enquired,
> And gave me food, and rest, more welcome, more
> desired.[8]

"The Convict" is an onset against capital punishment. In

---

[5] Emile Legouis, "The Lyrical Ballads of 1798," Wordsworth and Coleridge: Studies in honor of George McLean Harper, p. 8.

[6] Cited in Emile Legouis, "The Lyrical Ballads of 1798," Wordsworth and Coleridge, p. 10.

[7] Ibid.

[8] XLV, 404-405.

a less tragic way several other poems censure the harshness of the social law or the lack among men of feeling for their fellow man. Goody Blake can make no fire in the coldest winter unless she steals sticks from the hedge of her hard-hearted neighbor Harry Gill. Poor Martha Ray, about to become a mother, is forsaken by Stephen Hill; she kills her baby and becomes half-witted. In "The Last of the Flock" we are asked to pity a father of ten reduced by poverty to sellall his sheep one by one.[9]

Even in poems dedicated to nature, Wordsworth hints at the deplorable condition of society. In "Lines Written in Early Spring," he contrasts the happiness and beauty of a grove with what "man has made of man." In "Tintern Abbey," his thoughts occasionally turn from the harmony of nature to listen "to the still sad music of humanity," and he counts among the evils of this world "the sneers of selfish men" and "greetings where no kindness is." To me, these are all examples of chronological primitivism.

The impulse underlying primitivism is either the desire to escape from a corrupt and sophisticated society, or the desire to reform such an existing civilization by bringing it into conformity with an ideal of virtuous simplicity. It seems to me that Wordsworth did both. He did not want to stay in London, where he was constantly amazed at the

---

[9] Emile Legouis, "The Lyrical Ballads of 1798," Wordsworth and Coleridge, p. 10.

vice and corruption which he saw there. And he escaped such sophisticated society not only in his own life but in the life he wrote about. Instead of the "getting and spending," the laying waste of all life to the attainment of a distant purpose, the savour is in the "mere living":

> my blood appeared to flow
> From its own pleasure.[10]

It is this joy in the sheer act of living which Wordsworth chiefly loves in Nature. His heroes are the hare who runs races in her mirth, the kitten playing with the falling leaves, birds, "whom for the very sake of love we love," and the Idiot Boy, "with his power of unadulterated joy without forethought or after-thought."[11] From such associates there comes to him "a happy genial influence," and a freedom for his natural impulses of love, and escape from the anxieties and ambitions of comples social life and

> the fear that kills;
> And hope that is unwilling to be fed.[12]

Yet he is forever conscious that good men, the genuine "wealth of nations," are not easy to find:

> I could not but inquire,
> Not with less interest than heretofore,
> But greater, though in spirit more subdued,
> Why is this glorious Creature to be found
> One only in ten thousand?[13]

---

[10] The Prelude, ii, 187.

[11] Powell, op. cit., p. 133.

[12] "Resolution and Independence."

[13] The Prelude, xii, A 87-91.

He felt that if this good man was to be found any where on earth he was to be found in the man close to nature:

> --Let good men feel the soul of nature
> And see things as they are.[14]

and

> For lowly shepherd's life is best![15]

for this man

> has a true relish of simplicity, and therefore stands the best chance of being happy; at least, without it there is no happiness, because there can be no true sense of the bounty and beauty of the creation, or insight into the constitution of the human mind.[16]

"Wordsworth's ideal woman was not a social butterfly, or a social leader, or a masterful clubwoman, or a political campaigner, or a clinging vine, or a useless angel; but an incarnation of spirituality, benignity, sympathy, home-bred sense, foresight, and patience."[17] His ideal man "not a dull-witted sportsman or a hustling business-man, or a roystering adventurer, or an ambitious seeker after fame, or a blase worldling, or a milksop, or a self-righteous reformer of others; but a generous spirit, devout, gentle compassionate, studious and thoughtful, firm in char-

---

[14] "Peter Bell," Part Third, 29-30.

[15] "Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle," 86.

[16] Letter to George Beaumont Oct., 1905; The Early Letters of Wm. and Dorothy Wordsworth, ed. by de Selincourt, p. 525.

[17] E. Bernbaum, A Guide Through the Romantic Movement, p. 145.

acter and of high purpose, self-forgetful, and ambitious only to help good prevail."[18] In both men and women, Wordsworth thought, a virtue even nobler than compassion was fortitude, i.e., the courageous and uncomplaining endurance of the toils, trials, and adversities inevitable in human existence.

Nature had a benign influence on such people:

> And grossly that man errs, who should suppose
> That the green valleys, and the streams and rocks,
> Were things indifferent to the Shepherd's thoughts. .
> . . . . . .
> Those fields, those hills--what could they less? had laid
> Strong hold of his affections, were to him
> A pleasurable feeling of blind love,
> The pleasure which there is in life itself.[19]

There can be little doubt that this enthusiasm which Wordsworth has for rural scenes and simple folk is a primitivistic and sentimental conception of nature.

The same is true of his treatment of idiots and crazy people. In them he sees a faculty of intensive feeling, of instinctive insight, moral good. There is a deep element of love and essential feelings. He even suggests that there exists perhaps in such people an inner fountain of Divine Wisdom and that "their life is hidden with God." They possess the principle of life: they possess instinct. Is this not indeed primitivistic?

---

[18] Ibid.

[19] Lines 62-64; 74-77.

Also Wordsworth believes that the divine is inherent in the heart of a child, as is an intuitive sense of goodness and truth. The child is held up as an example of simple, if not divine, contentment. In 1802, Wordsworth wrote

> 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 in natural piety.

There are many poems in which he extols the sacredness and the divinity of childhood. Later, he broke this chain of natural piety, or reverence for the unspoiled instincts of childhood and youth. And yet even in "Ode to Duty," the poet cannot forget the innocent souls who by their birthright, their divine heritage of essential goodness, live "without reproach or blot, as the following stanza, which was later cancelled, shows:

> There are those who tread a blameless way
> In purity, and love, and truth,
> Though resting on no better stay
> Than on the genial sense of youth:
> Glad Hearts! without reproach or blot;
> Who do the right and know it not:
> May joy be theirs while life shall last
> And may a genial sense remain when Youth
> is past.[20]

He gave up or greatly modified the "genial faith, still rich in genial good," which guided his younger days. And yet

---

20 Cited in Harper, op. cit., II, p. 117.

He realized himself the loss which came with such a change in feeling:

> But yet I know, where'er I go,
> That there hath passed away a glory from the earth.[21]

Wordsworth is primitivistic in that he is opposed to progress to a certain extent. "Even in nature, it was the simple, the abiding, and the changeless for which he cared most deeply."[22] Nature's richest ministrations, he tells us, are found "chiefly where appear most obviously simplicity and power,"[23] not beauty. And in the earlier version, Michael, parting from his son at the sheepfold, said:

> let this sheep-fold be
> Thy anchor and thy shield; amid all fear
> And all temption, let it be to thee
> An emblem of the life thy Fathers lived.

Later, Wordsworth changed this to

> think of me, my Son,
> And of this moment.[24]

This was the Wordsworth who had lived to see

> A new and unforeseen creation rise
> From out the labours of a peaceful Land
> Wielding her potent enginery to frame
> And to produce, with appetite as keen
> As that of war, which rests not night or day,
> Industrious to destroy.[25]

---

21 "Intimations Ode," 17-19.

22 Sneath, op. cit., p. 42.

23 The Prelude, xii, 232.

24 "Michael," 406.

25 The Excursion, vii, 89-95.

Practically all of the elements had been utilized to bring about this change. The result, of course, had been to make England one of the greatest markets of the world, and a power to be respected and feared. But at what price? At the expense of the spoliation of Nature, and the bodily and moral welfare of the people. These are the fruits of the manufacturing spirit, and Wordsworth deplores them.

What hope rises from the new order of things? Wordsworth decided to look

> For present good in life's familiar face,
> And built thereon my hopes of good to come.[26]

One might also look to rustic peoples, for

> A few strong instincts and a few plain rules
> Among the hersdmen of the Alps, have wrought
> More for mankind at this unhappy day
> Than all the pride of intellect and thought.[27]

And Wordsworth tries to cure the existing woes by refining the sense of pity and sympathy. Sensibility stands with him in the place of mere logic; his weapons are feeling and "the language of the sense." For he believes that

> 'T is Nature's law
> That none, the meanest of created things,
> Or forms created the most vile and brute,
> The dullest or most noxious, should exist
> Divorced from good--a spirit and pulse of good,
> A life and soul, to every mode of being
> Inseparably linked. Then be assured
> That least of all can aught--that ever owned
> The heaven-regarding eye and front sublime
> Which man is born to--sink, howe'er depressed,

---

[26] The Prelude, xii, 62-63.

[27] "Alas! What Boots the Long Laborious Quest," 11-14.

So low as to be scorned without a sin;[28]

The essential universality of goodness is affirmed. But he never gets away from the fact that man may be found at his best where his life is most simple--where the conventionalities, customs, and institutions of society have not rendered it artificial and complex. Among rural folk we may find human nature in its essential, universal, elemental life, better than anywhere.

> Nowhere (or is it fancy?) can be found
> The one sensation that is here; 't is here,
> Here as it found its way into my heart
> In childhood, here as it abides by day,
> night, here only; or in chosen minds
> That take it with them hence, where'er they go.
> --'T is, but I cannot name it, 't is the sense
> Of majesty, and beauty, and repose,
> A blended holiness of earth and sky,
> Something that makes this individual spot,
> This small abiding-place of many men,
> A termination, and a last retreat,
> A centre, come from wheresoe'er you will,
> A whole without dependence or defect,
> Made for itself, and happy in itself,
> Perfect contentment, Unity entire.[29]

"And here, despite all of the mental, moral, and spiritual infirmity disclosed, we find that fundamentally our humanity has worth."[30] The inner nature is good; and Man's potentialities are such that, under proper conditions, they will unfold to his credit, and he will achieve a worthy destiny under God.

---

[28] "The Old Cumberland Beggar," 73-84.

[29] The Recluse, 136-151.

[30] Sneath, op. cit., p. 304.

Thus in Wordsworth

> We have traced the stream
> From the blind cavern whence is faintly heard
> Its natal murmur; followed it to light
> And open day; accompanied its course
> Among the ways of Nature, for a time
> Lost sight of it bewildered and engulphed;
> Then given it greeting as it rose once more
> In strength, reflecting from its placid breast
> The works of man and face of human life;
> And lastly, from its progress have we drawn
> Faith in life endless, the sustaining thought
> Of human Being, Eternity, and God.[31]

The glow from this enthusiasm kindled the flame of "an idealism which varied much in its expression and even seemed to belie itself in belying its first forms, before it declined with age. But it was never completely extinguished, preserving as it did until the end a radiating power that was still effective."[32] And because the spirit of Nature is the divine spirit, Wordsworth cares about the common life of her several creatures. The goodness of the life of the senses is a vital element. Whether it is known in the happy natural life of flowers, beasts, unsophisticated people, those devoid of all intellectual light, children, or in its power to paint in precious detail for mankind the aspirations of the soul to majesty, its vivid joy is what keeps Wordsworth's philosophy alive. "As its glory passes from the earth, his poetry fades into anybody's moralizing."[33]

---

[32] Legouis and Cazamian, History of English Literature, p. 1035.

[33] Powell, op. cit., p. 132.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Wordsworth's Works

Complete Poetical Works of Wordsworth, ed. by A. J. George, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1932.

The Prelude, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt. London: Oxford University Press, 1926.

Lyrical Ballads, a reprint, ed. by H. Littledale. London: Oxford University Press, 1911.

Prose Works, ed. by W. A. Knight. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1896.

The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1935.

Biography, Criticism, and Background

Babbitt, Irving. Rousseau and Romanticism. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919.

---------- "The Primitivism of Wordsworth," Bookman (U. S. A.), LXXIV, pp. 1-10.

Babenroth, A. C. English Childhood. New York: Columbia University Press, 1922.

Banerje, Srikumar. Critical Theories and Poetic Practice in the Lyrical Ballads. London: Williams and Norgate, 1931.

Baugh, A. C.,et al. A Literary History of England. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1948.

Beach, Joseph Warren. "Reason and Nature in Wordsworth," Journal of the History of Ideas, I, pp. 335-351.

---------- The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry. New York: Macmillan Co., 1936.

Beatty, Arthur. William Wordsworth: His Doctrine and Art in Their Historical Relations. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1927.

Bernbaum, Ernest. Guide Through the Romantic Movement. New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1930.

Blunden, Edmund. Nature in English Literature. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1929.

Burton, Mary E. The One Wordsworth. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942.

Charpentier, John..Rousseau, the Child of Nature. New York, The Dial Press, 1931.

Cooper, Lane. "A Glance at Wordsworth's Reading," Methods and Aims in the Study of Literature. Boston: Ginn and Co., 1915.

De Selincourt, Ernest. Wordsworthian and other Studies. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1947.

Elwin, Malcolm. The First Romantics. London: Macdonald and Co., 1947.

Fairchild, H. N. The Noble Savage. New York: Columbia University Press, 1928.

---------- The Romantic Quest. New York: Columbia University Press, 1931.

Fitzgerald, M. M. First Follow Nature: Primitivism in English Poetry 1725-1750. New York: King's Crown Press, 1947.

Garrod, H. W. Wordsworth. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1927.

Gingerich, S. F. Essays in the Romantic Poets. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1924.

Grierson, H. H. C. and Smith, J. C. A Critical History of English Poetry. London: Chatto and Windus, 1947.

Griggs, E. L., ed. Wordsworth and Coleridge: Studies in Honor of George McLean Harper. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939.

Harper, G. M. William Wordsworth: His Life, Works, and Influences. 2 vols. New York: Scribner, 1916.

Havens, R. D. The Mind of a Poet. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1941.

Hood, E. P. William Wordsworth. London: W. and G. F. Cash, 1865.

Josephson, Matthew. Jean-Jacques Rousseau. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1931.

Legouis, Emile and Cazamian, Louis. A History of English Literature. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1929.

Legouis, Emile. The Early Life of William Wordsworth. Trans. by J. M. Matthews. London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1921.

---------- "William Wordsworth," The Cambridge History of English Literature, XI, pp. 103-128.

Lovejoy, A. O. and Boas, George. A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas, Vol. I. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1935.

Lovejoy, A. O. "Optimism and Romanticism," Publications of the Modern Language Association, XLII (1927), pp. 921-945.

---------- "Morboddo and Rousseau," Modern Philology, XXX (1933), pp. 275-296.

---------- "The Supposed Primitivism of Rousseau's Discours sur l'Inegalite," Modern Philology, XXI (1925), pp. 165-186.

McKillop, A. D. English Literature from Dryden to Burns. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1948.

Myers, F. W. H. Wordsworth. London: The Macmillan Co., 1929.

Oeuvres Completes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ed. by V. D. Musset-Pathay. Paris: P. Dupont Co., 1824.

Powell, A. E. The Romantic Theory of Poetry. New York: Longsmans, 1926.

Rader, M. R. The Presiding Ideas in Wordsworth's Poetry. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1931.

Raleigh, W. A. Wordsworth. New York: Longsmans, 1921.

Read, Herbert. Wordsworth. London: Cape, 1930.

Smith, Elsie. An Estimate of William Wordsworth. London: Oxford University Press, 1932.

Sneath, E. H. Wordsworth: Poet of Nature and Poet of Man. Boston: Ginn and Co., 1912.

Strong, A. T. Three Studies in Shelley and an Essay on Nature in Wordsworth and Meredith. London: Oxford University Press, 1921.

Symons, Arthur. The Romantic Movement in English Poetry. New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1909.

Warner, J. H. "The Reaction in England to Rousseau's Two 'Discours'," Publications of the Modern Language Association, XLVIII (1933), pp. 471-487.

Whitney, Lois. Primitivism and the Idea of Progress in English Popular Literature of the Eighteenth Century. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1934.

Winchester, C. T. William Wordsworth: How to Know Him. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1916.

Wordsworth, Dorothy. Journals, ed. by W. A. Knight, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1924.

Wright, Ernest H. The Meaning of Rousseau. London: Oxford University Press, 1929.