William Wordsworth –Philosophical Poems

"Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey […] July 13, 1798"

[…]

These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,
As have no slight or trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts
Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

If this
Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft—
In darkness and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart—
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!

[…]

(1798)

Tintern Abbey is a deserted monastery specially admired as a scenic ruin on the River Wye in Cumberland

'*Tranquil restoration*': the idea that memories and thoughts of Nature can 'restore' tranquillity and give us back the happiness of childhood while also influencing our moral deeds as adults and informing our life with a sympathy for all living beings is fundamental to the Romantic Movement in poetry and here Wordsworth expresses it in verse. (See Verse Notes, infra.)

'*beauteous forms*': Wordsworth is referring to the scenes of nature in his childhood, memories of which have stayed in mind. The poem develops the idea that such memories have a permanently moral and intellectual effect on us, guiding us to good actions and also to an appreciation of what he calls 'the life of things'. Probably the biggest test set by the poem is to understand fully what he means by that phrase and to decide if 'the life of things' has any real meaning for us today at all! An ecologist might say "yes" …

Wordsworth has the idea that the influence of nature passes 'in[to] the blood and thence to the heart and brain. This is therefore a kind of alternative anatomy, complementing the scientific discoveries of the previous century. (The circulation of the blood was discovered by Harvey in 1628 and became the bedrock of modern medicine.) Wordsworth's poem argues that Nature is both a moral and a physical force. Do you agree?

Bradford (2010) and other critics tell us that Wordsworth is using Milton's system of blank verse here – the favourite form of Elizabethan playwrights – in order to express philosophical ideas while supplying imagery of the kind that characterises lyric poetry. The trick is that his senteences tend to run on from line to line where we might expect the idea to end at the close of each. In this way he sets up a tension between the strictures of the verse form and the more elaborate pattern of intellectual prose. This kind of reflective poetry was rarely written after Wordsworth—as though he had exhausted its potential. His "Ode on Intimations of Immorality is an alternative way of conduction philosophical poetry. Which do you prefer and why?

Wordsworth's most famous philosophical disquisition is written in unrhymed iambic pentameters—the so-called 'blank verse' of Elizabethan drama and perhaps the most serviceable vehicles for meditative writing among English poetic forms. (After all, it is the metre of Hamlet and Macbeth.) Here he allows the ideas to build and flow in much the same way as Milton does in *Paradise Lost* yet the overall feeling is conversational in the manner ioneered by Coleridge ("This limetree my bower") and practice by other English Romantic poets after him. In spite of the absence of rhymes, it isn't easy poetry to translate. To test this, try translating one of the three sentences of the extract—whether 'These beauteous forms …', or 'Nor less, I trust ….', or else 'If this / Be but a vain belief …' Tricky? Well, I don't have to tell you that?

"Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood"

[…T]he babe leaps up on his mother's arm:—
I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!
—But there's a tree, of many, one,
A single field which I have look'd upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?
[…]
Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

[…]
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!

[…]
Then sing, ye birds, sing, sing a joyous song!
And let the young lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound!
We in thought will join your throng,
Ye that pipe and ye that play,
Ye that through your hearts to-day
Feel the gladness of the May!
What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.
[…]
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day
Is lovely yet;

The clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

(1802-04; pub. 1807.)

SOME QUESTIONS—

Wordsworth here expresses a theory of human birth and growth which carries him ever further away from childhood into a time before birth when we are part of something else. Is this a serious belief and do you share it?

Wordsworth wrote this ode as a young man—22 years of age when he started it—yet it sounds like the thoughts of an old man. Is this a strength or weakness in the poem?

Where Wordsworth speaks of 'years the bring the philosophical mind', do you think he is identifying a real quality of experience and, if so, how does it compare with the mentality of childhood?

Does the poem persuade you to share his theory of 'immortality'? Do you have similar thoughts, feelings, and insights, and what are their effects on your moral ideas or your conduct?

If you dislike any of the terms or phrases in this note, please say why.