

Wordsworth's Spots of Time

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CHARACTERISTICALLY Wordsworth describes the virtue of the spots of time in Book xi of *The Prelude*¹ as that of 'visitings of imaginative power'. That is, the power functions mysteriously, and comes and goes in obedience to unknown laws. The context is that of recovery. In xi he has once again returned to his fall from what he described in x as 'the exactness of a comprehensive mind' to the spurious exactness of dissection. Divided, he warred within himself, rejecting the great society or family with which in elevation or ecstasy he had identified himself, and looking towards a new Man 'parted as by a gulph From him who had been'. How important this fall was to Wordsworth is clear from the frequency with which he returns to it. Originally Book xi began with it, and he found it necessary to preface the opening recapitulation of near disaster by forty lines celebrating the recovery. A key word in xi is 'passion', which the Essay Supplementary to the Preface of 1815 speaks of in terms of action and effort. It is the 'mysteries of passion' (xi.84) to which he is returning, and under the stress of recollection of division, and conviction of the mysteries of human passion, he carries the restoring concept of the one great society of x.968-70 even further, to a

brotherhood of all the human race
Through all the habitations of past years
And those to come. (xi.88-90)

These mysteries of passion indicate the real context of the spots of time in xi. It is not for nothing that the wind blows so strongly in those spots, as it did not blow in other and comparable passages: he urgently needed their renovating strength if he was to recover from the self-murdering dissection which had overtaken

¹ References are to the 1805 text throughout.

him. Of course all such spots throughout the poem have in the end the same function of restoration. In the first two books they aid his recovery from the strain of an ambition which has become perverted, and the cure for which is *The Prelude* itself. The difference in XI is that the need, within this narrative of restoration, is more immediately urgent. The spots of Books I, II, V, and XI are to be found in MSS U and V.¹ And if we examine them in this context the difference between the XI spots and the others becomes obvious. For one thing, that element of stillness common to many of these episodes is absent from the XI spots. The bird-snaring episode is marked by silence hardly broken by the sounds of indistinguishable motion; his rowing words echoes across the placid lake in the boat-stealing episode; there is the more than inland peace of the Saint Mary's Abbey passage, where the sea wind passes overhead, the twilight calm snapped by leaping fish in the episode of the drowned man of Book V, and the calm of the Winander Boy episode, which belongs roughly to the same period. The wind of the XI spots hardly appears. In fact, if we except the related general statement of II.321-41, where both poles of storm and calm necessarily appear, it is only in the episode of the plundering of the raven's nest that the wind is of any importance. And there is little in the other episodes of those clearly defined characters which play so great a part in the XI spots. There may be something of this in the ear-shaped peninsulas of the episode of the drowned man. There too death occurs (in a startling enough form, without any of the hallowing and ideal grace added when the passage was worked into Book V) as it occurs in the XI spots, and not in the others. This passage is something of an exception, and in the early MSS it immediately precedes the XI spots. There are, of course, other elements in the episodes worked into XI which are hardly present in the related passages in the other books. In the first episode in XI the five-year-old horseman mounts with proud hopes; he is imitating the adult, and he is exposed to adult superstition and the fear of death. In the second spot the boy enters the adult world of death and the knowledge of the precariousness of hopes. With the exception of the Book V episode, nothing of this appears in the

¹ *The Prelude*, eds E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, Oxford, 1959, p. xxviii.

other spots. Nor does the loss of the guide and protector which is at the heart of both episodes in XI.

Wordsworth's final expression of the experience of the first episode in XI is as good a place as any other to begin an analysis of this passage.

It was, in truth,
An ordinary sight; but I should need
Colours and words that are unknown to man
To paint the visionary dreariness . . .

(XI.308-11)

The first thing to understand about 'visionary dreariness' is that it is not 'dreary vision'. It is a phrase of peculiar authority, in which each word invades the other. It is perhaps typical of Wordsworth that in the act of saying that no human language can convey it he should come near achieving it in words whose immediate task is only to indicate what it is that cannot be described. There is little point in speaking of it as something opposed to the reassuring world in which the child has lived: a child's world is not always reassuring. But the dreariness in part arises from the sudden recognition of alien proportions, and the vision is of something so alien that the distinctions between human and non-human almost disappear. The pitcher-bearing girl is so reduced as to make Pool, Beacon, and Woman bear almost equal parts in the child's vision. (In the 1850 text 'Woman' becomes 'female': the equivocal use of the capital was no longer available to Wordsworth, and he was obliged to translate.) More intense, and more clearly localized, this represents a further stage than the huge and mighty forms that do not live like living men, and it is utterly opposed to those later transports of the outward sense recalled two hundred lines earlier in Book XI.

The characters in the turf are a writing where it should not be, mysteriously maintained: a meaning, somewhere between the human and the non-human, in the middle of a wilderness. From another reading we learn that they are 'far-famed':¹ the child has heard them spoken of, and now, lost and alone, finds himself before them. In the 1850 text, incidentally, the insistence on fear blurs the bareness of the early text, which was consistent with the

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

child's vision of something not to be understood. (It is not so far from what is behind the aim of VI.493-4: 'The circumstances I will here relate Even as they were.')

Faltering, and ignorant where I was, at length
 I chanced to espy those characters inscribed
 On the green sod: forthwith I left the spot . . .
 (XI.300-2)

becomes

A casual glance had shown them, and I fled,
 Faltering and faint, and ignorant of the road
 (XII.246-7: 1850)

'Faltering' in the early text is in the context of 'ignorant', suggesting hesitation rather than fear or faintness. The 1850 text dramatizes, and at a cost. The only fear explicitly stated in the early text is that which he feels when he is separated from honest James, and the curiously neutral 'forthwith' is consistent with an important effect of the language. For the present it is enough to note that in the early text there is an effect of events succeeding each other without much comment, in accordance with a policy of allowing the event to make itself explicit, until the final statement. It is in keeping with the uncanny attributes of these characters that they should be renewed from year to year: superstition does what it believes might be magically performed. Geoffrey Hartman has pointed out the translation of the first set of characters into the second: those of the Pool, the Beacon, and the Woman.¹ The language conveys this clearly enough:

At length
 I chanced to espy those characters inscribed
 On the green sod: forthwith I left the spot
 And, reascending the bare Common, saw
 A naked Pool that lay beneath the hills . . .
 (XI.300-4)

One of the effects of 'saw', coming where it does, is once again that of an odd neutrality. It seems almost a natural consequence of 'chanced to espy'; it creates a blank, in which 'chanced to espy' continues. Following 'and' (changed to a separating 'then' in the 1850 text) it seems to confirm the Pool, the Beacon, and the

¹ Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814*, New Haven and London, 1964, pp. 216-17.

Woman in the context already established by the written characters.

The written characters lie in the hollow, the others are of openness and the heights. Conditioned by the first, they come as a kind of revelation. The first characters have operated through secrecy and fear; the second characters are an enforced reading of what he sees when he makes his escape. The desolation and the mystery extend themselves. The child is looking for the guide he has lost and in the act of looking has seen something else. The process is familiar, and it will be repeated, over a longer period of time and with more deliberate reflection, in the second episode in xi. 'Look', of course, suggests both the conscious mind and what he has called in 188 and 272 the outward sense, which, in certain passages of life, we know to be only the servant of the mind. And the blankness or apparent lack of urgency of 'saw' in line 303 is not the whole truth. In spite of the effect on this word of the deliberately ordered sequence which follows it, which contributes to this neutrality, it has its own urgency. The distinction is that between a conscious and limited looking out for, and an unexpected receiving, and in that sense 'saw' looks before and after. He chances now to see, or to receive. The language in which this is finally conveyed goes beyond the act of seeing. 'It was, in truth, An ordinary sight' is the voice of the adult who recalls the experience. But the reflux of lines 309-16 (the culmination of this episode) opposes to 'look'd all round', not 'saw' or 'sight', but the investing of those characters by visionary dreaminess: a process out of his control, a visiting of power, the impersonality of which seems to have begun with 'saw'.

The invocation of these two episodes confirms the restoration to which the eleventh book is dedicated. The original context of the episodes becomes clearer when we understand that Wordsworth, rehandling them for xi, is influenced by two other related passages. The diviner radiance shed by those remembrances goes back to

tragic facts

Of rural history that impressed my mind
With images to which in following years
Far other feelings were attached

from the early version of the drowned man passage of Book v. And the very accents of the strength described in the passage later to appear in II ('the soul, Remembering how she felt, but what she felt Remembering not') are in the famous lines

So feeling comes in aid
Of feeling, and diversity of strength
Attends us, if but once we have been strong.
Oh! mystery of Man, from what a depth
Proceed thy honours! I am lost . . .

Diversity of strength attends him now as he writes. As the experience of the man in love was strengthened by the very different experience of the child, so now the two together strengthen that mystery of Man hinted at in those unifying mysteries of passion in 84-90. 'I am lost' is a further effect of strength, a startling proof of this diversity. It is not only a restatement of the theme of the lost child, with so much of what that implies here: by a paradox common enough in Wordsworth, it represents an immediate apprehension. Such is the force of the mystery that the thinking 'I' is momentarily lost. It is a kind of *admiratio*, the only possible mode of apprehension of such mystery.¹ As such, it is at the heart of this brilliant and uneven book. But if 'I am lost' has sometimes been misunderstood, the lines which follow — the closing of the hiding-places of his power and the seeing by glimpses — have often received a false emphasis. Without the Intimations Ode we might be less ready to particularize the failure. Is it reasonable to expect that the hiding-places of such power will open? That they even seem to open is surely one of the last effects of such power. So far from being an open admission of defeat, the passage breathes such conviction of man's greatness that he can hardly do other than pass over his own failing powers. There is far more of exultation in these short periods than there is of failure: the statement of failure is less dramatically sudden than incidental.

Then, with an almost apologetic comment, Wordsworth passes to the second episode, which is also the last of such episodes of childhood in *The Prelude*. Fittingly it is also the most

¹ See Donald Davie's discussion of *admiratio* and its importance for an understanding of *Lyrical Ballads*, in 'Dionysus in *Lyrical Ballads*', *Wordsworth's Mind and Art* (ed. A. W. Thomson), Edinburgh, 1969, p. 134.

comprehensive, operating through themes and processes we have observed before: death, and the loss of a guide; character or figure at its bleakest; the looking, and the seeing; and finally, a kind of understanding which has only been hinted at in earlier episodes. Perhaps the essential meaning of this episode is in the movement from the sheep and hawthorn as they appear before the death of the boy's father to their stark reality after it.

Upon my right hand was a single sheep,
A whistling hawthorn on my left, and there,
With those Companions at my side, I watch'd . . .

(XI.359-61)

The singleness and the bleakness are there, but the grouping, marked by the chiasmus of 359-60, is speciously formal, and the tree and sheep are promoted to the state of Companions of his watch. Then with the understanding of what had been prepared, the companionship is gone: instead appear

The single sheep, and the one blasted tree

— forms naked and alone, embodying the bleakness of a reality not grasped before. But the companions have not simply become naked characters of desolation: this is not the visionary dreariness of the first spot, any more than it is Yeats's desolation of reality. There seem to be two stages in the understanding. The first is that of the event received as a chastisement. Though the boy's reflections of morality are trite, it is in the deepest passion (again that most significant word) that he bows to God's correction. The second stage is that of the real expression. As before, something has been looked for, and something else seen, though this time in retrospect. The difference is in the understanding of what has been seen, and with this comes that exultation which is so marked in this episode. Deep feeling now returns upon the scene, and turns it to the business of the elements. With 'And afterwards' the voice seems to deepen with the exultation of this knowledge. What is revealed is quite different from the security of human hope and expectation: a world of other and intensely active forces. The phrase 'the business of the elements' has roughly the same importance in this episode as 'visionary dreariness' had in the first episode. But the investing of visionary dreariness is not the revelation of 'business'. Intimate, yet in its

context distant, the word conveys an understanding that is almost participation. The scene of which the boy had been the centre and the meaning is broken down, translated into the constituents of something wholly different. The exultation in the action and the indifference of forces suddenly revealed, and in his own significance, is the real voice of the morality whose direct statement was only in triteness.

The conclusion¹ is in

the mist
Which on the line of each of those two Roads
Advanced in such indisputable shapes . . .

As de Selincourt pointed out, this echoes Hamlet's 'Thou comst in such a questionable shape'.¹ 'Indisputable', however, has its own meaning. Perhaps the mist that advanced along the roads was not to be mistaken for what he was expecting. But the real distinction is as before: that between the sheep and the tree as companions, and the sheep and the tree as themselves, and so as characters of deep meaning. The mist in retrospect advances and declares itself. That is to say, things as they are, and as they are sometimes seen to be. It is in this, after so much division and abstraction, that the mystery and the power are found.

¹ I prefer this to the 'camst' in the de Selincourt edition of 1926, p. 596, and the de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire edition of 1959, p. 615.

To My Little Daughter

Her doodling
on the fly-page of my scrap book
flows free into
occult signs of some prenatal visions,
soon to ossify into
rows of steel-edged words,
punctured by stops and dashes,
Clashing and clanging
for the meaning
that is not there.

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