

THE FAILURE
OF
WORDSWORTH'S MYSTICISM

by

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C H A P T E R I

INTRODUCTION

The gropings of the human mind are ever upward towards the only source that can completely satisfy the intellect of men. To a mind guided by faith and illumined by grace the ascent is possible of attainment, and must be begun here on earth, at least in an imperfect way, if we are to see God face to face in heaven. Left to its own resources, the human mind is weak and fallible, and no matter how ardent the quest and sincere the effort, the attaining of even a vague and diffuse knowledge of God is a matter of much uncertainty.

William Wordsworth offers an interesting illustration of an attempt on the part of a sensitive and refined nature to penetrate to the mystery of God by a contemplation of the visible effects of God. To see what measure of success he achieved is the purpose of this study. Through a consideration of the means used by the great Christian saints and the blessed by centuries of Catholic usage we shall be able to evaluate accurately the success of Wordsworth's earnest efforts. If success marked his quest, his method should be appraised most critically and made available for others, for certainly to-day men are far from Reality, and they need the assistance of every discoverable means of reaching the end for which they were created. On the other hand, if his method failed of achievement, that fact must be noted lest it serve as a snare and deception for other souls in their quest for God. Since Wordsworth was perhaps the most self-revealing of all poets, his writings should furnish an adequate basis for judgment.

That Wordsworth thought he was successful in his quest we shall show later. That others too have considered him as a gifted and penetrating seer is apparent from even a casual examination of the literary criticism of his poetry. Several reasons may be advanced for the errors of those who described Wordsworth as a mystic who reached the same heights through a contemplation of natural beauty as the saint reached through prayer. With some, a blind admiration for the poet led them to ascribe too much to his efforts. With others, an inadequate notion of the limitations of the human mind and a false notion of God as a transcendent Being led them, even as it led Wordsworth, into the illusion that he enjoyed an intimate communion with Highest Truth.

In justice to many critics who have called Wordsworth a mystic (in a true and religious sense) and failed to qualify the term, it may be stated that had they the fruits of modern scholarship at hand they might have avoided the error. The edition of "The Prelude" as it was first written, and a comparison with the later revisions made in the text, edited by Professor Ernest de Selincourt, and published by the Clarendon Press in 1926, throws a new light on the current idiom of Wordsworth's thought. It was the traditional view to interpret all of Wordsworth's poetry in the light of his later orthodoxy, and to assume that when he spoke of his highest flights, as in "Tintern Abbey", that he held the same essential religious beliefs and the same idea of God as when he wrote the "Ecclesiastical Sonnets" years later. As we shall show, Wordsworth's philosophy of his great nature period from 1793 to 1805 underwent a vast transformation before it settled into an orthodox and Christian channel in his mature years. Inevitably then, many writers were led to assume that Wordsworth was always the same person intellectually before the original 'Prelude' was

edited. This valuable contribution to scholarship shows the modifications Wordsworth made in his philosophy.

It is not a question here of setting out to prove that Wordsworth did not enjoy the sustained heights of rapture and intimate union with God that the greatest saints attained. The unitive way in which the soul is habitually under the influence of the gifts of the Holy Ghost was never claimed by the poet, nor by others for him. Yet if Wordsworth ever did attain to a direct and immediate contact with God even for a moment, he did so through the assistance of Divine grace, and not through his own unaided powers as we shall show in discussing the nature of such a union. It would be false to dismiss Wordsworth's claims to a direct and intuitive knowledge of God on the grounds that he was not a great saint. Under the influence of God's generous graces a man might be lifted to the loftiest heights of the intuition of God, even though at the time he hold no theological faith. Professor Maritain makes this point in treating of the mystical experiences of some of the Oriental schools,¹ and the same case seems to prevail with Wordsworth. During his period of naturalistic thought, for example, when some of his most penetrating passages were written, such a grace from God would have been necessary.

Among the writers who thought that Wordsworth penetrated to an intimate and direct union with God through his contemplation of Nature, a representative group only will be mentioned here. Among the literary critics may be found: F. W. Meyers in his work called Wordsworth,² written in 1887;

¹ J. Maritain, The Degrees of Knowledge (Scribner's N.Y., 1933) Page 336

² F. W. Meyers, Wordsworth (Harper & Brothers, N.Y., 1887) Page 131

H. W. Garrod in his Wordsworth ¹ of 1923; and O. J. Campbell in the essays on Wordsworth and Coleridge ² published in 1939.

I have selected these three for the significant reason that they represent a time range of over fifty years, and this illustrates the fact that the misconceptions were not confined to any one or to any short period of time.

Among the writers on Mysticism who have inadequately conceived the essentially supernatural nature of that science, two may be mentioned here: Dean Inge ³ in an introduction to an Anthology of Mystical Verse, and C. F. Spurgeon in Mysticism in English Literature ⁴. Neither of these writers is a Catholic and neither has any fixed and sure principles of classification. They both disregard the philosophical background of the so-called mystics they refer to, and are content merely with the verbal expression. What the poet may have believed at the time he wrote, what he reached and how he reached it were given slight consideration.

Now it is true that the word 'mystic' may admit of varied shades of meaning, but there must be some fundamental and essential underlying the word, otherwise it is useless. That there has been confusion of thought in applying the word to Wordsworth is apparent. Some critics it is true, use the word mystic in reference to Wordsworth in a particular poetic sense as indicating a special genre of poetry. Others quite obviously from the comparisons they make use the word in a purely religious sense as if

¹H.W. Garrod, Wordsworth (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1923) page 105.

²O. J. Campbell, Wordsworth and Coleridge (Princeton University Press, 1939) page 32.

³W. R. Inge, Lyrica Mystica (Macmillan, N.Y., 1932) Introduction

⁴C. F. Spurgeon, Mysticism in English Literature (Cambridge University Press, 1927) page 60.

they were discussing the attainments of St. John of the Cross. To throw light on this problem through a careful consideration of what the poet said, and the religious convictions he held when he said it, is the purpose of this thesis. Since the highest claims have been made for the poet, these must be evaluated in the light of the traditionally revealed methods of reaching a union with God. Having established the fact that Wordsworth did not reach any intimate union with the God of Christian revelation, we shall point out the success he did have, and the parallels with the true mystic experience that his method offers.

The purpose of this thesis, then, is the clarification of thought. Its limitations derive from the fact that we are dealing with the secret recesses of a poet's mind and heart, the key to which only God can turn. However, since Wordsworth was an avowed teacher, and since words are the expression of ideas, an honest and fair judgment of the poet's ideas can be gleaned from a critical and impartial weighing of his words.

C H A P T E R I I

MAN'S QUEST FOR GOD

At the outset, our purpose will be to establish a clear and accurate definition of mysticism based on the traditional and historical use of the term. This should not prove difficult, for testimony to mystical experience has been borne in the modern world and throughout all Christian centuries. The annals of old sanctity and the commentaries of expert theology constitute together an exceedingly large literature. In Eastern lands too, though it does not fall directly within the confines of this study, there is a vast and impressive testimony of the reality of this mode of knowing God. Yet I think that among the bulk of the recognized literate and thoughtful people of the modern world, there is still only a slight understanding, and much confused comment on this ancient and noble system. ¹

The terms 'mysticism' and 'mystical' are still used to characterize the dealings of 'occult science'. Hallucinations, illusions and vaguely expressed feelings are often honoured with these terms. Then too, simple statements of Divine faith and metaphysical speculations are over-rated or misunderstood by careless critics and casually styled Mystic. ² This wanton use of a term of historically exact connotation has done much to belittle and confuse. Words have an exact significance, and unless we cling to the precise implications of a term, our

¹ A. E. Waite, *Lamps of Western Mysticism*. (Alfred A. Knopf, New York) 1923. Page 240.

² *Lyrica Mystica, An Anthology of Mystical Verse*. (McMillan, New York) 1972. Introduction by Dean Inge.

criticisms of poets and artists is sterile and misleading. As we shall see, the word mysticism suggests the world-old science of the soul's immediate, intuitive, direct attainment of God, and any who apply the term to any conventional metaphysics or any branch of mental philosophy, to any reveries high or low, are no less mistaken, as Waite points out, than those who use it as a term of scorn.¹ Waite adds a significant statement: "I care nothing in this connection for the etymological significance of the word as denoting what is secret and withdrawn. It has come in the course of years to have one meaning only in the accurate use thereof, and we should abide by this for the sake of ordered thought--unless and until the keepers of mystical science shall agree between themselves on another and more definite term as an expression of the whole subject."² Margaret Smith makes the same plea for confining the term to its traditional implications.³

It is perhaps a truism to observe that we should always explain things in the lowest possible realm of knowledge. It amounts to an evasion of the question if we have recourse to faith to explain what is only a clearly reasoned truth; to invoke the calculus for a simple arithmetic solution is pure pedantry. So too in treating with poetry, we should not have recourse to super-nature if the poet's thought can be explained in purely natural terms. It is flattering neither to the poet nor to our own critical ability. Of course, it is an easy way

¹A. E. Waite, Op. Cit., Page 241.

²Ibid, Page 241.

³Margaret Smith, History of Mysticism (S.P.C.K. New York) Page 6.

to avoid the problems of research, but it can only be an expression of and contribution to muddled thought. I am sure that I can demonstrate the fact that many critics of Wordsworth, invoke the term mystical when there is no need whatever to look beyond the purely natural channels of thought to see what the poet was stating.

we have no right to set down a definition of our own and then new away all that does not conform to it; we must let the mystics - those favoured souls who have attained to the highest realities - speak for themselves. Not all of them have left us a clear, ordered exposition of their 'way to God'; nor did their mystic flights set them in a special mould. Some mystics were philosophers, such as Plotinus, Eckhart and St. John of the Cross; others were mystics of the cloister who detached themselves from the world, devoted themselves to uninterrupted prayer; others, as St. Bernard, spent themselves in ceaseless and fruitful activity.¹ Mysticism does not efface the human personality. The traits, tendencies and aptitudes that are native remain, purified and purged it is true, but basically the same.

No worthy contribution to these problems can be made unless we establish from the writings of the mystics themselves a concise, clear, working definition. Spurgeon, in her work, Mysticism in English Literature, after decrying the vagueness with which the term is used, goes on to say that, "mysticism is in truth a temper rather than a doctrine, an atmosphere

¹ W. R. Inge, Op. Cit. Introduction.

rather than a system or philosophy."¹ Such descriptions of this can but add to the confusion, for two more indefinite words than 'temper' and 'atmosphere' would be hard to find. This type of comment on mysticism is critical of those who are out of the Catholic tradition, and hence cannot or will not accept the reality.

The word mystic is one of those elastic terms which are always open to abuse, and, as De Wulf points out, are applied to anything: to character, to theories and even to politics. Some apply the word to whatever pertains of the unreal and whatever borders on the realms of reverie.² Garrigou-Lagrange indicates the problem when he says, "Some persons talk about mysticism, but misunderstand it and abuse it. These persons must be enlightened by the sound teaching of theology. Others, far more in number, are altogether ignorant of mysticism, and apparently wish to remain so."³

The mystical problem is not a question of comprehending God, but of perceiving His presence.⁴ With the idea of mysticism as the intuitive or experiential union of the divine,⁵ we can evaluate Wordsworth's writings and sort his claim to the classification of being, along with Blake one of the two mystics among the English poets.⁶

¹C. F. Spurgeon, *Mysticism in English Literature* (Cambridge) 1927, Page 2.

² Maurice De Wulf, *Mystic Life and Mystic Speculation in the Heart of the Middle Ages*. Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 3, Page 175.

³Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, Herder (London) 1937, Page 3.

⁴St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*, I, 1.50, 2.3. 'non cognatur de comprehensione comprehensionis sed visionis.'

⁵Albert Ferrer, *Mystical Phenomena* (Burns, Oates--London) 1936, Page 55.

⁶C. F. Spurgeon, *Op. Cit.* Page 40.

In arriving at the traditional notion of the nature of mysticism as understood by the great Christian mystics we may reasonably follow St. Augustine, St. Gregory the Great, St. Thomas Aquinas, Richard and Hugh of St. Victor, and St. John of the Cross, for as one of the better equipped of modern writers on mysticism, herself not a Catholic, declares that "The greatest mystics have been Catholic saints,"¹ This is even more readily understandable as we realize that the members of the Catholic faith with a mystical bent have a synthesized body of doctrine and instruction to fall back upon; a doctrine that has been the slow growth and accumulation of centuries, fostered and cherished by contemplative souls throughout the Christian era.

MAN'S QUEST FOR GOD

It is a commonplace to say that man desires happiness. To be complete this happiness must be entirely satisfying and permanent, filling the exigencies of man's nature-material and spiritual. Wealth, honor, fame and the like, cannot fill this role, for they either fail to fill man's entire need or they are transient and so bring with them the torture of being lost.² Aristotle in his system, reached this conclusion, but could not go on to answer it, for to the Grecian mind, man seemed to be a purely natural creature bounded by matter without either destiny or aspiration to anything above. He chose then to leave the answer vague.³

¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (Dutton, New York) New Edition.
Page 126.

² St. Thomas Aquinas, *La IIae*, q. 1-5.

³ Walter Farrell, *A Companion to the Summa* (Sheed and Ward, New York) 1938, Volume 1, Page 15.

Faith and revelation give us the answer. It is only God who can fully satisfy the needs of our nature as St. Augustine said: "Thou hast made us for Thyself O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee."¹ The difficulty is apparent, only God can fully satisfy man, and how is man to know Him? It is evident that man cannot see God, for the Universal Good, the essence of God, cannot be crowded into a concept, nor abstracted from sensible things, and such is the way our intellect works.² That is the way it must work now, by a circuitous approach to Reality, aided by the crutch we call reasoning. Man can be by virtue of an obediential power, lifted above this lowest grade of intelligence, and brought face to face with God, not through an image or concept, but in the way that divinity sees itself, through an immediate union of that supremely knowable Essence with the intellect of man. That is mystic knowledge: a direct, immediate, intuitive union with God.

It is strictly true that it is supernatural and cannot be obtained through unaided human endeavour, as we shall show later. Yet, paradoxically, it is a strictly personal attainment. It is supernatural, but that fact is no more an affront to man's self-sufficiency, to the efficacy of nature, than is the fact that man is born without protection and clothes but is given hands and reason to make up for the deficiency. It is a personal attainment; no other man, woman, angel or God himself can force it on us. Step by step, by our own human actions

¹ St. Augustine, Confessions, Book 1, Chapter 1.

² Walter Farrell. Op. Cit. Page 10.

³ Walter Farrell. Op. Cit. Page 16.

working with the constant help of God, we finally attain. It could not more be done for us by another than our own thinking could be. The intellect, instead of constructing its object analogically and approximately from materials borrowed from the sensibility, can sometimes attain that object by an immediate assimilation.¹

Complete human activity is a fusion of the activities of body and soul. The mind is aware of the particular through being rooted in a concrete substance, together with the will, the senses and the passions. The simultaneous satisfaction of each in a perfectly proportioned object causes the experience of beauty, the release of the whole personality into activity and delight. These are the moments the memory returns to; the mysterious appreciation of a single situation. The sense of being on the point of holding a thing just as it is, of being on the edge of discovery, is more cherished than the understanding of principles or the drawing of conclusions.² These may become 'Emotions recollected in tranquillity', as Wordsworth aptly calls them.³ They may be the stuff, the material element of poetry.

"The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more."⁴

So too in the mystical sphere, a sudden, blinding, all-enveloping flash of the Divine Reality, may inundate the favoured soul, and be thereafter an inspiration and transforming moment of

¹Joseph Marechal, *Mysticism* (Burns, Oates, Ashburne, London, 1927)

²Translated by Thorold. Page 194.

³Thomas Gilby, *Poetic Experience*. (Jneed and ard, London, 1934) P.71.

⁴William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.

⁴William Wordsworth, *The Solitary Reaper*. Lines 31-32.

existence. It is love that effects the contact of the soul with God,¹ and mysticism finds its working expression not in intellectual speculation but in prayer.²

In attempting to lay the essential basis of mysticism, a rigorous selection must be made. Under the label 'mysticism' taken in the widest sense that language allows we shall find in descending order: Christian ecstasy, the orgiastic exaltation of ancient paganism, the ritual trance evoked among certain savage races by fantastic dances or the use of stupifying agents, and the so-called religious hallucinations of hysterical subjects. Now since all of these are at one time or another 'mystic' by definition, the lowest term of the series ought to include in itself the essential kernel of the mystical state, and this kernel should be met with under accidental varieties in the other terms. If we stick close to our initial sophistry to the end, we arrive not without some astonishment, at these rather extraordinary propositions: That Christ, considered as a mystic differs only in degree and manner from a delirious megalomaniac; or that the raptures of St. Teresa are to be found in germ in the visions of the hashish smoker or in the religious intoxication of the animist medicine man.³ No word in our language, as Dean Inge points out, not even Socialism, has been employed more loosely.⁴ Sometimes used as the equivalent of allegorism, sometimes for theosophy or occult science and sometimes it merely suggests

¹ Garrigou-Lagrange, Op. Cit. Page 210.

² C. Butler, Western Mysticism. (Constable & Co. London, 1927)
Page 189

³ Joseph Maréchal, Op. Cit. Page 287.

⁴ W.R. Inge, Christian Mysticism (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1933) Page 3.

the mental state of the dreamer or vague and fantastic opinions about God and the world.

The mystic communication between the soul and God is not attained according to the ordinary way of communication - that is, merely by the powers of the soul with which we are endowed by nature. In other words, reason and philosophy cannot give us a mystical knowledge and love of God.¹ For a philosophical knowledge of God is indirect; it comes to us by means of creatures. The God demonstrated by reason and philosophy is known by the medium of the works of His hand. This is a beautiful and true conception and one that was very dear and precious to the heart of St. Francis of Assisi.² But the seeing of God in nature and recognizing that material creation as in various ways symbolic of spiritual realities is not mysticism in its historical meaning. The mystical quest has ever been inward rather than outward. "God", says Plotinus, "is not external to anyone, but is present in all things, though they are ignorant that He is so."³ St. Thomas voices the same opinion thus: "Since God is the universal cause of all being, in whatever region being can be found, there must be the Divine Presence."⁴ Such a notion of Divine Immanence is notoriously apt to degenerate into Pantheism, but we shall see presently how careful the mystical writers have been to guard against this error. Later too, we shall see, how careless Wordsworth and other poets were about avoiding this intellectual pitfall.

¹ Maurice De Wulf, Op. Cit. page 117.

² C. Butler, Op. Cit. page 11.

³ Plotinus: Ennead VI, 9 (Quoted by E. Underhill, Op. Cit. page 119).

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, I, iii. Cap. lxviii

It is possible that the existence of a Supreme Being worthy of worship and love, may be discovered by the human mind through a purely natural knowledge of the universe, and from this purely natural knowledge may spring a purely natural love. Physical environment may have much to do with the development of this thought in the individual. Wordsworth, for example, born and reared in the Lake country¹, a region noted for its natural beauty, from youth to manhood spent most of his time in the presence of picturesque mountains and sheltered dales, of wild fells and rapid waterfalls. The religious love which he had for nature is traced by him to these early associations:

"Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up,²
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear."

This in itself would not be sufficient to produce the lofty states of mystical union, but it would serve as a refining agent and dispose a youthful mind to be more amenable to the influence of beauty and truth. Now while there is a vast difference between a poet and a mystic, the native mental characteristics of the former could serve as an appropriate basis for more penetrating insight. Even in his youth, Wordsworth had a dim consciousness of some vast power, overshadowing this sense-world of ours and making itself felt in the soul.³ He possessed a moral sensitiveness which very early affected his imagination and impelled him to give an ethical interpretation to certain aspects of nature, and to claim for natural beauty an influence above and beyond the purely aesthetic.⁴ This type of nature ecstasy, Butler describes

¹ F. W. Meyers, Wordsworth (Harper's N.Y. 1887) Chapter 1V.

² William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book 1, lines 301-303.

³ Veitch, The Theism of Wordsworth (Transaction of the Wordsworth Society, Number 8, Page 24.

⁴ E. Sneath, Wordsworth, Poet of Nature and Poet of Man, Boston 1912, Page 3.

as an exaltation of the mind without abnormal physical concomitants, akin to ecstasy, non-religious in the manner of its production, and non-religious or vaguely religious in its content.¹

Then too, within Christianity itself, religious excitement and expectancy frequently produce the feeling of being specially visited by God. In the most cases, the experience is purely subjective the result of highly-wrought religious emotions, and nothing more than the excess of sensible devotions. So too, the various visions, revelations, locutions, auditions, impulses etc. are a field wherein there is endless scope for illusion, self-deception and auto-suggestions.²

Against all of these, there is the perfectly clear traditional meaning handed down in the Christian tradition through the centuries. The claim consistently and unequivocally made by the whole line of great mystics is, in the words of St. Augustine: "My mind in the flash of a trembling glance came to Absolute Being - That Which Is."³ Another great mystic telling of the supreme effects of such a 'glande' says that the whole creation compared with the infinite Being of God is nothing. "All the beauty of the creation in comparison with the infinite beauty of God is supreme deformity. All the wisdom of the world compared with the Infinite Wisdom of God is simple and supreme ignorance."⁴

¹ C. Butler, Op. Cit. Page 329.

² Ibid, Page 196.

³ St. Augustine, Confessions, VII, 23.

⁴ St. John of the Cross, The Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book 1, Chap. 4.

DEFINITION OF MYSTICISM

Dean Inge, in an Appendix to his 'Christian Mysticism' lists twenty-six specimen definitions of the word mysticism.¹ Underhill defines it as 'the art of establishing conscious relation with the Absolute'.² A Catholic theologian describes it as the 'supernatural and infused loving knowledge of God, full of sweetness, which only the Holy Ghost can give us, and which is, as it were, the prelude to the beatific vision.'³ Sharpe gives: 'a conscious, direct contact of the soul with Transcendental reality' and 'a direct objective intellectual intuition of Transcendental Reality'⁴ as working definitions of mysticism. All of these indicate the genus of the object of our study and when considered in the light of the writings of the mystics themselves who, after all, are the only ones qualified to speak on the subject, they will enable us to grasp the essential elements in true mysticism. It should be borne in mind that in the definitions of metaphysicians, the Absolute, Transcendental Reality and Reality, become for the Christian and theist-God.

THE TYPICAL FEATURES OF TRUE MYSTICISM.

The mystics clearly maintain the possibility of the soul's attainment of God. Regarding the mode of the attainment St. John of the Cross throws light. "We must remember that the Word, the Son of God, together with the Father and the Holy Ghost,

¹ Dean Inge, Op. Cit. Appendix A. Pages 335-348.

² E. Underhill, Op. Cit. Page 97

³ Garrigou-Lagrange, Op. Cit. Page 14.

⁴ E. Sharpe, (Quoted by Inge, Op. Cit. Appendix A. page 336).

is hidden in essence and in presence in the innermost being of the soul. The soul therefore that will find Him, must go out from all things in will and affection and enter into the profoundest self recollection, and all things must be to it as if they existed not. Go not to seek Him out of thyself for that will be but a distraction and weariness, and thou shalt not find Him; because there is no fruition of Him more certain, more ready, more intimate than that which is within."¹ St. John of the Cross is here evidently basing his doctrine on that enunciated by St. Paul who wrote, "Know you not that you are the temples of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you."²

St. Gregory the Great insists on the same introversion as means of ascending to intimate union with God.

"The mind must first free itself of all sense perceptions and of all images of things bodily and spiritual, so that it may be able to find and consider itself as it is in itself, i.e., in its essence, and then by means of this realization of itself thus stripped of all, it rises to the contemplation of God."³

In spite of this emphasis on 'seeking God within', the mystics are careful to avoid any hint of Pantheism. Ruysbroeck in describing the intimate union with God, insists on this point. "If man wishes to penetrate further, then all of the powers of his soul must give way, and they must suffer and patiently endure that Piercing Truth and Goodness which is God's Self. For as the air is penetrated by the brightness and heat of the sun, and iron is penetrated by fire, so that it works

¹ St. John of the Cross, The Canticle of Love, Stanza 1, 7-9.

² St. Paul, First Corinthians, III, 16.

³ St. Gregory, Homily on Ezechial, II, Verses 8-9.

through fire the works of fire, each retains its own nature. For fire does not become iron. So also God is in the being of the soul; the soul knows and loves God, through God's assistance, but it does not cease to be an individual personality."¹

St. John of the Cross, too, is careful to preserve the individuality of the human soul in the mystical experience. "The soul seems God by participation, though in reality preserving its own natural substance as distinct from God as it did before, although it is transformed in Him".² And again, he insists on the intimacy and yet the distinctiveness of each element in the union: "The thread of love that brings so closely God and the soul, and so unites them that it transforms them and makes them one by love, so that, though in essence different, yet in glory and appearance the soul seems God and God the soul."³ This fusion of the ideas of Divine Transcendence and Immanence so characteristic of Christian Mysticism, is an obvious deduction from St. John's Gospel: "If any man love Me he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and we will come and will make Our abode with him."⁴ Again in the fifteenth chapter, St. John stresses the need of divine aid before we can perform truly supernatural actions: "Abide in Me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abide in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. He that abideth in Me and I in him, the same beareth much fruit: for without Me you can do nothing."⁵

¹ Paul de Jaegher, An Anthology of Mysticism (Burns, Oates; London 1935) Page 50.

² St. John Of the Cross, Ascent of Mt. Carmel, 11,5.

³ St. John Of the Cross, The Canticle of Love, xxxi (Prefatory Note).

⁴ St. John The Evangelist, Gospel, xiv, 23.

⁵ Ibid, xv, 4-5.

The traditional testimony of the mystics is unanimous in stating that the attainment of the vision of God exceeds the powers of the unaided human intellect. Nor is the discovery of God in or through nature, sufficient for the mystical life. The true mystic strives to put aside the universe which, it is true, is the handiwork of God, but it is only an imperfect vestige, and the mystic longs to see and love God in Himself. For this there is needed something beyond the resources of the human mind and will, since such contact with God is above and beyond our nature. Mystic contemplation of God is the fruit of a supernatural grace.¹

Richard of St. Victor in a little treatise entitled, *Of the Degrees of Contemplation-(De Gradu Contemplationis)* shows the difference between ordinary philosophic knowledge of God attained by unaided reason, and the knowledge of the mystic when it pleases God to disclose Himself. "The lowest degree of the contemplation of God is the study and admiration of sensible things, which through the channel of the five senses gain entrance into the soul. This is the knowledge of philosophers. "The arks made by philosophers fall to pieces; the materials of which they are made perish. On the other hand, the ark of Moses remains even till to-day, stronger than ever. These elevated states are above men, above the power or capacity of human reason. "Constat itaque supra hominem esse, et humanae rationis modum vel capacitatem excedere quae ad haec novissima contemplationum genera videntur pertinere."²

¹ M. De Wulf, *Op. Cit.* Page 177.

² Richard of St. Victor, *De Gradu Contemplationis*, iv, 1.

a remote resemblance to God in so far as He is Being; plants resemble Him distantly in so far as He is living; human souls resemble Him by analogy in so far as He is intelligent; but no created nature can resemble God in so far as He is God. Grace alone can make us participate really and formally in the Divine Nature, in the intimate life of Him whose children we are by adoption.¹

Grace is the radical principle of attaining to God. Each faculty acts according to its nature, and so the object of human intelligence is in conformity with the powers of the mind. But God is an object that far surpasses the attempts of the human intelligence to grasp, and He will remain unknown unless there be effected some connaturality in the human soul, for there must be a proportion between the knower and the thing known. God then, in a sense, must deify us if we are to be able to know Him.² This is the exact function of grace, and it at once raises all direct and immediate contacts of the soul with God to the supernatural plane..

Farges points out the distinction between philosophical contemplation and mystical knowledge when he says that the former is of the natural order, the latter of the supernatural. The former has as its object an idea, such as the idea of God; the latter has the very reality of the active presence of the Divine Being in the one so favoured. The former is produced by reasoning or effort of man's genius; the second is the gift of God and the product of supernatural action in the soul of His choice; also it is common to the ignorant and the learned, while the former is the privilege of the learned only.

¹ Garrigou-Lagrange, Op. Cit. Page 54.

² St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Ia, Ilae, Q 112, a 1.

Finally, the one is of a purely speculative order; the other finds its end in the love of God and in sacrifice. It is no longer merely an exercise of the intelligence, but of holiness and of union with God.¹

Great sanctity and the highest mystical states go hand in hand. In this regard, Chesterton's contrast between the Christian mystic and the Oriental 'adept' is of interest. "No two ideas could be more opposite than a Christian saint in a Gothic cathedral and a Buddhist saint in a Chinese temple. The opposition exists at every point, but perhaps the shortest statement of it is that the Buddhist always has his eyes shut (reasonably, he adds later, because he is looking at that which is I and Thou and We and They and It), while the Christian always has his wide open."² Open, because he is in contact not with any vague, indetermined, impersonal world force, but with God. Of the latter let it be said that the very foundation of Christian mysticism is the existence of a God who is transcendent and unique; wholly other than His creatures. To confound God with the works of His hand, the saint would consider the greatest blasphemy.³

THE ESSENTIALS OF TRADITIONAL MYSTICISM.

It will clarify our discussion of Wordsworth's poetry if we keep in mind the main, definite essentials of the traditional Catholic mysticism (and indeed there can be no other kind). First, there is this essential feature, a direct,

¹ Albert Farges, Op. Cit. Pages 57-58.

² G. K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy (Sheed & Ward, N.Y. 1938) Page 241.

³ Bede Frost, St. John of The Cross (Harper and Brothers, London 1937) Page 11.

conscious contact of the soul with God. Each word is significant, and this is the basic claim of all mystics, the immediate intuitive attainment of God, in an active, non-symbolic presentation.¹ As St. John of the Cross puts it: "This knowledge consists in a certain contact of the soul with the Divinity, and it is God Himself who is then felt and tasted, though not manifestly and distinctly as it will be in glory."²

Secondly, and a point to be kept in mind, the contact that the soul makes is with a transcendent God. This was not the case with the Greeks for example, and their apparently mystic flights constitute an entirely different thing. It is the idea of creation that makes the difference, and this idea comes with Revelation. The gap between the infinite God and the creatures whom His free act called out of nothing is vastly different from the gap between the first Mover of Aristotle, and the very last thing moved, or between the One of Plotinus and the most insignificant of its emanations. There is nothing particularly distinctive or unique about a direct personal contact with God as presented in Greek philosophy, but the union of a creature with the Christian God is indeed a transforming experience.

St. John of the Cross is most emphatic in showing the vast abyss between Creator and creature, and the impossibility of realizing an intimate union with God through creatures. This view stands in sharp conflict with the vague, sentimentalized ideas of Wordsworth who saw in man and nature the basis for all his loftiest thought. "All created things with the affections

¹ Joseph Marechal, Op. Cit. Page 199.

² St. John of the Cross, The Ascent of Mt. Carmel, 11, Canto 26.

bestowed on them are nothing, because they are a hindrance, and the privation of our transformation in God. Until our soul is purged of these affections, we shall not possess God in this life in the pure transformation of love, nor in the life to come in clear vision. The whole of creation compared with the infinite Being of God is nothing."¹

In the Living Flame of Love, St. John brings out another excellent point regarding the manner in which the true mystic comes to know and appreciate the material and individual environment: "Though it is true that the soul here sees that all creatures are distinct from God, in that they have a created existence, it understands them in Him in their power, root and energy. It knows also that God in His own essence is, in an infinitely pre-eminent way, all these things, so that it understands them better in Him, their first cause, than in themselves. This is the great joy of this awakening: namely to know creatures in God, and God in His creatures. This is to know effects in their Cause, and not the Cause by its effects."² This would imply very certainly, that it would be impossible to rise from a contemplation of visible nature to an immediate attainment of God. The best and highest possible attainment would be a philosophical knowledge, not a mystic, intuitive grasping of the Divine Essence.

The truly great lovers of nature, such as St. Francis of Assisi, loved nature not for what she is in herself, but because they saw in her vestiges of the hand of God. In fact

¹ St. John of the Cross, Ascent of Mt. Carmel. 1, 4.

² St. John of the Cross, The Living Flame of Love, Cantos xv, 5.

in so far as one is pre-occupied with creatures, to that very extent is one deprived and hindered from soaring aloft to a true and intimate union with God. "The soul must of necessity, if it would attain to the divine union with God, pass through the dark night of mortification of the desires and self-denial in all things. The reason is this: all the love we bestow on creatures is in the eyes of God, mere darkness, and while we are involved therein, the soul is incapable of being enlightened and possessed by the pure and simple light of God, unless we first cast that love away. He who loves creatures becomes vile as that creature itself and in one sense even viler, for love not only levels, but subjects also the lover to the object of his love."¹

This fact is most clear from reading the mystics; the mystic experience is of God Himself in as direct and intimately personal a manner as is possible in this life. It is precisely not a seeing or experience of God in or through creatures of any kind whatever.

Among non-Christian writers, like J. W. Sullivan, C. M. Joad and Middleton Murray, we find a constant confusion between what is known as 'nature-mysticism', 'modern pantheism' and true 'Christian Mysticism'. To them it seems to mean a feeling of oneness with the universe as a whole, a sense of the illusive character of life, and experience of being emancipated from the temporal and the material in the manner in which such a freedom from time and space comes when listening to a Beethoven symphony or when entranced by a beautiful view. All of this,

¹ St. John of the Cross, Ascent of Mount Carmel, 1, 4.

whatever truth or fact there may be in it, has no relation to the mystic experience which is a personal and immediate seizure of God Himself. The loftiest aesthetic pleasures differ not only in degree but in kind from the true mystic experience; the former are purely of the natural order and are certainly indulged in by those who do not even posit the existence of God.

Note too that no Christian mystic would dream of supporting M. Bergson's argument in 'Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion' that his experience supplies the greatest proof of the existence of God.¹ Doubtless it adds to the accumulation of evidence which converges from all sides, since the mystical experience is rooted in and proceeds from such a belief. But the Christian Mystics would be the last persons in the world to support the popular theory of our own day that the experience of the Christian is the supreme proof of the existence of a personal God. Very wisely has the Christian tradition ever refused to base any dogma or any practice of religion on the experience of individuals or upon private revelations made to them. It has rightly preferred the ways of reason and faith as furnishing the only sure and solid foundations upon which religion, dogma and practice, can safely stand. Moreover, if the purported private revelations in any way conflict with the accepted norms of faith, they are branded as spurious, and condemned as dangerous.

A third characteristic of Christian mysticism which is readily seen from the discussion of the second point

¹ Bede Frost, Op. Cit. Pages 37-38.

above, is the withdrawal from the senses. This too stands in sharp contrast to the so-called 'nature mystics', who maintained that a certain sensuous ravishment was the prelude to vision. But the Christian mystics never start with merely natural knowledge. As St. Gregory said, "In the cognition of God, our first door is faith and our second is sight (species), to which walking by faith, we arrive."¹

In a later passage, St. Gregory, stressing the importance of a complete divorce from the senses and sense data, adds, "But the mind cannot recollect itself unless it has first learned to repress all phantasmata of earthly and heavenly images, and to reject and spurn whatever sense impressions present themselves to its thoughts, in order that it might seek itself within as it is, without these sensations."² St. John of the Cross speaks of the dark night of the sense through which the soul must pass, and this night is not merely the absence of sensible knowledge, but even of sensible delight. And furthermore, not only is sensible knowledge left behind, but even the ordinary processes of the mind are left in abeyance, so that the culmination of the mystical experience is supra-intentional, i.e. direct and not by means of a representative idea.³

A fourth feature of all mysticism in the Christian tradition, and one that is an essential preamble to reaching the loftiest mystical states is asceticism. "According to the saints, the soul which for the love of God, labours to strip itself of all that is not God, is soon penetrated with light and

¹ St. Gregory, Homilies on Ezechiel, 11, verse 8.

² St. Gregory, Ibid, 11, verse 9.

³ C. Butler, Western Mysticism (Op. Cit.) Page lxvii.

so united to God that it becomes like Him and enters into the possession of all his goods."¹ This ascetical strain is but an echo of St. Paul's : "I chastize my body and bring it into subjection-,"² and can be seen in varying degrees of intensity in the lives of all the great Christian mystics down through the centuries.

Recapitulating then, the mystical union is beyond the natural powers of the human soul, and it is then supernatural both regards its method and its object. As St. Thomas indicates there must be a proportion between object and faculty, between the thing known and the knower, before knowledge can result. The human intellect is the faculty of the soul united to the body; its object cannot be pure ideas, but must be objective concepts abstracted from matter. It follows then that God cannot be the natural object of our intellect because He is not a body. The human intellect can know the existence of God by its own unaided powers in a negative way only. It can know too some of His attributes, but the direct, positive knowledge of the essence of God is entirely outside its natural range.³

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF A PURELY NATURAL MYSTICISM.

There remains to be considered the nature and range of a purely 'natural mysticism'. True mystical experience as we have seen exceeds all metaphysical speculation, for the object attained surpasses the native potentialities of the human mind.

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¹ Garrigou-Lagrange, Op. Cit. Page 23.

² St. Paul, First Corinthians, IX, 27.

³ St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa, Pars Prima, Q.84, A. 7.

The philosopher, as such, cannot even in an inchoate fashion know the Beatific Vision or 'the things God has prepared for those who love Him'.¹

To take contemplation in its widest sense as a form of concentrated meditation, there is a natural contemplation which as Albert the Great said, is for the perfection of him who contemplates and which remains in the intellect without passing into the heart by love.² This contemplation though it lacks the essential of a supernatural adherence to God by direct intuition, may nevertheless be united to the contemplated object with a natural love, and may be filled with a fondness for it which gives it the color of an affective and experimental experience.³ In the true mystical union, it is the connaturality of love, which under the illumination and special inspiration of the Holy Ghost, is the formal means of knowing. The gifts of the Holy Ghost respond to a special instinct and operate according to a super-human mode, for they perceive divine things not through concepts, but through an affinity made actual by divine charity.⁴

With regard to the exterior and outward visible signs by which judgment is made of these things, certain resemblances of an extrinsic nature may be found between the two

¹ St. Paul, First Corinthians, 11, 9.

² St. Albert the Great, De Adhaerendo Deo, Chapter 9.--
'Contemplatio Philosophorum est propter perfectionem contemplantis, et ideo sistit in intellectu, et ita finis eorum in hoc est cognitio intellectus. Sed contemplatio Sanctorum est propter amorem ipsius, scilicet contemplati Dei: idcirco, non sistit in fine ultimo in intellectu per cognitionem, sed transit in affectum per amorem.'

³ J. Maritain, The Degrees of Knowledge. (Charles Scribner's New York. 1938) Page 330.

⁴ Thomas Gilby, Op. Cit. Page 75.

conditions. When this 'natural contemplation' is cultivated by minds in quest of spiritual perfection, and when it makes use of those natural means of a moral and ascetic order, it is understandable why the discernment of the difference may become difficult, despite the diversity in their essential natures, and the possession of various means of judgment. Yet this 'contemplation of the philosophers' in a pure state remains at the highest point of rational and discursive activity which is rightly human, but whose stability is always precarious for nature is always pressing us on. It soars, but it cannot rest. It has not the supernatural passivity of the contemplation of the saints which is in reality the most incomparably profound activity - that contemplation which at once soars and rests.¹

The fact that the phenomena of mysticism do not necessarily presuppose supernatural grace and can often be explained by natural causes suggests; can there be a mystical union with God on the purely natural plane? Have the intuitions of a philosopher like Plotinus or a poet such as Wordsworth, to do with the same realities as the loving knowledge of the Christian Mystics?² If as Maritain points out (and Graham accepts Maritain's conclusions as his) one gives to the words 'mystical experience' a vague sense, inclusive of all the diverse analogies which the natural order may present to infused contemplation, an affirmative answer is easy; but to confine the words to their true significance, an authentic mystical experience, neither a counterfeit or illusion, which bears on God Himself and makes us sensible of the Divine Reality, we must reply that no such experiencing knowledge of God is possible

¹ J. Maritain, Op. Cit. Page 331.

² Dom Aelfred Graham, The Love of God, (Longmans, Green and Co, New York, 1940) Page 225.

in the natural order. The whole distinction between nature and grace is here called into question.¹

In the previous exposition of the requisites for a direct and intuitive knowledge of God as understood by the great Christian mystics from St. Paul through the subsequent ages, it was pointed out how impossible it is for the human intellect to grasp the Infinite God by its own unaided powers. Since the object of the mind is Being, and because of its native potentialities (one might say elasticity) under the influence of grace and the gifts of the Holy Ghost, the mind can be raised to know God 'face to face'² in a super-human mode, due to the connaturality founded on charity. It is therefore precisely and only the supernatural which permits of an experimental knowledge of God.³

In no way do I wish to deny the genuineness of poetical and philosophical experience; the poets are unquestionably the recipients of some sort of inspiration not given to ordinary mortals, and one has not to search far among their writings to discover passages analogous to the accounts that mystics give of their own experiences. But it is hard to see how those who hand over so lightly the treasures of the saints to the poets and philosophers do not empty our concept of divine grace of its unique content, being unconsciously guilty of confusing the natural and the supernatural orders. It seems definitely a 'refugium in mysterium', unworthy of philosopher or critic to seek to solve a problem in aesthetics by appealing to supernatural revelation. There is no reason to maintain that the insight of even the

¹ J. Maritain, Op. Cit. Page 331.

² St. Paul, First Corinthians, XI, 12.

³ J. Maritain, Op. Cit. Page 332.

greatest among the poets (as poets) exceeded in richness and profundity the vision of Plato gazing upon the world; or that the most uncompromising neo-Platonist ever reaches at the term of his 'vision' anything more illuminating than being, which led Aristotle to describe metaphysics as a quasi-divine science. And let it be borne in mind that neither Plato nor Aristotle knew the elements of what Catholic tradition understands by sanctifying grace.

To clarify the issue, let me insert the comprehensive comments of M. J. Maritain who states that to admit even in the simplest imaginable form, an authentic experience of the depths of God upon the natural plane is to be guilty of:¹

- a) either confounding our natural intellectuality, which is made specific by being in general, with our intellectuality in grace, which is made specific by the Divine Essence Itself;
- b) or confounding the presence of immensity, whereby God is present in all His creatures by the power of his creative might, with the special and holy indwelling of God, that special presence of God in the soul in the state of grace;
- c) or again, muddling up in the same hybrid concept the wisdom of the natural order (metaphysical wisdom) and the infused gift of wisdom;
- d) or finally, attributing to the natural love of God what exclusively belongs to supernatural charity. In one way or another this would be to confound what is absolutely proper to grace with what is natural and of the order of nature.

Without reservation Maritain concludes, and I readily embrace the logic of his position, "There can be no 'immediate seizure' of God in the natural order: authentic
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¹ J. Maritain, Op. Cit. Page 332.

mystical contemplation in the natural order is a contradiction in terms: an authentic experience of the depths of God, a felt contact with God, a 'pati divina' can only take place in the order of sanctifying grace and by its means."¹

We must keep in mind the fundamental distinction between an analogous knowledge of God and a true mystical union, for there is a vast difference between a reasoned, deductive idea of God from the notion of causality, and an immediate ~~seizure~~ seizure of the divine essence as it is in Itself. One is detached speculation; the other an intimate union of lover and Beloved. God can be discovered in His creation. In it He has left His superscription. It is the trace of His footsteps, the glimpse of His countenance, that the eye discerns in nature, in the stars, in the silent hills, the human body, and especially in the face from which the soul looks out.²

A word on 'natural mysticism' seems timely, and the case of Plotinus comes to mind. Slater says of him: "Really it is not necessary to have recourse to preternatural influences in order to explain the ecstasies of Plotinus. The natural powers of the human soul are quite sufficient to explain them. They are the natural effect of philosophical contemplation. After careful preparation, the follower of Plato made the ascent of the ladder of being, concentrated his attention on the contemplation of the One, the True and the Good, and if circumstances were favourable he was occasionally rewarded by the vision of Perfect Beauty fashioned by himself. Unless I am mistaken, that is the

¹ J. Maritain, Op. Cit. Page 333.

² Blanche M. Kelly, The Sudden Rose. (Sheed and Ward, New York, 1939) Page 20.

explanation of the ecstasies of Plotinus and of many another so-called mystic."¹ Butler too, speaking of 'natural mysticism' says that it is coming to be recognized that there need be nothing miraculous or supernatural in ecstasy, rapture or trance in themselves; on the physical and psychological side they are often induced in purely natural ways. If there be any supernatural element in them, it arises from what takes place during them.²

It must be remembered that in many ways the idea of communion with divinity and the effort to achieve it and the conviction of the individual that he has achieved it, are common features of religions of all kinds. The vast majority of such claims have to be set aside as unreal. Often the means taken to bring about the state of ecstasy are repulsive-magical, orgiastic or immoral. Often too they are hypnotic. Of such methods the result is often religious frenzy and abnormal phenomena akin to hysteria.

PANTHEISM

Since it will be necessary to refer to the pantheistic aspects of Wordsworth's poetry, it seems appropriate to insert a brief treatment of the doctrine here, in the more philosophical chapter of this thesis.

The metaphysical systems hatched in the course of history are as manifold as are the chances of error on the part of human reason. But every metaphysical system at least leans toward a mysticism as its crowning point and its fruition. In the lower forms we have animism which introduces behind the world

¹ Quoted by Butler, *Western Mysticism* (Op. Cit.) Page 346.

² C. Butler, *Op. Cit.* Page 344.

of outward experience an unsubdued multiplicity of 'souls'. Often a rudimentary mysticism may be built upon such poor data as this. With the mysterious objects of his cultus, the medicine man, the sorcerer, the ignorant devotee, will associate the mystery of certain subjective states that are strange to his immature experience; dreams of sacred content, delirium provoked by narcotics, trances, hysterical ecstasies brought on by music or perfumes, chronic or temporary states of insanity.

Moving into the higher forms of metaphysics, we see the problem of the absolute stated in all its fulness. The universe, viz. all that is not the ego or the Absolute, offers a strange spectacle to the eyes of the metaphysician; it is changing, but without a pure variability; it is manifold without being a pure multiplicity; it manifests the attributes of both being and not-being at once. It is not, but becomes.¹ There are various attempts at solution, ranging from the illusory nature of things to the most rigid materialism.

The solution that demands our immediate attention is that of pantheism. Western pantheism dates from Plotinus, though it had been prepared for a long time previously by the monism of the Eleatics, and the idealism of Plato. All pantheism rests on a highly-systematized concept of emanation. In the visions of Plotinus, the created perfections served as an indispensable ladder by which the soul might rise towards God. Spinoza, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, the metaphysics of all these men coincides with the bold dream of certain so-called mystics - "eritis sicut dii".² These integrated the operations of the human spirit into a veritable 'becoming divine'. The 'mysticism' inspired by such a system is purely natural apart from the

¹ Marechal, Joseph, Op. Cit. Page 295.

² Joseph Marechal, Ibid, Page 300.

philosophical errors on which it rests. There is nothing in it that reminds one of the Christian notion of grace. Though purporting to be rationalistic, they overlook the manifest distinction between nature and super-nature, and if the creature tends efficaciously towards an intuition of the absolute, it does so solely by the development of its native potentialities. In contrast to the higher and supernatural Christian mysticism, Pantheism is strictly natural in its method, and it rests on the intuition of God as He is in things.

The doctrine of pantheism seems to have had a special appeal to English poets. Wordsworth, Shelley, Blake and others were more or less under its influence. Deriving readily from some aspects of Platonism, it seemed very applicable to the problems of life, especially among artists who had not the security of Catholic principles to rest on.

ASPECTS OF WORDSWORTH'S THOUGHT

Having enunciated the underlying principles of a true and historical mysticism, we are prepared now to apply these principles to Wordsworth's poetry, and to determine to what extent he may be called a mystic. That he has been called a mystic without any qualifications, has been indicated in the Introduction.

It will not be necessary to discuss each poem that the poet wrote, for it is perfectly evident that the vast majority of them have no mystical strain whatever. Three poems especially: The Prelude, Tintern Abbey, and sections of The Excursion will prove the centres of our study. The Excursion will be referred to less than the others for it represents a more orthodox Christian philosophy of life than the others and is entirely devoid of any passages that are mystical either in tone or content. Its significance for our purpose is, that though dominantly Christian in concept, it throws much light on the changed views that marked Wordsworth's maturer years; it is effective in helping us to appreciate exactly what views of life, nature and God filled the poet's mind during his greatest poetic period.

Had we no other basis than his life and actions, we might arrive at a just estimate of Wordsworth's mysticism. But it seems more just and in better taste not to base our conclusions on Wordsworth as a man. It will be Wordsworth as a poet that will be the entire range of our study.

WORDSWORTH'S POETIC CAREER.

At the start it seems appropriate to review the poet's career briefly. Though not the most popular, Wordsworth is recognized as the greatest of the group of the Lake Poets. A pioneer in the Romantic movement, like all romantics he was strongly independent, and preoccupied with his own feelings. Like Milton he had much to say about his own feelings. His longest poem, running to fourteen books and 8000 lines, is The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind: an Autobiographical Poem. It is a most scrutinizing piece, and unique in the annals of verse up till that time. The new interest in psychology made this theme fascinating and novel. Beside the Prelude, The Excursion, in nine books, sets forth the experiences and philosophy of country life. Wordsworth proposed a longer poem, The Recluse on Man, Nature and Society, of which the Prelude and the Excursion were to serve as introductory. This projected masterpiece was never completed. Many short lyrics, some of which we shall mention in this treatise, rank with the finest in our language.

Wordsworth's poetic discoveries were in the region of nature that lies immediately about us, and in the lives and characters and humble arts and objects that are in closest touch and alliance with nature. Other poets had already dealt with these matters - Thomson, Gray, Goldsmith and Cowper, - to indicate but a few - and Wordsworth learned from them; but his originality lay in the delicate intensity and penetration and passion with which he observed and felt and interpreted nature in his poetry.

He was born at Cockermouth on the edge of the Cumberland lake region, of an old middle-class family long established in those parts. The country is wild and beautiful, and had for generations been peopled with sturdy, independent farmers and shepherds, close to the soil, and comparatively free from the feudal restraints of English life elsewhere. It was the ideal world to nurse the genius of Wordsworth. All through his life he retained a vivid recollection of the scenes and incidents of his childhood. These reappear in his verse, and he came to consider the matter for poetry - 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'.¹ These 'spots of time' recollected in maturer years, and intensified by his poetic imagination, flamed into his finest poetry, to reveal unsuspected beauty in the world close at hand. This was Wordsworth's strongest forte - to reveal the unsuspected beauties that lurk in our very midst. As a poet he dedicated himself to tear aside the veil from men's eyes and thus permit them to see the grandeur and magnificence in what appeared as casual and common.

This 'dedicated spirit',² felt the impact of the French Revolution directly. Confusion and uncertainty marked his years between seventeen and twenty-seven: Cambridge, visits to London, a tour of France and Switzerland just after the Revolution. His year in France, and the intimate association with a young French officer Michel Beaupuy at Blois, served to heighten his revolutionary ideals. Under the impact of Beaupuy's dynamic personality and from his own inclinations, Wordsworth came to broaden his sympathy with nature and extend it to include human life, at least the men and women who live in unsophisticated

¹ William Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads.

² William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book IV, line 337 (1850)

poverty or simplicity close to nature herself. The teachings of Rousseau appealed to him, and a society based on the natural and elemental goodness of man, became his ideal. The political teachings of Godwin heightened the naturalistic tendencies, and his poetry of this period as we shall see later was dominated by the thought of these men.

Chaos, uncertainty and doubt were stabilized by the influence of Dorothy Wordsworth, his sister, a sweet, devoted emotional girl who was a poet herself in all but the gift of song. Under her influence he regained his appreciation of nature, and the ten years that followed mark the height of his poetic genius. Following the Excursion in 1813, Wordsworth continued to compose during the thirty-seven years that remained of his life, but the divine fire flashed less and less frequently. Disillusioned with the ways of revolution and reform, he settled back into complacent acceptance of the best things as they are. At seventy-three his achievement was honoured by appointment as Poet-Laureate. He died in 1850 at the age of eighty years.¹

THE BACKGROUND

No one familiar with the poetry of Wordsworth will deny that he possessed a sort of moral sensitiveness and refinement, akin in some ways to the sensibilities of favoured souls. Very early, this affected his imaginative life, and impelled him to give an ethical and didactic purpose to certain aspects of nature,, and to claim for natural beauty and influence above and beyond the purely aesthetic. His poetry is to a great extent an account of his own inner experiences: experiences which

¹ The Voice of England: Charles Grosvenor Osgood. Harper & Brothers, New York. (1935) Page 402.

were originally sense impressions, but fused and amplified through recollection and given a moral interpretation.

In his account of his youthful, solitary, adventures he felt himself influenced and molded by strange and obscure agencies which had a direct and decisive effect on his spiritual and imaginative life. One experience after another seems to bear out the sense of something back of reality at once awful and incomprehensible.

As a boy, woodcock hunting with his companions by moonlight, when he is tempted to take more than his share of the spoils, he hears among the solitary hills, 'low breathings' coming after him,

"..... and sounds
"Of indistinguishable motion, steps
"Almost as silent as the turf they trod!"¹

The huge black peak seems to stride after him as if it were a vast mobile giant about to punish him instantly for his contemplated crime. His mind

"Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being." ²

Nature seemed full of huge and mighty forms, that did not live like men: dim, unseen presences which haunted his boyish sports, and "impressed upon all forms the character of danger and desire."³

There seems to be no doubt whatever as to the light in which Wordsworth himself viewed these experiences. He holds that for him, Nature was a moral teacher, the moulder of his conscience during these early years; that she enforced her lessons through pain and fear, and through the inspiration of

1 William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book 1, lines 323-325.

2 William Wordsworth, The Prelude, (1850) Book 1, lines 392-393.

3 William Wordsworth, Ibid., lines 471-472

high and enduring things.¹ However greatly he may have exaggerated in later years the impressions then made upon him, we see here the crude beginnings of that spiritual apprehension of Nature which was to form more and more an article of his poetic and philosophical creed.² He came to feel that he must

".....tread on shadowy ground, must sink
Deep, - and aloft ascending, breathe in worlds,
To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil." ³

In all of this it is apparent that Wordsworth seemed to have a dim consciousness of some vast power, overshadowing this sense-world of ours, and making itself felt in the soul.⁴ But he believed this power to be, not so much behind Nature, as in it. He held that through the contemplation of Nature man "may see into the life of things"⁵ and seemed to regard this insight as something akin to the beatific vision or a prophetic rapture. He would make Nature a revealing agency of the transcendental world, like love or prayer.⁶

The essential problem then is this: can the world of life and order and beauty, by which we are surrounded, however intimately it is studied and however lovingly it is pondered and however thoughtfully it is loved, ever lead us back to that knowledge and love of God which we have lost through sin? That Christianity is a supernatural system, propounding spiritual aids without which the human race can have no hope of regeneration, Wordsworth nowhere denies, but he nullifies this truth by asserting that man can be restored to a state of primitive purity by

1 William Wordsworth, The Prelude, (1850) Book 1, lines 409.

2 Arthur Clough, Literary Remains, London, 1869, Vol.1, page 310.

3 William Wordsworth, The Excursion, Preface.

4 E.W. Veitch, The Theism of Wordsworth. Transactions of Wordsworth Society, Number 8, page 24.

5 William Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey, line 51.

6 F.W. Meyers, Wordsworth (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1887), P.130.

a process purely natural, and independent of any superior agency.

"Paradise and groves
Elysian, Fortunate Fields-like those of old
Sought in the Atlantic main: why should they be
A history only of departed things,
Or a mere fiction of what never was?
For the discerning intellect of man
When wedded to the goodly universe
In love and holy passion, shall find these
A simple produce of the common day."¹

Notice the unmistakable thought of the last four lines - that the penetrating intellect of man moved by an intense love in the contemplation of the 'goodly universe' can regenerate itself, without any recourse to supernatural assistance. Throughout that portion of his poetry which represents his highest genius, the portion that is most apt to endure for all time, Wordsworth insists that the native capacities of the soul when in sympathetic communion with nature, is able to lift it to the highest communion with the Soul of the Universe.

"Or turning the mind in upon herself
Pored, watch'd, expected, listen'd: spread my thoughts
And spread them with a wider creeping; felt
Incumbencies more awful, visitings
Of the Upholder of the tranquil Soul,
Which underneath all passion lives secure
A steadfast life. But peace! it is enough
To notice that I was ascending now
To such community with highest truth."²

Again, in the Excursion the soul's self-sufficiency is upheld. The Solitary, one of the characters in the dialogue, complains that telling a sinful soul to rise from guilt is like telling a man to fly, and the Wanderer (who speaks for Wordsworth) answers him:

¹ William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, Book IV, Lines 47-55.

² William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book III, lines 111-120.

"Access for you
Is yet preserved to Principles of Truth
Which the Imaginative Will upholds
In seats of wisdom not to be approached
By the inferior Faculty that moulds,
With her minute and speculative pains,
Opinion, ever changing."¹

Nature abounds in facilities for inspiring
man:

"The whispering air
Sends inspiration from the shadowy heights
And blind recesses of the caverned rocks.
The little rills, and waters numberless
Inaudible to daylight, blend their notes
With the loud streams."²

Nature was for Wordsworth 'the nurse, the guide,
the guardian of my heart; 'he commended his sister Dorothy to
a like guardianship, as a sovereign remedy against 'all soli-
tude, or fear, or pain, or grief.'³ His highest aspiration for
the Cumberland beggar is that he may live and die in the eyes
of nature; the most telling incident he can summon to express
the degradation of Peter Bell is that the tiny flower by the
river's brim was nothing more to him than a yellow primrose.

In all of this Wordsworth was influenced,
whether he was aware of it or not, by Rousseau.⁴ A return
to Nature was the gospel of the day; the very air was charged
with it, and Wordsworth was all the more susceptible to its
influence because it harmonized so well with his predispositions
and likings.

Emile Legouis, a keen and penetrating critic of
the poet, says: "Wordsworth's surprise and resentment would

¹ William Wordsworth, The Excursion, Book IV, lines 1126 - 1132.

² William Wordsworth, Ibid., Book II, Lines 1170-1176.

³ William Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey, Lines 110 and 144.

⁴ Edward Caird, Essays on Literature and Philosophy, Glasgow 1892,
Pages 160-162.

surely have been provoked had he been told that, at half a century's distance, and from an European point of view, his work would seem, on the whole, though with several omissions and additions, to be a continuation of the movement initiated by Rousseau. It is, nevertheless, certain that it might be described as an English variety of Rousseau's well known tenets: he had 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 to 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 his feelings. For this reason Wordsworth must be placed by the general historian among the numerous 'sons of Rousseau' who form the main battalion of romanticism."¹

With Wordsworth this passion for Nature seemed to develop almost into a religion: he was a reverent worshipper at her shrine, and the overpowering vision which he beheld there was for him a tremendous reality, and he felt himself morally commissioned to speak that vision through his art. He was a 'dedicated spirit'.²

"I, long before the blissful hour arrives,
 Would chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse
 Of this great consummation; and by words
 Which speak of nothing more than what we are,
 Would I arouse the sensual from their sleep
 Of death, and win the vacant and the vain
 To noble raptures;"³

¹ Emile Legouis, Cambridge History of English Literature, Vol. XI,
 Page 103.

² William Wordsworth, The Prelude, IV, Line 337.

³ William Wordsworth, The Excursion, Preface, Lines 56-62.

It is true, of course, that natural beauty had a marked influence on many of the great mystics. St. Bernard, masterful and rigid ascetic as he was, writing to a young friend, urging him to leave the world and enter a monastery said: Thou wilt find something more in forests than in books: trees and rocks will teach thee ~~what~~ thou canst not learn from masters."¹ Here Bernard is simply making the point that the freer a life is from the complex toils of society, the more easily the soul rises to God. Bernard avows that he, himself, gained his understanding of the Scriptures by prayer and meditation 'in silvis et in agris',² when he had no masters except the oaks and beeches.. In very sharp contrast to Wordsworth's doctrine, we must note that the subject of St. Bernard's meditation was not the oaks and the beeches, but the Scriptures.

In the case of the true mystic, as we saw in the words of St. John of the Cross,³ it is the appreciation of unseen forces within and behind the material world that lead to a love of nature, and the transition is from the supernatural to the natural. Man cannot get a religion out of nature, nor can she be to him a source of inspiration, unless he come to the spectacle of her with the thought of God already in his mind. The beauty we see in earth and sky is not shed over it by us, nor projected from our souls. "The ideal is not in the soul, it is in the soul's ~~maker~~"⁴ with whom the soul is created to commune.

¹ St. Bernard, (Migne, Patrologia Latina, Vol. CLXXXII, P.242)

² St. Bernard, Loc.Cit., page 242.

³ St. John of the Cross, The Living Flame of Love, Canto XV, 5.

⁴ Orrestes Brownson, Quarterly Review 12, Page 537.

Wordsworth sought in common with other writers of his time to lead men from the old scholastic formulae to an intuition of an immanent God, and the result is a misty notion of an all-pervading spirit, which neither strengthens to endure nor rouses to action. In his poetry there is lacking the clear sense of the Personality of God. His theories might conceivably satisfy 'a herdsman on a lonely mountain top',¹ but would they convince men living in the midst of great, groaning cities? This is but a minor point of consideration, but the fact remains that, deplore it as we may, men do live apart from nature and they are the very ones whom spiritual starvation threatens most. Are such as these to be debarred from attaining moral and religious excellence because their surroundings afford no food for the imagination? One would expect a true and embracing philosophy to be more Catholic in spirit. The fanciful aspects of primitivism should not be considered when formulating a norm and rule of conduct for mankind. We must keep in mind that that is exactly what Wordsworth was trying to do, for above everything else he wished to be regarded as a teacher. We must not regard his philosophy as a personal thing, nor his supposed insight into reality as a unique experience; but these must be evaluated in so far as they are applicable to mankind.

Our evaluation of Wordsworth's supposed mysticism must take into consideration, of course, what he thought he reached in his contact with the Spirit of the Universe. We can posit his evident sincerity, but we must not be misled by his statements. As we all know there is no field where illusions

¹-William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, Book I, line 219

are more common than in matters of religion. We must honestly and objectively weigh the evidence and sift Wordsworth's right to be called a mystic in the proper and historical sense of the term.

As we consider some of the aspects of his thought and appreciate exactly his current philosophy when certain of his most 'mystical passages' were written, we shall be fully able to reach a just conclusion to this problem: viz, did Wordsworth ever attain a direct, contact with God?

WORDSWORTH'S NATURALISM

As I indicate in the introductory remarks on Wordsworth's career, other poets before him had treated of nature. With the appearance of Lyrical Ballads (1798) a really comprehensive statement of Wordsworth's view of nature becomes available - in the Tintern Abbey Ode. The one remarkable feature of this poem compared with the nature-poetry of the eighteenth century is that throughout the poem, there is not one single unmistakable reference to God. The poet does indicate that his commerce with the beauties of nature leads him to lofty intuitions which we feel to be in a broad sense religious. He has felt:

"A presence that disturbs me with the joy
of elevated thoughts..." ¹

The word 'presence' is often associated with God or other spiritual beings. Wordsworth used it in that significance in the Prelude:

"To presences of God's mysterious power
Made manifest in Nature's sovereignty" ²

1 Lines composed a few Miles Above Tintern Abbey: W. Wordsworth.
2 The Prelude, II, 416 - 418 (1805-06 edition) W. Wordsworth.

But at this period of his life, the reference is left deliberately vague. Whatever elevating or consoling effects it had upon him are referred to nothing higher or more specifically religious than 'nature and the language of the sense'. This scarcely seems to be the impassioned cry of a soul that has reached an immediate union with God. In earlier poets, the concept of universal nature is frequently associated with the concept of the first cause, the supreme being, clearly identified with God.

Thus Cowper in The Task avoids any naturalism:

"Nature is but the name for an effect,
Whose cause is God. He feeds the secret fire
By which the mighty process is maintained..."

Cowper clears away any hint of pantheism as well. On the other hand, in the Tintern Abbey poem Wordsworth refrained from making any association of nature with God. Even the mild pantheism of Thomson is avoided. It was not till six years later that he was to remove the vestiges of his purely natural thought with the admission that 'Nature's self, which is the breath of God', and to speak of the Sovereign Intellect as having diffused through the face of earth and heaven:

"A soul divine which we participate,
A deathless spirit." ¹

This is an advance at least to a pantheistic doctrine, and while a poet must be granted the privilege of rhapsodic expression, language must have some meaning as indicative of the thought which is behind it. Many interpreters of Wordsworth (like Stopford Brooke) were inclined to consider his poems, down through The Excursion (1814) as representing a consistent body

1 The Prelude, V, 16 - 17 (1805-06) William Wordsworth.

of doctrine. Without paying any attention to date and the change in the poet's thought, the read 'Tintern Abbey' in the light of his expressions in The Prelude. Besides they were unaware of the great difference in tone and view between the 1805-06 version of the poem, and the revised version first published in 1850. Only in 1926 when Professor de Selincourt published his edition with the two texts side by side did the full significance of the changes become apparent. He altered his expression in many passages so as to give a more Christian and orthodox tone to the whole. Clearly then if we are to arrive at a true estimate of the poet's mysticism we must base it on the early version of his poem before it was modified by his later views. It can be illustrated that in the very passages where the poet seemed to reach the loftiest flights of intimate union with God, when he wrote the passages, he did not have any belief in a personal God at all. This does not mean to say that in his moments of extreme unorthodoxy, that Wordsworth was positively irreligious or atheistical. It does mean however, that at this period Wordsworth was prone to identify the natural and the supernatural, and an inclination to get along entirely without Super-Nature in his explanation of the universe.

M. Legouis points out that at the time when Tintern Abbey was written, Wordsworth was still under the intellectual domination of the French officer, Beaupuy, who regarded religion as the enemy of liberty and progress.¹ This could account for the lack of religious tone in his poetry of the period. The naturalistic strain was always strong in his thought

1 Legouis: The Early Life of William Wordsworth: Dutton & Company, New York (1918) Translated by J.W. Matthews - Page 327.

and feeling. For him accordingly, there was no difficulty in seeking within nature herself for clues to the ultimate motive-power of the universe. It was from the contemplation of external nature, from 'nature and the language of the sense', that he received his 'sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused'.¹ An obvious comment is that if the Divine Spirit were so interfused in things, it would be difficult not to come in contact with It. Surely mysticism is more than this. There is no doubt that Coleridge saw the implications of a mechanical philosophy in Tintern Abbey for he wrote in his Aids to Reflection... "An increasing unwillingness to contemplate the Supreme Being in his personal attributes: and thence a distaste to all the peculiar doctrines of the Christian Faith, the Trinity, the Incarnation of the Son of God, and Redemption... Many do I know, and yearly meet with, in whom a false and sickly taste co-operates with prevailing fashion: many who find the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, far too real, too substantial; who find it more in harmony with their indefinite sensations

"To worship Nature in the hill and valley
Not knowing what they love;-"

and (to use the language, but not the sense or purpose of the great poet of our age) would fain substitute for the Jehovah of their Bible -

"A sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused..."²

If anyone knew Wordsworth's temper at the time it was Coleridge. He had counted on him as being the great philosophical poet of

1 Beach - The Concept of Nature in 19-Century English Poetry,
The MacMillan Company - New York (1936) page 125.
2 Coleridge - Aids to Reflection in Complete Works, I, 361-362.

the age, and when he noted the trend that Wordsworth's thought was taking, he hastened to intervene. He saw clearly that the naturalism into which he was sinking would be deadly.

CHANGES MADE IN THE PRELUDE

The Prelude was completed in the year 1805 at a time when Wordsworth was at the height of his poetic power. It was also at a time when he was still much under the sway of his revolutionary doctrines. The publication of the poem did not take place until 1850, and in the meantime it was much revised. The labour that Wordsworth bestowed on the revision was at least equal to that of the first composition.¹ For no poet ever revised his work for the press more meticulously. Writing of some minor pieces in 1816, Wordsworth stated that 'on the correction of the style I have bestowed as I always do, great labour.'² Now the purpose of this paper is not concerned with the changes made in diction and style which all concede to be an improvement, but solely with the changes of ideas. These are significant I feel, for they show how scrupulously Wordsworth removed from the original the unorthodox notions which show how far he had wandered from a true philosophy of life.

Then too, Wordsworth always felt a keen responsibility as a teacher. He was nothing, if not didactic, and he had good reason to know that he was misunderstood. Both the Tintern Abbey and Intimations of Immortality Odes had proved a stumbling block to many. He was accused even by readers of the Excursion of not distinguishing nature as the work of God and

¹ De Selincourt: Wordsworth's Prelude Oxford University Press
London (reprinted 1936) Introduction Page XLX.

² Letters of William Wordsworth (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1935)
Volume 2, 74.

God Himself, and he felt it a duty to remove from the Prelude all that might be interpreted as giving support to the heresy. He also wanted to bring the poem into accord with the later modifications of his faith. He took special care to relate, as far as possible, his naturalistic religion to a definitely Christian dogma. Some of the lines inserted may be construed as mere pietistic embroidery, in no way affecting the argument. Thus there are references to matins and vespers¹ which was not present in the first version of the poem.

Wordsworth is careful throughout by a small change of word or phrase, or by the addition of a sentence to cover up the traces of his early pantheism. Thus

"A soul divine which we participate,
A deathless spirit."

becomes

"As might appear to the eye of fleeting time,
A deathless spirit,"²

and

"God and nature's single sovereignty"

becomes

"Presences of God's mysterious power
Made manifest in Nature's sovereignty".³

These changes are certainly significant in showing the altered thought of Wordsworth. He wished to remove the tone of the original, and even at the price of repetition let me insist once more, that the most 'mystical passages' of the poet were written at a time when he held no real Christian dogma.

¹ William Wordsworth - The Prelude Book 1, line 45.

² Ibid, Book V, lines 16-17.

³ Ibid, Book IX, lines 237-8.

Several important changes were made to alter the flavour of his religion. The original poem stresses a joyous religion, springing from feeling, and this is changed into a more disciplined and less spontaneous emotion. The spirit of the early Prelude is that one, who communing with God and Nature,

"Saw one life and felt that it was joy."¹

To this simple utterance he adds the following lines to remove the taint of deism:

"Communing in this sort through earth and heaven
With every form of creature, as it looked
Towards the Uncreated with a countenance
Of adoration, with an eye of love."

Observe too, the complete removal of the primitivism from this passage:

"I worshipped then among the depths of things
As my soul bade me.....²
I felt and nothing else.."

changed to:

"Worshipping then among the depths of things
As piety ordained.....
I felt, observed, and pondered."

St. Francis of Assisi would sanction the later revision.

In the same way the tone of the next couplet is

changed:

"The feeling of life endless, the great thought
By which we live, Infinity and God."³

becomes when revised:

"Faith in life endless, the sustaining thought
Of human Being, Eternity and God."

¹ William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book 2, line 430.

² William Wordsworth, Ibid. Book 9, lines 234-237.

³ William Wordsworth, Ibid. Book 13, lines 183-184.

In the earlier Prelude the highest achievement of communing with Nature was that it lifted the soul into magnanimity, to that greatness which raised it above its petty self to realize the Godhead that is ours as natural beings in the strength of nature. The revised Prelude alters this conception and stresses the fact that communion with nature's greatness engenders in the soul of man, meekness and simple, trusting faith. The exuberance of Reason is toned down and the excessive claims made for it become in the later poem:

"balanced by pathetic trust
In hopeful reason, leaning on the stay
Of Providence.....¹

The changes noted in the foregoing pages indicate quite clearly the altered mood of the poet. In the last Book particularly, which is the philosophical conclusion of the whole poem, the changes introduced leave a totally different impression than that created by the earlier work. The Naturalism, Pantheism, and pagan attitude towards nature is modified considerably to conform with the more orthodox views. The changes introduced came from the brain that wrote the Ecclesiastical Sonnets and were quite alien to the thought and feeling of the poet's youth of which the Prelude tells the story. The changes were alien too to the mature period in which he wrote the Prelude. At any rate, the alterations made, very clearly change the authentic spirit of the poet between the years 1798 and 1805. That the poet's greatest years of creative power were also those in which his thought was most unorthodox may be regretted.

¹ William Wordsworth - The Prelude - Book XIII, lines 443-445.

The fact though remains. At the time when Wordsworth was most intense, most penetrating and apparently most 'mystical', at that very time was he most faithless and most beset by the errors of naturalism. Many critics regard the two things as synonymous - his irreligion and the height of his poetic career.¹ This of course seems absurd, and while it is not the immediate concern of this paper to trace the growth of Wordsworth's artistic powers and show their interrelation with his current idiom of thought, it does seem to me to be evident that as Wordsworth more and more embraced the tenets of the Anglicanism which was traditional in the family, he grew more and more conservative. Of course it must be remembered that age too may have caused some diminution in his powers, but the essential reason for the loss of his creative skill I believe is that his system had become arid. The sensationalism which motivated his art in his early years was stopping. 'Emotion recollected in tranquillity' had been the material of poetry for him. Obviously such a current was bound to degenerate and virtually dry up. The fact that this gradual stoppage seemed to accompany his departure from his revolutionary doctrines has led many to associate the two. The position seems a most illogical one. To further associate his creative period with a general contempt of formal religion seems additionally illogical.

¹ William Wordsworth's Prelude by E. de Selincourt (Oxford) Introduction, page XXXVIII.

A WORD ON WORDSWORTH'S PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE

A key point in our whole discussion concerns Wordsworth's idea of nature, and his notion of the spirit or soul of the universe. While this idea is more or less scattered throughout all his nature poems, it is expressed most exactly in a few passages in 'Tintern Abbey', 'The Prelude' and 'The Excursion'. In Tintern Abbey after listing the benefits of nature to him in the way of pleasure, of consolation, of restoration and moral stimulation, he arrives at the highest gift of all.

"And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of Elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things."¹

Another passage written in Germany in 1799, and later incorporated in the first book of The Prelude stresses the identical point:

"Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!
Thou Soul that art the Eternity of thought!
And giv'st to forms and images a breath
And everlasting motion!"²

Here spirit and soul are ascribed to nature and assigned as the dynamic principles of the universe. It is noteworthy that this Wisdom and Spirit are inherent in the universe and not separated from it. This same notion can be seen in other passages wherein it is clear that the God whom Wordsworth contemplates does not

¹ William Wordsworth - Tintern Abbey Ode lines 95-104.

² William Wordsworth - The Prelude - Book 1, lines 428-431.

transcend visible nature, but rather is related to it as the soul
is related to the body of man. Note the following:

"The great Mass
Lay bedded in a quickening soul, and all
That I beheld respired with inward breathing."¹

Again:

"From Nature and her overflowing soul
I had received so much that all my thoughts
Were steeped in feeling."²

And more explicitly:

".... my mind hath look'd
Upon the speaking face of earth and heaven
As her prime teacher, intercourse with man
Established by the sovereign Intellect,
Who through that bodily image hath diffused
A Soul divine which we participate,
A deathless spirit."³

Finally:

"Oh! soul of Nature, excellent and fair,
That didst rejoice with me, with whom I too
Rejoiced, through early youth....."⁴

Some of the passages one might dismiss as merely
poetic extravagance if they were unique in Wordsworth's writings.
But their recurrence and attempts at exactness show that the
poet was not merely using figurative language and, once having
personified Nature, was giving her a soul as well. They illus-
trate clearly the very fibre of the poet's thought. Nature is
here conceived and expressed not merely as the order of things,
the norm of conduct or the expression of a benevolent design.
It is clearly and emphatically stated (as explicit as language
could make it) that nature for Wordsworth is the animating

¹ William Wordsworth - The Prelude: Book 3, lines 133-35.

² Op. Cit. Book 2, 416-418.

³ Op. Cit. Book 5, 11-17.

⁴ Op. Cit. Book 11, 138-140.

activating principle of all things in the universe, not merely of living things, but of all the phenomena of the universe. This was the dominant philosophy he held during the Tintern Abbey and The Prelude period.

We see Wordsworth's more orthodox views of nature gaining expression in his Ode on Immortality. Without confining the poet too rigorously to the implications of the doctrine of pre-existence, the human soul comes into this world endowed with a spiritual essence which comes not from nature but from God:

"But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home...."¹

The youth remains 'Nature's Priest' simply by virtue of his nearness to the divine source of inspiration, but the glory and the dream fade away gradually as years remove the soul farther and farther from the original fount of glory. Far from nature being the "nurse, the guide, the guardian" of the soul as she was in Tintern Abbey², she is an agency for weaning the child's spirit away from the thought of his spiritual origin.

"The homely Nurse does all she can
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came."³

Quite clearly the latter poem gives almost a complete recantation of the earlier doctrine of nature. The divorce with his youthful views of nature is complete by the year 1822 when he writes in his Sonnet on Baptism:

¹ William Wordsworth, Intimations of Immortality Ode. lines 64-65.

² William Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey, line 110.

³ William Wordsworth, Intimations of Immortality, Ode, lines 81-84.

"Dear be the Church that, watching o'er the needs
Of Infancy, provides a timely shower
Whose virtue changes to a Christian Flower
A growth from sinful Nature's bed of weeds!"¹

Here emphatically we have the recognition of the doctrine of original sin, and the need of the supernatural graces of the sacraments to raise man from the depths of sin. This stands in sharp contrast to the spirit and diction of Wordsworth's Nature worship when he regarded man as quite capable of his own regeneration.²

References to nature continue to be frequent throughout the later poems of Wordsworth. He continues to celebrate the effect of secluded country life in promoting unworldliness, and he feels that the spiritual life and even Christian faith may be assisted by the beauty of natural forms, as long as faith is not made "of sense the thrall."³ But as even his most ardent admirers admit the heart went out of his nature poetry. He no longer calls himself as in Tintern Abbey, "a worshipper of nature". His faith in nature yields more and more to theological faith, and the naturalism of his philosophy entirely departs.⁴

¹ William Wordsworth, Ecclesiastical Sonnets, lll, Number XX.

² William Wordsworth, The Excursion, Book lV, lines 1126-1132.

³ William Wordsworth, The Church of San Salvador, lines 16-18

⁴ S. F. Gingerich, Essays in the Romantic Poets, New York, 1929, cf. 'Wordsworth', Chapter V.

C H A P T E R I V

AN EVALUATION OF WORDSWORTH'S MYSTICISM

In the light of the principles underlying Christian Mysticism in the accepted and historical meaning of the term, and in the light of the various significant aspects of Wordsworth's philosophy, we are now enabled to evaluate accurately the claim made for Wordsworth that he was a mystic. Confining the term to its strict signification, I say unhesitatingly that Wordsworth was not a true Christian mystic. The truth of this conclusion can be illustrated from a general consideration of the essentials of mysticism, as well as from a careful consideration of the individual passages that might appear at first glance to be expressions of a direct, immediate contact with God.

There is nothing in the Poet's writings either in tone or content that is comparable with the mystic writings of the great Christian Saints. That Wordsworth ever had an experimental, intuitive grasp of God as He Is is an assumption that his writings do not bear out. A diffused and vague contact with a nebulous World Spirit is not at all comparable to an immediate seizure of a personal God. The former might be as readily reached by a pagan; the latter could only be attained by a heroically virtuous Christian soul.

We saw in the discussion of the nature of mysticism the absolute necessity of sanctifying grace to effect a union between a created soul and the Infinitely, Uncreated God.¹

¹ J. Maritain, Op. Cit. Page 333.

In no place does Wordsworth, during the period which have come under closest scrutiny, show any evidence whatever of his reliance on supernatural aid to achieve his vision. Indeed, he stresses the full capability of nature alone to reach union, and to rise from the depths of degradation. This is wholly in conflict with the unequivocal testimony of the great line of Christian mystics who constantly assert the need of God's grace to achieve union with Him. It is not a question, on the one hand, of a human intellect knowing the existence of God, and in a negative way knowing some of his attributes, for each of these is within the unaided powers of the human mind. On the other hand, it is not a question of comprehending God, for that Object can only be adequately grasped by the Divine mind itself. The mystics have asserted the impossibility of the human mind attaining to a direct positive knowledge of the Divine Essence or a direct union with God without His special intervention and aid.

Another serious defect in Wordsworth's approach to the Divine Reality was his reliance on natural knowledge. The entire tone of his work under consideration is that through a contemplation of visible nature, one is led upwards to a fruition of vision. On the contrary, the Christian Mystics insisted on a complete withdrawal from the senses, and their aim was to get away from the senses as completely as possible. A typical illustration of this view was given by St. Gregory who said: "The mind cannot recollect itself unless it has first learned to repress all phantasmata of earthly and heavenly images, and to reject and spurn whatever sense impressions present themselves to its thoughts, in order that it may seek itself within

as it is, without these sensations."¹ Not only is sense knowledge left behind, but even the ordinary processes of the mind are left in abeyance, so that the culmination of the mystical experience is supra-intentional, i.e., direct and not by means of a representative idea. ² Wordsworth, on the contrary, was wont to insist that in nature and the language of the sense, one was best able to reach the loftiest heights.

When Wordsworth suggests that he had attained to a degree of rapture or ecstasy from his contemplation of natural phenomena, he in no way justifies the claim to true mysticism. Raptures and visions, as we saw, though the occasional accompaniment of the true mystical experience, in no way indicate its essential nature. In no manner can God be seen in the imagination or with the bodily eyes. For this reason, St. John of the Cross, while extolling the treasures to be found in the 'dark night of faith', was so distrustful of visions and ecstasies. These last are not genuine proofs of holiness in themselves. It is true that in many hagiographies the disproportionately large place given to mystical phenomena, visions, locutions, ecstasies and the like, is apt to hide from view their relative unimportance. They are undoubtedly to be found in the lives of Christian saints, but they are to be found also in the lives of those whose moral conduct shows them to be very far from saints. The theologians teach that preternatural manifestations of sanctity are either 'gratiae gratis datae', that is, graces given for the benefit of others or the Church as a whole,

1 St. Gregory the Great, Homilies on Ezechiel, 11,V,9.
2.C. Butler, Western Mysticism (Op.Cit.) Page LXVII.

or signs of the body's incapacity to adapt itself to the interior elevation of spirit. It may be noted that Our Lord Himself was never in ecstasy; for any of His followers to wish such a thing for themselves is illusion and vanity.¹

The fact then is this: even positing the validity of Wordsworth's raptures (which were manifestly infrequent, and not mentioned by a single other person who ever wrote about him) these phenomena do not necessarily presuppose supernatural grace. At the highest, they do not transcend the metaphysical speculations of Plato and such men. We have shown the essential supernatural nature of true mysticism, and deny entirely that the poet is a sort of broken down mystic who is moving towards essentially the same vision as that of the saints. If it is of the natural order (and there is no basis for asserting that Wordsworth's visions were of any other order - even he himself insisting on their origin in nature) they differ not only in degree but in kind from the loving knowledge of the Christian mystic.

In Christian mysticism in addition to the abandonment of sense knowledge and a withdrawal from the senses, there is invariably a purgative or ascetical stage. St. Bernard, for instance, describes the pilgrimage of the soul to union with God, as beginning with detachment from all that is not God - viz., the world and self in all their myriad forms. And Saint Bernard was but echoing the common theme of Jesus Christ's teaching. We may dismiss this point briefly by merely stating that there is no evidence of any preliminary asceti-

¹ Alfred Graham, The Love of God (Op. Cit.) Page 225.

cism in Wordsworth.

Clearly then, from a general consideration of the essential features of mysticism and a comparison with Wordsworth's general thought and tone, he has no claim to mysticism in the true and historical sense of the term.

A CONSIDERATION OF WORDSWORTH'S MOST 'MYSTICAL' PASSAGES.

Critics agree on the few poems wherein Wordsworth spoke of his highest flights. The main source of the poet's so called mysticism has always been Tintern Abbey, composed July 13th, 1798, and published the same year. The Prelude, which is perhaps the greatest long poem in the language after Paradise Lost, purports to trace the growth of Wordsworth's mind and picture his spiritual development up till the year 1805 when it was completed. This poem too yields some apparently mystical passages, and is most important for the light it throws on the current philosophy that Wordsworth held when he composed his other early works. The Excursion, though in the main it represents a Christian, and therefore a new point of view, nevertheless it expresses much of the characteristic Wordsworth faith of the period covered by The Prelude on which Wordsworth's claim to be called a mystic is founded.

Turning first to the Tintern Abbey poem, which according to Beatty is a psychological autobiography expressed in the terms used by David Hartley to describe the growth of the mind,¹ and described by Campbell as the exposition of the aes-

1 Arthur Beatty, William Wordsworth, his Doctrine and Art in their Historical Relations (University of Wisconsin Studies, 1927) Page 108.

thetic experience in which the poet realizes the central place which the mind occupies in the all-embracing unitary system of nature and the vast mental riches which such a relationship reveals,¹ we select two passages that seem to be the basis for the highest possible claims for the poet.

" ... 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."²

The poet feels his second moment of rapture at the moment of his reassertion of the delight which captures his soul when it feels itself interfused with the entire universe:

" ... And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things."³

The first comment on these passages should be the poet's own, and this Wordsworth does for us in the following lines:

" well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
of all my moral being."⁴

¹ O. J. Campbell, Wordsworth and Coleridge, (Princeton, 1939) Page 31.

² William Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey, Lines 41-49.

³ William Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey, Lines 93-102.

⁴ William Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey, Lines 107-111.

Another passage near the close of the poem shows with what sentiments the poet approached the object of his study, and bears out as accurately as words can do, my contention that Wordsworth at this time was certainly not thinking of God, as we understand Him.

"..... and that I, so long
A worshipper of Nature, hither came
Unwearied in that service: rather say
With warmer love-oh! with what deeper zeal
Of holier love."¹

Manifestly, Wordsworth's 'vision' or 'rapture' was effected through his contemplation of nature or being. That there was some sort of ecstasy seems implied in the earlier passage quoted (lines 41-49) for he speaks of the almost total suspension of bodily animation. Now as we have already seen there need not be anything supernatural in ecstasy, rapture or trance in themselves,² even if they were brought on by a deliberate meditation of things Divine. Much less need there be a question of the supernatural when the object of meditation was only the things of earth as it was in the case of Wordsworth.

Now the human intellect cannot know the essence of God, nevertheless, this knowledge cannot be radically impossible to it, else God could not bestow upon it the supernatural knowledge of Himself. This is the doctrine of the obediential power of St. Thomas Aquinas's teaching.³ Now since there are various degrees of mystical contemplation to which human souls may be raised, perhaps it may be held that Wordsworth received a special grace that enabled him to 'see into the life of things'.⁴

¹ William Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey, Lines 151-155.

² C. Butler, Western Mysticism, (Op. Cit.) Page 346.

³ St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Pars 3, Qu. XCII, A.1.

⁴ William Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey, Line 49.

However, I do not think this position is safe. It seems, first of all, most improbable that God would bestow his graces either personally or as a 'gratis gratis data' and at the same time not inspire the recipient with some more unmistakable vestige of Divine Wisdom. We know for certain that Jesus Christ instituted a Church and a sacramental system as the ordinary avenues of grace, and as the ordinary means of reaching God. It would imply a contradiction then, if God were, even in an individual case, to inspire a poet to suggest (rather, to insist) that the contemplation of visible nature is an adequate means of seeing God face to face. We must hold for the unicity of all truth and especially of Divine Truth, hence it would seem manifestly absurd that a poet could be given the message from his 'vision' that a new and different means of attaining to immediate union with God was available for any who wished to use it.

This point is not the central one of my thesis, but I think it is significant, and rules out the contention that might be made that natural mysticism reaches the same object as true, supernatural mysticism: that the aesthetic experience of the poet differs only in degree of intensity from the loving knowledge of the saint's union with God.

As I indicated earlier in treating of Wordsworth's Naturalism, the poem Tintern Abbey does not contain one single concrete reference to God. In a broad sense, the tone of the poem is religious, but there is no evidence that the writer would have to be a Christian. A cultured and refined pagan might have made any statement in the poem. Indeed the 'presence' which the poet contacts is not even capitalized much less personified. Far from being a contact with a transcendent God,

distinct from the universe, the 'presence' that Wordsworth realizes falls short even of a Pantheistic idea. At this particular period of his career, Wordsworth seems to have been least influenced by the theological doctrines of Christianity. In his references to the active principle of the universe, he does not recourse to any Supreme Being, distinct from the universe to explain the goodness and purposiveness of nature. This is all the more significant from the fact that the nature writers of the previous century were most careful to remove any taint of unorthodoxy. It seems possible that Wordsworth was still measurably under the influence of Godwin and d'Holbach and was desirous of avoiding any suggestion of supernaturalism. He wished perhaps to attribute to nature the self-active power of a non-materialistic philosophy without referring this power to any theological source.¹

Wordsworth did not always maintain this philosophy of nature, and gradually he replaced the naturalistic basis of his thought with an increasingly orthodox system. However, it is most significant that at the time he wrote Tintern Abbey he was unmistakably dominated by purely naturalistic concepts. The 'being' that he contacted in Tintern Abbey then was unquestionably not God, as he is understood by Christian revelation. Wordsworth does not say any place in the poem that he did have an immediate union with God. In fact he is most careful throughout to remove any hint of the supernatural, and is entirely content to base his idea of communing with the highest reality on - 'nature and the language of the sense'. Far from being a true mystic experience, the thought of the poem Tintern Abbey

¹ Joseph Beach, Op. Cit. Page 205.

falls far short of the teleological or cosmological demonstrations of the very existence of God. Critics then, I believe, err seriously in ascribing to the poem any mystical aspects; it is an assumption that neither the thought content in general nor particular passages bear out.

Turning now to consider some particular passages of the Prelude, a selection appears in the third Book which has the loftiest tone:

"Or turning the mind in upon herself,
Pored, watch'd, expected, listen'd; spread my thoughts
And spread them with a wider creeping; felt
Incumbencies more awful, visitings
Of the Upholder of the tranquil Soul,
Which underneath all passion lives secure
A steadfast life. But peace! it is enough
To notice that I was ascending now
To such community with highest truth."
(Book III, lines 111-126.)

This portion of The Prelude was written in the year 1804,¹ and the third Book from which it was taken covers the period of his residence at Cambridge. At that time he was seventeen years old, and at the time of writing it, he was in his thirty-fourth year. In a poem such as The Prelude, there is always the difficulty of deciding how accurately the poet recaptures the exact feelings of the time written about, and how much the recollections were coloured by his thoughts at the time of his writing. Wordsworth, himself, writing of his recollections of Cambridge where he spent an unprofitable period, said:

"I cannot say what portion is in truth
The naked recollection of that time,
And what may rather have been called to life
By after meditation."²

¹ H. W. Garrod, Wordsworth, (Oxford, at the Clarendon Press) 1923, p.37

² William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book 3, lines 610-613.

This point is significant in interpreting exactly what the poet means in certain passages, and while we may assume that in the main, the poem is an accurate revelation of the growth of his mind, there are bound to be details introduced which are far beyond the mentality of a child. So for example, some of the philosophy recorded in the first book seems amazingly mature for one who was not yet - "Twice five summers old".¹

The general tone of Wordsworth's writings in the year 1804 illustrates that the poet had advanced from the purely natural strain of the Tintern Abbey period, to at least a Pantheistic attitude.

Certainly as he conceived and wrote it, The Prelude abounds in an unorthodox view of the relation between God and nature. As I indicated in the revisions he made in the poem, Wordsworth was anxious to remove the traces of naturalism and pantheism and bring his thought into conformity with a more traditionally Christian philosophy. Thus, in the passage just quoted,

"the Upholder of the tranquil soul'
Which underneath all passion lives secure
A steadfast life....."

is more carefully described in the 1850 version of the poem in the following manner:

"...The Upholder of the tranquil soul,
That tolerates the indignities of Time,
And, from the centre of Eternity
All finite motions overruling, lives
In glory immutable. ..."²

¹ William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book 1, line 560.

² William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book 3, lines 117-121.

Quite evidently, Wordsworth noted the unmistakable pantheistic tone of the original version, and was careful to remove it in the light of his mature philosophy.

There is no question but that the God that Wordsworth contemplates in the third Book of the Prelude is not a transcendent Being. Shortly after the passage quoted above, the poet adds:

"..... the great mass
Lay bedded in a quickening soul, and all
That I beheld respired with inward meaning."¹

A similar concept of the relation between God and the universe is suggested earlier in The Prelude:

"Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe!
Thou soul that art the Eternity of Thought
And giv'st to forms and images a breath
And everlasting motion."²

Evidently the God that Wordsworth contacts does not transcend visible nature, but is related to it directly as the intelligent and vital life force. Wordsworth's contact with the God of The Prelude may be taken for granted, for it would seem very difficult to avoid an intimate contact with a Being who is the soul of the visible universe. In this Wordsworth differs precisely from the Christian mystics. With the true, and traditional mystics an infinite abyss separates God from the universe. The universe is His creation it is true; His Providence sustains it, for providence is but a continuation of the creative act,³ but the universe is certainly not God. To the true mystic, a direct, conscious contact of the soul with God is something

1 William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book 3, lines 130-132. (1850 Version)
The lines are identical in the 1805-06 version.

2 William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book 3, lines 401-404.

3 St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Pars Tertia, Qu. XCII, Art.1.

incredibly great and magnificent; to Wordsworth in the light of his philosophy it would seem a perfectly natural experience. At that even, Wordsworth implies that for the most part, his contact with the Spirit of the universe is indirect.

When one contrasts the approach of the Christian mystic with that of Wordsworth "to community with highest truth"¹ one is struck by the fact that the Christian mystics knew that union was effected through sanctifying grace, while Wordsworth in no place mentions the need of a supernatural help. In fact he asserts the full and adequate power of the unaided mind to reach the loftiest states of union. The Imaginative Will and the highest faculties of the mind are capable, he states, of raising aloft the mind to union.² I assert once more that these are absolutely incapable of themselves of effecting a true, direct, immediate and conscious contact with God which is the essence of true mysticism. If Wordsworth, using these instruments alone, thought he reached an immediate vision of God, he suffered illusion. Much as we may admire the poet, there is no need to sustain the illusion. We will not heighten Wordsworth's true stature as a poet by reading into and ascribing to his poetry ideas that it does not contain.

Clearly and emphatically ~~then~~, Wordsworth was not a mystic in any real sense of the term. At the time of his greatest visions, his idea of God was most naturalistic or pantheistic. It is significant that as he became more orthodox in his religious beliefs, his 'visions' also ceased. Instead of

¹ William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book 3, Line 126.

² William Wordsworth, The Excursion, Book 4, lines 1126-1129.

ascribing this to the decadent powers of the poet, does it not seem more logical that as his thought clarified and his concept of God became more accurate, Wordsworth realized more and more the abyss that separated him from God. Whence he was aware of his inability to reach a real union with a transcendental Being through a contemplation of nature and the mere effects of the First Cause. I believe, and the alterations made in the original version of The Prelude seem to bear out the contention, that Wordsworth saw the inadequacy of his original philosophy, and sought to change it, and make it conform to his more mature judgment.

C H A P T E R V

CONCLUSION

Poetry is a decidedly poor substitute for religion; its content is but a feeble reflection of the truth revealed through Christian Revelation. While the poet and the mystic may have something in common, they remain far apart. The mystic becomes more and more absorbed in the divine, and detached from the sensible; he tends to silent contemplation. The poet, though he soars, remains of the earth, conscious of his humanity and seeking humanly to speak through his frail medium. To ask him to do more is to mistake his mission, to underrate the depths of the Mystery of God or to overrate the intellectual powers of mankind. As a substitute for the knowledge of Christian faith, poetry is foredoomed to be miserably inadequate.

The role of the poet is to tear aside the veil that enshrouds the things of God, and to remove the film of custom that blinds men's eyes. In doing this he does a great service. He is a sort of priest of the visible creation, and in pointing out to men the unsuspected beauties that lurk in common and ordinary things, he ennobles their natures, and can render them more susceptible to Reality. The poet, as poet, does not lead men to an immediate union with God; only grace can effect such a union. Having removed the veil that surrounds reality, the poet discloses it as a fresh, lovely, loveable thing. The poet knows it as true, and loves it as good, and we who share the poet's experience are enriched as living, loving, creatures.

When the poet turns the brilliance of his sensitive nature to the contemplation of a thing, we who follow his quest of truth and beauty, are inclined to penetrate more deeply into the nature of reality. At times, following the poet's leadership, we may be led to appreciate something of the Maker of that thing. After all, in order to fully understand what a rose really is, we have to understand something of the Creator of the rose. The poet since he is a rational being, may assist us to scale the ladder of effect and cause to a rational consideration of the First Cause. Such an ascent for a mind devoid of faith is bound to be hesitant and slow; in fact, there need be no ascent at all. Countless cultured pagans sated with the beauty of art, music and poetry have gone no farther. Content apparently with the vestiges of God, and ravished by the beauty of the things of earth, they have failed to comprehend that earthly beauty can only reach its fullest meaning when seen in the light of Uncreated Beauty which is God.

The poet may let men share in the deep experiences of life and thus broaden their understandings and vivify their own personal experiences. The poet cannot purge their natures from the guilt of original sin since his medium is only a human one. He cannot illuminate the darkened understanding of men, nor buttress man's weakened will. Divine grace alone can effect these. The insight of the poet is but a faint echo of the virtue of faith; his aspirations, a faint glimmer of the virtue of hope; his love, only a tiny spark from the fire of Divine Charity. To seek then in poetry for the key to this life or the next is to grope in barren frustration.

It is thus with the poetry of William Wordsworth. Those who would find in his poetry a substitute for religion err seriously and are bound to be disappointed. We have shown that Wordsworth was not a mystic in the true and historical acceptance of the term. The data derived from his contemplation of nature is meagre indeed compared with the accepted dogmas of Christianity. The approach he suggests to what he considered Ultimate Reality is a most narrow one; in fact it is not an approach at all, for we have shown that no attainment of God is possible without grace, and Wordsworth insisted on the self-sufficiency of human nature. To a mind without faith, Wordsworth's nature poetry would offer a very dubious and vague avenue to God. It could not do otherwise for the poet himself had a mistaken idea of God when he wrote it. If such poetry were instrumental in leading a soul to the Truth it would be because of its very incompleteness.

A mind already equipped with the saving truths of salvation may find in Wordsworth's poetry much that is inspirational. anyone who sings as ardently and sincerely as Wordsworth did of the beauties that are hidden all around us, is worthy of our admiration and gratitude. To those who already possess a knowledge and love of God (even though these may be imperfect) a striking and fresh picture such as Wordsworth has given us of the beauty and richness of God's creation, may serve to enrich that knowledge and intensify that love.

This is our conclusion from a consideration of the poetry and method of William Wordsworth: his mysticism failed. In no place does it approach the loving knowledge of God displayed by the saints; in no place does it give one unmistakeable

proof of having attained to a direct intuition of God. At its best, it reached only a vague and confused union with a vague and confused World Spirit - emphatically not the Transcendent God of Christian revelation.

Wordsworth does not thereby fail as a poet. His sincerity is intense, his simplicity is appealing, his beauty is inspirational. The richness and grandeur of created nature found in him an eloquent singer. If his magnificent pictures of nature's loveliness should prove instrumental in turning even one soul to consider the Source of that loveliness, he will not have written in vain. The claim is surely a modest one.



The Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, 1942.

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