Disputed Questions in Wordsworth's Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood

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DISPUTED QUESTIONS IN WORDSWORTH'S
ODE: INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY
FROM RECOLLECTIONS OF
EARLY CHILDHOOD

by
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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate
School of Loyola University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements For
the Degree of Master of Arts

June
1958
VITA AUCTORIS

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Early in March, 1802, William Wordsworth, sitting at breakfast one morning, began to compose his most majestic Ode, on a subject very close to his heart:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream...

At this time, Wordsworth completed four stanzas of the Ode, and then, strangely enough, put it aside for nearly two years. Then he finally did finish it, he had produced one of the great lyrical poems of the English language, a significant and profound expression of his own poetic inspiration, his philosophy, and his natural religion. He had also written an Ode that would challenge critical analysis even down to our own times. This thesis will study the Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Immortality, especially with reference to three points of dispute. These are the nature of the "childhood vision," which Wordsworth describes so rapturously in the early part of the Ode; the theory

of pre-existence of the soul proposed in the Ode; and the controversial "recovery stanzas" ending the poem with an exaltation of the "philosophic mind" in place of the childhood vision which seems to have been permanently lost. Finally, it will be necessary to examine the evidence for Wordsworth's reputed "conversion" to orthodox Christianity in the Anglican Church, as a result of losing his more "mystical" religious feeling together with the childhood vision.

These three topics have all merited much excellent critical writing, embodying a great diversity of opinions. It will be useful to examine the leading critics' commentaries on these disputed passages in order to arrive, if possible, at a positive synthesis of interpretation satisfactorily accounting for all the difficulties in Wordsworth's text. While only a treatment of the Ode itself is projected in this thesis, its backgrounds of one kind or another will, of course, need to be set down together with the critical opinions surrounding the Ode. The conclusions of this thesis should also provide some interesting general insights into Wordsworth's most recurrent themes and cherished ideals, which find classical expression in the Ode.

First, then, something of the Ode's background. Wordsworth was at Dove Cottage in Town-End, Grasmere, with his sister Dorothy at the time he began the Ode. Dorothy states in

her diary that Wordsworth had written the *Rainbow* poem just the evening before he wrote the *Ode*,\(^3\) which suggests that this little poem may have touched off the writing of the *Ode* itself, since the last three lines of the *Rainbow* are affixed by Wordsworth to the *Ode* as a prefatory motto; in full, the poem reads:

My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky:  
So was it when my life began;  
So is it now I am a man:  
So be it when I shall grow old,  
Or let me die!  
The child is father of the Man;  
And I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.

The last three lines, "The child is father of the Man," etc., are the ones used as the motto. Some critics attach great importance to this in forming their interpretation of the *Ode*'s overall meaning, as will be seen.

Dorothy records the event of the *Ode*'s composition in her diary as follows: "... a divine morning. At breakfast William wrote part of an ode."\(^4\) The entry is dated Saturday, March 27, 1802. Wordsworth dated the poem 1803-1806, and many critics, thinking that therefore Dorothy's entry refers to some other poem, have on the basis of Wordsworth's dating concluded that the *Ode*'s later stanzas were very probably influenced by the death of Wordsworth's brother John in February, 1805.\(^5\) De Selincourt however

\(^3\)Garrod, p. 112.


advances conclusive proof, based on further investigation, that
here, "as often," Wordsworth's dating is inaccurate, and that the
Ode was begun in March, 1802, and probably finished in March,
1804, before the death of Wordsworth's brother John. 6

Some critics think that Coleridge's visit to the Wordsworth's
home just a few days previously, in a state of dejection and
despair—not to mention physical wretchedness—due to his opium
habit, may have been the shock that touched off Wordsworth's
writing about his own lamentable state in the Ode. As it will
be seen more fully below in Chapter Two, Wordsworth in these years
following his return from France was in low spirits and rather
poor health himself, and had felt a lessening of his poetic in-
spiration. But this situation was not new at the time Wordsworth
wrote the Ode, and so, as Bowra concludes, "Something had forced
the issue (not a new one, but now more sharply focused) on him
with a new emphasis, and it seems likely that this was his discov-
ery that his crisis was not confined to himself but afflicted
Coleridge in an even more poignant manner." 7 There are ample facts
to substantiate this view, which is important in interpreting
the poem.

The first of these facts is the striking similarity between
the opening lines of the Immortality Ode and the first lines of

6de Selincourt, Works, IV, 465.

Coleridge's poem, "The Mad Monk," written in 1800, and expressing a loss of poetic spirit very similar to what Wordsworth felt.

Here are Coleridge's opening lines:

There was a time when earth, and sea, and skies,
The bright green vale, and forest's dark recess,
When all things, lay before mine eyes
In steady loveliness;
But now I feel, on earth's uneasy scene,
Such sorrows as will never cease:--
I only ask for peace;
If I must live to know that such a time has been! 8

That Wordsworth's Ode owes its origins to this earlier, little-known poem of Coleridge's is asserted by Mrs. Moorman, arguing that Wordsworth had never previously used the ode form, "yet in vigour, freedom, and majestic dignity it flows along, as though all came 'as naturally as leaves to a tree.'" 9 Then too, argues Mrs. Moorman, "The resemblance to the opening stanza of Wordsworth's Ode is too striking to be accidental," even though there is little else in common between the two poems, and even though it is strange that Wordsworth should have been thinking of Coleridge's poem so closely. 10

A more immediate and probably source for the Ode, also from Coleridge, is Coleridge's "Dejection: an Ode." For on the very day after writing the first part of the Ode, Wordsworth and


10 Ibid., p. 530.
Dorothy departed for Keswick to see Coleridge; and on April 4, a Sunday, while they were still at Keswick, Coleridge wrote between sunset and midnight the "Letter" in verse to Sarah Hutchinson, his quasi-fiancé, which, much pruned and with the name "Sarah" changed to "Edmund," was published in October in the *Morning Post* under the title "Dejection: an Ode." That Coleridge had read Wordsworth's *Ode* before writing his letter is clear enough, claims Mrs. Moorman, from internal evidences of similarity. Thus Mrs. Moorman has established, it seems, the interdependence of the two Odes, Wordsworth's poem both taking its beginning from Coleridge's "The Mad Monk," and its direction from Coleridge's Dejection Ode. Thus, Wordsworth's *Ode* is a kind of reply to his friend's desolation.

Bowra recounts that on April 21, after returning from Keswick, Dorothy wrote in her journal: "William and I sauntered a little in the garden. Coleridge came to us, and repeated the verses he wrote to Sarah. I was affected by them, and ... in miserable spirits. The sunshine, the green fields, and the fair sky made me sadder; even the little happy lambs, sporting about, seemed but sorrowful ... I went to bed after dinner, could not sleep." Bowra states that Coleridge brought the final version of "Dejection: an Ode" to the Wordsworths on May 6, and printed it in the *Morning*

11 Moorman, p. 528.

Post on October 4, Wordsworth's wedding-day. The poem is a cry from Coleridge's heart to his most intimate friends," Bowra states, and adds that Wordsworth's Ode is, at least in its last eight stanzas, "a kind of answer to Coleridge's 'Dejection,'" a declaration of belief intended to counteract the "searching doubts and melancholy fears" which Wordsworth saw in Coleridge and felt to a lesser extent in himself.

Both poems are concerned with central problems in the Romantic outlook, but Wordsworth was more resourceful, tougher than Coleridge; refusing to accept defeat, he sought a new scheme to replace the old. In setting out his positive beliefs for the comfort of his friend, Wordsworth "could not but think of his own case and try to lighten his own burden."

Just what the poem is about remains a controversial point. One critic states flatly that the Ode "proposes another cure for melancholia--the attainment of a trancelike condition by recreating within oneself the experiences of childhood." This man is the author of a learned and well-received recent "re-interpretation of Wordsworth"--Frederick Wilse Bateson. The editors of the Cambridge edition of Wordsworth's works define the Ode's meaning as

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13 Bowra, p. 86.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., p. 86.
16 Ibid., p. 88.
"the relation of the soul to sense, and the possibility that the former may forget its celestial birth," with the implied message that "by blending early intuition and mature reason we shall be able to see into the life of things."^{18} Helen Darbishire thinks the theme is "the immortal nature of the human spirit, intuitively known by the child, partly forgotten by the growing man, but to be known once more in maturity through intense experience of heart and mind."^{19} Wright Thomas and Stuart Brown, authors of Reading Poems, give this outline of the Ode: "in lines 1-57 the poet remembers his dream-like experience as a child and regrets its loss. Then in lines 129-203 he states his evaluation of that early experience and tells how the remembrance of it, and the powers that then began to operate, now enable him to find permanent and mature understanding and happiness" in the so-called "philosophic mind."^{20}

Many critics, says Lionel Trilling, regard the Ode as "Wordsworth's conscious farewell to his art, a dirge sung over departing powers." Trilling has undertaken a kind of private crusade against this opinion, asserting that the Ode is "actually a dedication to new powers," and that the fact that Wordsworth did not realize his

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^{20} Wright Thomas and Stuart Brown, Reading Poems (New York, 1941), p. 660.
hopes for these new powers is "quite another matter." Trilling supports his opinion by evidence from Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence," written earlier in 1802, and dealing with a mood of sullenness that occurs and is relieved. In this poem, Wordsworth, perhaps remembering the saying that "we poets in our youth begin in gladness;/ But thereof come in the end despondency and madness," urges himself to think of all the bad things that can possibly happen to a poet—solitude, pain of heart, distress and poverty, cold, pain and labor, all fleshly ills, and then even madness—but he never says that a poet stands in danger of losing his basic talent. Therefore, argues Trilling, Wordsworth did not fear the loss of his talent, and his famous Ode, which is obviously a poem about some sort of growth and change, is not a poem about growing old, as some say, but rather "it is about growing up." This more optimistic view of the Ode is the one that shall be defended in this thesis.

Some critics, as has been remarked, emphasize the biographical element in interpreting the Ode; following Harper, Wordsworth's standard biographer before Mary Moorman's work appeared, these critics make a sharp distinction between "the two Wordsworths, the

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22 Ibid., p. 140.

23 Ibid., p. 131.
earlier and the later, the radical and the conservative, the great-
er and the lesser."24 In contrast to this biographical approach, Cleanth Brooks proposes treating the poem as it were in a "vacuum," and this proposal has met with considerable attention—especially among the New Critics, of course. Brooks prescinds from all the light which is admittedly thrown on difficult points in the Ode by Wordsworth's letters, notes, and other poems; and though he does not think this forfeiture need be permanent, he is convinced that it helps to avoid confusion "between what the poem 'says' and what Wordsworth in general may have meant."25 Brooks' analysis of the poem on this basis is, of necessity, chiefly confined to a discussion of the imagery in relation to the theme of the whole poem; and in this sphere his remarks have merited much praise, and will be adduced later in this thesis when imagery is discussed.

Thomas and Brown, likewise taking the Ode at its face value, think that it deals primarily with the "psychology of childhood experience,"26 which is certainly true as far as it goes; but this is perhaps an oversimplification. Wordsworth himself lends weight to this view, however, by his own comments on the Ode: "This poem rests entirely," he writes, "upon two recollections of childhood;

26 Thomas and Brown, p. 660.
one that of a splendour in the objects of sense which is passed away; the other an indisposition to bend to the law of death, as applying to our own particular case. A reader who has not a vivid recollection of these feelings having existed in his mind in childhood cannot understand that poem."27 Evidently Wordsworth added the Ode’s subtitle, "Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood," to the 1815 edition in order to clarify the Ode’s meaning. When first published in 1807, the title was simply "Ode." Thomas and Brown claim that the subtitle has rather added to the confusion by the ambiguous word "immortality." The word in the Ode’s context, they claim, does not mean "life after death or life before birth; Wordsworth intended it to mean that human consciousness, the power of our mind and imagination, is infinite and can create experiences that are beyond things existing in time and space. The poem concerns what Coleridge called our ‘modes of inmost being.’"28

Thus far concerning the disputed theme of the Ode. In this study the writer will contend primarily for the positions that Coleridge’s Dejection Ode did play a part in dictating the form and content of Wordsworth’s Ode; that "The Mad Monk," Coleridge’s earlier poem, did give Wordsworth the initial idea for his Ode; and that the Ode is not a "dirge sung over departing powers," but

28 Thomas and Brown, p. 660, emphasis added.
a poem about the childhood experience and its psychological relationship to the adult mentality, but with admitted overtones of a speculation about the immortality of the soul as tangibly experienced by the child. Thus a middle course can be steered between two opinions which do not really contradict each other, but are rather a matter of emphasis.

This chapter might be suitably closed by demonstrating the importance of the Ode in Wordsworth studies, which makes it an apt subject for the critical discussion to be undertaken here. That Wordsworth himself considered the Ode unusually significant is indicated by the unusually lofty key in which he writes. He is professedly the poet of commonplace diction; yet here he speaks in the sublimest language, in such lines as "The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep." Then too, never before had he attempted a poem in this majestic Ode style; "His usual odes are not like this, but more formal and regular," remarks Bowra. The Ode was traditionally appropriate to great occasions and sublime subjects; Wordsworth's choice of it is therefore meaningful. The Ode has been called the embodiment of Wordsworth's most characteristic doctrines, those concerning childhood, nature, and the poetic vision as connected with these two. Finally, when Wordsworth him-

27Bowra, p. 78.
30Ibid., p. 77.
self arranged his collected poems for publication, he placed the Ode at the end, as if he regarded it as the crown of his work and "his last word on the central problems of his creative life."31

With these considerations in mind, the first of the three great disputed questions of the Ode, namely the nature of Wordsworth's "childhood vision," may now be approached.

31 Bowra, p. 76.
CHAPTER TWO

THE CHILDHOOD VISION

Wordsworth says there was a time in his childhood when everything he looked upon was "apparelled in celestial light." What does this mean? What kind of special vision, if any, did he enjoy as a child? Is this a mystic recounting his precocious extraordinary experiences, or merely a poet speaking in magic language of the childhood experiences that are common to all of us? Such is the question to be examined in this chapter. Further, Wordsworth says he has lost this vision; is he then writing a simple and beautiful poem about the fading enchantment of childhood such as everyone experiences it, or is he lamenting the loss of a special and personal mystical vision which gave him his unique poetic talent? Critical interpretation—and evaluation—of the poem hinges on this question.

Cleanth Brooks thinks that it is the child himself, looking round him with joy, who is at once the source and the recipient of this vision Wordsworth has in mind. This is manifested, says Brooks, by the rainbow, moon, stars, and sun—all examples of celestial light—in contrast to the earth. Wordsworth says the rainbow and the rose are beautiful, and one expects him to go on and say the same of the moon; but he reverses the pattern, "with
one of the nicest touches in the poem, 1 to say,

The moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare, 2
implying that though the poet cannot see the visionary gleam, the
moon can see it; and he suggests how she can: she sheds the gleam
herself, lighting up and thus creating her world. 3 Thus it is the
child himself, similarly, who confers the radiance on the morning
world which so delights his sight. In this context the word "ap­
parelled" seems important to Brooks, for "the light was like a gar­
ment. It could be taken off. It was not natural to the earth; it
has been taken off." 4 The dream quality, Brooks thinks, is thus
definitely linked with the transience of the experience. 5 The
world has a glory and a freshness for the child because it is all
so new to him; he is looking on it for the first time. The "ce­
lestial" quality of the light need not be taken as a reference to
the idea of immortality in the second part of the Ode, Trilling
points out. This idea may not have been in Wordsworth's mind at
all when he wrote the first part. "Celestial light" probably means

2"Immortality Ode," 12-13, Works, ed. de Selincourt, IV, 279.
3Brooks, p. 118.
5Ibid., p. 117.
only something different from ordinary, earthly, scientific light; it is a light of the mind, shining even in darkness. Helen Darbishire concurs with Brooks in observing that this imagery of light "presides over the whole Ode," and that Wordsworth's thought is carried "from stanza to stanza and from phrase to phrase in images of light."7

Such is Wordsworth's own description of the vision he has lost; but the evidence from the description in the Ode is inconclusive. This might be any child's loss, and then again it might be a poet's loss of vision. Wordsworth's other writings and the comments of critics will be helpful at this point. What further evidence do these provide?

Bowra claims that Wordsworth was aware of the waning of his youthful vision as much as four years before he began the Ode, and had been conscious of this situation for some time. When he wrote "Tintern Abbey" in 1798, he distinguished between the blessed time of his seventeenth year, "For nature then / To me was all in all,"8 and the years after it when this all-absorbing vision was lost:

That time is past,
And all its aching joys are now no more,
And all its dizzy raptures.9

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6Trilling, The Liberal Imagination, p. 132.
Mrs. Moorman supports this claim: "In the uneasy years following his return from France, his vision of Nature had certainly darkened. The undisturbed 'intercourse with Beauty' was now all too frequently a restless, 'greedy' indulgence of the outward senses, a striving no doubt to recapture the old peace, which bitter human experience had set at a distance, and mental conflict made unattainable. Such was his mood when he first visited the Wye and Tintern."¹⁰ And yet, Mrs. Moorman thinks that the experience which he describes in the Ode, the awareness of the loss of vision, must have been of more recent occurrence than that of those days at Alfoxden, from 1797 to May of 1798; "His full consciousness of it was, perhaps, not very much earlier than the actual writing of the Rainbow poem."¹¹

Raymond Dexter Havens agrees that by 1798, "the first ecstasy of youth and early manhood was already abated, although Wordsworth was then nearing the height of his creative powers."¹² This is a very important statement, for in effect Havens is denying that the loss of youthful sensuousness in Wordsworth's reactions to nature was at all equivalent to the loss of his poetic powers. Yet Havens

¹⁰Moorman, Wordsworth: The Early Years, p. 531.
¹¹Ibid., p. 532.
admits that about the time of his brother's death in February, 1805, Wordsworth was suffering "not only a second and greater decline in his delight in the external world but a serious dulling of his imagination. The 'Ode to Duty,' 'Peele Castle,' and parts of the Immortality Ode were written about the same time . . . and all reveal the loss of the 'deep power of joy' as well as a new emphasis on 'duty and pathetic truth' and on 'thoughts of man's concerns, such as become a human creature.'"13

Bowra admits that Wordsworth "naturally cannot make his meaning very precise, but has to speak in image and metaphor. What he has lost is variously called 'celestial light,' 'visionary gleam,' 'the glory and the freshness of a dream.' But despite the lack of exactness, it is clear that Wordsworth has lost something very special in his whole approach to nature and his relations with it."14 And again, Mrs. Moorman comes to Wordsworth's defense by way of rebuttal, assuring the reader that the "timely utterance" of the third stanza could scarcely be anything else than the Rainbow poem, whose "bridge-symbol," the rainbow itself, had come "timely" to reassure Wordsworth that, after all, and in spite of appearances, there had been no violent breach with the past, and all was not lost.15

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13 Havens, p. 631.
14 Bowra, p. 79, emphasis added.
15 Moorman, p. 531.
Browra is convinced that the completed Ode tells of a crisis that has indeed been surmounted, but was very grave nevertheless; certainly more severe than Wordsworth realized, though as he passed through it, working away at the poem, he found a cheerfulness that could not have been his when he received his first shock, but rather arose from the "philosophic mind" of the later stanzas.

Here again Cleanth Brooks takes the other side in the debate, asserting that after all the childhood vision is only one aspect of the "primal sympathy," which still remains intact, only accidentally altered, as the faculty by which men live; thus, "the continuity between child and man is actually unbroken." 17

Trilling also insists on an optimistic view of Wordsworth's "crisis." Commenting on the second stanza,

The Rainbow comes and goes,  
And lovely is the Rose,  
The Moon doth with delight  
Look round her when the heavens are bare;  
Waters on a starry night  
Are beautiful and fair;  
The sunshine is a glorious birth;  
But yet I know, where'er I go,  
That there hath past away a glory from the earth,

Trilling observes that Wordsworth is so far from noting a dimi-

16 Bowra, p. 79.  
17 Brooks, p. 137.  
18 "Immortality Ode," ll. 10-18 (de Selincourt, IV, 279).
nution of his physical senses that he explicitly affirms their strength. He is at pains to tell the reader how vividly he sees the rainbow, the rose, the moon, the stars, the water and the sunshine. He even affirms his ability to perceive beauty; and yet, he knows "That there hath past away a glory from the earth."

Trilling distinguishes therefore on this word glory, conceding that a special delight or emotional coloring may have been lost, but denying that any failure of the senses is meant. "Thirty-two," says Trilling, Wordsworth's age at the time of writing the first part of the Ode, "is an extravagantly early age for a dramatic failure of the senses." 19

Nevertheless it is a rather striking fact that Wordsworth did age prematurely. Bateson recounts that De Quincey tells a story of a fellowpassenger on the stage-coach appealing to the other passengers for a verdict on Wordsworth's age. 'You'll never see three-score, I'm of opinion.' And everybody agreed, De Quincey assures us, that Wordsworth was rather over than under sixty. This was in 1809, when he was really only thirty-eight or thirty-nine! Dorothy also got old before her time in the same way. De Quincey attributed this premature ageing of the Wordsworths to 'the secret fire of a temperament too fervid; the self-consuming energies of the brain, that gnaw at the heart and life-strings for ever.' Whatever the precise explanation, the fact that he looked an old man before he was forty is extremely suggestive. Wordsworth's poetry was emotional rather than intellectual, and the physical basis was perhaps more important in his case than most writers find it. 20

19 Trilling, pp. 132-133.

H. W. Garrod proposes a similar theory to explain Wordsworth's failure of poetic power. "One is tempted to the conjecture," he says, "that the extraordinary force and frequency of visionary experiences in his earlier years exhausted prematurely--actually wore out by over-use--the faculty of vision itself.\textsuperscript{21} If Garrod means physical vision, it is quite possible; but if he means spiritual or intellectual vision, he is certainly mistaken, for spiritual powers do not of themselves "wear out." Of course these powers of the soul can be impaired indirectly, through bodily sickness or sheer debility. But while Wordsworth may have looked old, he was certainly robust well into old age, as his walking tours attest. He was no neurotic visionary, as Garrod seems to suppose.

Here as in other difficult problems, Mrs. Moorman gives her characteristically balanced explanation of the facts without going to extremes. She admits that a natural decline in "organic sensibility" as Wordsworth approached middle life could have mitigated his extreme sensitivity to sights and sounds.\textsuperscript{22} "This process--perhaps itself natural and inevitable--may have been hastened by physical pain and weakness, from which he had suffered much during the last two or three years.\textsuperscript{[he had indeed been ill for a time after his return from France]}, and by the intensity with which he had laboured at his appointed task. He had become a great poet.

\textsuperscript{21} Garrod, \textit{Wordsworth}, p. 119.

\textsuperscript{22} Moorman, p. 532.
In doing so he had paid a price for that achievement—he no longer beheld the earth with the colours of heaven. Again, this is not saying that Wordsworth had lost his talent, but only his youthful spirits, which in young poets often serve as a substitute for skill as yet unattained.

"So far as we can judge," claims Garrod, "as far as general report can be trusted, Wordsworth's experience in this particular is not that of ordinary men." This can readily be granted without admitting that Wordsworth had lost some kind of supernatural vision essential to his poetry. Ordinary men are not as preoccupied with their youthful sensitivity to Nature as was Wordsworth; and ordinary men are not so extraordinarily endowed in this respect as was Wordsworth—but his experience need not have been beyond the natural.

As to the precise nature of Wordsworth's "childhood vision," C. M. Bowra has perhaps given the best single analysis:

It is idle to ask too closely what Wordsworth means by the 'visionary gleam' or 'the glory and the dream.' If it were simple, he could probably have expressed it in simple words, but because it is complex and unfamiliar, he uses image and symbol. We may however distinguish three elements in it. First there is Wordsworth's conviction that at times he was in another world which was more real than that of the senses, a world not of sight but of vision. Secondly, his entries into this world were closely connected with his creative and imaginative faculties. It was the justification of his poetry, and he believed that his acquaintance with

23 Moorman, p. 533.
24 Garrod, p. 119.
it was due to his imagination which, in creating, had moments of visionary clairvoyance. Thirdly, when he had this experience, he felt that he had passed outside time into eternity. He was then so unaware of the common ties of life that he had a timeless exaltation. The three notions are closely allied, though they are distinct enough on analysis. Wordsworth saw them as a single experience and felt a need to explain them. To make his meaning clear, Wordsworth devotes stanzas V-VIII to his special idea of childhood as a time when 'the vision splendid' is normal with us, and to his explanation of this by a theory that a child has memories, which he gradually loses, of a blessed state in another world before birth. Of course, he has his own childhood in mind... and there is little need to question his truthfulness.\(^{25}\)

These last remarks, of course, refer to the stanzas dealing with the "pre-existence of the soul theory," which will be discussed in the next chapter. The general tenor of Bowra's comments, however, support the view that Wordsworth's imagination was the power that made him a poet—as it is the power that makes all poets, generally speaking. This imaginative process of creation is certainly stimulated more frequently and intensely in youth when one's sense powers are keenest, but it continues to function into the poet's old age, as abundant examples prove beyond question.

In view of these facts, the more sensible critical opinion seems to be that advanced by Brooks, Thomas and Brown, and by Myer Howard Abrams, among others—and of course, by Lionel Trilling. This opinion takes its textual evidence from Wordsworth's figure in the \textit{Ode} describing the childhood vision fading into "the light

\(^{25}\)Bowra, pp. 93-94.
of common day." The first part of this stanza V states the idea that the child has a life before birth, and this belongs to the next chapter; but the later lines taken in themselves are also pertinent here, describing the transition to common daylight:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But He
Beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.26

Ironically, Brooks remarks, it is the child himself who creates the radiance of his morning world, yet if he looks long enough at that world, he becomes deeply involved in its beauties, and the celestial radiance itself disappears;27 familiarity banishes novelty. In this sense the Ode is a beautiful statement of a very commonplace fact of life, that maturity brings a loss of wonder and a certain freshness in one's approach to life, but its gains more than compensate for these losses. In the normal light of "common day," which we settle down to in maturity, our higher powers of intellect, judgment, and understanding, make our life substantially richer. Yet there always remains a poignant

26"Immortality Ode," ll. 66-77 (de Selincourt, IV, 281).
27Brooks, p. 128.
nostalgia for the days of our youth, and the vivid fragmentary memories which it evokes. This nostalgia, especially intense in Wordsworth, seems to have been the origin, at a time of temporary depression and particular consciousness of youth's lost vision, of the *Immortality Ode* as Wordsworth conceived it.

Myer Howard Abrams has admirably summed up the poem along these lines, taking its theme to be an apparent change in the objects of sense; this change is developed in terms of mental schemes which analogize the mind to something which is at once projective and capable of receiving back the fused product of what it gives and what is given to it. Wordsworth's 'Ode' employs, with dazzling success, the familiar optical metaphors of lights and of radiant objects—lamps and stars. His problem is one of a loss of 'celestial light' and 'glory' from meadow, grove, and stream. The solution inheres in the figure (not uncommon, as we know, in Neoplatonic theologians) of the soul as 'our life's star,' 'trailing clouds of glory' at its rising, but gradually, in the westward course of life, fading 'into the light of common day,' though leaving behind recollections which 'Are yet the fountain-light of all our day.' But if maturity has its loss in 'splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower,' it has its compensating gains, and the mind, though altered, retains its power of radiant give-and-take with the external world:

'The clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality.'

By way of contrast, Abrams adds, Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" memorializes "not merely an alteration but the utter loss of the reciprocating power of the mind, leaving it a death-in-life

as a passive receptor of the inanimate visible scene."\textsuperscript{29}

Cleanth Brooks agrees with Abrams that the \textit{Ode} is describing an alteration, not a loss, of vision. He argues from the fact that, if Wordsworth worked out his figure consistently, trying to express a total loss of vision, he would have the boy arrive at darkness or near-darkness, the shades of the prison-house having closed round him all but completely, the youth having traveled "into some dark and dismal west."\textsuperscript{30} Yet the climax of the process is not darkness, but full daylight! We have a contrast, then, between "prosaic daylight and starlight or dawn light--a contrast between kinds of light, not between light and darkness."\textsuperscript{31}

Wordsworth is not content to say that he has suffered some sort of a loss of childhood vision; he goes on to dramatize it in the "May-morning scene" of stanzas three and four, which show him as an outsider "looking in" on the happy scene:

\begin{quote}
The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep; \textsuperscript{25}
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;
I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,
The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,
And all the earth is gay;
Land and sea
Give themselves up to jollity,
And with the heart of May
Doth every Beast keep holiday;--
Thou Child of Joy,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{29} Abrams, p. 67.
\textsuperscript{30} Brooks, p. 119.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 120.
Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy
Shepherd-boy!

IV

Ye blessed Creatures, I have heard the call
Ye to each other make; I see
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;
My heart is at your festival,
My head hath its coronal,
The fulness of your bliss, I feel--I feel it all.
Oh evil day! If I were sullen
While Earth herself is adorning,
This sweet May-morning,
And the Children are calling
On every side,
In a thousand fresh valleys far and wide,
Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,
And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm:--
I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!
--But there's a Tree, of many, one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The Pansy at my feet
Both the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam:
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?32

Just above those lines Wordsworth had described the bounding of the lambs "as to a Tabor's sound," and mentioned that in his sadness "a timely utterance" brought him relief. Now, hearing the birds' songs, the trumpets of the cataracts, the echoes and winds, he tries to enter into the springtime gaiety of the scene. Brooks observes that this third stanza is dominated by sound, for the poet cannot see the beauty of this scene as a child would:
"The effect is that of a blind man trying to enter the joyful dawn world . . . certainly he is trying very hard to enter into it.

32"Immortality Ode," 11. 25-56 (de Selincourt, IV, 280).
But what I notice is that the poet seems to be straining to work up a gaiety that isn't there. If his heart is at the children's festival, it is their festival, after all, not his.  

It has been mentioned that it was after writing the lines,

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?  
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

that Wordsworth put away this first part of the poem, not to take it up again for more than a year. The break in thought is very noticeable, striking even; as if after the overture of a symphony one now began to hear the main theme come swelling in. That theme, voiced in the symbolic figure of the child's pre-existence, will be discussed in the following chapter; but these closing lines of the first part set the stage for it rather dramatically.

These lines dealing with the May morning scene, so suggestive of a religious festival, have further significance in regard to Wordsworth's natural religion; but this point must also be deferred to discussion in connection with Chapter Four of the thesis, on Wordsworth's changed attitude to religion suggested in the "recovery stanzas."

We now come directly to the "child-symbol" used in the Ode, to Wordsworth's picture of childhood, and to his much-disputed eulogy of the six-year-old boy as "Thou Best Philosopher." Here are Wordsworth's own words, in stanzas VII and VIII:

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34"Immortality Ode," ll. 55-56 (de Selincourt, IV, 280).
VII
Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,
A six years' Darling of a pigmy size!
See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,
Fretted with sallies of his mother's kisses,
With light upon him from his father's eyes!
See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,
Some fragment from his dream of human life,
Shaped by himself with newly-learned art;
A wedding or a festival,
A mourning or a funeral;
And this hath now his heart,
And unto this he frames his song:
Then will he fit his tongue
To dialogues of business, love, or strife;
But it will not be long
Ere this be thrown aside,
And with new joy and pride
The little Actor cons another part;
Filling from time to time his 'humorous stage'
With all the Persons, down to palsied Age,
That Life brings with her in her equipage;
As if his whole vocation
Were endless imitation.

VIII
Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie
Thy Soul's immensity;
Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
That, dear and silent, read'st at the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,—
Mighty Prophet! Seer Blest!
On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,
In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;
Thou, over whom thy Immortality
Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,
A Presence which is not to be put by;
Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might
Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,
Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke
The years to bring the inevitable yoke,
Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?
Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life;35

35 "Immortality Ode," ll. 86-129 (de Selincourt, IV, 281-282).
The first of these two stanzas gives a definitely prosaic and condescending portrait of the little boy whose whole vocation is, or seems to be, not prophecy or poetry or philosophy, but "endless imitation." Then, remarkably changing his attitude to one of awesome approach to a little god, he hails this same little lad as the best philosopher, whose exterior semblance--described in the previous stanza--belie his soul's immensity; he is an "eye among the blind," he "read'st at the eternal deep," he is a "Seer Blest," on whose yet unspoiled mind those truths do rest which we are toiling all our lives to find; the little boy's "immortality" broods over him like the day, yet is he glorious in the might of his heaven-born freedom--and he possesses all these marvelous endowments in blissful ignorance, unaware that he is so richly privileged! Ironically, indeed, he is "at strife" with his blessedness, by the double fact that his is inevitably growing away from his childhood every day, and that he even takes earnest pains--also inevitably by the laws of growth--to hasten his growing up. Wordsworth's dark prophecy to the little lad--

Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight, 36
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life;

--sheds some light, it would seem, on the source of Wordsworth's own waning vision; he recognizes that this waning of vision is due to "earthly freight" which weighs down the soul with a weight

36 "Immortality Ode," ll. 127-129 (de Selincourt, IV, 283).
"heavy as frost," and as deep as life itself. The "earthly freight" may be taken to mean cares, duties, sorrows, and bodily ills; the "custom" is perhaps the weight of routine, of social convention, of the innumerable formalities and social obligations large and small to which a civilized man must, in part, surrender his freedom and his personal inclinations and deeper aspirations.

No one will deny that stanza VIII is lyrical, majestic in the extreme, that it soars high on the wings of beauty and noble poetry. But just what function does it fulfill here? Knight says that Wordsworth is here creating again the very thing that he has lost; the "central, towering height, or heart" of the Ode is here, where "the poet married his own birth-visions to the child-symbol. The elements are things of life, and the technical process a creative act, so that we have a miraculous birth, a vivid poetic life shooting its life-ray into the heart of life. The climax of the Ode rings out a prophetic and human splendour, unique in Wordsworth. Nor has it been properly understood." Elsewhere Knight says that Wordsworth "envisages life victorious in terms of the child. This is our approach to immortality."

Harper agrees that the central theme of the Ode is the "magisterial sanctity of childhood," and cites the three lines from the

37 Knight, Starlit Dome, p. 43.
38 Ibid., p. 43; Wordsworth "falls in love with his own symbol, and recreates before our eyes what he has lost."
39 Ibid., p. 39.
"Rainbow" poem, affixed to the Ode, as an indication of this:

The Child is Father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

"Piety" here is used in its original sense, of reverence or filial obligation, says Harper. "The Man is to respect the Child surviving in him, to obey its monitions, to work upon its plan."40

G. Wilson Knight, whose exceptional treatment of the entire Ode deserves the highest praise, thinks that the Child-symbol is "so tinglingly realized and given such full romantic associations that we can call it erotically conceived. . . . The Prelude often (not always) gives us tranquillity recollected, almost dilated, in more tranquillity; and as though to get the balance right at all costs, the Immortality Ode offers a peaceful substance (the child) dynamically (as in its 'leaping up'), almost erotically, apprehended . . . In all good poetry the form is finally quiescent."41

It is well-known that Coleridge, Wordsworth's most intimate friend and literary collaborator, was on occasion also his friend's most severe critic; and this child-passage in the Ode received Coleridge's double-barrelled attack. Coleridge thought the lines were preposterous bombast, and could not admit the child as "best philosopher" in any sense at all. Knight takes up this criticism

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41Knight, p. 49.
and answers it in his usual full, enlightened manner. Remark- ing that this is the kind of interpretation in which "criticism too rashly precedes interpretation," and "judgment is independent of understanding," he answers Coleridge's objections—which he implies are of this type—with a persuasive argument:

Why should the mighty force of creation be too slight a symbol of immortality? The Kingdom of Heaven itself is compared to a tiny mustard seed, and what universes of paradise, of earth, of hell, may be compacted in a child! So, not any literature, nor teaching, nor even the 'word' of God Himself, is the true centre of our religion; rather the Incarnation, the Birth of the Holy Child... the child is the new-minted coin of life, its freshest currency, stamped with the impress of the latest signature of paradise. It is thus an 'eye among the blind' possessing sight; deaf, silent, passive, its very being is a light and a vision. The child is a new eye of life. In later years we most often sleep. But in poetry, religion, music, love, in all ecstatic experience, we may wake to essential life, which is immortality. In this his very existence is an awakening to life, the child is indeed a 'mighty prophet' or blest 'seer.'

Bowra contributes the interesting fact, culled from Coleridge's unpublished letters, that the little six-year-old boy of the Ode is undoubtedly Hartley Coleridge, who was born in 1796 and could fairly be described as "a six years' darling" in 1802. "He seems to have been a delightfully imaginative little boy," says Bowra, "who made an irresistible appeal to all who knew him," Wordsworth not least of all. Bowra cites Coleridge's letter to his friend, Poole, in 1803, which contains the remark, "Hartley

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42 Knight, p. 44
43 Ibid., p. 45
44 Bowra, pp. 94-95.
... is a strange strange Boy—'exquisitely wild!' An Utter Visionary! like the Moon among thin Clouds, he moves in a circle of Light of his own making—he alone, in a Light of his own."

Though he himself had a little boy of such charm, Coleridge, as has already been mentioned, could feel no sympathy for Wordsworth's exaltation of the child in this poem. His indictments are worth quoting verbatim here:

What does all this mean? In what sense is the child of that age a philosopher? In what sense does he read 'the eternal deep?' In what sense is he declared to be 'forever haunted' by the Supreme Being? or so inspired as to deserve the splendid titles of a mighty prophet, a blessed seer? By reflection? by knowledge? by conscious intuition? or by any form or modification of consciousness? These would be tidings indeed. . . . Children at this age give us no such information of themselves; and at what time were we dipped in the Lethe, which has produced such utter oblivion of a state so godlike?

If these mysterious gifts, faculties, and operations, are not accompanied with consciousness . . . who else is conscious of them? or how can it be called the child, if it be no part of the child's conscious being?

The logic of much of this cannot be denied; but Coleridge's general objection is certainly open to refutation, as will be presently shown. But Coleridge's ingenuity of attack is not yet exhausted; he goes on to clinch his argument—supposedly—with a reductio ad absurdum: "In what sense can the magnificent attributes, above quoted, be appropriated to a child, which would not

make them equally suitable to a bee, or a dog, or a field of corn? or even to a ship, or to the wind and waves that propel it? The omnipresent Spirit works equally in them, as in the child; and the child is equally unconscious of it as they.47

These objections are, of course, speciously sound for the simple reason that they rest on an undemonstrable fact. Either one sees the divinum quid in the mystery that is every child, or one does not; either one remembers something of the magic of his own childhood experiences, or one does not--there is no arguing the point. What is surprising is that a man like Coleridge, who was himself so unusually gifted with an imagination tinged with supernatural tendencies, would find the idea of childhood fancy so improbable. We might expect such a reaction from an unimaginative businessman, but not from a poet! Filbert T. Dunklin, of Princeton, thinks little better of Wordsworth's child-symbol: "The passage on the six-year-old child as 'Mighty Prophet! Seer Blest!' is so unreal a fantasy that it may almost vitiate the whole."48

In a milder vein, Cleanth Brooks concedes that Wordsworth's treatment of the child in stanza VII is perhaps a bit sentimental, and also a bit humorous, with a "hint of amused patronage."49 Even if one grants Wordsworth's intention, says Brooks, the stanza

47Shawcross, II, 113.
48Filbert T. Dunklin, Wordsworth (Princeton, 1951); p. 16.
49Brooks, p. 129.
(VII) must still be accounted very weak; some of the lines are very flat indeed. Moreover, the amused tenderness of stanza VII is quite over-balanced by the great stanza VIII that follows it. Brooks concludes that he is "not sure that the poem would not be improved if stanza VII were omitted," and this writer agrees. Stanza VII is weak, and not really necessary, though in theory it is a helpful bridge passage to the sublimities of stanza VIII.

Turning now to a positive defense of Wordsworth's exaltation of the child as a "Best Philosopher" and "Seer Blest," one might begin by conceding that, as Brooks points out, these are daring figures of speech, and as such demand a certain toleration on the part of the reader. "The child who sees, does not know that he sees, and is not even aware that others are blind. Indeed, he is trying his best (or will soon try his best) to become blind like the others. . . . How blind is he, who, possessed of rare sight, blindly strives to forfeit it and become blind!"

On the other hand, in Wordsworth's very simplicity and seeming naiveté Brooks discovers a rich underlying meaning. In the lines developing the "best philosopher" idea, Wordsworth says that the child "read at the eternal deep, / Haunted for ever by the eternal mind," (ll. 113-114). Further on in the poem, in stanza IX, we have the children brought into explicit juxtaposition with the deep, in these lines:

Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,

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50 Brooks, p. 129.
51 Ibid., pp. 122-123.
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore. 52

''And how, according to the poem,'' asks Brooks, ''are these
best philosophers reading it [the eternal deep]? By sporting on
the shore. They are playing with their little spades and sand
buckets along the beach on which the waves break. This is the only
explicit exhibit of their 'reading' which the poem gives.''53

This is perhaps too literal a reading of the poem, but Brooks
goes on to show how rich even this literal sense really is. ''In
writing this,'' he explains, ''I am not trying to provoke a smile at
Wordsworth's expense. Far from it. The lines are great poetry.
They are great poetry because, although the sea is the sea of e-
ternity, and the mighty waters are rolling evermore, the children
are not terrified--are at home--are filled with innocent joy. The
children exemplify the attitude toward eternity which the other
philosopher, the mature philosopher, wins with difficulty, if he
wins it at all. For the children are those

'On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find.'''54

(11. 116-117)

Stopford A. Brooke, in his lectures on Wordsworth's theology,
asserts emphatically that this child-passage of stanza VIII is not

52''Immortality Ode,'' 11. 162-168 (de Selincourt, IV, 284).
53Brooks, p. 132.
54Ibid.
Platonism, and on the other hand, admits that "as expressed, it runs close to nonsense." Brooke undertakes to interpret, with notable coherence but with contradictorily Platonic notions of his own, Wordsworth's expressions in this stanza. By taking these expressions altogether, Brooke claims that "we feel rather than see what Wordsworth intended to say, that the child, having lately come from a perfect existence, in which he saw truth directly, and was at home with God, retains, unknown to us, that vision." Because he does retain this vision, he is the "best Philosopher," since he sees at once that which we through philosophy are endeavoring to reach. He is the mighty prophet, because in his actions and speech, he "tells unconsciously the truths he sees, but the sight of which we have lost; is more closely haunted by God, more near to the immortal life, more purely and brightly free, because he half shares in the pre-existent life and glory out of which he has come." 

The child is not conscious of this vision. He knows nothing about it; in this rather patent fact Brooke agrees with Brooks and with most other critics. The point, however, is that we, looking back on our childhood, or looking at children themselves

56 Brooke, p. 273.
58 This seems to be Coleridge's difficulty: that is the child is not conscious of his vision, it is therefore an airy nothing.
from the vantage point of an age which no longer enjoys the light which was once possessed, remember the light of this vision in our own childhood, and recognize its results and quality in children.

"We know," observes Brooke, "that what we then felt and now see in children, was and is divine, know it from bitter contrast, for 'the things which we have seen we now can see no more.' We are conscious that they were, because we have lost them." If, as Brooke asserts, there is something divine about childhood, since the child comes fresh from the "pre-existent life and glory out of which he has come," how does this differ from Wordsworth's own statement, which Brooke is trying to defend from accusations of Platonism? It may of course be admitted that there is indeed "something divine" about childhood, in a loose sense of the word; but this "divine" quality of childhood is to be ascribed rather to the child's moral innocence, his wide-eyed admiration of all the things of life, because everything is new to his tender, sensitive feelings and exuberant spirit. There is no need to have recourse to a pre-existence theory as an explanation of the facts, though a poet may use this theory as a symbol for these facts. Being a preacher, Brooke has taken Wordsworth's symbol too literally and seriously; which, of course, is the pious man's temptation.

Raymond Dexter Havens sheds some interesting light on this

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59 Brooke, p. 274, emphasis added.
60 Ibid.
question of the "best Philosopher" passage by comparing it with a passage about childhood in the Prelude, Book II, ll. 245-261. There is no suggestion in this other passage that the infant is a "best Philosopher" endowed with priceless wisdom by its previous existence; apparently the mind is rather a tabula rasa, and time brings not loss, as in the Ode, but gain. In the Ode however, he is thinking of intuitive truths, with which the creative activity of the child's imagination has nothing to do; they are recollected from previous existence. 

Havens here makes the proper distinction, inasmuch as we gain in experiential knowledge but lose something of our intuitive sense as we mature. However, Havens also seems to accept the previous-existence idea, which (as we shall see in more detail in the following chapter) is not to be taken seriously except in its place as a convention in the poem.

Here it might be noted that it is often difficult to establish with certainty whether many Wordsworth critics are holding the pre-existence theory as a personally accepted belief, or merely paraphrasing what Wordsworth is saying, without subscribing to it as a fact; only from the context of each critic's writings can one determine his real position, and even this is difficult at times.

Havens offers an interesting construction of Wordsworth's philosophy of creative imagination. In connection with the "best

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61 Havens, p. 322, emphasis added.
Philosopher" lines, he says that Locke had asserted that one could no more conceive a new idea than one could make new matter; and despite the frequent use of the term 'creative' after 1750, particularly by critics interested in original genius, it seldom meant more than 'inventive,' 'ingenious in producing surprises, in arranging the old cards in a somewhat new way.' According to Hartley, the mind is passive and does not form ideas; they are built up in it mechanically by sense impressions and their associations. Similar conceptions were generally held when Wordsworth himself began to write, and were presumably accepted by him before 1797. But when he found himself he turned against them as completely as he did against analytical reason. Indeed, the two seem to have been closely connected in his mind since he regarded analytical reason and taste as passive and hence greatly inferior to man's noblest attribute, the imagination, the distinguishing quality of which is activity, creativeness. He wished his own work to issue 'from a source of untaught things, Creative and enduring' (Prelude, XIII, 310-311), and treasured Coleridge's praise of some of his early poems for manifesting a 'higher power . . . An image, and a character, by beaks Not hitherto reflected,' (Prelude, XIII, 358-360).

To anyone who knows Wordsworth at all familiarly, the truth of Havens' statement of his philosophy of imagination here will be apparent. From the Prelude, which is certainly the fullest if not the most poetically succinct and popular expression of Wordsworth's dominant ideas on childhood and imagination, Havens draws some additional clarifications on the subject too; in the Prelude, XIV, 189-192, Wordsworth states that

Imagination
Is but another name for absolute power
And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
And Reason in her most exalted mood. . . .

62 Havens, p. 322.
and Havens comments, "For most persons, such an exalted conception of the imagination as this would mean that a child cannot be imaginative in any full sense of the term. Not so Wordsworth. Indeed, much of Wordsworth's glorification of the child arose from his conviction that the child is richly endowed with imagination in this very sense:

By sensible impressions not enthrall'd,
But quicken'd, rouz'd, and made thereby more apt
To hold communion with the invisible world."

--Prelude, XIV, A103-105.

It is through his imagination, claims Havens, that the child is haunted by the eternal mind, and it is due, in part, to the same faculty (as has already been seen) that the child is the "best Philosopher." Havens believes that the following lines were written by one "who saw childhood as possessed of imagination in all the might of its endowment":

Dear Child! dear Girl! That walkest with me here,
If thou appear untouch'd by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
And worshippest at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee whom we know it not.

To be sure, adds Havens, since the child does not have the experience or the needs of an adult, and since reason and the other faculties are only imperfectly developed in him, he cannot make the use of what the imagination offers, cannot learn from it,

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63Havens, p. 237.
64Ibid., p. 238.
65Ibid., quoting "It Is a Beauteous Evening," 11. 9-14.
as the "higher minds" do. Yet the faculty itself, Wordsworth seems to have thought, is as strong and as complete in the early as in the late years of life. 66

As a small footnote to this whole discussion of the childhood vision, Cleanth Brooks again has something valuable to contribute; he observes that, when, in stanza IX, the poet pays his debt of gratitude to the childhood vision he actually associates it with blindness and darkness:

... those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realised,
High instincts before which our mortal Nature
Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised;
But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain light of all our day, 67
Are yet a master light of all our seeing.

Wordsworth, states Brooks, "is trying to state with some sensitiveness the relation between the two modes of perception, that of the analytic reason and that of the synthesizing imagination." 68 This leads the present writer to suggest a comparison with St. John of the Cross's paradox of the "Dark Night" that is really brightest Light; a comparison which, at least, may serve to demonstrate that there are non-rational, intuitive, or "un-

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66 Havens, p. 238.
67 "Immortality Ode," II. 142-154 (de Selincourt, IV, 283).
68 Brooks, p. 122.
conscious" ways of knowing. That Wordsworth was ominently con-
sscious—at least post factum—of the unusual intuitions of his own
childhood, is an undebatable fact. To avoid repetition however,
details of his "mystical" experiences in boyhood will be deferred
until the fourth chapter of this thesis, which will discuss the
"shadowy recollections" which Wordsworth falls back upon in later
years. It is not his own extraordinary experiences as a child
with which Wordsworth is primarily concerned in the Ode, however,
but with the more nearly normal, yet fleeting, perceptions of
childhood. That, at any rate, is the contention of this writer.

Matthew Arnold has disagreed with this opinion, and it seems
that the reason for his disagreement is again that he takes too
seriously the pre-existence metaphor in the Ode; presuming this to
be a statement of belief, he naturally scoffs at Wordsworth's
supposed philosophical queerness:

Even the 'Intimations' of the famous Ode, those corner-
stones of the supposed philosophic system of Wordsworth,
—the idea of the high instincts and affections coming
out of childhood, testifying to the divine home recently
left, and fading away as our life proceeds,—this idea,
of undeniable beauty as a play of fancy, has itself not
the character of poetical truth of the best kind; it has
no real solidity. The instinct of delight in nature
and her beauty had no doubt extraordinary strength in
Wordsworth himself as a child. But to say that universal-
ly this instinct is mighty in childhood, and tends to
die away afterwards, is to say what is extremely doubtful.
In many people, perhaps with the majority of educated
people, the love of nature is nearly imperceptible at
ten years old, but strong and operative at thirty. In
general we may say of these high instincts of early
childhood, the base of the alleged systematic philosophy
of Wordsworth, what Thucydides says of the early achieve-
ments of the Greek race: 'It is impossible to speak
with certainty of what is so remote; but from all that we can really investigate, I should say that they [sic] were no very great things.'

To answer Mr. Arnold, it seems sufficient to cite two facts: first, that the "universal experience of mankind" argument he uses can be turned against him, since—it seems to this writer—very few people will agree with him that the child is not strongly affected by and towards nature in his early years; and secondly, that Wordsworth is not saying that the child can draw as much conscious inspiration from, or use as effectively, the imagination which he does possess—as Havens has well pointed out. To this writer it seems to be a most patent fact that the great and lasting popularity of the Ode among virtually all lovers of poetry is due to the fact that, whatever Wordsworth may have meant, his poem as a matter of fact expresses to most readers a beautiful figure of a childhood experience that is to some extent universal. Like Milton's "On His Blindness," Wordsworth's Ode tells of a personal experience and at the same time of that experience's real or allegorical application to the experience of many other men—indeed, of all men who have undergone any kind of experience at all analogous to the poet's own.

Summing up this second chapter's main conclusions, it may be said that the "celestial light" which gives the "glory and the freshness of a dream" to the objects of sense and sight in childhood, is that special emotional coloring, that new-born freshness

of approach, that intuitive closeness to nature which the child enjoys before the full development of his rational powers, whose exercise tends to separate him from nature and make him stand apart from what he has hitherto identified himself with in childhood. Wordsworth thus lost, not some kind of mystical perception of the world, but underwent a normal, if somewhat belated, process that comes even upon geniuses.

It is the child himself who creates the "magic" of his morning world; and because of this special closeness to nature, he can indeed be called a "best Philosopher" and a "Seer Blest," in a poetic context. In the Ode Wordsworth has recreated by the magic of poetic intuition the mystery that is the child, who is "haunted for ever by the eternal mind," who "read'st the eternal deep" because of his unconscious but psychologically real communion with that "mind" in nature. The beauty of the child-image opens instantaneously, observes Abercrombie, "into the heart of that which inspires it--Wordsworth's inmost intuition of what it means to be alive, to be a mind receiving the universe, and creating what it receives."70

CHAPTER THREE

PRE-EXISTENCE OF THE SOUL

Perhaps the central critical problem of Wordsworth's Ode, and the feature that attracts most interest for its beauty and its philosophical thought, is the picture of the child coming from heaven, its home, into this world--"trailing clouds of glory," with star-dust in his hair, from his previous existence with God. The idea is an epitomy of the English Romantic Period's spirit of the supernatural and the ethereal:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting
And cometh from afar;
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
60

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But He
Beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;

The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;

At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.
65

VI

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
And, even with something of a Mother's mind,

47
And no unworthy aim,
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.

What is the meaning to be taken from this passage in the Ode?
Is it Platonism pure and simple, or a Wordsworthian adaptation of
the Platonic doctrine? What were Wordsworth's sources for this
idea in the Ode? Finally, and most important of all, is Words-
worth really "holding" this idea as a philosophical doctrine, or
is he merely using it as a poetic symbol for his theory of child-
hood? Such are the questions to be examined in this chapter.

First of all, does this passage in the Ode accurately express
Plato's doctrine of pre-existence and reminiscence? To answer
this question, Plato's own teaching must be briefly stated here.
Stopford Brooke's summary will serve very well:
The Divine Ideas of Justice, Temperance, Beauty, Truth,
etc., are real existences, glorious sights of Heaven,
and the life of the Gods is in beholding them. The soul
of every man before he comes on earth has lived in this
train of the Gods, looked with them upon the vision of
the absolute Truth, upon the landscape of the divine
ideas which make up the Eternal Being. But the soul has
only seen these things imperfectly, glancing at them as
it were over a hill, and then departing. When the soul
comes to earth, its nature becomes threefold: rational,
sensuous, and moral or spiritual. Now the doctrine of
reminiscence comes in here, for the whole of after
existence is spent in regaining by a series of recol-
lections, through continuous struggle, the vision of
the absolute ideas. Of these ideas, only Beauty has a
visible form on earth. Now whenever we see earthly

1"Immortality Ode," ll. 58-85 (de Selincourt, IV, 281).
beauty we are excited by its likeness to eternal beauty, and losing possession of our soul we are impelled toward this earthly beauty. Here begins a struggle with the rational soul contending with the sensual. The rational soul remembers the eternal beauty and wants to restrain the sensual soul from rushing after the earthly beauty. At last, after many efforts, the sensual soul is wholly brought under the sway of the rational, who rides the person like a charioteer; the vision of true beauty is reached, and with it the vision of the other noble ideas. It takes ten thousand years, Plato thinks, before the soul can regain the imperial palace whence it came. But the world of sense also holds back the soul, which languishes out of its natural environment of abstract ideas, in a sensible unreal world with which it is not in harmony. Only the vision of the eternal world, flashed again and again before the soul, keeps it mindful of the pre-existent life, and each time the soul either rises or falls away from this pre-existent world, till at last if it does not continue falling, its wings are entirely reformed, and it rises to dwell with the Gods, re-entering eternal life, achieving immortality.\(^2\)

Such is Plato's doctrine. Brooke proceeds at once to point out an important difference in Wordsworth's version of it: Wordsworth draws a conclusion that Plato would never have drawn, that the child is nearer to God and to the vision of glory and loveliness than is the man. Plato held the exact opposite—that the grown philosopher was more conscious of his heavenly home than was the child. Wordsworth, then, was not a real Platonist, Brooke concludes; "He only liked these ideas of pre-existence and reminiscence, and made his own thought out of them."\(^3\) Such seems to be the case, as will be presently shown.


\(^3\)Ibid., p. 272.
Wordsworth in the *Ode* is trying to express the loss of the childhood vision, involved in the inevitable process of growing to maturity, but compensated for by the more philosophical understanding of later years. What could be a better vehicle for this idea, in poetic form, than the Platonic myth of pre-existence and reminiscence? As interpreted by Wordsworth, it fits the facts admirably; it is a "modified" Platonism. To understand this better, it may help to seek out the sources from which Wordsworth took his idea.

It seems evident here, as in many other cases, that Wordsworth drew upon his friend Coleridge for his inspiration. Here are the opening lines of a sonnet written by Coleridge in 1796, on the birth of his son Hartley—the little "six years' darling" of the *Ode* later on:

> Oft o'er my brain does that strong fancy roll
> Which makes the present (while the flash doth last)
> Seem a mere semblance of some unknown past,
> Mixed with such feelings as perplex the soul
> Self-questioned in her sleep; and some have said
> We lived ere yet this robe of flesh we wore.⁴

An almost "twin" source is Henry Vaughan's poem, "The Retreat," which stresses more the idea of declining powers, of celestial vision grown dim with passing years.⁵ However, Vaughan was speaking of the loss not of imagination but of innocence; and so Wordsworth, borrowing the idea of pre-existence from Coleridge and the

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theme of declining powers from Vaughan, formed the combination which is his own original theory. Another difference in Wordsworth's version of Plato's theory is that for Wordsworth the childhood ecstasy, itself an innovation, is gradually replaced by philosophic resignation and understanding, rather than a total loss of celestial vision. Among the more remote sources of the Platonic doctrine, Stallknecht mentions, in addition to Plato's close imitator Plotinus, Boehme's theory of divine "out-breathing" in harmony with Plato's emanationism, and the mystical ideas of the ancient gnostic Hermes Trismegistus, as well as the seventeenth century ideas of Vaughan and Traherne. Even Boehme himself, says Stallknecht, praises the great wisdom of children in his poem, The Aurora. Mr. John D. Rea has added the name of the later Neoplatonist, Proclus, to the list of possible sources.

Admittedly this pre-existence theory was a perfect vehicle for Wordsworth's central idea of childhood, already referred to above (page 22); namely, that the child has, at times, a vision of another world, that this visionary power is closely connected with the child's imagination, and that this vision leads him into the presence of Eternity. The pre-existence theory, as modified by Wordsworth, certainly fits his own theory.

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7 Ibid., p. 271.

8 Ibid., p. 270.
The pressing question, however—the central difficulty in criticism of the Ode—is this: "Must we take the pre-existence idea seriously to enjoy (or even appreciate) the poem?" John Mattison, in his article on this point, contends that "Nothing he [Wordsworth] says anywhere suggests that he entertained the doctrine other than seriously. . . . I am no more in doubt that Wordsworth believed the doctrine than I doubt that Plato did."9

What should have settled the dispute—namely Wordsworth's own express denial in the celebrated "Fenwick Note" that he had attached anything but poetic significance to the idea, has only served to add more confusion to the debate. The L. F. Notes, as they are also called, were dictated by Wordsworth to Isabella Fenwick, at her request, in 1843, and are a record of the circumstances under which many of the poems were written, and contain as well much valuable biographical information.10 Here are Wordsworth's comments, in part, on the Ode:

Archimedes said that he could move the world if he had a point wherewith to rest his machine. Who has not felt the same aspirations as regards the world of his own mind? Having to wield some of its elements when I was impelled to write this poem on the Immortality of the Soul, I took hold of the notions of pre-existence as having sufficient foundation in humanity for authorizing


me to make for my purpose the best use of it I could as a poet.11

This statement is obviously important; first of all, it tells us in clear terms that Wordsworth regarded the Ode as a lover to move the inner world of his own mind. Secondly, it tells us that Wordsworth used the "notions"--the plural confirms the eclectic manner of adaptation which critics have surmised--but did not take them for philosophical truth. Harper, however, takes a dim view of this "most regrettable Fenwick Note," which was "an unnecessary and almost humiliating concession to pragmatical and timid readers."12 The Fenwick Note, Harper claims, misrepresents Wordsworth as he was when he wrote the Ode, forty years earlier; for there is no evidence that he believed in a written or Christian revelation at this time, and every evidence that he did not believe in the Fall of man; furthermore, Harper claims, the note has called undue attention to a subsidiary and purely speculative notion, while distracting readers from the central idea of the poem, which is an idea supported by universal experience; and all of this, regrettably, against Wordsworth's intentions.13

James G. Smith also deplores the Fenwick Note--it is, he thinks, a timid attempt to pacify pious readers, who found no

13Ibid.
warrant for the pre-existence theory in the Bible. But that
Wordsworth's beautiful lines, "The soul that rises with us, our
life's star,/ Hath had elsewhere its setting,"14 is mere poetry.
Smith cannot believe. "If these words do not mean pre-existence,
they mean nothing," he contends—which is to miss the point that
critics are concerned not with what the poem's words say—which
is obvious—but rather whether Wordsworth meant them seriously.
Smith finds it more probable that Wordsworth at seventy-five had
forgotten what he meant when he wrote the Ode at thirty-five, than
that he was deliberately trying to misrepresent the facts by his
Penwick statement.15 With this belief the present writer concurs.

Matthew Arnold, as already mentioned, is so convinced that
Wordsworth believed in pre-existence that, speaking of the poet's
worth in general, he says that "We cannot do him justice until we
disson his formal philosophy."16

Gerald Bullett, in his book The English Mystics (among whom
he places Wordsworth), says that Wordsworth might answer those
who criticise him for upholding the erroneous pre-existence idea
in three ways: (1) since he professed no doctrinal religion at
the time he composed the Ode, he was not obliged to conform to
Christian doctrine; (2) he only used the doctrine as a convenient

14 "Immortality Ode," II. 59-60 (de Selincourt, IV, 281).
15 James C. Smith, A Study of Wordsworth (Edinburgh, 1944),
p. 96.
16 Matthew Arnold, "Wordsworth," The Works of Matthew Arnold
(London, 1903), IV, 109; cited in Mattehison's article, p. 428.
myth for his poetic effect; or, (3), if he did in any sense believe in pre-existence, "It was not individual pre-existence which he had in mind . . . it is a poet's statement of the ancient doctrine of the universal incarnation of the Divine Spirit in persons and things, the eternal self-division of the One into the Many."17 Bullett definitely thinks Wordsworth could have truly offered all three apologies, especially the third, although he was too prudent to profess open pantheism.18

On this point of Wordsworth's philosophy, Matthison points out, Sir Leslie Stephen, Harper, Carrod, and Beatty, all commentators on the Ode, also have serious difficulties. All of these critics have this in common: wishing to consider Wordsworth a serious philosopher, yet finding such an untenable position as pre-existence in one of the major documents of his philosophy, try to either get rid of, excuse, justify, or at least subordinate this pre-existence statement. Otherwise they feel they would be forced to lower their opinion of the philosopher.19

C. M. Bowra takes the middle-of-the-road position that he believed in pre-existence when he wrote the Ode, but ceased to believe in it in later years when he grew more orthodox. Bowra argues that Wordsworth "was not a man to put ideas into poetry

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18Ibid.
19Matthison, p. 425.
merely because they were suitable for it, nor was he capable of saying as a poet what he did not believe as a man. . . . It is impossible to read the Ode without seeing [that]. Wordsworth certainly must have believed in pre-existence in some manner when he wrote of it so movingly; but after all, poets are capable of writing very rapturously about ideas which, while they think them to be indeed very beautiful, and "humanly true," they do not take with literal seriousness. I may love to think of the stars as "the windows of Heaven," or of little children as coming fresh from Heaven, the new-minted coins of God's Kingdom—without confusing metaphor with cold scientific fact. It seems entirely probable that this may have been the case with Wordsworth. He himself insists that it was. On the other hand, evidence does not show Wordsworth to have been at all orthodox—if such a word has any meaning today—in his philosophical views at the time he wrote the Ode. Thus the case does not seem to admit of definite answers.

Whatever may have been Wordsworth's stated creed, there is little question that he did lay aside the severer doctrine of Original Sin, which stains the child with evil from its birth, and brings it into this world as the child of the Devil. Stopford Brooke points out that Wordsworth compares his infant daughter, making her "sinless progress" through a world "by sorrow darkened and by care disturbed," to the moon, "that through gathered clouds moves untouched in silver purity." "Fair are ye both," Wordsworth

20Bowra, p. 96.
exclaims, "and both are free from stain [his daughter and the moon]."21 It is not inconceivable, as Brooke surmises, that Wordsworth the Poet—as has been suggested above—may have subscribed to certain notions (not to be called beliefs) which as a matter of cold and sober fact he did not take seriously. The frequency of such attitudes among poets is well known and taken for granted.

Lest the reader think there is any paucity of critical viewpoints on this question, much less any facile solution to the problem, Newton P. Stallknecht's not improbable position should be included here. Many have thought that Wordsworth was a pantheist, and Stallknecht—an expert on Wordsworth's philosophical backgrounds—concurs in this judgment. Yet he claims that it is doubtful whether, at the time of writing the Ode, Wordsworth was thinking primarily of a personal pre-existence, or even of a personal post-existence; "He was thinking rather more of the finite soul as issuing forth from its eternal home, the 'immortal sea.'"22 Stallknecht claims that Wordsworth sees the World-Soul as the "matrix or living environment from which the soul issues forth. This matrix is never sharply isolated from the finite mind. It stands as the background of every soul. It is the soul's 'immensity,' its 'immortality,' its divine home."23 This is pure

21 Brooke, p. 269.
22 Stallknecht, p. 269.
23 Ibid.
Emanationism, and it is entirely possible that Wordsworth as a poet had no difficulties in holding both pre-existence and its "sister" idea, Emanationism. The poet can legitimately think of the soul's origins in this way when he is writing poetry, though not when he is talking philosophy. This admission is not to be confused with the Averroist doctrine of two-fold Truth.

On the other hand, Lionel Trilling states very forcefully that Wordsworth only used the idea as a metaphor; and Coleridge's scepticism in this matter is equally unambiguous. Thomas and Brown also hold that the idea is a mere device, while Harper, Bowra, and Matthiessen all add such important modifications to their initial assertions of Wordsworth's belief in the theory as to put themselves on the other side of the argument, with those who hold that it is a mere device. G. Wilson Knight, characteristically, comes up with an interpretation that is all his own. All of these positions defending Wordsworth's "orthodoxy" will be briefly outlined here.

Trilling, logically enough, takes Wordsworth's own statement in the Fenwick Note at face value, and believes the poet's claim—though made many years after composing the Ode—that he was using the pre-existence theory for his own purposes as a poet, and considered it obviously "too shadowy a notion to be recommended to faith." Thus, it had for him only the validity of any popular religious idea; that is, a kind of "suggestive validity." 24

24Trilling, Liberal Imagination, p. 143.
Coleridge, as has already been seen, did not think either Wordsworth or Plato really believed such a fanciful idea as pre-life for the soul.\(^25\) One cannot keep back a wry smile, then, on reading in Harper that the pre-existence idea, altogether derivative, extrinsic, and alien to Wordsworth's habitual lines of thought, and belonging more to "the cloudland of metaphysics and fancy," came from no other source than "his soul's companion, the greatest speculative genius our race ever produced"—Coleridge himself!\(^26\) Of course it could immediately be answered that this implies no contradiction, for Coleridge indeed knew of the idea, toyed with it, and even used it in poems, without ever giving it the slightest actual credence, as has been pointed out above.\(^27\) Harper concludes that this pre-existence idea, as expressed in the Ode and derived from Coleridge, is to be taken only as "a surmise, nothing more, that the excellence of childhood may be an inheritance from a previous and presumably superior state of existence."\(^28\)

Harper adds weight to his opinion by citing the high probability that Wordsworth was not likely to use seriously a borrowed idea like pre-existence as the burden and central theme of his

\(^{25}\)Garrod, p. 117.

\(^{26}\)Harper, p. 449

\(^{27}\)See above, p. 51, p. 33, Coleridge's description of his son, Hartley; and also p. 30.

\(^{28}\)Harper, p. 449, emphasis added.
poem, because he was by temperament too original a poet. Harper
cites Coleridge's praise of his friend's characteristic excellence
"a weight and sanity of the thoughts and sentiments, won, not
from books, but from the poet's own meditative observation. . .
They are fresh, and have the dew upon them." 29

Thomas and Brown, in their Reading Poems, advance the opinion
that the reader finds it easy to accept the pre-existence idea
uncritically because it is set in a poet's reveries on a May
morning, introduced by memories of childhood's sunny fancies,
which prepare the reader for the pre-existence passage as merely
another reverie, valid enough in its poetic setting. 30 Matthison
proposes much the same theory concerning the pre-existence device
in the Ode, 31 and these critics agree that Wordsworth's poem is
saying that the child's experiences are so unearthly that it is
as if he had come newly from a heavenly home, as if he still felt
heavenly emotions while looking upon the things of earth. 32

Plato's idea was sufficiently well-known, these critics claim,
for Wordsworth to be able to use it as an image, without fearing
that he would be misunderstood. But the fact that he was misunderstood by many intelligent readers makes this argument doubtful.
The pre-existence idea was indeed well known, but Wordsworth

29Coleridge, Biographia Litteraria, XXII, in Harper, p. 450.
30Thomas and Brown, p. 660.
31Matthison, p. 439.
32Thomas and Brown, p. 660.
writes of it so movingly and vividly that the most intelligent reader may be forgiven for taking Wordsworth, if not his idea, quite seriously.

Bowra thinks that Wordsworth's concern for the soul's pre-existent life is at least equalled by his intentness on a certain timeless condition which he thinks one can attain even in this life. Wordsworth believed he could have glimpses of this "eternity," if not by himself, then at least as it was reflected in children:

Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore. 33

Bowra cites Wordsworth's own statement, in his letter to Catherine Clarkson, that the Ode "rests entirely upon two recollections of childhood, one that of a splendour in the objects of sense which passes away, and the other in an indisposition to bend to the law of death as applying to our case." 34 Bowra claims that these two themes are reducible to one: "Wordsworth believed himself to be immortal because through the objects of sense he had known a lofty exaltation in which he passed beyond time." 35

33 "Immortality Ode," ll. 152-168 (de Selincourt, IV, 284).
35 Bowra, p. 100, emphasis added.
This interpretation alters the entire meaning of the *Ode*; for "Immortality" thus comes to mean, not pre-existent life of the soul, but post-existence of the soul, in the orthodox, traditional sense. Thus it is simply that argument which concludes that the soul is immortal because it operates at times independently of the sense-powers, and therefore must exist independently, and naturally continue to exist after the death of the body. This interpretation should make Scholastic philosophers breathe easier; but the word "immortality" cannot have this meaning exclusively in the *Ode*, because of the explicit references to pre-existence. In an inclusive sense Wordsworth could have meant both, for if the soul pre-existed without a body, it certainly follows that it can and will also exist after the dissolution of the body.

Finally, something should be said here concerning G. Wilson Knight's interpretation of the word "immortality" in the *Ode*. To Knight, it has the wide meaning of "a vision of essential, all-conquering life," carried over to us by such symbols as flowers, springtime joy, birds' music, all young life (the lambs), and pre-eminently, the child himself. 36 This seems to be merely blurring the lines of sharp definition for the sake of poetic effect (which Knight certainly achieves), without, however, contradicting the more plainly expressed views of the other critics; to describe the childhood intimations of immortality as "a vision of

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essential, all-conquering life," is indeed a beautiful way to put it.

The views of this second and opposing group of critics, therefore, may be generally summed up in the words of Lionel Trilling: "We may regard it [the pre-existence device] as a very serious conceit, vested with relative belief, intended to give a high value to the natural experience" of childhood.37

What conclusions may be drawn from this rather exhaustive debate? First of all, Wordsworth quite definitely did not believe in pre-existence in his later years, when he dictated the Fenwick Note. Secondly, he certainly did adapt the Platonic theory—which he obtained from secondary sources—to suit his own poetic uses as a vehicle for his thought, a device which would symbolically heighten the real experiences of childhood. As to the third and most knotty point, "Did he at the time of writing the Ode also hold pre-existence as a philosophical doctrine?", there seems to be good evidence—obvious evidence indeed—that he was enamored of the idea as a poet, and as a philosopher at least toyed with the idea. More probably, it was the Emanationist doctrine that he believed, and the closely allied Platonic pre-existence idea that he did not believe, but adapted for his poetic purposes. This position both respects Wordsworth's own account

of his position in the Fenwick Note, and also takes into consider-
ration the manifest evidences of pantheistic Emanationism in
his poetry—which, though no truer a doctrine than pre-existence,
is more widespread and philosophically "respectable." Further
certainty on this point seems impossible, at least at the present
stage of Wordsworth scholarship.

Whatever may have been the facts about Wordsworth's attitude
toward pre-existence of the soul, it remains supremely "true" in
a poetic sense, and the beauty of the Ode, like the sight of a
glorious setting sun, seems to offer glimpses of eternity, of the
life "in the heart of things," which have rightly enraptured all
those readers who have grasped what the Ode is saying.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE "RECOVERY STANZAS"

If the nature of the childhood vision and Wordsworth's personal attitude toward pre-existence have aroused critics to debate, the meaning of the Ode's so-called "recovery stanzas" has been almost equally controverted. Many critics think these stanzas are a pitiful swan-song of failing health and old age; others contend that they are a glorious statement of the richness of later years, the harvest-time of life. Concerning Wordsworth's appeal to the "philosophic mind," there is also marked divergence of opinion; and the "shadowy recollections" that grace the later years, Wordsworth's alleged pantheism, and his natural mysticism being supposedly changed into more doctrinal religion in his later life, are also much discussed. These topics are all inter-related; hence, an attempt must be made to examine each of them in turn and in relation to the others. Such is the burden of this fourth chapter.

It was shown in Chapter Two that many critics read the Ode as a gloomy announcement of complete loss. Chief among these is F. W. H. Myers, who seems to think that at thirty-five Wordsworth had suffered a stroke which permanently damaged his brain: "For those to whom the mission of Wordsworth appears before all things
as a religious one there is something solemn in the spectacle of
the seer standing at the close of his own apocalypse, with the
consciousness that the stiffening brain would never permit him to
drink again that overflowing sense of glory and revelation; never,
till he should drink it new in the Kingdom of God."¹

Fairchild similarly thinks that Wordsworth's perfect harmony
of sensuousness and didacticism in his best poems has been lost
by a physical drying up of feeling; so that the objects of nature
he now writes about are not enjoyed as real things, but are merely
symbols consciously chosen to "sugar-coat some ethical pill."²
This, of course, means the death of poetry; Wordsworth was through.
Fairchild cites as possible reasons for this decline, Wordsworth's
marriage to "an estimable but not very exciting woman who bore
him five children between 1803 and 1810," which had a quieting
effect on him, and blunted the old keen stimulus of association
with his sister, Dorothy. For him who had spoken much of poetry
as "emotion recollected in tranquillity," there was less and less
deep tranquillity of emotion, and more and more placidness; not
the deep tranquillity that lets us see into the heart of life,
but the insensitive tranquillity of the world that "is too much
with us." Fairchild also thinks Wordsworth was affected by his
estrangement from his friend Coleridge in 1806, and by the tragedy

¹Myers, Wordsworth, p. 123.
²Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Romantic Quest (Philadelphia, 1931),
p. 194.
of his brother John's drowning.\(^3\) All this, it would seem, can be admitted, provided a sense of proportion is preserved; no man is as jauntily optimistic at thirty-five, after life's normal share of "hard knocks," as he was, say, at eighteen. But this does not mean, even in Wordsworth's particular case, that he was utterly "crushed" as Fairchild suggests.\(^4\) Many poets have produced even greater poetry because of adversity experienced; certainly it does not destroy an artist's talent.

What many critics overlook is the fact that Wordsworth at thirty-five, when he wrote the Ode, was far from the withered senility of old age—even though, as Bateson records, he did look old for his age. To trace Wordsworth's later barrenness of poetic fruit in his old age back to his mid-thirties, and pronounce the Ode a swan song of departing powers solely on this extrinsic evidence, seems unwarranted. These critics overlook the fact that Wordsworth was still sufficiently possessed of all his poetic powers to write one of his greatest poems, and one of the greatest lyrics in English literature; and poets do not lose their talents overnight.

It remains true, however, that the Ode foreshadows and somewhat predicts Wordsworth's later decline. It is not, however, the last good poem he ever wrote, not by any means; much of the

\(^3\)Fairchild, p. 198.

\(^4\)Ibid.
Prelude was written in 1803-1804; The Excursion was completed in 1814; Memorials of a Tour in Scotland were begun in 1814; Memorials of a Tour of the Continent in 1820; the Ecclesiastical Sonnets in 1822, continuing up to 1845; Yarrow Revisited, and Other Poems in 1831, Tour poems of England (1833) and Italy (1837-1842)—to mention only groups of poems, all of which contain some excellent poems and very few really poor ones. In the light of this record, it is certainly rash to make such a complete distinction between the "early" and the "later" Wordsworth, that in his "later" days he is conceived as an utter failure, like an artist who never painted another picture, never finished another symphony, after a certain fateful day.

True enough, Wordsworth in his later years was bereft of that intense creative vision that had carried him to such heights in his prime. He retained his admiring circle of intimate friends, and remained in good health; but he no longer saw in impassioned vision "the power which sustains the universe and gives meaning to life," as William Butler Yeats remarks.5

Willard L. Sperry, Dean of Harvard Theological School in 1935, wrote a book, Wordsworth’s Anti-climax (Cambridge, 1935), whose title is taken from Professor Garrod’s strong statement that Wordsworth’s last years are "the most dismal anti-climax of which the history of literature holds record."6 In this book Dean

Sperry asserts that Wordsworth slowly realized that his own theory of poetry must inevitably lead to a loss of power, and that this concession is finally made in the Ode. "By 1806 he knew that the hope expressed so confidently on the Wye in 1798 [in "Tintern Abbey"] was never to be realized. With the end of the golden decade he felt the 'prison house' begin to close around him." This may well be true; but it is another matter to say that in 1806 Wordsworth had already lost his poetic powers completely.

Frederick Wils Bateson has reached the extreme in psychological treatment of Wordsworth's Ode; to Bateson the Ode "proposes a cure for melancholia—the attainment of a trancelike condition by recreating within oneself the experiences of childhood." The melancholia was supposedly brought on by the difficulties and complexities of adult relationships which were too much for Wordsworth. "Social irresponsibility," asserts Bateson in a stern tone, "cannot heal the guilt-complex brought on by social failure. . . . If only he [Wordsworth] could forget Annette and Caroline, with whom he and Dorothy had spent an uncomfortable month at Calais just before his marriage; if only he could forget Dorothy who continued to live at Dove Cottage, an un-upbraiding secretary with a broken heart." To read such biographical facts into the

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Ode so ingeniously, giving them such excessive importance, makes for poor scholarship. Bateson's method makes one think more highly than ever of Cleanth Brooks' "new criticism" approach to the poem, on the basis of internal evidence only. It seems at least the better of two extremes.

Gerald Bullet, who originated the idea that the Ode was Wordsworth's "swan song," steers a more sensible course in spite of his overly-sure interpretation of Wordsworth as a real "mystic" in the strict sense. Bullet agrees that Wordsworth is recording the loss of his poetic vision, that the Ode is "a swan song of Wordsworth's mystical rapture," which had irradiated his late adolescence and early manhood but was soon to grow dim. Yet he also sees in the Ode something "more profound and more complex":

Its mood is a blend of chastened exultation and noble acceptance. It is at once a lament for what is gone, the beatific vision, and a paean of thanksgiving for what nevertheless remains, be it only a memory. It is very far from being, however, the expression (an enjoyment) of a merely romantic regret. With the humility of mature wisdom, a wisdom born of the very experience it treats of, it recognizes loss and suffering, the fading vision, and the 'earthly freight' of custom, as belonging ineluctably to our human lot. By these, as well as by shared joys, we are bound to each other in a natural sympathy. Respond as we may to the divine mystery manifested in Nature—and how could we so respond were we not ourselves part of it?—it is by the 'human heart' that we live.

This mystical humanism, which according to Bullet is central

10 Bullett, The English Mystics, p. 204.
11 Ibid., p. 207.
in Wordsworth and the chief source of his poetic power, finds expression in the majestic closing lines of the Ode:

The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won. 200
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to Its tenderness, Its joys, and fears,
To me the meakest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.12

Myers suggests that the recovery stanzas perhaps indicate that old age "marks the beginning of operations which are not measured by our hurrying time, not tested by any achievement to be accomplished here."13 But this seems somewhat too tragic a note to strike. Geoffrey Hartmann definitely thinks Wordsworth gained as much as he lost by his transition to middle age. "The poet meditates," he believes, "on the mature man's loss of and compensations for a feeling and a love, that, in youth, had no need of a remoter charm 'By thoughts supplied, nor any interest / Unborrowed from the eye.'"14 After the initial and admittedly grievous loss described in the first stanzas, Hartmann thinks that Wordsworth regained strength when he heard "the cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep,"15 the trumpets being those of the

13 Myers, p. 123.
15 "Immortality Ode," 1. 25 (de Selincourt, IV, 280).
Last Judgment and the Apocalyptic Waters. He no longer sees, but he hears, at least with his mind; the relation is between light and revelation. The climax of Wordsworth's poetical experience occurs, thinks Hartmann, in the Prelude, Book XIV, with "the vision of the moon over the roaring waters, emblem of a mind which can still feed upon infinity." 17

Ernest Bernbaum admits that there is a poignant loss in the falling off of childhood's sense of harmony with the Universe; but the compensations which maturity brings to the reflective and imaginative mind, with its moments of insight and its recurrent sense of the eternal presences, are more than sufficient.

In agreement with Bernbaum, Lionel Trilling affirms—as has already been seen—that the Ode marks a change in the method of communion with the world of Nature, rather than a complete loss of such communion. 18 Trilling sees the Ode as made up of three parts; the first four stanzas stating a phenomenon, stanzas V-VIII representing a despairing answer to the phenomenon (a resistance to growth), and stanzas IX-XI answering the phenomenon with a true solution, a rejection of despair and an acceptance of growth. Trilling interprets stanzas V-VIII as saying that we live by de-

crease, by diminishing to facts, to reality; and in stanzas IX-XI he sees this decrease reconciled with hope in the idea of "an everlasting connection of the diminished person with his own ideal personality."

In this way, Trilling finds in the Ode that continuity hinted at by the lines of the Rainbow poem prefixed to the Ode—"The Child is Father to the Man." The possession of childhood is passed on to the adult as a legacy, for the mind is one and continuous; and so the childhood experiences become "the fountain-light of all our day," and the "master light of all our seeing"; that is, of our adult day and our mature seeing.

In another way Trilling also thinks the adult has gained: "Deep distress" has "humanized" Wordsworth's soul, and this is gain because happiness without "humanization" is to be pitied; for "'tis surely blind," and to be "housed in a dream" is to be at a distance from mankind. In this sense, Trilling points out, Wordsworth's poem, "Peel Castle," states that Fancy, a lower form of intellect in Wordsworth's heirarchy and peculiar to the time of youth, is really a stage in growing to maturer power. Thus does Trilling vindicate the recovery stanzas as genuine.

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21 "Immortality Ode," ll. 152, 153 (de Selincourt, IV, 203).

22 Trilling, Liberal Imagination, p. 142.

Carrod also offers interesting evidence that Wordsworth regarded his recovery as genuine. The *Rainbow* poem is, as has been seen, a "clue" to the Ode's meaning; and Carrod finds the same idea illustrated in another poem, "The Happy Warrior." The Happy Warrior is described as one, who,

... when brought
Among the tasks of real life, hath wrought
Upon the plan that pleased his childish thought. 24

Thus the Happy Warrior, as Carrod points out, is really "one who has bound his days together. He has so bound up his life that the pure and free impressions of childhood, its visionary experiences, are the inspiration of his mature age. The poem takes us from the natural to the moral world; but the principle at issue is the same, nor does Wordsworth part those two worlds so sharply as we do." 25

This principle is further illustrated, Carrod shows, in the "Ode to Duty," where duty is a second-best, whose support we seek when higher and freer powers fail us. Carrod doubts whether Wordsworth, "in his best period ever abandoned the doctrine that the highest moral achievement is that which presents itself as an inspiration, that which is part of natural life, that which is bound up with childhood and its unthinking 'vision.'" 26 The purer moral life is thus that life "which so binds our days to the vision of childhood that this suffices for later years." 27 It seems to

24 "Character of the Happy Warrior," 11. 3-5 (de Selincourt, IV, 64), cited by Carrod, p. 123.
25 Carrod, p. 123.
26 Ibid., p. 124.
27 Ibid.
this writer that there is much truth in this doctrine; men and women blessed with a good home and religious upbringing hark back to the ideals and inspirations of their youth all the days of their life, and find there a never-failing source of moral strength and refreshment. When this vision of one's childhood ideals—with the people and experiences which implanted those ideals in one's soul—lives vividly in one's mind, one adheres to them with ardor and joy of soul, and not by means of sheer devotion to the stern voice of duty. This is the creed that gives joy and hope to Wordsworth's later years: that his childhood experiences are indeed gone forever, but the vision of them remains bright and vivid as a strengthening light to his days.

Bowra agrees with this theory, and fills in details of its application to Wordsworth's later years:

In analyzing his creative powers, Wordsworth distinguished between his moments of vision and the more enduring effect which nature had upon his affections. This, he believed, remained with him, when the visions had departed. He was in his thirties, and he had settled in the countryside where he felt at home and which he was to make indissolubly his own. In the autumn he was to marry Mary Hutchinson and to build that family life which meant so much to him. The quiet tenor of his long later years presents a noble contrast to Coleridge's broken efforts and pathetically hopeless dreams. Nor need we doubt that Wordsworth's happiness came from living close to nature. In it he found a calm and contentment. He had years of work before him, and, even when his powers began to fail, he was still able at times to regain some of his old rapture.28

Wordsworth's conception of a joyous and wholesome relation-

ship with Nature was hardly a static one; rather it was a developing relationship, with three important stages. Childhood is the time of pure animal delight in nature, unreflective; adolescence brings a consciousness of one's own existence, and of one's environment—it is a time of agitation, growth, highly emotional response to life, rebellious, passionate, and fanciful. Surely there is nothing original about these first two descriptions of life's stages; but Wordsworth's concept of maturity is pivotal to his system. With maturity, the pleasures of sense grow less keen; but one not only retains a vivid recollection of the intenser experiences of one's childhood and youth, but also comes to understand their significance and value. Thus maturity brings a feeling of being at home in the world; adolescent self-consciousness and egotism are superseded by love, sympathy, and serene hope. Youthful Fancy gives way to sound imagination and insight.29

The recovery stanzas, therefore, herald the attainment of Wordsworth's third stage, the "years that bring the philosophic

29 Bernbaum, Guide, p. 93. Bernbaum here notes Wordsworth's conviction that "Ideal development of personality was often thwarted because both home and school ignored the distinction between the three ages. A false system of education forced the child in his early years into activities and conditions not appropriate thereto. That admirable maturity which every human being could potentially attain to was hardly possible unless he had the opportunity of passing through the first two stages in a wholesome and natural way. It was not only futile but harmful to attempt to make children act and think like little old men and women, or to compel adolescents to behave exactly like the middle-aged. Not that youth was wiser and better than age (quite the contrary), but that the hollowness of the follies and illusions of youth must be personally discovered if one was ever to become
mind," when all is transmuted from flesh and sensation into the highest reaches of man’s mind and spirit. James Venable Logan points out that a fourth stage, one of mysticism, is likewise dealt with in the Ode. This mystical stage is attributed here not to the influence of nature, but to the presence of "innate ideas surviving from childhood." This mystical stage was first recognized by Melvin Rader, who improved on Beatty's three-stage theory—which was not complex enough, according to Stallknecht, to fit Wordsworth's life, characterized as it was by a mystical element even in the early years.

Wordsworth's "philosophic mind" is neither abstract nor apathetic. He has not become less a feeling man, nor less a poet. What else is Wordsworth saying, asks Trilling, "except that he has a greater sensitivity and responsiveness than ever before?" The philosophic mind has increased his power to feel.

Stanza IX, in which Wordsworth expresses his gratitude for his childhood experiences—whose memories are still with him—mentions one kind of experience that is singled out as the most

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29—cont’d.: "a confirmed and passionate lover of truth and virtue," (pp. 93-94). Thus a rich maturity was made impossible by destroying its roots.


31 Ibid., p. 114.

32 Stallknecht, p. 273.

33 Trilling, Liberal Imagination, p. 151.
memorable and impressive:

... those obstinate questioning
Of sense and outward things,
Failings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realised,
High instincts before which our mortal Nature
Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised. ... 34

These are those "first affections, / Those shadowy recollections,"
which are yet the "fountain-light of all our day," and the "master
light of all our seeing."35 Just what are these "vanishings" of
which Wordsworth speaks? For they are obviously important.

Fortunately, we have Wordsworth's own notes, as well as his
biographical poem, The Prelude, to clear up these difficulties.
In his notes on the Ode,--the Fenwick Note again--he tells us that
often as a child, "I communed with all that I saw as something
not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many
times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or a tree to
recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality. At that
time I was afraid of such processes. In later periods of life I
have deplored ... a subjugation of an opposite character, and
have rejoiced over the remembrances,"36 [which are expressed in
stanza IX].

34 "Immortality Ode," ll. 142-148 (de Selincourt, IV, 283).
35 Ibid., ll. 149-150, 152, and 153.
36 The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, ed. A. B. Grosart,
III, 194-195. The Fenwick Note is also printed in the more easily
available Cambridge Edition of Wordsworth's Poetical Works, p. 35b.
James C. Smith describes two other experiences of Wordsworth's boyhood, which are recounted in the *Prelude*:

One of the favorite sports of the boys at Hawkshead was the snaring of woodcocks, which in winter settle on the hilltops round the village thick as the quails in the desert of Sinai. On moonlight nights Wordsworth used to climb the hills alone, to secure the birds that had been caught in his snares. Sometimes he yielded to temptation, and took birds from other boys' snares. 'And when the deed was done,' he says,

I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
Of indistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod.

[*Prelude, I, 322-325*]

Another time he stole a boat and rowed out into the lake. Undeterred by the mountain echoes, he fixed his eyes on a ridge which formed the horizon, and drove the boat along. Suddenly from behind the horizon-ridge a new peak arose, black and huge, towering up between him and the stars, menacing him, striding after him. His heart failed him, and he stole back to shore. But for many days after his brain worked with a dim sense of unknown modes of being; a darkness hung on his thoughts, blotting out all familiar shapes; and huge and mighty forms, that do not live like living men, moved slowly through his mind by day, and were a trouble to his dreams.

These graphically described experiences might indeed be the experiences of any young boy committing the inevitable boyhood thieveries; but they are powerful proofs indeed of the intensely sensitive reaction of a young conscience to any clear-cut moral transgression, no matter how small. These experiences, so soul-shaking and deep in innocent youth, are God's providential way of revealing Himself to every man born into this world. As Brooke

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states, these experiences when remembered in after years, are
d-powerful to put the mind into a world different from this; to re-
prove, exalt, and give light by bringing to our mind our immortal
birth; to support us in hours of obscure distress by the high
thought that we belong to God . . . and have come from an immortal
home."\(^38\)

It is interesting to note that, while at first Wordsworth
seems to emphasize the "glory and the freshness" of nature as the
source of his poetic inspiration, he gives thanks in this later
part of the Ode rather for these "vanishings." What stirred Word-
sworth's creative energies was not joy, as Coleridge describes it,
but something more complex. If nature delighted him, it also woke
hidden powers in him by a process that was not always enjoyable.
Before the mysteries of life and death he felt fear and awe—not
a deadening emotion, but "something that enriched his nature and
stirred his poetic depths," as Bowra remarks.\(^39\)

Lionel Trilling, believing that Wordsworth is talking about
experiences common to all of us, admittedly tries to be as natural-
istic as possible in interpreting the "vanishings" as referring
to the developing sense of reality. He cites the psychoanalyst
Ferenczi, who speaks of the child's reluctance to distinguish be-
tween himself and the world of external things, and also quotes

\(^38\)Brooke, pp. 278-279. Note Brooke's own Platonism here.
\(^39\)Bowra, pp. 91-92.
Freud, who thought that the "oceanic" sensation of being at one with the universe—which many psychologists have thought to be the source of all religious emotions—was really a vestige of the child’s pre-natal experience. 40 This seems to be carrying naturalism too far.

In relation to Wordsworth’s "philosophic mind" in general, what may be said more specifically about his literal, academic philosophy? Wordsworth has always been regarded as a philosopher-poet, with a naturally serious bent of mind. However, not a few critics have openly scorned his philosophical ideas, as has been seen. Matthew Arnold, as well as Herbert Read, would disagree with Sir Leslie Stephen’s belief that "Wordsworth’s poetry is precious because his philosophy is sound." 41 Rather, Read thinks Wordsworth’s philosophy is fanciful, if not patently false.

Ernest Bernbaum, however, praises Newton P. Stallknecht’s analysis of Wordsworth’s philosophy—which is quite favorable—as altogether sound. Stallknecht, himself a trained philosopher, refutes the Humanists, the New Critics, and even many Wordsworthians who have slighted the poet’s ideas as inconsequential or unorthodox. There is nothing either shallow, illogical, or intellectually contemptible in Wordsworth’s philosophy, says Stallknecht; how-

40Trilling, Liberal Imagination, p. 144.

ever, it is in the form of poetic truth, which is arrived at by poetic imagination more than by bookish study (though Wordsworth was well-read in philosophy), and is expressible only through poetic media. Such poetic knowledge is called "knowledge by con-
naturalty" in the language of Thomistic philosophy, and has been discussed very lucidly by Professor Jacques Maritain.42 The re-
result of Wordsworth's poetic knowledge, asserts Bernbaum, "is not out of accord with the ideologies of philosophic schools that are recognized as modern, mature, and legitimate."43 This, of course, applies only to his mature philosophy.

Mention has already been made of the numerous sources which Wordsworth drew upon, either directly or indirectly, for the Platonistic doctrine in the Ode.44 Other studies of the Ode have dwelt upon its mysticism and transcendental values; E. C. Baldwin sees in it traces of the Hermetical books, and similarities to Vaughan's Retreat have been pointed out by many critics.45 It is common knowledge that the Ode is a repudiation of Wordsworth's earlier doctrine of nature, taken from Hartley—that our spiritual life is the end-product of our experiences with nature.46 Words-

44 See above, Chapter III, pp. 50-51.
45 Logan, p. 121.
worth now held just the opposite—that our spiritual life was the
starting-point and causal agent of our experiences with nature. Thus from materialistic beginnings, his philosophy reversed itself to that mystical Humanism which is "the real Wordsworthian Faith," as Bernbaum calls it. 47

Wordsworth's alleged pantheism has been the object of more than one attack on his philosophy. There seems to be no question that, in his early years, he was definitely a pantheist. Bernbaum claims that critics err by confusing pantheism, "a heresy into which Wordsworth did not consciously deviate, with his panentheism, which is certainly orthodox." 48 One must interpret Wordsworth's poetry very benignly to hold this opinion.

Jone's, for example, points out that all the imagery in the third and fourth stanzas of the Ode suggests that the earth is a religious temple. The child comes from a heavenly imperial palace; the lambs "bound as to the labor's sound)—a reference to the Old Testament. Words like "jubilee," "festival," "wedding," "funeral," "coronal," and the like are suggestive of ritual, as are the phrases, "in the gladness of the May," and "other palms are won." 49

Helen Darbishire points out that the recurring flower-image

in the Ode is the natural symbol of "that Nature which is the 'breath of God,' which gives back to man an answering assurance of his own spiritual life." But this is rather "seeing God in all things," in the Christian sense of seeing the Creator in His works, than the pantheist's identification of God with His works.

Stopford Brooke poses a more serious indictment, claiming that Wordsworth invests Nature with a life and personality of her own. Nature for Wordsworth, says Brooke, is "a wholly distinct manifestation of [God's] life . . . and to this Being he allots the care also of the creature whom He [God Himself] loves."

Brooke goes on to quote Wordsworth's description of this Being, 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.51

This is more than a mere influence; it is a conscious life which realizes itself as a personality, in realizing itself within the sum of things. This Being is the life of the universe, says Brooke; it is the all-moving spirit of God, the soul of which is "the Eternity of Thought in Nature."52 Brooke admits that it may be the fashion to call this pantheistic (I), but contends that it

51Brooke, p. 98.
52Ibid.
is that "true and necessary pantheism which affirms God in all, and all by Him, but which does not affirm that the All includes the whole of God."\(^{53}\) Here again, Brooke, a Protestant Divine, seems to tend toward pantheism himself in attempting to explain Wordsworth's thoughts in a Christian sense which is often not there. It cannot be denied, however, that Brooke does seem to give the most accurate statements of what Wordsworth did, as a matter of fact, believe.

With the theological basis outlined above, Brooke shows how Wordsworth could—and did, evidently—imagine it possible to communicate with any one manifestation of this Being, this Life of the world; in a tree, a rock, or a cloud, or by abstracting from this or that particular part of this Being, even with that Being itself as a whole, as a Person with whom he could speak, and from whom he could receive impulse or warning or affection.\(^{54}\) This seems so close to real pantheism that distinctions are not of much avail in making Wordsworth's approach to nature seem just like that of any Christian and orthodox mystic; it is at least dubious.

By logical sequence following this discussion of pantheism, something should be said here concerning Wordsworth's religious beliefs in his later years. Many critics think the Ode's recovery stanzas mark Wordsworth's return to doctrinal faith, at least the

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\(^{53}\)Brooke, p. 100.

\(^{54}\)Ibid., p. 101.
beginning of that return, because his poetic lights were no longer sufficient to satisfy his heart. James Smith recounts that in later life, commenting on two sonnets which he had translated from Michelangelo, Wordsworth remarked that the second of the two poems was obviously written in Michelangelo's advanced years, "when it was natural that the Platonism that pervades [the first sonnet] should give way to the Christian feeling that inspires the other." In other words, he spoke from experience, concludes Smith. The natural mystic may need no Redeemer; the Man does.

Smith is among those who believe that when Wordsworth wrote the first four stanzas of the Ode in 1802, his visionary power had departed, "never to return except for a moment in 1818, 'Upon An Evening of Extraordinary Splendour and Beauty." Working on this theory, Smith surmises that as Wordsworth's vision faded, he "began to feel the need of that support to the spiritual life that comes when two or three are gathered together and faith is buttressed by institution. In his deep distress he turned, as others in like case have turned, to the consolations of revealed religion, with its promise of personal immortality and its assurance of Christian fellowship." A. D. Martin agrees with Smith, citing Bergson's belief that

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55 Smith, p. 93, emphasis added.

56 Smith, p. 96; for the poem, cf. de Selincourt, IV, 10-13. The last of its four stanzas contains many echoes of the Ode.

57 Smith, pp. 96-97.
man as body and spirit needs contact with God through both of two
sources of religion, the dynamic method of the mystic and the
static practices of the church-goer. 58

All debate about whether Wordsworth turned to orthodox
Christian faith seems to be settled, however, by the veritable
landslide of Christian and religious poems, composed during Words-
worth’s tour of the continent in 1820-1821, and followed by a
regular flow of similar poems—comprising up to thirty per cent
of his total output—for the rest of his writing years, until 1847.
The content of these poems is as devout and Christian as their
titles indicate; here are some titles selected at random from this
period: "Our Lady of the Snow," "The Church of San Salvador," "The
Last Supper," and "Processions." 59 From Wordsworth’s Ecclesiasti-
cal Sonnets, written at this same period, there are such titles as
"Saxon Monasteries," "Crusades," "Monks and Schoolmen," "Transub-
stantiation," "Saints," "The Virgin," and "Translation of the
Bible." 60 Of course, there are poems too on the abuses of the
monasteries and on "Popery." Wordsworth was a good Anglican, with
many of the Anglican prejudices against the Church of Rome.

Even in his earlier years, Wordsworth had been "religious,"
so to speak, "at that deeper, undifferentiated level where dis-
tinctions hardly obtain," as Bowers puts it. 61

60 Ibid., pp. 604-635. [This chronological order is handy here].
In his later years—from 1818 on—most critics concede that he became a doctrinal Christian church-goer, though his beliefs originated not so much in the teachings of the Church, says Bernbaum, as in his own personal experience, and in this way his empirical habit of mind inspired important religious leaders of the Victorian Age to bring traditional doctrines—especially in the Anglican Church—to the test of their own individual experience of life.

It may be concluded, therefore, that the "recovery stanzas" do express a real recovery, in the sense of a quite successful adaptation to the changing internal landscape of mind that came to Wordsworth with full maturity. The child has been Father of the Man, his days have been "knit each to each in natural piety," the piety of immortal hopes not dimmed with the passing of time.

"About this treatment of recovered powers there is a supreme concentration and a finality," Fairchild remarks. Those final stanzas of the Ode "regard Wordsworth's greater landscape with the steadiness and concentration of a dying gaze. Everything is here. The season of calm weather is the eye made quiet, the means of insight. The fields of sleep, not quite Elysian nor yet St. Augustine's Fields of Memory, [are] the home of insight, where, as again in 'though inland far we be,' the poet walks through time.


62 Brooke, p. 282.
as he walks through space." The features of this landscape are wind, water, mountain, and echo; the sea shore, and even "the nearest flower that blows," can still give Wordsworth "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."  

64 "Immortality Ode," 11. 203, 204 (de Selincourt, IV, 235).
CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This final chapter turns to a consideration of the Ode as an artistic whole, sums up the findings of the previous chapters, and serves as a conclusion to this study of Wordsworth.

It has been seen that Coleridge's influence, through his poems and his personal crisis at the time Wordsworth began the Ode, was considerable, especially as regards the second part of the Ode.1 The Ode itself, however, is not "a dirge sung over departing powers," or "a conscious farewell to art," but a poem about change, about growth.2 It embodies Wordsworth's most important notions about childhood, nature, and poetic vision.3 Wordsworth has indeed lost that intensity of sensuous vision belonging to youth--more especially to youthful poets--but, precious as it is, this vision is compensated for in maturity by new depth and power of understanding which enrich the man, even though the poet's powers are somewhat abated (though not lost) by the change.4

The Child, so exalted by Wordsworth in the Ode, is indeed--

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1 See above, p. 5.
2 See above, pp. 8-9.
3 See above, p. 12.
4 See above, p. 24.
in a strictly poetic sense—the "best Philosopher," and a "mighty
Seer Blest," because of his closeness to nature and almost con-
natural insight into its secrets. As to the Platonic doctrine
of pre-existence of the soul, Wordsworth derived it from secondary
sources, and modified it to suit his own poetic purposes as a
symbol for his own distinctive theory. Though one cannot be
certain, there is good evidence that Wordsworth was so enamored
of this idea when he wrote the Ode that he may well have believed
it at that time; but he abandoned it in favor of Christianity in
later years, just as he also abandoned his early pantheistic
notions.

The "recovery stanzas," treated in Chapter Four, are not a
half-hearted acceptance of a ruined life, but a joyous and philo-
sophical adaptation to the richer humanism and more intellectual
"mysticism" of the mature years of this great poet. Words-
worth's childhood experiences of God in obscurity have borne
their fruit in his "conversion" to doctrinal Christianity in the
years following the Ode, and though his early, more superficial,

5 See above, pp. 36-38.
6 See above, p. 63.
7 Ibid.
8 See above, p. 86.
9 See above, p. 85.
10 See above, p. 76.
11 See above, pp. 78-79.
12 See above, p. 87.
more quickly aroused poetic emotions have abated, his rich inner
life has made it possible for him to say, in his concluding
stanzas:

Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

XI
And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,
Forbode not any severing of our loves!
Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;
I only have relinquished one delight
To live beneath your more habitual sway.
I love the brooks which down their channels fret,
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day
Is lovely yet;
The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.13

The Ode, then, is a poem "about the human heart—its growth,
its nature, its development."14 J. Wilson Knight calls it "prob-
bly Wordsworth's most finally satisfying human work. Here he
houses many favourite intuitions in majestic light; marries his

13"Immortality Ode," ll. 178-204 (de Selincourt, IV, 204-285).
dearest inward feelings to a highly charged impressionism, pastoral and royalistic; and faces the intoxication of a sunlight creation. It is his only poem at once human, happy, and powerful. 15 About the structure of the Ode, Knight states that the reader must see it "spatially, not merely temporally; that is, [he] must view its pattern simultaneously controlled, the beginning and end as framework, the outer rose-petals; the centre its fiery heart, wherein we have our vision of the child, transfigured by poetry. At the close this transfiguration becomes an eternity given not the abysmal darkness of the Prelude—which is, with the exception of certain fine ocean-images, .... a singularly inland world—but .... a more Shakespearian symbol.16 This symbol is contained in the lines:

Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore. 17

It has been seen that the Ode, because of its richness and the number of important Wordsworthian notions it contains, is an excellent introduction to Wordsworth's poetry—and indeed, it remains the favorite of many Wordsworth admirers after they have

15 Knight, Starlit Dome, p. 37.
16 Ibid., p. 48.
17 "Imortality Ode," II. 162-168 (de Selincourt, IV, 284).
read his poems for many years. Aside from the majestic thoughts of the Ode, its very style has received great praise from the critics who know Wordsworth best. Here, by way of conclusion, are some of the praises lavished on the Ode for its style.

"The metrical changes are swift, and follow the sense as a melody by Schubert or Brahms is moulded to the text," Harper remarks. Abercrombie also admires the "magnificent design" of the great Ode, and the editors of the Cambridge Edition of the Works feel that "the total effect is perhaps the grandest in the literature of the century, so that the term 'inspired' is not forced when applied to the poet who could produce such a result." Gerald Bullett thinks that the Ode's "technical accomplishment and poetic integrity, its blend of fresh feeling with classical formalism and of generalization with vivid imagery" makes it the best of all Wordsworth's works. In Bullett's estimation, Wordsworth's Ode, together with "Tintern Abbey" and the Prelude, place him "among the greatest poets of all time."

Helen Darbishire notes that Wordsworth had never tried such a metre before, yet took to it "like a duck takes to water," using

19Abercrombie, Art of Wordsworth, p. 75.
21Bullett, English Mystics, p. 205.
a varied language that has "touches of splendour and of magic." Many critics have remarked, together with Bullett, how effectively Wordsworth uses the simplest and barest of diction in the Ode, and yet gives to the poem a splendour and a dignity "as of great sculpture or great music untainted by vulgarity of adventitious ornament," and "an almost dateless, anonymous quality, such as poetry attains to only in its highest moments; moments when the voice of the poet, losing its local or individual accents, becomes as it were the vehicle for the universal utterance. It is as though not a man but Man himself, the embodiment of all men, were speaking." Thus, the poem has a lasting value that will continue to contribute to Wordsworth's classical place in English literature.

Indeed, the Ode: Intimations of Immortality From Recollection of Early Childhood is above all sublime. In it, Wordsworth came very near "to Blake's eternity," the interpenetration of the natural by the spiritual," as Margoliouth observes. He is, as Bernbaum states, the poet that John Keats described:

He is of the cloud, the cataract, the lake,
Who watches on Helvellyn's summit, wide awake,
Catches his freshness from Archangel's wing.  

23Darbishire, The Poet Wordsworth, pp. 72, 74.
24Bullett, p. 203.
25Ibid.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. PRIMARY SOURCES


II. SECONDARY SOURCES

A. BOOKS


B. ARTICLES


C. UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL


APPENDIX

TEXT OF WORDSWORTH'S ODE: INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY FROM RECOLLECTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

[Composed 1802-1804. Published 1807.]

I
There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;--
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

II
The Rainbow comes and goes,
And lovely is the Rose,
The Moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare;
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair;
The sunshine is a glorious birth;
But yet I know, where'er I go,
That there hath past away a glory from the earth.

III
Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,

1de Selincourt, Poetical Works, IV, 279-285.
And while the young lambs bound
   As to the tabernacle sound,
To me alone there came a thought of grief:
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
And I again am strong:
The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;
I hear the Echoes through the mountains round,
The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,
   And all the earth is gay;
   Land and sea
Give themselves up to jollity,
And with the heart of May
Doth every Beast keep holiday;—
Thou Child of Joy,
Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy boy!

IV
Ye blessed Creatures, I have heard the call
   Ye to each other make; I see
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;
   My heart is at your festival,
   My head hath its coronal,
The fulness of your bliss, I feel--I feel it all.
0 evil day! if I were sullen
While Earth herself is adorning,
   This sweet May-morning,
And the Children are calling
On every side,
In a thousand valleys, far and wide,
Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,
And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm;—
I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!
---But there's a Tree, of many, one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The Pansy at my feet
   Both the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

V
Our Birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home;
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing boy,
But He
Beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

VI
Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
And, even with something of a Mother's mind,
And no unworthy aim,
The homely Nurse doth all she can
To make her Foster-Child, her Inmate Man,
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came.

VII
Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,
A six years' Darling of a pigmy size!
See, where mid work of his own hand he lies,
Prettied by sallies of his mother's kisses,
With light upon him from his father's eyes!
See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,
Some fragment from his dream of human life,
Shaped by himself with newly-learned art;
A wedding or a festival,
A mourning or a funeral;
And this hath now his heart,
And unto this he frames his song:
Then will he fit his tongue
To dialogues of business, love, or strife;
But it will not be long
Ere this be thrown aside,
And with new joy and pride
The little Actor cons another part:
Filling from time to time his "humorous stage"
With all the Persons, down to palsied Age,
That Life brings with her in her equipage;
As if his whole vocation
Were endless imitation.
VIII
Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie
Thy Soul's immensity;
Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, Thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,—
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,
In darkness less, the darkness of the grave;
Thou, over whom thy Immortality
Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,
A Presence which is not to be put by;
Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might
Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,
Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke
The years to bring the inevitable yoke,
Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?
Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

IX
0 joy! That in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!
The thought of our past years in me doth breed
Perpetual benediction: not indeed
For that which is most worthy to be blest;
Delight and liberty, the simple creed
Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest,
With now-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast:—
Not for these I raise
The song of thanks and praise;
But for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realized,
High instincts before which our mortal Nature
Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised:
But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the Fountain light of all our day,
Are yet the master light of all our seeing;
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never;
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavor,
Nor Man nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy!
Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

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

XI
And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,
Forebode not any severing of our loves!
Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;
I only have relinquished one delight
To live beneath your more habitual sway.
I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;
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Is lovely yet;
The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
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To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

L.C.S.
APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Frank A. Grady, S.J., has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

April 22, 1958

Date

J.P. Mavon, S.J.
Signature of Adviser