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ODE ON INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY

A CRITICAL STUDY

> "Now the interest and importance of the matter were here of the highest, his insight was at its very deepest."

This comment by Gerard Manley Hopkins [1] on Wordworth's *Ode on intimations of immortality* is an extreme instance of what seems to have been a frequent critical attitude and provides a useful starting-point for a fresh consideration. The poem has received much adulation, some questioning, but little close critical analysis. One of Wordworth's most impressive poems, it occupies a crucial position in his work, but it is questionable whether it is depth of insight that gives it its power.

Any discussion of "insight" inevitably involves some consideration of the relation of belief to poetry, a problem that is particularly relevant in the case of Wordsworth. The bulk of his work seems to express a very individual and deeply held view of existence. This does not mean that the value of his, or of any, poetry depends on the truth or conviction of the beliefs expressed: as I. A. Richards has pointed out,

> "... many ... of the statements ni poetry are there as a means to the manipulation and expression of feelings and attitudes, not as contributions to any body of doctrine of any type whatever." [2]

Although the kind of belief poetry demands is "emotional" rather than "intellectual" [3], nevertheless, Richards remarks,

> "intellectual exploration of the internal coherence of the poem"

is

> "not only permissible but necessary in the reading of much poetry." [4]

[1] Quoted by Humphrey House, *All in Due Time*, 1958, p. 45.

[2] *Practical Criticism*, 1930, p. 186.

[3] *cf. ibid.*, p. 274, ff.

[4] *ibid.*, p. 277.

Such an exploration is of particular interest in the case of the *Immortality Ode*, for the ideas expressed in the poem seem to be at variance, not only with each other, but also with the main line of thought in the bulk of Wordsworth's best work.[5] Thus it is necessary first of all to give some account of the mature Wordsworth's characteristic insight and orientate the *Ode* in the body of his work as a whole. A significant parallel in the work of Henry Vaughan further throws into relief the individual character of the *Ode* and the change of attitude that is beginning to appear in Wordsworth's work. The *Ode* can then be analysed in detail, with reference to this wider context, and its peculiar poetic effects can be established.

In the *Ode* Wordsworth laments the loss of the "visionary gleam" which, he tells us, belongs to childhood. The child inhabits a world irradiated by the light of heaven which it has only just left, but this light is gradually lost as the child grows up and earth weans it away from the heavenly existence it led before birth.

This conception of two worlds, the earthly and the divine, and of the gradual progression of man away from his source of insight and sense of glory in the divine world, is quite alien to the burthen of Wordsworth's major work. For the characteristic Wordsworth, *This green earth* comprises the whole of existence, mortal and immortal:

> the very world which is the world
> Of all of us, the place in which, in the end,
> We find our happiness, or not at all.
>
> (*The Prelude*, X, 126)[6]

The individual mind is exquisitely fitted to the external world:

> "and how exquisitely, too-
> ... The external world is fitted to the mind." [7]

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[5] This is not always recognised: *cf.*, for example, Graham Hough, *The Romantic Poets*, 1953:

"...he has lost none of his power of dealing with the facts of experience. The developement described is as true to his own heart as the least elaborated passages of the *Prelude*..." (p. 57)

[6] All quotations from *The Prelude* are from the 1805 text, ed. by E. de Selincourt, 1933.

[7] 63 ff. in the extract from *The Recluse* printed as *Prospectus* to *The Excursion*, 1814.

Moreover, this perception of the glorious unity of animate and inanimate is a quality of the mature man. The whole theme of *The Prelude* is one of development: like the *Ode* it has its image of a journey, but a journey in a different direction. In Book XIII Wordsworth, reviewing the course of the whole poem and the spiritual development presented, writes of having "traced the stream From darkness" until it eventually emerges as a broad river (cf. 172ff.). In the first two books of *The Prelude* Wordsworth traces in some detail the development of his appreciation of nature as a boy: first nature influenced him by "extrinsic passion", impressing itself upon him as it were by accident in the midst of physical activity, as in the stolen boat adventure (I, 372—427) and the skating description (I, 452—473). Gradually nature "was sought For her own sake", and he felt increasingly

> **"Those hallow'd and pure motions of the sense"**
>
> *(I, 548)*

The climax of his boyhood vision comes at the age of seventeen:

> "and now at length
> From Nature and her overflowing soul
> I had receiv'd so much, that all my thoughts
> **Were steep'd in feeling"**
>
> *(II, 415)*

This development continues through his undergraduate days: in his first summer vacation he felt

> **"A dawning, even as of another sense,**
> **A human-heartedness about my love."**
>
> *(IV, 225)*

When he went to France and found himself swept away by the ideals and turmoil of the revolution,

> "earth was then
> To me what an inheritance new-fallen
> Seems, when the first time visited, to one
> Who thither comes to find in it his home".
>
> *(X, 729)*

In the closing book of *The Prelude* he recounts his visit to Snowdon after his return from France, where, as a fully developed adult, he has a vision of the imagination, which is the "consummation of a poet's mind".

The Prelude ends on a note of buoyant optimism and anticipation, the poet possessing "undiminish'd powers" and

"delight
That fails not in the external universe."

(XIII, 118)

Thus, in this idea of pre-existence and its consequences, as presented in the *Ode*, Wordsworth is rejecting much of what is most significant in his assertions elsewhere.[8] Indeed, as if recognising this discrepancy, he himself tells us in his note that the idea of a pre-natal life is not to be taken simply as a statement of his own belief:

"Archimedes said that he could move the world if he had a point whereon 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 notion 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." (I. F.)

Wordsworth is using the idea as an image to express a particular state of his own mind[9]. But it is not clear in the poem that this is simply an image: although the idea of pre-existence is at variance with his usual way of thinking, Wordsworth seems in the poem to be offering it as a statement of belief, and the very fact that he needed to clarify matters in his note suggests some confusion in the thought of the poem itself. Likewise with the visionary experience he is describing:

"I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and 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 tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality ..." (I. F.)

The poem itself gives little idea of the subtlety of this experience. The "visionary gleam" of the first few stanzas is vague and unsubstantial as compared with its revelation in, for instance,

[8] This has been pointed out by Basil Willey in his brief but valuable discussion of the poem in *The Eighteenth Century Background*, 1946, pp. 284—7.

[9] The significance of the fact that Wordsworth needed to choose an external image has been pointed out by John Jones in his excellent study of Wordsworth, *The Egotistical Sublime*, 1954:

"...Wordsworth had always intended, in entire seriousness, to »move the world« through his poetry; and he has once felt able... to do so from within. But in the Immortality Ode he is preparing himself for the defeat of his imaginative monism: the answer to the world must be outside the world." (p. 167).

The Prelude. The childhood world of the *Ode* is paradisal, almost unreal in its splendour, "the glory and the freshness of a dream". This perpetual radiance is of a different quality from the light which embodies Wordsworth's vision in *The Prelude*. The characteristic light image of *The Prelude* is the flash:

"Gleams, like the flashing of a shield"

(I, 614)

"when the light of sense
Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
The invisible world"

(VI, 534)

The world of the *Ode* is "apparelled in celestial light", irradiated from without; the world of *The Prelude* is at least partly illumined by the mind of the beholder:

"an auxiliar light
Came from my mind which on the setting sun
Bestow'd new splendor"

(II, 387)

"from thyself it is that thou must give,
Else never can receive"

(XI, 333)

In the *Ode* vision gradually "fades into the light of common day", while in the bulk of Wordsworth's work it is precisely the „simple produce of the common day" [10] which is the object of the poet's transforming vision.

However, although this poignantly nostalgic evocation of the paradisal light of childhood dissociates the *Ode* from what is basic in Wordsworth's mature work, it does link the poem closely to the work of the seventeenth century poet, Henry Vaughan, and, in particular, to his poem, *The Retreat* [11]:

Happy those early days, when I
Shin'd in my Angel-infancy!
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race,
Or taught my soul to fancy aught

[10] *Prospectus* to *The Excursion*, 55.

[11] The similarity between the two poems has sometimes been briefly mentioned by critics, e. g. Douglas Bush, *A Minority Report*, in *Wordsworth* (Centenary Studies presented at Cornell and Princeton Universities), ed. G. Dunklin, 1951 (pp. 16—17). However, the whole question of Worsworth's relation to 17th century poetry seems to remain a largely unexplored and possibly fruitful field of investigation.

But a white celestial thought:
When yet I had not walk'd above
A mile or two from my first Love,
And looking back — at that short space —
Could see a glimpse of His bright face:
When on some gilded cloud, or flow'r,
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,
And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of eternity:
Before I taught my tongue to wound
My Conscience with a sinful sonud,
Or had the black art to dispense
A several sin to ev'ry sense,
But felt through all this fleshly dress
Bright shoots of everlastingness.

O how I long to travel back,
And tread again that ancient track!
That I might once more reach that plain
Where first I left my glorious train;
From whence th' enlightened spirit sees
That shady City of Palm-trees.
But ah! my soul with too much stay
Is drunk, and staggers in the way!
Some men a forward motion love,
But I by backward steps would move;
And when this dust falls to the urn,
In that state I came, return.

Vaughan's childhood world has this same quality of steady radiance. Vaughan has "a white celestial thought", Wordsworth "celestial light". Vaughan "shined in [his] angel-infancy", Wordsworth tells us,

"Heaven lies about us in our infancy."

Vaughan has "a gilded cloud or flower", Wordsworth, "clouds of glory", "Splendour in the grass", "glory in the flower".[12] Vaughan's child looks back and glimpses God's "bright face", Wordsworth's "comes from God" and "Beholds the light and whence

[12] *Cf.* also *The Excursion*, III, 437:

"what good is given to men,
More solid than the gilded clouds of heaven
What joy more lasting than a vernal flower?"

it flows". Vaughan's child has a "glorious train", Wordsworth's comes "trailing clouds of glory". Vaughan calls the earth,

> "this place
> Appointed for my second race."

Wordsworth comments,

> "Another race hath been, and other palms are won."

The use of the word "race" as a kind of pun, suggesting both a running race and a race of people, is characteristic of seventeenth century "wit", but is a linguistic feature most uncharacteristic of Wordsworth; the possibility of Vaughan's influence thus seems especially plausible here.

These similarities seem too close to be mere coincidence. The sense of sin in *The Retreat* and the hope of returning to heaven are elements absent from Wordsworth's poem; but it is significant that at this time Wordsworth seems to have found himself heavily under the influence of so essentially a Christian poet as Henry Vaughan. This division of existence into two worlds, divine and earthly, and the representation of the early vision as a sustained radiance, is a sign of Wordsworth's eventual adoption of a more orthodoxly Christian faith. This sign is glimpsed now and then even during the period of his most assured and characteristic work. For example, in *To the cuckoo*, written in 1802, the year in which the *Ode* was begun, the "visionary hours" and "golden time" of childhood are evoked in much the same terminology. The "unsubstantial faery place" evoked by the cuckoo's song might well be the childhood world of the *Ode*.

By 1806, in *Yes, it was the mountain Echo*, the divided worlds are made explicit; man hears "voices of two different natures", "Echoes from beyond the grave":

> "Listen, ponder, hold them dear;
> For of God, — of God they are."

By the time *The Excursion* appeared in 1814 this had hardened into a whole system of thought. The "imperial palace" of the *Ode*, so odd an image in the early Wordsworth, develops, in the vision with which Book II concludes, into "a mighty city":

"Fabric it seemed of diamond and of gold,
With alabaster domes, and silver spires,
And blazing terrace upon terrace."

(II, 839)

Composed upon an evening of extraordinary beauty and splendour, develops the theme still further: after describing the "beamy radiance" and "gem-like hues" of sunset, Wordsworth declares,

"From worlds not quickened by the sun
A portion of the gift is won;
An intermingling of Heaven's pomp is spread
On ground which British shepherds tread."

Wordsworth refers to the *Ode* himself in a note to this poem; one can see in it all the elements that seemed new in the earlier poem here colouring the poet's whole attitude and softened, almost sentimentalised.

This sense of divided worlds and falsification of childhood vision into a conscious and constinuous state, which in fact it was not, is an almost inevitable development of Wordsworth's peculiar kind of vision. *The Prelude* reveals him as perpetually poised between light and darkness; paradoxically, just as his mind has reached maturity and the full import of his youthful experience is revealed to him, he is simultaneously conscious that his vision is beginning to fail. It is a flickering vision and the poet is kept in a continual state of striving:

"The days gone by
Come back upon me from the dawn almost
Of life: the hiding-places of my power
Seem open; I approach, and then they close;
I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,
May scarcely see at all."

(The Prelude, XI, 334)

The "visionary gleam", momentary flash as it is, is only fully realised long afterwards:

"doom'd to sleep
Until maturer seasons call'd them forth
To impregnate and to elevate the mind."

(The Prelude, I, 622)

The clearest analysis of this experience is perhaps the passage in Book VI of *The Prelude* describing the crossing of the Alps:

"Imagination! lifting up itself
Before the eye and progress of my Song
Like an unfather'd vapour; here that Power,

In all the might of its endowments, came
Athwart me; I was lost as in a cloud,
Halted, without a struggle to break through.
And now recovering, to my Soul I say
I recognise thy glory; in such strength
Of usurpation, in such visitings
Of awful promise, when the light of sense
Goes out in flashes that have revealed to us
The invisible world, doth Greatness make abode,
There harbours whether we be young or old.
Our destiny, our nature, and our home
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be."

(VI, 525)

At the time Wordsworth was "lost as in a cloud". It is only now, years later, as he writes the account and recreates the situation in his mind, that the experience becomes a moment of conscious vision:

"And now recovering, to my Soul I say
I recognise thy glory." [13]

Moreover Wordsworth cannot say exactly what it is his vision reveals to him. All it gives him is a promise, a sense of something beyond him:

"With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be."

Or, as he explains at greater length in Book II, "these fleeting moods Of shadowy exultation" are of value in that

"the soul,
Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
Remembering not, retains an obscure sense
Of possible sublimity, to which,
With growing faculties she doth aspire,
With faculties still growing, feeling still

[13] This is closely related to Wordsworth's remarks on the origin of poetry; there is a similar re-creation of past experience:

"Poetry... takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind (*Preface* to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800).

That whatsoever point they gain, they still
Have something to pursue."

(II, 334)

During his period of most intense creative activity these momentary glimpses of "an obscure sense Of possible sublimity" were sufficient to sustain him, but gradually Wordsworth felt the need for a more settled, systematised inner life:

"Me this uncharted freedom tires;
I feel the weight of chance-desires:
My hopes no more must change their name,
I long for a repose that ever is the same."

(Ode to Duty)

The calm existence which he foresees in the *Ode to Duty* (1805) as a result of a dedication to duty has something of the sunlit quality of the childhood world of the *Immortality Ode*:

"Serene will be our days and bright,
And happy will our nature be,
When love is an unerring light,
And joy its own security."

In *The Excursion* his acceptance of duty as part of a schematised Christian view of existence is more or less complete. In Book IV, in lines which, as he tells us in a footnote, refer explicitly to the Ode, he remarks:

"Alas! the endowment of immortal power
Is matched unequally with custom, time,
And domineering faculties, of sense
In all"

(IV, 205)

but spiritual victory is sure for him who yields "submission to the law Of conscience". The *Ode*, begun in 1802 but not finished until at least 1804, reveals him in the midst of his dilemma. Confused and incoherent as it sometimes is in its thought, it seems to embody the accumulated doubts, fears and misgivings that were creeping upon Wordsworth at the height of his powers.[14]

In fact the *Ode* is principally an emotional statement, more so than, with its apparently intellectual statements, we would at first sight expect it to be. It is an expression of the emotional

[14] For a detailed account of the changing direction of Wordsworth's mind, *cf.* John Jones, *The Egotistical Sublime*, 1957, especially chs. 3—4 (pp. 111—192).

conflict caused by the poet's fluctuating vision, not, as is *The Prelude*, an attempted analysis or concrete illustration of this vision. The very verse form, the irregular ode structure, is uncharacteristic of Wordsworth, with his customary sobriety; it is essentially a rhetorical poem, demanding a strong emotional response from the reader [15]. The dramatic structure of the opening stanzas, the question and answer device, is employed to evoke the maximum emotional effect. The first two stanzas, with their elegiac rhetorical questions, lament the passing away of glory; in stanza III the poet reasserts for a moment his sense of joy, but in stanza IV, even as he raches an ecstatic climax, there is a sense of strain in his repeated

"I feel — I feel it all'

and later,

"I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!"

At this point the tension snaps, and the verse is brilliantly modulated back into the poignantly nostalgic key of the opening:

— "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
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?"

This emblematic selection of a particular tree, field, flower, is part of a large rhetorical gesture [16]. The landscape of the *Ode* has not the actuality and immediacy of Wordsworth's usual conception of nature. At least one line recaptures his characteristic imaginative force:

"The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep."

But the cataracts spring out of an almost Spenserian pastoral world, where

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[15] Matthew Arnold seems half to perceive this without appreciating its significance: he found "the great *Ode* not wholly free from something declamatory" (Preface to *The Poems of Wordsworth*, 1879, reprinted in *Essays in Criticism*, 2nd series, ed. S. R. Littlewood, 1956, p. 94).

[16] John Jones has commented on the change in Wordsworth's treatment of flowers in his later poetry. "Already, in the Immortality Ode, the »pansy at my feet« is completely formal, introduced with the barest of gestures... interesting only for its relevance to the human predicament" (*op. cit.*, p. 181).

"young lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound."

This idyllic May morning, with its suggestion of a literary rather than a truly rural origin, is primarily a rhetorical image.

Stanzas V and VI, contradictory as they are to the main statement of Wordsworth's work, are, even within their own limits, intellectually inconsistent. "Earth" in stanza VI is an alien element, seducing man from his contact with divinity, yet in stanza V the youth is "Nature's Priest". What exactly is the difference between "earth" and "nature", and what is the relation of "nature" to God? It is almost as if the word "nature" had slipped in unawares, characteristic as the phrase is of

"That spirit of religious love in which
I walked with Nature."

(*The Prelude*, II, 376)

And what exactly is the "no unworthy aim" which is attributed to "earth"?[17] The images do not bear an intellectual analysis, but again it is primarily an emotional response that is demanded. The stately rhythms and striking concrete images, asserting at once Wordsworth's sense of glory and sense of loss, are rhetorically effective, holding in abeyance the analytical approach.

Wordsworth now turns to the child himself, in stanza VII picturing the child at play, in stanza VIII eulogising the blessed state of childhood. The terms he uses are extreme ones:

"Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind, ...
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find ..."

Coleridge[18] criticised this passage scathingly; in what sense, he asks, can a child be called a philosopher, a prophet, a seer, and accuses Wordsworth of "mental bombast", that is, "a disproportion of thought to the circumstance and occasion". There is almost some justification for criticism here. The extreme terms, the

[17] G. Wilson Knight, admitting that "the poet confuses us with two uses of »nature«", maintains that two natures, an earthly and a divine, are present in the poem (*The Starlit Dome*, 1941, p. 40). But this does not justify the confusion, and any conception of two forms of nature is highly uncharacteristic of Wordsworth.

[18] *Biographia Literaria*, 1817, Everyman's Library (1917), p. 244.

cluster of metaphors, verge on exaggeration, but they are just saved from ridicule by the tremendous emotional drive that sustains the verse. The impact of the passage upon us is not a conviction of the justice of Wordsworth's statement, but the emotional impact of the poet's bitter sense of loss, striving after childhood experience, unable to recreate it, groping for words to define the child's vision, but only able to pour adulation upon it.[19]

In stanza IX the poem takes a fresh turn. All is not lost, Wordsworth says; but the part of childhood experience which he describes as of permanent value is something new in the poem:

> "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."

This sense of grim disturbance is quite different from the paradisal serenity which permeates the childhood world at the beginning of the *Ode*; but it at once recalls *The Prelude*, especially episodes like that of the stolen boat (I, 372—427). For a moment the characteristic Wordsworth seems to emerge: he no longer tries to classify his experiences, he simply rejoices in them, "be they what they may":

> "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 a 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: ..."

These lines, with their soaring confidence and assertion of the lasting validity of childhood experience, are the climax of the

[19] For an ardent appreciation of this passage and its philosophy *cf.* G. Wilson Knight (*op. cit.*, pp. 42—48), whose view is diametrically opposed to that of Coleridge, and who sees the "rest of the ode" as "the structure for this the central towering height, or heart" (p. 43).

poem: here Wordsworth seems suddenly in command again. But just as suddenly the tone drops again in the next stanza:

"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; ..."

The things that are left behind seem a poor consolation, and the vagueness of Wordsworth's language robs it of conviction. What exactly is "the philosophic mind"? And what are "the soothing thoughts that spring Out of human suffering"? We are at once reminded of the "still, sad music" of *Lines composed above Tintern Abbey*:

"the still sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue."

These lines, in their context, epitomize Wordsworth's attitude to suffering, the sympathetic but detached observation of the man who, like the Wanderer in *The Excursion*,

"could afford to suffer
With those whom he saw suffer."

We can give meaning to the "philosophic mind" and "soothing thoughts" by relating them to the body of Wordsworth's work; he reaches similar moral conclusions about suffering and endurance elsewhere:

"There is a comfort in the strength of love;
Twill make a thing endurable, which else
Would overset the brain, or break the heart."
(Michael)

"»God«, said I, »be my help and stay secure;
I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!«"
(Resolution and Independence)

"...what we feel of sorrow or despair
From ruin and from change, and all the grief
That passing shows of Being leave behind,
Appeared an idle dream"
(The Ruined Cottage)

But these observations take conviction from the dramatic demonstration of their validity in the preceding narratives: all Wordsworth's convincing moral reflections are the immediate outcome

of actual observed experience [20], and it is precisely this vitalising element that is missing in the *Ode*. There is nothing within the poem to support its moral statements, and the theme of nobility and wisdom through suffering is, when we meet it in Stanza X, a new one. Lionel Trilling, in one of the most interesting and substantial pieces of criticism on the poem [21], maintains that Wordsworth, far from lamenting a loss of power, is embracing a new, more mature attitude, rejecting the dream of youth for the chastened insight of the experienced man. The poem is

"actually a dedication to new powers. Wordsworth did not, to be sure, realise his hopes for these new powers, but that is another matter." [22]

But the failure of Wordsworth's hopes is not simply another matter; the failure is implicit in the poem itself. In the last two stanzas, with their sober colouring from the setting sun, Wordsworth does not convince us that what remains is of any real value, nor does he seem to convince himself. The powerful poignancy of the closing stanzas arises from the poet's desperate effort to reconcile himself to a changing world.

Uneven and inconsistent as the poem is in the progression of its thought, the emotional modulation is superb. It begins with the intense wistfulness of one bewildered by a loss of glory and unable to comprehend it (I—IV); it moves to an effort to find some sort of explanation that will fill the vacancy (V—VI); rises to a new emotional height in stanza VIII as the poet projects his anguished ecstasy into the idealised, almost idolised, child-figure; shifts to a new angle in stanza IX with a sudden recovery and assertion of the old power; and in the closing stanzas returns to the theme of the opening, but in a new chastened mood", the insistent questioning replaced by declamatory resignation. Wordsworth seems to be trying to do something quite different from usual. His characteristic poetry tends towards a state beyond emotion; his suffering figures, Michael, Margaret, the leech-gatherer, inhabit a world as it were on the other side of tragedy;

[20] Often, indeed, the moral observations are inadequate, for instance, the closing lines of *Resolution and Independence, quoted above*: the most effective commentary is implicit in the body of the poem itself.

[21] "The Immortality Ode", *The Liberal Imagination*, 1955, pp. 129—153.

[22] *ibid.*, p. 131.

his own joy reaches its height in an ecstatic tranquillity that transcends emotion, "that serene and blessed mood, dominated by the" eye made quiet". The *Ode*, however, is a passionate expression of doubt, conflict, heartbreak, and Wordsworth summons all the resources of a rhetorical and dramatic style to evoke the maximum emotional effect [23]. The bulk of his major work is an expression of or the fruit of a particular kind of visionary experience; the *Ode* is a very personal expression of the emotional state of the personality behind the vision. To declare where a poet's insight is deepest is perhaps in the last analysis a non-literary judgment; but to agree with Hopkins' statement one would have to deny the validity for Wordsworth of the central tenets and inspiration of much of his greatest work. The *Ode* in style and effect is unique in Wordsworth's work; it occupies a pivotal position, looking before and after, eloquently crystallising the complexity and shifting direction of the poet's mind.

[23] F. W. Bateson sees the poem as moving "because of the intensity of Wordsworth's longing for the impossible" (*Wordsworth, a Re-interpretation*, 1954, p. 162). But Bateson distorts the true significance of the poem by seeing in it only Wordsworth's desire to escape from particular personal problems besetting him at the time of composition.