

# The Intelligible Ode Revisited

Graham Davidson

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*The Coleridge Bulletin is pleased to publish a public lecture delivered by Graham Davidson to The Friends of Coleridge on September 23, 2023. The publication of his most recent book, The Intelligible Ode: Intimations of Paradise (Lutterworth, 2023), prompted the event (reviewed by Jennifer Jones in this issue). The online lecture was well attended by members of the Friends and other interested observers. The author has made light edits to the text for clarity, while largely maintaining the tone of his original lecture. He has also included a brief postscript that addresses two primary lines of discussion from the Q&A.*

THIS TALK IS BASED ON THE SUPPOSITION that the first business of a critic is to learn how to read poets in the spirit in which they wrote, to understand, in Collingwood's endlessly relevant formulation, what questions they were asking, why, and how they answered them. Wordsworth was conscious of a separation of mind and nature, and felt that the distinctly human powers of mind had been alienated from the life and being of the natural world, a separation we now take for granted. It is, to us, an extraordinary presumption that anyone ever supposed that the mind, in respect of its spiritual and moral qualities, was in some form present in nature. We take our power of reasoning as a tool to understand the physical world and keep the mind's other powers apart. But that union, in some measure sanctioned by Aristotle, was implicit in European thought prior to the formalization by Descartes in 1637 of a distinction that had been developing for nearly a hundred years, as far back as Copernicus in 1543. Wordsworth's question was by what means could mind and nature be re-united as 'the one Life', that life which both he and Coleridge believed underlies all life, natural and human. The *Immortality Ode*, the poem he set most store by, was his attempt to provide a definitive answer to that question.

## *Mind and Nature*

Why Wordsworth thought that separation an anathema is a much more difficult question. Why would anyone, educated in the eighteenth century, a hundred years after Bacon and Descartes, think the mind and nature division, or distinction, a chasm to be bridged? After all, it was then the so-called Age of Reason, that reason which had already proved such a powerful method in the analysing or 'vexing' of Nature as Bacon put it, or the murdering in order to dissect, as Wordsworth put it. Of course, Coleridge shared Wordsworth's opinion, and had some hard words to say about Descartes—as did Eliot, for comparable reasons. But Coleridge was familiar with earlier and countervailing philosophies, the Cambridge Platonists among them, in a way that Wordsworth wasn't, despite the fact that his thinking was closely aligned with theirs. The Cambridge Platonists were a group of thinkers who initially admired Descartes, and what he made of reason. However, they found a serious and unacceptable

flaw in his work—it put God outside his universe—once he'd made it, then having little or nothing to do with it. Coleridge summed it up with, 'Descartes was the first man to make nature utterly lifeless and godless'. He and Wordsworth wanted to make nature 'lifelike' and god-full. But the Platonists could not and would not dismiss Descartes' reason, and claimed both the reasonableness of religion, and that God, by means of an intermedium, existed in nature as an immanent power. Reason was their key word, but it was a development of the idea of reason, not an extension of it. That is, they took the ability of the mind to intuit, say, the theorems of geometry, and asked: if the mind can intuit those kinds of truth, why can't the same degree of certainty be ascribed to the mind's other intuitions, particularly the spiritual and moral? And as the human mind is an analogue of the divine mind, then we should find features of that mind present in nature. The title of Ralph Cudworth's unfinished work epitomises their approach: *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*. So perhaps Wordsworth learnt from Coleridge? Of course it is possible, but, and this is only an impression, consciousness of the regrettable division between the life of the mind and the life of nature is far too deeply embedded in Wordsworth's thinking for him to have first met with it at the age of 25 (at the earliest). On the other hand, it is quite likely that something latent in him was catalysed into life by Coleridge's conversation. Given the power that both would later ascribe to the imagination, the ability to re-unite mind and nature, to realize what they both called 'the one life', then the year they spent together in Somerset (1797–98)—largely discussing the imagination, so Coleridge tells us—may have been just the stimulus Wordsworth needed to find a focus for his poetry.

### *Life and Death*

So, however it came to him, the principal question Wordsworth was intent on answering was, How can mind and nature be re-united? what is the imagination, and how is its power expressed? Much of his poetry is the record of that quest in all its varieties. But that isn't the only question he was asking, not the only problem for which he sought a resolution. To put it rather bluntly, he wondered what purpose was served by the course of ordinary human life, especially in cases of undeserved suffering, which conventional narratives often resolve—think of *Silas Marner*. His answers were bleak: there is no resolution and the only monument to years of longing and suffering is a pile of stones, or a ruined cottage. Even the happier have no better end: his drowned brother John had become 'nothing but a name' and of a beloved schoolmaster, Matthew, honoured on a plaque, Wordsworth asks, 'can it be / That these two words of glittering gold / Are all that must remain of thee?'

Yes, it is, in respect of our passage through time, whether we suffer or not. Such is the still sad music of humanity. It isn't a wonderful life. In the ordinary course of things, Wordsworth doesn't pretend there is anything else. Life is to be got through, doggedly working our way towards the grave. So there are two Wordsworths, at least: the one emboldened by the magnificence of his near-

mad vision, on a journey that would take him 'aloft ascending' to 'breathe in worlds / To which the Heaven of heavens is but a veil', and on his way passing by 'All strength, all terror', unalarmed at anything that 'Jehovah, with his thunder, and the quire / Of shouting angels' could throw at him; who in the mind of man found something more terrifying than ever found in the 'darkest Pit / Of the profoundest Hell', led on this journey by the prospect of arriving at the reality of 'Paradise, and groves / Elysian, fortunate islands, fields like those of old / In the deep ocean', the myth of a lost world realized, Paradise regained—in effect, a journey of the mind. And then there is the journey of the body—of the mind without a vision—epitomized in Margaret's life and death, who tied, not to Paradise—all around her had she the power to see or feel differently—but to the wretched spot where her cottage stood, endeared to it only by the length of road along which she hoped to see her husband returning, and the 'rude bench' on which she sat nursing that hope.

It is difficult to see what these two 'visions', as we might call them, have to do with each other. It was a dilemma Wordsworth faced and struggled with. I think it is why he attempted to integrate, as far as he could, his two separate stories—of the Pedlar, and of Margaret—into one poem, what we now call 'The Ruined Cottage', Book I of *The Excursion*, which, compared to any of similar length, Coleridge once described as 'the finest Poem in our Language'. It is a curious fact that not much of the Pedlar's story has anything to do with the progress of his life, mostly with the growth of his own mind, a proto-Prelude; his death doesn't really come into it. Margaret's story has nothing to do with any kind of intellectual development, only with the history of her suffering ending in death. How did Wordsworth attempt to resolve this stand off? Eventually, in 1814, by giving Margaret a version of the Pedlar's power of meditation, that power which makes all that 'we feel of sorrow and despair / From ruin and from change, and all the grief / The passing shows of being leave behind' appear 'an idle dream'. This is ruthless stuff. Unless I have misread the passage, 'the passing shows of being' pretty much constitute our daily life from cradle to the grave and are here consigned to the dustbin of 'an idle dream'. Elsewhere he declares that habitual perception, 'the laws of vulgar sense', enslave the mind, so substituting 'a universe of death, / The falsest of all worlds, in place of that / Which is divine and true' (1805 XIII 135 ff.) Yes, but what life, that really *is* life, can replace this dream, this death? Or, what *is* divine and true?

We have to go back to the mind and nature division, and to its potential or imagined re-union, in order to understand how Wordsworth's idea of life is constituted. And it proves pretty simple. When 'the discerning intellect of Man' is 'wedded to this goodly universe / In love and holy passion' then 'Paradise and groves / Elysian' shall be a 'simple produce of the common day'—we will have got back to that Paradise from which we have so long been excluded, an exclusion of which the seventeenth century was particularly conscious. (It should be remembered that Wordsworth uses 'intellect' as a synonym of 'spiritual', so he is not confining his vision to the intelligent, or even to the

educated.) It is a sacramental or incarnational vision, of the ordinary made extraordinary, of habitual or vulgar sense redeemed—when the kingfisher’s wing answers light to light—and redeemed, important to notice, through love and holy passion, through an active power. No love, no passion, no redemption from the world of death—which undoes so many. Wordsworth is insistent that this is no esoteric process: ‘. . . by words / Which speak of nothing more than what we are / Would I arouse the sensual from their sleep / Of Death, and win the vacant and the vain / To noble raptures’. Occasionally, but only occasionally, Wordsworth indulges in a ‘them and us’, distinguishing himself as one of the spiritual elect, living in a world of light, opposed to the mass drowned in darkness. In this he is like Eliot, but unlike, as it is not habitual, perhaps aware that too soon, too early, that power in him had faded almost beyond recognition.

I have called this an incarnational vision, creative because it binds mind and nature, body and soul, together. But Descartes saw the mind as independent of the material, asserting in the Sixth Meditation that ‘je puisse tirer aucun argument qui conclue avec nécessité l’existence de quelque corps’—which a spluttering Eliot called an ‘extraordinary crude and stupid piece of reasoning’. But if Wordsworth lamented the vexing of nature, which ‘still dividing, and dividing still / Break[s] down all grandeur’, he celebrated the independence of the mind that, having its origin in God, is both the source of creative power, and transcends existence in time. We all want to turn away from the word ‘transcendental’ if we can—it is too limited and too pat a description of Wordsworth’s vision. But it is there—he describes the progress of life as passing through all nature to rest in God. I take the transcendental as the parent or poorer cousin of the incarnational, of the creative, a power he took as imitative of God’s act of creation, principally looking to its union with the material. And when Wordsworth cannot realize the incarnational in himself or others (I think he rarely if ever brings it alive successfully in others—*Peter Bell* might be taken as a failed attempt), then he resolves his difficulties by relying on the transcendental alone, sometimes asserting an orthodoxy. This is what he does for Margaret in *The Excursion*, which he didn’t do in the original *Ruined Cottage*, where she did not live in the eye of nature, although nature was all around her, so she had no incarnational vision; the power of imagination is not alive in her. Then what is originally ‘meditation’ or ‘imagination’ in the Pedlar becomes ‘prayer’ in Margaret,

Who, in her worst distress, had oft-times felt  
The unbounded might of prayer; and learned, with soul  
Fixed on the Cross, that consolation springs,  
From sources deeper far than deepest pain,  
For the meek Sufferer.

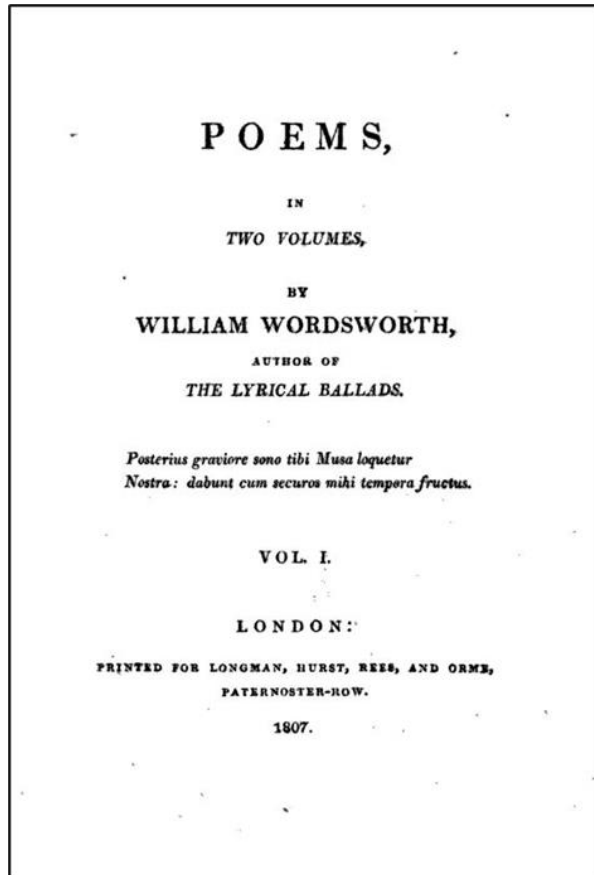
Wordsworth tries melding the two—meditation and prayer—by suggesting that the passing shows of being, including the deepest pain, could never maintain ‘dominion o’er the enlightened spirit / Whose meditative sympathies repose / Upon the breast of Faith’. But it is not terribly convincing, has none of the passion and power of his earlier insights. It is also something of a question whether suffering is relieved by the realization of Paradise, whether Margaret could ever have got over the loss of her husband. Suffering is conventionally excluded from Paradise. Adam and Eve had quite an easy time of it until the apple, and even then they enjoyed their senses in ways

we might envy. Perhaps Wordsworth was thinking of Christ’s words to his crucified fellows, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise’. But I doubt it, although the presence of the Cross might suggest that ‘the meek Sufferer’ is a figure incorporating both Margaret and Christ—Christ who suffers the ultimate and horribly painful price, or sacrifice, but believes he is on his way to Paradise—in the company of a couple of robbers.

### *The Ode*

I think this distinction—between the incarnational and transcendental—matters when we come to the *Ode*, because the one is realized in the other, particularly at the end of the poem, in a way predicated by the closing of *The Ruined Cottage*. So to the *Ode*.

First a few quick words about the title of the book, *The Intelligible Ode*, which is the background to this talk. The poem has come in for much stick for being, in various degrees, ‘unintelligible’—a word first used by Francis Jeffrey on its publication in 1807. Wordsworth’s friends, and friendly reviewers, didn’t do much better. Southey, Hazlitt, Montgomery, and even Coleridge saw only bombast based on a semi-heretical idea—Coleridge, who surely should have been able to, never did provide a reading of it, only quotations. Possibly even



Wordsworth was uncertain. It had no title, bar *Ode*, and an enigmatic epigraph, 'Let us sing of things a little greater'. Henry Crabb Robinson persuaded him to provide a subtitle in 1814—'Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood'—but that hardly helped: where's the proclaimed immortality, what's the credibility of childhood recollections? Although the Victorians entitled it 'The Great Ode', and it shook Hopkins to the core, it left Ruskin, Bridges, Patmore, and Arnold cold. It continued to divide opinion into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Even Eliot followed the herd and called it, in his backhand way, 'a fine piece of verbiage'. Recent critical readings have come to no consensus—is it a celebration, or is it an elegy? Does it lament lost powers, or recognize powers recovered? And whichever, or both, does its progress make any sense, is it coherent? In a word, is it intelligible?

Of course, I'm of the opinion that it largely is, and to that end *The Intelligible Ode* is my tuppenny worth of exegesis. Earlier in the book, later here, I make a particular attempt to answer the immortality and recollection questions. What follows is mostly about the structure, the way the poem progresses, which is, I think, perhaps the first thing to understand about a poem in order to know whether it is intelligible or not. Like all good stories, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end—and the end does what Coleridge thought all satisfactory stories and poems should do: it puts the snake's tail in its mouth, the beginning revisited and revised in the conclusion.

### *The Structure*

#### 1. The Statement of Loss (stanzas I–IV)

I think the *Ode* has four distinct phases, corresponding closely to Harold Bloom's idea, but working to a different end: a statement of loss, an analysis of loss, a recovery, and a resolution.<sup>1</sup> The beginning consists of stanzas 1 to 4, divided into two parts, two stanzas each. The opening stanza, 'There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream / The earth and every common sight, / To me did seem / Apparell'd in celestial light' is a very general statement of loss, covering everything, followed by a more detailed description in the second, ending 'But yet I know, where'er I go / There hath pass'd away a glory from the earth'. Paradise is absent, mind and nature, feeling and seeing, are not at one. These two stanzas are a simple assertion of loss. From loss one naturally seeks recovery, and the next two verses, twice as long as the first two, make that attempt.

Here begin some of the key problems of the poem. It is springtime, and all creatures, and the earth and sea, are giving themselves up to jollity, to a celebration of the arrival of spring. As all this is going on, an isolating thought of grief beleaguers the poet, interrupting his desired participation in the merriment. One presumes, though it is far from certain, that the thought of grief is an oblique reference to the loss outlined in the first two verses. The

<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*, revised and expanded edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 170–77.

gloomy Wordsworth is out of sync with the joys of spring. Readers hardly have time to digest this, when they are told, in the very next two lines, 'A timely utterance gave that thought relief, / And I again am strong'. That is a mighty quick turn-around, partially betrayed a line later when he says, 'No more shall grief of mine the season wrong', as if he is still fighting his grief. The nature of that utterance has never been satisfactorily explained. In my view it is a kind of subconscious glimpse of what he will fully unpack later in the poem. But here the divisive grief and the consoling utterance have little substance.

He wants to prove he is strong again, so we get those bombastic lines about trumpeting cataracts, mountain echoes, and winds from the fields of sleep: all 'strong' images. I've spent several pages in the book attempting to demonstrate that in fact they are fairly precise references to other poems and ideas—not bombast at all, but high-energy, well-focussed metaphors that seek to express his recovery, and then act as a prelude to the long list of the joys that come with spring. This celebration continues into and occupies almost all of the fourth verse, the poet asserting that 'My heart is at your festival', at one with the spirit of spring. Many critics have found in these lines a forced jollity, slightly hysterical, and even if, knowing what is to come, that's a retrospective reading, I think it is how they are best read. And there are hints, even in the course of this celebration, that all is not well: 'Oh evil day! if I were sullen / While Earth herself is adorning, / This sweet May-morning'. He is still resisting an unresolved grief. And the stanza closes with those magical lines beginning 'But there's a Tree, of many one,' bringing us down to earth and back to the beginning of the poem, a mini snake and tail, all attempts at resolution failed, and which conclude 'Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?'

## 2. The Analysis of Loss (stanzas V–VIII)

And so ends the beginning. But there has been an almost unnoticeable development. The section begins with a statement of loss, it ends with a question: where is that vision now, where has it gone? The presumption is that it has gone somewhere, and so if sought for, might be found. I have taken stanzas V to VIII as the middle of the poem, the analysis of loss, beginning, 'Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting . . .', ending, 'Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life'. These verses I think of as essentially answering the question, Where has it gone? Wordsworth pondered the problem for two years, between 1802 and 1804, and when it came to him, it came suddenly in what I've called a eureka moment—'I've got it: the glory we once knew we've lost—by being born—to this life'. The first and last lines of this section taken together almost say it all: life is lost in life, the soul begins to be smothered and frozen soon after birth by a life that is not life. But the problem is that this smothering life *is* our life, and so ensues a war between the two forms of life, in which the child is the hero because they can still remember the glory invested in the soul as it descended from heaven. They have the intuitive knowledge, power and vision that the adult loses by living. But the child is also the villain of the piece

because they blindly adopt all the deadening customs of the adult, as if their 'whole vocation / Were endless imitation' and so 'the vision splendid' fades 'into the light of common day'—this 'common day' the antithesis of the 'simple produce of the common day'.

There is a constant emotional, almost paradoxical, ambivalence running through these stanzas. The youth, travelling steadily away from the light of the East, whence his soul arose, towards the West, is nonetheless attended 'by the vision splendid'. The earth is a good place, full of pleasures of her own, of 'no unworthy aim', nursing the child 'with something of a Mother's mind'; but her intention is to make the child 'Forget the glories' they have known—surely an unworthy aim. The long description of life in the nursery is delightful, and most parents would recognize it as substantially true. But stanza VIII turns on the child and asks, 'Why with such earnest pains doest thou provoke / The Years to bring the inevitable yoke, / Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?' Why are you a traitor to yourself? And, again paradoxically, demonstrating the division in him, Wordsworth blames the child for provoking what it is anyhow inevitable.

### 3. The Recovery from Loss (stanzas IX and X)

But these are all in some sense rhetorical questions, all accounts of what does happen, and can't be undone. Wordsworth is now again in a different place; he understands the causes of his loss, and that the loss is, in itself, irrecoverable—as he says in stanza X, 'the radiance which was once so bright' is 'now for ever taken from my sight'. But what is not lost is the memory that it has been. And what that memory hints at is the lynchpin of a recovery that is worked through in stanzas IX and X—"The thought of our past years in me doth breed / Perpetual benediction", a constant, continual blessing, resonant of the Puritan belief that a single experience of grace is sufficient for one's salvation. There are lots of difficulties in stanza IX, principally associated with the nature of these memories, because they are not so much memories as sensations or feelings, 'shadowy recollections'. The imprecision for which these lines are sometimes criticized—their lack of distinct reference, a failure of articulation, a kind of woolly visionariness—slightly misses the point, because it is more important what these recollections are doing than what they are—'obstinate questionings / Of sense and outward things' dismiss the impressions of 'vulgar sense'; 'Blank misgivings of a Creature / Moving about in worlds not realized' make us conscious that such worlds exist behind the world of sense—there are things visible and invisible—or, in Coleridge's words, there is 'another world that now is'. 'High instincts' are those before which 'our mortal Nature' trembles with guilt in the ghostly presence of a much greater world—there is a hint here of what Hamlet said horrified before the ghost of his father—we are 'fools of nature', our disposition shaken with 'thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls', beyond what we can easily articulate. Wordsworth tries hard: to rehearse the long list—shadowy recollections, obstinate questionings, blank misgivings, high instincts, fallings from us,

vanishings, first affections—but in the end he gives up with ‘Which be they what they may’, adding—and here if anywhere is the core of the poem—‘Are yet the fountain light of all our day, / Are yet a master light of all our seeing’—that seeing apparelled in celestial light innate in the child, lost to the adult, that seeing which is also feeling. These inexpressible powers, derived from childhood experience, are the sources of our perpetual benediction, the embers still glowing, which ‘Man nor Boy / Nor all that is at enmity with joy / Can utterly abolish or destroy!’ It is worth remembering that as a prelude to this list of benedictions, a song of thanks and praise, Wordsworth dismissed what is ‘most worthy to be blest’, ‘the simple creed / Of childhood’, ‘Delight and liberty’, all that goes on in the nursery, things that have a name, create a belief, a creed, for what in itself is good. He is rehearsing, with the same emotional ambivalence, the distinction he made in stanzas VII and VIII, the child at play as the victim of custom, and the child ‘whose exterior semblance doth belie / Thy soul’s immensity’.

This reconnection with the visionary child enables at least a partial revival of visionary power in the adult. The adult, or their soul—and Wordsworth regularly distinguishes the two, comparable to his distinction between the two kinds of child<sup>2</sup>—now has, however far away, however far inland, ‘sight of that immortal sea / Which brought us hither’, and can hear ‘the mighty waters rolling evermore’. He is tentatively reconnected to the sources of immortality. His grief resolved, he turns back to the day he has forgotten and invokes his initial and failed celebration: ‘Then, sing ye birds, sing a joyous song’, and the next six lines are a deliberate reprise of that initially unshareable joy. But then comes an echo of the doubt that separated him from the May-time festival:

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 . . .

This is too close to ‘A timely utterance gave that thought relief, / And I again am strong’ to be definitely convincing, and here the reader has to make a decision: is this a recovery or not? What follows doesn’t help much. We are to find our strength ‘In the primal sympathy / Which having been must ever be’, another echo of the Puritan idea of grace—once blessed always blessed; but that sympathy is of a very peculiar kind, for it permits, even requires, ‘soothing thoughts’ to ‘spring / Out of human suffering’. One can hardly imagine anything less soothing. But it is here that we come back to Margaret. The sight of the spear-grass ‘By mist and silent rain-drops silver’d o’er’ filled the Pedlar’s mind with ‘So still an image of tranquillity’ that ‘what we feel of sorrow and despair / . . . all the grief / The passing shows of being leave behind, / Appear[ed] an idle dream that could not live / Where meditation was’. Consequently, despite the relentless, unrelieved suffering of Margaret, a story

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<sup>2</sup> ‘I seem / Two consciousnesses—conscious of myself / And of some other Being’ (1805 II 31–33).

told in great detail and with great sympathy, the Pedlar then says, 'I turn'd away / And walked along my road in happiness'. Rightly or wrongly, I take those words as the gloss to soothing thoughts that spring out of human suffering. They are consistent with the two lines that follow, and are the last of this, the penultimate stanza: 'In the faith that looks through death / In years that bring the philosophic mind'. Meditation, or the philosophic mind at work, enabled the Pedlar to look through death. I will come back to 'the philosophic mind' in some comments on 'Recollections'. Suffice to say here that the intuitions of the child are replaced by the powers of Reason in the adult. These lines from *The Prelude* summarize the key process of the *Ode*:

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, (1805 II 331–39)

The aspiration to sublimity is a passing through all Nature to rest with God (1805 VIII 824 ff.), a looking through the death to that which is life, divine and true; and the growing faculties, I suggest, are the growth of Reason, of the philosophic mind. Here it is of course a transcendent process, a leaving of this life behind, and not one of incarnation.

#### 4. The Resolution (stanza XI)

But one can't have incarnation without transcendence. I think there are indications that an incarnation is achieved in the final stanza, the division between seeing and feeling resolved. The first line, 'And oh ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves', evokes the first line of the poem, 'There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream', but the next two mark the difference: first, 'Think not of the severing of our loves', celebrates their union, if fearing their division; and then 'Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might'. A reciprocal power has returned with a reciprocal feeling; seeing and feeling are no longer separate, and in that union we might see a modest intimation of Paradise regained. Indeed, his love of nature is stronger than it was in his youth: 'I love the Brooks which down their channels fret, / Even more than when I tripp'd as lightly as they'. But as grief and fear of grief are counterpoints to the advent of joy, so here, consciousness of our mortality, of Margaret and Michael's progress through life, may be 'The Clouds that gather round the setting sun', and that sun setting perhaps Wordsworth's consciousness of declining powers. But life is not just attending to the still sad music of humanity: 'Another race hath been, and other palms are won'. These are elusive lines: what race? what palms? I have no clear idea, but as the story of mortality precedes the story of the growth of a redeeming power in *The Ruined Cottage*, perhaps something akin to the Pedlar's race and his palms. If we take 'human' as 'the distinctly human', then the joys and fears here may be the joys and fears that constituted the growth of the Pedlar's mind and soul. In which

case, the spear-grass epitomizes the meanest flower that blows, educing thoughts that are more profound than, and supersede, any tears shed for our mortality—that ‘idle dream’. Thus, says Wordsworth, at the end of the *Ode*, we can turn away, and walk along our road in happiness.

### *Immortality*

Now a few words about immortality, and then about recollections. For Wordsworth immortality is not a state to be arrived at, an endless existence in time, finding a path to the pearly gates through virtue and belief, where we can meet, in that sad old phrase, ‘Those gone before us’. It begins with his recognition that death is death and nothing of our human nature survives death. What he said of John and Matthew—summed up by the Pedlar, ‘We die, my Friend, / . . . and very soon / Even of the good is no memorial left’ (RC D 68–72)—he says repeatedly in other poems, notably in his reflections on the death of his daughter Catherine, and each time he comes to the conclusion he would rather not, that after death nothing recognizably human remains. There is no resurrection of the body, nothing of what orthodox Christian belief peculiarly and defiantly continues to assert. A former Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, mocked such teaching when he described it as ‘a conjuring trick with bones’.<sup>3</sup>

That conventional Christian doctrine was tacitly rejected as long ago as the seventeenth century, which produced many essays asserting the immortality and immateriality of the soul, essentially Wordsworth’s position. In the *Ode* he writes of ‘The Soul that rises with us, our life’s Star, / Hath had elsewhere its setting, / And cometh from afar’. We and our soul do not come from the same place. Our body is ours, but what we call ‘our soul’ is given to us, but a gift never fully ours. In ‘Lines Written in Early Spring’, he speaks of ‘The human soul that through me ran’. This distinction is implicit when he addresses the child as ‘Thou, over whom thy Immortality / Broods like the Day, / A Master o’er a Slave, / A presence which is not to be put by’. The distinction, and the relationship, is powerfully, if for some unfortunately, expressed. He also wrote, ‘The Soul . . . may be re-given when it had been taken away’. Immortality is a quality of the soul, and our immortality a relationship—that power not ours, nonetheless a birth-right—but which we lose as material life closes in on us. In addressing the child it seems that the mastering presence of immortality is integral to ‘Thy Soul’s immensity’: crush the soul with ‘earthly freight’ and out goes the individual’s sense of immortality, or to continue the metaphor, the master no longer has a slave, no-one to do his bidding. And the slave is free, but powerless. It is the relationship between the two that enables the child to be ‘Thou best philosopher’, a ‘Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!’ And to pun gently on the word ‘seer’, only someone in whom that relationship exists can see the world apparelled in celestial light, a paradise that for Wordsworth was near-

<sup>3</sup> His idea of resurrection. According to his BBC obituary, he considered ‘the resurrection was not a single event, but a series of experiences that gradually convinced people that Jesus’s life, power, purpose, and personality were actually continuing’.

synonymous with immortality. Most often the freed slave takes on a new master, the senses, and forgets the glories he has known. Wordsworth consistently rejects the senses as a source of life: habit enslaves the mind, oppresses it 'by the laws of vulgar sense'; 'Whose mind is but the mind of his own eyes / He is a Slave; the meanest we can meet!' (*MW* 269); and of himself he says, that mastering his heart 'The most despotic of our senses', the eye, 'gained / Such strength in me as often held my mind / In absolute dominion' (1805 XI 171–75). In a word, he became enslaved to sense, exiled from Paradise.

### *Recollections*

Wordsworth tells us, both in the Fenwick note, and of course in the subtitle of the poem, that it all hangs on childhood recollections. Have no experience of those, doubt their credibility, and the poem isn't really intelligible. Many readers, Coleridge included, have had such doubts. Perhaps they are simply an idiosyncratic psychological curiosity, more or less unique. Or we should read them as Freud did, the child's 'oceanic feeling', experienced prior to realizing the distinction of the ego and the world. It isn't difficult to imagine such a feeling described as Paradise, particularly in the light of the seventeenth century's pre-occupation with that word, the world Wordsworth was heir to. And that would certainly explain why such recollections are shadowy—they come from a time when memory barely exists. I haven't traced it out, but I think Wordsworth's awareness of the glories of childhood grew in him as he grew up, and that there's not much of this consciousness prior to 'Tintern Abbey'. But the glories were slowly recovered only for him to realize they were no more. The memory existed but not the experience. In 'Tintern Abbey', in his youth, 'The tall rock, / The mountain, the deep and gloomy wood, / Their colours and their forms, were then to me / An appetite: a feeling and a love'. But 'That time is past, / And all its aching joys are no more, / . . . other gifts / Have followed, for such losses, I would believe / Abundant recompense'. This perhaps indicates the beginning of a much more fundamental vision, which may reach its final expression in his belief in the power of 'the philosophic mind'.

Such doubts cannot be lightly dismissed. Here is one of English literature's greatest poems, apparently founded on a peculiar form of consciousness, which few share. So we get back to the magnificence of the music, and the dearth of meaning. But a new poet can change the history of poetry, said Eliot. In the 1920s, Traherne was a new poet. In my view, his thought and poetry substantiate Wordsworth's vision to a truly remarkable extent, and could revise the critical history of this poem. Traherne sets out the experience of a childhood Paradise, the causes of its loss, and the method of recovery, with a confidence and clarity Wordsworth might have envied when taking the same path much more tentatively. Those of you who have seen the flyer for this talk will have seen my summary of this parallel progress in three extracts from Traherne's work. Here are the first two, first describing the vision,

How like an Angel came I down!  
 How bright are all things here!  
 When first among his Works I did appear  
 O how their glory did me crown  
 The World resembled his Eternitie,  
 In which my Soul did Walk;  
 And ev'ry Thing that I did see,  
 Did with me talk.

and then the loss:

The first Light which shined in me in my Infancy . . . was totally eclipsed . . . If you ask me how it was eclipsed? Truly by the customs and manners of men, which like contrary winds blew it out . . . it is not our parents' loins, so much as our parents' lives, that enthrals and blinds us.

But the recovery is more of a problem, which I believe happens in the final stanza (XI). This is what Traherne says: 'I knew by intuition those things which since my Apostasy, I collected again by the highest reason'. After the Apostasy, although intuition is a power lost, the vision can be renewed by use of 'the highest reason'. The 'highest reason'? Remember Traherne was an Oxford-educated Cambridge Platonist. This is not rationality, though it is not irrational. It is that Reason that Coleridge capitalized to distinguish it from the Understanding, or Descartes' reason. It is a spiritual power that finds itself not only in the mind but in the material world. This, I suggest, is why Wordsworth calls the child 'Thou best Philosopher'—the child knows what adult philosophers struggle to know. And although it is easily dismissed as too light a reference to take seriously, I think he is referring to the growth of this form of Reason when writing of 'the years that bring the philosophic mind', the growth of faculties to which the soul 'doth aspire'. Traherne believes that the power of reason even enriches the childhood vision: 'I remember the time when the dust of the streets were as pleasing as Gold to my infant eyes, and now they are more precious to the eye of reason' (C I 25). Perhaps this is echoed in a couple of the closing lines of the *Ode* I have already quoted: 'I love the Brooks which down their channels fret, / Even more than when I tripped lightly as they', lines that come after the years that bring the philosophic mind.

To make one final connection between Traherne, Wordsworth, and Coleridge: Traherne's 'highest reason' might be 'reason in her most exalted mood', Wordsworth's definition of the imagination, that imagination which Coleridge wanted to unite with Reason in the last chapter of the *Biographia*. Perhaps the Reason of the Cambridge Platonists has become the Imagination of the Romantics.

*Postscript*

In the Q&A, I was asked two questions, the first of which, with a little more presence of mind, I could have answered more satisfactorily; and the second—whether Wordsworth had any knowledge of the Spanish mystics, I couldn't. I was only able to think of St. Teresa—two other key figures are St. Ignatius and St. John of the Cross. But Coleridge knew the works of St. Teresa—and of Crashaw—and I can imagine that Wordsworth did too. So, perhaps, but only perhaps, some Spanish mysticism entered his consciousness via those routes. But I haven't found any evidence that it influenced his work.

The first question was 'Did Coleridge understand the *Ode*?' He undoubtedly thought it was difficult, and that it would only 'be interesting, or perhaps intelligible to but a limited number of readers' (BL II 154). He suggested that its epigraph could have been some lines from Dante, which he translates as 'O lyric song, there will be few, think I, / Who may thy import understand aright; / Thou art for *them* so arduous and so high!' It was only for those 'accustomed to watch the flux and reflux of their inmost nature, to venture at times into the twilight realms of consciousness' who know that the attributes of time and space are inapplicable to 'modes of inmost being', but which can only be conveyed by symbols from time and space. However, for such readers 'the sense is sufficiently plain' (BL II 147).

Well, he never made it plain. He quotes long passages in *The Friend* and the *Biographia*, but never offers any comment or interpretation to bind his various selections together. And yet having heard the first four verses of the *Ode* at tea-time on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 1802, that very evening he wrote his astonishing 340-line response, the *Verse Letter*. In one evening? It seems incredible to us, but of that fact he always reminded anyone to whom he sent a copy. What is clear is that he believed that he and Wordsworth shared a common loss, for he deliberately echoed the opening of the *Ode* when he wrote 'I see, not feel / How beautiful they are'. In that sense he clearly understood the *Ode*. But we have to remember that he only heard the first four verses. He did not hear Wordsworth's 'solution' for another two years. And to put it briefly, I'm not sure he ever did understand it, for despite knowing the *Ode* in full by the time he published *Dejection*, he persisted in declaring that marriage was the answer, for it would lead to the joy that rebinds heaven and earth, 'the Spirit & the Power, / That wedding Nature to us gives in Dower / A new Earth & a new Heaven'. Wordsworth also believed that through 'the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things'. But his route there was utterly different to that proposed by Coleridge. And I suspect Coleridge never managed to follow Wordsworth along that route, especially as he was deeply sceptical about the key premise of the *Ode*, the pre-existence of the soul.