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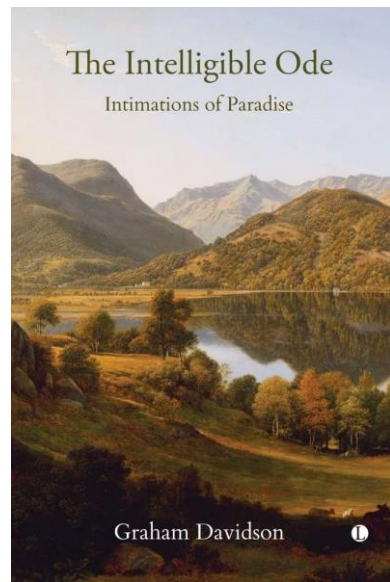
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The Intelligible Ode: Intimations of Paradise

by Graham Davidson¹

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH HAS NEVER LIVED DOWN his characterization as a restorative nature poet who will ‘cure . . . our delusion’, ‘let our minds rest’, and ‘console us, sustain us’.² The depiction has restlessly propelled interpretive and theoretical engagement with his poetry since 1879, influencing which poems get read and taught, how and why they have mattered, and whether we should continue to care about them. For Matthew Arnold, who was the author of this portrait, Wordsworth’s great *Ode* was not a matter for serious consideration. It was a poem all beauty and no substance, straying into a ‘supposed philosophical system’³ capable neither of curing nor sustaining its public. And for those who have come after, particularly after 1968, it is a poem that has been too quick to do both, deluding readers through frivolous or pernicious escapism that must be denounced and overcome.

Graham Davidson’s new book devoted to Wordsworth’s *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* is fascinating for its skillfulness in circumventing the dense history of Wordsworth criticism in practice—but not in spirit, which he subtly channels while also ensuring that intimate critical interaction between reader and poem remains central across seventeen chapters that span five sections: *Patterns, Principles, A Crisis: The Poems of 1802, Reading the Ode*, and *Looking Forward into History*. Davidson establishes a context for studying the *Ode*’s significance, associations, and influences that refuses partisanship about its consolatory powers. In its own time, as he points out, there were those who registered the significance of the *Ode* and recognized in it a distinctive intensity that muddled the waters of crystalline consolability and inconsolability alike, such as James Montgomery’s sense that the poem ‘turned [the reader] loose into a wilderness’ or Robert Southey’s belief that it is a poem with ‘a dark subject darkly handled’ (80). After reading Davidson’s book, I am made freshly aware of both the *Ode*’s resplendent brightness and its profound endarkenment—a recognition that intimates Geoffrey Hartman’s early sense of



¹ Graham Davidson, *The Intelligible Ode: Intimations of Paradise* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2023).

² Matthew Arnold, ‘Preface’ to *The Poems of Wordsworth* (1879), and the General Introduction to *The English Poets* (T. H. Ward, 1880) in (*Complete Prose Works*, ed. Robert Henry Super, vol. 9 [University of Michigan Press, 1960], 46, 161).

³ Arnold, ‘Preface’, 46.

the poem as defined by a structural instability that proffers hope of consolation and takes it away, simultaneously.⁴

Over the course of this book, Davidson inspires anew an answer for why we should want to be held by so seemingly delicate and yet relentless a poem as the *Ode*. And the answer, I would suggest, is as follows: so that we might recognize and experience an unapologetically creative poetic act bent on nothing less than authentic communion of love and sympathy through the power of Reason, what Davidson calls ‘the finest expression of the lyric spirit of philosophy’ (216). Along the way, Davidson presents a model of sustained engagement with a masterfully collected set of quotations spanning Wordsworth’s works. I especially enjoyed the emphasis he gives to *Home at Grasmere* and to unpublished works, such as ‘The Barberry Tree’, and the many new connections that he makes possible between these and more commonly studied poems.

The feature governing this book that sets it apart is its method: across the board, Davidson combines traditional scholarship and sophisticated close reading with speculative thinking, such that the former two ground the latter, and the effect is intellectually immersive and gratifying. As one example, this combination of critical research and interpretation with creative surmise defines Davidson’s treatment of the term, *unintelligibility* and its opposite, the poetic and philosophical development of which are central to his thesis. These terms evolve not only out of scathing influential contemporary criticism of the *Ode*, notably Francis Jeffrey’s declaration that the poem is ‘illegible and unintelligible’, but also Wordsworth’s poetic lexicon. The word *unintelligible* occurs, for example, in ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey’: ‘that blessed mood, / In which the burthen of the mystery, / In which the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world, / Is lightened’ (14). Davidson also embeds into this aspect of his study the speculative question of what might have been the trajectory of Wordsworth’s poetic influence and legacy if Jeffrey had never used the word *unintelligible* to describe the *Ode*, which would have been plausible if Wordsworth’s publication history had been different. Thus, from the start, Davidson’s method encompasses *what has been* and *is* as well as *what might have been*, and most wistfully, *what could also be*.

This method is furthered by attention to seventeenth-century precedents for Wordsworth’s *Ode* whom Davidson understands as centrally concerned with resisting Cartesian dualism. The first of these is the Cambridge Platonists, a loosely organized group of philosophers and theologians, most notably Ralph Cudworth and Henry More (both of whom Davidson mentions), who were influential in their own time but then fell away. The second is Thomas Traherne, a poet and Anglican cleric whose work reverberates powerfully with Wordsworth, such as the visionary quality of childhood or the significance of philosophical knowledge to ordinary life, but whose poetry was not published or known until the first decade of the twentieth century. In both cases,

⁴ Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1787–1814* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1964), 273.

Davidson meaningfully draws into Romanticist purview figures and writings not commonly associated with Wordsworth's poetry: a fine interdisciplinary and critical, canon-expanding project. Moreover, he uses the connections among them to deepen the thesis of the book, namely, that Wordsworth's greatest achievement is a poetics of philosophy rather than of nature. Perhaps most affectingly, Davidson also uses these connections to further the trajectory of speculative thinking. There is no formal evidence of Wordsworth having read either the Cambridge Platonists or Traherne. But making a case for conventional chronological lines of influence is not the point. Instead, these connections deepen Davidson's power as a speculative critic, endowing his readers with a sense of creativity and flexibility of mind about the significance of Wordsworth's *Ode*, both in its own time and for us now.

The effort to exorcise the nature poet from Wordsworth unfolds through sustained argumentation about the centrality of powers of mind in his poetry, culminating in the *Ode*. However, this is not an argument that posits Wordsworth as a philosopher or that understands his poems as philosophy per se. Instead, Davidson shows that at its very best, the philosophical is essentially poetic and manifests most strikingly and passionately for readers as poetry. In Davidson's treatment of them, Reason is emphatically not a category of thought or state of being but a power of mind. And that power is both hard earned and fleeting, accessible 'only in the moment of disclosure' (4). The *Ode*'s status as the culmination of this argument is beautifully rendered in the robust fourth section of the book, which commands seven of its seventeen chapters. Davidson's treatment of the rhythmic of the *Ode*'s syntax is especially fine, such as his foregrounding of the apparent simplicity of many of the lines scattered across the poem, what Coleridge called 'curiosa felicitas . . . "untranslatableness"' (169). Through their musicality, such lines are at once bewildering and clear. Davidson gives voice to something I have certainly sensed when he says, 'It is, I think, a common experience to feel that we understand the poem as we read it, but to find that when the music stops that confidence fades, and then we struggle to say what we have understood' (89). Simplicity in the *Ode* is a well-worn topic in Romanticist criticism, but it tends to be used against Wordsworth rather than to strengthen our understanding of his achievement, as it is rendered here. In Davidson's hands, this oscillation between bewilderment and clarity precisely creates the rhythmic of the momentary that makes it possible for readers to grasp Reason in its highest form, as Imagination. Through poetic unfolding, Davidson argues, we might participate in the philosophical culmination of Wordsworth's *Ode*, the intelligible.

At the epicenter of this book is the heartfelt claim that Wordsworth's lifework tells a story culminating in the yearning and fugitive means to reunite what has been divided—seeing and feeling, mind and body, self and world, and most fervently, terrestrial and divine. Many critics have studied the protracted composition history of the *Ode* that separates the first movement of the poem composed in 1802 from the latter two of 1804. Davidson leverages this history

to divide the poems that comprise Wordsworth's oeuvre into two overarching groups, such that the later poems respond to the problem posed by the earlier ones, just as stanzas five through eleven of the *Ode* respond to the problem of the first four. Working against what he views as debilitating Victorian misconceptions, Davidson argues that the early poems, poems of radical human suffering, are wrenchingly terrestrial, capable of enormous compassion and sympathy but 'reluctantly absolute'—without hope of consolation. These early poems evoke for the reader 'sympathy for all the "sorrow and despair" which is the burden of human existence' (223) but cannot alleviate or change it. They proffer no sense of 'physical or personal restoration' of the self either on earth or beyond it to restore what was lost or the incarnation of the self that preceded the loss. Along with the first four stanzas of the *Ode*, such poems as *The Ruined Cottage*, 'Simon Lee', and 'The Discharged Soldier' unfold as experiences without 'mitigation . . . relief never comes . . . suffering never resolved' (86, 87, 71).

Two crucial aspects govern Davidson's understanding of the consolatory energy of Wordsworth's later, divine poems, concerned with transcending human suffering. First, he understands them as a continuance of the efforts of the earlier poems, not a reversal or repudiation. These later poems' intimations of immortality evolve out of Wordsworth's prolonged grappling with mortality, his perception of which is, in Davidson's words, 'pretty ruthless' (6). Second, consolation, if it comes, arrives as a temporary power of 'meditation . . . but another name for imagination, contemplation, or faith—all the work of Reason' (223). In Davidson's rendering, consolation is as substantial as it is partial, fragile, and fleeting. I loved his description of it as analogous to erotic love, shadowed even in its plenitude by 'the continuing risk of separation' (217). Attaining to the divine is ultimately perspectival, opening our vision to the invisible that is nevertheless there; like to the apprehension of ten or more dimensions, dark matter, or thin spaces, such vision represents a fugitive binding of being to the non-sensory.

The speculative imagination of this book achieves full force in its final chapter, where Davidson meditates on what might have been if Victorian readers had had the benefit of reading Wordsworth's poetry in the general order in which it was written, so that they could apprehend the story he has told of the evolution of Wordsworth's philosophical poetics of Imagination. Had readers such a benefit, the *Ode* would not be understood as frivolous or anomalous but as central to Wordsworth's philosophical-poetic vision. For Davidson, this alternative world would eradicate the legacy of Wordsworth as the nature poet who was either misunderstood or ignored in the Victorian century and then unconsciously recreated, perversely, by T. S. Eliot in the next.

This final chapter set my mind to wandering. My own experience of Wordsworth as a student was governed by the monumental work not of Matthew Arnold but of Geoffrey Hartman, whom I could never stop thinking about despite being nudged and pressed forward by my mentors to seek a new day. I found myself musing that perhaps what would make Davidson

supremely happy would be to have had the generation following Wordsworth be something more like Hartman himself—except it would have to be a Hartman who wrote poetry and not just poetically about it, I thought. Then, inspired by Davidson’s speculative thinking, I did a quick search, plugging ‘Hartman, poetry’ into Google. And to my absolute surprise, I found that he did write poetry, multiple volumes of it. No one ever told me. And despite his influential work arguing for the leveling of creative and critical writing, I never asked.

For me, therefore, Davidson’s book ended in an alternative history that had been there all along but that I could not see, culminating in Hartman’s final poem, left unpublished at his death in 2016. The poem is rife with prayerfulness and longing. On the one hand the speaker begs for water—‘let it rain poetry, dear God’—and yet he is left emptied by its plenitude: ‘the nymphs of memory draw me under, into a bitter wave that whelms and does not cleanse. / I am poured out, unrhymed, unrhythmed’. I may never have read this poem had I not read Davidson’s book. Nor will I ever read this single, bare, terrifying, and thoroughly Wordsworthian line the same way now that I have read both: ‘Where is comfort to be found?’⁵ For that, I thank Davidson with a full, joyful heart.

⁵ Geoffrey Hartman, ‘Yoma’ (‘The Scholar as Poet: Remembering Geoffrey Hartman (1929–2016)’, Morris Dickstein, *Tikkun* (December 20, 2017).