

CHAPTER XYZ

Wordsworth's Poetic Vision of Nature in Light of Whitehead's Organic Philosophy

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This chapter interprets the nature poetry of William Wordsworth in light of the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead, such that the epistemological and cosmological implications of the former are brought more fully into philosophical view. According to Victor Lowe, it is probable that no other man, save Plato, shaped the imaginative background of Whitehead's outlook quite as profoundly as Wordsworth.¹ This influence makes my interpretive task far easier, since so much of what Whitehead labored to give clear conceptual expression to in his own work was originally awakened in him by the feeling for the universe that radiates off the pages of Wordsworth's poetry. In this sense, the aim of this chapter is the opposite of Whitehead's: to translate the basic outlines of his philosophical scheme back into the cosmic visions and archetypal visitations expressed in Wordsworth's verse.

One of the defining characteristics of Romantic literature is its exaltation of the figure of the philosopher-poet, the one who unveils the way in which, as Keats put it, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."² Coleridge and Wordsworth are each literary geniuses in their own right, but their famous friendship and intimate artistic collaboration invites us to consider them together as a single mutually formed and imaginatively alloyed soul whose *sympoetry* rivals that of Shakespeare or Goethe. "Sympoetry" is a term coined by the German Romantic philosopher-poet Friedrich Schlegel to refer to the production of "communal works of art" by "two minds [that] like divided halves...can realize their full potential only when joined."³ According to Owen Barfield, the friendship of Coleridge and Wordsworth both "exemplified the

¹ *Understanding Whitehead*, 257.

² "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819).

³ Fragment 125, *Athenaeum* Vol. 1.

contrast” and “deepened the affinity” between the poles of imagination, namely, self and world, or spirit and nature.⁴ Reconciling these two imaginative powers in one person is all but impossible, since “the finite activity of poetry, like every other motion, still requires a predominance, however slight, of the one pole over the other.”⁵ Coleridge had a more philosophical bent, tending toward reverential reflection upon the high station of spirit, while Wordsworth was easily charmed by the everyday and more sensitive to the living depths of the natural world. Though Coleridge proved himself on occasion capable of penning sublime poetry, it could be said that, as a result of Coleridge’s philosophical tutelage, Wordsworth was the greatest of his poetic achievements. Indeed, Whitehead writes of Coleridge that, despite being influential in his own day, when considering “those elements of the thought of the past which stand for all time...[he] is only important by his influence on Wordsworth.”⁶

Wordsworth is perhaps the most esteemed nature poet in the history of the English language. For Whitehead, he is the chief exemplar of the Romantic reaction against the abstract mechanistic picture of nature fostered by the scientific materialism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He cites the famous line, “We murder to dissect” with qualified approval, agreeing with Wordsworth that “the important facts of nature elude the scientific method” even while he, a mathematical physicist as well as a philosopher, believes the specialized abstractions of natural science need not necessarily leave nature lifeless.⁷ Science can and must be reformed. Mechanistic science of the sort championed by the likes of Galileo, Descartes, Newton, and Laplace commits the fatal sin of bifurcating nature, isolating its objectively measurable and mathematizable surfaces by peeling them away from its emotional and moral depths, depths that found their private home in a soul now entirely sealed off from the outside world. Concerning the ethereal hues of a sunset, the sweet fragrance of a primrose, or the melodies of a thrush the poets are all mistaken:

⁴ *What Coleridge Thought*, 90.

⁵ *What Coleridge Thought*, 90.

⁶ *Science and the Modern World*, 79.

⁷ *Science and the Modern World*, 79-80.

from the point of view of scientific materialism, nature itself is “a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colorless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly.”⁸ Contrary to the general thrust of natural science since its birth in the seventeenth century, Whitehead’s cosmological scheme is an attempt to systematize Wordsworth’s emphatic witness to the fact that “nature cannot be divorced from its aesthetic values, and that these values arise from the culmination...of the brooding presence of the whole on to its various parts.”⁹ In the jargon of his metaphysics, Whitehead saw in Wordsworth’s poetry “a feeling for nature as exhibiting entwined prehensive unities, each suffused with modal presences of others.”¹⁰ Hidden within this one short, cryptic sentence are the major categories animating Whitehead’s entire cosmological scheme, including “actual occasions,” “eternal objects,” “internal relations,” and “conrescence.”

Before moving on to unpack Whitehead’s metaphysical scheme, it is important to note that his allegiance to Wordsworth and the Romantic reaction is not at all to say that he has sided with subjective idealism over the objectivity of science. The danger in aligning oneself against the mathematical abstractions of mechanistic science is that one rushes too quickly to adopt the opposite extreme, elevating personal emotion and individual will to such unwarranted heights that the entirety of the visible universe is made to seem a private projection, a mere appearance dependent upon the constructive activity of my mind. Wordsworth’s absorption in living nature—“an inmate of this *active* universe,”¹¹ as he put it—all but inoculated him against this subjectivist over-reaction. But there are a few occasions when Wordsworth seems almost to become infected by other strains of the Romantic lineage, especially those emerging in the orbit of Kant’s transcendental idealism. Whitehead strongly positioned himself in opposition to Kantian, Fichtean, and Hegelian forms of idealism, all of which can be read as attempting to deduce the concrete and contingent particularities of the universe from the

⁸ *Science and the Modern World*, 55.

⁹ *Science and the Modern World*, 84.

¹⁰ *Science and the Modern World*, 80.

¹¹ *The Prelude*, 27.

abstract universal categories of thought.¹² Considering the influence of Schelling on Wordsworth through the intermediary of Coleridge, the congeniality of Whitehead's philosophy of organism to Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* is no surprise. Unlike the other thinkers of his idealist milieu who made mind transcendental and nature merely phenomenal, for Schelling, "Nature is *a priori*."¹³

Whitehead pithily suggests that his approach "aspires to construct a critique of pure feeling, in the philosophical position in which Kant put his *Critique of Pure Reason*."¹⁴ In Kant's first critique, experience is either translatable into conscious rational knowledge of law-governed phenomenal objects, or it is no experience at all. The vague but overriding feelings of nature's creative rhythms and physical purposes always scintillating along the fractal horizon of consciousness are ignored or downplayed in order to secure both freedom and knowledge for the rational ego.¹⁵ The abyssal complexities of our aesthetic encounter with the sublime are left for Kant's third critique, the *Critique of Judgment*, but even here, where Kant's philosophic powers reach their highest pitch, he recoils from the erotic receptivity that may have reconnected him with the animate intelligence of the cosmos and instead asserts the moral supremacy of Man over formless matter.¹⁶ In book XI of *The Prelude*, as if speaking directly to Kant, Wordsworth pays homage to the "animation and...deeper sway" of nature's soul while warning against the "narrow estimates of things" resulting from rational critique:

Suffice it here
To hint that danger cannot but attend

¹² *Process and Reality*, 89.

¹³ *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 198.

Nature here is *natura naturans*, the generative womb from which all finite forms arise and into which they perish. This is nature *alive* and is akin to Whitehead's category of ultimate generality at the base of all actuality: Creativity.

¹⁴ *Process and Reality*, 172.

¹⁵ *Modes of Thought*, 74-75.

¹⁶ See section 23 of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.

Upon a Function rather proud to be
The enemy of falsehood, than the friend
Of truth—to sit in judgment than to feel.¹⁷

While for Kant, “the world emerges from the subject,” for Whitehead, “the subject emerges from the world.”¹⁸ Whitehead thus inverts the Kantian conception of subjectivity, such that the order and meaning of our experience is originally given to us by the order and meaning of the surrounding cosmos. “[The subject] is not productive of the ordered world, but derivative from it.”¹⁹ Whitehead’s object-to-subject account of the formation of experience may seem too strict a rule for Wordsworth’s imaginative epistemology to obey, since for the latter the senses must be free to half-create and half-perceive the world, as he suggests in “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” (1798). This reversal of the vector of experience may at times prove to be a true tension in the two men’s outlooks, a tension worth untangling if only to discover a deeper commonality.

It would be an unfair reading of Whitehead, based on his reaction to much of German and British idealism, to neglect the extent to which his epistemology is fully awake to the creative and participatory role of the imagination in evaluating and synthesizing the facts of the world we experience as existing. His criticisms of idealistic accounts of perception result primarily from the mistaken prioritization of a derivative mode of perception, “presentational immediacy” over the truly primitive mode, which he calls “causal efficacy.” It is this mistake that leads idealists to reduce living nature to a mere appearance projected by the rational mind. Presentational immediacy is a relatively advanced form of experience available to conscious human beings and other complex animals with highly evolved sensory organs. Dominated by the eyes (“The most despotic of our senses”²⁰), this mode of perception gives us a certain degree of reflective distance from the energetic flow of cosmic vectors and the subsensory bodily

¹⁷ *The Prelude*, 209.

¹⁸ *Process and Reality*, 172.

¹⁹ *Process and Reality*, 113.

²⁰ *The Prelude*, 210.

emotions they engender. The world appears to the eye as colored surfaces in static spatial array. Modern philosophers have mistaken these patches of color (or the analogous “qualia” of the other outward facing sensory organs) for the primitive data of experience, when in truth they are the most superficial element of all. The more primal mode of perception that forms the base of our experience of the encompassing world is causal efficacy, our bodily feeling of inheritance generating the “mysterious presence of surrounding things.”²¹ For example, the “voluntary power instinct” of the brooding mountain peak that made the young Wordsworth’s hands tremble while rowing back to shore in his stolen skiff.²² When disconnected from the enlivening passion of causal efficacy, presentational immediacy becomes a fallen mode of perception, cut off from intimacy with nature, her inner life reduced to the external relations of dead objects mutely extended in empty space. Without the reflective disinterest of presentational immediacy, causal efficacy would swallow up our consciousness into the “dim and undetermin’d sense/Of unknown modes of being” that haunted Wordsworth for days after he returned the skiff to its mooring-place.²³

Whitehead describes a third, hybrid mode of perception called “symbolic reference,” which plays a role akin to the synthesizing imagination, able to skillfully interweave physical feelings with mental conceptions in order to produce heightened forms of aesthetic enjoyment and moral appetite. In Whitehead’s jargon, mental conceptions are also “prehensions,” or feelings, but instead of feeling concrete matters of fact, conceptual prehensions feel “eternal objects,” or abstract forms of possibility. Whereas causal efficacy is “the hand of the settled past in the formation of the present,” presentational immediacy is the “[projection which] exhibits the contemporary world in its spatial relations.”²⁴ Through the integrative perceptual mode of symbolic reference, habits of imagination are gradually acquired which bring forth the taken for

²¹ *Science and the Modern World*, 80.

²² *The Prelude*, 12.

²³ *The Prelude*, 12.

²⁴ *Symbolism*, 50.

granted world of everyday experience.²⁵ It is the synthesizing activity of this mode that Wordsworth refers to when he writes of how:

The mind of Man is fram'd even like the breath
And harmony of music. There is a dark
Invisible workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements, and makes them move
In one society.²⁶

A skillful poet is able to consciously moderate the synthetic activity of symbolic reference,

to keep
In wholesome separation the two natures,
The one that feels [causal efficacy], the other that observes
[presentational immediacy].²⁷

It would be a superficial reading of Wordsworth to ignore the degree to which he wavers in his assigning of precedence to either the mental or physical poles of experiential reality. Just a line below his statement in *Tintern Abbey* about the creative element in perception, he writes of being

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

He finds that his mind is not only necessarily tied to his sensual encounters with nature (as it is for Kant), but that the language of sense has birthed and raised to maturity even the purest of his ideas from out of the womb of nature herself. Elsewhere, Wordsworth writes of the way a mountain range

²⁵ *Understanding Whitehead*, 184.

²⁶ *The Prelude*, 10.

²⁷ *The Prelude*, 238.

By influence habitual to the mind
...shapes
The measure and the prospect of the soul.²⁸

Further conforming to Whitehead's object-to-subject reading of the vector of experience, he writes: "From nature doth emotion come, and moods/...are nature's gift."²⁹ But it could still be asked: is Wordsworth speaking here in a *psychological* or in an *cosmological* register?

Whitehead's characterization of Wordsworth's poetry as exhibiting a sensitivity to the interpenetrating "prehensive unities" of nature, "each suffused with modal presences of others," is meant to classify him as an ontologically committed panpsychist. Nature is not a prison of particles relating by blind collision alone; even at the electromagnetic level, the physical world is rather a society of experiential occasions wherein each individualization or quantum of energy is entangled with or internally related to every other, recapitulating the whole universe in a unique, once-occurrent way. In Whitehead's terms, "physical vibrations are the expression among the abstractions of physical science of the fundamental principle of aesthetic experience."³⁰ Without the aesthetic notion of a contrast between electromagnetic wave trough and wave crest, the notion of a vibration loses its sense. Such aesthetic contrasts are achieved by the process of concrescence, which composes not just the conscious experience of scientists and poets, but the unconscious experience of the wider cosmos. The physicist measures nature by counting vibrations, while the nature poet renders her into verse. Both are aesthetic acts of concrescence whereby nature entire conspires to grow together into a novel perspective upon itself.

Wordsworth's poetry is overflowing with hymns to the *Anima Mundi*, with references to the "the Life/of the great whole," and to the way "every natural form, rock, fruit or flower/...Lay bedded in

²⁸ *The Prelude*, 125.

²⁹ *The Prelude*, 218.

³⁰ *Religion in the Making*, 102.

a quickening soul.”³¹ Even here, however, just as Wordsworth appears to fully confirm his cosmological orientation, the tension of the poles of spirit and nature begin vibrating, as if hovering in superposition. Does Wordsworth mean that all these natural forms lay bedded in *his* quickening soul? In the same lines from *The Prelude* cited above, he could be read as congratulating *himself* for rousing nature from her sleep:

To every natural form...
I gave a moral life, *I saw* them feel,
Or linked them to some feeling...
[All] that *I beheld* respired with inward meaning.³²

But just a few lines later, Wordsworth again reverses the vector of his experience back from the idealistic to the cosmological pole, finding his mind “as wakeful” to the changing face of nature “as waters are/To the sky’s motion,” becoming to her activity as “obedient as a lute/That waits upon the touches of the wind.”³³ Perhaps Wordsworth’s tendency to waver on this issue betrays one of the key differences between a visionary poet, focused on capturing the vividness of each fading moment, and a systematic philosopher, focused on describing the ultimate generalities characterizing all experience.

Though it is beyond the scope of the present chapter, many parallels could also be drawn between Whitehead’s process theological conception of a dipolar divinity and Wordsworth’s visions of the World-Soul, “the Imagination of the whole.” Briefly, like all other actual entities, Whitehead’s God has two poles, a mental and a physical. Unlike other actual occasions, which begin their process of concrescence by inheriting physical feelings from the past, God’s everlasting concrescence is initiated by a primordial mental pole, which takes the form of an evaluative ordering of the otherwise infinite realm of eternal possibilities. This ordering serves to condition the further unfolding of the universe by making relevant novelties available to the

³¹ *The Prelude*, 37.

³² *The Prelude*, 37. Italics are mine.

³³ *The Prelude*, 37-38.

conrescence of each finite occasion of experience. Finite occasions are free to make their own decisions, but are lured toward greater intensities of beauty by the graded set of possibilities provided by the wisdom of God. Through God's consequent physical pole, the creative becoming of the physical world is taken back up into divine experience as through a loving embrace to be harmonized with God's primordial nature. To quote Whitehead at length:

God's role is not the combat of productive force with productive force, of destructive force with destructive force; it lies in the patient operation of the overpowering rationality of his conceptual harmonization. He does not create the world, he saves it; or, more accurately, he is the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness.³⁴

The everlasting pulsations of divine conrescence can be read as a macrocosmic analogy for Wordsworth's autobiographical journey in *The Prelude*, the growth of his poetic mind from childhood paradise, through the impairment and on to the final restoration of Imagination.

From love, for here
Do we begin and end, all grandeur comes,
All truth and beauty, from pervading love,
That gone, we are as dust.³⁵

³⁴ *Process and Reality*, 525.

³⁵ *The Prelude*, 233.

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