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WORDSWORTH AND POLITICAL COMMITMENT

IN TRYING TO DEFINE the political commitment of William Wordsworth as a man of letters,¹ we are immediately confronted by the image of the "lost leader", the zealous proponent of Godwinian tenets who, witnessing the early stages of the French Revolution (1791-92), could exclaim: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,/But to be young was very heaven." This image is set in counterpoise against the reactionary Tory violently engaged in fighting the 1832 Reform Bill. Faced with this sharply-drawn pattern of conversion, most interpreters of Wordsworth's creative development have easily resolved the tension of his attitudes by assuming his "anti-climactic" decline as an established psychological fact. Thus after 1808 the late Wordsworth appears a petty propagandist, an orthodox Anglican who repudiated his former individualism to win public acclaim and official recognition from the Establishment.

Such an approach is, of course, over-simplified. It unreasonably transforms an hypothesis into a criterion for aesthetic judgment. Dissenting from this trend, Edith Batho, for one, blames the Reformist Liberals such as Crabb Robinson for the charge of Wordsworth's "apostasy", and for ignoring the subtle qualifications the poet made of his views on current specific problems.² Certainly, to call Wordsworth either a Whig or a Tory would be simply obscuring the concrete, expansive, and heightened awareness of mind at the centre of his political deliberations; a mind that, by the sheer force of its complexity and breadth of interests, escapes categorical analysis.

Such an enlarged awareness of mind Wordsworth possessed in his identity as poet, "a man speaking to men . . . endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul."³ Since the notion of commitment implies a basic moral engagement with values, any attempt to clarify Wordsworth's political beliefs would embrace, first, his view of human nature and its destiny, and, secondly, his conception of the historical process.

In dealing with the political patterns of human behaviour, we are confronted with the problem of trying to comprehend seemingly isolated or discrete acts within ever-present but constantly changing configurations of experience in which such acts are actually lived. The aim of understanding such patterns governs the mutations of Wordsworth's political attitudes. Evidently it will be too easy to assume a dichotomy in his beliefs. On the other hand, to superimpose a presumed integral unity would perhaps be rashly simplifying the vital complexity of Wordsworth's sensibility acting within its milieu. Because of his sensitive awareness of facts and of affective factors in his society, his commitments take on a dynamic flexibility. Judging from his own stages of adaptation to contemporary developments, Wordsworth seems to exclude from his view of society and the state any static attribute which would reduce them to fixed products of history. Instead, he tends to regard society and state as empirical organisms. According to Karl Mannheim, political conduct is "concerned with the state and society in so far as they are still in the process of becoming. Political conduct is confronted with a process in which every moment creates a unique situation and seeks to disentangle out of this ever-flowing stream of forces something of enduring character."⁴ As a realm of creative activity, politics would then involve processes of becoming in which, in individual cases, decisions have to be made that give rise to new and unique situations. Politics deals, as a rule, with social events without a set pattern; it deals with uneven irruptions that challenge the rational framework of any given society. From this viewpoint, every social process involves (1) a rationalized sphere of settled and routine procedures in dealing with situations that recur in an orderly fashion, and (2) the irrational by which it is surrounded. We have then the rationalized structure of society and the irrational matrix, i.e., impulsive, biological factors that furnish the potential for the energies of state and society. Undoubtedly man conceals irrational depths whose unpredictable irruptions in social life escape rational or historical categories. Such depths involve the unchanging realm of blind, subconscious instincts that permanently underlie every historical event, and that are beyond the level of historical meaningfulness. Political conduct in this sense would signify the perception of the distinction between the rationalized scheme (English government and society of 1815) and the irrational setting in which it operates, as manifested by public violence (e.g., the Peterloo Massacre, the Bristol Riots, Chartist agitations).

First of all, what was Wordsworth's response to the Reform Act of 1832? In objecting to the nature of the Act, he answered, first of all, the

charge that he was an anti-Reformer. Do not let us confuse, he pleaded, the identity of an Anti-Bill man with that of an Anti-Reformer. This attitude was further reinforced by Wordsworth's rejoicing over the French revolution of 1830: "One is glad to see tyranny baffled and foolishness put to shame." In unequivocal terms, he judged the revolution most praiseworthy because it arose from the dissatisfaction of the French people over their constitution as "not sufficiently democratic for the high notion that people entertain of their fitness to govern themselves."⁵ As testimony of the sustained revolutionary impetus of Wordsworth's politics, this passage may be submitted:

I cannot but deeply regret that the late King of France and his ministers should have been so infatuated. Their stupidity, not to say their crimes, has given an impulse to the revolutionary and democratic spirit throughout Europe which is premature, and from which much immediate evil may be apprehended, whatever things may settle into at last. Whereas, had the government conformed to the increasing knowledge of the people, and not surrendered itself to the counsels of the priests and the bigoted royalists, things might have been kept in an even course to the mutual improvement and benefit of both governed and governors.⁶

Wordsworth argued for reform in general, but the Act of 1832 antagonised his inmost principles:

It is a fixed judgment of my mind, that an unbridled Democracy is the worst of all Tyrannies. Our Constitution had provided a check for the Democracy in the regal prerogative, influence and power, and in the House of Lords acting directly through its own Body and indirectly by the influence of individual Peers over a certain portion of the House of Commons—the old system provided in practice a check, both without and *within*. The extinction of the nomination-boroughs has nearly destroyed the internal check. The House of Lords, as a body, have been trampled upon by the way in which the Bill has been carried, and they are brought to that point that the Peers will prove useless as an external check, while the regal power and influence has become, or soon will, mere shadows⁷

Such a reaction stems directly from his aversion to the spectacle of the mob usurping the function of reform. He was then gravely alarmed: "I was always a moderate Reformer; and, now that success seems at hand, I think more of the dangers than the promises. . . ."⁸ To him the central problem of all political institutions appeared to be how "to put shackles as well on the people as on the government", or how to subdue the irrational within a rational framework. Apprehending the arbitrary quality of the franchise based on what he deemed "artificial property qualification", Wordsworth feared that the passions of the

fanatical public would only reduce the representatives to "mere slavish delegates" under the dictation of ignorant and selfish numbers.

In 1821 Wordsworth confessed that when young he thought it "derogatory to human nature to set up property in preference to person, as a title for legislative power."⁹ Now, however, he perceived countless advantages in England's "complex system of representation" which in due time tempered his ardour for reform. But, he adds, "if any plan could be contrived for throwing the representation fairly into the hands of the property of the country" instead of the large proprietors controlling it, he would vigorously be for this plan. Should such a system be established, he would recognize even the need of acquiescing to the "sacrifice of personal rights." In other words, Wordsworth hated that scheme of reform which would make the manufacturing faction tilt the balance of power against the landlords. What Wordsworth disliked was the imposition of the knowledge of "financial profit and loss" as a measure of political valuation. He sought to establish the primacy of interests in Parliament against individuals and their "profit-motives". In this, Wordsworth echoes Burke, who considered landed property "the firm base of every stable government", because the acquisition and possession of property is proof of a natural, steady self-interest and a "guarantee against the untrammelled operation of irrational and changeable feeling."¹⁰ By virtue of his acquisitions, the property owner possesses a "steady perception of his own interests and of the limits set to it by the rights of others and of the community."¹¹ A later political thinker, Walter Bagehot, similarly condemns the Act for instituting a reign of intellectual monotony.¹² By changing the cardinal principle of the system, the Act legislated for uniformity against variety, for the ignorant and least competent middle class who, before 1832, were ruled by the wealthy, and, after 1832, were dominated by the poor. The Act destroyed the nomination-boroughs, the select constituency which served as the "organ for specialized thought, for trained intelligence busy with public affairs", the orientation centre for men of intelligence and ability who would raise the intellectual tone of Parliament. For Parliament was the organ of a high kind of mind which could only be fostered by an electorate, now virtually abolished, which could appreciate young and old talent alike. Now the ascendancy of the "elite" is on the decline. Popular excitement, says Bagehot, has decisively prevailed over "the ordinary authority of trained and practised intelligence." To Wordsworth as well as to Bagehot, the Reform Act in sum betrayed England's tradition.

"Perilous is sweeping change, all chance unsound", Wordsworth asserts

in one of the "Sonnets to Liberty and Order" (1828). Earlier, however, in 1809, he actively responded to agitations for reform:

The misfortune of this question of reform is that one party sees nothing in it but dangers, and the other nothing but hopes and promises. For my part, I think the dangers and difficulties great, but not insurmountable. Whereas, if there be not a reform, the destruction of the liberties of the country is inevitable.¹³

Wordsworth's reactions function, in this respect, as a seismograph recording the upheavals and agitations of his times. In the *Address of 1818*, he believed that "Government and civil Society are things of infinite complexity, and rash politicians are the worst enemies of mankind; because it is mainly through them that rational liberty has made so little progress in the world."¹⁴ Whereas he denounced the supporters of the Reform Act, in 1843 he proclaimed that "as far as the people are capable of governing themselves, I am a Democrat."¹⁵

In 1848, he confessed that he was a Chartist—in sympathy if not in deed.

In 1839, he expressed concern over the political evil of mass lethargy: "Relieve the people of the burden of their duties and you will soon make them indifferent about their rights."¹⁶

In 1828, he was a true historical conservative imbued with a certain assured largeness of intuitive understanding:

It is hard to look upon the condition in which so many of our fellow-creatures are born, but they are not to be raised from it by partial and temporary expedients: it is not enough to rush headlong into any new scheme that may be proposed. . . . We must bear the sight of this and endure its pressure till we have by reflection discovered the cause, and not till then can we hope even to palliate the evil. It is a thousand to one but that the means resorted to will aggravate it.¹⁷

In 1809, he declared that he would accept assistance from any party that would help initiate temperate reform; his outlook had a pragmatic sanction behind it: "If I have a hill to climb, and cannot do it without a walking stick, better have a dirty one than none at all."¹⁸ Such a fluctuation of his views appears on any tabulation of Wordsworth's political attitudes toward the changing circumstances of his times. He characteristically defends himself against his accusers by affirming the condition of life as growth: "If I were addressing those who have dealt so liberally with the words 'renegade' and 'apostate', etc., I should retort the charge upon them, and say, *You* have been deluded by *places* and *persons*, while I have stuck to principles."¹⁹

Consider Wordsworth's view of society and the function of the emotions within the structure of the rational sphere of human affairs. Observing that the emotional ties which kept the different classes in vital and co-operative dependence were slowly dissolving, Wordsworth indicts the depersonalizing effect of commercialism. Most of the themes of *The Excursion* and *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* are distilled here: "All this moral cement is dissolved; habits and prejudices are broken and rooted up, nothing being substituted in their place but a quickened self-interest". . . .²⁰ That is, the self-interest of business men. Since farmers were no longer attached directly to the landlord, the labourer to the farmers, the personal feelings that used to govern trading and agricultural transactions had been deprived of nourishment enough to sustain the foundation of Church and State.

To repeat, Wordsworth believed that the complexity of the political administration surpasses the understanding of mere financiers and theoreticians. Man's passions, his effective motivations, defy geometrical classification or utilitarian calculus of any sort. In this view, competitive *laissez faire* is inherently antithetical to a society whose intrinsic harmony rests on hierarchy. In 1817, Wordsworth hypothetically puts "the condition of England question" into a series of questions that he would like to direct to a Cabinet Minister: "What loss has the Country sustained, within these last twenty or thirty years, of those habits, sentiments, and dispositions, which lend a collateral support, in the way of buttresses, of equal importance for the preservation of the edifice with the foundation itself? If the old props have been shaken or destroyed, have adequate new ones been substituted?"²¹ As a rule, Wordsworth's political attitudes derive their significance from the insight that in order to maintain a balanced adjustment of man's psychological drives and interest, an emotive pattern of behaviour, approximating ritual charged with sacramental significance, should be sustained. The essence of Wordsworth's politics ultimately lies in the word "Duty" and all its connotations:

The education of man, and above all of a Christian, is the education of *duty*, which is most forcibly taught by the business and concerns of life; of which, even for children—especially the children of the poor—book-learning is but a small part. There is an officious disposition on the part of the upper and middle classes to precipitate the tendency of the people towards intellectual culture in a manner subversive of their own happiness, and dangerous to the peace of society. It is mournful to observe of how little avail are lessons of piety taught at school, if household attentions and obligations be neglected in consequence of the time taken up in school tuition; and if the head be stuffed with vanity, from the gentlemanliness of the employment of reading.²²

To Carlyle, man's life acquires meaning through the fulfilment of the duty lying nearest to him. Likewise, to Kipling, the "day's work", Duty and Obedience to Law, organize human activity round an integral centre of the life-process.

It should be observed, in summary, that whatever surface changes and deviations may be perceived in the evolution of Wordsworth's political thought, such deviations should be liberally interpreted as adaptations of definite ideals and principles to the changing circumstances of his times. Wordsworth himself anticipated his accusers: "I should think that I had lived to little purpose if my notions on the subject of government had undergone no modification. My youth must, in that case, have been without enthusiasm, and my manhood endued with small capability of profiting by reflection." Wordsworth, in this context, is a revolutionary if we take "revolutionary" to mean, fundamentally, the continual recurrence to first principles in the analysis of social and political problems. I do not deny, however, the annoying presence of inconsistencies and enigmas, such as for instance Wordsworth's defence of slavery. But let us bear in mind what W. B. Yeats, a member of the Irish Senate for six turbulent years, said of himself in an address to the Senate on July 14, 1926—a gesture which recalls Wordsworth's commitment: "You will forgive me if I forget that I am occasionally a politician, and remember that I am always a man of letters and speak less diplomatically and with less respect for institutions and great names than is, perhaps, usual in public life."²³

NOTES

1. The relevant discussions are A. V. Dicey, *The Statesmanship of Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1917); Crane Brinton, *The Political Ideas of the English Romantics* (New York, 1926); Herbert Read, *Wordsworth* (London, 1930); and especially Edith Batho, *The Later Wordsworth* (New York, 1933).
2. Batho, pp. 119-233.
3. "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)".
4. "The Prospects of Scientific Politics", *Images of Man*, ed. C. Wright Mills (New York, 1960), p. 67; see also Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* (London, 1936), particularly Chapter II.
5. Letter to George Huntly Gordon, circa 1830. The source for all the letters cited here is *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, ed. William Knight (London, 1903).
6. *Ibid.*
7. Letter to Crabb Robinson, February 5, 1833.

8. Letter to the Pattisons, June-September, 1831, quoted by Batho, p. 185, from H. Crabb Robinson, *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence*, ed. Thomas Sadler (London, 1809), II, pp. 508-509.
9. Letter to James Losh, Dec. 4, 1821.
10. Charles Parkin, *The Moral Basis of Burke's Politics* (London, 1957), p. 45.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
12. "Lord Althorp and The Reform Act of 1832", *Biographical Studies* (London, 1881), pp. 308-317.
13. Letter to Daniel Stuart, May 25, 1809.
14. From the second of "Two Addresses to the Freeholders of Westmoreland, 1818", *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (London, 1876), I, p. 248.
15. Letter to Henry Reed, November 10, 1843.
16. Cited by Batho, p. 197.
17. Letter to Hugh James Rose, *ca.* 1828.
18. Letter to Daniel Stuart, March 31, 1809.
19. Letter to James Losh, December 4, 1821.
20. Letter to Daniel Stuart, April 7, 1817.
21. Letter to Stuart, June 22, 1817.
22. Letter to Christopher Wordsworth, April 27, 1830.
23. *The Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Donald R. Pearce (Bloomington, Indiana, 1960), p. 119.