

Chapter 1

A Philosophical Framework: Understanding the Intelligible

'a superb piece of verbiage' T.S. Eliot¹

WORDSWORTH'S 'ODE' was first published in 1807, the last poem in his collection, *Poems, in Two Volumes*. It was greeted with very little praise and various degrees of incomprehension, descending into ridicule. Francis Jeffrey, a spirit as mean as he was witty, declared it 'illegible and unintelligible' (Woof 199). If by 'illegible' he meant that its irregularity and obscurity made it unreadable as poetry, then the world quickly proved him wrong: there was music in it, even if, then as now, some of the grand rhetoric was felt to be vague and bombastic. As T.S. Eliot also said, 'The first question about a poem is not whether it is intelligible but whether it is readable' (AP I 803). It proved then as it proves now, very readable. But 'unintelligible' hit home harder. How was it to be understood? What was its subject matter? The lack of any description in the title, against the grain of Wordsworth's frequent practice, suggested he wasn't sure himself, and the epigraph *Paulò majora canamus* (*Let us sing of things a little greater*) didn't help: what was this greater theme? That question puzzled Wordsworth's advocates as much as his enemies. Thus Henry Crabb Robinson urged Wordsworth to give it a subtitle when it was republished in 1815.² Unfortunately that subtitle – 'Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' – proved a hostage to fortune. Where in the poem was the proposed 'immortality'? Did the 'recollections' have any validity?

¹ *The Dial*, 83 (September 1927), pp. 259-63; AP I 529. My thanks to Christopher Ricks for the reference.

² Henry Crabb Robinson, *Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson with the Wordsworth Circle* (Oxford, 1927), vol. II, pp. 838-39.

Neither Coleridge, friend, nor Hazlitt, foe, believed they did. Such doubts have haunted the poem ever since, even though Wordsworth consistently regarded it as a summation of his work, the ‘master light’ of all his seeing, placing it last in all his collections bar *The Excursion*, and expecting readers to draw on earlier poems to understand it.

By ‘intelligible’ Jeffrey meant what is open to rational explanation. For Wordsworth and Coleridge, that was one meaning, but it also meant something quite different. In Tintern Abbey we meet its negative – ‘unintelligible’. Wordsworth speaks of a mood

In which the burthen of the mystery
 In which the heavy and the weary weight
 Of all this unintelligible world
 Is lightened: –

Wordsworth then describes not what he means by ‘unintelligible’, or ‘mystery’, or ‘burthen’ – emphasized as ‘the heavy and the weary weight’ – but turns to the conditions by which ‘that serene and blessed mood’ may be realized, partially relieving the burden. We are left to wonder why he finds the world unintelligible, why the burden is a such a mystery and how the two clauses relate. Our difficulties are complicated by the encompassing ‘all’. It may mean all the world is unintelligible, or that there is a distinct or specific world – ‘this’ – which is separately unintelligible from another world more intelligible. That still leaves us with the question ‘What world?’ The nearest we get to its identification is in what the blessed mood achieves – seeing ‘into the life of things’. There is one life and there are many things. Whatever those things are, they are discrete phenomena, existing, we presume, according to whatever law or system governs their being. It only requires the discovery of those laws to understand the existence of any particular phenomenon, or group of phenomena, and so all ‘things’ become intelligible – we understand their life – we do not need any mystical power to see into what constitutes their mode of being. Thus we are puzzled as to why Wordsworth should find the world, an assembly of ‘things’, such an enormous burden that had to be lightened or resolved.

It was not ever thus. The rational investigation of the phenomenal, the very groundwork of our relationship with the world in which we now live is, in historical terms, a relatively recent achievement. We presume that, although our bodies, as all bodies sensible and insensible, are governed by material laws, our minds are not, that we have a life that we call variously, psychological, moral or spiritual, and that this life is

peculiar to us, both generically and individually; and that it is not the life of the physical or material world. Thus there are at least two distinct forms of life. However self-evident it may now seem, that distinction did not always exist, or not with the clarity that has in effect become a division. Until the sixteenth century, it was by and large presumed that the mind and the physical world had common powers, or if there was a difference, it was not of kind. On the one hand, there was a greater sense of one world and one mind, giving rise to such concepts as the *anima mundi* – espoused by Plato. On the other, Aristotle’s corraling of all forms of being into generic categories (e.g. substance, quantity, quality, motion), composed of variations of the four elements – air, earth, water and fire – explained the particular nature of phenomena by the imposition of mental concepts rather than by a progressive or rational investigation. That is, classical and medieval thinking tended not to distinguish powers of the mind from their insights into the structures of the physical world.

Openly expressed dissatisfaction with Aristotle’s methods is sometimes dated to Copernicus’s *De revolutionibus* (1543), and over the next hundred years his approach was taken up, for example, by Tycho Brahe, Francis Bacon, Galileo, Johannes Kepler and formalized by Descartes in *Discours de la Méthode* (1637). If not a new power, a new method of using a known power was established. What is now called reason had escaped the limited and sometimes syllogistic logic of medieval thought and would eventually lead to the continuing discoveries of modern science, now taken for granted. It was also a power whose systematic results are considered more or less irrefutable – at least until further investigation reveals another level of ‘truth’. The classic example is the modification of Newton’s law of universal gravitation by Einstein’s theory of general relativity.

What we now take as an unquestionable relationship between mind and phenomena by no means immediately disposed of the intellectual methods attributed to Aristotle. Late in the seventeenth century, In *A Free Inquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature* (1686), Robert Boyle was puzzling over aspects of Aristotle’s ideas, still then considered sufficiently important to be addressed. Aristotle’s principles have never been entirely dismissed. Eliot thought that what he called the ‘Copernican revolution’ was the ‘real abyss between classic scholastic philosophy and all philosophy since’ and had been ‘impressed on the world by Descartes’ (*VMP* 80). He took it as not much less than a European tragedy, one consequence of which he called the ‘dissociation of sensibility’. Eliot’s thought remained classical

and Aristotelian, an example of which is his decision to identify each of the *Four Quartets* with one of Aristotle's four elements.³

The newly focused power, perhaps inevitably, came to be termed reason. Its boundaries took longer to determine. It is sometimes associated with Bacon's *lumen siccum* ('dry light'), which has been defined as 'the objective light of rational knowledge'.⁴ That fits quite well with our understanding of the term 'reason', and our capacity for induction and deduction. Yet in that form Coleridge relegated reason to 'the reflective faculty', subject to any one of Bacon's four idols. For him, as for Bacon, the *lumen siccum* was also a greater and intuitive power. It did not begin with the notices of sense, nor depend upon inductive or deductive processes. He distinguished it as 'the purest reason, the spirit of true light and intellectual intuition'. He believed this power anticipated and guided empirical discoveries, because the pure laws thus intuitively revealed would 'be found to correspond to certain laws in nature' (*LHP* 487-88).

'Reason' was therefore a complex power of uncertain definition. In its simpler form, its ability to relate one phenomenon to another, to deduce causes and produce chains of causes, it became evident that it might lead to a full understanding of how the universe functions. If all causes relate, then something or someone has to be the first cause, *causa causarum* – or, for Christians, God. The office of this new philosophy, declared one adherent, must be

to find out the process of this divine art in the great automaton of the world, by observing how one part moves another, and how those motions are varied by the several magnitudes, figures, positions of each part, from the first springs or plummets ... and Descartes hath proceeded farthest in the like attempt, in that vast machine, the universe...⁵

It was a short step from there to the paradigm of God's relationship to the world as of clockmaker to clock, or the maker to the made, which dominated the next two centuries, and has yet to find a replacement fit for the pulpit. In sum, God set the world a-going, and on it went – tick-tock.

³ Wordsworth noted the continuing influence of Aristotle: 'the English, with their devotion to Aristotle, have but half the truth: a sound Philosophy must contain both Plato and Aristotle' (6 October 1844).

⁴ *The Oxford Essential Dictionary of Foreign Terms in English*: www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199891573.001.0001/acref-9780199891573-e-3977.

⁵ Patrick, *Brief Account*, p. 12.

Beginning with the notices of sense, with the observation of phenomena, this form of reason necessarily deals with what is material. Consequently, British materialism also went steadily marching on, hugely successful in its own terms, meeting occasional but always defeated resistance, unwittingly marching into the philosophical and poetic impasse from which it has yet to escape.⁶

This did not bother most theistic thinkers – God was still the author of the universe – but a group of theologians and philosophers, collectively known as the Cambridge Platonists, saw consequences that diminished their enthusiasm for Descartes. God would stand outside nature and take no part in its working. There would be no ongoing relation of maker and made, their modes of being heterogeneous, as a clock functions quite differently from the mind that made it. Ralph Cudworth saw this as potentially undermining even theism. He posits the idea of ‘plastic Nature’ as an intermediary between God and the world, without which ‘either God must be supposed to Doe all things in the world Immediately, and to Form every *Gnat* and *Fly*’, or else ‘the whole *System* of this *Corporeal Universe*, must result onely from *Fortuitous Mechanism*, without the Direction of any *Mind*; which *Hypothesis* once admitted, would Unquestionably, by degrees, *Supplant* and *Undermine* all *Theism*’.⁷ A prescient remark: fortuitous mechanism is still the generic answer of the godless. However, for the godly there is another, perhaps more serious consequence: Cartesian reason as described by Simon Patrick would ‘make God to be nothing else in the World, but an *Idle Spectator*... and render his Wisdom altogether Useless and Insignificant, as being a thing wholly Inclosed and shut up within his own breast, and not at all acting abroad upon anything without him’.⁸ God is isolated from his creation and mind is divorced from nature, a divorce that, like the Platonists, Coleridge attributed to Descartes, who was ‘the first man who made a direct division between man and nature, the first man who made nature utterly lifeless and Godless’ (*LHP* 565). The world is thus meaningless in relation to the distinct powers of the mind – exemplified by

⁶ British, and American, idealism had a brief flowering in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in figures such as Josiah Royce, T.H. Green and F. H. Bradley; more loosely in R. G. Collingwood and Owen Barfield. It is a surprising feature of all these idealists, except Barfield, that they never connect their work with that of Coleridge or the Cambridge Platonists.

⁷ Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678), p. 147.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 149. There is an echo of this thought in Eliot’s lectures, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*: under the influence of Descartes ‘Mankind suddenly retires inside its several skulls’ (*VMP* 80).

Patrick as ‘Wisdom’ – but elsewhere identified with other ideas by both Wordsworth and Coleridge, for example, ‘eternity, freedom, will, absolute truth, of the good, the true the beautiful, the infinite’, ideas derived from intuitions independent of sense.⁹ In that respect, the world has become unintelligible, for it is unrelated to these ideas. However, reason as a tool – empirical, rational and reflective – proved itself such a force that it left behind all the worries of the Platonists who, though flourishing in their own time, are now regarded as having made little or no impression on the subsequent development of theology or philosophy in England.

Nevertheless, they appear to have made a deep impression on Wordsworth’s poetry and Coleridge’s thought. Coleridge, according to Lamb, declaimed Iamblichus and Proclus in the cloisters of Christ’s Hospital, and he read Cudworth when only 23 or 24, never veering far from what he called ‘the Plotino-platonic Philosophy’, the principal virtue of which was ‘that it never suffers, much less causes or even occasions, its Disciples to forget themselves, lost and scattered in sensible Objects disjoined or *as* disjoined from themselves’ (CN III 3935). In this mode of thinking, the objects of sense – things, phenomena – are, ideally, joined to us, part of what we call self, and that self is all that one discovers if one follows Coleridge’s principle dictum, ‘Know thyself’.¹⁰ The implication is that the beings of those who examine sensible objects detached from self – the very principle of rational investigation – are lost and scattered through those objects. And for those who would have it otherwise, objects detached from self lie like a dead and unintelligible weight on the soul.

What is more surprising, as there is no indication Wordsworth ever read them, is how closely many of his beliefs and assertions, particularly as recorded in *The Prelude*, match the opinions of the Cambridge Platonists.¹¹ His thought is too deeply and too early embedded with Platonism, and particularly this form of Platonism, for him to have taken it from Coleridge. If a principal concern of the Platonists was the divorce of mind and nature, the consequence of Cartesian methods, Wordsworth both felt the presence of mind in nature – ‘while yet a child’

⁹ CS 47; see also AR 351, where Coleridge describes these ideas as ‘the *peculia* of our humanity ... *congenera* of Mind and Will’.

¹⁰ BL I 252.

¹¹ See ‘A Track Pursuing Not Untrod Before’, in Douglas Headley and David Leech (eds), *Revisiting Cambridge Platonism: Sources and Legacy* (Heidelberg, 2019), pp. 215-40.

... in the hollow depths of naked crags
 He sate; and even in their fix'd lineaments,
 He trac'd an ebbing and a flowing mind,
 Expression ever varying.¹²

and saw his principal task as their reunion, outlined in his soaring Prospectus to *The Excursion* – originally the conclusion to the most optimistic of his poems, *Home at Grasmere*. He begins with mind: 'the Mind of Man, / My haunt and the main region of my Song'.¹³ This mind, which he also calls 'the discerning intellect of Man', is to be 'wedded to this goodly universe' – no mere marriage but a 'great consummation' – which his 'spousal verse' would celebrate. He believed it a match made in heaven, or a heaven-making match, his 'voice' proclaiming 'How exquisitely the individual Mind /.../.to the external World / Is fitted; and how exquisitely, too – / ... The external World is fitted to the Mind'. The outcome of this 'blended might' of mind and nature is 'creation (by no lower name / Can it be called)'. That creation is self-evidently not of the phenomenal world because that world exists prior to this marriage.¹⁴ The nature of that creation is considered below.

The Cambridge Platonists did not refute or refuse the achievements of reason as understood by Descartes and Bacon. They began there, and then hoisted the flag a good deal higher:

For reason is that faculty, whereby a man must judge of every thing; nor can a man believe anything except he have some reason for it, whether that reason be a deduction from the light of nature, and those principles, which are the candle of the Lord, set up in the soul of every man, that hath not wilfully extinguished it; or a branch of divine revelation in the oracles of holy Scripture.¹⁵

The Platonists saw the various forms of reason as continuous, from simple deduction to the principles constituting the soul to its supporting

¹² RC E 153-56. Wordsworth is speaking as the Pedlar. In a manuscript, he also wrote 'In all forms of things / There is a mind' (RC, p. 123).

¹³ Cf. his belief that 'the mind of man can become / A thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells' (1805 XIII 446-48).

¹⁴ Cf. 'there is nothing in the course of religious education adopted in this country ... that appears to me so injurious as perpetually talking about *making* by God' (MY II 188-89). God is a power in nature, not a material being creating a material world.

¹⁵ Patrick, *Brief Account*, pp. 5-6.

the truths of revelation. Whether they were able to demonstrate that continuity is less certain. There is little doubt that Wordsworth and Coleridge inherited those attitudes to the forms of reason, and developed and defined their relations. For instance, Coleridge, as noted above, described inductive and deductive reason, the reflective faculty, as the Understanding, working with the notices of sense. He spent much of his life distinguishing it from Reason as an intuitive power. To achieve expression, the truths or ideas of Reason must inform the Understanding, and Coleridge always declared their relationship reciprocal, however often he stated the limitations of the Understanding. What is also clear is that that power, as it must always be considered, was very closely associated with other nominated powers – meditation, contemplation, imagination, the philosophic imagination, the philosophic mind, and even faith are instances.¹⁶ The very variety of terms suggests a sense of discovery, that whatever its true nature, that power was gradually revealed in many different circumstances and through various modes of expression.¹⁷ In an early poem, *The Destiny of Nations*, ‘Fancy’ functions just as the Imagination later would. Moreover, in Coleridge’s view, Wordsworth was still conflating the two powers in his Preface of 1815: ‘I am disposed to conjecture, that he has mistaken the co-presence of fancy with imagination for the operation of the latter singly. A man may work with two very different tools at the same moment’ (*BL I 294*) In the same Preface, however, Wordsworth identified another form of imagination, and all but rehearsed Coleridge’s distinction between the primary and secondary imagination, conflating, as Coleridge complained, the latter with fancy:

the Imagination is conscious of an indestructible dominion; – the Soul may fall away from it, not being able to sustain its grandeur, but, if once felt and acknowledged, by no act of any other faculty of the mind can it be relaxed, impaired, or diminished. – Fancy is given to quicken and to beguile the temporal part of our Nature, Imagination to incite and support the eternal.¹⁸

¹⁶. What is the Pedlar’s ‘meditation’ in *The Ruined Cottage* will become Margaret’s ‘faith’ in *The Excursion*.

¹⁷. Wordsworth connected Reason and Imagination much earlier than Coleridge. He had established or at least asserted the connection in the conclusion of the 1805 *Prelude*. Coleridge tried but failed in the *Biographia* (1817).

¹⁸. Cf. ‘the eternal act of creation’ of the primary imagination, akin to what Wordsworth means by ‘creation’ when mind and nature are wedded.

Wordsworth and Coleridge also distinguished two modes of intuitive Reason, the principal examples of which are found in mathematics, particularly geometry. Wordsworth describes the Pedlar's pleasure in 'books that explain / The purer elements of truth, involv'd / In lines and numbers' (*RC E* 242-44), and in *The Prelude* he shares John Newton's experience of 'that clear synthesis built up aloft / ... / ... an independent world / Created out of pure intelligence' preserving 'the mind / Busy in solitude and poverty' (*1805 VI* 182-87). Although at first conflating the two, in *The Friend* (1818), when defining 'pure Reason' as the power by which we become possessed of ideas, Coleridge noted that 'In the severity of Logic, the geometrical Point, Line, Surface, Circle etc. are Theorems not Ideas' (*FI* 177). The difference between the two resides in the function of the will. Once realized, no act of will can alter the truths of mathematics – and that form of intuitive reason is in some measure continuous with the Understanding. Yet the 'principles, which are the candle of the Lord, set up in the soul of every man', can be 'wilfully extinguished'.¹⁹ Paradoxically, it is not a candle that can be lit by a simple or deliberate act of the conscious will. Wordsworth thinks of Reason as 'A crown, an attribute of sovereign power, / Still to be courted – never to be won' (*The Excursion V* 502-4). Coleridge speaking of 'the highest and intuitive knowledge', which he believes one with Wordsworth's 'The vision and the faculty divine', reminds us that according to Plotinus we should 'watch in quiet till it suddenly shines upon us' (*BL I* 241). This is a power that comes upon us, or rises up within us, only when the will is attentive but not deliberative. And its arrival is often a surprise.

That there is a mind in Nature, and that Nature and Reason are co-ordinate powers, are two key principles underpinning Wordsworth's poetry. In *Home at Grasmere*, as he draws towards 'This small abiding-place of many men, / A termination and a last retreat', he knows that 'On Nature's invitation do I come / By Reason sanctioned' (*HG D* 71-72). As the poem closes, his arrival is celebrated as Nature's achievement in exactly the same terms: 'That which in stealth by Nature was performed / Hath Reason sanctioned' (*HG D* 733-34). In both instances, Nature works to draw him back to his better self; in the first, putting behind him 'the Realities of Life – so cold', which nonetheless have been 'Bold and bounteous unto me'; and in the second, taming his 'wild appetites and blind desires, / Motions of savage instinct' that gloried in such tales as those of 'Of two brave Vessels matched in deadly fight' – the

¹⁹. 'The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord', from Proverbs 20:27, was first the mantra of the Cambridge Platonists, and then taken up by George Fox.

‘desperate course of tumult and of glee’. Nature working ‘in stealth’ suggests some kind of guardian angel gently guiding an errant spirit back to their proper course. In turn, Reason says to Nature, ‘Well done’.

That what ‘is an Idea in the Subject, i.e. in the Mind, is a Law in the Object, i.e. in Nature’ (*FI* 497) is the premise with which Wordsworth and Coleridge began; in other words, the ideas that individuals must realize within themselves are ‘essentially one with germinal causes in Nature’. Throughout his works Coleridge offers examples of the ideas of Reason, but to see how these are also Nature’s ‘germinal causes’ is a much harder, even impossible, task. Insight into the laws of nature was and is the work of reason, but we cannot imagine how the ideas of ‘eternity, freedom, will, absolute truth, of the good, the true, the beautiful, the infinite’ – ‘the *peculia* of our humanity ... *congenera* of Mind and Will’ – are co-ordinate with nature’s ‘germinal causes’.

That proved to be a route neither poet actually took. If Aristotle and Plato are ‘the two classes of men, beside which it is next to impossible to conceive a third’, it is their attitude to reason that distinguishes them: ‘The one considers Reason a Quality, or Attribute; the other considers it a Power. I believe Aristotle could never get to understand what Plato meant by an Idea’. Nonetheless, Coleridge admired Aristotle, who ‘was and is the sovereign lord of the Understanding’ (*TT* I 173; 2 July 1830). In naming ideas as above, there is the risk of considering them attributes rather than powers, and Coleridge gradually moved from the naming of ideas to considering words inadequate to their expression. In the *Biographia* (1817), he wrote that ‘The ideas themselves [Plato] considered as mysterious powers, living, seminal, formative, and exempt from time’ (*BL* I 97); and in the *Opus Maximum* he declared that ‘All pretense, all approach to particularize on such a subject involves its own confutation: for it is the application of the understanding ... to truths of which the reason, exclusively, is both the substance beheld and the eye beholding’ (*OM* 215). All we are finally allowed to know is that ‘the *Ideas* (living truths – the living Truths,) ... may be re-excited but cannot be expressed by Words, [they are] the Transcendents that give the Objectivity to all Objects, the Form to all Images, yet are themselves untranslatable into any Image, unrepresentable by any particular Object’ (*CN* V 6742).²⁰ Coleridge felt that his mind had been prepared to receive these powers in his ‘early study of Plato and Plotinus ... of Proclus’ and Bruno, later

²⁰. “Philosophy is fundamentally prosaic” insisted Kant ... This censure is consistent with the restriction Kant places on speculative Reason. Unlike Coleridge and much of Plato, Kant denies that human Reason can have access to the noumenal realm’: James Vigus, *Platonic Coleridge* (London, 2019), p. 6.

catalysed by the mystics Fox, Boehme and Law, all ‘keeping alive the heart in the head’ (BL I 144/152). His was nevertheless a journey of discovery, demonstrated by the subsequently muddled and wandering progress of the *Biographia*.

If Wordsworth took Reason as the principal power of the mind, and ‘Imagination /.../ ... reason in her most exalted mood’ (1805 XIII 167-70), he made no attempt to delineate any specific forms, only distinguishing ‘the grand / And simple reason’ from ‘that humbler power / Which carries on its no inglorious work / By logic and minute analysis’ (1805 XI 123-27).²¹ But he did associate that power with the power he found in Nature. Therein rose his principal difficulties, as it was in the appearances of nature that he sought expression of that power – that appearance must be some measure of reality. That again is a tough ask. What is the relationship of discrete appearances to a power essentially singular, that power which is the power of the one life? This became the question he had to answer as soon as he discovered that his youthful sense of the union of power and appearance had faded away. Yet if he believed that a singular power sustains nature through all its forms, he also believed that power was a power in him, common to humanity and to nature, and thus that, if he could find the power in himself, he would find the power in nature. Where did Wordsworth finally locate that power?

Paul Davies, describing the Baconian process of ‘vexing’ nature that links one cause to another, creating a set of causes, which then rest upon some laws or physical principles, asks ‘Where can such a chain of reasoning end? It is hard to be satisfied with an infinite regress’,²² a dissatisfaction he illustrates by the tale of the turtle. A woman interrupts a lecture on the universe to declare that it is ‘a flat plate resting of the back of a giant turtle’. The lecturer asks what the turtle rests on and she replies, “It’s turtles all the way down!” (p. 223). Faced by the necessity of interrupting that infinite regress all one can do is draw a line in the sand: ‘God’ – or ‘a “superturtle” that stands at the base of the tower, itself unsupported’. Davies then takes the reader through three versions of ‘turtle trouble’ as he calls it, and concludes that the ‘search for a closed logical scheme that provides a complete and self-consistent explanation for everything is doomed to failure’ (p. 226). But that is not the end of the story. He suggests that we can make at least some sense of the universe if

²¹ Cf. ‘I had been taught to reverence a Power / That is the visible quality and shape / And image of right reason’ (1850 XIII 20-22).

²² Paul Davies, *The Mind of God* (Harmondsworth, 1990), p. 223.

we are willing to venture ‘outside the road of rational scientific inquiry and logical reasoning’; that it is possible that ‘the reason for existence has no explanation in the usual sense’, and that ‘an understanding of its existence and properties’ may lie beyond ‘the usual categories of rational human thought’ (p. 224). Thus Davies, an atheist, turns to mysticism to escape the various forms of infinite regress and the limitations of rational thought: ‘mystics claim that they can grasp *ultimate reality* in a single experience, in contrast to the long and tortuous deductive sequence (petering out in turtle trouble) of the logical-scientific method of inquiry’ (p. 227). Davies’s examples of mystical experience are not drawn from traditional sources, but from scientists, and eminent scientists at that – from people who have come to or seen the end of their rational road, and know their journey is not done. What is curious from a romanticist’s point of view is the strong sense of *déjà vu*, of having heard it all before – in other words.

Russell Stannard, a particle physicist, ‘writes of the impression of facing an overpowering force of some kind, “of nature to command respect and awe ... There is a sense of urgency about it; the power is volcanic pent up ready to be unleashed”’ (p. 227). One is reminded of the apocalyptic power that Wordsworth experienced after losing his way through the Simplon Pass. David Peat, a solid state physicist, speaks of

a remarkable feeling of intensity that seems to flood the whole world around us with meaning ... We sense that we are touching something universal and perhaps eternal, so that the particular moment in time takes on a numinous character and seems to expand in time without limit. We sense that all boundaries between ourselves and the outer world vanish, for what we are experiencing lies beyond all categories and all attempts to be captured in logical thought. (p. 227)

That experience has its clearest counterpart in Eliot’s moments in and out of time, but the sense of boundaries dissolving, of all life being present in one moment, is also at the centre of Wordsworth’s experience. The Pedlar looking on the world around him finds that

All things there
Breath’d immortality, revolving life,
And greatness still revolving; infinite.
There littleness was not; the least of things
Seemed infinite; (RC E 216-20)

The idea of the infinite pervades Wordsworth's poetry, epitomized in his remark to Henry Crabb Robinson in which he spoke of 'that infinity without which there is no poetry', a remark as difficult to understand as it is significant.²³ What Wordsworth's idea of the infinite and Peat's kind of experience have in common is that they begin with or go on to reach the *ne plus ultra*. There is a sense of completeness, of having no more questions to ask.

It is not self-evident that mystical experience involves the infinite, but that is the step that Davies takes.²⁴ If one allows, as did Coleridge, that the infinite and the absolute speak of the same truth, then the kind of experience which permitted Wordsworth to believe that the infinite underpinned all life – 'the one thought / By which we live, infinity and God' (1805 XIII 183-4) – may be considered the inverse of Rudy Rucker's, a mathematician:

The central teaching of mysticism is this: *Reality is One* ... No door in the labyrinthine castle of science opens directly onto the Absolute. But if one understands the maze well enough, it is possible to jump out of the system and experience the Absolute for oneself ... But, ultimately, mystical knowledge is attained all at once or not at all. There is no gradual path ... (*Mind of God*, p. 228)

In Rucker's view, one must get to the end of the road before one is fit to jump; but jump one must if not to be faced with the meaningless prospect of an infinite – in the sense of endless – regression.

Out of all this, I have but one point to make: if one begins with the phenomenal, and in order to reach conclusion one must make the leap to the infinite or absolute, then if one begins with the infinite, might it not be possible to make the leap in the opposite direction, jumping back into the phenomenal; from a singular power, to a power endlessly diversified? There may be a question whether the two forms of consciousness are harmonious or heterogeneous; but that may be answered by the connection between reason and Reason.

²³ Robinson, *Diary*, Vol. II, p. 22; cf. Robinson, *Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 401. This is no casual remark of Wordsworth's: 'in poetry it is the imaginative only, viz., that which is conversant with or turns upon Infinity, that powerfully affects me ... but all great Poets are in this view powerful Religionists' (Letter, 21 January 1824).

²⁴ Davies's argument is more complex than my presentation of it, but Wordsworth would surely have agreed with Davies's conclusion that that power 'can only be known through a flash of mystical vision' (p. 231), even though he hoped it might be continuous.

So, were one to follow the maze in the opposite direction, one might find a continuous and reciprocal relationship between the phenomenal and the infinite. It is an act of trust, of faith, and I make no claim that this was a conscious act on Wordsworth's part. However, he had a belief in, and some experience of, what he took as the infinite; and he had an equal belief that the appearances of nature were substantiated by the same power, and always hoped that each could speak to the other. It is a happy exemplification of Coleridge's adage ('extremes meet') to think that beginning from opposite poles rational thinkers could meet poets and philosophers coming the other way, and in their passing agree that 'physical existence surely cannot be rooted in anything finite' (*Mind of God*, p. 230) – that all begins and ends in the infinite.

Remembering his early years, Wordsworth declares 'I sought not then / Knowledge, but craved for power – and power I found / In all things' (1805 VIII 754-56). That power as a continuous presence soon deserted him, and he recognized that as a man he could only see by glimpses (1805 XIII 338). As soon as he ceased to experience that power, to feel its presence, the relationship between mind and nature broke down, and nature became unintelligible, no more than a series of objects 'dead and spiritless ... // ... a barren picture on the mind', such as that subject to rational investigation.²⁵ But what is 'the creation' – which cannot be called by any 'lower name' – that the 'blended might' of mind and nature may yet 'accomplish'? Those lines are almost a rehearsal of some just preceding – 'For the discerning intellect of Man / When wedded to this goodly universe / In love and holy passion' (*HG D* 805-6) then 'Paradise, and groves / Elysian, fortunate islands' are 'the growth of common day', that which, had we the power to see it, is around us all the time – for 'Earth [is] nowhere unembellished by some trace / Of that first Paradise whence man was driven' (1850 III 112-13). When mind and nature are perfectly integrated, when the world has become wholly intelligible, Paradise is regained. But this power was – inevitably in the light of the discussion above – a rare and fleeting visitor, and Wordsworth only ever saw by glimpses, fearing he would cease to see at all.

Thus he celebrated whatever intimations of Paradise he saw around him, or found in himself. Grasmere, seen for the first time from Loughrigg Terrace, looked like 'paradise before me' (*HG B* 12). The poem beginning

²⁵ RC; additions to MS D, pp. 373-74. More of the passage containing this core belief closes the Introduction, followed by lines from Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Stephen Gill emphasizes its importance by quoting it at full length as appendices both in *William Wordsworth: A Life* and in *The Major Works*.

‘Who fancied what a pretty sight’, in which he sees a rock encircled with snowdrops, concludes, ‘The device / To each or all might well belong. / It is the Spirit of Paradise / That prompts such work, a Spirit strong’ (MW 303). Recovering from an illusion that he had been ‘falsely taught’, he describes himself as having ‘the eyes of Adam, yet in Paradise / Though fallen from bliss’ (1805 VIII 818-19). Beside this must be set his willingness, only 160 lines earlier, to dismiss ‘all Arcadian dreams, / All golden fancies from the golden age’ (HG B 829-30), dreams and fancies hardly distinguishable from Elysian groves and fortunate isles. This is not a unique paradox in Wordsworth’s poetry: we find our happiness in ‘the very world’ or not at all; yet our home is with infinitude and only there. How this kind of paradox might be resolved is discussed principally in Chapter 9.

* * *

In this introduction I have tried to present a clear if simplified account of the background of Wordsworth’s poetry, clearer than Wordsworth himself could ever have expressed because he was *in media res*, and the critic has the advantage of the complete works to consult. His was a journey of discovery, of loss and of at least partial recovery, often uncertain what direction he was taking, what he was struggling with. The chapters that follow trace something of that struggle, and the various forms his search for power took, that power which would make the world intelligible. Understanding what he and Coleridge meant by the words ‘intelligible’ and ‘unintelligible’ makes it possible, paradoxically, to offer a rational and progressive account of the Great Ode, not only countering Jeffrey’s condemnation, but also the repeated refusal by some of every generation to read it for anything but its music and emotional power, a refusal typified by Eliot’s thoughtless remark.

* * *

*For was it meant
That we should pore & dwindle as we pore
Forever dimly pore on things minute
On solitary objects still beheld
In disconnection dead and spiritless
And still dividing, and dividing still
Break down all grandeur still unsatisfied
With our unnatural toil while littleness
May yet become more little waging thus
An impious warfare with the very life
Of our own souls. Or was it ever meant*

*That this majestic imagery, the clouds
The ocean, and the firmament of heaven
Should lie a barren picture on the mind?*

*On Margate sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.*

SAMPLE