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Wordsworth and the Mountains

Over the last two hundred years, Samuel Taylor Coleridge has had rather a good mountaineering press. Coleridge, you will recall, was the great conversationalist, the experimenter, the risk-taker, and above all the man who descended Broad Stand alone, in what probably ranks as the first recorded act of mountaineering adventure in Britain. His great friend William Wordsworth, by contrast, has come down to us through the ages as being much more staid, worthy rather than wild, and someone who strolled through the daffodils along the shores of Ullswater instead of conquering the crags. This is a thoroughly unfair and inaccurate portrayal of Wordsworth, fuelled I suspect by the fact that he lived to a ripe old age, became increasingly conservative as the years advanced, and with a few rare exceptions allowed the poetic fire to die out at the same time. But the *young* Wordsworth: ah, there is a poet and poetry to be conjured with. And his work in those early years is shot through with the lure, the magic, the soul of the mountains. It is time to rediscover Wordsworth as a mountaineer, and as a poet of the hills and crags.

Wordsworth was someone, of course, who thought nothing of walking twenty miles to post a letter. He composed *Tintern Abbey* – one of the great, iconic poems of English literature – in his head as he was walking from the Wye Valley to Bristol. He roamed the hills from his earliest years as a schoolboy at Hawkshead. He deliberately chose to settle in a simple cottage in what was then one of the most remote parts of the country. Walking was second nature to him. And I could lead you through his poetry, poem by poem, line by line, and recapture for you the power of mountain landscape that probably had more impact on his writing than on that of any other major poet.

Take his early poem *Michael*, for instance. It is a poem about a Grasmere shepherd, and when the storm calls all other travellers to shelter, it summons him up into the mountains: ‘... he had been alone / Amid the heart of many thousand mists, / That came to him, and left him, on the heights.’ Or take *Tintern Abbey* itself, where he describes his youthful enthusiasm for nature, ‘... when like a roe / I bounded o’er the mountains, by the sides / Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams, / Wherever nature led ...’; and then goes on to reflect how maturity has brought a deeper love for nature, tinged with a more perceptive recognition of the human condition. Or read the passage in the first book of *The Prelude*, where he describes skating by starlight on Lake Windermere, and the way he feels the crags wheeling round him as he retires from the throng into a silent bay, ‘To cut across the image of a star / That gleamed upon the ice ...’

Later in *The Prelude* Wordsworth describes his walk through the Alps, starting from Calais and walking through France, past Mont Blanc, and over the mountains into Italy – and the sense of exhilaration when he suddenly discovers that he has crossed the watershed of the Alps. But above all, perhaps, read the passage in the final book of *The Prelude* where he describes the ascent of Snowdon in a cloud inversion, climbing steadily through the cloud and mist and then suddenly emerging into sunlight:

... and on the shore
I found myself of a huge sea of mist,
Which, meek and silent, rested at my feet.
A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved
All over this still ocean; and beyond,
Far, far beyond, the vapours shot themselves,
In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,
Into the sea, the real sea ...

This surely is mountain poetry at its best. This is a poet who has lived amongst, climbed, roamed, and loved the hills and who writes about them with a sensitivity that few have ever matched.

But Wordsworth is more than this: together with Coleridge, he brought about nothing less than a revolution in English literature. It is hard for us to conceive now, but just over two hundred years ago when the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* appeared – a joint project by the two poets – it heralded a complete change in the course of English poetry and thought. And Wordsworth went on to build on that during the whole of the next decade.

For a start, Wordsworth's poetry is written in a simple, straightforward style, using the rhythms of ordinary speech, but in a remarkably powerful way. He describes the act of writing poetry as being 'a man speaking to men'; and not only does he talk about the lives and experiences of ordinary people, often vagrants and outcasts, but he does so in a way that is completely different from the carefully crafted, overtly 'poetic' writing of much of the eighteenth century.

And of course in his greatest poem, *The Prelude*, he writes something that no one had ever done before: an epic poem about himself, his own life and experiences, and the thoughts and feelings they bring. This is a new poetry, focused on the interior life, reflective, exploring the boundaries and relationships between mind, soul and experience, that would have been undreamed of in earlier times.

So Wordsworth is a pioneer in what he writes about, and how he writes it. But the revolution goes far deeper. Along with his fellow Romantic poets, he believes profoundly in the transformational power of the imagination. For him, it is the special task of the poet to see the world afresh, to see beyond the surface of things into the deeper reality, to take the most ordinary of people or things and find in them the revelation of

something powerful and special. Looking out over the huge sea of mist from the upper slopes of Snowdon, for example, he sees a great chasm in the clouds, through which he hears an immense roaring of waters, and senses a glimpse of infinity, where nature has lodged 'The soul, the imagination of the whole'. Reaching out to touch a sense of the infinite which is implicit in the material world around us is at its heart what much of Wordsworth's poetry is about; and not only Wordsworth, but Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Blake and others too. It is the great Romantic legacy for our contemporary world.

Wordsworth is also distinctive in that much of his poetry is an exploration of the interrelationship and interdependence of the individual human soul and the world around it – especially the world around as expressed in the mountain landscapes and wild country to which he is passionately devoted. Many of his early poems, from the *Lyrical Ballads* onwards, describe a succession of solitary people, strange looming figures who come towards us in an empty landscape: the Old Cumberland Beggar, the Leech-gatherer, the old Soldier, Lucy Gray. The Leech-gatherer is perhaps the strangest of them all. When he comes across this very old, still man sitting beside a wild moorland pool, he describes him in the most inanimate of terms: 'As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie / Couched on the bald top of an eminence ...' or, later, 'like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf / Of rock or sand reposes ...'. The Leech-gatherer's essence is existence, rather than activity; he hardly speaks or moves throughout the whole poem, and towards the end it is as if he merges back into the landscape whence he first appeared. The exploration this prompts in Wordsworth's own mind, however, about the nature of existence, and about the relational power of mind or action, is profound. The poem may end with a jovial attempt to laugh off the encounter, but it has had a deep impact.

As Wordsworth takes us through his own life story in *The Prelude*, the same exploration – applied to himself, his friends, and his thoughts – keeps appearing and re-appearing. If I have a favourite passage from this greatest of English poems it is the one in Book V (which also appears as a separate poem in the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*) where he describes a young friend on the shores of Windermere:

There was a Boy: ye knew him well, ye cliffs
 And islands of Winander! – many a time
 At evening, when the stars had just begun
 To move along the edges of the hills,
 Rising or setting, would he stand alone
 Beneath the trees or by the glimmering lake,
 And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands
 Pressed closely palm to palm, and to his mouth
 Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,
 Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls,

That they might answer him; and they would shout
Across the watery vale, and shout again,
Responsive to his call, with quivering peals,
And long halloos and screams, and echoes loud,
Redoubled and redoubled, concourse wild
Of mirth and jocund din; and when it chanced
That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill,
Then sometimes, in that silence while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind,
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received
Into the bosom of the steady lake.

I have quoted the whole passage, not just because it is a fine and beautiful piece of writing, rolling from peaceful mountain setting to breathless noise and back to silence, but because in the process it encapsulates perfectly the interrelationship of human mind and surrounding world which lies at the heart of Wordsworth's work. Note for example that line-ending which produces such a pregnant pause, where he 'hung' ... 'Listening' – a proactive and re-active moment at one and the same time. And note also the way in which the sound of torrents is carried far into his heart, and the visible scene enters into his mind. The human mind and soul themselves act, and are also acted upon. Their identity and experience are shaped by what they are intrinsically, but also by the experiences they receive whilst in the midst of nature's finest scenery.

How often have I remembered that line about carrying far into the heart the voice of mountain torrents, as I've been descending from some high mountain in the late afternoon, and have stopped on a rock beside the path to reflect on the day and what it has brought. And the sound of the streams fills the air, comforting, reassuring, reflective, a little elegiac perhaps. These are some of the most exquisite and moving moments of our time in the hills. And they do speak to the heart.

As we struggle in our modern world to understand better our relationship as human beings with the natural world around us – as we try to make sense of the way we use and abuse the elemental environment – we can do worse than return to the wisdom and understanding that Wordsworth brings to his greatest poetry. He puts his love of mountain country directly into his work, yes. Few have done it as well as he has. But he also explores what that means for us, and how the experience of mountains and landscape deepens what we are as human beings.

Coleridge will always have Broad Stand to his credit. But Wordsworth has the whole world of the mountains to his; and his poetry at its best

helps us to see the world with new eyes and new feelings. He, too, is a true mountaineer. Perhaps the last word is best left with another great, more recent, Cumbrian poet, Norman Nicholson. In a poem addressed ostensibly to the River Duddon, he writes profoundly about Wordsworth's poetry:

A hundred years of floods and rain and wind
Have washed your rocks clear of his words again,
Many of them half-forgotten, brimming the Irish Sea,
But that which Wordsworth knew, even the old man
When poetry had failed like desire, was something
I have yet to learn, and you, Duddon,
Have learned and re-learned to forget and forget again.
Not the radical, the poet and heretic,
To whom the water-forces shouted and the fells
Were like a blackboard for the scrawls of God,
But the old man, inarticulate and humble,
Knew that eternity flows in a mountain beck ...

From 'To the River Duddon', in *Five Rivers* (1944)

That really is what Wordsworth's poetry is all about. For those of us who love the mountains, it's something we instinctively know, but always need to learn – and re-learn.

Note: Quotations from *The Prelude* are from the 1805 version, as edited by Ernest de Sèlincourt.