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## A MONARCH OF MYSTICISM: RE-READING WORDSWORTH

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### ABSTRACT

Mysticism is a consciousness of the transcendental Reality which is infinite and eternal and which permeates, pervades and gives meaning to the finite creation. Mysticism may also be defined as the enlightened effort of the mind to transcend the barriers of the sensory world and yield itself to the ultimate Reality. Plato had suggested, in Book VI of the *Republic*, that the Form of the Good was supreme in the world of the Forms. Plotinus' philosophy may be seen as a set of variations on this Platonic theme. He refers to the Supreme Form more frequently as The One than as The Good, and emphasizes its aspects of Unity, Intelligence, and Soul or Life. This transcendent vision of the Supreme Form is of abiding importance in a mystic's life. Caroline Spurgeon has pointed out in *Mysticism in English Literature*, the true mystic knows that there is unity in diversity at the centre of all existence; mysticism, therefore, is the ardent adventure of the soul, 'the flight of the Alone to the Alone' (Plotinus). William Wordsworth (1770-1850) is a renowned mystic poet of the Romantic Revival. If William Blake is the prince of mysticism, William Wordsworth is undoubtedly the monarch of the kingdom of mysticism. William Wordsworth has not only possessed the lofty imaginative grandeur of a great romantic poet but he is also endowed with the illumined spiritual vision of a mystic. This paper intends to highlight that mysticism is the apotheosis of Wordsworth's poetry.

**Keywords:** Mysticism, Romanticism, Imagination, Spiritual vision, Nature, Wordsworth

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### DISCUSSION

An all comprehensive definition of mysticism is too difficult to provide. Each mystic perceives and projects his accumulated experience in harmony with his own religious background. Mysticism denotes the achieved experience of a mystic's communication with a benign Being who is conceived as the supreme and ultimate reality. The mystic in all cultures recognizes a truth beyond the grasp of the rational intellect; his consciousness is elevated to the state of inexplicable sublimity by

dint of which he can perceive the abiding unity of all things and realize the co-immanence of the eternal and the temporal. Mysticism may also be defined as the enlightened effort of the mind to transcend the barriers of the sensory world and surrender itself to the ultimate Reality. To give a rare insight into the nature of mysticism, Aurobindo writes:

"A light not born of sun or moon or fire,  
A light that dwelt within and saw within  
Shedding an intimate visibility,

Made secrecy more revealing than the word:

Our sight and sense are a fallible gaze and touch And only the spirit's vision is wholly true". (Savitri)

This transcendent vision not only predominates but also is of paramount importance in a mystic's life. Mysticism denotes a splendid state of sublime, solemn and spiritual vision in which one has an intuitive perception of an infinite and eternal reality which pervades and permeates the universe. Caroline Spurgeon has pointed out in *Mysticism in English Literature*, the true mystic knows that there is unity in diversity at the heart of all existence; mysticism, therefore, is the ardent adventure of the soul, 'the flight of the Alone to the Alone'(Plotinus).

In England it was during the 14<sup>th</sup> century that mystical literature flourished the most. The writings of mystics like Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle and Lady Julian of Norwich came to be widely read. The 17<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the blooming of the mystical verse. Many poets belonging to the school of Metaphysical Poetry wrote poems that disclose a sensibility akin to the mystical. Henry Vaughan was the true forerunner of Aurobindo in their intense longing for 'light' which is symbolical of divine energy and spiritual lustre. Vaughan's most celebrated poem, *The World* records some incomparable mystical lines:

"I saw Eternity the other night  
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,  
All calm, as it was bright,  
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days,  
years Driv'n by the spheres  
Like a vast shadow mov'd, in which the  
world And all her train were hurl'd..."

Romantic age saw the soaring of two eminent mystic poets, William Blake and William Wordsworth. Gifted with sacramental vision, Blake could perceive:

"The world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour". (Auguries of Innocence)

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) is the most outstanding visionary, a monarch of the empire of mysticism. William Wordsworth has not only

possessed the heightened imaginative vigour of a great romantic poet but he is also endowed with the illumined spiritual vision of a mystic. He is undoubtedly a Nature Mystic. A large bulk of his verse is meditative in mood and in a number of his poems, especially *Tintern Abbey*, *Ode on Intimations*, *The Prelude* etc. the contemplative and mystical element is dominant. The whole canon of Wordsworth's nature mysticism is attuned to the trinity: God, Nature and Man. Mysticism is the quintessence of Wordsworth's poetry.

'God is passion'- these three simple words summarize mysticism perfectly. The deepest aspirations of romanticism are essentially spiritual and in their finest form they take on the colours of mysticism. In the romantic point of view it is heightened imagination which leads a poet to the mystic perception of the constant behind the flux, the infinite behind the finite, the eternal behind the ephemeral and the transcendental behind the sensory. Romanticism fosters the view that there are baffling phenomena in this 'unintelligible world'; it is only imagination which can offer fleeting flashes of the profound and penetrating insight into the heart of the reality. Emphasizing the prolific power of imagination, Wordsworth says:

"... Imagination, which, in truth,  
Is but another name for absolute power  
And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,  
And Reason in her most exalted mood"  
(Prelude, Book IV)

The four lines are immensely significant in clarifying a romantic's concept of imagination; it is "Reason in her most exalted mood." It is evident that Wordsworth wants to show the difference between a romantic and a neo-classical writer's attitude to 'Reason'. The Neo-Classical Age emphasized the principle of Mimesis as well as the Horatian recommendation and direction of artistic purpose that unquestionably and unalterably aims at catering delight and instruction to readers. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, an alignment of attitude and values is noticed that questions the foundation of the imitative-rationalist aesthetic to establish an individual-empiricist aesthetic that embraces the subjective dimension of human experience. The antithetical thought that had

originated with the Precursors of the Romantic Revival e.g. Thomas Gray, William Cowper, Robert Burns, William Blake etc. culminated in the magical and magnetic output of William Wordsworth who inaugurated the potential Romantic Movement and advocated the necessity of imagination and emotion in poetic works. In his *Essay Supplementary to the Preface* (1815), Wordsworth writes, "In the higher poetry, an enlightened Critic chiefly looks for a reflection of the wisdom of the heart and the grandeur of the imagination." In a letter to Benjamin Bailey (November 22nd, 1817), Keats has asserted his view in the same vein, "I am certain of nothing but the holiness of Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination. What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth... O for a life of Sensation rather than of Thoughts!" Maurice Bowra refers to imagination as the fundamental prerequisite for the romantics as they consider poetry as meaningless and insignificant without it. He says, "This belief in the imagination was part of the contemporary belief in the individual self. The poets were conscious of a wonderful capacity to create imaginary worlds, and they could not believe that this was idle or false. On the contrary, they thought that to curb it was to deny something vitally necessary to their whole being. They thought that it was just this which made them poets and that in their exercise of it they could do far better than other poets who sacrificed it to caution and common sense. They saw that the power of poetry is strongest when the creative impulse works untrammelled, and they knew that in their own case this happened when they shaped fleeting visions into concrete forms and pursued wild thoughts until they captured and mastered them"<sup>1</sup>

Wordsworth in *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (1798) defines poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility". The definition highlights two things – spontaneity and powerful feelings; the one ensures effortless experience and the other an energy which conveys feeling spontaneously. It suggests that poetry is not insensate artistry rather it originates from and is sustained by an original and sincere subjective sensation. A. C. Bradley remarks "There have been

greater poets than Wordsworth, but none more original. He saw new things, or he saw things in a new way....The spirit of his poetry was also that of his life - a life full of strong but peaceful affections; of a communion with nature in keen but calm and meditative joy; of perfect devotion to the mission with which he held himself charged; and of a natural piety gradually assuming a more distinctively religious tone."<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth's chief originality is, of course to be sought in his poetry of Nature which teaches us that between man and Nature there is mutual consciousness and mystic intercourse and which is expressive of the formative, restorative, moral and spiritual influence of Nature on the mind and personality of man. While speaking of Wordsworth's fidelity to nature and his unaffected, inartificial style W.J. Dawson says, "One effect of this ardent love of Nature in Wordsworth is that he excels all other poets in the fidelity of his descriptions, the minute accuracy of his observation of natural beauty. His eye for nature is always fresh and true, and what he sees he describes with an admirable realism. His sense of form and colour is also perfect, and nothing is he so great an artist as in his power of conveying in a phrase the exact truth of the things he sees."<sup>3</sup> The other Romantic poets have also written poems which are thoroughly impregnated with the love of nature. To Byron, nature appears as a healing, consolatory, strengthening and exhilarating power during the moment of his revolt against the folly of man. To Shelley, the ethereal and mesmerizing presence of nature, her disguised brilliance cast an intoxicating and magnetic spell on the mind. But Wordsworth conceives nature as a living personality, as a vast embodied Thought, as a Presence, as "the Mighty Being" who not only ennobles and elevates man but also endows him with noble discipline, lofty feeling and fervent enthusiasm. He speaks of "the Mighty Being" in his Sonnet *Evening on Calais Beach*, written in August 1802:

"It is a beauteous evening, calm and free;  
The holy time is quiet as a nun  
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun  
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;  
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the sea:  
Listen! the Mighty Being is awake,

And doth with His eternal motion make  
A sound like thunder- everlastingly...."

The 5th line in the sonnet, "The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea", references the creation myth of Genesis 1:2 and a similar use of "broods" is found in the *Intimations* in stanza VIII:

"Thou, over whom thy Immortality  
Broods like the Day, a master o'er a slave  
A Presence which is not to be put by..."

The following lines from *A Poet's Epitaph* and *The Tables Turned* throw light on Wordsworth's conception of and attitude to Nature; the Mighty Presence or a benevolent Spirit in nature teaches man the secret truths and moral disciplines of life:

"The outward shows of sky and earth,  
Of hill and valley he has viewed;  
And impulses of deeper birth  
Have come to him in solitude.  
In common things that round us lie  
Some random truths he can impart,-  
The harvest of a quiet eye  
That broods and sleeps on his own heart."

(*A Poet's Epitaph*)

"One impulse of a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,

Than all the sages can." (*The Tables Turned*)

Wordsworth not only loves nature but glorifies, deifies, divinizes and spiritualises her. Wordsworth's worship and adoration of nature is never inspired by passion for the aesthetic beauty or visible splendour. All forms and objects, aspects and appearances of nature whether beautiful, graceful, majestic or sombre, awe-inspiring-alike stir and stimulate his visionary imagination for they are to him incarnations of divinity. Like all true mystics Wordsworth believes in the spiritual source and divine destiny of human life. As he has said:

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home:" (*Ode on Intimations*)

William J. Long says, "...there is hardly a sight or a sound, from a violet to a mountain, and from a bird note to the thunder of the cataract, that is not reflected in some beautiful way in Wordsworth's poetry....No other poet ever found such abundant beauty in the common world. He had not only sight, but insight, that is, he not only sees clearly and describes accurately, but penetrates to the heart of things and always finds some exquisite meaning that is not written on the surface....there is hardly one natural phenomenon which he has not glorified by pointing out some beauty that was hidden from our eyes."<sup>4</sup> All objects high or low, significant or trivial, sentient or insentient are, to Wordsworth, irradiated with the sublime splendour of the Divine. It is on account of his perception of 'One Interior life' in all, that even an ordinary object of nature could kindle his vision, replete his mind with lofty and sublime thoughts and lead him to the profoundly mystic contemplation of the Divine immanent in all creation:

"To every natural form, rock, fruits, or flower,  
Even the loose stones that cover the highway,  
I gave a moral life: I saw them feel,  
Or linked them to some feeling: the great mass lay bedded in a quickening soul, and all That I beheld respired with inward meaning." (*Prelude Book III*)

"The most memorable passages", says Graham Hough, "in the early books of *The Prelude* are not analytical: they are incomparable descriptions of incidents in his childhood where it seemed that he actually felt in Nature a moral and spiritual presence, moulding and working on his mind as a human teacher might have done, though more mysteriously and profoundly.....The occasion itself is trivial: yet what is being described is evidently close to mystical experience: and it is such experience that is at the source of Wordsworth's most living work"<sup>5</sup>. In the bird-snaring episode the poet has vividly captured his first experience of pure fear and has sincerely acknowledged the moral influence of nature. During their night wanderings sometimes a strong desire overpowered his conscience:

".....and the bird

Which was the captive of another's toils  
Became my prey;" (Prelude Book I)  
But the excitement soon yielded to the awe-  
inspiring feeling of the invisible presence of an  
unseen force:

".....when the deed was done  
I heard among the solitary hills  
Low breathings coming after me, and  
sounds  
Of undistinguishable motion, steps  
Almost as silent as the turf they trod"  
(Prelude Book I)

The incident of rowing on the lake one night and the  
uncanny and mysterious experience he gained then  
had an indelible impression on his immature mind.  
As his boat went heaving through the silent water of  
the lake he observed before him a huge peak which  
suddenly appeared to him as a mighty presence "As  
if with voluntary power instinct" and strode after  
him "With measur'd motion, like a living thing":

".....and after I had seen  
That spectacle, for many days, my brain  
Work'd with a dim and undetermin'd sense  
Of unknown modes of being; in my  
thoughts  
There was darkness, call it solitude,  
Or blank desertion, no familiar shapes  
Of hourly objects, images of trees,  
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;  
But huge and mighty Forms that do not live  
Like living men mov'd slowly through the  
mind  
By day and were the trouble of my dreams"  
(Prelude Book I)

It is unmistakable and undeniable that Wordsworth  
regards the natural form as embodiment of the  
spiritual force in nature. While referring to  
Wordsworth's mysticism Visvanath Chatterjee  
illustrates, "Wordsworth's mystical experience can  
best be appreciated if it is seen as the culmination of  
his changing attitude to Nature. In his mature years,  
Wordsworth lost the spirit and buoyancy, verve and  
vigour, of his early youth."<sup>6</sup> But the loss was well  
compensated for; in his meditative temperament he  
could listen to "The still, sad music of humanity"  
(Tintern Abbey) in nature. Nature humanizes his  
soul and the sensuous pleasures of youth come to

be supplemented by the delight of spiritual  
contemplation. To him it is a rare sublime  
experience to sense in nature the 'presence' of the  
Universal Spirit:

"..... And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things." (Tintern  
Abbey)

The perception of this 'presence' has its culmination  
when nature bestows on the poet her greatest gift.  
This she does by leading him to a state of feeling in  
which there is almost a complete suspension of  
physical consciousness which induces in him a sense  
of inner illumination and he can have an intuitive  
awareness of the ultimate import of existence. This  
is the climax of Wordsworth's mystic experience of  
nature:

"..... -- that serene and blessed mood,  
In which the affections gently lead us on –  
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame  
And even the motion of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul;  
While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things." (Tintern  
Abbey)

### Conclusion

Mysticism according to Evelyn Underhill, "is  
not an opinion: it is not a philosophy. It has nothing  
in common with the pursuit of occult knowledge. On  
the one hand it is not merely the power of  
contemplating Eternity: on the other, it is not to be  
identified with any kind of religious queerness. It is  
the name of that organic process which involves the  
perfect consummation of the love of God: the  
achievement here and now of the immortal heritage  
of man...it is the art of establishing his conscious  
relation with the Absolute."<sup>7</sup> While speaking of  
Wordsworth's distinctive dealing with mysticism,

Charles H. Herford comments, "Wordsworth is regarded as the poet of a peculiar mystic idealism, who disclosed, in the rapt communion with nature, an undreamed of access to the life of things".<sup>8</sup> However, Wordsworth's attitude to Nature underwent a progressive evolution- from 'the coarser pleasures' of the boyish days through a predominating passion of youth untouched by intellectual interests to the significant stage of spiritual and mystical interpretation of Nature. His poetry is not simply an artistic encapsulation of lovely, tranquil or awe-inspiring aspects of nature but also a comprehensive account of his mystical and spiritual experiences. Poetry becomes with Wordsworth the record of moments of 'ennobling interchange of action from within and from without' (The Prelude). Wordsworth wrote to Lady Beaumont, "There is scarcely one of my poems which does not aim to direct the attention to some moral sentiment or to some general principle, or law of thought, or of our intellectual constitution".<sup>9</sup> If Blake could see the world in the grain of sand, Wordsworth can find sermons in an ordinary flower:

"To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

(Ode on Intimations)

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