"THE VISIONARY GLEAM" AND "SPOTS OF TIME"—A STUDY OF THE PSYCHOLOGY-PHILOSOPHY OF WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

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Two expressions peculiar to the terminology of William Wordsworth afford light upon certain important concepts of this poet. He uses them in salient passages of his poems. Separately they have had considerable attention upon the part of critics concerned with his system of thought. But no comparative analysis of the two terms has ever been published, though such comparison of the visionary gleam and spots of time as Wordsworth uses these terms of his own coining in referring to his subjective experience—indeed to subjective human experience typically—reveals important general contrasts and, upon one essential condition, a still more significant identity.¹

These unique phrases both apply to subjective experience. Both bear upon emotional life.² Both are so far involved in Wordsworth's psychological system that they may actually be viewed as quasi-technical in nature and may be so interpreted. Both have to do with what Wordsworth in The Recluse avows is his outstanding preoccupation: viz., "the Mind of Man"—and to a notable degree as he uses these terms he means elements and systematic processes in that mind physically. Positively or negatively these same terms are significant regarding aspects of growth of the human mind, as Wordsworth conceives of it—from the inception of consciousness (and even previously) through demonstrable stages of complexity to a maturity of reason and constructive imagination.³

¹ The late Professor Arthur Beatty recognized the character and essential important of these phrases and recurred to them singly or together in his study "William Wordsworth, His Doctrine and Art in their Historical Relations," University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature, Number 24, Madison, 1st Edition, 1922; 2d Edition, 1927. This work, which underlies much of the significant Wordsworth study of recent years, has an enduring value which renders somewhat inadequate the term "pioneering" which has been applied to it. My own analysis is indebted to it at every turn; at times, in the face of misleading criticism, I should have been "halted without an effort to break through," had it not been for the aid of Beatty's critique.

² The Prelude XII, lines 268-270.

³ Aside from Beatty's work, perhaps the finest tribute to Wordsworth as a psychologist is to be found in the article by M. Leguois constituting Chapter V, Volume XI, of the Cambridge History of English Literature. "Poetical psychology is his triumph," declares this critic of Wordsworth; and he calls attention to the passage (in the note to "The Thorn") where poetry is described as a "history or science of feeling."
By these two phrases, “the visionary gleam” and “spots of time,” Wordsworth refers to subjective phenomena in ways that have important bearing upon what he means by Imagination and by Intuition (erroneously held by some commentators to be identical in Wordsworth’s terminology). And finally there is involved also the controversial questions of mysticism, so-called in this poet.

The visionary gleam and spots of time can indeed be defined from the standpoint of factual brain physiology as well as, less tangibly, in the field of abstract psychology. This is not to pervert or force and distort the poetry where the terms find mention, but is in the purest spirit of their author’s purpose. It is directly conducive to a richer appreciation of the poetry.

The visionary gleam finds most familiar exposition in the “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.” Spots of time are defined most explicitly in The Prelude, Book XII, lines 207 ff. These and relevant passages elsewhere will be cited in detail in the present study as it proceeds to analysis and comparison.

The visionary gleam is “fugitive.” Except under special conditions of recollection which we shall note in Wordsworth’s references later, it is confined to the periods of childhood and youth.

“There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream ...”

“The Youth ... still ... by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended . . .”

But, Wordsworth declares in his maturity, “The things which I have seen I now can see no more.” “The radiance which was once so bright,” he asserts, is “now forever taken from my sight.”

“Whither is fled the visionary gleam,” he asks. “Where is it now, the glory and the dream?” “Nothing,” he laments, “can bring back the hour of splendor ... Of glory ...”

4 Legouis, op. cit., page 104, perhaps fosters this widespread erroneous view. Yet he declares that Wordsworth never consented to a “divorce between imagination and reality.” The significance of this declaration lies in an inherent and yet frequently unrecognized difference between intuitive immediacy and a mental process Wordsworth calls Imagination. The latter process, according to Wordsworth, invariably acts over established and physiological mediun or neural paths in the brain. This factual, physical, realistic concept will be explained below.


6 Ibid., lines 56–57. This is not to say that the youthful visionary experience of the vision is irreplaceable. It is important, as we shall see, in Wordsworth’s system to note that this vision may be recalled, as in “The Cuckoo.” But its validity is a recollected thing, dependent on the Mind of Man, where it is stored away. The “hour” of the gleam is in the past; it is a glory whose immediacy is vanished.
By way of contrast, spots of time, moments of keen awareness of life, are “scattered everywhere, taking their date from our first childhood.”

But they are distinctly valid in maturity: “The days gone by return upon me,” declares Wordsworth in The Prelude. In our minds are “rememberable things” that are stored away cortically, physically, in what the poet calls “the hiding places of man’s power”; and he refers in The Waggoner to subjective “hiding places ten years deep” that “leap” at certain times into consciousness. These are “visitings of imaginative power” recalled from the past; by them “our minds are nourished and invisibly repaired”; they arise from

“those passages of life that give
Profoundest knowledge to what point, and how,
The mind is lord and master—outward sense
The obedient servant of her will.”

Such spots of time “retain a renovating virtue”; from them, Wordsworth insists, he has subsequently been enabled in spirit to drink “oft” —and “as at a fountain”. That spots of time, therefore, are not “the gleam, the light that never was, on sea or land” is expressly evident because in “Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle” Wordsworth repudiates the visionary “gleam” as a “fond illusion . . . which nothing can restore,” where-as he values these hiding places, these “spots of time,” these “visitings of imaginative power,” and hopes while he is in his prime to enshrine them in his verse and give lasting “substance and life” to them for the sake of his future and more decrepit years—years in which mentality begins for physical reasons to flag.

“I see by glimpses now; when age comes on
May scarcely see at all.”

The visionary gleam is instinctive, and immediate, and unsought, “a Presence which is not to be put by.” Hence it comes quite independently of the ratiocinative processes of the mind; for it is unearned—a visitation, requiring no effort to attain it.

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8 The Prelude, Book XII, lines 224–225.
9 Ibid., Book I, line 558.
10 The Waggoner, IV, lines 211–212.
11 The Prelude, Book XII, line 599; further quotations just here are also from the end of Book XII.
12 Ibid., XII, line 203.
13 Ibid., XII, lines 211–228. This passage has been very widely misinterpreted. The physical aspect of age and decrepitude is particularly involved, and not the spiritual.
14 Ode: Intimations,” line 150.
15 Ibid., line 113.
16 Ibid., line 120.
17 Ibid., lines 115–116.
Spots of time, on the contrary, demand and involve mental effort—as Wordsworth expressly declares in dealing with them: “Thou must give, else never canst receive.” The mind must be “willing to work and to be wrought upon” by this type of experience. And spots of time play a distinct role in the building of the mind. They are the pabulum by which experience, through sensation, feeds the developing brain. They are of “renovating virtue”; it is by these experiences, as Wordsworth pointedly declares, that “our minds are nourished and invisibly repaired.” In other words, the subjective experiences described by the expression “spots of time” make their mark, contribute to the mental storehouse, persist, are associated in the self-active mind, are revivable, and are clearly identifiable elements in growth of the Mind of Man from sensation, to emotionalized Fancy, to the mature Imagination.

The process is perhaps most suggestively described in the poetic passage of psychology-physiology-philosophy of The Prelude which begins

“Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows  
Like harmony in music; there is a dark  
Inerutable workmanship...”

Wordsworth continues here in terms that, as Beatty first demonstrated, are distinctly of the associationistic school of philosophy and psychology. The poet speaks of a “register of permanent relations” in the brain, and he insists upon the necessity of factual experience—of sensation from external stimuli—for mental perception and development. The process is important to any understanding of Wordsworth’s concepts of human psychology; he speaks of the

“ties  
That bind the perishable hours of life  
Each to the other, and the curious props  
By which the world of memory and thought  
Exists and is sustained.”

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38 “The Prelude,” XII, lines 276-277; see also “The Excursion,” IV, 1. 126.
39 Ibid., XIV, line 103.
40 Ibid., XII, line 210.
41 Ibid., I, line 240.
42 The extensive discussion in Beatty, op. cit., is pointedly endorsed by C. H. Herford (Wordsworth, pages 101 ff.); by Herbert Read (Wordsworth, pp. 134 ff.); by Ernest de Selincourt (Prelude, Introduction, page xxix); and by numerous other scholars. Irving Babbitt (“The Primitivism of William Wordsworth, Bookman LXXIV, pages 1-10) makes appreciative acknowledgment of Beatty’s thesis; but he completely ignores its full implications when he denies to Wordsworth’s concept of Imagination any active intellectual ingredient. Though Babbitt proffers a rebuttal, the article by Joseph Warren Beach, “Expostulation and Reply” (PMLA, XL pages 346 ff.) remains a valid refutation of all denials of this sort.
43 “Prelude” VII, 11. 461 ff.
In the famous passage quoted above he declares "there is a dark inscrutable workmanship

that reconciles
Discordant elements, makes them clinging together
In one society."\(^{24}\)

The various forms of Nature, says Wordworth of his early days,

"remained in their substantial lineaments
Depicted on the brain..."

and these were
"by invisible links
Fastened to the affections..."\(^{25}\)

Wordsworth is concerned with physiological processes, in all these descriptions of the Mind of Man. Our sense experiences, as positive stimuli carried to the mind over bodily nerve connections, serve "to impregnate and to elevate (in higher physical as well as ideational cortices) the mind";\(^{26}\) and they yield us "life and food For future years..."\(^{27}\)

This heritage derives from the fact that

"to the memory
... Something cleaves at last
Whence profit may be drawn in times to come."\(^{28}\)

Our "thoughts," says Wordworth, are "indeed the representatives of all our past feelings."\(^{29}\) These subjective "elements" or ingredients, however, these "props" in mental life and growth, are not sentimental or arbitrarily to be selected and controlled. That is to say, a man cannot go out somewhere in the presence of Nature-beautiful-and-fair and "have" or induce deliberately and calculatedly a spot of time for himself. Wordworth tells us in Book IX of The Prelude how he visited the ruins of the Bastille,

"in the guise
Of an enthusiast; yet, in honest truth," he declares

"I looked for something that I could not find,
Affecting more emotion than I felt."\(^{30}\)

\(^{24}\) Ibid., I, lines 241 ff.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., I, lines 599-600; 611-612.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., I, lines 596.

\(^{27}\) "Tintern Abbey" 11. 64-65.

\(^{28}\) The Prelude, III, 11. 827-828.

\(^{29}\) "Preface," 1800. Irving Babbitt (op. cit., page 6) cites this passage deprecatingly as conclusive evidence that Wordworth is a devotee of idle feeling and guilty of "abduction of the intellect" (cf. "The Prelude" XII, 11. 222-223). He overlooks the fundamental principle of Wordworth's psychology here—that only intellectually approved emotion is permanently accepted by the mind as pabulum. Cf. The Prelude XII, 11. 276-277; XIV, 11. 106 ff., and the "Preface," "our feelings are modified and directed by our thoughts."

\(^{30}\) Book IX, lines 671 ff.
This frank and shrewd recognition leads to a corollary:
Spots of time, in their chief significance as experience undergone, recorded, associated, and recollected, necessarily involve a complex psychological and physical process. The sense is stimulated, the sensation is transmitted to the brain, is received and stamped there upon neural paths and areas. An associating and connecting or relationships-establishing set of actions follows. Then whenever conditions are right, the spot of time in all its vividness can be revived, perhaps years later; and it will carry enhanced value because of all implications attached to it by the maturing Imagination-Reason. The "renovating virtue" of spots of time

"chiefly lurks
Among those passages of life that give
Profoundest knowledge to what point and how
The mind is lord and master, outward sense
The obedient servant of her will . . ."[32]

This is no sense a divorce but rather an intimate interrelationship between mind and sense.[33] It will perhaps best be illustrated in Wordsworth's own words, as quoted by De Quincey:

"I have remarked from my earliest days, that if, under any circumstances, the attention is energetically braced up to an act of steady observation, or of steady expectation, then, if this intense condition of vigilance should suddenly relax, at that moment any beautiful, any impressive visual object, or collection of objects, falling upon the eye, is carried to the heart with a power not known under other circumstances. Just now, my ear was placed upon the stretch in order to catch any sound of wheels that might come down upon the Lake of Wythburn from the Keswick road: at the very moment when I raised my head from the ground in final abandonment of hope for this night, at the very instant when the organs of attention were all at once relaxing from their tension, the bright star hanging in the air above those outlines of massy blackness, fell suddenly upon my eye, and penetrated my capacity of apprehension with a pathos and a sense of the Infinite, that would not have arrested me under other circumstances."[34]

[31] See the famous definition of poetry in The Preface, describing the process of "recollection in tranquility." This may be glossed by innumerable passages which give the poems a consummate critical interest. And see particularly Beatty, op. cit., pages 159–168.
[32] In what is ostensibly a verbatim citation, Herford, op. cit., page 5, misquotes this passage, with consequent possibilities of wrong implication as respects the roles of "mind" and "will" in connection with the Imagination. He renders the passage "the obedient servant of his (Wordsworth's) will." The problem involved will appear more clearly and explicitly in our continued discussion.
[33] Wordsworth's is "a philosophy of the interrelation of the senses and the imagination." Garrod, Wordsworth, page 131. See The Prelude, XIV, 1. 76.
In its origin, as depending upon acutely active sense activity, this is a typical spot of time. In its progress, and its contemplation of the Infinite, it is significant as regards the essential sense-based character of the Imagination and, then, as regards its synthesizing role. The Imagination (as Wordsworth defines and traces this activity of the mind) always functions through physical processes which are anything but immediate, or independent of media.

Wordsworth in his poetry and prose is constantly paying tribute to the force and influence of objective stimuli, and to the means whereby "Nature by extrinsic passion...peopled" his mind with "forms sublime and fair." The Prelude is a consistent exposition of normal mind growth from sensation through physiological paths which carry associated and associating ideas—ideas which later, as the mind matures, become the more "pure" (remote from the peripheral) thoughts to which Wordsworth frequently refers. There appears mostly clearly in The Prelude how factual (and physiological) is the process by which the individual mind "to the external world is fitted;—and how exquisitely, too,

"The external World is fitted to the Mind." Wordsworth's argument demonstrates how, through experience of sense stimulus, followed by innate self-activity of the normal healthy mind associating mental impressions, the

"common haunts of the green earth...
Are fastening on the heart
Insensibly, each with the other's help."

It is thus factually—physiologically—that the human mind is built up "by slow gradations" rather than through visitations

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35 The Prelude, I, lines 545–546.
36 Cf. Rader, op. cit., page 165: "...synthesis is not effected by the mind after sensation, but the sensations appear to enter into consciousness already synthesized." This interpretation offers Wordsworth gratuitous aid. According to the physiology-psychology of Wordsworth, the dark inscrutable workmanship of the subconscious mind is well able to make prompt synthesis of extrinsic impressions. (Rader mentions spots of time nowhere in his study. Perhaps he feels the term per se is of minor value. He makes footnote quotation of the passage containing Wordsworth's most specific treatment of the "spots" in the attempt to show that to Wordsworth "if the imagination is once active, if the mind informs the senses, then a genuine and imperishable increment of power is added to existence." This is to overlook the process of "renovation" as one of recall rather than of immediacy. A multiplicity of references in Wordsworth will testify to the informing of the mind by the senses, rather than vice versa.
37 The Recluse, lines 63 ff.
38 Rader's definition of "transcendentalism" (op. cit.) is so broad as to admit "some forms of thought" that "do not derive from experience but from the constitution of the mind." Critics are agreed that the associationist school of philosophy never insists that the mind is tabula rasa originally. Wordsworth's whole concept postulates an innate self-activity in the normal mind. (See Beatty, op. cit., pp. 189–191.) (See Rader, op. cit., page 155, where "emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic" forces are declared to be recognized by Wordsworth as "intuitive or transcendental".—This is contrary to innumerable claims in Wordsworth's poetry that the senses inform the mind. (Cf. "The Prelude," XII, lines 127 ff.; 214–215; 222–223; VI lines 601–602.)
39 "The Prelude" VIII, line 120.
40 Ibid., VIII, line 677.
that are immediate—carried, that is, without media or neural paths from the periphery, or even from cortical centers themselves.

The immediacy of the visionary gleam (as contrasted with the media-traversing, physiological processes that utilize the spots of time) has been pointed out above. The gleam may be divorced from sense experience and the material world of realities. In his youth, Wordsworth experienced "fleeting moods of shadowy exultation."

"Oft in these moments . . . bodily eyes
Were utterly forgotten . . ."

the fleshy ear
Forgot her functions and slept undisturbed."

Phenomena of this type during childhood Wordsworth refers to in the "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" as

"those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings,
Blank misgivings of a creature
Moving about in worlds not realized."

The world (to repeat) was "apparalled in celestial light" during these experiences.

It follows that whereas this visionary gleam of childhood and youth is quasi-mystical and the creation of youthful Fancy, spots of time are sense-based experiences, recollectable, incorporated into our definite thinking, and elements in the mature Imagination. Imagination, it must be noted here, is Wordsworth's term for peak attainment of the Mind of Man; he uses the term in the sense of matured feeling-intellect-Reason; it is essentially rooted in a mind life that has developed through factual experience and has grown from stage to stage of complexity or powers of intricate association of ideas—a Hartleyan concept soundly argued by a great school of English philosophy. "Gently did my soul put off her veil," says Wordsworth of the early visions

"and, self-transmuted, stood
Naked as in the presence of her God."

As a youth, still under the dominance of Fancy, he felt

"visitings
Of the Upholder of the tranquil soul
That . . . from the center of Eternity . . . lives
In glory immutable."

43 Ibid., II, lines 348 ff.
42 Ibid., II, lines 416-417.
43 "The Prelude," XIV, lines 303-304.
44 Cf. Raleigh, op. cit., pp. 94; 100; 122; 148; Legoues, op. cit., p. 103, "semi-mystical": Rader, op. cit., p. 136 "at least bordered on the mystical"; "semi-mystical," de Selincourt, op. cit., p. 513; Bernbaum, Guide to Romanticism, 1st edition, pp. 134 ff. These are only a few instances. They fail, however, to convey the quasi-mystical experience to childhood and youth, which as will be seen was really the limited case.
45 "The Prelude" IV, lines 150-152.
46 Ibid., 1850 version, III, lines 115 ff. The earlier versions are less orthodox.
Now the mature Wordsworth, in a pointed phrase in "The Prelude," rejects the idea of mysticism positively, and couples it with idleness and futility. But his repudiation is not limited to this single utterance. It is implicit or avowed in the entire body of his work; experiential psychology, with physical sensation as the starting point in mind growth, is the motif of his whole system; physical neural pathways and media are central to the ratiocination of man. This philosophy is manifested in the spots of time idea. Wordsworth's whole philosophy of the normal human mind contemplates mentality as a unit, self-active, developing through sensation and the association of ideas so acquired, from infancy through successive stages to a maturity of Imagination-Reason; and when he says that Imagination is Reason he means that the two operate in identical fashion over physical media in the brain. Much confusion of interpretation can be avoided by cleaving to this concept as a formula, so to say. It is basic in applicability to passage after passage in Wordsworth's poetry. Relevant to the present study there is a particular passage of crucial character—puzzling until this formula is remembered and Wordsworth's favorite poetic method, reminiscence, is borne in mind: A certain emotionally vivid experience discussed in The Prelude is termed "visionary". The poet says

"I should need
Colors and words that are unknown to man
To paint the visionary dreariness
Which, while I looked all round . . .
Invested moorland waste, and naked pool,
The beacon crowning the lone eminence,
The female and her garments vexed and tossed
By the strong wind."

Is this experience, which meets essentials of what Wordsworth termed a spot of time, simply another sort of visionary gleam? Wordsworth speaks elsewhere of

"Those recollected hours that have the charm
Of visionary things."

The "visionary gleam" is at particular times "rememberable" in a definite connection with mind processes. Is any line to be drawn, after all, between a spot of time and visionary fancy?

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47 Ibid. II, line 230.
49 See Beatty, op. cit., pages 138-148; 155-165.
50 "The Prelude" XIV, 1. 192; XIII, 1. 22.
51 Ibid., XII, lines 254 ff.
52 Ibid., I, lines 630-631.
53 Ibid., I, line 588.
The solution of the entire problem is discoverable if we follow Wordsworth faithfully. The following passage will afford the key: “Even then,” says this poet, of childhood’s “vulgar joy” and “giddy bliss”

“even then I felt
Gleams like the flashing of a shield; —the earth
And common face of Nature spake to me
Rememberable things; sometimes, ’tis true
By chance collisions and quaint accidents
—yet not in vain
Nor profitless, if haply they impressed
Collateral objects and appearances,
Albeit lifeless then, and doomed to sleep
Until maturer seasons called them forth
To impregnate and to elevate the mind.”

To Wordsworth the visionary gleam of childhood and youth, providing that it furnished definite pabulum for the association of ideas in the mind (not by any means always the case), could be lasting rather than only “fugitive”; the gleam held potentially the material for mind growth, just as did the poet’s contacts with the earth and common face of Nature. This role in the growth of the mind the gleam may share with spots of time! The simple essential requisite is that “collateral objects and appearances,” significant phenomena to be “associated” or mentally related, must be stamped on the memory; and maturer seasons must bear evidence of this impression. —That is, recollection must be possible, a recollection of experience made significant through some brain activity of the glorious synthesizing faculty which Wordsworth views as a peak attainment of the Mind of Man, “the haunt and the main region of my song,” and which he terms the Imagination. He couples it with Reason.

The “visionary gleam,” then, is viewed by Wordsworth primarily as exciting at the time of its occurrence—in Childhood and Youth—and then “forever gone”—unless associated in constructive relationships with valid and meaningful phenomena—a gleam, say, had at one time played over some scene the developing mind, stirred by emotion, took and made contributory to its active perception of truth, of beauty, of goodness—or their opposites. The fruitless type of “gleam” is insubstantial, evanescent, fanciful, unpredictable, unearned, and of itself undependable—“the gleam, the Light that never was on sea or land.”

Concern of the critics, and of any admirer of Wordsworth, need not be wasted over questions of “mysticism”—assuredly of rich

54 Ibid., I. lines 586 ff. Italics added.
55 And for the development, hence, of Imagination—and of poetry!
worth in its own right, wherever it authentically obtains. The intuitions of Wordsworth are those of a scientist of the feelings; he simply rejects an approach to experience in a "mystical and idle sense." His spots of time, richly felt, are intellectual building blocks; he insists on the superior importance, for poetry, of feeling over situation and actions, because feeling is a sign of activity of the mind; and ultimately all proper feeling leads along on building blocks, so to say, beyond any taint of sentimentalism into the realms of Reason.