

HOPE WITHOUT AN OBJECT

The line blurs with Wordsworth and what, conventionally, we call the Romantic era in Britain (circa 1790-1830s). Wordsworth, as we will see, projects a new kind of quasi-theological, imaginative hope, and the basis of this transcendent hope is the psychology of secular hope. Let me first note that Wordsworth is remarkably non-judgmental about worldly hopes, even far-fetched ones. We are, for Wordsworth, hoping beings. Hope rarely appears as a vice, even when its effects are potentially or manifestly catastrophic. In the collection of poems, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), witness the tenderness and glee of Wordsworth's *The Idiot Boy*, a ballad that troubled his collaborator Samuel Taylor Coleridge because in it Wordsworth apparently condones the proud and dangerously unrealistic hopes that Betty Foy places in her feckless boy, sending him out on a nocturnal mission to fetch the doctor for their perilously sick neighbor.²¹ In the event, the mission does not succeed (as anyone but Betty could have predicted), but the poem nonetheless has an improbable comic denouement. Conversely, in the manuscript poem *The Ruined Cottage* (1798-99), Margaret's exorbitant hope (for her husband's return) is a sickness unto death; yet, as Wordsworth's narrator presents it, this fatal hope is made to seem as natural as the weeds that invade Margaret's cottage grounds. Wordsworth later incorporated *The Ruined Cottage* into his long dialogue-poem *The Excursion* (1814), in which irrational hope afflicts, in addition to Margaret, the Solitary and the Solitary's wife. Through these characters, Geoffrey Hartman observes, Wordsworth "shows...the inhuman or too human strength of hope."²²

But in Book 6 of the 1805 *Prelude*, hope as an ineluctable part of human psychology segues into a new kind of quasi-theological hope. Having reco-

²¹ "In the 'Idiot Boy,'" Coleridge writes in *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter 17, "the mother's character... is an impersonation of an instinct abandoned by judgement... [T]he idiocy of the *boy* is so evenly balanced by the folly of the *mother*, as to present to the general reader rather a laughable burlesque on the blindness of anile dotage, than an analytic display of maternal affection in its ordinary workings." Quoted from Samuel T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 volumes in 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2:48-49.

²² Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 302.

unted his experience of crossing the Alps (in the year 1790) without being aware of it—an immense anti-climax to imaginative expectations that may or may not have been inordinate—Wordsworth, writing in 1804, apotheosizes the imagination and the hopes to which it gives rise:

Imagination!—lifting up itself
 Before the eye and progress of my song
 Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,
 In all the might of its endowments, came
 Athwart me....
 In such strength
 Of usurpation, in such visitings
 Of awful promise, when the light of sense
 Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
 The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
 There harbours whether we be young or old.
 Our destiny, our nature, and our home,
 Is with infinitude—and only there;
 With hope it is, hope that can never die,
 Effort, and expectation, and desire,
 And something evermore about to be. (*Prelude* 5:525-42 [1805 text])

Over the past fifty years, this passage has received more commentary than perhaps any other in *The Prelude* thanks to its centrality to Geoffrey Hartman's highly influential 1964 study of Wordsworth's poetry.²³ For Hartman, the key term in the passage is "Imagination," that is, the visionary imagination opposed to nature and the senses; Hartman's larger argument is that Wordsworth, as a poet, constantly negotiates between the opposing claims of nature, on one hand, and the transcendent or "apocalyptic" imagination, on the other. However, Hartman prefaces his quotation of this post-crossing the Alps passage with a terse, pregnant sentence: "Wordsworth [here] descants on the Pauline definition of faith" (as "the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that are not seen" Hebrews 11:1). But what is the faith or the hope expressed here? Jonathan Wordsworth, for one, could find none: "Wordsworth's language cries out for a transcendental interpretation, but at this period he has none to offer."²⁴ Suffice it to say that for Wordsworth imagination is linked to hope, and hope with infinity, the promise of "something evermore about to be." How far have we come from Pope's line, "Man never Is, but always

²³ Hartman quotes this passage in *Wordsworth's Poetry*, 46; he sets forth the Wordsworthian opposition between nature and imagination in his chapter "Synopsis: The Via Naturaliter Negativa," 31-69.

²⁴ Jonathan Wordsworth, "Wordsworth's Borderers," in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M.H. Abrams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 183.

To be blest”? The key difference between the two poets is that for Pope hope has a determinate object—eternal life—even if that object should not be (although it is) specifically imagined. Wordsworth’s, by contrast, is a radically indeterminate hope, having no clear object and perhaps no proper object at all. Indeed, it is hope for some life that is not yet, that is always about to be in infinite projection.

Conceptually, this strains sense. With Wordsworth, hope comes to have a value apart from the thing hoped for or believed in—which, arguably, makes no sense outside of the Christian context that he presumes without affirming. Wordsworth blurs or occupies both sides of the line between hope as emotion and as theological virtue; his disallowance of simple binaries is what Simon Jarvis calls his “poetic thinking.”²⁵ Similarly, I have written elsewhere on Wordsworth’s “advancing Paul’s theological virtues in a manner that allows them to pertain to a detheologized ethics as well as to Christianity.”²⁶ I might add that Wordsworth’s poetry was consequently much esteemed in the Victorian era by readers of evangelical faith and of no faith at all.²⁷ Indeed, from one angle Wordsworth’s work may be seen as a *de*-differentiation between religious and poetic modes of authority in the nineteenth century.

As Wordsworth aged, however, he grew more akin to his Christian audience. In the last stage of composing *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s brother John drowned, and the poet’s correspondence reveals his struggle to accept Christian hope in eternal life.²⁸ His first effort to do so appears in the thirteenth and final book of the 1805 *Prelude*, where he records as the culminating intuition of his mind’s progress: “The feeling of life endless, the one thought / By which we live, infinity and God” (13:183-4). Re-written for the 1850 version of *The Prelude*, these lines become doctrinally Christian: “Faith in life endless, the sustaining thought / Of human Being, Eternity, and God” (14:204-5). Between the first and final versions of these lines, Wordsworth fully defended the theological virtues, not in his own person, but through the character of the Wanderer, in Book Four of *The Excursion* (titled “Despondency Corrected”).²⁹ In response to the misanthropic Solitary’s account of his political and familial disappointments in the French Revolutionary years, the Wanderer urges “faith, / Faith absolute

²⁵ Simon J a r v i s, *Wordsworth’s Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-32.

²⁶ Adam P o t k a y, *Wordsworth’s Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 181.

²⁷ On Wordsworth’s Victorian reception, see Stephen G i l l, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and Robert M. Ryan, *Charles Darwin and the Church of Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁸ Jonathan W o r d s w o r t h, “Wordsworth’s Borderers,” 183-7; see also *The Prelude*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, 468, n. 6.

²⁹ W o r d s w o r t h, *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell *et alia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

in God, including hope, / And the defence that lies in boundless love/ Of his perfections” (4:21-24). Of the Solitary’s dead family, the Wanderer maintains:

I cannot doubt that They whom you deplore
Are glorified; or, if they sleep, shall wake
From sleep, and dwell with God in endless love.
Hope,--below this, consists not with belief
In mercy carried infinite degrees
Beyond the tenderness of human hearts:
Hope,--below this, consists not with belief
In perfect Wisdom, guiding mightiest Power,
That finds no limits but its own pure Will. (4:187-95)

But the beliefs that the Wanderer urges on the Solitary are precisely those that the Solitary, by his own account, does not have. In the end, the Wanderer’s despondency is not “corrected,” or even much alleviated, by the Wanderer’s faith. Lovers of poetry will also notice that the Wanderer’s sermonic discourse lacks the thrilling ambiguities or “poetic thinking” of *The Prelude*’s finer moments. Wordsworth here makes poetry out of beliefs rather than, as he earlier did, beliefs out of poetry.