

# **Christianity and Pantheism: the Contraries in Wordsworth's Quest of Nature**

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## **Abstract**

For a Romantic like Wordsworth religion is at its best merely a slightly disguised form of pantheism. The powerful effect of eighteenth century philosophy on poetry and the subsequent retaliatory modification of the philosophic outlook under the influence of the poet's manner of looking at things construct the basic framework of it. The Romantic poets, particularly the Germans, believed that they derived their religion from the eighteenth century philosophers. The deism of the English philosophers, too, underwent a strange transformation in the hands of the Romantics. The truth is that deism in a poet's mind is very likely to become pantheism and not Christianity.

Religion in its final analysis is not a belief in God or the immortality of the soul or reincarnation, nor a set of

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dogmas; it is a state of mind which enables man by the exercise of supersensuous faculties to arrive at that spiritual peace by virtue of which he may escape from the oppressive sensation of the transitoriness of human things and perceive the un- changing, the eternal. Much may be added to this bare outline, dogmas and ethical laws, for instance; these remain, however, merely collateral and do not challenge the pre- eminence of the essential element. It can hardly be denied that Wordsworth approaches this region of spiritual elevation, and he has the distinction of being the only outstanding Romantic poet who did so. Wordsworth tells us, paying tribute to the pantheistic enthusiasm of his age, that his guide was nature. He believed he attained that supreme calm which he so wondrously transfers to us in several of his poems by recognizing in nature and the language of the sense, "The anchor of [his] purest thoughts", "the nurse", "The guide", "the guardian of [his] heart, and soul / Of all [his] moral being".

### **Paper**

For a Romantic like Wordsworth religion is at its best merely a slightly disguised form of pantheism. The powerful effect of eighteenth century philosophy on poetry and the subsequent retaliatory modification of the philosophic outlook under the influence of the poet's manner of looking at things construct the basic framework of it. The Romantic poets, particularly the Germans, believed that they derived their religion from the eighteenth century philosophers. But the severe philosophic pantheism of Spinoza is far removed from the type of pantheism which the poets espoused in his name. The deism of the English philosophers, too, underwent a strange transformation in the hands of the Romanticists. The confusion is undoubtedly to be traced in large part to

Rousseau. Rousseau is ranked with the deists. The truth is that deism in a poet's mind is very likely to become pantheism, and Rousseau was, in essence, a pantheist. His influence was so great that before the dawn of the nineteenth century Spinozan pantheism and English deism had degenerated into the poetic pantheism of the romanticists, which differs only slightly from the pantheism of Rousseau. Rousseau felt insulted when it was intimated that his religion was not Christianity. Chateaubriand was enraged when his *Atala* and *Rene* (1801) were pronounced unedifying as parts of an apology for Christianity. He wrote these two tales when he was wavering between atheism and Rousseauistic pantheism. Then came his conversion; he changed the stories only slightly and inserted a preface in which he shows that they prove the superiority of the Christian faith to all others! Such is the ease with which the Romanticist transforms himself from an unbeliever into a believer. The reaction from the rationalism of the old regime did not lead to pure spiritual elevation; it followed the path traced by Rousseau, a tortuous path which has led us, as might be expected from the fact that Rousseau is more akin to Voltaire than to Pascal, not out of the "dark wood" but back to a point very near that from which we set out, to a condition not unlike the reasoned doubt of the eighteenth century. True to its pantheistic origin, romantic religiosity took the form of an expansive yearning to lose oneself in the universe, to become a part of the cosmic stream:

Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,  
With rocks, and stones, and trees. (A Slumber  
Did My Spirit Seal: 7-8)

This desired dissolution may be approached only through ecstasy. There are two roads to such ecstasy, woman and nature. The French prefer the former of these, the English

the latter, but it is not clear that one will lead any nearer to true spirituality than the other.

To a Romanticist like Wordsworth religion is exclusively emotional, and by emotion he does not mean that state of rapt concentration out of which proceeds the vision of a medieval saint; he means nothing more than the operation of the senses. "Feeling is all," says Faust. The Romanticist lives in the world of the senses, precisely those senses which all religions pronounce to be the enemies of man's higher nature. The Romanticist brought great gain to the world when he restored respectability to the five senses; at the same time he tended to give them such pre-eminence as virtually to take our religion from us-without realizing it. He is ["sweet religion makes/ A rhapsody of words"(Hamlet: III; 88-89)] a hateful desecration to Shakespeare's finest gentleman. If religion is to be anything at all, it demands not an expansive outpouring, but a return upon ourselves. It demands not the unfolding of the senses to the fullest degree, but the rigorous control of the senses that we may hear the voice within. "Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, Lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke: 17;21) Its climax is reached not in a sensuous ecstasy, but in a rapture from which the sensuous world is banished. It can not be reached through the senses, it must be sought through far other, far higher faculties. "Virtue is an effort. I do not like effort," (Bowra: 1961) says Lamartine. None of the romanticists liked effort. True religion presupposes effort, intense effort.

It is not here implied that the ordinary human being who has not gone through the experiences of a St. Francis, a Dante, or a Pascal may not consider himself religious, but it is maintained that the poet who has not the religious insight of a St. Francis, a Dante, or a Pascal can not write poetry whose religious message will be of surpassing value. As in other

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matters, so in religious force, it is permissible to all human beings to be mediocre-except to the poet of religion. The religion of the Romantic poets is mediocre at best, and in a study of their works it does not seem worthy of the serious consideration it commonly receives. There is only one conspicuous poet of the romantic school whose religious profundity does not seem to be purely illusory. That is Wordsworth. To question Wordsworth's soundness as a religious teacher is to run counter to a well-established tradition. Only careful definition can avert confusion. It is recognized that religion in its final analysis is not a belief in God or the immortality of the soul or reincarnation, nor a set of dogmas; it is a state of mind which enables man by the exercise of supersensuous faculties to arrive at that spiritual peace by virtue of which he may escape from the oppressive sensation of the transitoriness of human things and perceive the unchanging, the eternal. Much may be added to this bare outline, dogmas and ethical laws, for instance; these remain, however, merely collateral and do not challenge the pre-eminence of the essential element. It can hardly be denied that Wordsworth approaches this region of spiritual elevation, and he has the distinction of being the only outstanding romantic poet who did so. He, therefore, may properly be counted among the poets of the world who have merited in the highest degree the gratitude of mankind, for here we are in the supreme reaches of poetic inspiration.

Wordsworth tells us, paying tribute to the pantheistic enthusiasm of his age, that his guide was nature. He believed he attained that supreme calm which he so wondrously transfers to us in several of his poems by recognizing In nature and the language of the sense, "The anchor of [his] purest thoughts", "the nurse", "The guide", "the guardian of [his] heart, and soul / Of all [his] moral being" (Tintern Abbey;

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109-112). This potency of sensations proceeding from contemplation of natural objects, of the "language of the sense," to transform and purify the springs of action, to raise man to that sub-lime height to which true religion may raise him, we cannot admit; and it is because Wordsworth taught the doctrine that the validity of his claim to be a wholly beneficial force in the development of the religious sense is contested. In the attainment and transmission of the mood of religious insight he is incomparably superior to his contemporaries in any country, but he sinks to their level when he assumes the role of religious teacher, for his doctrine, though never vitiated by the sensual elements so prevalent at the time, was essentially the same as theirs. His ethical grandeur is in refreshing contrast to the moral uncertainty which surrounded him; he attains spiritual summits hardly approached since Milton's days. Whatever there is of real religious serenity in the "Tintern Abbey" (1855) and in "Westminster Bridge" (1821) proceeded from the native spirituality of the man and not directly from communion with nature.

Wordsworth was primarily a seeker after truth. But he did not regard truth as consisting solely or mainly in mere facts, or in mere abstract propositions. To him truth was reality, the inner life of things. The world of nature and of man expressed not only thought but feeling, and this thought and feeling was the thought and feeling of a Being greater than the world, because he was the Maker and the Life of the world. The macrocosm could be interpreted by the microcosm, for macrocosm and microcosm alike were modes in which the Infinite One made himself known to us. It is the great and unique merit of Wordsworth that he first used the common, unsophisticated, primary, and universal sympathies of humanity, to interpret the physical universe in which

humanity has its dwelling-place. He is the poet of nature, because he perceives the kinship between nature and man by reason of their common origin and life in God.

The Hebrews saw God in nature. They said, "The God of glory thundereth," (Psalm: xxix) and "The heavens declare the glory of God."(Psalm: xxiv) Our Lord declared that God fed the birds, and clothed the grass of the field with beauty. Paul and John recognized the presence of God in his works. As all men "live, move, and have their being"(Psalm: xxv) in God, so all things "consist" or hold together in Christ, the one great Revealer of God; "whatever has come into being was life in him." The Eastern Church in general held more strongly to this conception of God's immanence than did the Western; Augustine and Calvin unduly emphasized the forensic element, and made God's operation more a matter of law than of life. Puritan theology is thus led by natural reaction to deism, with its distant God and its automatic universe. Upton has said:

The defect of deism is that on the human side it treats all men as isolated individuals, forgetful of the immanent divine nature that interrelates them and in a measure unifies them, and that on the divine side it separates man from God and makes the relation between them a purely external one.

(Wellek: 1959)

On this view, man loses his dignity, and the sympathies and aspirations which men have in common cease to be matters of interest or concern. But nature follows the fate of man. It becomes a curious machine, whose mathematics may be studied, but whose life and glory have departed. A universe which can get on without God has no longer anything which irresistibly attracts the mind of man. There is no affinity between man and nature; nature has no voice with which to

stir man's heart; nature indeed is dead.

Wordsworth, most distinctly of all poets up to his time, apprehended the principle of all true poetry and most consistently and continuously applied it to the description of nature and of man. Henry Crabb Robinson states the principle, when he says that "by the imagination the mere fact is connected with that Infinity without which there is no poetry." (Wellek: 1959) Wordsworth regarded it as his sacred mission to show that the world is full of beauty and meaning because it is throbbing with the life of God. Nothing is insignificant or valueless, for each thing manifests the "Wisdom and Spirit of the universe." "Amongst least things he had an undersense of the greatest." We see in him the true biological impulse which since his day has transformed science as well as literature, and Emerson only expressed Wordsworth's leading thought, when he wrote,

In the mud and scum of things

Something always, always sings. (Emerson:  
1918)

It is fortunate that we have in *The Prelude* (1798-1805) the poet's account of the growth of his own mind. For frank unfolding of the innermost experiences of a great man and a great writer, it holds much the same place in literature as that which is held in philosophy by Descartes' *Treatise on Method* (1637), and in theology by the *Confessions of Augustine* (Tr. F. J. Sheed; 1944). *The Prelude* (1798-1805) is a poem of nine thousand lines, yet it is intended only as a sort of ante-chapel to a great cathedral upon which Wordsworth intended to spend the main labour of his life, and to which his minor poems were to sustain the relation of niches, oratories, and altars. "The Excursion," (1850) nearly eleven thousand lines in length, was the only part of the great structure which the poet actually completed. It was meant to be the second book of the



poem. "The Recluse," (1852) of which only fragments were written, was to be the first book. The third book never existed except in Wordsworth's imagination. In many ways "The Prelude," (1798-1805) though long and occasionally prosaic, is an invaluable record. The poet has there disclosed himself more perfectly than Dante or Milton ever did. As we read, we see a vigorous and healthy, yet a calm and quiet spirit developing under our eyes, even though we fail to see the justice of Coleridge's praise when he described the poem as

An Orphic song, indeed,  
A song divine of high and passionate thoughts,  
To their own music chanted. (The Prelude; II:  
45-47)

"He began to construe the universal life as quasi-human," says Professor Knight, his biographer. "Delight in nature for herself was exchanged for delight in nature for what she revealed of man. The process of idealization, or rather, of interpretation, was matured, only when he detached himself from nature and realized the separateness and the kindredness together." (Lowe-Porter:1948)

As if awakened, summoned, roused,  
constrained,  
I looked for universal things, perused  
The common countenance of earth and sky; (The  
Prelude; III: 105-107)

It must not be inferred that Wordsworth was a specifically Christian poet. It was not his business to put dogma into verse, or to buttress any particular ecclesiastical system. He valued the Church of England as a safeguard of popular morals, a comforter of the poor, an elevator of national ideals, and a noble inheritance from the past. "I would lay down my life for the church," (Lowe-Porter:1948) he said. But it is still true that he did not often attend the services of

the church. We are reminded of the Polish nobleman who was ready to die for his country, but who could not be prevailed upon to live in it. It was not so much the Christian scheme which the poet conceived himself as set to teach. It was rather the great truths of natural religion, which lie at the basis of the Christian scheme indeed, but which may be treated apart from their relation to a supernatural revelation. This is his meaning when he says:

I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.(My Heart  
Leaps Up When I Behold; 7-9)

God is manifested in nature. He may be recognized in the unity, law, order, harmony, of the world. Our own intelligence and affection find even in the physical universe another and a higher intelligence and affection coming out to meet us. The storm reveals a power, and the sunshine reveals a love, which gives us joy. This recognition of nature's divinity, and the submission of the soul to its tranquilizing and restoring influence, is what Wordsworth means by "natural piety." (Wordsworth:2008)

This is not Christianity, but it is not inconsistent with Christianity. God has not left himself without a witness, even where the light of Christ's gospel has never shone. Paul declares that "the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are plainly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity." (Paul: xiv) And these presuppositions of Christianity are of inestimable importance.

The usual tendency of deistic thought has always been to render Christianity an impertinence and an absurdity. Wordsworth's poetry was one long protest against this banishment of God from his universe. Because he believes in "Nature's self, which is the breath of God," he can also believe

in "his pure word, by miracle revealed." And rather than abandon this pure elementary faith in a divine life hidden beneath the raiment of the natural world, he would go back to heathen religion, because that still preserved some remnants of the truth. (Wordsworth: 2008)

Great God! I'd rather be  
A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn. (The  
World is Too Much With Us; 9-14)

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