

## VII

## Odes

During the golden decade of his poetry, Wordsworth wrote two odes which are among the most admired and appreciated in English poetry: "Ode to Duty" in 1805 and "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood", between 1803 and 1806. Everyone who knows Wordsworth's name knows about the second ode. It is a perfect poem, full of beautiful imagery and of serious thought effectively and pleasantly expressed.

## "Ode to Duty".

In the note to this ode, Wordsworth said that he wrote the poem because he had been twitted by his wife and his sister for having been too free and done as he pleased too much. But when we study the poem, we can see that Wordsworth had turned to duty for his support. About the time when he wrote this ode, Wordsworth was much afflicted. It was an important phase of his life and he found that there was a change in him. Helen Darbishire said, "A young man comes to the end of his youth: the vigour and confidence which seemed to guide him inevitably in the paths of love and truth are ebbing away: how is his moral being to be sustained? Wordsworth's answer is the 'Ode to Duty'." The sense of duty relieved all his afflictions.

Wordsworth calls duty "Stern daughter of the Voice of God," Duty, though stern, is the command that comes from God. Duty shows us the way, prevents from doing wrong and reproves us. When we are afraid because we do not know what to do, if we follow duty, we will win the victory. Duty keeps us from doing what we shouldn't do and is a calming influence in the confusion of human life.

O Duty! if that name thou love  
 Who art a light to guide, a rod  
 To check the erring, and reprove;  
 Thou; who art victory and law  
 When empty tenors overawe;  
 From vain temptations dost set free;  
 And calm 'st the weary strife of frail humanity!

There are some people who do not pay attention to duty. Those are the young and confident. They do things with love and truth

and without doubt. These people have happy hearts; they perform their duty without knowing it. At times, they put their trust in wrong things. In such a case, Wordsworth invokes Duty to save them:

There are who ask not if thine eye,  
 Be on them; who, in love and truth,  
 Where no misgiving is, rely  
 Upon the genial sense of youth:  
 Glad hearts! without reproach or blot  
 Who do thy work, and know it not:  
 Oh! if through confidence misplaced  
 They fail, thy saving arms, dread Power! around them cast.

When men have love and joy they are happy. Love leads them to do what is right and joy makes them feel secure. Those men are wisely bold because they live in love and joy. Even so, they at times <sup>seek</sup> duty's aid:  
 A

Serene will be our days and bright,  
 And happy will our nature be,  
 When love is an unerring light,  
 And joy its own security.  
 And they a blissful course may hold  
 Even now, who, not unwisely bold,  
 Live in the spirit of this creed;  
 Yet seek thy firm support, according to their need.

Wordsworth says that he loved freedom and was inexperienced. He was firm in his point of view, not changing his thought with every gust of wind. He was also self-confident and trusted himself blindly. Therefore, formerly, he neglected his duty for pleasanter things. But now he will serve duty more strictly.

Though he is not disturbed or conscience-stricken, he willingly begs duty to control him. He has become tired of unguided freedom and feels that his desires are like a burden. From now on, his hopes will always remain the same. He desires a lasting rest.

Duty is a stern lawgiver but has good influence that flows from God. No reward is greater than the feeling of having done one's duty. Moreover it is the law of the universe, it keeps the stars from wrong and makes the heavens fresh and strong:

Stern Lawgiver! yet thou dost wear  
 The Godhead's most benignant grace;  
 Nor know we anything so fair  
 As is the smile upon thy face:  
 Flowers laugh before thee on their beds  
 And fragrance in thy footing treads;  
 Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong;  
 And the most ancient heavens, through  
 Thee, are fresh and strong.

Controlling the stars and heavens is a high work. But Wordsworth calls duty to humbler work: to be his guide from this hour on. He wishes that duty may end his weakness. He asks duty to give him the spirit of self-sacrifice and make him humble and wise. He asks duty to give him confidence of reason. He says that he will live in truth and will serve duty faithfully:

To humbler functions, awful Power!  
 I call thee: I myself commend  
 Unto thy guidance from this hour;  
 Oh! let my weakness have an end:  
 Give unto me, made lowly wise,  
 The spirit of self-sacrifice;  
 The confidence of reason give;  
 And in the light of truth thy Bondman let me live!

This poem is successfully handled as we can see from the first stanza. The first lines have four feet. The words follow each other quickly, calling the attention of the readers. Thus, the invocation is very effective:

Stern daughter of the Voice of God!  
 O Duty! if that name thou love  
 Who art a light to guide, a rod  
 To check the erring and reprove;

When the reader's attention is caught, the metre slows down:

Thou, who art victory and law  
 When empty terrors overawe;  
 From vain temptations dost set free;

The long last line:

And calm 'st the weary strife of frail humanity.

suggests a meditative characteristic and makes the reader stop and think of what has been said in the preceding lines.

"Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of  
Early Childhood"

This second ode contains Wordsworth's most serious idea that comes nearest to philosophy: his conception of life and death. In his note to this poem he said, "Nothing was more difficult for me in childhood than to admit the notion of death as a state applicable to my own being." In "We Are Seven," he said that a child was never able to know what death is. It could not see any difference between the living and the dead. This ode explains the reason of the Child's thought. It had just come from an existence to which its brother and sister went. It still remembered the existence and could not see that the former was different from the present one. In "Lines composed at Grasmere....." (1806), he affirmed the idea by setting a question.

But when the great and good depart.

What is it more than this ---

That Man, who is from God sent forth,  
Doth yet again to God return? ---  
Such ebb and flow must ever be,  
Then wherefore should we mourn?

Such "ebb and flow" that "must ever be" is clarified in this ode. It is the immortality of man.

The bright imagery suggested by the word "celestial light" makes the beginning of the poem very attractive. The poet said that he saw the celestial light when he was a boy. In his childhood, the common sights: the meadow, the grove and the stream seemed to be dressed in heavenly light. Such light, such glory and freshness could not be found on earth, they existed only in dreams. But now when he has grown older, he can not see what he saw before:

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,  
 It is not now as it hath been, of yore;-  
     Turn wheresoe'er I may,  
     By night or day,  
 The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

Natural objects are as beautiful as before. The rainbow is still there, the rose is beautiful. The moon looks happy when there is no star in the sky. The sunshine and the water are as they used to be. But in his heart, he knows that the glory has gone away from the world:

The Rainbow comes and goes,  
 And lovely is the Rose,  
     The Moon doth with delight  
 Look round her when the heavens are bare,  
     Waters on a starry night  
     Are beautiful and fair;  
 The sunshine is a glorious birth;  
 But yet I know, where'er I go,  
 That there hath past away a glory from the earth.

While everything in nature is happy and gay, the poet feels very sad. But someone has said something at the right time and that relieved his sad thought. He found that he became strong and was able to see the "celestial light" again. He was able to hear the noise of the waterfall and the mountain echoes and to feel the gentle wind again. Everything, the land, the sea were happy. The animals were full of joy in springtime. He said that he would not let his sadness spoil the gaiety of the season. He asked the joyous shepherd-boy to shout so that he could hear his happy voice:

Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,  
 And while the young lambs bound  
     As to the tabor's sound,  
 To me alone there came a thought of grief;  
 A timely utterance gave that thought relief,  
     And I again am strong:  
 The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;  
 No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;  
 I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,  
 The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,  
     And all the earth is gay;  
     Land and sea

Give themselves up to jollity,  
 And with the heart of May  
 Doth every Beast keep holiday;-  
 Thou Child of Joy,  
 Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy  
 Shepherd boy!

This stanza produces many pleasant pictures. The young lambs jumping to the sound of the drum is a happy sight to see. "The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep" is a very effective metaphor. The long lines:

I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,  
 The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,

are smooth and serene. But the succeeding lines change the tone and are full of vividness:

And all the earth is gay;  
 Land and sea  
 Give themselves up to jollity,  
 And with the heart of May  
 Doth every Beast keep holiday;-

The poet called the shepherd-boys "Ye blessèd Creatures." He heard their voices. The sky was happy with them and he shared their happiness:

My heart is at your festival,  
 My head hath its coronal.

He said that he could feel their complete and pure happiness. He said it would be an evil day if he were in a bad mood while the May morning was beautiful, the children were picking wild flowers which grew everywhere in the valley, the babies were leaping in their mother's arms and the warm sun was shining. About the happiness of spring, the poet said, "I feel, - I feel it all." Those pleasant sounds, he said, "I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!"

Even in that happy mood, a single field and a tree reminded him of what had passed. Even a little flower seemed also to tell that his imaginative power had decreased.

The Pansy at my feet  
 Doth the same tale repeat:  
 Whither is fled the visionary gleam?  
 Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

Wordsworth left these first four stanzas for three years before he continued with the following part. By that time, John was already dead. The death of his beloved brother stimulated him to probe deeper into the subject of death. The second part begins:

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:  
 Heaven lies about us in our infancy!  
 Shades of the prison-house begin to close  
     Upon the growing Boy,  
 But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,  
     He sees it in his joy;  
 The Youth, who daily farther from the east  
     Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,  
     And by the vision splendid  
     Is on his way attended;  
 At length the Man perceives it die away,  
 And fade into the light of common day.

He said birth was like a sleep. A man who is born forgets his former existence like a man forgetting while he is asleep. His soul comes from afar and will at the end go back to the place it came from. When a man is first born, he can still remember something. He comes to life carrying with him some glory from God to whom he will go back at the end. When he is an infant, heaven is quite near to him. When he becomes a boy, he begins to lose his freedom. But still the boy sees the "celestial light." He knows where it comes from and he is glad. When he becomes a big boy, though he draws daily closer to his death, he still worships nature and still has visionary power. Finally he becomes a man. He sees the power die away and is unable to see anything except the common things in everyday life.

Thus a man comes from heaven to earth. Once he is on earth, he finds that it is full of pleasure, different from what he saw with the "heavenly light." Earth loves man in her own way. Her love is like a mother's love of her child. She has a worthy purpose for him. A child is heaven's real son and earth adopts him. She gives him love and pleasure and does everything she can to keep him with her. He becomes her prisoner. She tries to make him:

Forget the glories he hath known,  
And that imperial palace whence he came.

When he is young, "A six years' Darling", he finds all kinds of pleasures which are new to him. He enjoys being loved by his parents. Even then, he has made a plan for his later life, using the knowledge that he has newly learned. He knows about man's activities such as a festival or a funeral. Then he learns to talk about them and tries to use the language that is suitable for what he talks about. He learns to use the language of business, of love and of argument. He is like a little actor who plays different roles and changes from one role to another whenever he likes. He acts as people of different ages, from young to old people. It seems that all the child's work is to imitate everything all the time.

Though he is a little child, an immense soul is hidden in him. He is the best philosopher. He still has what he receives from God. He has an eye that can see the truth while the grown-ups cannot. The child is a mighty prophet and a blessed seer. In him, there is truth which the grown-ups try hard all their lives to find but cannot. They look for the truth but lose themselves in darkness and die without finding it. The child is covered and protected by immortality, the presence which he cannot get rid of. The child, in spite of all his blessings, tries hard to find a yoke and fight against his happiness. By so doing, he loses his immortality and he has to carry his earthly burden. Soon he has to follow custom which is heavy and has to be strictly obeyed.

However, we are still glad because we know that in our past, we had the "celestial light". We are happy just to remember that it ran away from us.



O joy! that in our embers  
 Is something that doth live,  
 That nature yet remembers  
 What was so fugitive!

When the poet thinks of his past, the thought is<sup>a</sup> lasting blessing to him. He writes this poem to praise and express his thankfulness for, not the delight and liberty of childhood but, the thing that is vanishing from him. He is thankful for the doubt of a man who lives but does not understand the world. He is thankful for the high instincts which man's mortality fears. He writes this poem in praise of the vague recollections which are the "fountain light," the source, of his life and which enable him to see things correctly. His recollections support him and make him feel that he lives in the "eternal Silence." This recollection is a truth that can never be destroyed. This recollection makes him know that he used to see immortality from which he comes from and to which he will go back:

Hence in a season of calm weather  
 Though inland far we be,  
 Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea  
 Which brought us hither,  
 Can in a moment travel thither,  
 And see the Children sport upon the shore,  
 And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

After having praised his recollections of immortality, the poet is more cheerful. He tells birds and lambs to enjoy themselves. He will share their joy in thought. Though the radiance has been taken from his sight and he cannot feel the real joy, he will not be sad. He will find strength in what is left to him and in the sympathy that existed when he was born and will continue to exist forever. He will also find strength in the soothing thoughts that come from experience with human suffering. He will find courage in faith by which he looks at death and in the years that make man able to look on life calmly with understanding.

Finally he says to Nature that he still loves Nature and feels its power. He has only given up being completely under Nature's influence.

Now he loves the running brook more than when he was younger. He loves the pure brightness of the dawn. The clouds around the setting sun attract his thoughts because he has been thinking about man's mortality. He has seen men living and getting what they want. His thoughts on immortality have humanized him. He feels grateful to his human heart for its sympathy, its joy and its fear. These things make him more understanding. These things make up for the loss of knowledge of immortality. They enable him to look at a humble flower and find in it thoughts that are <sup>so</sup>sad that he cannot weep over them.

And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,  
 Forebode not any severing of our loves!  
 Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;  
 I only have relinquished one delight  
 To live beneath your more habitual sway.  
 I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,  
 Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;  
 The innocent brightness of a new-born Day  
     Is lovely yet;  
 The Clouds that gather round the setting sun  
 Do take a sober colouring from an eye  
 That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;  
 Another race hath been, and other palms are won.  
     Thanks to the human heart by which we live,  
     Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,  
 To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
 Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

Besides the serious idea about immortality, there is complete poetic beauty in this poem. We can read it merely for the pleasure of poetry. The poet describes a joyful scene in which everything is happy and gay. Then he explains how he sympathized with the joy. He says to the happy things which he sees :

The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;  
 My heart is at your festival,  
 My head hath its coronal,  
 The fulness of your bliss, I feel- I feel it all.

The description of the warm May morning when children are picking flowers and babies leaping in their mother's arms enables us to share their joy and also his joy.

His powerful expressions are incomparably effective. Many people have borrowed such expressions as "celestial light," "visionary gleam," "trailing clouds of glory" and "imperial palace" from the poem because they cannot think of any other expressions that are so good.

His comparisons are very effective, too. He compares custom to heavy frost. Custom, when we obey it, has no weight and is as light as the thin layer of ice. But we must be more careful when we are under it than when we are under really heavy things. It is fragile and we will break it if we go only very slightly wrong. The feeling that something lies over us and we must be careful not to break it makes us bend lower than when we carry ordinary heavy things. The phrase "deep almost as life" is also memorable because we all know that we can never fathom the depths of life. His description of a child, like a bird, with "new - fledged hope still fluttering in his breast" is also admirable.

The description of the sea of immortality, with its waves running eternally and with children playing on its shore stimulates us to imagine what it would be like and pleases our imagination. When we read poetry, we expect beauty, not philosophy, and this ode is full of beauty. Serious thought, if it is as successfully conveyed as the immortality in this ode, is a blessed by-product. Wordsworth's ability to mingle the thought with poetic beauty proves that in this single poem, he deserves the name of a "mighty poet."