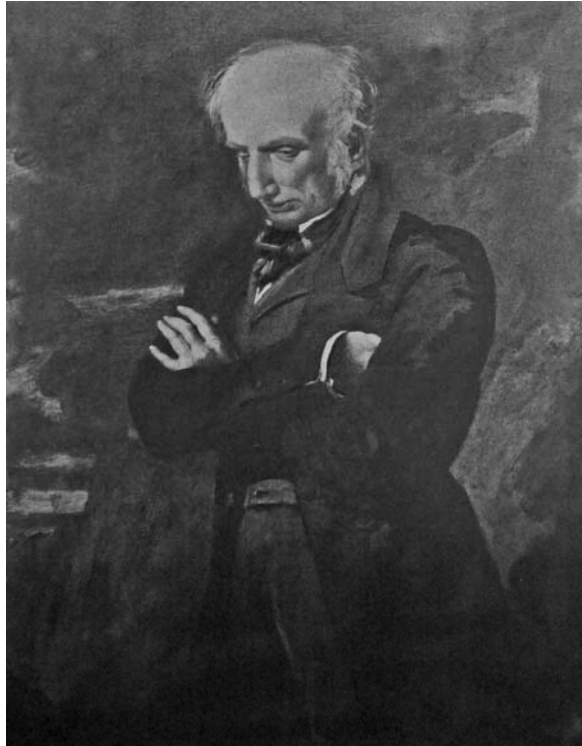




22 May 2011  
The Fourth Sunday after Easter  
Choral Evensong  
Job 38  
Matthew 6 vv. 24–34



### **Wordsworth on Second Thoughts**

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When William Wordsworth arrived in Cambridge in 1787, he found himself having to touch walls and trees to convince himself that they were real, and that he was really part of the great University. Cambridge dazzled Wordsworth. He was less impressed with what he called the ‘three gloomy courts’ of St John’s College. His humble rooms, in particular, dismayed him, and he recounts the incessant noise of the college kitchens beneath them. Even worse was the quarterly chiming of Trinity’s clock, which disturbed his sleep and his thoughts. Despite Wordsworth’s continuing awe at being part of a ‘garden of great intellects’ (as he called it), he found the Cambridge curriculum cripplingly boring. Distracted from his set work, he describes reading ‘lazily, in lazy books’, and in the space of a few months he had determined to craft his own course of study instead. Wordsworth spent his time toasting Milton’s memory at parties, drinking, drifting about the town, and staying up all night talking with his friends. Apart from the bit about Milton, then, it’s a fairly familiar picture of undergraduate life.

One aspect of Johnian life Wordsworth records, is his memory of being late for a compulsory chapel service. He describes distinctly mixed feelings as he slings his surplice over his shoulder, and runs to take his place in a pew. Much scholarly ink has been spent attempting to delineate Wordsworth’s attitude to religion and religious observance, and Wordsworth has been placed at various points along a spectrum stretching from radical pantheism to conservative Anglicanism. Probably, the best we can say in summary is that his religious views were considered and fervent, and that they fluctuated over the course of his life.

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Whatever his religious allegiances, most modern critics have assumed that Wordsworth's poetry takes Protestant themes of inwardness and spiritual transcendence and adapts them to an essentially secular world. Such a notion of spiritual transcendence originates in the concept of sublimity. Like most poets and philosophers of the Romantic period, Wordsworth was deeply interested in 'The Sublime': an experience of transcendence which completely overcame the subject, temporarily eliminating even a sense of selfhood. This amazing experience could not be understood, or put into words: beyond the realms of reason, sublimity was also beyond the reaches of language. In the huge gap in knowledge and expressibility which the very idea of the sublime opened up, in the space where whatever it was that couldn't be put into words existed, many writers identified an encounter with God, or at least with a phenomenon which could best be understood through parallels with the idea of God.

Recalling an experience of the sublime, Wordsworth claims that:

Remembering *how* she felt, but *what* she felt  
Remembering not—[ the soul] retains an obscure sense  
Of possible sublimity  
[*The Prelude*, Bk 2, ll. 321-338 (1805)]

This vague, obscure sense of possible sublimity, and the idea that how but not what Wordsworth felt is remembered, might seem to offer an example of, or an excuse for, not thinking – for the renunciation of thought, in favour of a luxuriant dwelling in the climax of the sublime state. But this is not at all what Wordsworth advocates, either explicitly in the content of his poetry, or implicitly, through its form.

And perhaps, rather than spend time wondering what Wordsworth's own attitude to God was, or even exploring Wordsworth's ideas of possible sublimity as a way of thinking about our own encounters with the spirit, we might see Wordsworth's poetry as a prop to our own faith in a slightly less direct way. We might, that is, recognise that poetry, and perhaps Wordsworth's poetry pre-eminently, can offer us a model for the way we should approach faith. It can do this even when its subject is utterly removed from religious ideas, because it both initiates and reflects a process of thinking which mirrors the way that Christians should think about their faith, as something which should be constantly considered, rather than blindly, unthinkingly absorbed. Because Wordsworth does not set out in his poetry to teach us how to live. Rather, he wants to teach us how to think.

Wordsworth's dismissive lines about St John's College, and the allusion to 'possible sublimity', appear in his great work, *The Prelude*. *The Prelude* is Wordsworth's autobiography in verse. As a biographical work, which is therefore a record of memory in action, Wordsworth's *Prelude* is fundamentally concerned with looking back; with reconsidering; with revision. That is amplified by the fact that *The Prelude* exists in four different versions. In tracing the alterations Wordsworth makes to his manuscript at different points in his life, we can see revision – the second, or third, or fourth look – in action.

Constant revision is a vital part of Christian life; or rather, it is revision which makes Christian life vital. Unthinking faith stultifies and dies. If there is no revision, no thought about faith, then it ceases to be faith: it becomes instead knowledge, and as the Romantic poets knew, God, who is sublime, cannot be an object of our knowledge. Revision in this sense (the constant second look at what we think we know for certain) is thus essential to the life of faith.

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In this way, the life of faith is like Wordsworth's autobiography. Biography; 'bio'; the word implies something endowed with life, which implies deeds. In *The Prelude*, these deeds form the subject of the verse, but they are also the deeds of the mind, found in thought, in the processes of remembering and in writing poetically. Wordsworth knows that life loses its vitality if it becomes ossified in words: that's why he never stops fiddling with *The Prelude*. True biography, like the true life of faith, demands constant revision.

So: Wordsworth's *Prelude* is a useful model, because it is a poem about having another look at things, and in it we can see Wordsworth's literal revising in action. But *The Prelude* is also illustrative, because literature in general causes us through its structures and devices to look at things in a different way. Wordsworth – and the pun is always there in his name – Wordsworth is well aware of the worth of words. The properties of language allow for the fact that revision, that second look, might be contained within a single reading, and that a poem, which is in the end written down, can still resist that ossification, those definitive decisions which writing things down might seem to entail. Looked at like this, reading poetry is again good practice for a life of faith, because great literature encourages criticism. It invites thought, and demands revision in each act of re-reading; but it also refutes certainty in any individual moment of interpretation. Critics can argue over what one word in a poem might really mean *because* poetic language is flexible and suggestive enough to contain multiple readings. (Skilful poets like Wordsworth make the suggestiveness of language work to their advantage.) Parables function in a similar way. And if God wanted us to disengage our interpretative and critical faculties, why couch the lessons of the Bible in stories and metaphors? Why not say directly how the Christian life should be lived? Why would an omniscient, loving and wise God make the huge blunder of leaving the foundational text of the Christian religion open to interpretation, if he didn't want us to think about it, and to engage with, and try to accommodate, the differing interpretations of others?

In the reading we heard from Matthew's Gospel earlier this evening, Jesus insists that his followers should not think, in the sense of a futile turning over of worldly concerns; that we should 'take *no thought* for the morrow'. And yet we are simultaneously entreated to '*consider* the lilies of the field', that is, to think about them. So it isn't that we shouldn't think at all, but rather that we should think in the right way; to abandon closed, self-interested questions and instead to think more openly and to be receptive to inspiration from outside of ourselves.

Similarly, the incessant questions which echo through tonight's Old Testament reading demand thought, yet the very purpose of their rhetoric seems to prompt an inevitable response: to close down the possibilities of open thought. Of course Job does not know the ordinances of Heaven. Neither do we; nor can we. And yet just as we (with Job) are facing our ignorance; just as we are accepting that we cannot know those ordinances of Heaven, just then, at that moment, are we commanded to *think about thought*, as God demands 'Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts? who hath given understanding to the heart?'

For centuries, the idea of 'right reason' has been debated as theologians have tried to determine how much it is appropriate to aspire to know. We cannot 'know' God rationally and completely, because to do so we would have to be greater than God. Yet as we heard in tonight's reading, God has given understanding to the heart: presumably, he wants us to use it. It is the *wisdom* of the inward parts which compels us to resist certain knowledge in favour of a potentially more fluid understanding. And according to Job's God, that 'understanding' is of the 'heart', not of the mind. If we cannot know God completely with our reason, then imagination and feeling (themselves the province of poetry) become the necessary means of a fullness of encounter with God.

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Wisdom and understanding are ideas that Wordsworth addresses directly, though with reference to philosophy rather than religion, early on in the *The Prelude*. Wordsworth admits to being ‘baffled by a mind that every hour / Turns recreant to her task, takes heart again, / Then feels immediately some hollow thought / Hang like an interdict upon her hopes.’ After all, as many undergraduates are currently finding out, you can revise too much: you can take too many second looks, until you no longer know what to think or where you are. If we transplant Wordsworth’s words on philosophy into an account of the life of faith, most of us can recognise moments of bafflement. But of course, there is another aspect of Christian faith which rescues us from what Wordsworth calls the ‘drooping’, from the ‘vain perplexity’ the poet finds in the bleaker moments of the impossibilities of philosophy. For Wordsworth, searching for a ‘philosophic song’, constant questioning equates with constant doubt. For the Christian, it need not do so. For as Christians we can find peace within the steadfast knowledge of the love of Christ. We cannot comprehend the nature of that love, but within our constant alertness and wondering, there is a steadiness and repose to be found in the certainty of Christ’s promises. Wordsworth recognises the problems of the inquiring philosophical mind, which ‘dupes me by an over-anxious eye / That with a false activity beats off / Simplicity and self-presented truth.’ But the infinite complexity of the Godhead is encountered for us through the simplicity and self-presented truth of Christ’s love. Faith thus demands that we accept both infinite complexity and ultimate simplicity at the same time. Faithful revision opens up a space for continually thinking, but *not* deciding, and yet still believing in God. Poetry can thus, if you like, offer a sort of training in the art of being faithful, or at the very least a way of thinking about it, because it insists that we keep thinking, even as we see the end of the page and recognise the limits of our interpretation: poetry prompts that vital second look.

In our individual relationship with God, the conversation often feels one-sided; unlike Job, we are unlikely to hear a voice speaking out of the whirlwind, at least, not one speaking words we can easily comprehend. Thinking about God can be a bit like reading a poem we don’t understand. But not understanding isn’t a reason not to read on, to be inspired by the possibilities suggested, and ultimately to take comfort in the ability of poetry like Wordsworth’s, and love like Christ’s, to hold us in a state between knowing and wondering.