

WORDSWORTH: THE GLORIFICATION OF THE CHILD, NATURE, & THE POET

CHILD	Innocence	Paradise	“Born Free”	One with Nature, Edenic, Closer to the Divine (Kinder-Garten)
ADULT	Experience	Paradise Lost	“Everywhere in Chains” (Rousseau, Blake)	Loses Touch with Nature and its Spirit
POET	Recollection	Glimpses of Paradise Regained	Celebrates Freedom; Laments Servitude	Reconnects with Childhood & Spirit through Memory & Nature

ODE: INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY FROM RECOLLECTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD (c. 1802-04)

- An intimation is a subtle hint of something.
- An intimation of immortality is a vague feeling of immortality; it's not a secure faith in it.
- The title suggests that recollecting early childhood evokes some shadowy sense of immortality, some fragile feeling of permanence in the midst of decay.

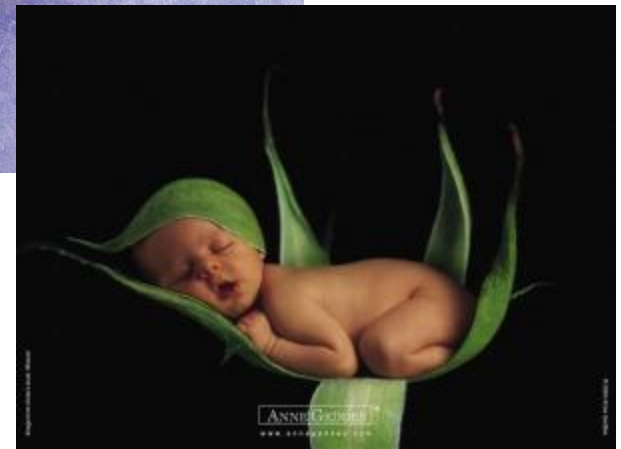
Romantic Glorification of the Child



Thou little child,
yet glorious in the might
Of heaven-born freedom
on thy being's height

**Morning (Detail) by German painter
Otto Runge (c. 1808-09)**

THIS IS NOT



WHAT WORDSWORTH HAD IN MIND

Once upon a time...

1

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.

2

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.

**With the magic of
childhood perception,
nature seems Eden-
like, glowing in
celestial light, but this
paradise associated
with early childhood
has been lost.**

3

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.**

....

4

....

--But there's a tree, of many, one,
A single field which I have look'd upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
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?**

**The power of
poetry and the
inspiration it
provides
comes...**

...and it goes.

5

...

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.

**Infancy is linked
with divinity and
aging is
associated with
enslavement.
Rousseau says
man is born free
but is everywhere
in chains. Blake
writes of the
“mind-forg’d
manacles” heard
in the cries of man.**

NOTE: The movement here is at odds with the basic premise of the Enlightenment that we are born like a blank slate, *a tabula rasa*, upon which learning and experience will teach us things for our gradual improvement and “enlightenment.” For nostalgic Romantics such as Wordsworth, such “light” is brightest at our birth, and as we age that light fades.

Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,
 A six years' darling of a pigmy size!
See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,
Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses,
With light upon him from his father's eyes!
See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,
Some fragment from his dream of human life,
Shaped by himself with newly-learned art;
 A wedding or a festival,
 A mourning or a funeral;
 And this hath now his heart,
 And unto this he frames his song:
Then will he fit his tongue
To dialogues of business, love, or strife;
 But it will not be long
 Ere this be thrown aside,
 And with new joy and pride
The little actor cons another part;
 Filling from time to time his 'humorous stage'
 With all the Persons, down to palsied Age,
 That life brings with her in her equipage;
As if his whole vocation
Were endless imitation.

This seems charming but it can also be read cynically: the child may *already* be learning arts of imitation to please other people.

Ultimately, the child becomes little more than a people-pleasing actor, a talking head, a puppet, imitating others to fit in, win their approval, and feel pride in doing so.

...

Thou best philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the eternal Mind,--
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
On whom those truths rest
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,
In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;

...

**Ironically, then, it is the
infant that has true insight.
As we toil away in darkness,
we can only hope to catch a
glimpse of the untainted,
uncorrupted vision of the
child.**

...

But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,
Are yet a master-light of all our seeing;
Uphold us--cherish--and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never;
 Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,
 Nor man nor boy,
 Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
 Can utterly abolish or destroy!
 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.

But the first impressions of our infancy never leave us. We can still recollect them, and they can guide us and sustain us. The child is father of the man. The child serves as “a master-light of all our seeing.” Memory (though “shadowy”) preserves what may seem lost. As Wordsworth tells Dorothy in “Tintern Abbey,” her “mind shall be a mansion for all lovely forms / [her] memory be as a dwelling-place.”

10

...

What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

11

...

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.

**We can never
recapture the
brilliance of untainted
youth, but we can find
strength in memory
and find solace in the
poet's philosophic
mind that recognizes
what has been lost yet
recaptures what still
remains.**