

Wordsworth's *Resolution and Independence*: Such a Figure, in Such a Place

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ABSTRACT

In *Resolution and Independence* there is a solitary figure, he is very much part of the present; his encounter with the poet is seen against a background of immediate worries and fears on the poet's side. It is known that The Leech-Gatherer is based on a beggar who came to the door of Dove Cottage and who is described in Dorothy Wordsworth's Journal. The strange comparisons of the old man to a stone which is in turn compared to a sea beast make us realize his oddness, yet he is present in the poem, entering into conversation with the narrator, he is stoical and cheerful, firm in his mind and dignified in his conversation in spite of his hard life dwindling profession of Leech Gathering. The poem shows Wordsworth transforming what would superficially appear to be the most unpromising of material into a work of the most remarkable power and cogency. Wordsworth sank to a profound depression- 'And fears and fancies thick upon me came; Dim sadness- and blind thoughts'. The poet's former depressions and fears return and he asks the man how he lives and what he does. Although this is often taken as a simple question, in fact it goes far beyond a request for information on profession and is a fundamental, despairing question on the nature of human existence.

Key Words: *old man, spirituality, imagination, melancholy, diction,*

Preface:

The poem was written at Town end between May and June 1802 and published in the 1807 volume. Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journal* gives the date. She tells us how her brother worked almost continuously on it on certain days and "tired himself to death".

The poem is founded on an incident which Dorothy put on record on October 3, 1800. Wordsworth probably met the Leech-Gatherer on September 28, on the road to Grasmere. Not far from Dove Cottage, the brother and sister met 'an old man almost double', carrying a bundle; he wore an apron and a night cap, 'his face was interesting! He had dark eyes and a long nose'.

The man was of Scotch parents, and he had been in the army! His wife and nine out of ten children were dead. His trade was together leeches, but now leeches were scarce, and not the strength for it. He lived by begging, and was making his way to Carlisle where he should buy a few goodly books to sell.

Wordsworth writes, “I was in the state of feeling, described in the beginning of the poem, while crossing over Barton Fell from Mr. Clarkson’s at the foot of Ullawater towards Askham. The image of the hare I then observed on the ridge of the Fell”. F W H Myres quotes from a letter of Wordsworth to some friends a passage to explain Wordsworth’s feelings in writing this poem. The passage is worth reproducing-“I will explain to you” says Wordsworth, “in prose my feelings in writing the poem. I describe myself as having been exalted to the highest pitch of delight by the joyousness and beauty of Nature; and then as depressed even in the midst of those beautiful objects, to the lowest dejection and despair. A young poet in the midst of the happiness of Nature is described as overwhelmed by the thoughts of the miserable reverses which have befallen the happiest of all men, viz, poets. I think of this till I am so deeply impressed with it, than I consider the manner in which I am rescued from my dejection and despair almost as an interposition of providence. A person reading the poem with feelings like mine will have been awes and controlled, expecting something spiritual or supernatural. What is brought forward? A lonely place, a pond by which an old man was the figure presented in the naked simplicity possible. The feeling of spirituality or supernaturalness is again referred to as being strong in my mind in this passage. How came he here? Thought I, or what can he be doing? I then describe him, whether ill or well is not for me to judge, with perfect confidence, but this I can confidently affirm, that though I believe God has given the imagination, I cannot conceive a figure more impressive than that of an old man like this, the survivor of a wife and ten children, travelling alone among the mountains and all lonely places, carrying with him his own fortitude, and the necessities which an unjust state of society has laid upon him. You speak of his speech as tedious when one does not read with the feelings of the author. *The Thorn* is tedious to hundreds; and so is *The Idiot Boy* to hundreds. It is in the character of the old man to tell his story, which an impatient reader must feel tedious. But good heavens! Such a figure, in such a place, a pious self-respecting, miserably infirm and pleased old man, telling such a tale!”

The poem is written in a stanza from rarely attempted by Wordsworth. It is a seven line stanza, each line an iambic pentameter, with the rhyme scheme- a b a b b c c. The seventh line, however, consists of six feet, while some of the other lines are hypermetric.

In *Resolution and Independence* there is a solitary figure, he is very much part of the present; his encounter with the poet is seen against a background of immediate worries and fears on the poet’s side. It is known that The Leech-Gatherer is based on a beggar who came to the door of Dove Cottage and who is described in Dorothy Wordsworth’s Journal; in Wordsworth’s hands he becomes a strange, solitary, motionless figure out on the moor. He is described in physical and bodily terms, but he also has an air of the other world about him:

Now, whether it wee by peculiar grace

A leading from above, a something given,

*Yet it befell that, in this lonely place,
 When I with these untoward thoughts had striven,
 Beside a pool bare to the eye of heaven'
 I saw a man before me unawares,
 The oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs. (II. 50-56)*

The language of the first lines suggests an over seeing providence which ordains that the poet shall meet the Leech Gatherer. But he is unmistakably human and not an angelic visitor, he may be strange, but he is a man, the oldest man there has ever been, one might say. The poet stumbles across him on a fine morning, after heavy rain, it is a most beautiful day, but the poet can not enjoy it because of his 'untoward thoughts'- his worries about the future and his sadness about great poets (Chatterton, Burns) who died young. Now he meets this strange and solitary figure:

*As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie,
 Couched on the bald top of an eminence,
 Wonder to all who do the same espy,
 By what means it could thither come, and ehence,
 So that it seem a thing endued with sense,
 Like a sea beast crawled forth, that on a shelf,
 Of rock or sand reposeeth, there to sun itself,
 Such seemed this Man....." (II. 57-64)*

The strange comparisons of the old man to a stone which is in turn compared to a sea beast make us realize his oddness, yet he is present in the poem, entering into conversation with the narrator, he is stoical and cheerful, firm in his mind and dignified in his conversation in spite of his hard life dwindling profession of Leech Gathering.

He is resolute and independent, and his resolution communicates itself to the poet who makes a 'resolution' at the end;

*'God' said I, be my help and stay secure,
 I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!'*

The poem shows Wordsworth transforming what would superficially appear to be the most unpromising of material into a work of the most remarkable power and cogency. An actual meeting with a real Leech-gatherer did in fact take place and is recorded in Dorothy Wordsworth's Journal for 3 October, 1800. We should read this entry carefully in order to appreciate fully the power of the imagination which transformed this ordinary

man into the very images of basic and enduring nature; 'As a huge stone', 'Like a sea-beast crawled forth', 'Motionless as a cloud' all endowed him with a powerful symbolic meaning. He had been on his way to Carlisle, a coat over his shoulders, wearing an apron and night cap, his face was interesting with dark eyes, long nose, and he was married with ten children and had earned his living by collecting leeches, which were now so scarce that he was reduced to begging.

From this rather ordinary encounter recorded by Dorothy, Wordsworth created- in recall- a poem about man's fundamental doubt and about his questioning of his ability to live in a world of trouble and partial consciousness. He asks the question: how must or should man respond to such a world, especially men of intense awareness, such as poets? Such men are able to feel the extremes of both joy and sorrow and indeed to imagine them before they occur. The poem thus illustrates to the reader the validity of Wordsworth's ideas on the transforming powers of the imagination. The actual encounter, which is merely interesting becomes a prophetic and almost visionary experience to the poet, it further shows us the extension of validity in the idea of taking ideas from 'common life' and proves- a point missed by some critics in the past- that this does not imply writing merely about domestic or emotional trivia.

Development of Thoughts:

The first stanza details the beauty of a morning which follows a night of wildness: 'There was a roaring in the wind all night'. Everything in this morning suggests freshness and joy and the specific references to natural life enhance this idea. This concept of joy is further developed in stanza two: 'The sky rejoices in the morning's birth'. (Note the double personification here; there is no hint of artificiality in it-we sense that this is how Wordsworth really perceives the sky and the morning).The hare, 'running races in her mirth', seems to symbolize this power of nature to effect rebirth and nature is embodied in the wind and sun and water. Notice, too, the aptness of Wordsworth's diction: 'plashy' here, being a combined word, suggests the wet, muddy conditions and is also onomatopoeic and visually strong-'Raises a mist'. The sounds and sights of nature brought to Wordsworth, then, on that moor, a sense of happiness so that his 'old remembrances' of melancholy were dispersed. But the words 'vain and melancholy' insist upon and contrast strongly with the scenes of natural joy already depicted, and soon, from this height of joy, Wordsworth sank to a profound depression- 'And fears and fancies thick upon me came; Dim sadness- and blind thoughts'. This sense of nameless doubts and dread, of anxiety about the whole nature of human life, is not limited to poets such as Wordsworth, nor yet to twentieth- century man; it is a universal experience and, for this reason, we are able to identify with the poet's feelings here. What is different is the degree of the poet's awareness and his ability to express it.

The next stanza indicates the poet's awareness of the present state of happiness; the diction emphasizes this- 'warbling', 'playful', 'happy', 'blissful'-and Wordsworth sees that this is where he differs from the natural creatures around him. He is able imaginatively to project himself into a future, 'another day', when 'solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty' are all his lot. Thus the conscious- therefore fearing- man is powerfully contrasted with the natural elements.

This sense of doubt is developed in the next verse and following one draws on examples from the poetic world: Chatterton, a poet of on mean ability, who turned to forgery and eventually committed suicide, and Burns, 'Following his plough..... 'By our own spirits are we deified' contrasts sharply with the end of stanza which prophesies 'despondency and madness' for the poet, thus suggesting a failure of that spirit which initially

'deifies' the poet to himself. Wordsworth, of course, is not talking merely about poets; he is thinking of all sensitive, aware human beings.

At this point, Wordsworth becomes aware of an ancient man 'Besides a pool bare to the eye of heaven' and the next stanza, with its images of timelessness and endurance, develop the picture. The old man is compared to a 'huge stone' and a 'sea-beast'. The man seemed in a state between life and death but his body was bent and feeble with suffering and there is a strange contrast here between the real, physical man- 'bent double'- and the 'vision' which seems to identify the man with all the natural elements around him and insist upon the element of stillness and endurance-'propped', 'Motionless as a cloud'- and the closeness of this man's identification with nature.

In the next stanza, the old man 'stirred with his staff' the muddy waters, suggestive of a wise man, a prophet. In response to Wordsworth's greeting, the old man,

..... replied, a flash of mild surprise

Broke from the sable orbs of his yet- vivid eyes.

The vivid words 'sable orbs' and 'flashes' suggest a spiritual energy and awareness quite at odds with the feebleness of the man's physical frame. His words, though 'feeble', emerge with a 'lofty utterance' above the reach, of ordinary Men'. He tells the poet of his search of leeches but as he talks his being becomes more and more like a vision to Wordsworth. His voice 'to me was like a stream'.

And the whole body of the Man did seem

Like one whom I had met with in a dream;

or –and here Wordsworth specifically acknowledges a visionary element in the man's presence- like a man 'from some far region sent' to give spiritual courage to the poet.

The poet's former depressions and fears return and he asks the man how he lives and what he does. Although this is often taken as a simple question, in fact it goes far beyond a request for information on profession and is a fundamental, despairing question on the nature of human existence, The emphasis here is on How; how does a man live in face of 'the fear that kills'? The old man's answer is perhaps ambiguous. The leeches are becoming scarcer but he goes on looking. They have dwindled by 'slow decay' but, because of his resolution and independence, he maintains his hope and his search. Perhaps we may read two messages into this; first, the leeches could be seen to symbolize Wordsworth's poetic power, dwindling by 'slow decay' and this poem may be an unconscious fortifying of the poet by a moral compensation and, two, a more likely message and more applicable to humanity in general, that human life and its fear, terrors, depressions, must be faced with dignity and resolution. In the final verse, Wordsworth himself finds courage from the presence of the old man and the message which that presence conveys.

Its merits:

This is a poem where subject matter and style blend perfectly. The diction is vivid yet unobtrusive; the images- all concerned with natural elements- reinforce the visionary element of the old man; there is a concern for exact, visual detail and an equally exact creation of mental states; the Spenserian, regular stanzas and the

unobtrusive regularity of rhythm and rhyme tend to force the reader towards a concern for what is being stated. Wordsworth is here raising and considering the most fundamental of issues which concern conscious humanity.

Margaret Drabble writes: *Resolution and Independence*, the first written of the group, seems to be almost like a premonition of what was to come. It was written at an apparently prosperous and joyful time of his life, while he was at the height of his poetic powers- technically and imaginatively, it is one of his finest works and yet it tells of threats and dangers and endurance. It starts off optimistically enough, it is the morning after a heavy storm, and Wordsworth is off on one of his solitary walks. Both he and the world around him are full of joy and life, the grass is 'bright with rainy drops', the hare is 'running races in her mirth', the lark is singing, and the poet is as light hearted and happy as a boy. As he walks, he says, he forgets all his troubles:

My old remembrances went from me wholly;

And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy. (19-20)

But as he continues his walk, he is quite suddenly and for no apparent reason plunged into the deepest gloom; his happy mood turns quite involuntarily to 'dim sadness' and 'blinds thoughts'. In the depths of this acute and irrational fit of depression, he starts to imagine all the dangers that might possibly threaten his present happiness, and which did overwhelm in the lives of other poets, he thinks of Chatterton, 'the marvelous boy', who committed suicide, and of Burns, who died while still young in poverty and sickness. As he contemplates these disasters, he imagines them happening to himself; he says that although he himself is now as carefree as the Lark and the Hare:

There may come another day to me-

Solitude, pain of hearts, distress and misery-

And he goes on to compare his own lot with lot of other poets, saying:

We poets in our youth begin in gladness;

But thereof come in the end despondency and madness. (48-49)

He is not speaking here of purely physical hardships, but of mental failures, he seems to imply that it is the very intensity of joy itself, the violent gladness of the young poet, which wears him out and plunges him later into sorrow and misery. He fears that the moods of exaltation described in *The Prelude* may be paid for in the end. He seems in this part of the [poem to be foreseeing the loss of his powers, and to be dreading the fate of unseeing mediocrity in store for him.

But then, as he wanders along in this mood of vague but deep forebodings, he comes upon the leech gatherer. This leech gatherer is the strangest and most impressive of all Wordsworth's many portraits of old age, and he appears mysteriously, as though by divine intervention. He is a warning, a portent, and admonition, the poet feels at once that he has some message for him, and that his appearance there in those lonely places is not without meaning. When he first sees him, he is standing alone and motionless by a pool, and Wordsworth describes him in this famous and striking image:

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie

*Couched on the bald top of an eminence;
 Wonder to all who do the same espy,
 By what means it could thither come, and whence;
 So that it seems a thing endued with sense;
 Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf
 Of rock or sand reposes, there to sun itself.
 Such seemed this Man, not all alive nor dead,
 Nor all asleep- in his extreme old age;
 His body was bent double, feet and head
 Coming together in life's pilgrimage;
 As if some dire constraints of pain, or rage
 Of sickness felt by him in times long past,
 A more than human weight upon his frame had cast.(57-70)*

These images, of the 'huge stone', and of the 'sea-beast crawled forth', make the old man at once a part of the landscape, a natural, almost inanimate object, and yet at the same time an object of wonder and mystery, whose very presence is a cause of wonder. Wordsworth watches this strange impressive figure, standing there motionless propped on his staff staring into the pool. And then, in typically Wordsworthian fashion, he proceeds to question him, just as he questioned the disbanded soldier, and the little girl in *We Are Seven*. He asks what the man is doing in such a lonely place, and what occupation he is pursuing. The leech gatherer replies in a feeble voice, but with dignity; his words are 'solemn', 'stately', 'measures', 'lofty'. He says that, being old and poor, he does what he can to earn his living by wandering the moors from pond to pond collecting leeches to sell. As he replies, the poet's attention wanders, and he drifts off once more into his own private depression, he still dimly hears the leech gatherer's voice in the back of his mind, 'like a stream scarce heard' while he ponders on his own fears, on:

*Cold, pain and labour, and all fleshly ills,
 And mighty Poets in their misery dead. (115-116)*

The leech gatherer is not forgotten; he is present 'like one whom I had met with in a dream', and his own fears and the leech gatherer's tale of uncomplaining hardship blend into an extraordinary visionary sense of dim trouble and dim comfort. Wordsworth, when he pulls himself out of his reverie, asks the old man to go over his story again, just as he asked the little girl and the little boy in *Anecdote for Fathers* to repeat their answers again and again. The old man patiently repeats himself, and Wordsworth says that when he ended:

I could have laughed myself to scorn to find

In that descrepit Man so firm a mind.

'God', said I, 'be my help and stay secure;

I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!'. (137-140)

And on this note the poem too ends. It is an extraordinary and powerful work, with the same strange distance between meaning and argument that appears in passages of *The Prelude*. On one level, Wordsworth seems to be saying something like this: 'One day, while out for a walks, I fell into a mood of unaccountable depression and anxiety. Then I met an old leech gatherer, who was so old and so poor and so much worse off than me that I felt guilty about feeling sorry for myself, and in future every time I start to feel sorry for myself, and in future every time I started to feel sorry for myself I will think of that poor old man'. And in one way, this is precisely what Wordsworth does mean, but a crude summary like this misses out everything that makes the poem important. Once again, it is not the thought that counts, for the thought is trite enough; it is the circumstances. It is the figure of the old man himself which makes the poem so remarkable. He is at once real and symbolic, a real old man and a portent of something else. It is his dignity more than his poverty that impresses Wordsworth; he is very much the poet's superior in the virtues of resolution and independence mentioned in the poem's title, and the poet feels awe and admiration for him, not pity. He is not saying, 'Thank God I am not as badly off as he is', but rather hoping that he may bear whatever comes to him with like honour The old man. Like the black cliffs that towered above the boy Wordsworth in the stolen boat, or like the 'low breathing' that warned him off when he stole birds from other boys' snares. Is a force of nature, he impresses Wordsworth not by what he *says* but by what he *is*.

This poem is good example of what people mean when they speak of Wordsworth's 'profound simplicity'. At first sight, there is nothing complicated about it all. The moral of 'count your blessings' appears to be straightforward enough. The story and its setting are simple; the moor, the pond, the racing hare, the weather and the old man himself are all described in very plain language. The one real event of the poem, Wordsworth's encounter with the old man, is outwardly at least the most ordinary sort of occurrence. In fact, to some people the whole poem seems ludicrously simple, and trivial to the point of insignificance; Wordsworth had to defend it himself to his close friend and admirer, his wife's sister Sarah, who found the leech gatherer's ramblings 'tedious'. He wrote to her with indignation:

"It is the character of the old man to tell his story in a manner which an impatient reader must necessarily find tedious. But Good God, such a figure, in such a place, a pious, self-respecting, miserably infirm Old Man telling such a tale".

That phrase- 'such a figure, in such a place'-is the clue to the whole poem's power, it is the time and the place, the circumstances, the reality of the situation that make the difference between a profound truth and a boring commonplace. What the leech gatherer says may be simple and tedious enough, but its meaning in the context of the whole poem is new and weighty.

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