

Some Features of Wordsworthian Autobiography – and Some Dickensian Applications

Talk Plan

- a. Wordsworth's early autobiographical poetry – "The Vale of Esthwaite" (1787) – comparison with William Cowper's *The Task* (1785)
- b. Wordsworth's mature autobiographical poetry – *The Prelude* (1798-1805; frequently revised thereafter) – the idea of "spots of time"
- c. Dickens relationship to Wordsworth
- d. Two passages from *David Copperfield* in the light of Wordsworth's autobiographical poetry

1) No spot but claims the tender tear
By joy or grief to memory dear
One Evening when the wintry blast
Through the sharp Hawthorn whistling pass'd
And the poor flocks all pinch'd with cold
Sad drooping sought the mountain fold
Long Long upon yon steepy rock
Alone I bore the bitter shock
Long Long my swimming eyes did roam
For little Horse to bear me home
To bear me what avails my tear
To sorrow o'er a Father's bier.
Flow on, in vain thou hast not flow'd
But eas'd me of a heavy load
For much it gives my soul relief
To pay the mighty debt of Grief
With sighs repeated o'er and o'er
I mourn because I mourn'd no more
For ah! The storm was soon at rest
Soon broke the Sun upon my breast
Nor did my little heart foresee
— She lost a home in losing thee
Nor did it know—of thee bereft
That little more than Heav'n was left.

("The Vale of Esthwaite," 272-95)

2) ... [I] have lov'd the rural walk
O'er hills, through valleys, and by rivers' brink,
E'er since a truant boy I pass'd my bounds
T' enjoy a ramble on the banks of Thames.
And still remember, nor without regret,
Of hours that sorrow since has much endear'd,
How oft, my slice of pocket store consum'd,
Still hung'ring, penniless and far from home,
I fed on scarlet hips and stony haws,
Or blushing crabs, or berries that imboss
The bramble, black as jet, or sloes austere.
Hard fare! but such as boyish appetite
Disdains not ...

(*The Task*, I, 109-24)

3) One Christmas-time,
On the glad eve of its dear holidays,
Feverish, and tired, and restless, I went forth
Into the fields, impatient for the sight
Of those led palfreys that should bear us home;
My brothers and myself. There rose a crag,
That, from the meeting-point of two highways
Ascending, overlooked them both, far stretched;
Thither, uncertain on which road to fix
My expectation, thither I repaired,
Scout-like, and gained the summit; 'twas a day
Tempestuous, dark, and wild, and on the grass
I sate half-sheltered by a naked wall;
Upon my right hand couched a single sheep,
Upon my left a blasted hawthorn stood;
With those companions at my side, I watched
Straining my eyes intensely, as the mist
Gave intermitting prospect of the copse
And plain beneath. Ere we to school returned, –
That dreary time, – ere we had been ten days
Sojourners in my father's house, he died;
And I and my three brothers, orphans then,
Followed his body to the grave. The event,
With all the sorrow that it brought, appeared
A chastisement; and when I called to mind
That day so lately past, when from the crag
I looked in such anxiety of hope;
With trite reflections of morality,

David Chandler

Yet in the deepest passion, I bowed low
To God, Who thus corrected my desires;
And, afterwards, the wind and sleety rain,
And all the business of the elements,
The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,
And the bleak music from that old stone wall,
The noise of wood and water, and the mist
That on the line of each of those two roads
Advanced in such indisputable shapes;
All these were kindred spectacles and sounds
To which I oft repaired, and thence would drink,
As at a fountain ...

(*The Prelude*, 1850 version, XII, 287-326)

4) There are in our existence spots of time,
That with distinct pre-eminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
By false opinion and contentious thought,
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,
In trivial occupations, and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired;
A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
That penetrates, enables us to mount,
When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.
This efficacious spirit chiefly lurk
Among those passages of life that give
Profoundest knowledge to what point, and how,
The mind is lord and master – outward sense
The obedient servant of her will. Such moments
Are scattered everywhere, taking their date
From our first childhood.

(*ibid.*, XII, 208-25)

5) ... my occupation in my solitary pilgrimages was to recall every yard of the old road as I went along it, and to haunt the old spots, of which I never tired. I haunted them, as my memory had often done, and lingered among them as my younger thoughts had lingered when I was far away. (*David Copperfield*, chp. 22)

6) One dark evening, when I was later than usual – for I had, that day, been making my parting visit to Blunderstone, as we were now about to return home – I found him [Steerforth] alone in Mr. Peggotty’s house, sitting thoughtfully before the fire. He was so intent upon his own reflections that he was quite unconscious of my approach. This, indeed, he might easily have been if he had been less absorbed, for footsteps fell noiselessly on the sandy ground outside; but even my entrance failed to rouse him. I was standing close to him, looking at him; and still, with a heavy brow, he was lost in his meditations.

He gave such a start when I put my hand upon his shoulder, that he made me start too.

“You come upon me,” he said, almost angrily, “like a reproachful ghost!”

“I was obliged to announce myself, somehow,” I replied. “Have I called you down from the stars?”

“No,” he answered. “No.”

“Up from anywhere, then?” said I, taking my seat near him.

“I was looking at the pictures in the fire,” he returned.

“But you are spoiling them for me,” said I, as he stirred it quickly with a piece of burning wood, striking out of it a train of red-hot sparks that went careering up the little chimney, and roaring out into the air.

“You would not have seen them,” he returned. “I detest this mongrel time, neither day nor night. How late you are! Where have you been?”

“I have been taking leave of my usual walk,” said I.

“And I have been sitting here,” said Steerforth, glancing round the room, “thinking that all the people we found so glad on the night of our coming down, might – to judge from the present wasted air of the place – be dispersed, or dead, or come to I don’t know what harm. David, I wish to God I had had a judicious father these last twenty years!”

“My dear Steerforth, what is the matter?”

“I wish with all my soul I had been better guided!” he exclaimed. “I wish with all my soul I could guide myself better!”

There was a passionate dejection in his manner that quite amazed me. He was more unlike himself than I could have supposed possible. (ibid.)

7) I don’t know why one slight set of impressions should be more particularly associated with a place than another, though I believe this obtains with most people, in reference especially to the associations of their childhood. I never hear the name, or read the name, of Yarmouth, but I am reminded of a certain Sunday morning on the beach, the bells ringing for church, little Em’ly leaning on my shoulder, Ham lazily dropping stones into the water, and the sun, away at sea, just breaking through the heavy mist, and showing us the ships, like their own shadows. (ibid, chp. 3)

8) The general sense of a “screen memory” today is of a memory characterized by a clear and heightened sense of reality, focused on a seemingly innocuous event that screens from memory a contiguous or associated traumatic event. This screen memory is generally considered to be unchanged and of long standing; because of its seemingly innocuous nature, its retention is often something of a mystery to its possessor. (Richard Reichbart, “Screen Memory: Its Importance to Object Relations and Transference,” 2008)