WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

From THE PRELUDE
or
GROWTH OF A POET’S MIND

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POEM

From Book Seventh
Residence in London

[The Blind Beggar. Bartholomew Fair]

As the black storm upon the mountain top
Sets off the sunbeam in the Valley, so
That huge fermenting Mass of human-kind
Serves as a solemn background or relief
To single forms and objects, whence they draw,
For feeling and contemplative regard,
More than inherent liveliness and power.
How oft amid those overflowing streets
Have I gone forward with the Crowd, and said
Unto myself, “The face of every one
That passes by me is a mystery!”
Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed
By thoughts of what and whither, when and how,
Until the Shapes before my eyes became
A second-sight procession, such as glides
Over still mountains, or appears in dreams.
And once, far-travelled in such mood, beyond
The reach of common indication, lost
Amid the moving pageant, I was smitten
Abruptly with the view (a sight not rare)
Of a blind Beggar who, with upright face,
Stood propped against a Wall; upon his chest
Wearing a written paper to explain
His Story, whence he came, and who he was.
Caught by the spectacle, my mind turned round
As with the might of waters; an apt type
This Label seemed, of the utmost we can know
Both of ourselves and of the universe;
And on the Shape of that unmoving Man,
His steadfast face, and sightless eyes, I gazed
As if admonished from another world.
Though reared upon the base of outward things,
Structures like these the excited Spirit mainly
Builds for herself. Scenes different there are,
Full-formed, that take, with small internal help,
Possession of the faculties—the peace
That comes with night; the deep solemnity
Of Nature’s intermediate hours of rest,
When the great tide of human life stands still,
The business of the day to come—unborn,
Of that gone by—locked up as in the grave;
The blended calmness of the heavens and earth,
Moonlight, and stars, and empty streets, and sounds
Unfrequent as in deserts: at late hours
Of winter evenings when unwholesome rains
Are falling hard, with people yet astir,
The feeble salutation from the voice
Of some unhappy woman, now and then
Heard as we pass; when no one looks about,
Nothing is listened to. But these, I fear,
Are falsely catalogued; things that are, are not,
As the mind answers to them, or the heart
Is prompt or slow to feel. What say you, then,
To times when half the City shall break out
Full of one passion, vengeance, rage, or fear?
To executions, to a Street on fire,
Mobs, riots, or rejoicings? From these sights
Take one, that annual Festival, the Fair
Holden where Martyrs suffered in past time,
And named of St. Bartholomew; there see
A work completed to our hands, that lays,
If any spectacle on earth can do,
The whole creative powers of Man asleep!
For once the Muse’s help will we implore,
And she shall lodge us, wafted on her wings,
Above the press and danger of the Crowd,
Upon some Shewman’s platform. What a shock
For eyes and ears! what anarchy and din
Barbarian and infernal—a phantasma
Monstrous in color, motion, shape, sight, sound!
Below, the open space, through every nook
Of the wide area, twinkles, is alive
With heads; the midway region and above
Is thronged with staring pictures, and huge scrolls,
Dumb proclamations of the Prodigies!
With chattering monkeys dangling from their poles,
And children whirling in their roundabouts;
With those that stretch the neck, and strain the eyes;
And crack the voice in rivalship, the crowd
Inviting; with buffoons against buffoons
Grimacing, writhing, screaming, him who grinds
The hurdy-gurdy, at the fiddle weaves,
Rattles the salt-box, thumps the Kettle-drum;
And him who at the trumpet puffs his cheeks;
The silver-collared Negro with his timbrel;
Equestrians, tumblers, women, girls, and boys,
Blue-breeched, pink-vested, with high-towering plumes.
—All moveables of wonder from all parts
And here, Albinos, painted-Indians, Dwarfs,
The Horse of Knowledge, and the learned Pig,
The Stone-eater, the Man that swallows fire—
Giants, Ventriloquists, the Invisible-girl,
The Bust that speaks, and moves its goggling eyes,
The Wax-work, Clock-work, all the marvellous craft
Of modern Merlins, Wild-beasts, Puppet-shews,
All out-o’th’-way, far-fetched, perverted things,
All freaks of Nature, all Promethean thoughts
Of man; his dullness, madness, and their feats,
All jumbled up together, to compose
A Parliament of Monsters. Tents and Booths,
Meanwhile, as if the whole were one vast mill,
Are vomiting, receiving, on all sides,
Men, Women, three-years’ Children, Babes in arms.
Oh blank confusion! true epitome
Of what the mighty City is herself
To thousands upon thousands of her Sons,
Living amid the same perpetual whirl
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
To one identity, by differences
That have no law, no meaning, and no end;
Oppression under which even highest minds
Must labour, whence the strongest are not free!
But though the picture weary out the eye,
By nature an unmanageable sight,
It is not wholly so to him who looks
In steadiness, who hath among least things
An undersense of greatest; sees the parts
As parts, but with a feeling of the whole.

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This did I feel in London’s vast Domain;
The Spirit of Nature was upon me there;
The Soul of Beauty and enduring life
Vouchsafed her inspirations; and diffused,
Through meagre lines and colours, and the press
Of self-destroying transitory things,
Composure, and ennobling harmony.

From Book Ninth
Residence in France

[Paris and Orléans. Becomes a “Patriot”]

Even as a River—partly (it might seem)
Yielding to old remembrances, and swayed
In part by fear to shape a way direct
That would engulp him soon in the ravenous Sea—
Turns, and will measure back his course, far back,
Seeking the very regions which he crossed
In his first outset; so have we, my Friend!
Turned and returned with intricate delay.
Or as a Traveller, who has gained the brow
Of some aerial Down, while there he halts
For breathing-time, is tempted to review
The region left behind him; and if aught
Deserving notice have escaped regard,
Or been regarded with too careless eye,
Strives, from that height, with one, and yet one more
Last look, to make the best amends he may,
So have we lingered. Now we start afresh
With courage, and new hope risen on our toil.
Fair greetings to this shapeless eagerness,
Whene’er it comes! needful in work so long,
Thrice needful to the argument which now
Awaits us! Oh, how much unlike the past!
Free as a Colt, at pasture on the hill,
I ranged at large through London’s wide Domain
Month after Month. Obscurely did I live,
Not seeking frequent intercourse with men
By literature, or elegance, or rank
Distinguished. Scarcely was a year thus spent
Ere I forsook the crowded Solitude;
With less regret for its luxurious pomp
And all the nicely-guarded shews of Art,
Than for the humble Bookstalls in the Streets,
Exposed to eye and hand where’er I turned.
—France lured me forth, the realm that I had crossed
So lately, journeying toward the snow-clad Alps.
But now relinquishing the scrip and staff
And all enjoyment which the summer sun
Sheds round the steps of those who meet the day
With motion constant as his own, I went
Prepared to sojourn in a pleasant Town
Washed by the current of the stately Loire.

Through Paris lay my readiest course, and there
Sojourning a few days, I visited
In haste each spot, of old or recent fame,
The latter chiefly; from the field of Mars
Down to the suburbs of St. Anthony;
And from Mont Martyr southward to the Dome
Of Genevieve. In both her clamorous Halls,
The National Synod and the Jacobins,
I saw the Revolutionary Power
Toss like a Ship at anchor, rocked by storms;
The Arcades I traversed, in the Palace huge
Of Orleans, coasted round and round the line
Of Tavern, Brothel, Gaming-house, and Shop,
Great rendezvous of worst and best, the walk
Of all who had a purpose, or had not;
I stared, and listened with a Stranger's ears
To Hawkers and Haranguers, hubbub wild!
And hissing Factionists, with ardent eyes,
In knots, or pairs, or single. Not a look
Hope takes, or Doubt or Fear are forced to wear,
But seemed there present, and I scanned them all,
Watched every gesture uncontrollable
Of anger, and vexation, and despite,
All side by side, and struggling face to face
With Gaiety and dissolute Idleness.
—Where silent zephyrs sported with the dust
Of the Bastille, I sate in the open sun,
And from the rubbish gathered up a stone
And pocketed the Relic in the guise
Of an Enthusiast; yet, in honest truth,
I looked for Something that I could not find,
Affecting more emotion than I felt;
For 'tis most certain that these various sights,
However potent their first shock, with me
Appeared to recompence the Traveller's pains
Less than the painted Magdalene of Le Brun,
A Beauty exquisitely wrought, with hair
Dishevelled, gleaming eyes, and rueful cheek
Pale, and bedropp'd with everflowing tears.

But hence to my more permanent Abode
I hasten; there by novelties in speech,
Domestic manners, customs, gestures, looks,
And all the attire of ordinary life,
Attention was engrossed; and, thus amused,
I stood 'mid those concussions unconcerned,
Tranquil almost, and careless as a flower
Glassed in a green-house, or a Parlour shrub
That spreads its leaves in unmolested peace
While every bush and tree, the country through,
Is shaking to the roots; indifference this
Which may seem strange; but I was unprepared
With needful knowledge, had abruptly passed
Into a theatre whose stage was filled,
And busy with an action far advanced.
Like Others I had skimmed, and sometimes read
With care, the master pamphlets of the day;
Nor wanted such half-insight as grew wild
Upon that meagre soil, helped out by talk
And public news; but having never seen
A Chronicle that might suffice to shew
Whence the main Organs of the public Power
Had sprung, their transmigrations when and how
Accomplished, giving thus unto events
A form and body; all things were to me
Loose and disjointed, and the affections left
Without a vital interest. At that time,
Moreover, the first storm was overblown,
And the strong hand of outward violence
Locked up in quiet. For myself, I fear
Now, in connection with so great a Theme,
To speak (as I must be compelled to do)
Of one so unimportant; night by night
Did I frequent the formal haunts of men
Whom, in the City, privilege of birth
Sequestered from the rest: societies
Polished in Arts, and in punctilio versed;
Whence, and from deeper causes, all discourse
Of good and evil of the time was shunned
With scrupulous care; but these restrictions soon
Proved tedious, and I gradually withdrew
Into a noisier world, and thus erelong
Became a Patriot; and my heart was all
Given to the People, and my love was theirs.