

WORDSWORTH'S POETRY:
THE CHILD AS NOBLE SAVAGE

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To my wife Sandra.

PREFACE

Of the numerous critical works concerned with Wordsworth's poetry, none seems to investigate thoroughly the subject of Wordsworth's treatment of childhood as a logical outgrowth of the Noble Savage convention. Yet, a relationship between the Noble Savage and the child in Wordsworth's poetry seems obvious to this author. Both possess the same ideals, and both may be similarly defined. Also, belief and interest in the Noble Savage convention and real savages reached a climax at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century when Wordsworth was composing his finest poetry. Therefore, this author chose to examine Wordsworth's poetry in light of the Noble Savage tradition.

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"It is not now as it hath been of yore"

CHAPTER I

EARLY HISTORY OF THE NOBLE SAVAGE CONVENTION

The Noble Savage is a natural, uncorrupted, innocent being. His undefiled way of life, unhampered, that is, by society, makes the virtues of civilization suspect.¹ The idea of the Noble Savage includes a concept of prehistoric tribes, the American Indians, Negroes, South Sea Islanders, romantic peasants, and especially children when their healthy, child-like naivete is contrasted to the oftentimes depraved state of adult sophistication and experience.²

The idealization of children and savages is a form of cultural primitivism, a reflection of the discontent of civilized men with their society. Chronological primitivism is a looking back into the earliest beginnings of history and finding there the happiest state in the history of mankind's development--the true Golden Age.³ The legend of the Golden Age has been merged with the idea that primitive people, like children and savages, are superior to civilized

¹Hoxie Neale Fairchild, The Noble Savage, p. 2.

²Loc. cit.

³Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity, p. 287.

or formally trained people.⁴ Therefore, the Noble Savage convention is closely related to the concepts of the Golden Age and primitivism, and to a lesser extent, to the pastoral tradition. The idea of a Golden Age is to be found among primitive people, before the time of Homer and Hesiod. For example, the Egyptian vizier, Ptah-hotep (twenty-ninth century B.C.), alluded to a past era in which men were happy. He referred to it longingly as "The times of RA."⁵

According to Lovejoy and Boas, the idealizations of savages and the Golden Age are thought to have begun as a literary tradition in Greece, with Homer's Iliad.⁶ In the Elysian fields and the Isles of the Blest, the condition of mankind was in its most excellent state.⁷ Homer invariably pictured the remotest peoples as living the best possible life. For example, in the twelfth book of the Iliad, Zeus contrasts the violence of the Trojan war to the peace and equanimity of the noble Abioi, the milk-drinkers of the North.⁸

⁴Joseph Warren Beach, The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry, p. 17.

⁵J. O. Hertzler, "On Golden Ages: Then and Now," South Atlantic Quarterly, XXXIX (July, 1940), 318.

⁶Lovejoy and Boas, op. cit., p. 288.

⁷Henry A. Burd, "The Golden Age Idea in Eighteenth-Century Poetry," The Sewanee Review, XXIII (April, 1915), 173.

⁸Lovejoy and Boas, op. cit., p. 288.

These milk-drinkers, later called "Scythians," were for the ancients what American Indians were for eighteenth-century primitivists.⁹

Perry explains that it was not until Hesiod's Works and Days (about 700 B.C.) that the term, "Golden Age," came into common usage. In this work, Hesiod describes the progression of society from its earliest beginnings to his own day, in the terms of the Five Ages: the Golden, the Silver, the Brazen, the Heroic, and the Iron age.¹¹ In the Golden Age, men lived together without strife, pain, or the worries associated with old age, because the God, Saturn, lived on the earth, providing all of man's necessities in plenty.¹² Man did not have to work or cultivate the soil, because his relationship with nature was innocent. The degeneracy of man, however, began with the end of the Golden Age. The race became sinful and was doomed to endless work, hatred, and violence. Thus, mankind matured.

Simultaneously with Hesiod's account of the Golden Age arose the myth of the Garden of Eden.¹³ For the Hebrews,

⁹Ibid., p. 289.

¹⁰W. J. Perry, "An Anthropological Study of the Golden Age," Hibbert Journal, XVI (October, 1917), 46.

¹¹Burd, op. cit., p. 173.

¹²Loc. cit.

¹³Hertzler, op. cit., p. 319.

this primitive era stood for the original innocence of man and woman; it was an idyllic, God-graced state.¹⁴

Three centuries later, in Greece, Plato exerted an influence upon the development of primitivism. In the Critias, he taught that mankind had begun correctly, but had slowly deteriorated until its covenant of goodness was broken.¹⁵ His dialogues, Phaedo, Phaedrus, and the Apology, explain that man's soul came from a perfect world to enter the mundane world of the flesh. It was possible, according to these dialogues, for the human to infer his immortal stature through intimations from the soul. According to Plato, the soul could become corrupt in the material world.

Greg states that Theocritus, held to be the first true pastoral poet, contrasted his childhood, which was passed in the hills of Sicily, to the sophisticated urban life of Alexandria.¹⁶ In so doing, he idealized the shepherd's life and bestowed upon it the attributes of the Golden Age.¹⁷ Theocritus gave to pastoral poetry its one constant characteristic--that of the disparity between the simple life of the shepherd and the complicated life of men in complex

¹⁴Loc. cit.

¹⁵Loc. cit.

¹⁶Walter Wilson Greg, Pastoral Poetry and Pastoral Drama, p. 5.

¹⁷Burd, op. cit., p. 173.

civilizations.¹⁸ As the power of Greece slowly declined, the Stoic writer, Posidonius, contrasted the virtues of the savage Scythians to the degenerate state of civilized Greece.¹⁹

From Hellenic culture, the Golden Age concept, with its corollary, the glorification of the savage, drifted into Latin literature. Taylor points out that it was the Roman Stoic philosopher, Lucretius, who modified the conventional view of the past in Book IV of De Rerum Natura, where, instead of picturing the Golden Age as a time of ease and plenty, he described it as a relentless struggle for survival.²⁰ Nevertheless, he viewed it as an ideal time,²¹ because primitive man's struggle matched with his physical prowess produced a simple life that was greatly superior to civilized life.²² Lucretius believed that from the savage, uncomplicated past, man had declined.

Burd shows that Virgil, in his Eclogues, also modified the Golden Age myth. He not only pictured the serene life of shepherds in contrast to the want and squalor of the immediate wars through which "civilized" Rome had passed, but

¹⁸Greg, op. cit., p. 4.

¹⁹Lovejoy and Boas, op. cit., p. 289.

²⁰Margaret Taylor, "Progress and Primitivism in Lucretius," American Journal of Philology, LXVIII (April, 1947), 180.

²¹Burd, op. cit., p. 173.

²²Taylor, op. cit., p. 181.

he also looked forward to a second Golden Age in the future.²³ The poetry of Horace and Ovid is, moreover, profuse with allusions to the Golden Age. Both closely follow Homer's and Hesiod's respective concepts of the Isles of the Blest and the Five Ages of Man.²⁴ Langenfelt describes Tacitus as the last important Roman contributor to the myth of the savage. In his historical work, entitled Germania, he glorifies the robust and strenuous life of the savages which were eventually to conquer the morally decayed state of Rome.²⁵ In summary, then, the idea of a Golden Age, an example of chronological primitivism, and the idea of the Noble Savage, an example of cultural primitivism, fuse when attention is focused upon the earliest stages of man's development.²⁶ One sees that both ideas emerged from man's sense of unhappiness in his surroundings or his immediate conditions.²⁷ Both are concerned with an earlier time in which groups of men or individual primitives were dependent upon nature for all of their physical and aesthetic needs.²⁸ Redfield surmises that, perhaps, such an innocent and good age really existed, many

²³Burd, op. cit., p. 174.

²⁴Loc. cit.

²⁵Gosta Langenfelt, "'The Noble Savage' until Shakespeare," English Studies, XXXVI (October, 1955), 222.

²⁶Lovejoy and Boas, op. cit., p. 8.

²⁷Langenfelt, op. cit., p. 222.

²⁸Burd, op. cit., p. 175.

thousands of years ago before the development of cities. Archaeological discoveries show that man's earliest period was the time in which he was a hunter and fisher, or savage,²⁹ when he lived in folk societies that evoked a highly personalized kind of behavior, when he, as an early individual, projected his inner experiences into all objects, both human and inanimate, and invested them with the reality that is life.³⁰ In this respect, it is possible to see that the mind of the savage, the child, and the poet operate in similar ways, detecting in all things a symbolism brought about by a synthesis of related objects, neither rational, objective, nor scientific.³¹ It is man's loss of this primitive perception of nature which all civilized societies bemoan.

²⁹Robert Redfield, The Primitive World and Its Transformations, p. 1.

³⁰Robert Redfield, "The Folk Society," American Journal of Sociology, LII (January, 1947), 301.

³¹Ibid., p. 305.

CHAPTER II

RECENT HISTORY OF THE NOBLE SAVAGE CONVENTION

After the fall of Rome, the Noble Savage convention temporarily declined. In English literature it was kept alive through the Middle Ages mainly by Chaucer, only, when he paraphrased the ancient concept of a Golden Age in The Former Age, a poem concerned with an earlier time when people wore no clothes and had no money, weapons, or commerce.³² These individuals were unconcerned with profit and wealth, because Mother Nature provided bountiful crops. Fairchild points out that, suddenly, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a renewed concept of the Noble Savage emerged, now as a unified belief that was to survive until the middle of the nineteenth century.³³ He shows that the causes were varied, but that the most important influences were the observations of explorers, a revived academic interest in classical conventions, and the varied philosophies of men of letters.

One of the first authors to be influenced by this revival of primitivistic motifs was Edmund Spenser, who, in The Faerie Queene, reveals a profound interest in the Golden

³²Langenfelt, op. cit., p. 222.

³³Fairchild, op. cit., p. 2.

Age, in pastoral shepherds, and in savage life.³⁴ For example, Pearce notes that in Book IV, Spenser especially emphasizes the childlike ignorance of simple shepherds,³⁵ rustics who, according to Frye, symbolize a state of nature opposing the standards of a tutored court-life in the Renaissance.³⁶ Through contrast, Pearce thinks that Spenser's shepherds demonstrate a Renaissance belief that the world was "running down" and that the better life was gone forever.³⁷

One may readily observe the transition that occurred from the idealized life of the shepherd in The Faerie Queene to that of the glorified savage in Montaigne, the French essayist, who was influenced by Jean de Lery, also a Frenchman, who had traveled in Brazil and had written about the natives he had observed there.³⁸ In "Of the Caniballes," the thirtieth chapter in his first book of essays, Montaigne elaborates upon de Lery's descriptions of savages.³⁹ Herein,

³⁴Roy H. Pearce, "Primitivistic Ideas in the Faerie Queene," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, XLIV (April, 1945), 139.

³⁵Ibid., p. 143.

³⁶Northrup Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias," Daedalus, XCIV (Spring, 1965), 340.

³⁷Pearce, op. cit., p. 142.

³⁸Raoul Allier, The Mind of the Savage, p. 14.

³⁹Fairchild, op. cit., p. 373.

he describes the natures of friendly, primitive tribes in traditional terms of the Golden Age and gives to these individuals all of the characteristics of the earliest dwellers upon earth. For example, he describes them as generous, loving, and hospitable to strangers. Furthermore, because property among them was shared by all, these natives were free from greed, envy, and all vestiges of civil dissension. They were, in other words, untainted by civilization.⁴⁰

This particular tradition of the Noble Savage, begun most evidently by Montaigne, survived until the close of the eighteenth century.⁴¹ Whitney shows that, next, Montaigne's concept of the natural goodness of primitive men merged with the philosophy of the English or Oxford Platonists. Henry More and Joseph Glanvill, in particular, believed that the laws of nature were an innate part of all men's capacities.⁴² These men also taught that God implanted the principles of natural goodness in man, who, in turn, would follow them as long as his mind remained in an innocent, uncorrupted, and primitive state. However, they pointed out that since most men, through maturity, corrupt their minds with Baconian-like "idols," they become no longer cognizant of

⁴⁰Loc. cit.

⁴¹Allier, op. cit., p. 14.

⁴²Lois Whitney, Primitivism and the Idea of Progress, p. 14.

the laws of nature.⁴³ Therefore, they concluded that the simple process of "growing up" was that which tainted men's minds. Although many thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries disagreed with More and Glanvill, no other age contained so many philosophers who believed that even the low-born, most undistinguished intellect could easily perceive the obvious and permanent truths of nature.⁴⁴

Shortly after the deaths of More and Glanvill, according to Burd, Alexander Pope revived the pastoral interest in shepherds. As a youth, Pope was intrigued by the Golden Age concept, believing that the first poetry of man was pastoral in design and was composed by shepherds themselves. In 1709, he published his imitation of Theocritus and Virgil, called Pastorals.⁴⁵ He also treated the subject of the Golden Age in his "Messiah, a Sacred Eclogue," which appeared in the May, 1712, issue of the Spectator.⁴⁶

From Spenser's time to Pope's, and after, the discoveries of many adventurous explorers influenced poets in their glorification of the Noble Savage. Columbus was probably the first in a long line of explorers to commend the

⁴³Loc. cit.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁵Burd, op. cit., p. 176.

⁴⁶Loc. cit.

⁴⁷Fairchild, op. cit., p. 8.

physical beauty and generosity of the natives whom he had observed in his travels.⁴⁷ Moreover, the log of Sir Francis Drake favorably describes the natives of Brazil who treated him as a god and who were deeply grieved when he departed. Fairchild observes that Sir Walter Raleigh, also, describes the natives of Guiana as having never tilled the soil or planted crops, because nature had provided them with an abundance. By the time of the eighteenth century, there was a considerable increase in world travel and, consequently, in the amount of travel books that were published.⁴⁹ In fact, the eighteenth century was the age of the circumnavigations of the world. Accounts of world voyages were given by Cowley, Dampier, Cooke, Woodes Rogers, John Clipperton, George Shelvocke, Francis Pelsart, Byron, and James Cook.⁵⁰ Healy shows that in addition to these were the widely circulated descriptions of Indians written by Jesuit missionaries who had lived among uncivilized Indian tribes and who described them in glowingly exaggerated terms.⁵¹ The Jesuits

⁴⁷Fairchild, op. cit., p. 8.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 13.

⁴⁹Lois Whitney, "English Primitivistic Theories of Epic Origin," Modern Philology, XXI (May, 1924), 370.

⁵⁰Loc. cit.

⁵¹George R. Healy, "The French Jesuits and the Idea of the Noble Savage," William and Mary Quarterly, XV (April, 1958), 145.

contributed to the impetus of the Noble Savage theme by accentuating the Indians' good qualities while ignoring their evil attributes.⁵²

Immediately preceding the time of Wordsworth's birth, there were unparalleled conditions which were ripe for contrasting savage and civilized life, as a consequence of world-wide explorations. For example, in the 1760's, according to Tinker, Commodore Byron, Captain Cartwright, James Bruce, Captain Furneaux, Captain Wallis, and Captain Cook were engaged in important expeditions.⁵³ For the first time, because of these men, savages were brought to London from their natural habitats. In 1772, Captain Cartwright brought a family of Eskimos to London, and the excitement which their presence engendered was exceeded only by the appearance, in 1774, of Omai, a South Sea Islander who was brought to England by Captain Furneaux.⁵⁴ For the first time, Englishmen could now observe what real savages were like. All Londoners who became acquainted with these natives admired them for their seeming naivete.⁵⁵ But an acquaintance with the civilized western world corrupted them, and every member

⁵²Allier, op. cit., p. 15.

⁵³Chauncey Brewster Tinker, Nature's Simple Plan, p. 5.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 8.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 75.

of Cartwright's Eskimo family died of smallpox (which they would not have been exposed to in Labrador). Moreover, Omai, upon his return to his island, seemed unsuited thereafter to live among his own kind.⁵⁶

During this period of exploration, James Thomson broadened the literary theme of primitivism by writing The Seasons, wherein he stresses the advantages of a life in the country as opposed to an existence in the city and contrasts the innocence of the miserable poor to the sophistication of the wealthy.⁵⁷ In his descriptions of country life and the scenery of his native Scotland, he evokes, once again, the theme of the classical Golden Age. Furthermore, as Burd points out, in "Spring," Thomson frequently digresses upon the joyfulness of a lost age and asserts that modern man lives in an Iron Age (a parallel, in part, with Hesiod's views in Works and Days).⁵⁸ Thomson argues that man can find the Golden Age only in the country where conditions are conducive to peace, tranquility, and undisturbed meditation.⁵⁹

Burd shows that, like Thomson, Joseph Warton also transplanted the characteristics of the ancient Golden Age to rural England, filling "The Enthusiast" with countless

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 28.

⁵⁷Fairchild, op. cit., p. 57.

⁵⁸Burd, op. cit., p. 178.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 179.

allusions to the Golden Age, all intent upon revealing that man is happiest in those places which are the farthest removed from society, demonstrating that the American Indian lives a kind of life that most closely approximates the characteristics of the mythical golden past.⁶⁰ He was even aroused by a concept of the Indian's staunch endurance in the face of hardship, thus, contrasting the Indian's vigorous life to civilized man's life of lost virtue in smoky cities.⁶¹

The German thinker, Johann Gottfried von Herder, must also be mentioned because of his primitivistic views which are a part of this same tradition. Herder, Warton's contemporary, stated his views in Fragments in 1766.⁶² Reed thinks that, in this work, Herder makes an important contribution to the Noble Savage idea as it was later to affect Wordsworth, drawing together the history of the world with the history of the individual.⁶³ Herder theorizes that each individual's life is a microcosm, from birth to death, representing the entire development of mankind throughout recorded history. Accordingly, he proposes that the first stage of the development of man ("man," generically or

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 182.

⁶¹Frank Edgar Farley, "The Dying Indian," Kittredge Anniversary Papers, p. 251.

⁶²Eugene E. Reed, "Herder, Primitivism, and the Age of Poetry," Modern Language Review, LX (October, 1965), 553.

⁶³Ibid., p. 565.

individually) was the purest, including the period of youth and the childhood of language; thus, he deems it the Age of Poetry.⁶⁴ He explains that just as youth through the exercise of reason formed shadowy abstractions and linguistic symbols and became prosaic, so had the world moved from a concept of sensual animalism to that of intellectual stagnation.⁶⁵

Unquestionably, the greatest influence upon Wordsworth's concept of the Noble Savage was Rousseau. It is at once apparent, of course, that Rousseau was not the founder of a Noble Savage myth, although many critics imply that he was. As a matter of fact, Rousseau did not idealize the savage as so many think and as Wordsworth was, eventually, to do.⁶⁶ But Rousseau did believe, especially as he reveals in Emile, that man had experienced a loss of natural goodness through a civilizing process, and that the emphasis upon reason, which opposed to nature, had hindered man's liberty.⁶⁷ He also praised the advantages of ignorance and those who existed in such a blessed state: e.g., the savage, the shepherd, and, particularly, the child.⁶⁸ Rousseau differs

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 556.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 559.

⁶⁶Fairchild, op. cit., p. 136.

⁶⁷Irving Babbitt, Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 38.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 51.

from the earlier primitivists, however, in that he praises neither the wholesome, but amoral condition of primitive man; nor the intellectualized, but hypocritical condition of civilized man, but a stage in between the two extremes.⁶⁹ By the time that Rousseau had published Discours sur l'origine de l'inegalite parmi les hommes, in 1755, serious discussions of problems connected with primitive man had been prevalent for at least a decade.⁷⁰ Thus, while Rousseau certainly played a prominent role in the formation of new romantic concepts about primitive states of society, in no way was he responsible for the origin of these ideas.⁷¹

By the time of Wordsworth, a complete Noble Savage tradition had been formed, still as an integral part of the Golden Age myth. As a tradition, however, it was destined to survive only four decades, but, in these forty years, Wordsworth's poetry was to breathe a new and different life into these concepts of the Noble Savage. Whereas the Noble Savage had been a remote creature, Wordsworth was to move him to the soil of England; whereas he had been artificial, Wordsworth was to make him real; and whereas he had been an adult, Wordsworth was to make him a child. Thus, Wordsworth's

⁶⁹ Arthur O. Lovejoy, Essays in the History of Ideas, p. 32.

⁷⁰ Lois Whitney, "English Primitivistic Theories of Epic Origins," Modern Philology, XXI (May, 1924), 351.

⁷¹ Lovejoy, op. cit., p. 30.

poetry is the culmination or the climax of a long-lived literary tradition.

Preceding Wordsworth, the Noble Savage ideal symbolized many things. It announced that the country was better than the city, that evil was incidental to human progress, and that there was a degenerative progression in the species even as there was in the individual. In the eighteenth century, these symbolic values were accentuated by an increase in travel and, subsequently, travel literature, and the appearance of real savages, whom the English took as evidence of the reality of the goodness of primitive man. What were these natives but modern counterparts of the Golden Age? What the Golden Age was to ancient poets, the Noble Savage idea was to eighteenth-century poets.⁷²

The Noble Savage, before Wordsworth was to modify its meaning, was the creation of a philosopher who reacted against current glorifications of culture, drew from explorers, travel books and real savages a picture of a savage as a virtuous being, which then became associated in his mind with the extensive classical tradition of a similar nature, and reached a conclusion that discredited the achievements of the human intellect.

⁷²Fairchild, op. cit., p. 2.

CHAPTER III

WORDSWORTH'S POETRY: A STUDY OF THE CHILD AS NOBLE SAVAGE

The Golden Age myth along with the cult of the Noble Savage was metamorphosed in the poetry of William Wordsworth into a new entity symbolized in the innocence of childhood. This transformed view came easily to Wordsworth, because as a youth he lived in the wild, animal manner of a savage. When he was eight years old, his mother had died, and five years later, he was left an orphan at the death of his father.⁷³ After his mother's demise, he moved to the home of Anne Tyson and attended school at Hawkshead.⁷⁴ His schoolmaster was a liberal and understanding man who afforded Wordsworth much free time. He tells one that these Hawkshead years and his first years at Grasmere were his happiest, because they were periods in which he felt his most direct communion with nature, in which he had fewest responsibilities, and in which his love of nature was not yet intellectualized.⁷⁵ In the Prelude, Wordsworth explains that his boyhood was

. . . as if [h_e] had been born
On Indian plains, and from [h_is] mother's hut

⁷³Thomas Hutchinson (ed.), The Poetical Works of Wordsworth, p. xxiii.

⁷⁴Loc. cit.

⁷⁵George McLean Harper, William Wordsworth: His Life, Works and Influence, I, 35.

Had run abroad in wontonness, to sport,
A naked savage, in the thunder shower.⁷⁶

Not only does he equate his youth with the childhood of a savage but he also seems to merge the Golden Age with his past boyhood in "To the Cuckoo":

And I can listen to thee yet;
Can lie upon the plain
And listen, till I do beget
That golden time again.⁷⁷

While at Hawkshead, he learned to value the morality of the simple poor, thus, forming a judgment of humble rustics which was neither sentimental nor unfeelingly pragmatic.⁷⁸ He lived among the dalesmen, ate at their homes, and played with their children. His entire life, but especially his childhood, was lived in the manner of the rustics whom he so much admires in his poetry.⁷⁹ Indeed, he always believes that one purpose of poetry is ". . . to make the present time vanish before [the reader], and to throw the mind back, as by enchantment, into the happiest season of life."⁸⁰ Looking back upon his childhood, he states, "Time was when field

⁷⁶Hutchinson (ed.), op. cit., p. 498.

⁷⁷Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, II, 208.

⁷⁸Harper, op. cit., I, 40.

⁷⁹Edward Townsend Booth, God Made the Country, p. 174.

⁸⁰Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), op. cit., II, 411.

and watery cove / With modulated echoes rang."⁸¹ As a child,

Such hues from their celestial Urn
Were wont to stream before his eye,
Where'er it wondered in the morn
Of blissful infancy.⁸²

Wordsworth views his childhood, a time when he was a "naked savage," as a "blissful infancy," a "golden time." Yet, he explains that this youthful joy was "Full early lost," and remarks that "Tis past, the visionary splendour fades; / And night approaches with her shades."⁸³ He was soon to leave for Cambridge, London, and Paris, and he was to be unhappy in all of these places. The loud noises of the cities gave him headaches, and the closed quarters of the university made him feel trapped and nervous.⁸⁴ The memory of his idyllic childhood was to influence him later as a poet, because he did not view his own Golden Age as a mere poetic vogue, but as a glorious past that was irrevocably lost.⁸⁵

Wordsworth's primitivistic views were influenced not only by his childhood, but also by the shepherd types whom he knew so well throughout his life. His admiration for adult peasants is based on three constituents: he grew up among

⁸¹Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), op. cit., IV, 10.

⁸²Ibid., p. 12.

⁸³Ibid., p. 13.

⁸⁴Booth, op. cit., p. 171.

⁸⁵Leslie Nathan Broughton, The Theocritean Element in the Works of William Wordsworth, p. 98.

them; he esteemed their language; and he praised their child-like simplicity and honesty. In the "Preface to the Second Edition" of the Lyrical Ballads, he states that he desires to incorporate into his poetry "the real language of men,"⁸⁶ further explaining that

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently, may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men has been adopted . . . because from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions.⁸⁷

In other words, Wordsworth chooses to use the language of humble men because of its almost primitive simplicity and because it is not affected by the artificiality of the language of educated, city-bred men. He believes that "the increasing accumulation of men in cities" and the resultant spurious language are "now acting with a combined force to

⁸⁶ Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), op. cit., II, 384.

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 386-7.

blunt the discriminating powers of the mind."⁸⁸ But the dalesman retains the pure, concrete language of his period of youth which was led in isolation, much as a South Sea Islander lives in isolation, away from the "social vanity" of civilized men.

Although it may be an exaggeration to assert that Wordsworth copies the language of rustic men because it is the language of the Noble Savage, he almost always presents these rustics in his poetry as Noble Savages. Their simple way of life casts discredit upon the "achievements" of the human intellect. He finds that country folk are as good-hearted as people in high stations of life.⁸⁹ He says of them that their "kind of life of which I have seen much . . . is peaceable; and as innocent as (the frame of society and the practices of government being what they are) we have a right to expect."⁹⁰

"Peter Bell," for example, exemplifies Wordsworth's treatment of rustics. In this poem, he describes a simple pedlar, whose very being is softened and improved by the

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 389.

⁸⁹ E. C. Knowlton, "The Novelty of Wordsworth's 'Michael' as a Pastoral," PMLA, XXXV (1920), 432.

⁹⁰ Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, II, 223.

kindly hand of nature. In an address to Robert Southey, Wordsworth explains that this poem is "within the compass of poetic probability" and that it is about "the humblest departments of daily life."⁹¹ It depicts a change, a conversion, which overcomes Peter Bell, a totally unthinking and cruel man, who, although he has lived his life in the beauty of nature, is cold toward the forests, streams, and dales:

"He roved among the vales and streams,
In the green wood and hollow dell;
They were his dwellings night and day,--
But nature ne'er could find the way
Into the heart of Peter Bell."⁹²

. . .

"Of all that lead a lawless life,
Of all that love their lawless lives,
In city or in village small,
He was the wildest far of all:--
He had a dozen wedded wives."⁹³

His mind perverts the effluences of nature:

"To all the unshaped half-human thoughts
Which solitary Nature feeds
'Mid summer storms or winter's ice,
Had Peter joined whatever vice
The cruel city breeds."⁹⁴

One night, while taking what he thinks to be a short cut,

⁹¹ Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, II, 331.

⁹² Ibid., p. 340.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 341.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 342.

he loses his way and comes upon an ass that is standing by a stream. Thinking to steal the animal, Peter seizes its halter to lead it away. But the animal will not budge. In a fit on anger, he beats the ass until it collapses upon the ground. With sorrowful eyes, the animal stares directly at Peter and, then, turns to look into the stream by which it has fallen. In exhaltation and contempt, Peter once again strikes the beast only to be taken aback by its loud bray, the echo of which produced in " . . . the rocks / . . . something Peter did not like."⁹⁵ Here, nature seems not only to be warning Peter of his crime, but also to be appalled by his offense to nature:

The moon uneasy looked and dimmer,
The broad blue heavens appeared to glimmer,
And the rocks staggered all around.⁹⁶

In stooping to strike the beast, again, Peter glances at the same spot in the stream upon which the ass had stared and views a horrible sight:

Is it the moon's distorted face?
The ghost-like image of a cloud?
Is it a gallows there portrayed?
Is Peter of himself afraid?
Is it a coffin,--or a shroud?⁹⁷

The frightening visage is, in reality, the corpse of the man who had owned the ass. Peter shouts; his hair stands on end;

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 351.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 352.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 353.

and he faints. At length, he recovers to find that his attitude toward the animal, now, has strangely changed. He realizes that the ass was stubborn, not out of brutishness, but out of loyalty to his dead master. With a more wholesome intent, he mounts the animal, determined to find the dead man's abode. Now, begins an account of an unusual, almost supernatural, journey, that is to end with the permutation of Peter's character. He sees many strange sights--a boy weeping in a cave; a trail of blood which follows his path; a green chapel, similar to the one in which he married his sixth wife; a tavern, at which he earlier would have stopped, but which he now avoids; and, most strangely, a vision of a woman whom he had once forsaken. By the implications in this last vision, and by his recognition of past cruelty, "his heart is stung."⁹⁸ Nature, thus, tempers his mind, coaxing it to return to thoughts of past events:

Now, turned adrift into the past,
 He finds no solace in his course;
 Like planet-stricken men of yore,
 He trembles, smitten to the core
 By strong compunction and remorse.⁹⁹

With dismay and self-reproach, he is carried by the ass into a clearing, whereupon his heart is lightened and revived by the words of a Methodist minister: "Repent!

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 374.

⁹⁹Loc. cit.

repent! . . . though your sins be red as scarlet, / They shall be white as snow!"¹⁰⁰ Upon hearing these tidings of salvation, Peter experiences a complete conversion, and he acquires the innocence of a child:

Each fibre of his frame was weak;
Weak all the animal within;
But, in its helplessness, grew mild
And gentle as an infant child,
An infant that has known no sin.¹⁰¹

Nature has effected the change:

And now is Peter taught to feel
That man's heart is a holy thing;
And Nature, through a world of death,
Breathes into him a second breath,
More searching than the breath of spring.¹⁰²

Thus, "Peter Bell" demonstrate's Wordsworth's belief that a person even of humble birth may learn of all of the higher perceptions and feelings usually ascribed to those of noble birth.

In the poem "Michael," one may observe Wordsworth's conscious effort to depict Michael as a symbol of the noble shepherd, living a covetable existence in the heart of nature and Luke, Michael's son, as a symbol of the destruction, by the wicked city, of a good and innocent being.¹⁰³ Although

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 376.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 377.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 380.

¹⁰³ Hoxie Neale Fairchild, The Romantic Quest, p. 154.

old, Michael is a strong and frugal man who commands the respect of the entire vale. He has a "blind love" for the green valleys, streams, and hills among which he works. More than anything, he loves his son, Luke, because ". . . more than all other gifts / That earth can offer to declining man, / [A child] Brings hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts."¹⁰⁴ As Luke grows older, his father teaches him all that must be known about the care of the flock. The two live in mutual love in Grasmere Vale until the arrival of distressing news--Michael must unexpectedly pay the forfeiture on his property. He has no choice but to send Luke, now eighteen, to London for work. For a short time, Luke does well in the city, but he begins to relax in his duties until

. . . at length,
 He in the dissolute city gave himself
 To evil courses: ignominy and shame
 Fell on him, so that he was driven at last
 To seek a hiding-place beyond the seas.¹⁰⁵

"Michael" shows that Wordsworth's idealization of the country and deprecation of the city were influenced by the Golden Age myth, which emphasizes mankind's original innocence before the development of cities.¹⁰⁶ To Wordsworth,

¹⁰⁴Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, II, 85.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁰⁶Booth, op. cit., p. 202.

cities stood for chaos and unnatural restraint:

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.¹⁰⁷

It has been noted that in his description of cities, Wordsworth was somewhat careless, yet his descriptions of natural objects are invariably done with punctilious care.¹⁰⁸ He believes that an over-crowded population leads to vice and corruption, whereas a sparse population (men on their own land) tends towards innocence through minds occupied fully with pleasant employment.¹⁰⁹

Primitivism, also, colors "The Brothers," a tale that revolves around Leonard, who, at the age of sixteen, left his brother, James, in order to become a mariner. Leonard returns, years later, to speak with a country priest concerning the fate of his brother. On his way to the priest's cottage, he passes through the vale of his childhood, recalling the joys of his youth and that

¹⁰⁷Hutchinson, (ed.), op. cit., p. 546.

¹⁰⁸Harper, op. cit., II, 106.

¹⁰⁹Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, II, 226.

. . . happy time
 When, whether it blew foul or fair, they two
 Were brother-shepherds on their native hills.¹¹⁰

But he soon perceives that this early time is now gone and that
 all has been altered:

. . . he walked
 Through fields which once had been well known to him:
 And ah what joy this recollection now
 Sent to his heart! he lifted up his eyes,
 And, looking round, imagined that he saw
 Strange alteration wrought on every side
 Among the woods and fields, and that the rocks,¹¹¹
 And everlasting hills themselves were changed.¹¹¹

Upon reaching the cottage, Leonard discourses with the priest
 about the boys' past, when they were "Like roe-bucks" that
 "went bounding o'er the hills," and when they "played like
 two young ravens on the crags."¹¹² The priest relates to
 Leonard the history of James, telling him how James, an
 orphan, moved from family to family, how he remained a child
 of nature, how he upheld his loyalty to Leonard whom he
 thought dead, and how he, a frail boy, slipped from a summit
 and fell to his death. Leonard solemnly leaves the priest to
 meditate tearfully upon his loss and upon the changes wrought
 by time and maturity:

It was not long ere Leonard reached a grove
 That overhung the road: he there stopped short,

¹¹⁰ Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, 11, 3.

¹¹¹ Loc. cit.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 8.

And, sitting down beneath the trees, reviewed
 All that the priest had said: his early years
 Were with him:--his long absence, cherished hopes,
 And thoughts which had been his an hour before,
 All pressed on him with such a weight, that now,
 This vale, where he had been so happy, seemed,
 A place in which he could not bear to live.¹¹³

In looking to his past and contrasting it to the present, Leonard reflects all mankind's disillusionment over the loss of a Golden Age.

In Wordsworth's own life, he treats the dalesmen as his equal:

One of our neighbors, who lives as I have described, was yesterday walking with me, and as we were pacing on, talking about indifferent matters, by the side of a Brook, he suddenly said to me with great spirit and a lively smile: "I like to walk where I can hear the sound of a Beck" (the word as you know in our dialect for a brook). I cannot but think that this man, without being conscious of it, has had many devout feelings connected with the appearances which have presented themselves to him in his employment as a Shepherd, and the pleasure of his heart at that moment was an acceptable offering to the divine Being.¹¹⁴

Both William and Dorothy were friendly with their shepherd neighbors and often aided them in numerous ways. They were known to have fed beggars and poor children, and their aid was given sympathetically.¹¹⁵

The American Indian is treated poetically by Wordsworth in much the same way as was the shepherd. In Book VII of the

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 13.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 351.

¹¹⁵ Harper, op. cit., II, 408.

Prelude, he asks the reader to

Think, how the everlasting streams and woods,
 Stretched and still stretching far and wide,
 exalt
 The roving Indian, on his desert sands.¹¹⁶

One may also remember that he compared his own youthful days to that of an Indian child. In "The Blind Highland Boy" he writes, "Ye have seen / The Indian's bow, his arrows keen, / . . . Gifts which, for wonder or delight, / Are brought in ships from afar."¹¹⁷ "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman," which exalts the Indian's stoical demeanor in the face of imminent death, recalls the similar stoicism of the shepherd:

The thought of death sits easy on the man
 Who has been born and dies among the mountains.¹¹⁸

"Ruth" concerns a youth, by no means a Noble Savage, who has recently arrived from Georgia dressed "with splendid feathers" which he had bought "from the Cherokees."¹¹⁹ The youth had roamed with the Indians and had acquired some of their impetuous manners. Whether or not Wordsworth consciously attempted to present the shepherd and the Indian as Noble Savages, he must have been aware of the fact that they are

¹¹⁶Hutchinson (ed.), op. cit., p. 547.

¹¹⁷Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, III, 91.

¹¹⁸Ibid., II, 6.

¹¹⁹Ibid., II, 228.

all motivated by the same disposition to abhor corrupt civilization, to live in a primitive state of natural simplicity, and to stand as evidence that man's earlier existence, of which they are residual proof, was best.¹²⁰ Wordsworth often presents his view of the contemporary world in a way that is similar to Hesiod's concept of the Iron Age, the last and most corrupt stage of man's development. For example, he writes that "The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: / Little we see in Nature that is ours; / We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!"¹²¹ He implies that modern man has lost his primal relationship with nature through his misguided love for material wealth. The "Sacred Nurseries of blooming youth" have "suffered from Time's gnawing tooth."¹²² And it is man's intellect which Wordsworth blames for this loss:

One impulse from a vernal wood
 May teach you more of man,
 Of moral evil and of good,
 Than all the sages can.

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
 Our meddling intellect
 Mis-shapes the beautiful forms of things:--
 We murder to dissect.¹²³

¹²⁰ Hoxie Neale Fairchild, The Romantic Quest, p. 153.

¹²¹ Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, III, 18.

¹²² Ibid., III, 39.

¹²³ Ibid., IV, 57.

In one of his letters, he depicts contemporary England as having reached its lowest ebb:

This country is in fact fallen as low in point of moral philosophy (and of course political) as it is possible for any country to fall.¹²⁴

Childhood--the Golden Age--passes through the civilized world--the Iron Age--and travels in "sinless progress, through a world / By sorrow darkened . . . and by care disturbed."¹²⁵

It would be incorrect to call Wordsworth anti-intellectual, but he does state that books are "a dull and endless strife" and that man has had . . . "enough of Science and of Art."¹²⁶ He is opposed to schooling for the very young rather preferring them to be placed in natural surroundings. He says that the "diet" which schools offer "is not the natural diet for infant and juvenile minds" and that most of it is "mummery."¹²⁷ As opposed to natural education in a wholesome environment, schools teach "conceit, and presumption, and vanity . . . , and hypocrisy."¹²⁸ So

¹²⁴Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, II, 264.

¹²⁵Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, II, 175.

¹²⁶Ibid., IV, 57.

¹²⁷Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, IV, 330.

¹²⁸Loc. cit.

far as children are concerned, . . . "their condition in school is artificial."¹²⁹ In a letter written to a woman about the vanity of her daughter, Wordsworth writes that a child prospers best where it is "least noticed and least made of," that is, where it "received the least cultivation."¹³⁰ He advises that

. . . if the child be not constrained too much, and be left sufficiently to her own pursuits, and be not too anxiously tended, and have not her mind planted over by art with likings that do not spring naturally up in it, this [vanity] will by the liveliness of her independent enjoyment almost entirely disappear.¹³¹

Thus, Wordsworth advocates a return to nature, the best teacher, and an avoidance of man-made, artificial institutions. After all, he asks, "Have I not reason to lament / What man has made of man?"¹³²

His treatment of shepherds and Indians, which reflects the Noble Savage tradition, reaches a kind of poetic fulfillment in his presentation of childhood. For him, childhood is the real world.¹³³ What the Golden Age is to humanity, the blissful days of youth are to responsibility-

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 332.

¹³⁰ Ibid., II, 102.

¹³¹ Loc. cit.

¹³² Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, IV, 58.

¹³³ Laurie Magnus, "Wordsworth's Children," Cornhill Magazine, LXIX (December, 1930), 755.

laden man.¹³⁴ He sees the entire history of the race repeated in the development of each individual. Wordsworth observes in the microcosm of the individual all that the ancient writers had recorded about the macrocosm of man on earth. Just as his shepherds represent a strong and elemental way of life that was too rapidly disappearing, childhood represents the true power of man, which also must change and weaken.¹³⁵ In his depiction of childhood, Wordsworth fuses the child and the Noble Savage:

Star-guided contemplations move
Through space, though calm, not raised above
Prognostics that ye [presentiments] rule;
The naked Indian of the wild,
And haply, too, the cradled Child,
Are pupils of your school.¹³⁶

Ryan points out that Wordsworth is probably the first poet to make children a fit subject matter for art.¹³⁷ Although Homer makes a few references to children, Greek literature is practically void of any serious literary treatment of childhood. The Old Testament seldom speaks of children. The child played a very small part in the art of the ancients

¹³⁴Broughton, op. cit., p. 91.

¹³⁵Ibid., p. 98.

¹³⁶Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, II, 306.

¹³⁷Calvin T. Ryan, "The Child in Wordsworth's Poetry," The South Atlantic Quarterly, XLI (April, 1942), 193.

because of their lowly attitude towards it. It was not until Christ that a great figure spoke often about children. Although Chaucer relates the story of a child in "The Tale of the Man of Lawe," and poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries mentioned the child, childhood was not fully treated in English literature until Wordsworth.¹³⁸

At the hands of his critics, however, Wordsworth paid dearly for his idealization of such simple people as children and shepherds. In the August 21, 1814, issue of The Examiner, William Hazlitt writes:

We can go along with him [Wordsworth] while he is the subject of his own narrative, but we take leave of him when he makes pedlars and ploughmen his heroes and the interpreters of his sentiment.¹³⁹

In the November, 1814 edition of the Edinburgh Review, Francis Jeffrey asks:

What but the most wretched and provoking perversity of taste and judgment could induce anyone to place his chosen advocate of wisdom and virtue in so absurd and fantastic a condition [as a pedlar]?¹⁴⁰

The critics were stunned and appalled by Wordsworth's emphasis on the humble in society. Up to his time, apparently, fictitious characters, according to literary criticism, had to be of a certain rank in society. The critics confused

¹³⁸ Loc. cit.

¹³⁹ Quoted in George McLean Harper, William Wordsworth: His Life, Works, and Influence, II, 238.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 241.

poetry with children for its subject matter with poetry that might be termed "childish." However, Wordsworth weathered the obtuse criticisms and produced the cult of the child.

Wordsworth desires that the instinctive love of nature found in childhood be extended into adult life:

My heart leaps up when I behold
 A rainbow in the sky:
 So was it when my life began;
 So it is now I am a man;
 So be it when I shall grow old,
 Or let me die! ¹⁴¹

In "The Fountain," he describes an old friend, Matthew, who reminisces about childhood joy:

"My eyes are dim with childish tears,
 My heart is idly stirred,
 For the same sound is in my ears
 Which in those days I heard.

"Thus fares it still in our decay:
 And yet the wiser mind
 Moans less for what age takes away
 Than what it leaves behind."¹⁴²

And, as all boys grow into men, " . . . [they] are pressed by heavy laws," and " . . . glad no more, / [They] wear a face of joy, because / [They] have been glad of yore."¹⁴³ To Wordsworth, childhood was as carefree and undetached

¹⁴¹ Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, I, 226.

¹⁴² Ibid., IV, 72.

¹⁴³ Loc. cit.

from responsibility as the short life of a butterfly:

Stay near me [butterfly]--do not take thy flight!
 A little longer stay in sight!
 Much converse do I find in thee,
 Historian of my infancy!
 Float near me; do not yet depart!
 Dead times revive in thee.¹⁴⁴

Indeed, he raises childhood to a spiritual level, in a sonnet addressed to the infant Mary Monkhouse, when he writes "That one enrapt with gazing on her face / . . . Might learn to picture, for the eye of faith, / The Virgin, as she shone with kindred light, / A nursling couched upon her mother's knee."¹⁴⁵ The child becomes an example of holy contentment. Wordsworth desires to revitalize society through the child, just as Tacitus desired to renew Roman society by contrasting it to savage man.¹⁴⁶ In the "Characteristics of a Child Three Years Old," Wordsworth incorporates into his poem all of the child's finest attributes: . . . "loving, wild, innocent, happy, and all-sufficient."¹⁴⁷ It is as wild and wanton as nature herself:

Light are her sallies as the tripping fawn's
 Forth-startled from the fern where she lay couched;

¹⁴⁴ Loc. cit.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., III, 46.

¹⁴⁶ Adolph Charles Babenroth, English Childhood: Wordsworth's Treatment of Childhood in the Light of English Poetry, p. 302.

¹⁴⁷ Ernest De Selincourt, Wordsworth's Poetical Works, I, 229.

Unthought-of, unexpected, as the stir
Of the soft breeze ruffling the meadow-flowers.¹⁴⁸

The child is like an innocent animal:

Her joy is like an instinct, joy
Of kitten, bird, or summer fly;
She dances, runs without an aim,
She chatters in her ecstasy.¹⁴⁹

The child's mind is not only innocent, it is also uncluttered by the rational, analytical, and unnatural practices of the adult mind. The child's vision is based upon faith; the man's, upon empirical knowledge. Because the child's mind is not muddled by convention, what it observes is true, and the adult, beclouded by reason, can learn from him. In "Anecdote for Fathers," Wordsworth relates a conversation between a father and his five-year-old son. Having moved from Kilve, on the sea, to Liswyn farm, the father asks his boy "had you rather be, / . . . On Kilve's smooth shore, by the green sea, / Or here at Liswyn Farm?" The boy simply answers, . . . "at Kilve I'd rather be / Than here at Liswyn farm." The father is made distraught by his son's answer and demands a reason for the boy's preference for his earlier home, but the boy has no rational answer. Out of impatience, the father orders, three times, that his son give him some logical cause for these feelings.

¹⁴⁸Loc. cit.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., p. 231.

The boy, forced into lying by the pressure of the father's empirical demands, spots a weather vane upon the house and replies, "At Kilve there was no weather-cock; / And thats the reason why." Immediately sensing that, as an adult, he has forced his child to lie, the father meditates:

O dearest, dearest boy! my heart
 For better lore would seldom yearn,
 Could I but teach the hundredth part
 Of what from thee I learn.¹⁵⁰

Wordsworth further expands the dichotomy between adult and child in "The Idiot Boy," a ballad of a mother, Betty Foy, who must send her idiot child, Johnny, for a doctor. Because Betty's husband is away, and because she must remain with an ailing neighbor, Susan Gale, Johnny is the only available messenger. Although one is not told Johnny's age, he is old enough to ride upon their gentle horse and is, therefore, somewhat mature. But the significance of his character, no matter what his age, is that, as an idiot, his mind has been arrested so that he remains in a perpetual state of boyhood. It is this simple or primitive state of mind which Wordsworth constantly contrasts to the orderly workings of the mother's adult mind. For example, she logically describes the route which her boy must traverse:

. . . he must post without delay
 Across the bridge and through the dale,

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 243.

And by the church, and o'er the down,
To bring a Doctor from the town . . .¹⁵¹

Apparently, she leaves no room for error:

And Betty o'er and o'er has told
The Boy, who is her best delight,
Both what to follow, what to shun,
What do, and what to leave undone,
How turn to left, and how to right.¹⁵²

But the boy's mind is in a different sphere. Incapable of rationalizing his mother's advice, his mind perceives only a childlike joy in his freedom in the cool night air. No sooner does he mount his horse than he is overcome by a boyish delight:

But when the Pony moved his legs,
Oh! then for the poor Idiot Boy!
For joy he cannot hold the bridle,
For joy his head and heels are idle,
He's idle all for very joy.¹⁵³

In traveling a short distance, he seems to have forgotten all of his mother's exhortations, if, indeed, he ever understood them originally:

His heart it was so full of glee
That, till full fifty yards were gone,
He quite forgot his holly whip,
And all his skill in horsemanship:
Oh! happy, happy, happy John.¹⁵⁴

Betty expects Johnny's return in two hours. But after five

¹⁵¹Ibid., II, 69.

¹⁵²Loc. cit.

¹⁵³Ibid., p. 70.

¹⁵⁴Loc. cit.

hours, he has not yet arrived with the doctor. Beside herself with fear, Betty sets out to find the boy. At this point, Wordsworth once again exemplifies the operation of the adult mind and ironically pictures it, in all of its mature "wisdom," as distorting the truth. In her distraught state, she visualizes only evil: perhaps, Johnny has climbed a tree and will remain there until death; perhaps, gypsies have kidnapped him; or, perhaps, ghosts have murdered him. Betty's mind moves from distortion to iniquity when she condemns the "wicked Pony," which she knows to be the gentlest and most trustworthy mount in the entire vale, for misleading her boy, and when she rails against Susan Gale, whom she normally recognizes as her closest friend and neighbor, and who is the cause of the boy's mission:

"If Susan had not been so ill,
Alas! I should have had him still,
My Johnny, till my dying day."¹⁵⁵

From a vulgar condemnation of the innocent, her mind then proceeds to consider the ultimate shortcomings of the reasoning intellect, reflecting despair. This poem is, therefore, a satire on the manner in which the mature mind, through complexity of thoughts and emotions, falls into a state of dejection:

Poor Betty now has lost all hope,
Her thoughts are bent on deadly sin,
A green-grown pond she just has past,

¹⁵⁵Ibid., p. 74.

And from the brink she hurries fast,
Lest she should drown herself therein.¹⁵⁶

Certainly, the contemplation of suicide is unknown to the retarded, happy child. It is to Johnny's benefit that he is only "half-wise,"¹⁵⁷ that "He's not so wise as some folks be"¹⁵⁸ After describing the common, nonetheless abnormal, mind of the adult, Wordsworth immediately contrasts it to the joyful imagination of Johnny, who envisions himself as picking stars from the heavens for his mother, and as a "dreadful hunter" in a "desert wilderness."¹⁵⁹ At last, Betty finds her boy in perfect health and joyfully greets him. In the description of their return trip to their home, Wordsworth, once again, demonstrates the disparity between the processes of their individual minds. Betty asks her son perfectly logical questions, at least so far as the mature mind is concerned:

. . . "Tell us, Johnny, do,
Where all this long night you have been,
What you have heard, what you have seen:
And, Johnny, mind you tell us true."¹⁶⁰

Even though Johnny comprehends these questions, his mind

¹⁵⁶Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., p. 73.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., p. 75.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., p. 80.

still operates on a childish, instinctual level, so that mind and imagination are one. Throughout the night, he has perceived nature, not in a rational manner, but in a primitive, imaginative light. To her questions, he happily answers:

"The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,
And the sun did shine so cold!"¹⁶¹

Although one must admit that Johnny confuses an owl with a rooster and the moon with the sun, one must also admit that Wordsworth decidedly makes the boy's ignorant, non-abstract cognition of nature preferable to the mother's mature, yet absurd and fearful display in the presence of nature.

In "We Are Seven," one also observes Wordsworth's contrast between adult intellectuality and child simplicity. A young girl, when asked how many children are in her family, replies that there are seven. "And where are they?" asks the passer-by. She answers that two live in Conway, two are at sea, and two are buried in the church-yard. The visitor is amazed. Certainly, there are only five children in the family if two are dead. He continues, therefore, to quiz her:

"How many are you then," . . .
"If they two are in heaven?"
Quick was the little Maid's reply,
"O Master! we are seven."

¹⁶¹ Loc. cit.

"But they are dead; those two are dead!
 Their spirits are in heaven!"
 'Twas throwing words away; for still
 The little Maid would have her will,
 And said, "Nay, we are seven!"¹⁶²

For the little girl, her dead brother and sister are still alive. All of the visitor's logical questions and systematized concepts are meaningless to her. Her knowledge seems to derive from a different source than that of the adult. The child has a better hold upon reality, through its perceptions and unsophisticated instincts, than the adult.¹⁶³ The child seems to have a feeling for the eternality of things, as man, with his cares and responsibilities, does not.¹⁶⁴ But as he grows older, time seems to cover the internal with external appearances, which belie the inner oneness with which the child was once acquainted.¹⁶⁵ Thus, Wordsworth suggests that, if a man desires to awaken from his civilized lethargy, he must begin anew as a child.¹⁶⁶ Indeed, Wordsworth intimates that if one will merely allow himself, although an adult, completely to love and trust in a child, figuratively put oneself into the hands of an

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 238.

¹⁶³ Harper, op. cit., II, 123.

¹⁶⁴ N. R. Niblett, "Wordsworth's Study of Childhood," London Quarterly and Holborn Review, CLXIX (January, 1944), 49.

¹⁶⁵ Loc cit.

¹⁶⁶ Babenroth, op. cit., p. 338.

infant, he will receive comfort and even grace:

The high crag cannot work me harm,
Nor leaping torrents when they howl;
The babe I carry on my arm,
He saves for me my precious soul 167

For it is the child only who unwittingly receives grace from
the immutable emanations of permanent forms:

Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!
Thou Soul, that art the Eternity of thought!
And giv'st to forms and images a breath
And everlasting motion! not in vain,
By day or star-light, thus from my first dawn
Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me
The passions that build up our human soul;
Not with the mean and vulgar works of man;
But with high objects, with enduring things 168

Just as man looks to the Noble Savage as a symbol of his
potential innocence, he also looks to the dream of childhood
as a solace for his disenchantment with adult life.¹⁶⁹

Wordsworth almost paraphrases the tenets ascribed to the
Noble Savage myth when he writes that all men desire

. . . to supply in another state of existence
the deficiencies of this, and to carry still
nearer to perfection whatever we admire in our
present condition.¹⁷⁰

In "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,"
he looks back to his childhood in the same way that

¹⁶⁷Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, II, 109.

¹⁶⁸Ibid., I, 248.

¹⁶⁹Broughton, op. cit., p. 91.

¹⁷⁰Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, IV, 134.

eighteenth-century poets and men of letters looked to the Noble Savage. Just as the Noble Savage myth assuages men who live in filthy cities, Wordsworth's memories of childhood comfort him "in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din / Of towns and cities."¹⁷¹ As a child, he displays the primitive characteristics of an animal: "like a roe / I bounded O'er the mountains."¹⁷² He speaks of his coarse pleasures and their "glad animal movements." As a youth the forms of the mountains and woods were "An appetite: a feeling and a love, / That had no need of a remoter charm / By thought supplied."¹⁷³ He admires the Noble Savage because of the remote and wild places in which he lives; he idealizes the child because of the "wild ecstasies" it finds in the presence of nature.¹⁷⁴ Even though Wordsworth cherishes his childhood, one cannot accuse him of exhibiting a sense of false sentimentalism. His view of his childhood days is not distorted by a deceptive memory, for the light of that lost time shines through the facade of maturity and illuminates both stages.¹⁷⁵ Perhaps,

¹⁷¹ Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, II, 260.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 261.

¹⁷³ Loc. cit.

¹⁷⁴ Babenroth, op. cit., p. 313.

¹⁷⁵ Andrew Young, The Poet and the Landscape, p. 162.

there is a "recompense" for the loss of childhood, but all that is ennobling of man is to be found in man's earliest years. Indeed, Wordsworth often associates the word, "noble," with children in the same manner as earlier writers associated "noble" with savages. For example, in a letter to Richard Wordsworth (December 12, 1803) he writes of the birth of his son John:

I wish you could see your nephew and Godson; he is indeed a noble Child.¹⁷⁶

A month later, he writes to Francis Wrangham, "I have a son; and a noble one too he is, as ever was seen."¹⁷⁷

In the Prelude, one may trace the stages of Wordsworth's life, with all of their roots in childhood. Like "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," it is autobiographical. Significantly, the Prelude may be divided into five stages, in the same manner in which Hesiod divided the development of mankind into the Golden, Silver, Brazen, Heroic, and Iron ages. They are childhood, boyhood, youth, early manhood, and maturity.¹⁷⁸ Childhood is the time of sensation and innocence:

¹⁷⁶Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, I, 354.

¹⁷⁷Ibid., p. 355.

¹⁷⁸Melvin Radar, Wordsworth: A Philosophical Approach, p. 85.

Blest the infant Babe,
 (For with my best conjecture I would trace
 Our Being's earthly progress,) blest the Babe,
 Nursed in his Mother's arms, who sinks to sleep,
 Rocked on his Mother's breast; who with his soul
 Drinks in the feelings of his Mother's eye!
 For him, in one dear Presence, there exists
 A virtue which irradiates and exalts
 Objects through widest intercourse of sense.

. . .

. . . Such, verily, is the first
 Poetic spirit of our human life,
 By uniform control of after years,
 In most, abated or suppressed; in some,
 Through every change of growth and of decay,
 Pre-eminent till death.¹⁷⁹

The child is . . . "an inmate of this active universe: /
 For feeling has to him imparted power / That through the
 growing faculties of sense / Doth like an agent of the one
 great Mind / Create, creator and receiver both."¹⁸⁰ The
 child feels the benevolence of its mother and its natural
 surroundings, just as early man lived peacefully with all
 creatures when the world was young.¹⁸¹ The early vitality
 of the mind is excited by sense perceptions because abstraction
 has not yet intervened between natural objects and the mind.
 For example, in "Nutting," Wordsworth recollects a day in
 his boyhood when he was so attuned to the presence of nature

¹⁷⁹ Hutchinson (ed.), op. cit., p. 505.

¹⁸⁰ Loc. cit.

¹⁸¹ Margaret Fitzgerald, First Follow Nature: Primitivism in English Poetry, p. 10.

that he not only grieved in her setting, but also learned of the permeating spirit that resides there. It was a sunny day, producing a care-free mind:

In that sweet mood when pleasure loves to pay
Tribute to ease; and, of its joy secure
The heart luxuriates with indifferent things,
Wasting its kindliness on stocks and stones,
And on the vacant air.¹⁸²

Although in a "sweet mood," he suddenly arises, and, in the spirit of unthinking youth, grabs the branch of a tree, and, breaking it, throws it to the earth, destroying the serenity of the once quiet bower. Immediately, nature seems to inform him that this destructive act was wrong:

. . . unless I now
Confound my present feelings with the past,
Ere from the mutilated bower I turned
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings,
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees, and saw the intruding sky.¹⁸³

His mind, uncluttered by adult rationalization, learns from the incident:

. . . move along these shades
In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand
Touch--for there is a spirit in the woods.¹⁸⁴

Wordsworth makes clear that this "spirit" is not a chimera, but an external manifestation which operates, although in an unknowable manner, directly upon the child's mind. Wordsworth also describes this phenomenon in "There Was a Boy":

¹⁸² Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, II, 212.

¹⁸³ Loc. cit.

¹⁸⁴ Loc. cit.

. . . the visible scene
 Would enter unawares into the boy's mind
 With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
 Its woods, and that uncertain heaven received
 Into the bosom of the steady lake.¹⁸⁵

However, the development of mind is usually impeded by "uniform control." As a child, "the common range of visible things / Grew dear" to Wordsworth, and he "loved the sun."¹⁸⁶ But, eventually he explains, "Those incidental charms which first attached / [His] heart to rural objects, day by day / Grew weaker."¹⁸⁷

In much the same way as a savage is awed and frightened by the powers of nature, real or imagined, Wordsworth, as a boy, experienced fear among the lonely hills. After stealing birds that were caught in snares that did not belong to him, he says,

I heard among the solitary hills
 Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
 Of undistinguishable motion, steps
 Almost as silent as the turf they trod.¹⁸⁸

On another evening, he found a small boat tied to a willow tree and he stole it. As he rowed across the lake,

. . . a huge peak, black and huge,
 As if with voluntary power instinct
 Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
 And growing still in stature the grim shape
 Towered up between me and the stars, and still,

¹⁸⁵Ibid., p. 206.

¹⁸⁶Hutchinson (ed.), op. cit., p. 504.

¹⁸⁷Ibid., p. 505.

¹⁸⁸Ibid., p. 498.

For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me.

He returned the boat, but recounts,

. . . after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.¹⁸⁹

Nature kept the young Wordsworth virtuous through its ministry of fear, and the Noble Savage was also thought to be just and innocent because of his close contact with nature. But, at this point, Wordsworth does not consciously use the Noble Savage as a symbol of man's natural instincts impressed by nature, for here is the child, which all men, because of their pasts, know intimately as living in harmony with nature's laws.¹⁹⁰ Wordsworth believes that

Youth maintains,
In all conditions of society,
Communion more direct and intimate
With Nature, --hence, ofttimes, with reason too--
Than age or manhood, even.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 499.

¹⁹⁰ Babenroth, op. cit., p. 378.

¹⁹¹ Hutchinson (ed.), op. cit., p. 569.

Nature impresses itself upon Wordsworth's young mind not only through fear, but also through pleasure:

Oh, many a time have I, a five years' child,
In a small mill-race severed from his stream,
Made one long bathing of a summer's day;
Basked in the sun, and plunged and basked again
Alternate, all a summer's day¹⁹²

While climbing a precipitous ridge, he seems to be addressed by the wind:

With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ear! the sky seemed not a sky
Of earth--and with what motion moved the clouds!¹⁹³

He speaks of his relationship with nature as a communion that operates most completely in solitude:

Nor was this fellowship vouchsafe to me
With stinted kindness. In November days,
When vapours rolling down the valley made
A lonely scene more lonesome, among woods,
At noon and 'mid the calm of summer nights,
When, by the margin of the trembling lake,
Beneath the gloomy hills homeward I went
In solitude, such intercourse was mine;
Mine was it in the fields both day and night,
And by the waters, all the summer long.¹⁹⁴

On winter days in his youth, he often leaves his skating party consciously to seek a solitude with nature:

Not seldom from the uproar I retired
Into a silent bay, or sportively
Glanced sideways, leaving the tumultuous throng,
To cut across the reflex of a star

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 498.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 499.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 500.

That fled, and, flying still before me, gleamed
Upon the glassy plain¹⁹⁵

In this seclusion, nature has a sense movement, even though
he has stopped skating:

. . . the solitary cliffs
Wheeled by me--even as if the earth had rolled
With visible motion her diurnal round!
Behind me did they stretch in solemn train,
Feebler and feebler, and I stood and watched,
Till all was tranquil as a dreamless sleep.¹⁹⁶

Looking back, Wordsworth sees his own childhood, because
of his intuitive understanding of nature, bathed in a
sunlight which, through the years, has grown dim:

Those recollected hours . . . have the charm
Of visionary things, those lovely forms
And sweet sensations . . . throw back our life,
And almost make remotest infancy
A visible scene, on which the sun is shining.¹⁹⁷

In 1793, when England declared war upon revolutionary
France, Wordsworth, emotionally distraught, temporarily
rejected his earlier intuitive love of nature and accepted
the extreme rationalism taught by Godwin.¹⁹⁸ His childhood
experiences ceased to have meaning for him, as he deprecated
any non-rational mental exercise. Later, he views this period

¹⁹⁵ Loc. cit.

¹⁹⁶ Loc. cit.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 502.

¹⁹⁸ Paul Turner, "The Parable of the Idiot Boy,"
English Studies, XLI (December, 1960), 370.

of fanatic rationalism as an illness.¹⁹⁹ The cure for this mental anguish was accomplished by his sister, Dorothy, who spoke to him in a "sudden admonition" and promised him . . . "That brightness would return."²⁰⁰ This fact largely explains what Wordsworth wrote many years later: "He [Coleridge] and my beloved sister are the two beings to whom my intellect is most indebted . . ."²⁰¹ It is clear that Dorothy maintained throughout her lifetime the childlike awe of nature which William had temporarily lost. He could see in her "wild eyes" the "past existence" of his own youth.²⁰² A few years after Wordsworth was recalled to England from France (1792), he moved into Dove Cottage, Townend, in Grasmere. Dorothy joined him, and her presence unquestionably aided his most productive years, approximately from 1799 to 1815. During the years 1802-1804, he produced "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." This poem is the epitome of Wordsworth's analogy hitherto drawn between the Noble Savage and the child.

Wordsworth owes his basic theme of the "Ode"--that of pre-existence--to Plato. Originally, the poem was simply

¹⁹⁹Ibid., p. 371.

²⁰⁰Hutchinson (ed.), op. cit., p. 573.

²⁰¹Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, V, 625.

²⁰²Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, II, 263.

entitled as "Ode." However, Henry Robinson suggested to Wordsworth that he give it a more descriptive title, because many readers had already misunderstood the contents.²⁰³ Acting upon Robinson's advice, Wordsworth deliberately entitled the work, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." The new title condensed the meaning of the poem and put its theme unquestionably in the foreground.²⁰⁴ Wordsworth's knowledge of Plato is easily demonstrated. Even if he were not exposed to Platonic philosophy at Cambridge, Coleridge, himself a zealous Platonist, certainly discussed Plato's theories with him.²⁰⁵ Also, Wordsworth had his own copy of the Greek lexicon, which contained the Dialogues.²⁰⁶ Furthermore, many of Plato's works were found later in his Rydal Mount library.²⁰⁷ Although he may not have read Plato extensively, he surely had read the "Phaedo."²⁰⁸ Concerning pre-existence in the "Ode," Wordsworth dictated the following thoughts to his friend, Isabella Fenwick:

. . . having in the Poem regarded it [the dream-like quality of childhood] as presumptive evidence

²⁰³Rader, op. cit., p. 168.

²⁰⁴Loc. cit.

²⁰⁵Elliott A. White, "Wordsworth's Knowledge of Plato," Modern Language Notes, XXXIII (April, 1918), 247.

²⁰⁶Ibid., p. 248.

²⁰⁷Rader., op. cit., p. 72.

²⁰⁸White., op. cit., p. 248.

of a prior state of existence, I think it right to protest against a conclusion, which has given pain to some good and pious persons, that I meant to inculcate such a belief. It is far too shadowy a notion to be recommended to faith, as more than an element in our instincts of immortality. But let us bear in mind that, though the idea is not advanced in revelation, there is nothing there to contradict it, and the fall of Man presents an analogy in its favor. Accordingly, a pre-existent state has entered into the popular creeds of many nations; and, among all persons acquainted with classic literature, is known as an ingredient in Platonic philosophy.²⁰⁹

Wordsworth's sonnet, entitled "Persuasion," suggests a Platonic scheme of pre-existence. It is his poetic paraphrasing of a famous passage from the "Conversion of Edwin," a part of Bede's Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum.

Wordsworth compares the span of man's life to the swiftness with which a sparrow, entering a window from the cold night wind, passes through a warm banquet hall and flies out the opposite side into the chilly blast. The sparrow is not only a symbol of the transitoriness of life, but also of the pre-existence and post-existence of the soul:

"But whence it came we know not, nor behold
Whither it goes. Even such, that transient Thing,
The human Soul; not utterly unknown
While in the Body lodged, her warm abode;
But from what world She came, what woe or weal
On her departure waits, no tongue both shown"210

Plato's theory of the pre-existence of the soul is also to be found in his three dialogues entitled "Phaedrus," "Apology,"

²⁰⁹ Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, IV, 464.

²¹⁰ Ibid., III, 349.

and "Phaedo." In these works, Plato distinguishes between the perfect world (comparable to heaven) of the soul and the material world of the flesh. The soul is eternal; that is, it has always been and will always be. At birth, the soul leaves the perfect world and enters the body, to reside there until the flesh dies. Because the soul has had a previous existence, it is possible for man occasionally to intuit his immortality. In an almost primitivistic sense, the man can look back to an earlier era (heaven), and see in it a time of innocent, untroubled perfection. Undoubtedly, the first stanza of the "Ode" is marked by Platonic primitivism:

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 things²¹¹ which I have seen I now can see
No more.

What past, primitive life represents to society, Wordsworth's lost childhood represents to him. All facets of nature were divine, nearly Edenic, when he was young. But he has since lost, as an adult, a vital primary perception of nature's unity.²¹² The ideas, "There was a time" and "It is not now as it hath been of yore," clearly demonstrate the fact that

²¹¹Ibid., p. 279.

²¹²Lois Whitney, Primitivism and the Idea of Progress, p. 294.

this "Ode" is colored by his concept of the Golden Age myth.²¹³ In the same way that the Noble Savage symbolizes a lost state, childhood stands for the fact that . . . "there hath past away a glory from the earth."²¹⁴ The instinctive joys of childhood degenerate into the intellect of man's maturity.²¹⁵ Now, a tree and "a single Field" both "speak of something that is gone": Wordsworth asks,

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?²¹⁶

Eighteenth-century Englishmen observed in savages such as Omai a simplicity and forthrightness which they invariably contrasted to their own complicated, hypocritical states of existence. They admired Omai, because he was childlike, and the similarity between savages and children seems to be an inescapable conclusion. As has been demonstrated, Wordsworth often poetically synthesized the two. In "Address to My Infant Daughter, Dora," he not only correlates childhood with savagery, but he alludes also to the savage's intuitive awareness of nature's cosmic time:

Hadst thou been of Indian birth,
Couched on a casual bed of moss and leaves,

²¹³Beach, op. cit., p. 17.

²¹⁴Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, IV, 279.

²¹⁵Noblett, op. cit., p. 50.

²¹⁶Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, IV, 280.

And rudely canopied by leafy boughs,
 Or to the churlish elements exposed
 On the blank plains,--the coldness of the night,
 Or the night's darkness, or its cheerful face
 Of beauty, by the changing moon adorned,
 Would, with imperious admonition, then
 Have scored thine age, and punctually timed
 Thine infant history, on the minds of those
 Who might have wandered with thee.²¹⁷

Wordsworth knew that these Indians would be aware of the passing of time, not by means of clocks, but through the movements of the sun and moon, and the daily, monthly, and seasonal rhythms of nature. It is precisely this kind of uncategorized and non-artificial perception of which Wordsworth demonstrates the loss in the "Ode."

He begins by explaining that the child has recently come from God, and, for this reason, understands beyond the scope of the adult.²¹⁸ Of man's beginnings, Wordsworth says that

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
 The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,
 And cometh from afar:
 Not in entire forgetfulness,
 And not in utter nakedness,
 But trailing clouds of glory, do we come
 From God, who is our home.²¹⁹

The child is hallowed, not only because he is the source of man's development, but also because, like the Noble Savage,

²¹⁷Ibid., II, 174.

²¹⁸Ryan, op. cit., p. 195.

²¹⁹Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, IV, 281.

he stands for those sacred beginnings from which all men decline.²²⁰ The child's mind, as yet unaware of the ways of adults, intuits a beauty, peaceful and joyful, which reveals the immutable order of existence:

. . . we are told that the Founder [Christ] of this religion rejoiced in spirit, that things were hidden from the wise and prudent, and revealed unto babes²²¹

Because of pre-existence, the child enters the world with innate knowledge, that is slowly beclouded by the institutions of man. Thus, a kind of separation between childhood and mature man in society evolves, and the sources of life are increasingly ignored.²²² In the "Ode," Wordsworth describes how the visionary child is reduced to an ordinary man by imitating adult occupations:

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.²²³

Through this mode of imitation, the child seems to bring

²²⁰ Harper, op. cit., I, 48.

²²¹ Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, IV, 331.

²²² Niblett, op. cit., p. 49.

²²³ Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, IV, 282.

about his own slavery in the world:

Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke
The years to bring the inevitable yoke,
Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?
Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!²²⁴

Wordsworth implies that the civilizing of the child entails a movement from possibility to actuality, or from generality to specificity. In other words, a child, through its imagination, is capable of being all things. As he grows older, however, "custom" demands that he pick one vocation and become less than he was before. In place of the child's diverse observations, the man concentrates his interest in certain definite fields, and, in this way, loses his childish unpremeditated joys in the rational and acceptable responses of maturity.²²⁵ When the child grows into adulthood, ". . . nothing can bring back the hour / Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower" ²²⁶ Despite Wordsworth's attempts to praise the recompense that comes to the adult for this loss, through mature, philosophical insight, he continually looks back to the novel perceptions of childhood and associates them with the "vision splendid."²²⁷ The

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 283.

²²⁵ Babenroth, op. cit., p. 357.

²²⁶ Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, IV, 284.

²²⁷ Hoxie Neale Fairchild, The Romantic Quest, p. 156.

Golden Age, the Noble Savage, and the child of Wordsworth's poetry all symbolize a pure and innocent era, which has irrevocably disappeared:

At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.²²⁸

Up to this time critics have used the term, "child of nature," to describe Wordsworth's presentation of children. However, a disparity exists. In the Prelude, nature is presented as a power that nourishes and molds the mind of a child. But, in the "Ode," nature "is shown as dulling and beclouding the mind, or soul."²²⁹ The specific lines read, as follows:

The homely Nurse doth all she can
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came.²³⁰

The "Ode," therefore, acts as a repudiation of Wordsworth's earlier doctrine concerning nature and casts doubt upon the validity of the term, "child of nature." Furthermore, in the romantic era, the word, "nature," was generally attached to some vague notion of the Golden Age.²³¹ It is more valid, therefore, to interpret Wordsworth's presentation of childhood

²²⁸ Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, IV, 281.

²²⁹ Beach, op. cit., p. 155.

²³⁰ Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, IV, 281.

²³¹ Beach op. cit., p. 17.

from a primitivistic point of view, than from a merely "naturalistic" one, in the modern sense of the word.

A primitivistic interpretation, in light of the Noble Savage convention, is also supported by the scope of Wordsworth's reading that encompasses nearly all of the literary figures earlier mentioned in this study. Indeed, he was aware of the Noble Savage tradition. In a "Preface" to the 1815 edition of his works, he indicates the extent of his reading in the Bible, Theocritus, Lucretius, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Spenser, Thomson, and Warton. Furthermore, his familiarity with travel literature has been thoroughly examined by Coe.²³² In his personal letters, Wordsworth also demonstrates his knowledge of Homer, Theocritus, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Thomson. From all of these sources, he brings together the Golden Age, the Noble Savage, and the child:

Once Man entirely free, alone and wild,
Was bless'd as free--for he was Nature's child.
He, all superior but his God disclaim'd,
Walk'd none restraining, and by none restrain'd,
Confess'd no law but what his reason taught,
Did all he wish'd, and wish'd but what he ought.
As man in his primaeval dower array'd
The image of his glorious sire display'd,
Alas! That human guilt provoked the rod
Of angry Nature to avenge her God.
Still, Nature, ever just, to him imparts
Joys only given to uncorrupted hearts.²³³

²³² Charles Norton Coe, Wordsworth and the Literature of Travel.

²³³ Ernest De Selincourt (ed.), Wordsworth's Poetical Works, I, 72.

It is significant that Wordsworth's presentation of childhood seems to be the climax and last stage of eighteenth-century interest in the Noble Savage. In the three decades before his death, the Noble Savage convention began to wane. Science created a new, harsh, and mechanistic view of nature, that was less and less thought of as a kind foster-mother who would protect man from the disconcerting elements of civilization. When the Noble Savage thence lost much of its philosophical backing, it began to decline and, eventually, gave place to other romantic elements.²³⁴

Although there is no primary evidence, such as the letters, to prove that Wordsworth consciously modified the Noble Savage myth, the record of his life, poetry, and letters nevertheless demonstrates his knowledge and use of this myth. His approach to Childhood, in general, and to his own youth, specifically, is a melancholy and primitivistic one. Perhaps, more than any other poet, Wordsworth devotes his works to embracing all facets of the movement from youth to old age. His complete poetical works may be so arranged as to begin with childhood and to end with old age. In this manner, he takes into his providence a universal truth about man in which he states that, although mankind remains basically the same, no matter how obstinately civilizations look to a

²³⁴Hoxie Neale Fairchild, The Noble Savage, p. 363.

Golden past, individuals do change and forever recollect
an earlier and purer existence.

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