

# Essay on *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*

by Phillip W. Weiss

In *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, childhood is more than just a stage in one's life. Rather, it is a metaphor for a state of mind through which we can attain a level of spiritual awareness and clarity of thought that will allow us to do great things, become one with eternity and thereby achieve immortality, and for William Wordsworth, that is what life is all about.

Signs of spiritual awareness are intrinsically pleasing. Wordsworth writes: "But He beholds the light, and whence it flows, He sees it in his joy," (69-70). The light symbolizes the essence of the spirit.

As a child, Wordsworth was in touch with that spirit; as an adult that contact was lost: "At length the Man perceives it die away / And fade into the light of common day" (75-76). The spirit extends through eternity; yet, we are not conscious of our connection with that spirit: "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting" (58). Nevertheless, it exists and is a fundamental part of our nature from birth: "Heaven lies about us in our infancy!" (66). In section 8 of the poem, Wordsworth again alludes to the spirit's all-pervasive presence and of its connection to immortality itself: "Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie/Thy Soul's Immensity" - 108-109, elaborating on this point as he writes:

Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea  
Which brought us hither,  
Can in a moment travel thither,  
And see the children sport upon the shore,  
And hear the mighty waters roll evermore.  
(163-167)

For Wordsworth, child's play is more than the mere random behavior of young,

impulsive beings. Rather, it is the spirit itself bursting forth in all its glory, as seen with children sporting on a beach that borders a huge, never-ending sea.

But as we get older, we stop playing on the beach, our spirit subsumed by the drudgery of our daily existence, making dim what was once so bright.

Wordsworth writes: "What though the radiance which was once so bright / Be now for ever taken from my sight" (175-176). Yet, Wordsworth knows that something big, something that surpasses mortal life itself, is still there, which is the source of truth and beauty and the foundation of immortality itself, all of which comes from God: "But trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home" (64-65). Death then is not the end of existence, but the return to something greater, "... the primal sympathy / Which having been must ever be ..." (181-182), and only after death will the nature of the spirit be revealed to us, as our spirit again becomes one with eternity and God.

Inspiration as a function of spirituality eludes easy explanation; perhaps no completely authoritative description or explanation is possible. Yet Wordsworth is grappling with this question, trying to make sense out of something that is fundamentally emotional, ephemeral, and speculative and eludes empirical examination, and which seems to have a supernatural component. He senses that something is out there, something that envelops the entire human race but which is beyond the purview of our physical senses, leaving us only with our intellect as the sole gateway through which we might be able to gain a glimmer of understanding of our place in the universe. Wordsworth writes of the "glory of

the flower" (178), the flower being more than just a mere natural object, but an embodiment of the spirit revealed in its very structure, if we notice it. And that, paraphrasing Shakespeare, is the rub. Hence, the purpose of the poet: to bring to our attention that which we may normally never notice. A single flower may be summarily dismissed as an object that warrants little attention. Yet, that very same flower contains an essence so sublime and so profound as to propel us to heights of ecstasy, reminiscent of that emotional state we experienced while playing as children. Wordsworth writes:

We in thought will join your throng,  
 Ye that pipe and ye that play,  
 Ye that through your hearts to-day  
 Feel the gladness of the May!  
 (171-174)

Wordsworth is referring to that state of childlike innocence, a time when the spirit is alive and percolating in all of us, when, unfettered by the cares and pressures and stresses of life, we play, we laugh, and are in touch with the spiritual core that infuses us with a joy and a desire to live. Wouldn't it be wonderful to again feel the gladness of May?

A baby's cry: Is it a call, a shriek, a grating noise, a primeval, unintelligible communication, or is it something more? For Wordsworth, it is the spirit within us bursting forth – bombastic, unfettered, jubilant, ecstatic, and spontaneous – heard by people who, having long ago lost their innocence, do not comprehend its meaning. Wordsworth fondly recalls the exuberance of childhood when he writes: "Thou Child of Joy, / Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy /

Shepherd-Boy!" (34-36). Childhood is a time of bliss ("Behold the child among his new-born blisses" (86)), but that moment does not last and is followed by the arrival of the "inevitable yoke" (125), at which point, overwhelmed by worldly forces, we lose touch with our sense of immortality, the yoke being like "a weight,/ Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!" (128-129). Our creative spirit is overwhelmed by the mundane, and life is empty and drab. But all is not lost. By merely observing "the splendour (sic) in the grass," (179), we can reconnect with the spirit and be transported to heights of ecstasy that can reinvigorate our lives. Wordsworth writes:

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,  
 Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,  
 To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
 Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.  
 (201-204)

If we observe a flower and are brought to tears, then we have achieved a moment of spirituality so sublime as to elevate us to higher level of consciousness. This unity of consciousness and spirit is the source from which creativity springs.

The truthfulness of Wordsworth's message can be found in real life events. For instance, in 1973, Tug McGraw, a pitcher for the New York Mets, coined the phrase "Ya gotta believe!" as he led the Mets to victory in the National League pennant race and a chance to play in the World Series. For McGraw, his spirit ignited, baseball once again became a game played by children, his joyful exuberance a source of inspiration for his team mates and amazement for the

fans who, now energized, responded with an outpouring of adulation that swept the sports world. Tug is now deceased and his statistics are buried in the record books along with the statistics of thousands of other players, some still famous but most of whom now sadly forgotten. Yet, as long as baseball is played, Tug McGraw will be remembered, not for his won-loss record or earned run average,<sup>1</sup> but for what he said and what he meant to his team mates and fans in 1973, which makes him immortal, a part of a living history and an iconic cultural figure whose actions break the shackles of time. When Wordsworth writes about immortality, he is writing about the life and spirit of Tug McGraw.

Thus, in *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, William Wordsworth asserts that there is a spirit that inspires creativity and transcends our mortal existence on earth and that this spirit is evident in childhood when we are in a state of innocence and that later, as adults, this spirit can be rekindled if we get in touch with it.

Work Cited:

William Wordsworth, "Ode – Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," 1817. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Eighth ed.* Volume D, Stephen Greenblatt ed. (W. W. Norton & Company, New York), 2006.

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<sup>1</sup>Tug McGraw's lifetime won-loss record was 96-92 with a 3.14 earned run average and 180 saves in a career that spanned 19 years (1965-1984). McGraw died in 2004 at age 59. Source: [Baseball-reference.com](http://Baseball-reference.com).

