

Wordsworth, “The World Is Too Much With Us”

“Wordsworth” always reminds me of my own past.

I started out intensely disliking William Wordsworth. I took a course, in college, in Romantic Poetry. Keats impressed me, Shelley too. Byron was a bit too ironic and comic, but then I thought (likely in error) that he was not a poet of the very first rank. I did like Coleridge, though I wasn't sure why.

Wordsworth stuck in my craw. He was not as melodious as Shelley, not as finely crafted as Keats. There was something, well, prosaic and even preachy about his poems. Often they struck me, especially the early Lyrical Ballads, as simplistic.

I can remember a professor almost kicking me out of class when we were reading Wordsworth's long poem, The Prelude. I had made a disparaging remark about the poet's tedious banality. I don't remember my exact words, but whatever they were, they expressed something along these lines: boring, preachy, prosy, not worth our sustained attention.

And then the most remarkable moment in a lifetime of reading poems occurred. It was late at night: I recall the circle of light as I sat in a chair in my dorm room reading the final 'books' of The Prelude. In the last book of that poem, Wordsworth recounts how he once climbed a mountain, Mount Snowden in Wales, at night in order to see the sunrise from the mountain's peak.

As he was climbing upward in the cloudy darkness, head bent toward the earth beneath him, suddenly the clouds parted and in bright radiance the moon appeared above him. He was, in both the literal and figurative sense of the word, enlightened.

So was I. When the moon above shone on Wordsworth, the light of the poem shone into my mind. Is the sentence I have just written trite and sentimental? Maybe. But it is nonetheless true. I had a moment of great enlightenment. Having worked my way through two hundred and fifty pages of Wordsworth's often mystifying and often (to me) unpoetic blank verse, suddenly the poem made sense. Suddenly, Wordsworth made sense.

You who are reading this page may have become accustomed to these introductory notes setting up poems rather than presenting them. But since the passage I am referring to was one of the great experiences of my life, I will reproduce it here.

It was a close, warm, breezeless summer night,
Wan, dull, and glaring, with a dripping fog
Low-hung and thick that covered all the sky;

calls/To rouse them; in a world of life they live,/By sensible impressions not enthralled,/ But by their quickening impulse made more prompt/To hold fit converse with the spiritual world...hence the highest bliss/That flesh can know is theirs--the consciousness/Of Whom they are... ”

The conclusion to The Prelude revealed words that have shaped my life. The first bolded phrase below is, in a wonderfully pithy form, my philosophy of teaching, and it has guided me as I worked with students for most of my life. The second bolded phrase is what impels me, and perhaps you, toward art of every sort:

Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak
A lasting inspiration, sanctified
By reason, blest by faith: **what we have loved,
Others will love, and we will teach them how;
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells....**

Ah, but it is not The Prelude I wrote about in what follows, but a sonnet Wordsworth wrote in 1802 (between early drafts of The Prelude), a sonnet first published in 1807.

“Happens to like is one/Of the ways things happen to fall,” Wallace Stevens wrote teasingly at the end of a poem. He was referring to how chance, accident, shapes our lives.

Thus:

As I turned to reworking this essay, I happened upon a sentence by Paul Baran, a mid-20th century Marxist economist, which revealed to me something I have been on the cusp of recognizing. Baran wrote, “Television and other mass media...contributes to a crippling of the individual’s mental and emotional capabilities. By helping to instill in him a phantasmagoric image of existence it disarms him on the social and individual plane.¹”

That analysis resonated so deeply with me because I always question why we should be reading poems, and in particular why I should teach them and talk about them. Baran’s answer, and I recognize he was an economist and not a literary critic, might be that many (if not most) of the cultural experiences we have diminish us. They contribute “to a crippling of [our] mental and emotional capabilities.”

Is this true? Does watching t.v., going to the movies, reading the newspaper, checking up on FaceBook, wandering the aisles at a big-box store: Do these things cripple and diminish us? Or is that just socialist rhetoric?

¹ I have since first writing this read a good deal of a late 20th century French cultural theorist, Jean Baudrillard. His theory of the ‘simulacrum’ seems, to me, to say what Baran said, but at greater length and with greater concentration,

To me the answer is clear. We are in fact crippled and diminished by the world we live in. I have quoted at length the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky in one of the preceding essays, but skipped over a key phrase that I understand better now that I have thought about what Baran wrote. Shklovsky said, the poem exists “to make the stone stony.”

We have, to a greater extent than we acknowledge, lost the capacity to see and feel the world we live in. We are cosseted by devices (my wife claims, rightly, that I never saw an electronic device that I haven't considered buying) and cushioned by products, dulled by sentimentality and manipulated by advertising. “Nor can foot feel, being shod,” Hopkins wrote in one of his sonnets, in one of my favorite lines of all time, a line I cited in another letter.

What I am saying is that I got it right when I wrote this, and long before me Wordsworth got it right. This is a visionary poem as well as one of the great diagnoses of modern life. We are out of touch with much in our world. Not just the natural world but with our own deeper selves, with our own capacities.

Today, in search of a something I thought I owned, I looked over several shelves of books while writing this introduction. Their titles reminded me of how many books I have read. I am not bragging here, because the experience was disheartening: how many books I have forgotten I had once read! We may like to think of consciousness, of our minds, as a sponge, but all too often consciousness is more like a broken sieve. So much of what is poured into our minds leaks or streams away.

The book I was looking for was one I read long ago, and which I seldom call to mind anymore. The Changing Nature of Man, by J. H. van den Berg. Van den Berg is little known, a Dutch psychoanalyst of the middle twentieth century. I have met only one person besides myself who has read the book, my colleague at the University of Vermont, Richard Sugarman. Richard was as impressed by it as I was. The much-reviled Harold Bloom was an admirer of van den Berg as well and an essay of his first led me to van den Berg.

Van den Berg was a phenomenological psychoanalyst, whatever that is. In trying to understand the ‘mind of man’ he recognized that consciousness changes in historical time. (This is probably something most of us do not believe.) ‘Human nature,’ in its most fundamental aspect, the aspect of how we think and feel, does not remain the same. As we relate to one another in different ways, what a Marxist would refer to by using the phrase ‘changing social relations,’ our very awareness of ourselves and the world changes.

Neither van den Berg nor Wordsworth was a Marxist. But van den Berg understood, as few have understood, how profoundly the changes in our social/scientific world change the way we think and feel.

I would argue, and I suppose this is just what I do in part argue in the essay which follows, that Wordsworth also understood that human consciousness had changed. A new human stance toward the world had come into the world. Thirty or forty years after this poem a number of

German philosophers (first Ludwig Feuerbach, then Karl Marx) diagnosed what they called alienation. In their day, the poet Charles Baudelaire would dissect the new emotion of 'boredom,' another way of approaching the modern consciousness.

Wordsworth, in this poem anticipates them by about fifty years.

A Renewal of Wonder

The World Is Too Much With Us

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!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.--Great God! I'd rather be
A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

Some poems stay with us, poems we often return to because they reside in memory. We care about them so much that they keep coming to mind. For me, “The world is too much with us,” by William Wordsworth, is such a poem. Although I don’t know it by heart, it is so familiar that I can call up not just its words but its shape as easily as I can call up the color and rectangular form of the kitchen table of my early childhood.

It is a strange poem to like so well. For one thing, it is a little too rhetorical. It begins with a proclamation, one that is more like a prose statement than a lyrical sharing of intimate feeling. “The world is too much with us.”

And yet, and yet, the opening phrase resounds with me. The world *is* too much with us, or with me. Not always, but often. It makes too many demands, this world of which Wordsworth is writing. Even before he qualifies which world it is – the world of getting and spending – we know that is what he is referring to.

No one claims, I think, that he or she is concerned about too much nature, or too much joy. The world that is too much with us is, even before Wordsworth goes on to define it, is the social world in which we are embedded².

Earlier in my life, when I occasionally taught seminars in poetry and theory, I approached this poem by focusing intensely on that world of “getting and spending,” the world of commerce and consumption, which was newly emergent when Wordsworth wrote the poem in 1802. He was living not at the dawn of the industrial age, but a short time afterwards when the industrial revolution was already reshaping human society³.

When I taught this poem I emphasized its relation to the Industrial Revolution. I guess I have just done that again, in the footnote.

My focus was always on the first half of the poem, which is less rhetorical than the second half. Who goes around proclaiming, “Great God!” the words with which the second half begins? Only Wordsworth, in this poem, and caricatures of dowdy old English gentlemen. Who goes around citing Greek gods⁴? Suffice it to say, I was enamored of the first half of the poem, the octave (plus half a line) and a little embarrassed by the second half. As I like to tell my students, carefully watch people who teach poems: if you pay attention, they will almost always skip over

² I wrote this essay in Washington, when I spent ten hours or more of each day on the ‘business’ of Capitol Hill. I suppose one could argue that it was not technically ‘getting and spending,’ but no matter how much we care about our jobs, they are part of that social world of money and status and ‘getting and spending.’ I think when I chose this poem, I was saying something to myself and to my colleagues on the Hill about how being consumed by the business of politics was, well, diminishing.

³ The spinning jenny and the flying shuttle were invented in the second half of the eighteenth century, the same time that James Watt perfected the steam engine. All were created and developed and deployed in Britain. In consequence, Britain became the first nation to industrialize, and hence the birthplace of the industrial revolution. British textile manufacture – based on what William Blake in 1804 so powerfully called “these dark Satanic mills” in his poem “Jerusalem” – would, along with the power of the British navy and that navy’s protection of both trade and colonization, create the greatest empire of the modern world. That British empire was based not only on military dominance, but also on British domination of the manufacture and trade of textiles.

The most necessitous material needs of human beings are for food and shelter. Agriculture was predominately local until the twentieth century, though rare goods such as spices and sugar and tobacco were shipped long distances and formed the basis of mercantile empires. Housing, until the emergence of steel and cement in the twentieth century, was produced from local products and by local builders. But clothing – the immediate ‘shelter’ for the human body – which had previously primarily been produced locally from cloth made by spinners and knitters and weavers, could now suddenly be produced in quantity. The British invention of industrial textile manufacture made clothing cheaper and more readily available. ‘Getting and spending’ was a concomitant of the new industrial age. Formerly, getting and spending as a major activity was restricted to princes and the nobility. Everyone else had to make do with modest amounts of clothing, furniture, household items. Suddenly, the world which in our time gives us WalMart and K-Mart, the Gap and Macy’s, came into being.

⁴ The German poet Friedrich Hölderlin cited Greek gods frequently. His greatest works were written in the same years as Wordsworth’s, though in English Hölderlin’s poems are not well known. Thus, the similarity is for academics to pursue, not us.

something or other. That's because in almost every great poem, no matter how short, there is something that resists understanding. In this poem, I would always spend 95 percent of my time and effort on the first half and very little on the second. I won't do that here.

It is time to plunge into "The world is too much with us." First, the form. It is a Petrarchan sonnet, fourteen lines long, divided into two parts, the first (the octave, the first eight lines) consists of a little over eight lines; the second part (the sestet) begins in slightly delayed form with that over-the-top "Great God!" It has a Petrarchan rhyme scheme, abba abba cdcddc, with the letters corresponding to rhymes: that is, soon-powers-hours-boon; moon-hours-flowers-tune; be-morn-lea-lorn-sea-horn. The first part, the octave, sets a problem; the second part, the sestet, tries to resolve it.

O.K., enough with the technical. Technical stuff matters, not because English teachers know it and students often don't – expertise can be an off-putting thing, and the last thing I want to do in these essays is put you off by making poetry seem to be something only for initiates in some strange literary religion – but because it so often serves as an armature for content. An armature, in this case, referring to what sculptors use as an inner scaffolding if they are not working with marble or steel to hold the sculpture up and hold it together. Clay droops and loses its shape without an armature. Poems are the same.

The octave is all about how we feel as we confront the world of consumption that has so characterized the advent of the Industrial Age. What we might call modern-day consumer society. "The world is too much with us": the "too much" indicates excess. In the poet's view the world he is referring to is "too much" and not 'just enough' or 'about right' or 'productive of great joy or serenity.' The world is too much. As I said before, I think we already know when we first encounter the opening of the poem more or less which world he is referring to, but to make sure, Wordsworth defines it explicitly: that world is the world of "getting and spending." Buying. Striving for things. Using money. The world of commerce and consumption.

And this world is with us seemingly all the time: "late and soon," meaning a while back and right around now. We are immersed in this world of commerce and consumption, an immersion he will shortly characterize as a "sordid boon" because in it "we lay waste our powers." The excess with which the poem opens, that "too much," weakens us: To "lay waste" is often a military phrase, and denotes total ravaging. So much for our powers: 'gone, gone utterly' as Yeats might say.

That first phrase is in apposition to what follows the semicolon: “Little we see in Nature that is ours.” There is a wonderful ambiguity here, in that we encounter no certainty of cause and effect. Is it because we are so caught up in getting and spending that we cannot see Nature or ourselves in Nature; or is it because we cannot see Nature that our powers are ravaged? Probably both.

According to Wordsworth, we have fallen in love with the wrong thing, “given our hearts away,” and paradoxically, powerfully, the excess of “too much” is now clearly a loss, the loss of our hearts. So we march through our lives without a heart, caught up in getting and spending, trapped in a mercantile world, cut off from ourselves (we no longer are in touch with Nature and the natural self). This is – a most ironic phrase – the modern “boon” (from the Old Norse, “blessing”), to be cut off from nature and without a heart, to be in thrall to something that does not sustain us. No wonder the “boon” is “sordid” – dirty, wretched, squalid.

So let’s sum up:

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!

Now we come to the second quatrain:

This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;

Two metaphors and a simile and then another metaphor. But let’s start at the end of the quatrain because it situates the previous figures of speech. For these two or three things we are “out of tune.” In fact, the almost throwaway phrase “for everything” deepens the line, and the poem, to cosmic disharmony: “For this, for everything, we are out of tune.”

To be in disharmony with Nature is to be in disharmony with everything, even, as the next line suggests, one’s own self. In poetic terms, the lack of closure at the end of the octave is remarkably unconventional: the left-over part calls a kind of poetic attention to itself, indicating the very worst disorder. “It moves us

not.” We are emotionally closed to the world, not only the natural world, but to “everything.” Getting and spending have gutted our lives.

When I taught the poem in earlier days, this is where I ended. The poem is about alienation – from nature, world and self – and that alienation is caused by too much immersion in getting and selling, in the new culture which results from the production of things and the seeking after things⁵.

I’ve skipped the two metaphors and the simile, not because I do not understand them (they are not hard to understand) but because I wanted to trace the argument Wordsworth makes before I concentrated on the several examples he gives. Because we are caught up in getting and spending we have laid waste our powers, we have given our hearts away, we are out of tune with everything. We cannot see the sea. Well, we can see the water I suppose, but we cannot see its beauty, we cannot see it open before us as a nurturing force. “The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon” suggests an openness that is at great odds with the poet’s existence which is closed, which is revealed as “out of tune” three lines later⁶.

Wordsworth is no sentimental lover of nature. In *The Prelude* appear these strange, wondrous and memorable lines about fear. Wordsworth understood that the ‘sublime’ requires terror and that any real encounter with the world must encompass the destructiveness that is a part of ‘Nature.’ The bold print I have added calls attention to the radical strangeness in the passages:

Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up
Fostered alike by beauty **and by fear**

and these,

Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,
But with high objects, with enduring things—
With life and nature—purifying thus

⁵ In this, as in his pre-Hegelian view of the historicity of consciousness in his 1805 epic, *The Prelude*, Wordsworth anticipates Karl Marx. Marx would ‘discover’ the social origin of alienation in 1848, attributing alienation to selling one’s time, and hence one’s life, for pay. Wordsworth’s prescience, his feeling his way forward into the new world of industrial production and commerce, is one of the more remarkable instances of art long in advance charting paths philosophy and intellectual thought would later explore.

⁶ “The Sea” is also seen as animate, something which will connect directly with the strange sextet we will encounter shortly. The Sea is also a life force: that bared breast is, lest we gloss over it too quickly, sexual as well as nurturing.

The elements of feeling and of thought,
And sanctifying, by such discipline,
Both pain and fear, until we recognize
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.

Thus, the line about the Sea's gentle and welcoming bosom is followed by recognition that the Sea births storms, fearsome and destructive winds. (Did I mention Wordsworth is standing by the ocean as he writes or thinks this poem? No, of course not: he has not told us yet. But he will tell us precisely where he is standing, on an agreeable meadow – “this pleasant lea” – overlooking the ocean, several lines further on.)

“The winds that will be howling at all hours” are prospective, couched in the future tense. In the poem's present, as he observes what is before him, the winds are calm and – wonderful simile – “upgathered now like sleeping flowers.” But quiet beauty can blossom into fury, into howling destruction.

You probably don't know that, I don't know that, and the poet doesn't know that, for he is out of tune and unmoved by what he sees. Having given his heart away, his powers are gone, abandoned through his own decision to immerse himself in “getting and spending.” Not just he, but “we,” “lay waste out powers.” With his use of the first person plural, Wordsworth implicates *us* in the poem. We cannot see Nature or what is in nature, as he reveals through his examples of the moon-touched sea, the quiet breeze, the storms-to-come: “for this, for everything, we are out of tune.” “IT MOVES US NOT.” We see only the water, or perhaps more likely, think of how we will be able to get or buy this or that, whatever material object it is we desire.

Yes, the poem portrays alienation from nature, alienation from the self's sources of strength, alienation from feeling. What we see moves us not.

That is the problem the poem poses, and I return to the poem so often because I think his description of being swallowed up by the modern world touches a deep nerve, because Wordsworth's diagnosis is apt⁷.

⁷ It occurs to me that Matthew Arnold, a poet most people today prefer to ignore or forget, called Goethe the great “physician” and diagnostician. He does so in a poem called “Memorial Verses,” written as an elegy to Wordsworth on the occasion of the British poet's death. Here are brief excerpts. Since I love a lot of Arnold's poem, I am going to presume mightily by quoting some of it here:

The last poetic voice is dumb—
We stand today by Wordsworth's tomb....

When Goethe's death was told, we said:

Let me call attention to the exclamation point in the response to the problem of alienation that Wordsworth has posed in the octave.

Great God! I'd rather be
A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

“Great God!” I’ve already said this is rhetorical, and try as I might I still find it – even though I am about to embrace the sestet more strongly than I ever have before — overkill. Great God? Really? And an exclamation point (!) because the words themselves cannot make the point strongly enough? One can be forgiven if, at this point, one questions Wordsworth’s capacity to edit his own poems.

But it is so easy to be superior that one can miss the full import of what Wordsworth says in the strange lines which follow. And those lines *are* strange. He tells us he’d rather be a pagan than a Christian, and this is in times when to be an atheist did not get support and acclaim from many, as it does today. Even Bill Maher, when he rails against religious belief, does not seriously suggest he would prefer to be a pagan, to leave civilization behind, to suckle on long discarded

Sunk then is Europe’s sagest head.
Physician of an iron age.
Goethe has done his pilgrimage.
He took the suffering human race,
He read each wound, each weakness clear;
And struck his finger on the place
And said: *Thou ailest here, and here!*

What Arnold attributes to Goethe is what Wordsworth has done thus far in our poem.

Here is what Arnold goes on to write about how Wordsworth goes beyond Goethe and Byron, though Arnold’s words apply even more strongly to some of Wordsworth’s other poems, such as *The Prelude* and “Tintern Abbey” and some of the *Lyrical Ballads*.

Time may restore us in his course
Goethe’s sage mind and Byron’s force
But where will Europe’s latter hour
Again find Wordsworth’s healing power?
Others will teach us how to dare,
And against fear our breast to steel;
Others will strengthen us to bear—
But who, ah! who will make us feel?

beliefs. Outside of India, where Hindus still believe in multiple gods, who believes in a bunch of gods and goddesses? And who sees Greek polytheism as a corrective to whatever ails us?

Well, Wordsworth does. He is not proclaiming that he wants to be a polytheist, or return to a time twenty-two or -three centuries ago when life was mostly “nasty, brutish and short,” as the philosopher Hobbes described human life in 1651, before the Industrial Age⁸.

Wordsworth tells us in the sestet that if he has to choose between existing as a ‘civilized’ human being in a world of getting and spending, and existing as what we might call a savage, he would rather be a savage. He would prefer believing – Wordsworth knows, I think, that we cannot live outside of culture – in an old way of seeing, a “creed outworn.”

Look: I just did again what I have been doing for most of my life as regards this remarkable poem. I wrote about the sestet and *once again skipped over* the final lines themselves. It is hard, very hard, to keep one’s focus on a poem. Here I had pledged to myself, and those of you reading this, that I would look at the sestet which I have so often glossed over, and then – damn! – I ignored exactly what I said I would do. Yes, I did meditate on the sestet and what it tells us; I reached reasonable conclusions about it, so I didn’t skip it entirely. But to reach those conclusions I ignored the specificity of what Wordsworth wrote.

So before I go on to any larger analysis, let me pay close attention. Not only would he rather be a pagan, he would prefer to “suckle” on a “creed outworn” if that would enable him to see what he cannot see when he is so caught up in “getting and spending.”

⁸ I recently looked up the passage from which this famous phrase comes, Hobbes’ description of man in nature, and found it such a striking backdrop to this poem that I will cite it here:

In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently, no culture of the earth, no navigation nor the use of commodities that may be imported by sea, no commodious building, no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force, no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society, and, which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

Why cite the whole of Hobbes’ sentence? Because it reveals the radical nature of what Wordsworth proposes in the sestet. No industry, no navigation, no commodities, no knowledge of the world beyond where one stands, “no arts, no letters, no society.” Amazing. The Hobbes passage reveals to us just how radical Wordsworth’s alternative is, even though Wordsworth is citing a Greek culture which was pagan and but which also gave us the *Iliad* and the *Oresteia*.

You may be a step ahead of me here: it is hard to ignore the connection, once we see that “suckle,” between the outworn creed and the Sea which offers up its breast to the moon. Nurturing, sexual, and most certainly vital, the Sea can be encountered only if we put modern material desires aside. If we were pagans, believing in gods and not in ‘getting and spending,’ we would be, as the poet imagines himself to be, “less forlorn.”

Proteus, a god of the sea, has a name which has come down to us in contemporary English and thus is revelatory of his essential nature: ‘protean’ means ever in change. Proteus has no essential nature. He embodies that capacity of the world to be, like the sea, ever in motion, ever-changing, always open to make us marvel and delight or cower in fear. The sea, to the pagan, is ever-changing. Its power, unlike our own atrophied powers in line two of this poem, can renew our own powers. Proteus, if we could only look with an eye that has cast aside getting and spending, might be seen rising from the sea.

And Triton. Triton was the herald of the sea god, carrying a trident and blowing on a conch shell. That shell: we all know from our childhood that when one puts an ear to a shell, the sound of the sea is conjured from within its whorls. So our powers, could we put ‘getting and spending’ aside, would be new risen, and sounds would emerge. Those sounds – the horn is “wreathèd,” decorated, an emblem of art – those would be the sounds of the ocean and also the ever-changing world which is the origin of music, of art.

To see and hear the sea, even from a pleasant meadow in green England, might make us less forlorn and enable us to overcome the alienation which envelops us. We would see as the ancient Greeks did, see a nature animated and even filled with divinity, not the “sordid boon” that is the legacy of those caught up in “getting and spending.”⁹

Let me return to what I had written before we looked closely at the “pagan suckled in a creed outworn” and what his way of living might enable us to do: envision, connect with, Proteus and Triton.

Wordsworth suggests an alternative that might resolve our alienation, our not being in tune with things, our being unmoved as we stand before the world or stride through it. Although this is not a ‘nature’ poem, the alternative it presents is

⁹ I am pretty sure the reader does not have to be a Freudian to feel Triton ‘rising’ at the end as an antidote to the ‘lay waste our powers’ that the poet bemoans at the poem’s start. There is potency in the rising, fertility in the suckling. Is it going too far to see that horn as a renewed phallic power?

to come to terms with nature in a more elemental fashion than we do in our commercialized world. Face to face.

We also must come to terms with ourselves, face to face, not encumbered by material goods and our hankering after them. Our world, Wordsworth tells us, can be re-animated. Gods can rise from the sea, that same quiet sea that reflects the moon, that gives rise to the small breezes that can become hurricanes, if we put aside our desires for material goods, our need for 'getting and spending,' our longing for the comfort invented by the eighteenth century and pursued increasingly ever after.

Since we are creatures of the modern world, not of Attic Greece, what we would more likely see are not gods, but a nature that revitalizes us. Remember what we do not see in the second quatrain? Bosoms, the moon, winds, flowers, music?

I think that what Wordsworth reaches for, in the sestet, is a desire for a renewal of wonder. He wants us to put aside the desires spawned by modernity and re-engage the world in which he lived.