



Mycroft Lectures.
Adapted Transcript for:
William Wordsworth's
Upon Westminster Bridge.

(Mycroft lectures always provide sentence-by-sentence parsing, paraphrasing and explanation of each poem. However, each lecture also presents extra information to enhance appreciation and understanding of the poem under discussion. As the Mycroft lectures are not read from a script, a transcript of a lecture contains the imperfections of a spoken presentation. To avoid the embarrassment of having the spoken performance thought to be an essay and being quoted as such, I have made occasional changes to the spoken lectures for the purposes of clarification. What follows is the transcript of a lecture, not an essay.)

Chronology of the Lecture.

1. Description of the geographical location of the poem.
2. How the poem is often simplistically thought of as a love poem to London.
3. Wordsworth and the Romantic poets.
4. The poem is read through.
5. The poem is parsed, paraphrased, explained line by line in simpler English. Various complications noted, or areas of interest raised and questioned, are:
 - ⤴ The relevance of the city wearing 'the beauty of the morning' as a garment.
 - ⤴ How can the city be wearing the 'beauty of the morning' and be 'bare' at the same time?
 - ⤴ The look of London at the time the poem was written.
 - ⤴ Comparisons to William Blake's poem *London*.
 - ⤴ How the last line of *Upon Westminster Bridge* is often misread.
 - ⤴ An examination of the things Wordsworth likes, and how they do not relate to

attributes of a city.

▲ The conspicuous omission in this poem.

6. Wordsworth defines poetry as “The spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” The statement is questioned and rephrased. It is then applied to the poem *Upon Westminster Bridge*.

7. The poem’s form is examined.

8. The poem is read through for a final time.

From the lecture: “All the things Wordsworth recounts pleasantly about what he sees are attributes of the morning. They are not attributes of the city. One could even argue that this is more a poem about a morning sunrise than it is a poem about the beauty of the city.”

Lines composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802 by William Wordsworth.

Transcript for the *Upon Westminster Bridge* Lecture.

That's the full title of the poem we normally know as *Westminster Bridge*. Westminster Bridge is a bridge in London, it's the one with the Houses of Parliament just to the side of it, and in this poem, Wordsworth is standing on Westminster Bridge, gazing presumably in the direction of St. Paul's, and the poem is exactly what the title suggests it is: lines written on Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802.

The poem is usually thought of as something of a love poem to London, and it's often contrasted with William Blake's earlier, very famous, poem *London*. This can be a very simplistic way of reading Wordsworth's *Westminster Bridge*.

Wordsworth himself was one of the Romantic poets. He is of the first generation of the Romantic poets of William Blake; and his good friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge; the other Romantic poets being Byron, and Shelley, and John Keats. These guys somewhat loosely form a cannon we call 'the Romantic poets'. And like the Romantic poets, he was very interested in transcendent moments, and particularly interested in nature. He's one of

England's most famous nature poets. Most of his poetry is written about the Lake District areas of England. But in this poem here, he addresses London, and he addresses the city of London. So, unusual amongst Wordsworth's works, this is a poem addressed to a city. What he has to say about the city is what we will reveal in the close analysis we will do of this poem.

Now, after I have done that analysis, I'll look at the poem through one of the statements that Wordsworth is famous for making about the construction of poetry. He gives us what is often deemed to be a definition of poetry.

Wordsworth tells us, 'poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, and it takes its form recollected in tranquility'. We'll look at that statement later to see how it relates to *Westminster Bridge*.

So, the first read through of William Wordsworth's *Westminster Bridge*.

*Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!*

Let's do the line-by-line analysis.

Earth has not anything to show more fair:

There's not really anything there that should confuse us.

'Fair' just means beautiful. *Earth has not anything to show more fair:* means there is

nothing more beautiful on the earth than this. 'Fair' does not mean fair as in light-dark fair, it doesn't mean fair as in justice-injustice fair, this means fair as in beautiful.

*Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:*

Similarly, I don't really see any problems in this line for us. Wordsworth is saying that, 'whoever could walk past this sight that he is looking at, this sight that he describes as *so touching in its majesty*, anyone who could walk past that without commenting on it, without noticing it; anyone who could just pass by without seeing it would be dull of soul.' *Dull of soul?* 'Boring' is an easy way to explain it. To be *dull of soul* could mean perhaps you have no poetic impetus. It would mean you're not the sort of person who would recognize beauty when you see it, but basically, it means boring. So, the opening lines of the poem then are quite simple for us. 'This is one of the most beautiful sights I have ever seen, and anyone who could pass by it without noticing it would be really boring.'

But, what is he looking at? And Wordsworth tells us:

*This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare*

So, he's looking at the city of London. He's looking at the city of London which he sees as wearing the beauty of the morning. So we know that it is morning, and mornings are beautiful, and the city has morning on, as if it is... imagine it as a cloak. The city is wearing the beauty of the morning. It is silent and bare. Now, we may note here, how can the city be bare and be wearing a garment at the same time? And, having raised that, I think the easiest way to address it and to deal with it is to just say, 'Yeah, that is a bad line. It has been commented on before, and Wordsworth himself towards the end of his life was considering changing that line.' The city cannot wear the morning or the beauty of the morning like a garment and be bare at the same time.

I think that what Wordsworth gets out of using the word 'bare' there is he can imply that the city is naked, virginal almost, untouched, clean. If you were to imagine a bare sheet of paper even, perhaps, it's that sort of image that he's looking for. Untouched.

*This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.*

So Wordsworth, he tells us what he sees as he looks over London. He gives us a list. He says he sees 'Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples'. Yeah, these are the sort of things we would see in London. Normal, man-made things. This is written of course in 1802 and the city is growing at this point. And these are the sorts of things we find in cities. Wordsworth does not see them as in any way ugly, he sees them as *Open unto the fields, and to the sky; all bright and glittering in the smokeless air*. This does seem very beautiful.

London at this time, we must assume, there are still fields and open sky there that can be seen from Westminster Bridge. All of the things Wordsworth mentions here are the offshoots of city commerce as well. And they're all man-made. And Wordsworth certainly seems like he's enjoying what he's looking at. Well, he is, for he tells us at the start of the third stanza,

*Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;*

'Steep' means to go up. So, Wordsworth is saying, 'the sun has never risen over a valley, a rock, or a hill quite as beautifully as it is rising over what I am looking at at the moment'. So, *valley, rock, and hill* are there to symbolize the countryside. And basically, what he is saying is, 'The sunrise over the country has never been more beautiful than this sunrise I am looking at now, over the city of London.' In fact, he concludes this with, *Never saw I, never felt I a calm so deep*. In fact he starts with, *Ne'er saw I never felt, a calm so deep!* He's never seen anything that looks this tranquil, serene, this beautiful. He's never felt this calm.

The river glideth at his own sweet will: The river, which is of course the Thames, is gliding at its own sweet will. The Thames was often called 'old father Thames', so giving the Thames a gender here, *gliding at his own sweet will*, you can understand where that comes from. And I can't help thinking that Wordsworth is alluding here to Blake's poem, *London*, which starts off,

*I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.*

'Chartered' being owned, worked. In Blake's poem, it's as if everywhere in London has become so commercialized that the river itself has actually been chartered. All of it is doing something for the commercial engine that London is. But not to Wordsworth.

When he says *The river glideth at his own sweet will*, it's as if the river is not chartered, it's owned by itself.

*The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;*

And 'Dear God' here is like an expostulation of 'Wow, whew, wow, the very houses seem asleep'. The whole scene that he's looking on as the sun rises over the city of London is so tranquil it seems as if the very houses in London are asleep,

And all that mighty heart is lying still!

Well, 'the mighty heart' is obviously the mighty, commercial, beating heart of the city of London. London, up and vibrantly and dynamically working, as cities do. Wordsworth says, 'Dear God it seems the very houses are asleep, and all that mighty heart is lying still.'

Well, he seems quite happy. There's no denying that he likes what he sees.

But is this a poem which is laudatory to the city of London? Is this a poem that says what a great place the city of London is?

Let's look at that last line a bit closer.

*Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!*

First thing, when does a heart, mighty or otherwise, lie still? There's only one time that a heart lies still, and that's when you're dead. When you're dead, your heart stops beating, your heart lies still. So one could paraphrase that last line, it's as if Wordsworth is saying 'London looks dead. Dear God! the very houses seem asleep; and all that mighty heart, that

dynamic, pulsating heart that keeps London alive, is lying still!

I might even add to that last line, that *And all that mighty heart is lying still!* Lying could also have the connotation of also meaning not telling the truth.' The mighty heart of London is not telling the truth.' Because there's something in that wording which sums up what is going on in this poem. The poem, at first light, appears to be championing London. But this is London seen at first light. This is London at, well, when would the sun rise in London in September? On September the third. Let's say 6 o'clock in the morning. This is a poem written to London at 6 o'clock in the morning. What Wordsworth is looking at is London, but it is London at 6 o'clock in the morning. Now, if you were to write a poem that says what a wonderful place the city of London is, don't write it about London at 6 o'clock in the morning. Write it about London at any other time, but not at 6 o'clock in the morning when the impression that you're getting of London is completely distorted.

And all that mighty heart is lying still!

What Wordsworth is saying there is, 'What I am looking at here is not the real London. This is a London that is calm, peaceful, and tranquil, and basically, asleep. And even dead. And I like it like that,' is what Wordsworth is saying. Were that final line the only example of this, I could be seen to be misinterpreting the poem.

But it isn't.

Let's look at that line I mentioned earlier where Wordsworth says,

This City now doth, like a garment, wear

The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,

The city of London is wearing the beauty of the morning like a garment, and pretty soon, the garment is going to come off. And when it comes off, the city of London is going to reveal itself in all its majestic, dynamic, mighty beating heart glory that Wordsworth doesn't seem to like. What Wordsworth sees is the houses that are all bright and glittering in the smokeless air. This is beautiful, none of us is going to deny this. The houses are bright and glittering, presumably because it's still dark, the sun hasn't risen yet and they're being lit by candles. They're bright and glittering in the smokeless air. The reality of London during the rest of the day when the smoke has started is that it is not smokeless. The river does not glide at its own sweet will. It is basically the busiest river in the world, or was the busiest river in

the world then. So rather than this being a poem to the city of London about how beautiful the city of London is, which is how it is often put across, this is more a poem about how beautiful the morning is. How beautiful the sunrise is. All of the attributes that Wordsworth champions in this poem about London, every pleasant thing he says about what he sees, or everything that he recounts pleasantly about what he sees, are attributes of the morning, not attributes of the city. One could even argue that this poem is as much a poem about the beauty of the morning sunrise as it is a poem about the beauty of the city.

If one were to write a poem about the city, you'd struggle to say, 'the city is a wonderful place' without mentioning one of the main attributes of the city proper, which is people. The fact that there are no people in this poem is a conspicuous omission. So, what I submit to you here is that this is not a poem saying what a wonderful place London is. In fact, the way I imagine this poem being constructed is Wordsworth is walking along Westminster Bridge at 6 o'clock in the morning, and he stops and he looks over London and he says, 'Wow, that is really beautiful. Absolutely stunningly beautiful place. I might even try to write a poem about that.' And he thinks, 'better actually do it pretty quick, because that is beautiful in the morning, but in a minute, the beauty of the morning which is being worn like a garment by London at the moment is going to come off, it's going to look horrible. That river is going to be owned and chartered by the people there, the place is going to be smoke-filled and filled with people and it's going to be really loud. All those nice, quiet, sleepy houses are going to be thump, thump, thumping away, and everybody's going to be shouting and screaming and trying to make money. God I can't stand this city. But, while it's still not sunrise yet, I must admit even this is really beautiful.' And from that, he writes his poem. I sound very flippant when I relate it to you like that, but that's not far removed from what probably happened.

What I want to address here, and then I'll relate it to this poem, is Wordsworth's definition of poetry. Wordsworth defines poetry as, 'The spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its form recollected in tranquility'. That sounds great, until you look at it a bit closer, and then you realize it's not even a definition of poetry at all.

Let me explain why it's not. 'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions'? Okay, so when we get, or when we see, a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions, that's powerful. So let me use a comical example, when Mike Tyson bit Evander Holyfield's ear off, that was poetry, was it? That looked like a fairly spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions to me. He didn't look like he was planning to do it, and he looked pretty

angry. That looked like a powerful emotion.

I don't think we're going to call Mike Tyson biting Evander Holyfield's ear off a poem. Of course, Wordsworth doesn't really mean 'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions'. He means 'poetry is the spontaneous overflow of *positive* emotions'. And you think, 'Okay, fair enough'. But, is it? Don't you actually have to say something or write it down for it to be poetry?

I mean I know in a sort of metaphorical way you can say, 'The way the woman walked was a poem in itself'. But let's be rather boring about this bit and say that you do actually have to write it down, or say it, or at least think it for it to be a poem. Had Mike Tyson, after biting Evander Holyfield's ear off - and if you haven't seen this, watch it on Google, it is hilarious - after doing this, Mike Tyson goes home and, in tranquility, he forms some thoughts about it, he thinks about it: is that a poem? If Mike Tyson writes down what he thought about the experience, would that be a poem? Well, I don't know Mike Tyson's poetic capabilities but maybe it would.

I'd like to believe that the thing that we call a poem would be written by someone with a certain degree of verbal dexterity and poetic acumen, but that doesn't mean that it couldn't be done by somebody who doesn't have those things. But I don't think it's too much for us to ask that the thing which we call a poem is written down or spoken by someone.

But my first problem with Wordsworth's statement here: 'Poetry *is* the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions'. No, it's not. What Wordsworth presumably means here is: 'Poetry is *generated* by the spontaneous overflow of what I call positive, life-enhancing emotions, which I then go away and in tranquility think about and then write down.'

But even that's not completely true, because not all poetry is generated in that way. The poetry Wordsworth writes and likes and champions *is* written in that way, but not all of it. So, if I was to change Wordsworth's statement into one that I think makes perfect sense, I would have to amend it and I'm not doing this facetiously, incidentally, because the statement is very well known, and you see what Wordsworth's talking about enacted in this poem.

And the statement, which the world knows, doesn't make a lot of sense. But if you amend it, it does.

So you amend Wordsworth's original statement 'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, and it takes its form recollected in tranquility', you amend it to, 'The type of poetry I like and write is generated by the spontaneous overflow of powerful, positive, life-affirming feelings, which I then go away and recollect in tranquility and form a poem from due to my intellectual acumen and poetic dexterity.' That statement that I've given

you does make perfect sense about the way Wordsworth seems to construct his poetry.

We can imagine it happening with this poem.

The spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion that Wordsworth gets is looking at London first thing in the morning, walking along the bridge, stopping because he's not dull of soul and he will not pass by a sight so touching in majesty. He looks over the sunrise, 'Wow, that is really beautiful', and presumably after seeing it, he goes away and, in tranquility, he recollects what he's just seen. I mean, he could sit down ten minutes later and recollect what he saw ten minutes before, or he could go away for a year and recollect what he's seen and write it down. But as I say, I don't think it's beyond the talents of William Wordsworth to sit down ten minutes later and write this poem. He sees the beautiful sunrise, he has the spontaneous moment of overwhelming feeling about it, and in tranquility, he writes, *Earth has not anything to show more fair.*

So let me just mention something on the form of the poem because it is the classic Sonnet in the Petrarchan form. It has the ABBA ABBA opening four rhymes of every Petrarchan sonnet, and after that it goes CDCDCD. Now it being a sonnet, Petrarchan or otherwise, these are traditionally the way love poems are written, so I suppose we could claim here that this is a love poem to the city of London in the morning, or just the morning, in the same way that, for example, Rupert Brooke's *The Soldier* is a love poem to England.

That's worth commenting on, but I think one of the most relevant attributes of this poem being a sonnet is the actual ABBA ABBA rhyme scheme that Wordsworth imposes on himself means that he has to rhyme words with 'fair', 'wear', and 'air'. I'm mentioning this only to give Wordsworth a get-out clause for that

*This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,*

in using 'bare' he has to use the word with 'fair', 'wear', and 'air', so presumably he put a word in that rhymed and then worked backwards from it. So, it is a Petrarchan sonnet. It is, in some ways, a love poem to the morning, or the city of London in the morning, but I wouldn't attempt to get too much out of the relevance of this as a sonnet.

I'll read the poem through for you one more time.

*Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by*

*A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!*

Thank you. That was the Mycroft Online Lecture on William Wordsworth's
'Composed on a Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802.

I am Dr. Andrew Barker, thank you.

Dr. Andrew Barker
drandrewbarker.com
Adbarker86@hotmail.com

Some Additional notes: