Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802

©2011 eNotes.com, Inc. or its Licensors. Please see copyright information at the end of this document.

Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802

The Poem

This poem's title, "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802," tells the reader its setting: William Wordsworth is in London on the bridge that crosses the Thames River by the houses of Parliament, close to where Big Ben's Tower stands today. When he tells the poem's place and date of composition, however, the poet may not be strictly accurate. He probably began composing the poem on July 31 as he crossed the bridge at the beginning of a journey to France; he may have then finished it by his return on September 3. His sister, Dorothy Wordsworth, records that on July 31 as they drove over Westminster Bridge they saw St. Paul's Cathedral in the distance and noticed that the Thames was filled with many small boats. "The houses were not overhung," she reports, "by their cloud of smoke, and they were spread out endlessly, yet the sun shone so brightly, with such a pure light" that it seemed like "one of nature's own grand spectacles." Dorothy Wordsworth's description can help one to read the poem.

The reader may first think that the poet is musing to himself, but his somewhat public tone suggests a general audience. One may first be puzzled; if it were not for its title, the general subject of the poem would not be immediately apparent. Lines 1 through 3 make a forceful assertion, but it is a negative one: Whatever the "sight" turns out to be, nothing on earth is more beautiful, and only a very insensitive person could ignore it. All one knows of this "sight" so far is that it is impressive ("majestic") and moving ("touching").

In line 4, the reader discovers that the subject of the poem is the beauty of the city. One should probably take "City" to mean all the parts of greater London that could have been seen from Westminster Bridge in 1802, and perhaps in particular the sections called the City of Westminster (located by the bridge) and the City of London, with its towers and spires visible downriver on the north bank of the Thames. The poet, echoing his sister's description, describes the panorama of this vast city in the silence and clear air of an early morning in summer. He sees the tops of many different structures; he sees ships on the river, but most of all such urban landmarks as theaters and churches. The dome must be that of St. Paul's itself. His eyes move easily from these buildings to the sky and to the open hills and fields that in those days lay close to central London to the southwest and were visible on hills to the north.

At line 9, the poet stops his description of London and begins to compare it to those wonderful sights he has seen in nature. He has never seen anything in nature more beautiful than this view of the city. He has never seen a sight any more calm than this, nor presumably has any sight ever caused him to feel more calm himself. In the poem's final three lines, the poet returns to give vivid, even extravagant pictures of the beautiful city and the river. He exclaims to God that London's "mighty heart" is alive and motionless in houses that themselves "seem asleep."

Forms and Devices

This poem is a sonnet—a fourteen-line lyric poem with a moderately rigid rhyme scheme. In his sonnets, Wordsworth rhymes in the manner of the Italian Petrarch and the Englishman John Milton, not in that of William Shakespeare (the most famous sonneteer in English). Here Wordsworth rhymes *abba, abba, cdcdcd*. Two groups of four lines (or quatrains) form the octave (or opening eight-line grouping). This sonnet does not break down into units as markedly as do more traditional examples of the form. Although like most sonnets it changes direction after the octave, the change is less sharp than usual. The sestet's meaning shifts between lines 10 and 11, but the shift is not abrupt.

In spite of its rather strict form, the poem seems unconstrained. In most ways, its sentences proceed in a normal conversational English way, with a list here or a parenthetical remark there. One exception to this generalization is that the poet often inverts normal word order to achieve emphasis: "Dull would he be," "Never did sun," "Ne'er saw I." As a result, the poem reads somewhat like dramatic prose, even though the reader does feel a regular musical pulse. Wordsworth said elsewhere that he tried to write poetry in a language close to real speech, and here he appears to succeed. As in ordinary conversation, this poem's language has few extravagant figures of speech. A simile compares the city's morning beauty to "a garment" that it wears; valleys "steep" in sunlight. In the last three lines, the poet employs obvious personifications: The river has its own will, houses sleep, and London has a dormant mighty heart.

The force of the poem's language lies in its vigorous emphasis and its descriptions (and perhaps one allusion). As noted above, inversions of words often create strong emphases. Many lines, particularly in the octet, are enjambed; that is, many lines run into the next, propelling the poem's rhythm forward. The last six lines provide successive short, forceful, and somewhat unconnected exclamations and statements. Most readers can respond to the sights of the city that this poem provides. The image of the London skyline is vivid even to those who have never seen a picture of London, as are the separate pictures (the river, the houses) evoked by the personifications in the last three lines of the poem. (Note that Wordsworth has simplified what he must have seen; the boats that Dorothy mentioned do not appear in William's account.)

The poem reads easily. It presents its ideas forcefully by means of comparatively simple devices and vivid images. Nevertheless, many readers come away with a sense that there is more to the poem than an uncomplicated, vigorous description of what Wordsworth saw from Westminster Bridge.

Themes and Meanings

Between July 31 and September 3, 1802, William and Dorothy Wordsworth traveled to France to visit William's former lover, Annette Vallon, and William and Annette's illegitimate daughter, Caroline. Even though at this time Wordsworth was preparing to marry someone else, one should not assume that the visit was at all traumatic. The reader gets quite the opposite impression from the poet's account of a walk with his daughter that he describes in another sonnet, "It Is a Beauteous Evening." War had separated Wordsworth and Annette for ten years, and any idea that they might marry had been put aside. Undoubtedly, Wordsworth was living intensely at this time, but the reader should resist trying to find any specific autobiographical meaning in this poem.

To a reader of Wordsworth's other poetry, the most unusual thing about "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802," is its subject matter. In most of his poetry, Wordsworth describes natural scenes: streams, hills, mountains, woods, and meadows—natural sights located in Switzerland, Wales, and most of all in the Lake District in northwestern England. He not only describes those scenes but also explains how experiencing them refreshes and ennobles the human spirit. In contrast, he usually pictures cities in general, and London in particular, as the opposite of the country, as places where those ennobling experiences do not happen, places where human nature is degraded. He celebrates his own escape from a city in the opening lines of *The Prelude* (1850), and later in that poem he describes the depravity of London at great length. He often

sympathizes with his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge because he was unlucky enough to have spent much of his boyhood in London.

So it is unusual that in this poem Wordsworth finds the city fully as beautiful as natural scenery. He celebrates London's beauty in many of the ways he talks about natural sights. As in "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," what one sees on the earth's surface in London blends into the sky and harmonizes with it. The London scene is suffused in glorious light. As in other poems, this scene and its observer are "calm"—a word that to Wordsworth never means simply "without motion," but rather describes a profound and life-giving peace.

Wordsworth knows that he is not seeing the city in all of its aspects. He sees London at its best, early in the morning of a beautiful summer day. He knows that, later, the city will awake and that the streets will fill up with their normal noise and bustle. In colder seasons, smoke from fireplaces will darken the sky. Wordsworth's simile in lines 4 and 5 makes this point clearly: The beauty of the morning is like a garment which makes its wearer beautiful, but which can be taken off—presumably to reveal a different, less lovely city underneath. If line 6 contains an allusion to the insubstantial, soon-to-disappear "cloud-capp'd towers" of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611; act 4 scene 1), one sees even more vividly how ephemeral is Wordsworth's vision.

Nevertheless, the vision is real. Its effect is powerful, and it lasts in the memory. It is a vision of calm beauty—and something more. In other passages in his poetry, most notably in Book 1 of *The Prelude*, one senses a force outside the poet, pressing upon him. This force can be terrifying (as when great hills stride after him) or simply exciting or invigorating. In this poem, many readers sense that the poet has seen and evoked such a force in the autonomous river gliding "at his own sweet will," in the soon-to-awaken houses, and in the energy and potential activity of the sleeping collective heart of the inhabitants of London.

Copyright Notice

©2011 eNotes.com, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

For complete copyright information, please see the online version of this work:
http://www.enotes.com/composed-upon-westminster-bridge-september-3-1802-salem