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Rare-Item Post: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnet "On a Portrait of Wordsworth, By R. B. Haydon"

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), the most popular and influential woman poet in the 19th century, had a great admiration for William Wordsworth as an "Evangelist of Nature." Accordingly, she freely expressed a deep respect through her sonnet "On a Portrait of Wordsworth, By R. B. Haydon." This manuscript, written in 1842, is held in the Armstrong Browning Library's 19th Century Collection at Baylor University. After looking at a portrait of Wordsworth painted by Benjamin Robert Haydon, EBB portrays her impression of the poet as a "poet-priest." It is significant to notice her representation of Wordsworth as someone who acts as a priest between the reader and nature because Wordsworth himself does not appear as a religious person according to a general sense of his poetry.

To briefly explain the connection between EBB and Wordsworth, she actually met her revered "poet-priest" in 1836, when she was thirty and when Wordsworth was sixty-six, and exchanged notes. Their gratifying meeting took place six years before writing the sonnet.

EBB's sonnet "On a Portrait of Wordsworth, By R. B. Haydon," was first published in the *Athenaeum* (1842), and subsequently collected in *Poems* (1844). In these two different versions, there are two tiny but important differences. The first difference appears in lines 11-12 in both of the versions. In the 1842 version of the sonnet, the line is composed as a question: "A vision free / And noble, Haydon, hath thine Art releast?" It asks the reader if Haydon's art,

Wordsworth's portrait, is released. But in the 1844 version, it makes a declaration: "A noble vision free, / Our Haydon's hand hath flung out from the mist!" These two differing styles surprisingly make a difference in the meaning of this passage. As mentioned above, the first version is a question rather than a declaration. In the first version, Haydon's art has not "flung out" Wordsworth's likeness, instead, the narrator seems to be waiting on Wordsworth's portrait to be "releas't." Through the dissimilarities, EBB is establishing a progress in her view of the artist.

The last difference is found in the manuscript written in 1842. EBB wrote beneath the sonnet, "Evangelist of Nature!", which does not appear in the printed version of 1844. It can be a decisive clue to her view on Wordsworth as a religious leader. The phrase "Evangelist of Nature" vivifies EBB's sense of portraying the poet as a priest who leads the reader to discover the spiritual vision of nature. In fact, this sonnet was written during the Victorian period when many people, not only EBB, referred to Wordsworth as "poet-priest" and "Evangelist of Nature" because his poetry had a deep sense of spiritual value to help the reader.

In representing Wordsworth as a priest of nature, EBB actually draws on Wordsworth's own portrait of himself. In "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth interestingly sets up the scene in the beginning: "Do I behold...on a wild secluded scene impress / Thoughts of more deep seclusion, and connect / The landscape with the quiet of the sky" (Tintern Abbey 6-8). Though Wordsworth is with his sister Dorothy in this scene, he portrays himself as if he were alone in a private meditation with nature. In later lines, he describes smoke as if it were incense being offered up: "wreaths of smoke / Sent up in silence from among the trees" (18-19). Later, he calls himself "a worshipper of nature" (156). Together, these images imply that the poet is turning the whole scene into a temple of meditation. He is actually above

the ruins of an ancient church, Tintern Abbey. While the church is in ruins, he suggests that all of nature is itself a church, a place of devotion and meditation. Hence, EBB, in her sonnet, extends a suggestion that is already in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey."

Therefore, in her sonnet, EBB is literally portraying Wordsworth as a mediator who "Takes here his rightful place as poet-priest / By the high altar, singing prayer and prayer / To the higher Heavens!" (9-11). Examining the sonnet encourages the reader's view of Wordsworth as "Evangelist of Nature," a mediator between the reader and nature.