



Life-Changing Literature

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WHEN I WAS FOURTEEN I started a new school. I had grown up in the countryside, but this was in the town. The buildings were all steel and concrete and the only green was the football pitches and I did not play football. I think I must have felt pretty sorry for myself. No one wanted to know me and I reciprocated.

However, anonymity – like the third person when you have a pen in your hand – grants you freedom to roam. So I roamed, and the quietest place, and therefore the place where a new pupil might stand out the least, was the library. I stood at the doors and, like Larkin's churchgoer, waited till I was sure there was nothing going on inside.

I remember trying to look at ease. I remember thinking I should probably read something, just as in a bar you should probably drink something. I wanted to be a scientist when I grew up, but that day I needed something stronger. I was so desperate I found myself in the poetry section.

The name Wordsworth struck me as subliminal advertising, but I had to start somewhere. I flicked through the contents of his collected works like a menu in a foreign language and chanced, via the memory of a dull, rainy family holiday in Wales on 'Lines Composed above Tintern Abbey'. It seemed to be about someone returning:

Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,



That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.

It was what I expected. A slightly antiquated evocation of landscape. Back where he felt he belonged. I was happy for him. Not much use to me.

Then the John Constable roadshow stops: though he's been away, he suggests, he never really left:

These beautiful forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet [...]

It's a simple message. But it was what I needed. I had assumed life was linear, that what was lost was lost. But now, in that rarely trodden aisle of the library, the simple conspiracy of writer and reader revealed itself to me: I felt what he felt; lifted up, dizzy with what, through writing, could be reclaimed. That which seems lost, to concrete and steel, to anonymity, to the exile of youth, to change, is not lost. Not the best of it.

He goes on to describe the best teenage fix, that no joint, no vodka and coke, no school disco crush could match, as, through memory

[...] even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

Not long afterwards I gave up science.