

Wordsworth, William, 1770-1850
from Literature Online biography

Published in Cambridge, 2001, by Chadwyck-Healey (a Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company)

Copyright © 2001 Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company. All Rights Reserved.

Article Text:

William Wordsworth (1770-1850), poet, was born in Cockermouth (at the northern edge of the English Lake District) on 7 April 1770. His family were prosperous, his father, John Wordsworth, being the law-agent to Sir James Lowther, a powerful landowner, businessman and politician who dominated the area. But Wordsworth's childhood was unsettled. The family home served as Lowther's campaign centre, and the Wordsworth children were regularly dispatched to their unsympathetic maternal grandparents at Penrith for long periods. The early deaths of both his parents, his mother in 1778, his father in 1783, the consequent guardianship of uncles he disliked, and attendant sense of homelessness, increased Wordsworth's sense of dislocation. John Wordsworth's death also plunged his children into economic insecurity. Unlike his three brothers, who subsequently followed safe professional careers, Wordsworth struggled financially for much of his life.

Between 1779 and 1787 Wordsworth attended Hawkshead Grammar School and obtained an excellent classical education. Here, besides reading extensively in contemporary literature, he began writing poetry himself. Boarding away from home he enjoyed considerable freedom to engage enthusiastically in such boyish sports as fishing, birdnesting, sailing and skating: such activities, he later recorded in *The Prelude*, 'first attach'd' his 'heart to rural objects'. The 'attachment' once made, 'nature' gradually ceased to be 'secondary', but was 'sought / For her own sake'. Something of the compulsiveness of that seeking is revealed in the most important poem of Wordsworth's Hawkshead years, 'The Vale of Esthwaite' (c. 1786-7), which mixes natural descriptions with extravagant Gothic passages, the latter reflecting Wordsworth's difficulty in finding a literary language to reflect the power of his sensations. His next long poem, *An Evening Walk* (begun 1788), purged the gothic elements to become a more conventional essay in the fashionable loco-descriptive mode, perhaps with a view to publication.

Wordsworth's years at St John's College, Cambridge, between 1787 and 1791 were unspectacular, despite initial promise. His university career reads as a subdued protest at family expectations that he would obtain a fellowship and enter the Church. In summer 1790 came an act of outright rebellion: shortly before final examinations he embarked on a long walking tour of France, Switzerland and Italy, effectively destroying any hopes he may have had of obtaining a fellowship. A pursuit of nature in her most 'sublime' and 'picturesque'

aspects (then conventional categories of appreciation), this tour also developed Wordsworth's political awareness, giving him a prolonged experience of France in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, though he was slow to recognise its full significance. His political education continued when he spent several months in London in 1791, at a time of intense discussion of revolutionary principles. At the end of the year, still trying to avoid a Church career, he returned to France, ostensibly to study French. His politically radical, even revolutionary views, steadily strengthened. 'Descriptive Sketches' (begun 1790), a poem based on the 1790 tour, came to incorporate a passionate message of support for the cause of 'freedom'. While in France Wordsworth had a relationship with Annette Vallon, a young Frenchwoman, who subsequently gave birth to his daughter. It is probable that Wordsworth intended to marry Annette, but the outbreak of war between Britain and France in 1793 prevented his doing so.

Back in London in 1793, with a view to making money, Wordsworth published *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*. He was now prepared to enter the Church after all, but influential members of his family, exasperated by his previous behaviour, declined further support. Wordsworth continued to live on family credit and the goodwill of friends. In 1793 he wrote his most politically radical works: a long poem entitled 'Salisbury Plain' and a political pamphlet, *A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, intended as a contribution to the volatile Revolution debate. Neither was published, though it is not clear whether this was Wordsworth's choice: in the tense atmosphere of the times, the Letter in particular, with its avowed republicanism, could have provoked prosecution. In 1794, reeling from disappointment in the bloody course of the French Revolution, as well as the British Government's increasingly repressive response to political agitation at home, Wordsworth at least found his financial situation improve when a friend left him £900. This should have made him independent, though bad investment decisions substantially reduced its practical effect.

Early in 1795 Wordsworth made his most sustained attempt to establish himself as a radical journalist in London; when this failed, he accepted the offer of friends to live rent-free in their father's country house, Racedown Lodge in Dorsetshire. This move from London to the country, accompanied by a shift in self-image from urban man-of-letters to Horatian poet-in-retirement, was in many ways the turning point of Wordsworth's life, and he commenced his autobiographical *Prelude* with it. He produced his first unequivocally great poetry at Racedown, and commenced living with his sister Dorothy, as he would for the rest of his life. Wordsworth later credited Dorothy with restoring him to his 'true self' at this period, after the personal and political shocks of 1792-5. The relationship between brother and sister was unusually close and intense, and has sometimes been interpreted as latently incestuous. Wordsworth associated Dorothy with nature and felt that 'nature's self' too had assisted in the restoration he underwent at Racedown: it 'Revived the feelings of [his] earlier life' and brought 'strength' and 'knowledge full of peace'. Much of his subsequent poetry was concerned with reviewing, in various ways, his earlier experiences.

Wordsworth's first literary work at Racedown was a revision of 'Salisbury Plain' into 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain'. The revised poem is less political and demonstrates significant new interests in individual psychology and the way storytelling establishes relationships between human beings. These elements were further refined and de-politicised in 'The Ruined Cottage', Wordsworth's first truly major poem, the earliest version of which was completed in 1797. In between he wrote *The Borderers*, his only play, a searching critique of revolutionary individualism. All these works remained unpublished for many years. In 1797 Wordsworth and Dorothy developed a close and epoch-making friendship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and quickly moved to Alfoxden House, Somerset, to live close to him. Coleridge convinced Wordsworth that his proper life's work was a grand philosophical poem to be called *The Recluse*, and Wordsworth struggled with this project, which was never realised, for the rest of his life. In a less serious vein the two poets co-authored *Lyrical Ballads*, published anonymously in 1798. Wordsworth's contributions include poems like 'Simon Lee', 'The Thorn', and 'The Idiot Boy', which revolutionised the romantic and sentimental ballads popular at the time with their narrative complexity and quiet humour. He also contributed some creedal lyrics, hymning Nature as a moral teacher. Most importantly, the volume concluded with 'Tintern Abbey', which, in passionate blank verse, described Wordsworth's personal development in terms of his deepening relationship with nature.

In September 1798 the Wordsworths travelled to Germany with Coleridge, though afterwards separated from him, taking up residence at Goslar. In winter 1798-9 Wordsworth wrote some of his finest poetry: a series of evocative but fragmentary blank verse descriptions of his Hawkshead days, as well as the 'Lucy' and 'Matthew' poems. In 1799 the autobiographical fragments were developed into a two-part poem, now recognised as the first version of *The Prelude*. Addressed to Coleridge, as all subsequent versions of *The Prelude* were, it represents Wordsworth's childhood and adolescence as shaped by the 'severe' lessons of a nevertheless benevolent nature. The advantage of this sort of growth-in-nature is that human passions become 'intertwined' with natural landscapes: hence Wordsworth's celebrated formula of 'spots of time' to describe memories which possess a restorative function. The poem as a whole, in all its versions, was designed to represent Wordsworth as properly equipped to write *The Recluse*.

The Wordsworths returned to England in 1799, and at the end of the year moved to Grasmere, in the centre of the Lake District. Wordsworth began writing 'Home at Grasmere', a part of *The Recluse*. The poem's extravagant happiness was somewhat tempered by doubts respecting the moral character of country people, and quite what the Wordsworths' relationship with their new neighbours would be. Much of 1800 was taken up with assembling a second, greatly expanded edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, published in January 1801 (but dated 1800) under Wordsworth's name. The new poems were more wholly serious than those published in 1798, and, reflecting the intervening work on *The Prelude*, more concerned with the relationship between man and nature: among the most important are 'Hartleap Well', 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' and 'Michael'. Many of the poems refer quite specifically to places in the Lake District and ultimately led to Wordsworth's being strongly

associated with the region. By far the most controversial part of the 1800 edition was Wordsworth's theoretical 'Preface' which described contemporary culture declining into cheap sensationalism due to the pressures of urbanisation. His remedy was a poetry based on the subtle observation of country people and their language, in which 'the primary laws of our nature' are better displayed. Some young readers found a new gospel in the 1800 Lyrical Ballads, responding with the fervour of religious conversion. They were the first 'Wordsworthians'. But in 1802, Francis Jeffrey, writing in the rapidly influential Edinburgh Review, criticised the 'Preface', which he represented as a politically-motivated attack on existing standards of poetry. Jeffrey here gave birth to the influential myth of a subversive 'Lake School' of poets led by Wordsworth, Coleridge and Robert Southey.

After the industry of 1800, 1801 was a fallow year. However in 1802, the year of his marriage to Mary Hutchinson, Wordsworth again engaged in extensive composition. The Recluse now on hold, to Coleridge's frustration, he wrote an important series of lyric pieces concerned with his responses to slight, ordinary events, and also a considerable number of sonnets, many of them politically motivated, though Wordsworth's politics were now of a stirring, patriotic kind, and he hoped to strengthen the moral fibre of the nation in its conflict with Napoleon. He continued to write in both these forms for the rest of his life. A number of the political sonnets were published in the Morning Post in 1802-3 and comprise his only significant new publication between Lyrical Ballads and Poems (1807). 1803 was again a comparatively fallow year, but in 1804 Wordsworth returned to The Prelude and drastically enlarged it. Initially he planned to expand it to five books, taking his autobiography up to his Cambridge years, and introducing the structural device of an imaginative 'fall' and restoration. Before this plan was achieved, however, he abruptly decided to expand it again, and eventually completed a poem in thirteen books, extending the personal narrative to the Racedown period. He never published it, and spent the rest of his life periodically revising it. Another major product of 1804 was 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', describing a positive, moving 'philosophy' which could accept, and even welcome loss as an essential part of human experience.

The happiest years of Wordsworth's life ended when his brother John was drowned in February 1805. His grief on that occasion produced several poems, including 'Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle' (1806), one of his finest. But the event substantially brought his 'Great Decade', 1797-1806, to an end. Some major poetry was produced after 1806, but it was no longer so innovative, or consistently brilliant, and Wordsworth devoted increasing amounts of time to revising, and sometimes publishing, earlier work. At a personal level his life was marked by an expanding family and a necessary move to a larger house at nearby Rydal. In 1812 two of his children died in infancy, and the death of his beloved daughter Dora in 1847 came as a late, devastating blow. Both Dorothy and Mary outlived him. His friendship with Coleridge slowly declined, and a major rift in 1810-11 was never completely healed. Politically, Wordsworth moved towards a position of fierce Toryism, and in time bitterly opposed the 1832 Reform Act. In the same decades he became an outspoken supporter of the Anglican Church. His obtaining a government office in 1813 as Distributor

of Stamps for Westmoreland seemed to some young liberals to best symbolise Wordsworth's retreat into the establishment.

Literary success came slowly. *Poems* (1807) was a commercial disaster. This collection of Wordsworth's lyric pieces and sonnets of 1802-6 concluded with the 'Ode', as subsequent collected editions of his work would do. It substantially supports Harold Bloom's verdict that Wordsworth 'invented modern poetry', but early reviewers jeered at what they regarded as the silliness and egotism of the lyrics. This led to a crisis in Wordsworth's career. No new poetry was published until 1814, though in 1810 appeared the first (anonymous) edition of his *Guide Through the District of the Lakes*, later one of his most successful works. The *Excursion*, mainly written in 1810-12, was published in 1814 with the announcement that it was 'a portion of *The Recluse*'. This epic-length, blank verse poem, which largely takes the form of a dialogue between 'The Author' (who says little), 'The Wanderer', 'The Solitary' and 'The Pastor' amid the scenic splendours of the Lake District, incorporated 'The Ruined Cottage', Wordsworth's early masterpiece. Although *The Excursion* ranges widely over social issues, its (rather heavily didactic) 'wisdom' is anchored on a particularly Wordsworthian view of Nature, and reviewers again found it an easy target. In 1815 appeared Wordsworth's first collected *Poems*, drawing together the contents of *Lyrical Ballads and Poems* (1807), and adding several new pieces. The 'Preface' and 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' added to this collection again damaged Wordsworth's reputation, and led to a spurt of parodies. Wordsworth argued that great poets had never been properly recognised by their contemporaries, and that he trusted posterity to regard him as a great imaginative poet. To many this epitomised the vanity and egotism of his whole poetic project.

Wordsworth's reputation substantially improved in 1820, however, when a volume of new poems, *The River Duddon*, obtained generally favourable reviews. Although this collection was much more conventional than anything Wordsworth had published since 1798, its comparative success also reflects the fact that the Byronic craze of the 1810s was declining. A major re-evaluation of Wordsworth's earlier work now began. During the 1820s his reputation steadily rose, and by the 1830s he was the object of a cult, his house a place of literary pilgrimage. In 1843, on the death of Southey, he was appointed Poet Laureate. What readers in the 1820s and 30s increasingly discovered (variously) in Wordsworth was a calm, meditative approach to life, a sublime self-sufficiency, an undoctinaire spirituality, a sensitivity to natural beauty and the concerns of ordinary people, and what John Stuart Mill would term a 'culture of the feelings'. He still had his opponents, but their polemics were now as often directed against 'the Wordsworthians' as against Wordsworth himself.

Since the 1830s Wordsworth's work has revealed an enduring capacity to inspire both partisan zeal and fierce hostility. The power of his best poetry has never been seriously doubted, but it has not always been liked, and there has been extensive debate over its nature. It has consistently attracted strong critics. In Wordsworth's lifetime the most impressive criticism came from Coleridge, Thomas De Quincey and William Hazlitt. Coleridge and De Quincey agreed that Wordsworth was an essentially 'imaginative' poet, but while Coleridge felt that

Wordsworth's true forte was grand, 'philosophical' poetry (*The Recluse*), and that it was unfortunate he had written so many short, lyric poems, De Quincey valued those shorter poems as 'scintillating with gems of far profounder truth'. De Quincey read Wordsworth as profoundly in touch with something deeply embedded in human nature, and better explains Wordsworth's actual popularity than Coleridge . Hazlitt , by contrast, read Wordsworth's poetry in political terms, arguing that what was best in his work was a result of his early attachment to the cause of liberty. This conveniently explained why Wordsworth's poetry seemed to decline after 1806. In the later nineteenth century Matthew Arnold emerged as Wordsworth's most significant and influential critic. His highly successful *Golden Treasury* selection (1879) proved critical in the formation of the modern Wordsworth canon. Arnold privileged poems from the 'Great Decade' and anticipated twentieth-century tendencies by extracting 'The Ruined Cottage' from *The Excursion* as 'composed separately' from the rest. Following De Quincey , he disliked the consciously philosophical Wordsworth, championing instead the 'poetic truth' of the shorter poems, which he located firmly in nature: 'It might seem that Nature not only gave him the matter for his poem, but wrote his poem for him.' Although he admitted he was a 'Wordsworthian', he opposed the generally indiscriminate enthusiasm of fellow admirers, arguing that a careful and selective criticism was required if Wordsworth was to become properly established as 'one of the very chief glories of English Poetry', and, in Arnold's view, one of the six great poets of Christian Europe. Arnold's essay thus anticipates the subsequent, professionalised study of Wordsworth's work.

The *Prelude* had been posthumously published in 1850, and was initially received with only mild enthusiasm. However, the work of critics like De Quincey and Arnold led to its supplanting *The Excursion* and eventually being understood as Wordsworth's greatest poetic achievement. Both cause and effect of the rise to prominence of *The Prelude* is a marked biographical turn in late nineteenth-century Wordsworthian criticism. A dull, 'official' *Memoir of Wordsworth* had been published in 1851, saying little about his early life and less still about his radical politics. A dramatic shift in emphasis was completed in Emile Legouis's *La Jeunesse de Wordsworth, 1770-1798* (1896; English translation 1897). This was essentially a study of *The Prelude* , and Legouis was the first major critic to make *The Prelude* central to an understanding of Wordsworth. George McLean Harper's *William Wordsworth: His Life, Works, and Influence* (1916), a comprehensive critical biography, was the first monument of twentieth-century Wordsworth scholarship. Harper paid extensive attention to Wordsworth's early life and politics, arguing, as Hazlitt had done, 'that Wordsworth at his best, in his great years, when he was most truly himself ... was a fervent Revolutionist'. Harper also made public Wordsworth's relationship with Annette Vallon and all in all did more than anyone else to overthrow the staid Victorian image of Wordsworth. Throughout the twentieth century much of the best writing on Wordsworth continued to be essentially biographical, a recent major contribution being Kenneth R. Johnston's *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy* (1998). Though subsequently disputed, Johnston's claim that Wordsworth may have worked for the British intelligence service when he went to Germany in 1798 proved as sensational in the 1990s as the Annette Vallon revelation in the 1910s and 20s, and suggests that the biography may still be far from complete (quite apart from the extensive

psychoanalytical speculation Wordsworth has inspired, which is, in its nature, almost indefinitely extendable).

If twentieth century Wordsworthian biography was a process of revealing what Johnston calls 'The Hidden Wordsworth', textual scholarship took a similar direction. At his death much of Wordsworth's poetry was either not published, or only published in revised form. A major achievement of twentieth-century Wordsworthian scholars was to excavate the manuscripts. First, and most significant, appeared Ernest De Selincourt's annotated edition of *The Prelude* as Wordsworth completed it in 1805 (1926), which enormously influenced subsequent discussion of the poet. The earlier two-part *Prelude* of 1799 was finally published in 1974. In 1975 Cornell University Press began the publication (still continuing) of photographs of all the significant manuscripts, along with transcriptions, annotated 'reading texts', and a collation of Wordsworth's extensive revisions. The result of all this is an almost uniquely intimate view of compositional processes, a tendency to privilege early texts, and the appearance of a very different poet from the Wordsworth known to his contemporaries.

Twentieth-century Wordsworth criticism may be said to have begun with A.C. Bradley's 1903 Oxford lectures (published in 1909). Criticising Arnold's 'Natural' Wordsworth, Bradley insisted 'that the "mystic," "visionary," "sublime," aspect of Wordsworth's poetry must not be slighted'. He argued that the power of much of Wordsworth's best writing derived from a fruitful tension between the natural and the visionary. Bradley's project to defamiliarise Wordsworth was supported by H.W. Garrod, who argued in the 1920s that 'The real difficulty ... of understanding Wordsworth proceeds from our finding it so hard to believe that he means what he says'. During the period from the 1920s to 1945 Wordsworth (like all the Romantic poets) was disliked, or viewed with suspicion, by most of the best critics and the period was mainly remarkable for its contextualising scholarship, examining Wordsworth's work in relation to the history of ideas. The result made Wordsworth's poetry seem less personal, but part of a larger intellectual culture, therefore academically -- and even philosophically -- respectable. After the Second World War the balance shifted: the best critics generally admired Wordsworth, but the collective picture of the poet which emerged was again that of a solitary figure. Criticism of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s was dominated to an extraordinary extent by the work of Geoffrey H. Hartman and the so-called 'Yale School' (which also included Harold Bloom and Paul de Man). Placing himself in the (still very limited) Bradley tradition, Hartman traced in Wordsworth's work a 'consciousness of consciousness' in terms of a dialectic between nature and imagination, arguing that Wordsworth came to realise that imagination was 'apocalyptic' and independent of nature. Wordsworth then tried to 'humanise' his imagination by creating the myth that nature itself had guided him to a realisation of imagination's independence. The critical skill with which Hartman applied this model, far from dogmatically, to the whole range of Wordsworth's work, effectively disarmed criticism for many years, though some critics felt that he was biased towards imagination and too dismissive of the nature side of Wordsworth.

Hartman recognised the political element in Wordsworth, though his own criticism was not

concerned with it. This was true of most critics in the post-War decades. In the 1980s, however, political readings returned with a vengeance, provoking an unprecedentedly extensive discussion of Wordsworth's work. Unlike Hazlitt and Harper, who had maintained that Wordsworth's best work was inspired by his radical beliefs, 1980s critics like Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson and Alan Liu argued that it was inspired by a denial of political and social reality. Both nature and imagination, they urged, were Wordsworthian constructs intended to separate the 'romantic self' from history. These (loosely) 'New Historicist' critics held that earlier criticism of Wordsworth was itself mired in 'the Romantic Ideology'. Another, related, 1980s trend was to explore the way in which not only criticism of the Romantic period, but the whole 'English Literature' establishment was 'Wordsworthian'. Critics who explored this idea, from various vantage points, included Jonathan Arac, Don Bialostosky, and Clifford Siskin. In 1990 Marilyn Butler's article 'The Political Narratives of Romantic Poetry and Criticism' advanced the claim that Wordsworth, the private, deep-thinking man, had become a favourite of the academy because he imaged its own values. Her call for a broader historical engagement with the early nineteenth century, and a study of less personal literature, set the tone for the 1990s, when critical discussion of the Romantic period finally did move on from Wordsworth's consciousness. There was no obvious reduction in the number of new publications devoted to Wordsworth, however, and at the present moment it would appear that the recent turn towards cultural history does not so much represent a turn away from Wordsworth as a desire to place him in a larger cultural matrix (again).

DC , 2001