

Chapter 1

Life

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A longing for the company of others shaped Wordsworth's life, one he met by forming a number of intense relationships. These relationships unfolded with friends, most notably the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge; lovers, specifically Annette Vallon and Mary Hutchinson; and siblings, particularly Dorothy and John (he was not so intimate with his other two brothers, Richard and Christopher). Born in the Lake District in 1770, Wordsworth's early life was marked by a dependency on Dorothy, to whom he was especially devoted in the absence of his father, who often worked away from home. He was also close to his mother, a figure whom he recalled as a moral and upright influence, balancing his 'moody and violent' temperament:

I remember also telling her on one week day that I had been at church, for our school stood in the churchyard, and we had frequent opportunities of seeing what was going on there. The occasion was, a woman doing penance in the church in a white sheet. My mother commended my having been present, expressing a hope that I should remember the circumstance for the rest of my life. 'But', said I, 'Mama, they did not give me a penny, as I had been told they would'. 'Oh', said she, recanting her praises, 'if that was your motive, you were very properly disappointed'. (*PW*, III.371–2)

Wordsworth's cynicism deepened when his mother died of pneumonia in 1778, and Dorothy was sent to live with his mother's cousin, Elizabeth Threlkeld, in Halifax. When their father died just five years later in 1783, Wordsworth, Dorothy and John came to rely on each other, developing an affectionate bond that both inspired and attracted to it figures such as

Coleridge, fellow writers Charles Lamb and Thomas De Quincey, and the sisters Mary and Sara Hutchinson, whom Wordsworth had met at primary school in Penrith. Separated from Dorothy and the Hutchinsons at grammar school in Hawkshead, however, Wordsworth sought solace in his new environment. The natural world surrounding Hawkshead, Windermere and Coniston offered Wordsworth the most stunning of mountainous landscapes from which to borrow poetic images and sounds; and he quickly forged strong familial ties with his boarding family, Ann and Hugh Tyson. In addition, his teachers and the books they taught granted Wordsworth new worlds in which to imaginatively escape. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Fox's *Book of Martyrs* encouraged his taste for Homer, Virgil, Juvenal and Cicero; and he recalls reading 'all Fielding's works, *Don Quixote*, *Gil Blas*, and any part of Swift that I liked' (PW, III.372).

Wordsworth was an unusual student, not for his intellectual brilliance, but because of his eagerness to read widely in all subjects. Thomas Bowman, a former headmaster of Hawkshead, even reported that 'he believed that he did more for William Wordsworth by lending him books than by his teaching ... it was books he wanted, all sorts of books; *Tours and Travels*, which my father was partial to, and *Histories and Biographies*, which were also favourites with him; and *Poetry* – that goes without saying'.¹ Wordsworth later admitted that he read little contemporary literature ('God knows my incursions into the fields of modern literature, excepting in our own language three volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, and two or three papers of the *Spectator*, half subdued – are absolutely nothing').² Yet he was nevertheless very much taken by the then fashionable emotive sensibility promoted by eighteenth-century poets like Helen Maria Williams and Charlotte Smith, as well as by the graveyard poets Edward Young and Thomas Gray.

Deep in his studies, of poetry and the natural world, Wordsworth was shaken by his father's death in 1783, not only because it left him orphaned and dependent on relatives, but also because it reminded him how distant he had been from his father. Worse still was the discovery that the family finances were tangled up in the affairs of the much-hated landowner, Sir James Lowther, whom Wordsworth's father had worked for as a law-agent and investor. Unable to retrieve these investments (the claim was not settled until 1802), the Wordsworth children were left homeless, a state of affairs that only served to increase the intimacy between Wordsworth and Dorothy, and also with their friend, Mary Hutchinson. The poet remembers his early relationships with the two women in *The Prelude* as 'the blessed time of early love' (P, XI.318), a period that stood in stark contrast to his imminent life at university, where he was to take his degree and prepare for ordination.

Education and politics

When he was 17, Wordsworth enrolled at St John's, Cambridge, a college with strong connections to Hawkshead and where his uncle, William Cookson, was a Fellow. He was granted a 'sizar's place', which meant that he received financial support in exchange for menial errands, and he added to this scholarship with academic awards, proving himself an initially enthusiastic, confident and committed student. Yet he was soon disillusioned by his lived experience of Cambridge. As he wrote in *The Prelude*, 'I was not for that hour, / Nor for that place' (*P*, III.80–1), one that he found intellectually and imaginatively outdated. Academic achievement, he feared, was based not on hard work at Cambridge, but on 'Honour misplaced, and Dignity astray' (*P*, III.635). For example, when the college Master died shortly after his arrival, Wordsworth, whose poetic aspirations were already apparent, was asked to write an elegy for him. This appalled Wordsworth, who understood elegy as a personal exploration of genuine grief: the expectation that he should show false emotion for the sake of college duty simply reinforced his sense of Cambridge as a dead and alienating place that produced only imprudent ministers and lawyers. His results plummeted and he left with only a basic degree.

For Wordsworth, real education was reflective rather than accumulative. He learned, not by accruing facts and figures, but through his experiences of poetry, nature and travel as shared with his close family and friends. His pedagogy was one wherein the individual spends time thinking about his or her own situations and experiences before searching out new ones. Wordsworth put this into practice in his poem, 'An Evening Walk' (1788–9), addressed to his strongest ally, Dorothy. Yet even Dorothy was not party to the walking tour of Europe Wordsworth planned with his friend Robert Jones for the summer of 1790. Travelling for three months and covering 3,000 miles (2,000 of them on foot), the two men excited what Wordsworth described as a 'general curiosity' both in those they met abroad, and also in those Cambridge acquaintances who had reproved the scheme as 'mad & impracticable'. Their tour was, indeed, extraordinary: on reaching Calais on 13 July, Wordsworth and Jones were immediately thrown into the first anniversary celebrations of the fall of the Bastille, the 'whole nation mad with joy,' Wordsworth wrote, 'in consequence of the revolution.'³

Moving from these celebrations to explore the monastery of the Grande Chartreuse, Lake Geneva and the Alps at the Simplon Pass, Wordsworth found his return to England a difficult one. Finishing his studies in 1791, he

left the stuffiness of Cambridge for the equally hostile clamour of London, finding respite in a few weeks' stay with Dorothy and also a visit to Jones in Wales, where together they climbed Snowdon. Here was a habitat in which Wordsworth could reflect on his months in London, a period in which he had absorbed the political fervour produced by English reactions to the Revolution in France. Public debate was alive both in the capital's more radical meeting places – dissenting chapels, bookshops and coffee houses – and also in parliament, where Wordsworth attended debates in the Commons. He listened to the conservative Irish politician Edmund Burke speak against the Revolution, and the radical pamphleteer Thomas Paine, feminist philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft and political theologian and scientist Joseph Priestley speak for it. Urged by their dialogue to consider his own position on France, Wordsworth decided to return there, partly to learn French and so improve his career prospects (his brothers were already employed, Richard in the law and John in the East India Company), but also to think more about what the idea of revolution really meant.

Wordsworth's second trip to France, from November 1791 to December 1792, was one of the most important years of his life: emotionally (he experienced his first love affair); politically (he saw firsthand the crushing impact of the Revolution on the poor); and intellectually (he wrote his first significant poetry). In Paris, Wordsworth socialized using a series of letters of introduction from Charlotte Smith, whose self-consciously elegiac and sentimental poetry provided the main model for his own work of this period. He also hoped to meet the poet Helen Maria Williams, but on just missing her during a visit to Orléans, Wordsworth was instead introduced to a French family called the Vallons. He was immediately attracted to their daughter, Marie Anne, known as Annette, and by February 1792, he moved to Blois to spend time with her. While we know little about their love affair at this time, we do know that their child, Anne-Caroline Wordsworth, was baptized on 15 December, a ceremony Wordsworth was unable to attend. By the end of the month, he was back in England, and did not see either Annette or Anne-Caroline for another ten years.

Critics are divided on the reasons for this separation: some suggest that the Vallons' Roman Catholicism, a religion Wordsworth despised, prevented him from committing to the family; some claim that his already-established affection for Mary got in the way; and others suggest that the circumstances of Britain's war with France severed the lovers' connection. These same circumstances also ended Wordsworth's other ardent relationship of this period with a captain in the French Royalist army called Michael Beaupuy. Wordsworth considered Beaupuy a model humanist, philosopher and philanthropist, who guided him through a France that was no longer elated by

the Revolution. It was with Beauvuy in Orléans that Wordsworth encountered the 'hunger-bitten Girl' of *The Prelude* (P, IX.512), a symbol of the food riots now commonplace across rural France. Concerned by reports of this rioting, Dorothy urged her brother to return home, distressed as she was by 'daily accounts of Insurrections & Broils'.⁴ She was right to worry: Wordsworth had returned to France in the aftermath of the imprisonment of the King and the September Massacres, and escaped back to England only a few weeks before Louis XVI was guillotined on 21 January 1793.

Now desperate to earn a living, in part to support his French family, Wordsworth begrudgingly decided he would take up William Cookson's offer of a curacy. On discovering his liaison with Annette, however, his uncle withdrew all forms of assistance. Relieved, Wordsworth finally admitted to himself that he could only really find fulfilment in writing poetry. His early publications, 'An Evening Walk' and 'Descriptive Sketches' (1793), were issued by the radical publisher, Joseph Johnson, and, while not financially successful, they were noticed by those who would prove most important in his formation as a poet: Dorothy and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Dorothy was in fact rather critical of the volumes, writing that while she believed the 'Poems contain many Passages exquisitely beautiful', they 'also contain many Faults, the chief of which are Obscurity'.⁵ It was this propensity for aesthetic judgement, as well as her unwavering emotional support, that Wordsworth most respected, and her comments inspired him to improve his writing.

Wordsworth's particular affection for Dorothy, as for his brother John, was rooted, not only in familial love, but also in their capacity to embody a poetic sensibility he sought to express linguistically. Now lodging with Richard in London, he felt a deep need for the sensitive companionship of his sister, longing for someone to share his frustration at England's refusal to enter into the revolutionary spirit he had encountered in France. The government were quick to suppress dissent at home for fear it would spill over into civil war, and the apparent radicalism of groups such as the London Corresponding Society appeared tame in comparison to the fervour of Beauvuy. When Richard Watson, the Anglican Bishop of Llandaff, echoed Burke's argument that the Revolution had transformed the French into 'an humiliating picture of human nature, when its passions are not regulated by religion or controlled by law', Wordsworth was quick to respond. *A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, written in 1793, asserted the rights of the French to choose their own kind of government, one that would above all defend and support the poor. Terrified his brother would be prosecuted for treason, Richard urged Wordsworth to 'be cautious in writing or expressing your political Opinions', and the pamphlet was not published until after Wordsworth's death.⁶

Wordsworth was otherwise very vocal in expressing his anger at England's failure to embrace radicalism. His family remained so unnerved by his dissenting views that they even tried to separate him from Dorothy for fear of untoward influence. The two therefore met secretly in January 1794 at their friend William Calvert's home in the Lake District. Wordsworth had been touring the country with Calvert, visiting landmarks that would later appear in his poetry: Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain, Tintern Abbey and Goodrich Castle. He might even have briefly returned to France to visit Annette, claiming later in life to have witnessed firsthand the execution of a journalist called Antoine Joseph Gorsas in October 1793. He was back in the Lake District by Christmas, however, again meeting Dorothy at Calvert's, where she began what would become a regular job – entering fair copies of his poems into a home-made notebook. The Calvert family also financially supported Wordsworth, their younger son Raisley leaving him £900 in his will after the poet had nursed him through tuberculosis. With this money, Wordsworth could finally commit to a publishing career, and he immediately acted on a plan to establish a humanist journal with a friend from Cambridge called William Mathews.

The journal was called the *Philanthropist*, and was largely informed by Wordsworth's discovery of the political philosopher William Godwin and his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (1793). Godwin's main argument in the *Enquiry* was that only reason and truth, not violence or revolution, would create change in society. The argument appealed to Wordsworth because it suggested that revolution was motivated on the one hand, by the ideals of fairness and honesty, and on the other, by literature and education. While the *Philanthropist* project stalled, Wordsworth's interest in Godwin intensified and he returned to London in early 1795 to join a circle of radical thinkers, including the poet George Dyer (who had introduced Coleridge to Godwin the previous year) and Godwin himself. Wordsworth also met Basil Montagu at this time, a struggling lawyer and widower with a young son. Montagu found Wordsworth a profoundly supportive presence, so much so that one of his wealthier friends offered the poet and his sister a house in Dorset rent-free on the condition that they would take care of Montagu's son, also called Basil. Wordsworth jumped at the idea, and moved into the house, known as Racedown Lodge, in 1795. He was desperate to leave London, disillusioned with its high society and bored with Godwin's politics, which he now considered excessively empirical. In reaction against the city, the poet made Racedown into a warm and intimate family community, comprising himself, Dorothy, little Basil, Mary Hutchinson and his new friend, Coleridge.

Coleridge

Wordsworth met Coleridge in 1795 and the two men were immediately enamoured with each other. Wordsworth found Coleridge a visionary and intellectually brilliant poet and philosopher, and Coleridge was mesmerized by his new admirer's commitment to exploring new modes of writing and thinking. In July 1797, Wordsworth and Dorothy were invited to Coleridge's house in Nether Stowey, a village in northwest Somerset where he had 'retired' from active political activity to be with his wife, Sara Fricker. The Coleridges were then hosting the essayist and children's writer Charles Lamb, who was desperately in need of respite after his schizophrenic sister, Mary, had murdered their mother. Lamb later recalled how comforted he was by Wordsworth's poem, 'Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree', recited to the group in an adjoining garden owned by the tanner and book collector, Thomas Poole. Yet it was the strong relationship between Wordsworth and Dorothy that provided the foundations for their community in Somerset. The brother and sister were never again parted after moving into Racedown, and Coleridge was a constant presence wherever they moved, before and after Wordsworth's marriage to Mary Hutchinson in 1802.

Only a week after arriving at Nether Stowey, Wordsworth and Dorothy rented Alfoxden House just four miles away from Coleridge, where they had 'a view of the sea, over a woody meadow-country'.⁷ Coleridge frequently stayed overnight at Alfoxden without his wife, and he, Dorothy and Wordsworth were inseparable during 1797 and 1798, forever raving about each other. 'His conversation', Dorothy wrote of Coleridge, 'teems with soul, mind, and spirit. Then he is so benevolent, so good tempered and cheerful, and, like William, interests himself so much about every little trifle.' Coleridge reciprocated: 'She is a woman indeed! – in mind, I mean, & heart ... her eye watchful in minutest observation of nature – and her taste a perfect electrometer – it bends, protrudes, and draws in, at subtlest beauties & most recondite faults.' His admiration for her brother, however, was beyond any he had previously felt: 'The Giant Wordsworth – God love him!' he declared, writing that 'his soul seem[s] to inhabit the universe like a palace, and to discover truth by intuition, rather than by deduction'.⁸

Together the three walked miles over the nearby Quantock Hills, often through the night, discussing and writing poetry. As Wordsworth 'mumbl[ed] to hiss[el] along t'roads', as one local observed, Dorothy followed behind memorizing his words and transcribing them into notebooks.⁹ Such behaviour struck the native community as extremely suspicious, however, and a government agent called Daniel Lysons was soon employed by the Home

Office to track their activity. Their communal set-up immediately confused Lysons: 'the master of the House has no wife with him but only a woman who passes for his Sister,' he wrote, but he was equally concerned by their knowledge of French politics and literature as by their strange accents (northern, but assumed to be French).¹⁰ He was also concerned with the group's neighbours at Nether Stowey, who included the notorious 'Citizen' John Thelwall, founder of the London Corresponding Society, and feared in Britain as a potential terrorist.

While all of Lysons' accusations were unfounded, the commotion forced the group out of Alfoxden, and Wordsworth, Coleridge and Dorothy grew desperate to leave England. Wordsworth was miserable after his play *The Borderers* (1796–7) was rejected by Covent Garden; and Coleridge was deep in a feud with the poet Robert Southey, with whom he had previously studied and collaborated. Southey was both jealous of Wordsworth, and also upset that Coleridge had tasked Wordsworth, and not him, with the writing of a new Miltonic philosophic epic (which would eventually become *The Prelude*). This *Paradise Lost* (1667) for the nineteenth century was to be entitled *The Recluse or Views of Nature, Man, and Society*, 'addressed to those, who in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness'.¹¹

The idea developed partly out of Wordsworth, Dorothy and Coleridge's conception of a new kind of poetry, a hybrid of the lyric and the ballad that would speak to a broad readership on different levels. While still at Alfoxden, Wordsworth and Coleridge had decided to write a collection of these poems together called the *Lyrical Ballads* in order to raise money for a trip to Germany to research *The Recluse*. In reality, Wordsworth wrote most of the poems, but the project was undoubtedly communal, Coleridge's politics and Dorothy's journals appearing fragment-like throughout the collection. Ensuing revisions, however, notably the 1800 and 1802 editions, are dominated by Wordsworth, who added numerous prefaces and appendices that ultimately distanced Coleridge, whose poems were largely excised.

J. & A. Arch published the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* in October 1798, their friend Joseph Cottle, to whom the poems were promised, having rejected the volume as a potentially unprofitable investment. By this time, Wordsworth, Dorothy and Coleridge were already in Hamburg. While Coleridge, subsidized by a wealthy benefactor, was eager to travel to the university towns of Ratzeburg and Göttingen, Wordsworth and Dorothy longed for Alfoxden. The two struggled on insufficient savings and felt generally isolated: neither could speak German and Dorothy was almost constantly ill during the trip. Settling in the relatively cheap city of Goslar for the duration of a ferocious

German winter, the siblings had only each other, their personal memories, thoughts and feelings, and a few books for company. Deep in the Gothic poetry of Gottfried Bürger and Thomas Percy's collection of manuscript ballads, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), Wordsworth began to write a series of his own ghostly ballads, including the Lucy and Matthew poems. He also wrote over 400 lines of the poem Coleridge had set him to write, and by April he and Dorothy had found their way to Göttingen to visit their friend and make plans to return to England. Eager to re-establish the community at Racedown in the Lake District, Wordsworth toured the area with Coleridge before renting a house just north of his old school in a village called Grasmere.

Home at Grasmere

With Mary, Wordsworth and Dorothy remained resident in Grasmere for the rest of their lives. After the less than warm reception they had received in Alfoxden and Germany, Grasmere felt like a welcoming paradise, their cottage overgrown with brambles and shrubs, framed by an orchard at the back and overlooking 'the lake, the church, helm cragg [sic], and two thirds of the vale'.¹² In 1800, by which time Coleridge was almost a permanent guest, the Wordsworths' brother John had joined them, staying for much of the year and helping to furnish the cottage and develop the gardens. John was a model of sensitivity, judgement and modesty for Wordsworth, 'his eye for the beauties of Nature [as] fine and delicate as ever Poet or Painter was gifted with; in some discriminations, owing to his education and way of life, far superior to any person's I ever knew'.¹³ John promised to financially support his siblings using money earned for his work at the East India Company, and planned to build himself a cottage near to them on his return from his next trip. Energized by the familial support of Dorothy, John and Coleridge, Wordsworth continued to work on *The Recluse*, moving on from the introductory lines he had composed in Germany (referred to by modern critics as *The Two-Part Prelude*) to begin the first book on 'nature': 'Home at Grasmere' (c.1800).

Many of the poems Wordsworth wrote during this time focus either on events and people he encountered in the Lakes, or on particular objects he observed around him, a bird or a flower, for example. It was his emotional response to people and the natural world, however, which remained key for Wordsworth, who regularly made himself ill in his compulsion to fine-tune and revise his verse. He felt a great responsibility to his readers, believing that poetry might reproduce the kind of 'domestic affections' and communal love currently being destroyed by industrialization. He was himself dependent on

the presence of a loving community of people around him, which, in 1802, included Dorothy, John, Coleridge, Mary and Mary's sister Sara. The group even carved their initials on a stone now known as 'Sara's Rock' during a walk between Grasmere and Keswick as a testimony to this bond.

Relationships within the group flourished. Coleridge fell in love with Sara (even though he was not to separate from his wife until 1806), and Wordsworth was intent on marrying Mary, but first had to settle his affairs with Annette and Anne-Caroline. Now free to travel to France due to the temporary peace established by the Treaty of Amiens (1802), Wordsworth, accompanied by Dorothy, set out for Calais to see the Vallons. Annette gracefully accepted his intention to marry Mary, and when the Wordsworths returned to Britain, they discovered that the Lowther claim that had so haunted the family since their father's death was finally settled, granting Wordsworth some added financial security.

Wordsworth married Mary on 4 October 1802, in the village church of Brompton-by-Sawdon in Yorkshire, near to the Hutchinson farm at Gallow Hill. Critics make much of Dorothy's anxious state prior to her brother's marriage, but the three adults were undoubtedly close, and Dorothy confessed to a friend that she had 'long loved Mary Hutchinson as a Sister'.¹⁴ Perhaps to placate any potential fears his sister might have felt towards his marriage, Wordsworth asked Dorothy to wear Mary's ring the night before the wedding, intimating that he would remain as loyal to her as to his new wife. On the day of the marriage, which Dorothy did not attend, she records in her journal: 'I gave him the wedding ring – with how deep a blessing! I took it from my fore-finger where I had worn it the whole of the night before – he slipped it again onto my finger and blessed me fervently.'¹⁵ Any anxiety Dorothy might have felt was dispelled by the reality of events anyway: the ceremony was over soon after 8am, when Wordsworth had returned home to Dorothy to prepare for their move back to Grasmere, where the three embodied, wrote Coleridge, 'the happiest Family, I ever saw'.¹⁶

Wordsworth's relationship with Coleridge, however, was becoming strained. In the summer of 1803, the poet decided to tour Scotland with him and also Dorothy in an attempt to smooth things over, despite Mary having just given birth to their first child, John, in June. Soon into the six-week tour, Coleridge announced that he was ill and wished to travel alone, even though Wordsworth and Dorothy often ended up staying in cottages and inns only just vacated by their friend. The three felt alienated further by their surroundings, having no grasp of Gaelic and astonished by the extreme poverty apparent in the subsistence economy communities of the north. Wordsworth was once again relieved to return to Grasmere, and more so when he was presented with the

title deeds to an estate in the hamlet of Applethwaite near Keswick by a new acquaintance: Sir George Beaumont.

Beaumont was a painter, art patron and collector, and greatly admired the *Lyrical Ballads* after being introduced to the volume by the novelist Walter Scott, whom Wordsworth had met in Scotland. He and his wife Margaret remained steady champions of Wordsworth's poetry, but more importantly, offered him friendship just as his relationship with Coleridge was beginning to break down. Coleridge kept insisting that he was 'SO VERY VERY ill' during this period, but he was in fact addicted to the opium that he took to relieve both his physical complaints and the 'scream-dreams' he claimed haunted his sleep.¹⁷ While Dorothy nursed him for several weeks in Grasmere, Coleridge finally decided to leave the Wordsworths for Sicily and Malta where he could convalesce in a warmer climate.

Coleridge wrote Wordsworth and Dorothy an emotional farewell letter from Portsmouth in April 1804, effusively expressing a love for them both which had been significantly revitalized by his final weeks at Grasmere. Not only had the two men made a pilgrimage to Greenhead Ghyll where, 'sitting on the very Sheepfold dear William read to me his divine Poem, Michael', but Wordsworth had also read him 'his divine Self-biography' to which he was now fully committed.¹⁸ The poem still remained what he described as a 'tributary' or 'portico' to *The Recluse*, but Wordsworth continued to revise and expand this 'prelude' to include not only memories from his life, but extended reflections on ideas such as the imagination, experience, truth and love.¹⁹ The poem had become a meditation on how we shape our existence through an imaginative understanding of our environment enhanced by both our love for others and capacity for 'cheerfulness in every act of life' (*P*, XIII.117). Such cheeriness, Wordsworth reminds the reader throughout *The Prelude*, is dependent on its opposite emotion – grief – and it was while reflecting on this that he was to experience the deepest sorrow of his adult life.

Friendship and love

On 5 February 1805, John Wordsworth's ship, the *Earl of Abergavenny*, sank just off Portland Bill, killing around 250 passengers and crew. As captain, Wordsworth's brother remained at his command throughout the night, but was swept out to sea just after midnight. While Richard immediately wrote to Wordsworth and Dorothy to alert them to the tragedy, Sara Hutchinson had already seen it reported in the newspapers, and walked over to Grasmere to relate the news. Wordsworth was devastated. 'I have done all in my power

to alleviate the distress of poor Dorothy and my Wife, but heaven knows I want consolation myself', he wrote to Richard.²⁰ The family were cast into deeper distress by John's portrayal in the popular press as an irresponsible captain, and, while most respectable reports of the event suggested that John was not guilty of misconduct, Dorothy and Mary were soon seriously ill with stress. Wordsworth was also emotionally paralysed: 'I feel that there is something cut out of my life which cannot be restored', he wrote.²¹ His poetic response to John's death, 'Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm, Painted by George Beaumont' (1806), draws on this idea of irreversible loss, while also indicating Beaumont's role in helping him through this period of grief.

Wordsworth responded to John's death in two key ways. First, his commitment to the idea of community and relationship escalated, his own family now including a daughter Dorothy (always called Dora and born in August 1804), and a son Thomas (born in June 1806). Second, the disaster profoundly affected his poetic style, which became significantly more controlled and regulated. This reserve may also have been a reaction to Coleridge's dismissive behaviour during this period of bereavement. While Wordsworth remained devoted to his friend as the addressee of his philosophic epic, commonly referred to by friends and family as the 'Poem to Coleridge', Coleridge had near abandoned him. He felt painfully jealous of Wordsworth's closeness to Sara and his poetic productivity alike, feelings magnified by the publication of Wordsworth's *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807). As Coleridge struggled with his addiction to opium, Wordsworth was welcomed into London's literary circles and visited the city to promote his work.

During his trip to London, Wordsworth attended the Royal Academy exhibition in which Beaumont displayed the painting of Piel (or Peele) Castle that inspired 'Elegiac Stanzas'. He was now more intimate with the Beaumonts than Coleridge, and went to stay with them at their new house at Coleorton in Leicestershire. Returning briefly to the capital, where he caught up with his brother Christopher and met the painter John Constable, Wordsworth was soon making plans to go back to the Lakes, taking Mary to Bolton Abbey en route, the site of his new poem 'The White Doe of Rylstone' (1807–8). It was important to the poet that Mary accompanied him on trips to emotionally significant places, and his relationship with her was more loving and affectionate than critics often accept. Only Coleridge in his most invidious and depressed moments inferred that Wordsworth was excessively close to Dorothy, or indeed to Sara, and even he withdrew these accusations in later notebooks and letters.

Many critics have unthinkingly followed Coleridge's resentful reading of Wordsworth's relationship with Mary, but their love-letters, discovered only

in 1777, reveal a passionate, mutually dependent and physically ardent bond between the two lovers. As the correspondence illustrates, Wordsworth and Mary consistently express their longing for each other during their marriage: 'when I move I shall feel myself moving towards you ... O my beloved how my heart swells at the thought, and how dearly should I have enjoyed being alone with you so long' to 'see to touch you to speak to you & to hear you speak', he wrote; 'Oh William I cannot tell thee how I love thee & thou must not desire it but feel it, O feel it in the fullness of thy soul & believe that I am the happiest of Wives & Mothers & of all Women the most blessed', Mary replied.²² Of course Dorothy also adored her brother, exclaiming that she was very 'partial to William' and that he felt a 'sort of violence of Affection' for her too (she notably rejected all her male suitors, including Thomas De Quincey, who, having been rebuffed, predictably implied she was a lesbian).²³ Sara too professed that Wordsworth was 'always the soul of the Parties – the Ladies say they are nothing without him'.²⁴

As a gently flirtatious family man, then, Wordsworth was exuberant and lively. As a poet, however, he was self-absorbed and neurotic, fearful that the public would never recognize that the pedagogic foundation of his poetry was to teach them how to feel. The reviews of *Poems, in Two Volumes* had been so negative that he struggled to find a publisher for his new poem 'The White Doe', a point of contention between the poet and his family who were now desperate for financial support. When Coleridge intervened to help him publish the poem, Wordsworth irritably withdrew it, offending an already ill and bitter Coleridge and also demoralizing Dorothy. 'Do, dearest William!' she wrote, 'do pluck up your Courage – overcome your disgust to publishing – It is but a *little trouble*, and all will be over, and we shall be wealthy, and at our ease for one year, at least'.²⁵ Wordsworth uncharacteristically ignored his sister's pleas, despairing of those 'London wits and witlings' unable to engage with his poetry.²⁶

These 'witlings' had damned Wordsworth's recent volumes, bemused by what Lord Byron called their 'puerile' and 'namby-pamby' language. The critic Francis Jeffrey echoed this analysis, claiming that their 'silliness and affectation' renders them 'tedious and affected', 'illegible and unintelligible' and expressive of a 'quintessence of unmeaningness'. The *Satirist* suggested the poems should be jointly published with 'Mother Goose's melodies', while the *Cabinet* thought them 'contemptible effusions', 'trash', 'conceit', 'bombast', a position affirmed also by the *Eclectic Review*, which simply considered them absurd. Even Leigh Hunt, himself later attacked for advocating the effeminate poetics of John Keats and Barry Cornwall, announced in the *Examiner* that Wordsworth join 'The Ancient and Redoubtable Institution of Quacks'.²⁷

While critics praised the volumes' sonnets, a more recognizably elite form of poetry, they failed to appreciate the elevation of everyday and domestic feeling in Wordsworth's shorter lyrics. Worse still, their belief that Wordsworth was unable to address philosophical subjects in his poetry both missed the point: the capacity to experience simple feeling enables deep reflection for Wordsworth, and underlies the insight of then-unpublished poems such as 'The Ruined Cottage' (1797) and 'Home at Grasmere' (c.1800). Upset by this response to his work, Wordsworth began a series of more meditative pieces in 1808 – 'St Paul's', 'To the Clouds', 'The Tuft of Primroses' – but each was marked by an elegiac caution issuing from that loss of poetic power he described in the 'Elegiac Stanzas'.

It was this loss of power, however, that enabled Wordsworth to articulate the values closest to him – emotional being and community – in prose. His political pamphlet, *The Convention of Cintra* (1809), for example, bemoans Britain's inability to respect the national honour of Spain during the French invasion on 1808. While the British army defeated the French, they then freely allowed them to return home without consequence. This refusal to allow Spain the chance to assert itself over the French paralleled Britain's failure to understand the spirit of liberty behind the American and French Revolutions. Britain was, Wordsworth bemoaned, insensible to the 'moral virtues and qualities of passion which belong to a people' (*PW*, I.235). Perhaps, the poet conjectured, it was this lack of respect for localized communal feeling that made his poetry so unpopular with readers at home.

Wordsworth also addressed his readers' incapacity to imaginatively feel their way into a poem, a political event, or the situation of a neighbour in his *Essays upon Epitaphs* (1809–10), the first of which was published in Coleridge's short-lived magazine, *The Friend*. With his sons Hartley and Derwent, Coleridge was now regularly living with the Wordsworths again, who in May had moved into Allan Bank, a larger house in Grasmere able to accommodate the family and the newly born Catherine. Thomas De Quincey, initially welcomed by the group 'as if he were one of the Family', also joined them there, seemingly replacing Coleridge at least in Dorothy's affections. While she hated the fact that he was still vulnerable to opium ('If he were not under our Roof, he would be just as much the slave of stimulants as ever'), she was more disturbed still by his exploitation of Sara, who was now working day and night on *The Friend*. 'I am hopeless of him,' Dorothy wrote, 'and I dismiss him as much as possible from my thoughts.'²⁸

Distressed by the increased distance between Dorothy and Coleridge, Wordsworth turned again to nature, and began work on an intimate travel guide of those landscapes with which he was most familiar. Published first as

an introduction to Joseph Wilkinson's *Select Views in Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Lancashire* (1810), Wordsworth later extended it as *A Guide through the District of the Lakes* (1835), appending his earlier essay 'The Sublime and the Beautiful' (1811–12). The Lakes are made sacred here, presented as the ideal backdrop for his vision of community as outlined in poems such as 'Michael' (1800) and 'The Brothers' (1800), and prose pieces such as *The Convention of Cintra* and *Essays upon Epitaphs*. Wordsworth also became a regular teacher at the village school in 1811, enthused by the new curate, William Johnson, who admired his poetry and who was committed to educational reform.

Despite Wordsworth's enthusiasm for local education, the environment and his immediate community, his own relationship with Coleridge had reached crisis point. Coleridge's narcotized dreams were now so paranoid that he feverishly believed the Wordsworths were conspiring against him. When Mary gave birth to a fifth child, William, in May 1810, Coleridge went to visit his wife in Keswick, and decided to return to London in October with Montagu who had come up to Allan Bank to see Wordsworth. When Montagu mentioned to Coleridge that Wordsworth had expressed concern over his dependence on opium, he was furious. He broke with Wordsworth for the next eighteen months, writing in his notebook: 'W. authorized M. to tell me, he had no Hope of me! No Hope of me! absol. Nuisance! God's mercy is it a Dream!'²⁹ Wordsworth was so incredulous of the misunderstanding that he refused to register it for the first few months, feeling progressively upset when he realized that their quarrel was the subject of gossip in London. Coleridge, paranoid and dependent on alcohol and opium (despite having left the wife on whom he had blamed his depression for so long), now wrongly believed that Wordsworth had used the expression 'rotten drunkard' against him. Their truce was subdued, and, while initiated by Wordsworth, was only settled through a third party, the journalist and writer Henry Crabb Robinson.

No longer close to Coleridge, Wordsworth developed his friendship with Robinson, who introduced him to several admired poets, including Byron, William Lisle Bowles and Anna Barbauld. Wordsworth was also wrapped up in an attempt to secure the release of a French prisoner-of-war distantly related to Annette. Mary supported his involvement and was herself off on a tour of the Wye to see Tintern Abbey. Their letters of this period are more fervent than ever, but while both Mary and Wordsworth were travelling, their three-year old daughter Catherine died of convulsions. Mary, who could not forgive herself for being away, was inconsolable, and spiralled into a depression when 6-year-old Thomas also died of a violent fever only six months later in December 1812. The Wordsworths had been living in their current residence – the disused rectory opposite Grasmere Church – since May 1811, but

the close proximity of Catherine and Thomas's graves overpowered Mary to such a degree that, a few months after Thomas's funeral, Wordsworth moved the household to Rydal Mount.

When Coleridge refused to visit during this intense period of bereavement, Wordsworth realized their friendship was irrevocably damaged, and turned all his attention to his family, now in need of serious financial support. Mary's health was failing and Dorothy struggled to look after her sister-in-law and the children, as well as a string of constant visitors, on very little income. When Wordsworth was offered £100 a year from Sir William Lowther, he accepted a salaried post instead. As Distributor of Stamps in Westmorland and the Penrith area of Cumberland, Wordsworth was now responsible for the returns from the stamped, and so taxed, paper used in legal transactions, a position entirely at odds with his poetic aspirations.

Tory humanist?

Many critics denounce Wordsworth for accepting this post, claiming that he had betrayed his vocation and earlier radical politics. While working for the revenue-gathering service undermined Wordsworth's reputation, it is perhaps overly harsh to condemn the poet for taking steps to support his grief-stricken and ailing wife and family. It was Wordsworth, for example, who initiated and contributed to the educational fund for Coleridge's children while their father spent their annuities on opium and spirits. The privileged Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley may well have ridiculed Wordsworth's choice to work for his money, but real friends of the family understood Wordsworth's reasoning. As one of Dorothy's friends told Robinson: 'It will relieve the females from a good deal of hard work which they have performed most cheerfully – but wh[ich] has certainly at times been prejudicial to them ... and what is the greatest good of all it will release Wordsworths [sic] mind from all anxiety about money.'³⁰

Now financially secure, Wordsworth was also free to finally publish a nine-book section of *The Recluse* he called *The Excursion* in 1814. While he was reluctant to publish the epic until it was complete, the death of his children forced Wordsworth to reflect on the uncertainty of his own continued existence; he was also determined to publish something that might overturn the derogatory comments of his critics, Jeffrey and Byron. At the same time, Wordsworth was aware that the poem might potentially feel unduly philosophical to some readers, and so went on holiday to Scotland with Mary and Sara to avoid poring over the initial reviews. As he expected, Jeffrey hated the poem, and even friends like Charles Lamb perceived the poem's religious

orthodoxy as one designed to shut down the relationship between God and nature. Wordsworth responded to this particular point by recalling his answer to a question from his son, William: 'How did God make me? Where is God? How does he speak? He never spoke to *me*.' Wordsworth answered that God was a spirit who materialized inside humans as thoughts and emotions, and not an external force.³¹

More disappointing than readers' confusion over the poem's religious message, however, was Coleridge's reaction to the poem. After all, it was Coleridge who had challenged Wordsworth to write the poem in the first place, and now, after years of silence, he accused his friend of failing the task. Wordsworth was again overwhelmed by Coleridge's malice, but it might be easily attributed to his friend's rising celebrity (indicated, for example, by an invitation from the historical painter, Benjamin Haydon, to sit for a life-mask). Undermined by Coleridge's critique, Wordsworth began to obsessively revise and reorder his poems, attempting to rearrange the verses in *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807) into categories. Reviewers remained critical, however, regarding the classifications as too subjective and the revised preface as sententious. Similar accusations were directed at 'The White Doe of Rylstone' (published in 1815), proclaimed by Jeffrey to be 'the very worst poem we ever saw imprinted in a quarto volume'.³²

As if all of these bad reviews weren't enough, Wordsworth returned to Rydal Mount to confront a series of tragedies. His brother-in-law, Charles Lloyd, was very ill with a mental disorder exacerbated by the death of his sister; Christopher's wife, Priscilla, had died suddenly after giving birth to a stillborn baby; Mary Lamb was amidst another nervous breakdown leaving Charles Lamb depressed and disaffected; and a wretched De Quincey, broken by his opium addiction, severed all contact with the family after impregnating, and belatedly marrying, his young mistress. More shocking still was the death of Wordsworth's brother, Richard, in May 1816, aged 47 and having only recently, and controversially, married his young servant, Jane Westmorland, with whom he had a 1-year-old son, John.

While mourning Richard's death, Wordsworth and Dorothy discovered that their brother had left the family finances in considerable disarray. Contrary to their assumptions, Richard had lost nearly all of their capital to creditors and in bad investments. Dorothy and Sara were forced to call off their planned trip to Paris to visit Anne-Caroline: Wellington's defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815 made the trip politically possible, but they could no longer afford it. Meanwhile Wordsworth seemed increasingly disillusioned. His commemorative *Thanksgiving Ode* marking Waterloo warns the British against falling prey to the revolutionary spirit that had haunted France in the

1790s. It is as if, with his family fading around him, Wordsworth turned to what he perceived as the cornerstones of community: national pride, a patriotic education system and moral feeling as conveyed through poetry and an orthodox Church of England Christianity. The *Thanksgiving Ode*, however, signals more than Wordsworth's changed politics. His poetry was becoming more dogmatic, and seemed empty of the touching stories of everyday human life that characterized his more compelling earlier work. Even his *A Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns* (1816), ostensibly an affectionate portrayal of one of Wordsworth's favourite poets, ends up collapsing into an angry and clumsy attack on Jeffrey. He was also upset by the denunciation of several of his poems in Coleridge's literary autobiography, *Biographia Literaria* (1817); when the two men met later in the year, Wordsworth all but ignored him.

The venue for this chilly reunion was a dinner party at Benjamin Haydon's, referred to as the 'Immortal Dinner' because of the array of celebrity guests: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Lamb and several prominent members of London society. The dinner is especially interesting because of its staging of an interaction between Wordsworth and Keats that casts light on the former's apparently conformist politics. This interaction was prompted by several of Keats' party deciding to cliquishly ridicule one of the less eminent guests, John Kingston. Kingston was one of Wordsworth's bosses at the Stamp Office in London, and when the poet refused to join in the bullying, Keats branded him a cowardly prude.

Defending Kingston against a group of bullies might deem Wordsworth conservative for some, but the act confirms the poet's commitment to tact and fellow feeling. A similar situation arose soon after Haydon's party, when Wordsworth returned home to campaign for the Tory candidates representing Westmorland in the forthcoming general election. While his allegiance appalled Keats, as it did Dorothy, Mary and Sara, it was rooted in a sense of duty to the individuals running for office, the sons of William Lowther who had helped him out of his recent financial troubles. At the same time, Wordsworth's zealous opposition to the liberal Whig candidate, Henry Brougham, can be attributed to the poet's fear that Whig radicalism might spur a repeat of the French Revolution and Britain's war with France.

On the one hand, then, Wordsworth's support of Tory politics amounts to a defence of hereditary wealth and power; but on the other, Wordsworth remained committed to the common man who, in both France and Britain, had been driven to poverty, disaffection and despair as a consequence of a patronizing middle-class politics that could not promise to assist the poor. However we choose to read Wordsworth's involvement in the election, his fervour for the campaign was soon displaced by a return to his poetry, and he published

two early poems, *Peter Bell* and *Benjamin the Waggoner*, in 1819. Wordsworth then began to prepare for publication his sonnets on the river Duddon, a short memoir of the local minister Robert Walker called *Topographical Description of the Country of the Lakes*, and some poems about climbing Helvellyn and crossing the Kirkstone Pass. Published in 1820, *The River Duddon: A Series of Sonnets* at last earned Wordsworth critical praise: as the *European Magazine* declared, 'he appears beyond all comparison the most truly sublime, the most touchingly pathetic, the most delightfully simple, the most profoundly philosophical, of all the poetical spirits of the age.'³³ This positive reception encouraged him to issue a four-volume edition, *The Miscellaneous Poems of William Wordsworth* (1820), which not only presented his entire canon but did so in a meticulously revised form.

With his new edition in press, Wordsworth finally travelled back to Calais with Dorothy and Mary with the aim of revisiting the Alps via Belgium, Geneva and Italy. The trip was eventful: Mary met Annette and Anne-Caroline for the first time; and Wordsworth secured an appointment with Helen Maria Williams, to whom he had addressed his first published poem in 1787. The tour also enabled Wordsworth to trace back and reflect on his past, especially as on his way out to Calais he had visited his old walking companion, Robert Jones. On returning to England, Wordsworth also called on Christopher, who had been recently appointed the new Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and the Beaumonts, with whom he discussed the site of a new local church. Struck by the religious commitment of his friends, Wordsworth began the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (1822), a group of poems mapping and defending the evolving power of the Church of England against anarchy, revolution and Roman Catholicism. A generous reader might suggest Wordsworth's interest in religious orthodoxy is again an integral part of his relationship with his community: the sketches were, after all, inspired by conversations with the Beaumonts. A more critical reader, however, might agree with Jeffrey that 'The Lake School of Poetry' was 'pretty nearly extinct', a judgement the poet helped realize by not publishing anything new until 1835.³⁴

Poet Laureate

By the 1820s, Wordsworth was acknowledged to be one of Britain's leading poets: pirated editions of his work were available in Europe, and the admiration of the Boston minister, William Ellery Channing, and Philadelphia Quaker, Elliot Cresson, secured his reputation in America. During the next few years, many aspiring writers made pilgrimages to Rydal, including Felicia Hemans,

John Stuart Mill, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Ruskin and Algernon Swinburne. On a visit to Wales in 1824, Wordsworth was warmly received by the Ladies of Llangollen (the intellectual lesbian couple Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby), and was also visited the following year by the poet Maria Jane Jewsbury, who immediately befriended Dora. Jewsbury, who seemed to reel between the extremes of a morose evangelism and a desire for urban celebrity, was perhaps not the best companion for Dora, however, and Wordsworth decided to part the two women by taking his daughter on a tour of Europe in 1828.

Strangely, Coleridge accompanied them on the tour, although he predictably fell ill during the trip and wrote in his private notebook that he felt alienated from Wordsworth, whose 'hard, rigid, continual, in all points despotic Egotism' and 'coarse concerns about money' left 'the flowers of his genius ... faded and withered'.³⁵ Wordsworth had, in fact, become obsessed with the publication and presentation of his poetry at the expense of writing new work, and even Dorothy admitted that she feared *The Recluse* would never be written.³⁶ Her brother seemed more invested in leaving his legacy to future readers: a five-volume *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* appeared in 1827; Edward Moxon's *Selections from the Poems of William Wordsworth, Esq., Chiefly for the Use of Schools and Young Persons* was printed in 1831; a collected sonnets appeared in 1838; he worked on *The Prelude* throughout 1839; and also had plans to issue a cheap edition for the common reader.

Even when Wordsworth did publish new work in his volume *Yarrow Revisited, and Other Poems* (1835), it was in part a response to two earlier verses, *Yarrow Unvisited* (1807) and *Yarrow Visited* (included in the 1815 *Poems*). The volume's postscript attacking the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) at least confirms Wordsworth's continued commitment to the poor: the act cut off any relief to the labouring classes, forcing them into workhouses instead. Wordsworth is still considered politically conservative at this time, however, because of his opposition to the Catholic Emancipation Act (1829) and Reform Bill (1832). Yet these views too derived from a desire to protect the poor against the kind of revolutionary activities that had desolated rural France. Wordsworth also defended Rydal against enclosure in 1824, and battled with the Kendal and Windermere Railway company's plan to ravage the rural communities of the Vales of Rydal and Grasmere. Modern critics might ignore Wordsworth's service to the poor in this period, but contemporaries did not. During his speech celebrating Wordsworth's honorary doctorate of civil law from the University of Oxford in 1839, the theologian and poet John Keble applauded Wordsworth as the nation's greatest poet of the poor.

However we read Wordsworth's late political position, then, it emerges from a sustained emotional relationship to labouring communities. By contrast, the

younger, and notably wealthier, generation of poets that so derided his apparent defection from radicalism aligned themselves with politics as much for reasons of fashion as of belief. As Wordsworth wrote of the ‘radical’ publisher John Murray, for example, who declined to answer any of his letters: ‘he is too great a Personage for any one but a Court, an Aristocratic or most fashionable Author to deal with.’³⁷ Always unconcerned with style (a notorious outfit included ‘striped duck trousers’ and ‘fustian gaiters’), Wordsworth wrote about what he genuinely considered important, even if this meant addressing awkward subjects like capital punishment: his infamous *Sonnets upon the Punishment of Death* (1841) are discussed in [Chapter 3](#).

Now in his late sixties, Wordsworth undoubtedly wrote some maverick verses, but his relationships with friends and family remained steady. In 1837, he travelled to France and Italy with Henry Crabb Robinson, revisiting places that revived emotionally significant memories. While stunned by St Peter’s in Rome, he was more affected by a large pine tree that he discovered was being preserved by a subsidy from his now deceased friend, George Beaumont. The specificity of the tree as a symbol of Beaumont’s kindness registered more deeply than the grandeur of buildings or art for Wordsworth. Similarly, the Italian Lakes felt meaningful to him because they provoked vivid memories of his tour there with Dorothy, who was now suffering from a form of Alzheimer’s disease that confined her to the Rydal Mount household. Remembering how healthy Dorothy had been during their early travels together moved Wordsworth so much that he was forced to keep ‘much to myself, and very often could I, for my heart’s relief, have burst into tears.’³⁸

Reflecting on Dorothy’s illness made Wordsworth suddenly aware of how fragile his personal community had become. Coleridge passed away in London in 1834, refusing to see his wife, children or friends in his final days of illness; and Sara Hutchinson died of rheumatic fever the year after. On reading about the death of the poet and novelist James Hogg, Wordsworth wrote an elegy called ‘Extempore Effusion’, in which he grieves for his friends (Walter Scott, Charles Lamb, Robert Jones and Felicia Hemans were also recently deceased), as well as his own transience in the world. In addition to Dorothy’s collapse and the varying illnesses of those close to him, Wordsworth felt betrayed and saddened by the secret marriage of his daughter Dora to the poet and translator Edward Quillinan in 1841.

Even towards the end of his life, however, Wordsworth was still forming deep attachments to new friends. One such acquaintance was an admirer called Isabella Fenwick, who first visited Rydal Mount in 1833, soon becoming an affectionately loved friend of Wordsworth, Mary and Robinson. Moving to Ambleside in 1838 to be near the Wordsworths, she was called on daily by the

poet, who in 1843 dictated a series of notes to her on the composition of his poems. The 'Fenwick Notes' remain a valuable record for readers of Wordsworth's late views on his poetry and career.³⁹

Wordsworth was also consoled by the continued rise of his reputation. He sat for portraits (painted by the artists Francis Wilkin, William Boxall, John Gardner and Haydon), and was granted honorary memberships from the Royal Institution of Liverpool and the University of Durham. He was also asked to present the 'Newdigate Prize', an award for best poem by an undergraduate, to a young John Ruskin, and at breakfast the next day met several members of the 'Oxford Movement' (discussed in [Chapter 2](#)). The party was hosted by Francis Faber, whose brother Frederick was an established admirer of Wordsworth. Moving to Ambleside to assist a local clergyman, Frederick soon sought to claim Wordsworth for the Oxford Movement, and had a significant effect on some of the religiously inclined revisions the poet made to the *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* and even his new *Musings near Aquapendente* (1837; 1841).

After a long wait, Wordsworth was finally appointed Poet Laureate in 1843. He resigned his role as Distributor of Stamps and settled into literary fame. Yet he was haunted by the thought that his life had 'been in a great measure wasted' and sat, Mary admitted to Fenwick, 'more over the fire in silence etc etc and is sooner tired on his walks.'⁴⁰ While he had managed to put together one last volume of his works, *Poems, Chiefly of Early and Late Years* (1845), he had been crushed by a series of terrible deaths: Mary's sister Joanna in 1843; his grandson Edward in 1845; both his brother Christopher and nephew John in 1846; Haydon's suicide in the same year; and most shocking of all, his beloved Dora in 1847. Despite the constant flow of admiring visitors to Rydal, Wordsworth would often, Mary wrote, 'retire to his room sit alone & cry incessantly', avoiding anywhere that reminded him of Dora. Attempting to rally him from this depression, his nephew Christopher began to collect memoranda for a future biography, published in 1851 as a two-volume *Memoirs of William Wordsworth*. While the poet's health suddenly revived in 1849, enabling him to cross 'the Malvern Hill twice without suffering any inconvenience', reported Robinson, he succumbed to pleurisy in 1850 and died at midday on 23 April. Dorothy died five years later, and Mary, who published *The Prelude* for her husband on his death, passed away in 1859. Both women were buried next to Wordsworth at Grasmere.