William Wordsworth is the most influential of the Romantic poets, and remains widely popular, even though his work is more complex and more engaged with the political, social and religious upheavals of his time than his reputation as a ‘nature poet’ might suggest. Outlining a series of contexts – biographical, historical and literary – as well as critical approaches to Wordsworth, this Introduction offers students ways to understand and enjoy Wordsworth’s poetry and his role in the development of Romanticism in Britain. Emma Mason offers a completely up-to-date summary of criticism on Wordsworth from the Romantics to the present, and an annotated guide to further reading. With definitions of technical terms and close readings of individual poems, Wordsworth’s experiments with form are fully explained. This concise book is the ideal starting point for studying Lyrical Ballads, The Prelude and the major poems, as well as Wordsworth’s lesser-known writings.

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The Cambridge Introduction to
William Wordsworth

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Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-72147-9 - The Cambridge Introduction to William Wordsworth
Emma Mason
Frontmatter
More information
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521721479

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First published 2010

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data
Mason, Emma.
The Cambridge introduction to William Wordsworth / Emma Mason.
  p. cm. – (Cambridge introductions to literature)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
I. Wordsworth, William, 1770–1850 – Criticism and
interpretation. I. Title. II. Series.
PR5888.M384 2010
821’.7–dc22
2010025643


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For G. J. A.
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Wordsworth, wrote Coleridge, 'both deserves to be, and is, a happy man – and a happy man, not from natural Temperament', but 'because he is a Philosopher – because he knows the intrinsic value of the Different objects of human Pursuit, and regulates his Wishes in Subordination to the Knowledge – because he feels, and with a practical Faith, the Truth.' Coleridge, like the other members of Wordsworth's close family group (his sister Dorothy, brother John, wife Mary and sister-in-law Sara), understood Wordsworth's poetic project in a way modern critics sometimes overlook: eager to brand the poet an apostate, conservative or ego-driven solitary, Wordsworth's practical and emotional commitments to his family, community, natural world, as well as to poetry, are often underplayed. His jokey, flirtatious and good-humoured side is similarly glossed over, while his vulnerability and neuroses pale before a critical focus on his assumed narcissism.

Yet Wordsworth sought to teach people how to feel and think not because he felt confident in his own efforts to do so, but rather because he did not. John Stuart Mill considered his poetic ability in similar terms: 'Compared with the greatest poets, he may be said to be the poet of unpoetical natures, possessed of quiet and contemplative tastes. But unpoetical natures are precisely those which require poetic cultivation.' Far from the self-involved figure conjured by those unwilling to engage with his project, Wordsworth was above all a watcher and a listener of his world. His visions, occasionally apocalyptic and sublime, are more often intimate and tender. They are concerned with starlings, sparrows, skylarks, daisies, butterflies, hedgehogs and glow-worms (often seen alongside Dorothy, who anchors his musings), or with individual human beings caught up in moments of everyday emotion – joy, affection, love, sadness, anxiety and loneliness.

That Wordsworth's ontological vision is concerned with the everyday and domestic is borne out in his early poem, 'The Dog: An Idyllium' (1786). Written for the deceased pet of his landlady, Ann Tyson, the poem enables Wordsworth to claim an intimacy with the dog that elevated them both as 'the happiest pair on earth' (24). His poetic attentiveness to the dog is also
suggestive of Wordsworth’s investment in an imagination concerned with the emotional meaning of everyday events. As Coleridge argued, Wordsworth’s ability to ‘give the charm of novelty to things of every day’ excites emotions in the reader that feel almost supernatural, but that are instead directed to ‘awakening the mind’s attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand’.  

Even when immersed in profound contemplation, as we find him at the end of *The Prelude* looking up to the moon from the heights of Snowdon, Wordsworth realizes that the ‘greatest things’ are built up ‘From least suggestions’ by those ‘ever on the watch, / Willing to work and to be wrought upon. / They need not extraordinary calls’ (*P*, XIII.98–101). Certainly Wordsworth never recorded having any ‘extraordinary calls’ to the vocation of poet, obsessively revising and rewriting his poems and doubting his poetic ability into the last days of his life. He was nonetheless spurred on by a devotion to poetry and its rhythms, pauses, cadences and silences as a path to that state of reflection in which our emotional experiences, joyful and painful, begin to make sense. His prosodic style invites readers to think about how they feel after reading a poem in order that they find meaning, not from computational analysis, but from their own felt reactions synthesized with thoughts. This is what Wordsworth meant when he suggested that poetry ‘is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’: the poem allows us to experience our current feelings – moral, sexual, domestic, intellectual – by rhythmically situating us in a state of contemplation where we recollect who are we are, think about it, and then, as ‘the tranquillity gradually disappears’, acknowledge the emotion that we feel in that moment (*PW*, I.149).

Wordsworth’s concept of memory, then, facilitates not nostalgic reminiscence, but the formation of a backdrop against which we can consider, and so feel, the intricacies of our present condition and how this might affect our being and that of others. For David Bromwich, one of Wordsworth’s most perceptive modern readers, the only hierarchy in Wordsworth’s work is between those who can feel and those who cannot: ‘to be incapable of a feeling of Poetry’, Wordsworth wrote, ‘is to be without love of human nature and reverence for God’.  

This introduction to Wordsworth serves to acquaint readers with the emotional spirit of his writing, and also works to blur preconceptions of him as a ‘nature poet’, ‘radical poet’, ‘Christian poet’ or ‘conservative poet’ in order to draw out the unsettling and yet animating experience the reader undergoes by engaging with his poetry. The first
chapter, indebted as it is to biographies of Wordsworth by Stephen Gill and Juliet Barker, offers an account of his life that is contextualized in relation to the period in Chapter 2. Chapters 3 and 4 explore his poetic theory and poetry; and the book concludes with an overview of his critical reception and some suggestions for further reading.
Acknowledgements

Thanks to everyone with whom I have read and discussed Wordsworth, especially Isobel Armstrong, Grover J. Askins, Jonathan Bate, Geoffrey Hartman, Mark Knight, Rebecca Lemon, Jon Mee, Jason Rudy, Charlotte Scott, Duncan Wu and my students at the University of Warwick. Thanks also to Linda Bree for her insightful comments on the manuscript; and most of all to Jon Roberts and Rhian Williams for helping me to hear, as well as read, Wordsworth's poetry.
The critical edition of Wordsworth's poetry is the Cornell Wordsworth, which includes an array of information on the genesis of each poem, its sources, revisions and chronology. The Cornell Wordsworth follows a prestigious line of editions of Wordsworth's work, edited by Matthew Arnold, William Knight, Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, Duncan Wu, Jonathan Wordsworth and Stephen Gill. Readers are encouraged to remember, however, that Wordsworth was so compulsively concerned with self-revision that it is difficult, not to mention unhelpful, to label certain versions of poems 'authoritative'. The Cornell editions are listed below for reference (all Cornell University Press), but for a more portable reading experience, readers can turn to Jared Curtis' abridged three-volume paperback/ebook *The Poems of William Wordsworth: Collected Reading Texts from the Cornell Wordsworth* (Humanities-Ebooks, 2009); John O. Hayden's two-volume *William Wordsworth: The Poems* (Penguin, 1977; repr. 1990); or Stephen Gill's *William Wordsworth: The Major Works* (Oxford World Classics, 2000; repr. 2008).

Cornell texts

*The Ruined Cottage and the Pedlar*, ed. James Butler (1979)
*Benjamin, the Waggoner*, ed. Paul F. Betz (1981)
*Peter Bell*, ed. John E. Jordan (1985)
*The Tuft of Primroses, with Other Late Poems for The Recluse*, ed. Joseph S. Kishel (1986)
*The White Doe of Rylstone; or, the Fate of the Nortons*, ed. Kristine Dugas (1988)