Introduction

1

Personally speaking, I often experience something like a shock of mild surprise at the restraint with which critics respond to the provocation of Wordsworth's name. There is, it is true, the chiastically punning title to Hugh Sykes Davies's 1986 book *Wordsworth and the Worth of Words*, and there is the rather more cryptic title to Geoffrey Hartman's 1979 essay 'Words, Wish, Worth: Wordsworth'.[1] But these are relatively isolated instances of critical *jeux d'ésprit* when it comes to the serious subject of Wordsworth's name. Even when, for example, Don Bialostosky entitles a chapter in *Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism* (1992) 'What de Man has made of Wordsworth', he still refrains from exploring the paronomastic possibilities that *Wordsworth's* name offers. Such critical restraint might come as a surprise in view of the fact that in what is thought to be his first published poem (the lachrymose 'Sonnet, on seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams weep at a Tale of Distress' (1787)) Wordsworth signed himself 'Axiologus', in a Graeco-Latin version of 'words-worth' (or, more literally, 'the worth of words').[2] Or that, some time around 1807–8, his friend and collaborator Samuel Taylor Coleridge continued the tradition by latinizing Wordsworth's name in two poems entitled 'Ad Vilmum Axiologum'.[3] Or that in a letter of 1801, Charles Lamb, the irrepressibly punning friend of both Wordsworth and Coleridge, also succumbed to a fit of paronomasia worthy of the poet's name when he asked Thomas Manning whether he thought there wasn't even 'a Word's-worth of good poetry' in the *Lyrical Ballads* (*WCH* 102).

But the modern critical restraint around the linguistic possibilities of Wordsworth's name may itself be understood as a subsection of the pervasive myth in the reception of William Wordsworth that this book will explore – the myth, to put it simply, that Wordsworth was a poet who didn't write poetry. The myth is linked to that other pervasive

conception of Wordsworth, the idea that despite what his name might suggest, his words, as words, are not worth much – the somewhat inscrutable sense that he was not a poet who paid very much attention to the raw materials of his art. He has, Francis Jeffrey remarks in a perhaps unconscious pun in his (in)famous review of *The Excursion* (1814), a 'natural propensity to wordiness' (*WCH* 386).[4] Despite his declaration in book five of *The Prelude* (1805) that 'words themselves / Move us with conscious pleasure' (lines 567–8) and his assertion that at the age of thirteen his 'ears began to open to the charm / Of words in tuneful order', finding them 'sweet / For their own sakes' (lines 577–9), despite his joy at the 'wondrous power of words' (*The Prelude* 7:121), or his darker sense that 'Visionary Power' is 'Embodied in the mystery of words' (5:619, 621) and his powerful and provocative statement in the *Essays upon Epitaphs* that words are 'too awful an instrument for good and evil, to be trifled with' and that they hold 'a dominion over thoughts' (*Prose* 2:84),[5] despite indeed his formal essay on poetic diction published as an appendix to the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1802,[6] there has often seemed to be a consensus that Wordsworth cared little for words, that he hardly minded them at all. In his richly logophilic book *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), for example, William Empson seems to surprise himself by writing on Wordsworth at all: 'One does not think of the poetry of Wordsworth . . . as depending on a concentrated richness of single words', he muses.[7] In *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952), Donald Davie states that in Wordsworth's poetry diction 'hardly ever matters' and that in his early poems, at least, language is 'as nearly irrelevant as it can be in poetry'.[8] Similarly, in *The Simple Wordsworth* (1960), John Danby remarks that Wordsworth was 'at heart . . . profoundly uninterested in poetry as words'.[9] And in a 1973 essay on Wordsworth's 'semantic theory', Stephen K. Land argues that Wordsworth shares with Descartes and Locke 'a profound mistrust of words': Land suggests that Wordsworth seems to consider language to be 'a necessary evil' and 'asserts that poetry . . . is only secondarily linguistic, that it is driven to the use of words . . . in order to communicate its immaterial essence'.[10] Such comments may echo Walter Pater's suggestion in an 1874 essay that Wordsworth 'stimulates' the reader to 'look below the surface' of the poetry and that he encourages 'a habit of reading between the lines' – an idea that might itself owe something to Matthew Arnold's declaration that Wordsworth 'has no style'.[11] But against such assertions, in fact, others have argued that Wordsworth is a poet of what Paul de Man calls 'sheer language',[12] and that he is always, as Frances Ferguson remarks in

Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit (1977), 'deeply conscious of the power of words'.[13] And Christopher Ricks has remarked on the lucidity or apparent lucidity of Wordsworth's 'speech' that it may tempt us, erroneously, to pay too little attention to his 'very words, since we are so confident of what they are saying'.[14] The two opposing traditions are encapsulated by Coleridge when (in two remarks that can both be read either way), he states in an 1803 letter to Robert Southey that Wordsworth's words 'always *mean* the whole of their possible Meaning' (*CL* 2:977), and in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) that there is a 'perfect appropriateness of the words to the meaning' in Wordsworth's poetry (*BL* 2:142).

This curious idea, this paradox of the poet for whom words are immaterial, is, as I say, related to that other paradox of Wordsworthian reception, the representation of Wordsworth as a poet who doesn't *write* poetry. Critics such as Matthew Arnold have promulgated and indeed mythologized Wordsworth as a writer who did not write, who did not write down poetry by declaring that 'nature herself seems . . . to take the pen out of his hand, and to write for him with her own bare, sheer, penetrating power'.[15] The idea that Wordsworth does not write poetry is based on the idea that he speaks it instead. To the extent that Wordsworth is represented by himself, or by others, as a poet who *speaks* poetry and as a poet for whom writing is something of an afterthought, words are, or become, devalued, lose their worth. Since for Wordsworth the act of writing, the sheer physical act of inscribing words on paper, was itself associated with a series of physical, psychosomatic and psychological symptoms – including bad eyes, headaches, bowel complaints, chest pains, irritability, fatigue, insomnia – the issue of which words are worth writing, worth the effort, worth the pain, was a matter of no inconsiderable importance. And just as Wordsworth increasingly relied on the women in his life – his sister Dorothy, his wife Mary, his sister-in-law Sara, his daughter Dora, his friend Isabella Fenwick – as well as his secretary John Carter and later his son-in-law Edward Quillinan, to write down his words, to transcribe his letters and his poems, his essays and his revisions, and later to make notes on his life and poems, it is notable that his poetry and his poetics themselves involve a model of composition that seems to be directed towards the exclusion of the act of writing.

To put it simply, from early on and not least as a result of his own careful efforts, Wordsworth's reputation has been associated with writing that was not written. As James Chandler has commented, Wordsworth's conception of his own poetry involves the idea that it 'can only succeed

by aspiring to the condition of *speech*': speech rather than writing, Chandler suggests, is therefore 'central to Wordsworth's literary program'.[16] We have only to think of two of Wordsworth's most famous and most provocative statements on poetry – the assertion in the Advertisement to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) that the poems are experiments designed to 'ascertain how far the language of conversation' can be 'adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure', and the declaration in the 1802 Preface that the poet is 'a man speaking to men' (*LB* 738, 751) – to see how important this notion is to the construction of a certain idea (indeed of Wordsworth's own idea) of the poet. In this book I will suggest that there is significant investment – cultural, ideological, psychological, intellectual, emotional, scholarly, educational, institutional – in a certain figuration of Wordsworth as a poet who doesn't write, as a poet who, paradoxically, doesn't write poetry. What Chandler has referred to as Wordsworth's 'deprecation of writing in favor of speech'[17] is evident in many ways in the poetry itself as well as in the prose, but also and perhaps most of all in records of Wordsworth's life and in his critical reception. Indeed, a certain kind of Wordsworth criticism is clear about this: Wordsworth wrote without writing.[18]

II

The problem – and the paradox – around which Wordsworth's poetry and his poetics turn, then, may be most clearly discerned by putting his declaration in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* that the language of his poetry is 'as far as possible, a selection of the language really spoken by men' and that a poet is 'a man speaking to men' (*LB* 750, 751) alongside his lament in book 6 of the 1850 *Prelude* over the 'sad incompetence of human speech' (6:594). While critics have often focused on both assertions in terms of *language*, in this book I examine the extent to which it is the question of *speech* itself that is at work here – speech and therefore writing. I suggest that a poetics of speech, the poetry of a man *speaking* to men, inevitably comes up against the problem of the 'sad incompetence' of that speech, an incompetence that is both resolved and compounded by the 'other' of speech, by its supplement, by writing. There is, of course, an obvious and indeed inevitable paradox of a writer writing about his poetry as speech because such a poetics seeks to exclude precisely that which the poet is primarily involved in doing – writing, and (therefore) *not* speaking. And it is in the gap between an ideal of poetry as a form of speech on the one hand and the notion that speech involves a

'sad incompetence', a fundamental, undeniable inadequacy of language to thought or conception or emotion on the other hand, that writing may be said to emerge in Wordsworth's poetics. Poetry, we must remember, as it is defined in another memorable phrase from the Preface, is a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' that 'takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity' (*LB* 756). In other words, according to this definition, poetry displaces apparent immediacy (the immediacy of speech) in favour of a deferral and delay that can be identified with writing. Since writing thereby forms a supplement to or substitute for the 'spontaneity' of speech, it cannot but itself involve – just in its very scriptural moment, in the instant of inscription – a certain failure or inadequacy. What Friedrich Kittler calls 'the strange, fugitive act of writing'[19] itself constitutes a 'sad incompetence' – not least because it is not speech (so 'the sad incompetence of human speech' refers to the way in which speech requires the troubling supplement of writing). And I want to suggest that it is precisely Wordsworth's resistance to this conception of poetry as written – a resistance complicated by his fascination with the work of inscription, with the act and process of writing itself, and by the simple fact of writing, by his seemingly endless acts of writing – that productively skews his own poetry.

But there is another problem, another, related paradox, that directs and determines Wordsworth's poetry and that I address in this book: the problem of the example, of Wordsworth as example. Critics and theorists in the Western tradition since Aristotle have argued that there is something about poetry, or about literature more generally, that makes it specifically and peculiarly, paradoxically indeed, exemplary. A literary text, to put it simply, is both unique, singular, a one-off, and, in principle at least, and in its own conception, general, or even 'universal' or universalizable.[20] Jacques Derrida is only the most recent to have forcefully expressed this dilemma: 'Something of literature will have begun', he proposes, 'when it is not possible to decide whether, when I speak of something, I am indeed speaking of something (of the thing itself, this one, for itself) or if I am giving an example, an example of something or an example of the fact that I can speak of something.'[21] In Wordsworth's case – as is perhaps the case of every autobiographical writer – the example in question, the exemplary human being, is the poet himself. Autobiography relies both on the singularity of the subject's history[22] and on its potential for forms of generalization. Wordsworth, like all autobiographers, uses himself as an – as *the* – example. This, in fact, is how Wordsworth defended himself from the charge of 'egotism' to Aubrey de

Vere, a charge that de Vere reports 'has come from those who did not perceive that it was with a human, not a mere personal interest that he habitually watched the processes of his own mind'.[23] In particular, I will suggest that the exemplary Wordsworth is Wordsworth in the act of composition, the writing poet. Wordsworth writing, in other words, is Wordsworth at his best, most 'himself', at his most unique, singular, individual, most 'worthy' but also – or therefore – at his most exemplary, least himself and most 'universalizable'. This, the composition of William Wordsworth, the composition of Wordsworth as he composes, in composing, is the haunt and main region of his song: his subject is both the mind of man and the mind of *this* man, now, as he writes or as he composes. And his topic is, above all, the way in which the poet, the man, is composed by, composed in, poetic composition, in writing. Commenting on 'Home at Grasmere', and on *The Recluse* more generally, Kenneth Johnston has remarked on Wordsworth's 'characteristic trope of generalization', which involves 'story-telling to achieve a sense of logical force by rhetorical multiplication', and of his attempt thereby to 'generalize the validity of his claims beyond himself and his place to other persons in other places'.[24] But it might be said that the force of Wordsworth's poetry is precisely to remain within this dilemma, to fail to go beyond the self or to generalize beyond the self – or, more accurately, that Wordsworth goes beyond the self just by remaining with himself. Wordsworth, Wordsworth especially in writing, *is* his own exemplary moment.

So here is my theory of Wordsworth: perhaps rather unremarkably, I want to suggest that Coleridge, Hazlitt, Keats and most perceptive commentators on Wordsworth ever since have been right all along when they point to egotism as the key to Wordsworth's work. It was egotism, I want to affirm, that made and that unmade Wordsworth as a poet and it was egotism's other (or another egotism), a certain moralism, as we might conceive of it, that did for him (as they say) and undid him, that did for his later poetry in particular.[25] I am using 'egotism' here in a specific sense, thinking of it in terms of a poet's consistent concern with and struggle over his conception of poetic selfhood, with the idea of the self, of himself as a poet. Many of Wordsworth's most successful poems – *The Prelude* is exemplary, of course, and it is not by chance that this is often thought of not only as Wordsworth's most important work but as the one great autobiographical poem in English – are built around the question of the making and unmaking of the self. Such poems express a fascination not only with the question 'Who am I?' but also with the process of

making *and unmaking* the self in language, through writing about that self.

It might be argued in response that such works as the 'Salisbury Plain' poems, or many of the ballad-like poems in the *Lyrical Ballads*, or 'The Ruined Cottage' are not obviously directed towards an examination or presentation or composition of the self. I would suggest, though, that such narratives are concerned, above all, with a certain narratorial perspective, with the way in which the teller himself is relating, and relating to, his moving tales, and with the affective response of that narrator and of the poet (as well as, therefore, by association or infection, the response of the reader). And it is precisely the exemplariness of that individual self, of that identity – an identity constituted in and by writing – that organizes such poetry.[26] In the later poetry – I am thinking here of the poetry written after Wordsworth completed the first full version of *The Prelude* in 1805 – this exemplariness of a unique individual tends increasingly to be subsumed under what I am calling a certain moralism. This moralism involves a different kind of egotism, whereby the individual's certainty about his opinions and views on life, his generalizing *knowledge* of the world (*The Excursion* is the major example here) shifts the balance away from a primary concern with the unique and uniquely troubled emergent self. And what we see in the later poetry is, at the same time, a shift away from *writing* in a double sense: in the first place, Wordsworth increasingly finds the physical act of writing down a poem or other work tiresome, physically painful, even distressing, and he relies more and more as time goes by on 'mental' or 'oral' techniques of composition and on dictation to his various amanuenses.[27] Secondly, though, an interest in 'writing' conceived of as an interest in the strange ways of words (Kittler's 'strange fugitive act'), or as an active sense of grammatological possibility, is increasingly subsumed within larger, more overarching and generalizing 'philosophical', 'spiritual' and 'moral' themes, on the one hand, and on the other hand within a concern with formal restrictions on poetry and poetic language.[28]

The third major aspect of my theory of Wordsworth writing concerns the allegedly 'curative' properties of writing and the way in which writing as therapy is in fact linked to an elision of the act of writing itself. I seek to dislodge the notion of a Wordsworthian writing 'cure', of a therapeutics of poetry, of poetry as involved in what Leo Bersani calls a 'culture of redemption'.[29] I suggest, in fact, that writing for Wordsworth is not so much the cure as the disease (to paraphrase Karl Krauss on psychoanalysis). The therapeutic reading of Wordsworth, by contrast,

almost always ignores the *act* of writing, which I take to be a major part of the point of the poetry. In *Poetry as Epitaph* (1990) Karen Mills-Courts has argued against more conventional readings, which suggest that *The Prelude* allows Wordsworth to 'cure' himself by achieving a final 'unity': for Mills-Courts, 'writing "happens"' in Wordsworth precisely *because* a final unity is impossible'.[30] She argues that *The Prelude*, in particular, is 'haunted by lacunae and fragmentation' and that it is these lacunae that 'force the poet to keep writing'.[31] Mills-Courts brilliantly captures the compulsive nature of writing for Wordsworth, but I would suggest that writing is itself 'performative' and that it is precisely the writing itself that resists unity, that it is precisely the writing *itself* that is the compulsion. Critics have often overlooked this difficult, disunifying, compulsive nature of Wordsworth writing. The fact that Wordsworth himself records in 1843 that 'Poetic excitement when accompanied by protracted labour in composition has throughout my life brought on more or less bodily derangement' (*FN* 32) might seem to undermine the notion that writing for Wordsworth is curative. Nevertheless, critics have argued for what we might call a thematics or praxis of cure in Wordsworth. In a recent book on Wordsworth's 'self-representation' in his major lyrics, for example, Leon Waldoff proposes:

> in literature the goal is not 'cure', at least not in any conventional sense, though a work may have some cathartic or therapeutic aims, as when Wordsworth recommends the 'healing thoughts' of 'Tintern Abbey' to Dorothy in the last verse paragraph of the poem . . . The analogy with transference can be taken only so far. Still, the greater Romantic lyric is a crisis poem, and in it a speaker typically tries to resolve the most serious moral, psychological, and philosophical problems. In doing so, he also tries to achieve a self-transformation through a process of self-dramatization.[32]

Despite his reservations concerning the curative properties of poetry, Waldoff still clearly aligns poetry with therapy. The question that such an analysis leaves open is that of writing, of composition: where is writing in such an analysis? The distinction that Waldoff fails to make here – the distinction that he signally blurs – is between writing as writing *about* a cure and writing *as* a cure. It is, I would suggest, a fundamental distinction and its blurring in this instance is exemplary of a more widespread elision of writing itself in the reception of Wordsworth. Once one tries to think about the mechanism of poetic therapy, it becomes clear that although the two may overlap, a poem that is about a cure would be fundamentally different from a poem that is, in being written, itself somehow curative. If we take Waldoff's 'the speaker' for the poet himself – which is what, in

part, Waldoff is concerned to do[33] – we can see that the therapeutics of poetry involves precisely the *act* of writing (including the 'process of self-dramatization'). Yet, like many critics, Waldoff is concerned very little with writing, as opposed to the thematic interpretation of texts. My concern in this book is with poems being written, as well as with poems as written texts – my aim is to consider poems as, in both cases, 'writing-effects'.[34]

III

Given the emphasis in his reception on Wordsworth as an oral poet, as a poet who wrote without writing, it is perhaps not very surprising that recent Wordsworth criticism has not on the whole been very interested in the poet's mode, manner and indeed theory of writing. Critics such as Ferguson, Geoffrey Hartman, de Man and J. Hillis Miller have produced influential accounts of questions of language and rhetoric in Wordsworth, engaging in particular with the tropological dimensions of writing and inscription. The present book owes much to what I have learnt from such 'deconstructive' accounts of Wordsworth, but it also seeks to engage more closely with the material dimensions – including the historical and biographical empirical dimensions – of what it means for Wordsworth to write. Other critics, such as Jonathan Wordsworth, Stephen Gill and, more recently, Duncan Wu have traced in detail the ways in which Wordsworth's poems evolved in composition and revision. Again, I have learnt much from such studies and this book can be seen as a development of, as well as a departure from, their work. Thirdly, there has been a certain amount of interest in what we might call the 'compositional poetics' of Wordsworth writing by such scholars as David Perkins (in *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Sincerity*, 1964), J. Douglas Kneale (in *Monumental Writing: Aspects of Rhetoric in Wordsworth's Poetry*, 1988), and Kenneth Johnston (in *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy*, 1998). The significance of writing itself, however, of the literal, material act of inscription and its impact on poetry through its influence on what Wordsworth refers to in the *Essays upon Epitaphs* as 'the act of composition' (*Prose* 2:59) has largely been overlooked by critics.[35]

The situation is not much different in the field of scholarship concerned with Wordsworth's practice of writing, in the editing of his texts. With the recent publication of the magisterial Cornell Wordsworth edition, Wordsworth scholarship has been provided with very rich resources for the investigation of the poet's writing practices. Yet even this

edition, with its detailed cataloguing of various stages of composition, seems to be concerned only incidentally with the process, rather than the product, of writing. The edition provides detailed information about such practicalities as paper, writing instruments and the writing hands of Wordsworth and his amanuenses, and it presents many of the extant manuscripts in facsimile, as well as in transcriptions and in 'reading texts'. And the provision of authoritative and reliable reading texts is indeed only a part of the aim in publishing such materials. The editors also seek to clarify and present the various stages of the complex, layered process of writing and revision. But it is, understandably, no part of the remit of such an edition to explore the complexities of Wordsworth's theory and practice of writing in and for itself, and critics have been slow to take up the challenge.[36] This relative lack of interest in Wordsworth writing, in Wordsworth as a *writer* rather than simply as a poet, is curious not only because of the fact that – self-evidently, but contrary to the myth – Wordsworth spent so much of his working life engaged in acts of writing, but also because acts of writing are so important in the constitution of his identity – as a man and as a poet – while, at the same time, being so deeply and productively troubling to him.

In this book, therefore, I attempt to redress this critical lacuna by discussing Wordsworth writing in three inextricably linked but also quite distinct ways. In the first place, I consider the empirical or biographical question of how, or of how much, or indeed of *whether*, Wordsworth wrote poetry, wrote it down, of the inscription of his poems, by hand – on paper or on other materials. This involves some necessarily quite detailed, even pedantic examination of the evidence for Wordsworth's habits of poetic composition. Secondly, I examine the consequences of a certain thinking of Wordsworth as a poet who, rather than writing, composed out loud or in his head, the implications of conceiving of him as a poet for whom the technologies of writing were an arbitrary and dispensable dimension of acts of composition. Thirdly, by exploring the associated but very different sense of writing as composition or invention I examine the importance of writing, of writing-as-composition, for Wordsworth's sense of himself as a poet, his sense of the figure of the poet, the self-figuring poet; rather than thinking of composition as logically contingent upon William Wordsworth, I try to reconceive the poet as, in some sense, a function or product of, or as contingent upon, composition or writing itself. Part of my focus in this book, therefore, is on writing as inscription, on writing as writing down. But related to this is a sense of writing that might not (simply) include physical inscription