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978-0-521-11578-0 - Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays

Marjorie Levinson

Excerpt

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## Introduction

### I

A NEW WORD is abroad these days in Wordsworth scholarship – “historicist” – and the adjective carries distinctly heterodox overtones.<sup>1</sup> What is thereby refused is an idealizing interpretive model associated with Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, Paul de Man, and even M. H. Abrams. At the same time, historicist critique distinguishes its interests and method from *historical* scholarship, or from the researches and argumentation of David Erdman, Carl Woodring, and E. P. Thompson. More specifically, a number of works published over the last three years position themselves as demystifications of Romanticist readings as well as of Romantic poems. They use history, or sociopolitical reconstruction, to resist the old control of Yale. However, insofar as they repudiate the empiricist, positivist concept of historical fact, in that they focus textual antinomy and erasure rather than manifest theme and achieved form, and in that they use their historical remove with conscious opportunism, these works are deeply of the devil's party.

By way of illuminating this curious consensus, I would like to situate this book in the general field of Romantic criticism over the past ten or fifteen years, and then within the very different context of today. My project took shape some five years ago in a critical climate which I perceived as inimical to the contextual elucidation of Wordsworth's poetry. By contextual, I refer not to an academically contoured intellectual or literary domain, but to a factual universe: the place of political realities and of the ideological pressures that organize this material into determinate sociopsychic experience. The context I hoped to reconstruct from and around the poetry was not, in other words, a formal or heuristic category (e.g., Rousseauvian primitivism, associational psychology, literary ballad) but something closer to an ‘extrinsic’ referential universe. I had the persistent feeling that Wordsworth's most generalized representations owed their pronounced ideality to some disturbing

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particular and to the need to efface or elide it. This suspicion – neither a theoretically derived (Freudian, Marxian) assumption, nor a heretical gesture – arose from my efforts to teach the great period poems to undergraduates, who had not learned not to ask irrelevant and irreverent questions. They wondered why, for example, in a poem commonly known as “Tintern Abbey” and, by its title, very concretely situated with respect to time and place of composition, there is no mention of an abbey, and only the most generalized treatment of occasion. When I reflected on this discrepancy – a logical contradiction between title and text – it occurred to me that the amassing harmonies of Wordsworth’s poem effectively muffle the social and political resonance of the date inscribed in the title, of the designated five-year interval, and of the scene of writing. As I began to recover that resonance – a semantic dimension – I saw that it did not dilute, discredit, or remain extrinsic to the poem’s psychological and metaphysical argument. Quite the contrary, these new meanings, that related Wordsworth’s existential *Angst* to his own less mediated experience, as to the truths of his moment and his nation, materialized what had come to seem an impossibly displaced and textualized meditation. It became clear, for example, that many of “Tintern Abbey”’s most innocent affirmations – doctrinal and iconic – signified within the universe of contemporary social discourse as negations. Under the sign of history, Wordsworth offers the growth of a poet’s mind: a privatized, self-generative, and causally perspicuous sequence. So smooth, sealed, and, in the language of “Tintern Abbey,” *purified* a history does the poem develop, that history in the commoner sense, and the conditions of Wordsworth’s historiography, have no room to surface.

Those commonplaces, and their relation to the uncommon wisdoms Wordsworth produces from them, were my quarry. My idea was not to produce the concealed subjects and occasions of Wordsworth’s poetry like rabbits from a hat, nor was it (and perhaps this amounts to the same thing), to reevaluate his most celebrated and transcendent poems with reference to some standard of first and final Truth. John Goode, in his excellent study of Gissing, puts the matter clearly and concisely: we do not expect “absolute veracity” from any fiction, but rather “a veracity made true by the historic significance of its mode of idealisation.”<sup>2</sup> Plainly, one cannot gauge the nature or success of the idealization until and unless one restores to the work that ‘actual’ (a congeries of conditions experienced by an

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epoch as its given Real) which the form so uniquely, so interestedly, and with such complete necessity makes symbolic. Far from seeking to depreciate Wordsworth's transcendence or to trivialize profoundly moving works, I hoped to renew our sense of their power by exposing the conditions of their success: that recalcitrant facticity with which they had to contend, explicitly *and* unconsciously. Neither was the point of this exercise to invert the old, idealizing control, and designate as either superior or typical those works revealing the most conflicted relation to their moment. That line of thought would, of course, merely replace one Romantic agony with another. My object was to explain the particular and particularly constrained manner in which Wordsworth sought figurally, mythically, or formally to resolve those conflicts which were his *idées fixes*, so to speak, his ideological knowledges.

The ablest practitioner of the method I sketch (and the best thing that has happened to Wordsworth studies in the past ten years) is John Barrell. While Barrell is everywhere and passionately concerned to restore diverse representational decisions to their determining social contexts, he also refuses – practically and theoretically – the referential privileging that tends to accompany such elucidations and to hypostatize the critic's own working knowledge. Barrell offers, for example, a cautionary critique of a writer who “ignores the surface” of Constable's paintings, the attempts to “conceal the pain of agricultural labour,” as if that surface “is only varnish to be cleaned off before we can see Constable in his true colours.” Barrell compares this approach to Raymond Williams's notion of ‘real history’ – “what really happened in the agrarian history of England when we have stripped away the nostalgia and mythologizing . . .” Barrell reminds us that “the myths really happened as well, and the human significance of Constable's pictures . . . is not simply what they cannot help divulging about the rural life in 1810 or 1820, but also what they choose to tell us.”<sup>3</sup> We might recall in this context Paul Ricoeur's comment on his ‘Dialectic.’ Where Ricoeur writes “psychoanalysis” and “the Freudian problematic,” we might substitute “Wordsworth” and “the Cartesian problematic.”

Psychoanalysis is limited by what justifies it . . . It is precisely this internal limitation of the Freudian problematic that will invite us, in a first phase, to oppose to it another explanatory point of view . . . and then, in a second phase, to find in psychoanalysis itself the reason for going beyond it. The

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task of that second reading is not so much to unmask the repressed and the agency of repression in order to *show* what lies behind the masks, as to set free the interplay of references between signs . . . The only thing that gives a presence to the artist's fantasies is the work of art; and the reality thus conferred upon them is the reality of the work of art itself within a world of culture.<sup>4</sup>

Barrell's respect for the reality of the appearance – the depth that is Constable's surface – highlights the question of style in Wordsworth's poetry. Or, one might study Wordsworth's mythic resolution of logically insoluble problems (what E. P. Thompson has called "search for a synthesis at a moment of arrested dialectic" and what we might conceive as an ideological compromise formation), in terms of the textual procedures that transform lived contradiction into the appearance of aesthetic complexity.<sup>5</sup> By these procedures, historically produced difference is mobilized into spatial and doctrinal design, and where there was unworkable, unspeakable loss, there is redemptive, figural definition. Because criticism has for so long and so volubly articulated Wordsworth's impulses from vernal woods, it is difficult to remember that the dominant effect of his poetry – its peculiar style – is its extreme artlessness, an apparent absence of style. In Arnold's phrase, Wordsworth's poetry is most distinctive when it is least distinctive, when it is 'as inevitable as Nature herself.'

Much of the recent historicist work on Wordsworth addresses poems or parts of poems that sketch (ambivalently, of course) the social dimensions of their primary representations. The later portions of *The Prelude*, *The Excursion*, "The Old Cumberland Beggar," "Guilt and Sorrow" – these are all predictably inviting subjects of explication. Marilyn Butler's brisk, trenchant positioning of "Laodamia" and some of the lyrical ballads, Jerome McGann's reading of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," and David Simpson's treatment of "Alice Fell" and "The Reverie of Poor Susan," are the exceptions.<sup>6</sup> They remind us that Wordsworth is most distinctively Wordsworth, most Romantic, and most successful in those poems where the conflicts embedded in his materials, motives, and methods are most expertly displaced and where, as a result, the poetry looks most removed from anything so banal as a polemic or position.

The poems I present – "Tintern Abbey," "Michael," the Intimations Ode, "Peele Castle" – are not only incontestably among the poet's greatest works, they are preeminent examples of that 'inevitability' so valued by readers such as Arnold, Pater, and Mill. These poems speak not a word about those sociopolitical themes which had

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occupied Wordsworth and others less than a decade before and which had become, in the light of the post-Revolutionary world, awkward on a number of levels. My argument is that the extreme disinterest evinced by these works indicates their resumption of those problematic themes at the level of image and of metaphysics, precisely because they were deadlocked at the practical level. More simply, these poems seek to resolve formally, through certain representational strategies, issues that were unthinkable under any but the most sublime – the most discursive – conditions.

Another reason these works solicited my attention is that while they appear to emerge with complete spontaneity and to owe their utterance to the profoundest, most diffuse and ineffable motivations, each poem perversely advertises its occasional, topical character. I ask the reader to recall, for example, Wordsworth's letter to Fox, where the poet identifies the social purposes informing his "Michael" and "The Brothers." Alerted by that letter, we focus references within Wordsworth's "pastoral" to distressing socioeconomic trends particularly evident in the Lake District. Or consider the title of "Tintern Abbey," which, with its prolix explicitness, underlines the multiple anniversaries, national and personal, marked by the date of composition, and the very public meanings lodged in the landscape that the poem registers by negation. Similarly, the Intimations Ode, largely composed on the day which concluded the ignominious Peace of Amiens, alludes with a strange, typological specificity to ostensibly generic items, and it develops its lofty metaphysical argument by way of a historically specific and, at the time of composition, distinctly polemical representational style.

The object of each of these poems is to replace the picture of the place with "the picture of the mind," such as it might be at any time and in any place. The structural device by which this usurpation is achieved is repetition or return. In "Tintern Abbey," the Intimations Ode, and "Peele Castle," the narrator returns in fact or memory to a scene darkly overwritten by determinate social meanings and the psychic conflicts precipitated by those meanings. The original scene is registered stylistically and through the pattern of negations that the verse develops.<sup>7</sup> The intention of the narration is to de- and re-figure the real,<sup>8</sup> so that the narrator-poet may restore continuity to a socially and psychically fractured existence. The larger boon sought by the poet and offered to his contemporary

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reader was the displacement of ideological contradiction to a context where resolution could be imagined and implemented with some success.

## II

Some time ago, E. P. Thompson sought to undermine the assumption, common among Wordsworthians at that time, that the poet's artistic success was a function of his political disengagement. In the view of M. H. Abrams, for example, "the great Romantic poems were written not in the mood of revolutionary exaltation but in the later mood of revolutionary disillusionment or despair," when "the militancy of overt political action" had evolved into "the paradox of spiritual quietism."<sup>8</sup>

Thompson's campaign, assisted by David Erdman and Carl Woodring, aimed to prove that Wordsworth's great art emerged from the tension between his "Jacobin affirmation and recoil." Once this tension evaporated, the poetry contracted and settled into "a point of rest."<sup>9</sup>

What Thompson and his fellow workers could not, given their critical moment, address, were the subtler languages of politics in Wordsworth's poetry, and the way these languages inform and inflect the manifest doctrine of the poetry, as well as its innocent aesthetic decisions. These scholars brilliantly illuminated that doctrine – the presented themes of the poetry – by restoring the social and political discourses wherein those themes were first articulated. Their research was not, however, directed toward textual intervention. Their arguments – astute and completely persuasive – could not change one's fundamental sense of the poetry, an impression determined by particular representational procedures, or the text's imperceptible way of framing its world and its readers.

While the historians were conducting their investigations, Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, and Paul de Man seized as their Wordsworthian truth the great epistemological and ontological arguments of the poetry – arguments developed by the poet and his exegetes in what was, to all appearances, a disinterested, philosophic fashion.<sup>10</sup> These scholars investigated the subtle negotiations whereby the mind of Man knew, 'married,' and redeemed ('humanized') Nature. They read both those agents, Mind and Nature, more or less sympathetically, or as they figure in the poetry.

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As Bloom, Hartman, and de Man developed their remarkable theoretical talents, one could look back on their practical criticism and appreciate the logic of their attraction to deconstructive thought (or, of their interpretation of that thought). Wordsworth's poetry – with its reception protocols, its narrative contingencies, its reflexivity, its thematizing of figuration and desire, discourse and plenitude, repetition and reproduction – in short, its irony and *aporia*, provided deconstructive theory with a perfect, that is, perfectly accommodating model of the literary. To put this more polemically, Romanticism's ideology of writing is deconstruction's ideology of reading. The reasons for this identity are various and complex. Gerald Graff, in his *Literature Against Itself*, offers a sociopolitical analysis of the Romantic ideology, then and now, and Terry Eagleton, more sketchily but very suggestively, situates Yale's resistance to the "terrorism of determinate meaning" within the context of less academic horrors: specifically, the Holocaust.<sup>11</sup> The Romantics, we recall, and especially the first-generation poets, knew apocalypse and terror as well: the Revolution and Napoleon. The origin and evolution of critical methodologies is not my subject. I merely observe that the marriage of Romantic poetry and contemporary semiotic theory was perhaps happier for the theory than for the poetry. In Wordsworth's case, the effect of this critical liaison was further to attenuate an already idealized canon, and to defend it more securely from properly historical interrogations. The more deliciously were we teased out of thought, the less likely were we to pose the kinds of questions ("Who are these . . . To what green altar . . . What little town . . .?") that would arrest the sport.

While Thompson and Erdman were reconstructing Wordsworth, and Yale was deconstructing him, M. H. Abrams was busy at Cornell with his own project, which was located somewhere beyond history and before theory. In his *Natural Supernaturalism* and several landmark essays, Abrams related Wordsworth's and his generation's political concerns to certain formal and stylistic issues. Whereas the stricter historians were textually noninvasive, Abrams's interest in the political commitment of the early poetry, and the 'quietist' or retired mode of the post-Revolutionary verse, sensitized him to the topical meanings carried by the poetry's nonthematic features. He perceived, for example, that certain very general, and, it seemed, perfectly innocuous words, such as "hope," were in fact politically charged "leitmotifs" focusing specific contemporary debates.<sup>12</sup>

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Abrams's subject, however, was the big picture – the general and relatively conscious poetic response to the failure of the Revolution. The christological concept he so brilliantly discovered in the poetry, and which he used to explain the carryover and transformation of those leitmotifs and interests, was a greatly enabling idea of order, but it further rationalized and totalized works which were subtly but deeply scored by contradiction.

Marilyn Butler's work takes up where Abrams (and Thompson, Erdman, and Woodring) leaves off. In her *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, *Peacock Displayed*, and most dramatically, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, she brings her impressive historical erudition to bear on the most innocent aspects of the work: a word, a character type, a narrative *donnée*. By recovering and elucidating the polemical meanings of those representations and procedures in their originary context, she gives her readers a more authentic and immediate relation to the literature. To focus Romantic Hellenism, for example, as a reaction to a contemporary ideological conflict and its literary inscription, is to understand the deeply political character of this Romantic escape, this 'luxury.' It is to register concretely the difference between the apolitical and the anti- or adversarially political.

Butler's work makes of us informed contemporary readers of Romantic literature; what she does not do is use her belatedness to theorize that within or about the work which the informed contemporary reader could not possibly know but which we, not so informed, can. Or, to put this another way, what Abrams did not do was to *present* the contradiction implied by his findings: on the one hand, a smooth, generalized, metaphysically preoccupied surface, and on the other, the historically specific, ideologically expressive, and greatly problematic methods that produced that manifest representation. Structuralism, by way of deconstruction, materializes textual absence and identifies its semiotic charge, so to speak; the reconstructive efforts of Thompson through Butler expose the faceted nature of works that present to our view a single plane. What was wanted was a way to mediate those projects, a theory of negative allegory.

Such a theory emerges in this generation from the work of Louis Althusser, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Pierre Macherey, and it is deployed in the more practical studies of John Barrell, James Chandler, T. J. Clark, John Goode, Kurt Heinzelman, Kenneth



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Johnston, Alan Liu, Jerome McGann, David Simpson, and James Turner. These writers, at once materialist and deconstructive, represent the literary work as that which speaks of one thing because it cannot articulate another – presenting formally a sort of allegory by absence, where the signified is indicated by an identifiably absented signifier. Here, for example, is Althusser's defense of a particular but representative hermeneutic move.

No doubt this was to *add* something to Marx's discourse: but in a different respect, I was merely *re-establishing*, i.e., *maintaining* his discourse, without yielding to the temptation of his *silence*. I *heard* this silence as the possible weakness of a discourse under the pressure and repressive action of another discourse, which takes the place of the first discourse in favour of this repression, and speaks in its silence: the empiricist discourse. All I did was to *make this silence in the first discourse speak, dissipating the second*.<sup>13</sup>

That silence or 'unspeakable' (Jameson's "logical scandal," Macherey's "rupture" and "fissure," Bakhtin/Volosinov's "intonation," Della Volpe–McGann's "quid"), inheres within the work and can determine its peripheral contours as well. The internal scandal occurs in those syntactic, dramatic, thematic, affective, and rhetorical contradictions that so deeply made (produced) and make (constitute) the work as to be nearly imperceptible to readers who share that work's field of vision, what these writers call its problematic. The omission of the picture of the *place* (as opposed to 'mind') from "Tintern Abbey" is a contradiction of this kind, a thematic/iconic bind. The syntactic contradiction in line 33 of "Peele Castle" ("So once it would have been, – 'tis so no more": opposition of a past conditional to a present indicative, thereby suppressing the *unconditional* past, i.e., the so once it *was*), locates another such node. Precisely where the work blurs its manifest representations and where its smooth surface thickens, invaginates, or breaks open, is where its ideological situation can begin to take shape for us. These places – quite literally, spots of time, or deposits of historicity – are where the privatized 'world' of the poem (Abrams's "heterocosm") confesses its possession by the *world*, "the place where, in the end, / We find our happiness, or not at all" (*The Prelude*, Book II, lines 143–44).

To focus these contradictions does not mean to discount the work's manifest themes and rhetoric, or what used to be called its achieved form. The idea is that criticism take possession of these trouble spots, or take up a position within but not *of* the ideology it

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seeks to articulate: a position at once intimate and removed. Criticism can use these logical binds to plot the polemic developed by the work's most spontaneous moves and its readiest materials: their reactive and dialectical, as well as their celebratory and more simply reflective dimensions. To read in this way is to split the atom of Romantic symbolism and organicism. Less flamboyantly, it is to set image *against* idea, form *against* content, process *against* product, in the hope that we may thus compel a tired organic apparition to reveal its fabulous fusions.

It is difficult to read Wordsworth in this conscientiously contentious way because the poetry explicitly rebukes even the gentlest material interest. Consciously or otherwise, one wants to defer to that celebrated, seductive instruction – let the feeling give importance to the incidents. What we must bear in mind is that we cannot *use* Wordsworth's protest on behalf of the inner life and his rejection of an obsequious mimesis, unless we first and continuously try to reproduce his universe of objects considered *as* objects, and the historically specific conditions of his apprehension and representation of that universe. This is the kind of work that leads to a knowledge of Wordsworth's achievement, since this – the object world and its modes of availability – is what the expressive and the heterocosmic orientations refuse.

Another textual obstacle to the sort of exercise I describe is that spectacular agon of self and other enacted throughout Wordsworth's great period poetry. Clearly, a deconstructive materialism must ultimately undermine the categorial distinctions which that Cartesian dynamic enforces: meaning–psyche–poetry vs. matter–sociality–history. Students of Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Pope, Johnson, Joyce, Whitman, and Lowell are better positioned to perceive the slippages whereby the mind's idea and the heart's desire and all that is conceived as external and inimical to that privileged (and therefore threatened) interiority, in fact produce, reproduce, and invade each other. Wordsworth's later poetry, like that of Coleridge, Shelley, and most passionately, Keats, mythically figures that enfolding – an interpenetration of private and public domains – but in the poetry of Wordsworth's great period, those ontological and social blendings or vortices are registered as contamination and they are fiercely resisted. The unacknowledged knowledge that Imagination and Nature are not only not distinct (and therefore not liable to prolific marriages) but are, equally, indifferent avatars of