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

Marjorie Levinson

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## Wordsworth's great period poems

This highly original study presents rereadings of four major poems from Wordsworth's great period of creativity, 1798–1805: "Tintern Abbey," "Michael," the Intimations Ode, "Peele Castle."

The Author's concern is to reveal within the profound philosophic and psychic themes of these poems a range of formative contradictions – social, economic, and political. Professor Levinson traces these binds to the determining conflicts of the age – e.g., the vicissitudes of the French Revolution, social and topographical change in England – and she investigates the special challenge these conflicts set for writers such as Wordsworth who had reached intellectual maturity by way of the ideals of the Enlightenment.

This book is not to be categorized as an illustrative contextual study. The author's project is to articulate the network of relations binding textual truths to social, historical, and political truths, and, through a materialist attention to verbal detail, to disclose the mechanisms whereby one set of meanings is used to suppress or displace the other.

*Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* is an important contribution to Romantic scholarship insofar as it situates the poetry as richly and concretely as possible within its historical and ideological moment.

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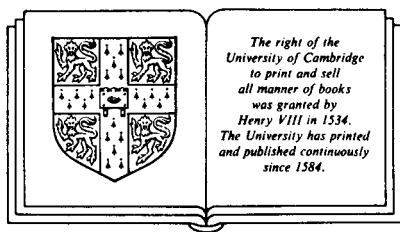
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# Wordsworth's great period poems

Four essays

MARJORIE LEVINSON

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

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](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521115780](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521115780)

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First published 1986  
Reprinted 1990  
This digitally printed version 2009

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

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Levinson, Marjorie.  
Wordsworth's great period poems.  
Bibliography: p.  
Includes index.  
1. Wordsworth, William, 1770–1850 – Criticism and  
interpretation. I. Title.

PR5888. L48 1986 821'.7 85-29119

ISBN 978-0-521-30829-8 hardback  
ISBN 978-0-521-11578-0 paperback

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This book is dedicated to my husband, Richard Harris  
He makes space, and gives time.

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## Preface

THIS BOOK is, as the title says, four essays: four experiments in elucidation, carried out over a number of years and sandwiched between phases of another project. The problem that set this book in motion was a pedagogical one. While the high Romantic arguments I had learned as an undergraduate and in graduate school satisfied me, they did not seem to satisfy my students, whose interests were more worldly than mine and whose intelligence had a decidedly practical, empiricist cast. To accomplish a full reading of the *Intimations Ode* in the presence of this audience was to feel oneself performing, somewhat foolishly, an academic exercise. It was to hear, very faintly, such questions as “so what,” “what does this mean to me,” “what manner of man was Wordsworth to have agonized so abstractly at the age of 32 (and 30 and 28)?” Certainly the theory I was reading at the time (Althusser, Bakhtin/Volosinov, Williams) helped me hear those muted questions and suggested ways of producing answers. As I was writing, however, I did not theorize my interest. Each essay was the answer to a practical problem focused by classroom activity or preparation. I sketch the general situation of this book partly to explain discrepancies of style, tone, and politics, and also because I think criticism should try to account for itself as an act of writing, a particularly determined act.

Along these lines, I wish to isolate a moment that I conceive as the immediate occasion of this book. In 1980, one year out of graduate school, I went to a Swarthmore College conference to hear Fredric Jameson talk. Along with Jameson came an art historian named Tim Clark. Jameson's talk was as daring and productive as all his work; I had never heard of Clark and even now I don't know anyone in literature who uses him. Clark spoke about David – “The Death of Marat” – and he spoke in such a way as to make for me the critical difference. He was kind enough to send me some offprints in reply to my letter of appreciation and it was, in particular, his analysis of two

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receptions (the response to Manet's "Olympia" and a Courbet review in the *Temple Bar Magazine*) that revealed to me the analytic and human power of a certain kind of social criticism. My greatest critical debt is not to him; Jerry McGann is the first and last influence on all my thinking, and he is also the best friend anyone ever had. Tim Clark's was the discourse, however, that materialized for me the acts of knowing and forgetting that get accomplished by style.

Marilyn Butler read the "Tintern Abbey" chapter of this book a long time ago and when it had many more faults than it does now. Hers was the first outside response and it was then and continues to be a reason to persist in what has seemed to some a murderous dissection.

David Simpson has been a tireless and perfectly selfless supporter of my work for several years. He has made the kind of collegial commitment to my critical interests I hope to make to others.

References to Wordsworth's poetry are to the standard, five-volume Hutchinson de Selincourt edition, except in the case of *The Prelude*, where I used the Norton edition (Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, Stephen Gill). I use the 1850 *Prelude* unless otherwise designated. Prose references are to Owen and Smyser. I thank Edmund Butler who read the manuscript for textual errors and helped standardize my references where I had used alternative texts.

*The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, Helen Darbishire, Thomas Hutchinson, 5 vol. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940–49).

*The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979).

*The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vol. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

Versions of chapters two and three have been previously published: "Spiritual Economics: A Reading of Wordsworth's 'Michael,'" *English Literary History*, fall, 1985, pp. 707–731; and "Wordsworth's Intimations Ode: A Timely Utterance," in *Historical Studies and Literary Criticism*, ed. Jerome McGann, (Madison, Wisconsin: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 48–75.