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978-0-521-12983-1 - Wordsworth and the Great System: A Study of Wordsworth's  
Poetic Universe

Geoffrey Durrant

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# WORDSWORTH AND THE GREAT SYSTEM

*A Study of  
Wordsworth's Poetic Universe*

GEOFFREY DURRANT

*Professor of English Literature  
University of British Columbia*



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## *Prefatory Note*

The purpose of this study is two-fold. It sets out, first, to show that Wordsworth was less hostile to physical science than criticism has usually supposed, and that on the contrary his poetic vision is deeply influenced by his scientific interests and his mathematical habit of mind. Secondly, it sets out to demonstrate by examination of individual poems the system of images, forming a coherent poetic grammar, with which Wordsworth undertakes the great task of following in the footsteps of the man of science, and of making the 'great system' of Newton intelligible to the imaginations of men. As a necessary corollary of these aims, the poems have been considered as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,' not of a predominantly emotional nature, but of a man 'who, being of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.' The poems in other words have been considered as acts of mind, in which the delight is in discovery and perception, rather than in the communication of personal feelings and anecdotes.

My experience as a teacher has led me to believe that Wordsworth can be thoroughly enjoyed and adequately understood only by those who have gained, from close study of his poems, a genuine respect for his intellectual genius. This study is meant as a small contribution to increased respect for Wordsworth, not as a philosopher, a mathematician, or a scientist, but as a poet in whom the intellectual life of those studies is made to contribute to the vitality of the poetry. It is after all the individual poems, each with its own new perception and its own account of reality, that finally matter to the reader of Wordsworth. It is as a poet that he claims our attention; and I hope that I have been able to show that his poems yield a pleasure that is proportionate to the intellectual effort we are prepared to bring to them. This is readily recognised when Shakespeare, or Donne, or T. S. Eliot is in question; it has not yet been fully recognised in the criticism of Wordsworth,

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chiefly because the legend of Wordsworth's 'simplicity' has a remarkable capacity for survival.

This study is deliberately one-sided. It deals with the elements of conscious intelligence in Wordsworth's poetry, and does not attempt an account of the overtones of myth, the echoes of classical poetry, and what may for want of a better term be called the 'animism' of his work, and especially his earlier work. I intend to deal with these in some detail in a study now in the course of preparation; their general nature is well indicated in the last chapter of B. R. Schneider's *Wordsworth's Cambridge Education*,<sup>1</sup> a work that provides a firm biographical support for any inquiry into the intellectual and literary traditions within which Wordsworth's poetry was written. I have moreover concentrated my attention on poems of the major phase, from 1798 to 1805. The earlier work has been looked at only to show how the characteristic mode of the great period was evolved. The later work has not been considered; it is very different in quality, and perhaps even in kind, from the poetry of 1798 to 1805, and forms no necessary part of a study of that poetry. No account of 'Wordsworth' in general has been attempted; my hope has been to establish the need for further critical inquiry into the nature of individual poems and groups of poems before any very useful ideas can be produced about the whole work of a poet about whom too much has been said in over-general terms.

Some parts of this study are derived from an essay on 'Wordsworth and the Sense of Fact' published in *Theoria*, iv, 1952. The chapter on 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' was originally published in *Theoria*, xix, 1962. I am indebted to the University of Natal Press for permission to reproduce material from these articles. The text as a whole, with a few variations, is that of a dissertation submitted to the University of South Africa. I am indebted to many colleagues and students for insights gained in discussion, to Professor D. R. Beeton for his help with the revision of the text, and to Mr Michael Black for illuminating comment and valuable suggestions.

G. H. DURRANT

*Vancouver, British Columbia*

<sup>1</sup> Cambridge University Press, 1957.