

STEPHEN GILL

Introduction

After struggling in his middle years to win more than a coterie readership, William Wordsworth lived to savour success. He died full of honours in 1850, Poet Laureate to Queen Victoria, a man recognized, in John Keble's words, as 'raised up to be a chief minister, not only of noblest poesy, but of high and sacred truth'.¹ Over the next fifty years his status as an English classic was confirmed in innumerable printings of his works, anthologies, and eventually scholarly studies. By 1950, however, it seemed that his time was over. At an event to mark the centenary of Wordsworth's death, Lionel Trilling, one of the foremost American critics of his generation, summed up what he took to be the current perception of the poet: 'Wordsworth is not attractive and not an intellectual possibility.'² Although Trilling's lecture went on to demonstrate that this was not his own view, his decisive and memorable formulation sounded right, as if Keble's words on the plaque in Grasmere Church were being given their sad but inevitable addendum. But such has not been the judgement of history. Since the muted celebrations in 1950, shifts in intellectual concerns have brought the Romantics into new focus and have rediscovered Wordsworth as a fully 'intellectually possible' figure. Western culture's preoccupation with identity and the self; the linguistic turn of much current theory; the interest in power and politics and nationhood; the return to history; environmental issues – all of these dominant features of the cultural landscape of the last half-century have been mapped across the terrain of Wordsworth's poetry and prose.

That today's 'Wordsworth' (the name constituting the object of study in its totality – poetry, prose, biography, historical context, critical history) is substantially different from that of 1950 is partly due to the labours of editors. As Keith Hanley's chapter in this collection spells out, multi-volume editions of Wordsworth's poetry and prose, as well as editions of his letters and of Coleridge's and of other members of their circle, have enormously enlarged our factual knowledge. As far as Wordsworth the poet is concerned we can say more: editorial interventions have reconfigured 'Wordsworth'.

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Students now routinely refer to poems which Wordsworth did not publish. *The Prelude* in thirteen books completed in 1805, was not brought to light until seventy-six years after his death. Since then other texts have emerged through scholarly activity, such as *Salisbury Plain*, *The Ruined Cottage*, *The Pedlar*, *The 1799 Prelude*, *The Recluse*. And this is not a case of editors beavering away at trivia. No one would doubt that the 1805 *Prelude* is Wordsworth's finest poem; recent criticism has treated the others mentioned as central to Wordsworth's achievement.

So strongly have these texts emerged, in fact, poems Wordsworth did not publish, that Jack Stillingier, himself an experienced editor, has warned against the effacement of the poetic canon Wordsworth did choose to authorize (for details see Hanley). But what is actually happening is not effacement – *Lyrical Ballads* and *Poems, in Two Volumes*, for example, are too powerful to accept relegation – but rather a realignment of texts in relation to one another as readers encounter an enlarged poetic corpus, with all the uncertainties inherent in the new apprehension that such an encounter must involve.

Something of the same sense of continuity bracketed with newness must strike us when we consider 'Wordsworth' more largely. I will consider three examples, but more could easily be adduced. In 1916 it was at last revealed publicly (scholarly insiders had known for some time) that Wordsworth had fathered a daughter on a French Royalist sympathizer when he was twenty-two years old. To some it was a relief to learn that Wordsworth had been like Keats and Shelley and Byron, a man with flesh and blood appetites, and not just a solitary visionary communing with Nature and the Universe, which is the figure most of the late portraits, busts, and statues conveyed. For others, though, the news had a more exciting meaning. Now one could see why Wordsworth's early poetry is peopled with abandoned women and destitute figures and haunted guilty men. The haunted, guilty one was the poet himself. Further speculation about Wordsworth's relations with his sister, Dorothy, added to the sense that the poetry up to, say, 1803 was the product of a tormented spirit.

That Wordsworth was a driven man in the 1790s is not in dispute, but more recently scholars struggling to penetrate the opacities of *The Prelude's* account of those years have focused on the poet's politics, on his allegiances and betrayals as they can be inferred, and in so doing have wonderfully thickened our sense of what it meant to be a radical poet in a country gearing up for a war of survival. But as Kenneth Johnston's *The Hidden Wordsworth* (1998) persuasively demonstrates, it is not the case that a newer, more fashionable *angst* has just supplanted the old. Johnston reminds us how complex the relation was in the 1790s between the private and the public and his work – as

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does that of David Bromwich in *Disowned by Memory* (1998) – invites still further investigation of Wordsworth in the most turbulent decade of his life.

Or consider the issue of Nature's healing power. In *The Prelude* it is claimed that 'Nature's self, by human love/Assisted' (1805 x 921–2) guided Wordsworth out of the labyrinth of error in which he was bewildered in the 1790s and one might say that in a sense his whole creative output is a thank-offering. Following up the question of quite how Nature's self saved the poet must lead us into Metaphysics, but it also must lead into appreciation of what the poetry does with Nature in the form of rocks and stones and trees. Wordsworth's poetry is about the 'sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused', but much of it is immediately and overtly about mountains and lakes, about clouds and weather and growing things. This immediately attractive aspect of the poetry eventually became the primary identifier of 'Wordsworth' – Wordsworth the 'Nature poet'. His spirit brooded over the foundation in Great Britain of the National Trust, charged with the preservation of landscape of exceptional beauty, and in America over attempts by John Muir (1838–1914) to persuade his contemporaries that the survival of wilderness was vital for the nation's soul. But it was also invoked by anyone wanting to persuade town-dwellers to part with their money on a day out in the country. 'One impulse from a vernal wood' ('The Tables Turned') can be the text for a monograph on Wordsworth's religion, but it can also be used to sell hiking boots.

Until recently it seemed that this bifurcation could only become more pronounced. Wordsworth's 'sense sublime' was increasingly alien, or simply unintelligible, to a post-Christian, urbanized readership. What has come to be called 'eco-criticism', however, has begun one kind of recuperation. Victorians found reassurance in their 'Prophet of Nature'; a few fanatical Wordsworthians testified that they carried a *Poetical Works* along with their Bible. Few if any readers in the twenty-first century are going to return to that. But it is with a sense of urgency that much criticism is reconsidering Wordsworth's writings about the natural world and the place of human beings in it. Coleridge thought it part of the special power of Wordsworth's poetry that it could nourish us 'by awakening the mind's attention from 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'.³ As Ralph Pite's essay in this collection ably shows, the eco-criticism of our own time reaches across the centuries to Coleridge here.

A final example: Wordsworth and the New World. After Wordsworth's death American admirers raised money for a memorial in Ambleside Church

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in the Lake District, confirming, what was already clear from the stream of visitors to the poet's home at Rydal Mount, that his work continued to be esteemed in America. Quite what the esteem amounted to, though, has been the question, one whose challenge was not adequately met by routine gestures towards Emerson and Thoreau. Recent work, however – and the pioneering studies of Alan G. Hill deserve tribute here⁴ – has begun to convey some sense of the diversity of response Wordsworth elicited in the new Republic, and Joel Pace's essay in this collection indicates how much more fascinating evidence is waiting to be investigated. But there is more work to be done, as Pace implies, not only on what Wordsworth meant to America but on what America meant to him.

What I am trying to suggest in these examples is that contemporary Wordsworth scholarship is vibrant because it is alive to its continuity with that of the past whilst being fully aware of historical distance, and in this respect it honours, in fact, a primary force in the creative powers of the poet himself. Wordsworth was obsessed with ensuring that nothing was lost from his past: 'I look into past times as prophets look / Into futurity'. Memory reaches, chains bind, bonds sustain, links link – the poetry and much of the prose celebrates whatever preserves affinities 'Between all stages of the life of man'.⁵ But the intensity of Wordsworth's gaze as he hangs 'Incumbent o'er the surface of past time' (1805 *Prelude*, IV, 263), is a function of his equally obsessive awareness that making sense of the past calls for a lifetime's revisiting, open to the possibility of and recognizing the necessity for reinterpretation. All of the specially commissioned essays in this Companion share something of the same awareness. Their topic, too, is Wordsworth past and present.

NOTES

- 1 The tribute from the dedication to Keble's Oxford lectures on poetry, *De Poetica Vi Medica: Praelectiones Academicæ Oxoniæ Habitæ* (1844), was inscribed on the plaque to Wordsworth in Grasmere Church, where he is buried.
- 2 Lionel Trilling, 'Wordsworth and the Rabbits', in *The Opposing Self* (London, 1955), p. 118.
- 3 *Biographia Literaria*, chapter XIV.
- 4 Alan G. Hill, 'Wordsworth and his American Friends', *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 81 (1978), 146–60. Much freshly researched information is also compressed into the footnotes of Hill's volumes of the Wordsworth letters.
- 5 *PW* II 481.

I

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Wordsworth: the shape of the poetic career

In sketching Wordsworth's life, two portraits might be drawn, almost as mirror images of one another. The first would present a child who was orphaned by the age of thirteen, and to whose family the first Lord Lonsdale refused to pay the substantial debt (over £4500) that was owing to Wordsworth senior at his death; a boy who rebelled against his guardians, slashed through a family portrait with a whip,¹ and failed, first to gain anything more than an unclassified BA (from St John's College, Cambridge, 1791), and then to take orders or enter one of the professions; a graduate who in 1792 travelled to revolutionary France, where he was converted to its cause and fathered an illegitimate child; a 'vagabond' who returned to England and several years of apparently aimless roving, leading, in 1796, to some kind of nervous breakdown; a young 'democrat' who kept dubious, if not actually dangerous company, and in 1798 was thought worthy of surveillance by a government spy;² a republican who laid plans for a radical monthly called the *Philanthropist*, and may have been involved in a liberal London weekly of that name, which ran for forty-two issues, 1795–6;³ an author of oppositional political tracts, the unpublished *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* (1793), written in defence of the regicide in France and rights of man at home, and *The Convention of Cintra* (1809), which accepted that fighting imperialist France constituted a just war, but was highly critical of the deal by which a Spanish revolt ended with Britain allowing the defeated French army to evacuate Portugal without loss; a 'Semi-atheist' whom Coleridge persuaded into an unspecific form of Unitarianism, and who in 1812 still had 'no need of a Redeemer';⁴ a would-be populist who argued that poetry was not the exclusive property of the middle and upper classes, and attributed to his own work the polemical purpose of showing that 'men who do not wear fine cloaths can feel deeply' (letter to Charles James Fox, 14 January 1801); a financially insecure poet who until his mid-forties lived in relative poverty, adopting a lofty defensiveness against an uncomprehending 'public' and the diffuse notoriety

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provided by hostile Tory critics, among whom he was synonymous at once with childishness and insubordination.

And yet a quite different silhouette might be drawn. This would outline a Wordsworth who was the second son of a well-to-do law-agent of the wealthiest peer in Westmorland; who, as a boy, was educated at Hawkshead, one of the best grammar schools in the country, with a string of Cambridge entrants to its name; who, as a young man, mixed with the foremost radical intellectuals of his day, and formed a profound friendship with Coleridge, a 'seminal' mind of the age; who was learned in Latin and Italian, as well as English literature, had many thousands of lines of poetry by heart, and came to possess a substantial library; who sent his edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) to the leader of the Whig Opposition, was recognized as a founder of the 'Lake School' of poetry, and, on Southey's death in 1843, rose to be Poet Laureate; who had a friend in Sir George Beaumont, a leading patron of the arts, and, as a landscaper, designed both the Beaumonts' winter garden at Coleorton in Leicestershire (1806–7) and his own grounds at Rydal Mount (where the Wordsworths moved in 1813); who was an influential arbiter of taste in rural scenery and who, as well as insisting on rights of way, campaigned for the Lake District to be spared the despoliations of rail-borne industry and tourism; who signed up for the Grasmere Volunteers when there was threat of French invasion in 1803, and addressed a sequence of sonnets to the theme of national moral and martial renewal; who in 1813 accepted a government post as Distributor of Stamps for Westmorland (which made him responsible for the tax raised on the stamped paper used in legal transactions); who became intimate with the second Lord Lonsdale, and in 1818 electioneered tirelessly on his behalf in the Tory interest, earning the nickname 'Bombastes Furioso' (as well as publishing *Two Addresses to the Freeholders of Westmorland* against agitation and press freedom); who latterly emerged as a defender of the Church of England and the Anglican tradition; who lived, as Stephen Gill has shown,⁵ to be still more central to the Victorian than he had been to the Napoleonic age; who had as brothers a London lawyer and a Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, was a regular presence among the London literary and social élites, and, at long last, in his sixties, found himself world-famous.

The entire career, and with it the path from anonymity to household name, is momentarily visible in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, published in 1871–2, two decades after the poet's death, and set just prior to the first Reform Bill of 1832: as chapter 2 opens, Mr Brooke is reminiscing about how he and Wordsworth missed each other as contemporaries at Cambridge (c. 1790), but dined together 'twenty years afterwards at Cartwright's', and in the company of the chemist Sir Humphry Davy. From the radical years of the 1790s

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to the no less turbulent period of the late 1820s, Mr Brooke has remained, albeit confusedly, on the liberal side of politics. Wordsworth, (in)famously, did not; and this break in the career has made him a pivotal and controversial representative of those who came of age at the onset of the French Revolution (1789). Just lately, some powerful revisionists (Jerome J. McGann, James K. Chandler, and Marjorie Levinson, among others) have produced readings of the early poetry in terms of its hidden clues to tergiversation, or silent evasions of ‘history’ (the most notorious test case being ‘Tintern Abbey’, whose title elaborately, almost teasingly, draws attention to its composition on 13 July, and so to the very eve of the Bastille Day anniversary). Such readings have kept Wordsworth at the centre of ‘Romanticism’, however much the concept may have shifted its ground around and beneath him.

The conscious liberal in Wordsworth died harder than has sometimes been suggested. He was understood to be ‘strongly disposed to Republicanism’ and ‘equality’ in 1806,⁶ and advocated ‘a thorough reform in Parliament and a new course of education’, in 1809 (letter to Daniel Stuart, *WL* ii 296). *The Excursion* (1814) drew to an end with a swingeing attack on child labour (Book VIII), and a call for a system of national education (Book IX). *The Prelude* allowed the ‘Bliss’ of witnessing the ‘dawn’ of Revolution to stand alongside an apostrophe to the ‘Genius of Burke’, added in 1832 (*Prel.* 1850 xi 108, vii 512–43). Even in 1836 Wordsworth could be heard praising the Sheffield poet Ebenezer Elliott, whose *Corn-Law Rhymes* (1828) spoke for the impoverished labouring classes and, incidentally, was being regarded by Henry Crabb Robinson as a fellow-traveller in Whiggish politics (*Diary* iii 87–8, 83).

Nevertheless, the late Toryism is hard to overestimate. Wordsworth was dead against Catholic Emancipation (1829) and the 1832 Reform Bill. His lifelong sympathy with the poor and appreciation of Ebenezer Elliot did not, as we might expect, extend to support for the Anti-Corn Law League’s challenge to the protectionist policy of taxing imported corn, the effect of which was to maintain the incomes of landowners at the expense of artificially high prices for bread. Nor was Wordsworth any better disposed towards the utilitarian and laissez-faire economics which sought to free trade and systematize welfare: his hostility to the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, which promoted workhouses over outdoor relief, gave a vivid political colouring to preferences he first articulated in *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, 1798. As this last example suggests, the late Wordsworth found new relevance and impetus for the radically inclined poetry of his youth. When the *Salisbury Plain* poems written in the 1790s were finally revised and published as *Guilt and Sorrow* (1842), they were placed in the context of the *Sonnets upon the Punishment of Death*, which argued in favour of the penalty and were

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published in the Tory *Quarterly Review*, for December 1841. As a result, a work which began life under the shadow of William Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793) as an attack on war and law (that is, on human sacrifices to 'Superstition', and a penal code which creates the crimes it punishes), instead ended by asserting the justice of sentencing a murderer to swing. The merciful – or squeamish – reader was reassured that, in this case, judgement was not marred by arbitrary cruelty, which in the eighteenth century demanded that the body be hung 'in iron case' as an entertainment, or warning, to the masses (the fate which had indeed formed the last outrage of the unpublished interim text, *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, 1795–9).

Wordsworth's shifts to the right may be gauged by the fact that the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' (1807 and 1815) were progressively devoted, first 'to National Independence and Liberty', and then 'to Liberty and Order'. Among the sonnets eventually collected in this sequence, one was written against the introduction of voting by ballot;⁷ another 'recommended to the perusal of the Anti-Corn Law Leaguers, the Political Economists, and of all those who consider that the Evils under which we groan are to be removed or palliated by measures ungoverned by moral and religious principles' (1843 Fenwick Note to 'Feel for the wrongs'); and three were offered *In Allusion to Various Recent Histories and Notices of the French Revolution*, the last of which addressed the nation thus:

Long-favoured England! be not thou misled
 By monstrous theories of alien growth . . .

This suspicion of the foreign and theoretical was sparked by the appearance of Carlyle's *French Revolution* (1837); but reached back to those patriotic and traditional allegiances which were first activated by the founding document of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Such tenacities of the memory, both for language and for feeling, had been the great strength of Wordsworth's writing. What became at last a panicky rigidity – a favourite line from Spenser, 'All change is perilous and all chance unsound',⁸ could well serve as the motto of old man Wordsworth – was once a lively fear of perishability, transience, and loss, a fear that may be related to the poet's acute anxiety for his own powers, and which shapes the massive achievements of 'Tintern Abbey' and *Resolution and Independence*, the 'Intimations Ode' and *The Prelude*. For all the evident dislocation between radical and reactionary Wordsworths, the poetry insists on its own revival as the evidence of undiminished imaginative life, and, faced with that vital threat of mortality, asserts a remarkable continuity of vision:

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I thought of Thee, my partner and my guide,
 As being past away. – Vain sympathies!
 For, *backward*, Duddon! as I cast my eyes,
 I see what was, and is, and will abide;
 The Form remains, the Function never dies . . .
 ('Conclusion' to *The River Duddon*, 1820)

Any account of the 'shape' of Wordsworth's career has to reckon with the fact that it has already been amply reflected upon by the poet himself. Wordsworth's chosen metaphors for this shape are the river and the church. The river flows through the central self-explorations, 'Tintern Abbey' and *The Prelude* (1805 i 271–304, ix 1–9, xiii 172–84), to say nothing of *Essays upon Epitaphs* I and the lines just quoted. The church is publicly asserted as a model in the Preface to *The Excursion* (1814), where it places all the poet's works as contributions to a single evolving gothic building. Both metaphors offer themselves as organic, counter-classical modes of organization. Yet, while each is insightful on its own account, these analogies are most interesting for the conflicts that emerge between them. The one is drawn from a natural, the other from a man-made, structure. If the rivery self-image suggests an identity of unceasing process and free-flowing form, ever-changing and yet continuous through time, then the cathedral of works is dedicated to the idea of a completed whole, an architectonic arrangement as final and incontestible as the claims of religion itself.

As it happens, we know (as Wordsworth's contemporaries did not) that, for all the confident aspirations of the architect, the edifice announced in *The Excursion* would never be built. Of the epic project of *The Recluse*, only the glorious 'Prospectus' and the – often impressive – fragments of false starts, remain: *Home at Grasmere*, 1800; 'St Paul's', 'To the Clouds', and 'The Tuft of Primroses', 1808; and the vital 1798 drafts, which were incorporated into *The Excursion* (see *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 676–81). When *The Recluse* was first devised, with Coleridge, in 1798, Wordsworth excitedly speculated that it would prove an all-inclusive shape: 'I know not any thing which will not come within the scope of my plan' (letter to James Webbe Tobin, 6 March 1798). By 1814, it has become the very *raison d'être* of the poet's enterprise, the great 'body' of the Wordsworthian church. But the 'blissful hour' never arrives.

As is now familiar from the work of Kenneth R. Johnston and others,⁹ this absence haunted Wordsworth's writing life and was fundamental in shaping his career. It also brings us to another way in which we have stolen a march on his contemporaries. Unlike them, we possess the 'biographical' poem which the Preface to *The Excursion* mentions as 'preparatory' to the unwritten

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Recluse. The ‘history of the Author’s mind’ had by 1814 long since assumed epic proportions, but did not get published until 1850. This second absence marks the great oddity of Wordsworth’s presentation of his career: that it is a shape which deliberately refuses to reveal itself in its most important form – *The Prelude* – until after the poet’s death. Wordsworth’s longest and most ambitious work to date was kept back as merely the ‘ante-chapel’ to the church, as a ‘prelude’ to, and preparation for, the one true epic. For most of us, it is on the contrary *The Prelude* which seems to make Wordsworth a true poet, and of the Romantic party without knowing it, because it shows how he wrote in fetters when striving to fulfil that hard task, *The Recluse*, and at liberty when exploring the self in all its rich and unphilosophic perplexity. It is *The Prelude* that has come to seem truly ‘Wordsworthian’.

A crucial aspect of this re-shaping of Wordsworth is that the results are neither univocal nor uniform. For we can speak, as (once again) original readers could not, of more than one *Prelude*. The retrieval from manuscripts of the earliest full-length version of the poem, completed in 1805, has been followed by the two-part version of 1798–9 (the former was first presented by Ernest de Selincourt, in 1926; the latter in the Norton Critical Edition, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, 1979). These texts, both of which are now standard ‘Preludes’, were just the start of a thorough-going rejuvenation of the Wordsworth corpus. The survival of a huge archive (now preserved by the Wordsworth Trust) has enabled scholars to present reading texts of many more early versions (the Cornell Wordsworth Series, under the General Editorship of Stephen Parrish). Thanks to this new-look Wordsworth, we can observe the precise moment at which Coleridge’s influence begins to be felt, in the development of *The Ruined Cottage* (now disentangled from its original place of publication as the first book of *The Excursion*); and the first stirrings of a poetry that traces the ‘Growth of a Poet’s Mind’, in the related biography of *The Pedlar*. We also have a wealth of material that is newly promoted to the status of ‘text’ rather than being allocated to footnotes or appendices: the juvenilia; the 1794 revisions of *An Evening Walk*; the multiple stages of *Salisbury Plain* and *The Prelude*; the full complexity of the early notebooks, and the drafts surrounding the *Lyrical Ballads* and *Poems, in Two Volumes*.

This versioning of Wordsworth (which far surpasses the variant readings supplied by old-fashioned editing) has altered his shape in two main ways. First, it has assumed that early is best. That assumption has turned readers and editors into textual primitivists and archaeologists: the accretions of a lifetime’s rewriting have been removed, so as to reveal the pristine, often pre-publication, and as it were unsocialized, Wordsworth. Putting it crudely, the youthful Romantic needed to be rescued from the ‘bleak old bore’