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Emma Mason

Excerpt

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A longing for the company of others shaped Wordsworth's life, one he met by forming a number of intense relationships. These relationships unfolded with friends, most notably the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge; lovers, specifically Annette Vallon and Mary Hutchinson; and siblings, particularly Dorothy and John (he was not so intimate with his other two brothers, Richard and Christopher). Born in the Lake District in 1770, Wordsworth's early life was marked by a dependency on Dorothy, to whom he was especially devoted in the absence of his father, who often worked away from home. He was also close to his mother, a figure whom he recalled as a moral and upright influence, balancing his 'moody and violent' temperament:

I remember also telling her on one week day that I had been at church, for our school stood in the churchyard, and we had frequent opportunities of seeing what was going on there. The occasion was, a woman doing penance in the church in a white sheet. My mother commended my having been present, expressing a hope that I should remember the circumstance for the rest of my life. 'But,' said I, 'Mama, they did not give me a penny, as I had been told they would'. 'Oh,' said she, recanting her praises, 'if that was your motive, you were very properly disappointed'. (PW, III.371–2)

Wordsworth's cynicism deepened when his mother died of pneumonia in 1778, and Dorothy was sent to live with his mother's cousin, Elizabeth Threlkeld, in Halifax. When their father died just five years later in 1783, Wordsworth, Dorothy and John came to rely on each other, developing an affectionate bond that both inspired and attracted to it figures such as

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Coleridge, fellow writers Charles Lamb and Thomas De Quincey, and the sisters Mary and Sara Hutchinson, whom Wordsworth had met at primary school in Penrith. Separated from Dorothy and the Hutchinsons at grammar school in Hawkshead, however, Wordsworth sought solace in his new environment. The natural world surrounding Hawkshead, Windermere and Coniston offered Wordsworth the most stunning of mountainous landscapes from which to borrow poetic images and sounds; and he quickly forged strong familial ties with his boarding family, Ann and Hugh Tyson. In addition, his teachers and the books they taught granted Wordsworth new worlds in which to imaginatively escape. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Fox's *Book of Martyrs* encouraged his taste for Homer, Virgil, Juvenal and Cicero; and he recalls reading 'all Fielding's works, *Don Quixote*, *Gil Blas*, and any part of Swift that I liked' (*PW*, III.372).

Wordsworth was an unusual student, not for his intellectual brilliance, but because of his eagerness to read widely in all subjects. Thomas Bowman, a former headmaster of Hawkshead, even reported that 'he believed that he did more for William Wordsworth by lending him books than by his teaching ... it was books he wanted, all sorts of books; *Tours and Travels*, which my father was partial to, and *Histories and Biographies*, which were also favourites with him; and *Poetry* – that goes without saying'.¹ Wordsworth later admitted that he read little contemporary literature ('God knows my incursions into the fields of modern literature, excepting in our own language three volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, and two or three papers of the *Spectator*, half subdued – are absolutely nothing').² Yet he was nevertheless very much taken by the then fashionable emotive sensibility promoted by eighteenth-century poets like Helen Maria Williams and Charlotte Smith, as well as by the graveyard poets Edward Young and Thomas Gray.

Deep in his studies, of poetry and the natural world, Wordsworth was shaken by his father's death in 1783, not only because it left him orphaned and dependent on relatives, but also because it reminded him how distant he had been from his father. Worse still was the discovery that the family finances were tangled up in the affairs of the much-hated landowner, Sir James Lowther, whom Wordsworth's father had worked for as a law-agent and investor. Unable to retrieve these investments (the claim was not settled until 1802), the Wordsworth children were left homeless, a state of affairs that only served to increase the intimacy between Wordsworth and Dorothy, and also with their friend, Mary Hutchinson. The poet remembers his early relationships with the two women in *The Prelude* as 'the blessed time of early love' (*P*, XI.318), a period that stood in stark contrast to his imminent life at university, where he was to take his degree and prepare for ordination.

Education and politics

When he was 17, Wordsworth enrolled at St John's, Cambridge, a college with strong connections to Hawkshead and where his uncle, William Cookson, was a Fellow. He was granted a 'sizar's place', which meant that he received financial support in exchange for menial errands, and he added to this scholarship with academic awards, proving himself an initially enthusiastic, confident and committed student. Yet he was soon disillusioned by his lived experience of Cambridge. As he wrote in *The Prelude*, 'I was not for that hour, / Nor for that place' (*P*, III.80–1), one that he found intellectually and imaginatively outdated. Academic achievement, he feared, was based not on hard work at Cambridge, but on 'Honour misplaced, and Dignity astray' (*P*, III.635). For example, when the college Master died shortly after his arrival, Wordsworth, whose poetic aspirations were already apparent, was asked to write an elegy for him. This appalled Wordsworth, who understood elegy as a personal exploration of genuine grief: the expectation that he should show false emotion for the sake of college duty simply reinforced his sense of Cambridge as a dead and alienating place that produced only imprudent ministers and lawyers. His results plummeted and he left with only a basic degree.

For Wordsworth, real education was reflective rather than accumulative. He learned, not by accruing facts and figures, but through his experiences of poetry, nature and travel as shared with his close family and friends. His pedagogy was one wherein the individual spends time thinking about his or her own situations and experiences before searching out new ones. Wordsworth put this into practice in his poem, 'An Evening Walk' (1788–9), addressed to his strongest ally, Dorothy. Yet even Dorothy was not party to the walking tour of Europe Wordsworth planned with his friend Robert Jones for the summer of 1790. Travelling for three months and covering 3,000 miles (2,000 of them on foot), the two men excited what Wordsworth described as a 'general curiosity' both in those they met abroad, and also in those Cambridge acquaintances who had reproved the scheme as 'mad & impracticable'. Their tour was, indeed, extraordinary: on reaching Calais on 13 July, Wordsworth and Jones were immediately thrown into the first anniversary celebrations of the fall of the Bastille, the 'whole nation mad with joy,' Wordsworth wrote, 'in consequence of the revolution'.³

Moving from these celebrations to explore the monastery of the Grande Chartreuse, Lake Geneva and the Alps at the Simplon Pass, Wordsworth found his return to England a difficult one. Finishing his studies in 1791, he

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left the stuffiness of Cambridge for the equally hostile clamour of London, finding respite in a few weeks' stay with Dorothy and also a visit to Jones in Wales, where together they climbed Snowdon. Here was a habitat in which Wordsworth could reflect on his months in London, a period in which he had absorbed the political fervour produced by English reactions to the Revolution in France. Public debate was alive both in the capital's more radical meeting places – dissenting chapels, bookshops and coffee houses – and also in parliament, where Wordsworth attended debates in the Commons. He listened to the conservative Irish politician Edmund Burke speak against the Revolution, and the radical pamphleteer Thomas Paine, feminist philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft and political theologian and scientist Joseph Priestley speak for it. Urged by their dialogue to consider his own position on France, Wordsworth decided to return there, partly to learn French and so improve his career prospects (his brothers were already employed, Richard in the law and John in the East India Company), but also to think more about what the idea of revolution really meant.

Wordsworth's second trip to France, from November 1791 to December 1792, was one of the most important years of his life: emotionally (he experienced his first love affair); politically (he saw firsthand the crushing impact of the Revolution on the poor); and intellectually (he wrote his first significant poetry). In Paris, Wordsworth socialized using a series of letters of introduction from Charlotte Smith, whose self-consciously elegiac and sentimental poetry provided the main model for his own work of this period. He also hoped to meet the poet Helen Maria Williams, but on just missing her during a visit to Orléans, Wordsworth was instead introduced to a French family called the Vallons. He was immediately attracted to their daughter, Marie Anne, known as Annette, and by February 1792, he moved to Blois to spend time with her. While we know little about their love affair at this time, we do know that their child, Anne-Caroline Wordsworth, was baptized on 15 December, a ceremony Wordsworth was unable to attend. By the end of the month, he was back in England, and did not see either Annette or Anne-Caroline for another ten years.

Critics are divided on the reasons for this separation: some suggest that the Vallons' Roman Catholicism, a religion Wordsworth despised, prevented him from committing to the family; some claim that his already-established affection for Mary got in the way; and others suggest that the circumstances of Britain's war with France severed the lovers' connection. These same circumstances also ended Wordsworth's other ardent relationship of this period with a captain in the French Royalist army called Michael Beaupuy. Wordsworth considered Beaupuy a model humanist, philosopher and philanthropist, who guided him through a France that was no longer elated by

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the Revolution. It was with Beaupuy in Orléans that Wordsworth encountered the 'hunger-bitten Girl' of *The Prelude* (P, IX.512), a symbol of the food riots now commonplace across rural France. Concerned by reports of this rioting, Dorothy urged her brother to return home, distressed as she was by 'daily accounts of Insurrections & Broils'.⁴ She was right to worry: Wordsworth had returned to France in the aftermath of the imprisonment of the King and the September Massacres, and escaped back to England only a few weeks before Louis XVI was guillotined on 21 January 1793.

Now desperate to earn a living, in part to support his French family, Wordsworth begrudgingly decided he would take up William Cookson's offer of a curacy. On discovering his liaison with Annette, however, his uncle withdrew all forms of assistance. Relieved, Wordsworth finally admitted to himself that he could only really find fulfilment in writing poetry. His early publications, 'An Evening Walk' and 'Descriptive Sketches' (1793), were issued by the radical publisher, Joseph Johnson, and, while not financially successful, they were noticed by those who would prove most important in his formation as a poet: Dorothy and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Dorothy was in fact rather critical of the volumes, writing that while she believed the 'Poems contain many Passages exquisitely beautiful', they 'also contain many Faults, the chief of which are Obscurity'.⁵ It was this propensity for aesthetic judgement, as well as her unwavering emotional support, that Wordsworth most respected, and her comments inspired him to improve his writing.

Wordsworth's particular affection for Dorothy, as for his brother John, was rooted, not only in familial love, but also in their capacity to embody a poetic sensibility he sought to express linguistically. Now lodging with Richard in London, he felt a deep need for the sensitive companionship of his sister, longing for someone to share his frustration at England's refusal to enter into the revolutionary spirit he had encountered in France. The government were quick to suppress dissent at home for fear it would spill over into civil war, and the apparent radicalism of groups such as the London Corresponding Society appeared tame in comparison to the fervour of Beaupuy. When Richard Watson, the Anglican Bishop of Llandaff, echoed Burke's argument that the Revolution had transformed the French into 'an humiliating picture of human nature, when its passions are not regulated by religion or controlled by law', Wordsworth was quick to respond. *A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, written in 1793, asserted the rights of the French to choose their own kind of government, one that would above all defend and support the poor. Terrified his brother would be prosecuted for treason, Richard urged Wordsworth to 'be cautious in writing or expressing your political Opinions', and the pamphlet was not published until after Wordsworth's death.⁶

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Wordsworth was otherwise very vocal in expressing his anger at England's failure to embrace radicalism. His family remained so unnerved by his dissenting views that they even tried to separate him from Dorothy for fear of untoward influence. The two therefore met secretly in January 1794 at their friend William Calvert's home in the Lake District. Wordsworth had been touring the country with Calvert, visiting landmarks that would later appear in his poetry: Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain, Tintern Abbey and Goodrich Castle. He might even have briefly returned to France to visit Annette, claiming later in life to have witnessed firsthand the execution of a journalist called Antoine Joseph Gorsas in October 1793. He was back in the Lake District by Christmas, however, again meeting Dorothy at Calvert's, where she began what would become a regular job – entering fair copies of his poems into a home-made notebook. The Calvert family also financially supported Wordsworth, their younger son Raisley leaving him £900 in his will after the poet had nursed him through tuberculosis. With this money, Wordsworth could finally commit to a publishing career, and he immediately acted on a plan to establish a humanist journal with a friend from Cambridge called William Mathews.

The journal was called the *Philanthropist*, and was largely informed by Wordsworth's discovery of the political philosopher William Godwin and his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (1793). Godwin's main argument in the *Enquiry* was that only reason and truth, not violence or revolution, would create change in society. The argument appealed to Wordsworth because it suggested that revolution was motivated on the one hand, by the ideals of fairness and honesty, and on the other, by literature and education. While the *Philanthropist* project stalled, Wordsworth's interest in Godwin intensified and he returned to London in early 1795 to join a circle of radical thinkers, including the poet George Dyer (who had introduced Coleridge to Godwin the previous year) and Godwin himself. Wordsworth also met Basil Montagu at this time, a struggling lawyer and widower with a young son. Montagu found Wordsworth a profoundly supportive presence, so much so that one of his wealthier friends offered the poet and his sister a house in Dorset rent-free on the condition that they would take care of Montagu's son, also called Basil. Wordsworth jumped at the idea, and moved into the house, known as Racedown Lodge, in 1795. He was desperate to leave London, disillusioned with its high society and bored with Godwin's politics, which he now considered excessively empirical. In reaction against the city, the poet made Racedown into a warm and intimate family community, comprising himself, Dorothy, little Basil, Mary Hutchinson and his new friend, Coleridge.

Coleridge

Wordsworth met Coleridge in 1795 and the two men were immediately enamoured with each other. Wordsworth found Coleridge a visionary and intellectually brilliant poet and philosopher, and Coleridge was mesmerized by his new admirer's commitment to exploring new modes of writing and thinking. In July 1797, Wordsworth and Dorothy were invited to Coleridge's house in Nether Stowey, a village in northwest Somerset where he had 'retired' from active political activity to be with his wife, Sara Fricker. The Coleridges were then hosting the essayist and children's writer Charles Lamb, who was desperately in need of respite after his schizophrenic sister, Mary, had murdered their mother. Lamb later recalled how comforted he was by Wordsworth's poem, 'Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree', recited to the group in an adjoining garden owned by the tanner and book collector, Thomas Poole. Yet it was the strong relationship between Wordsworth and Dorothy that provided the foundations for their community in Somerset. The brother and sister were never again parted after moving into Racedown, and Coleridge was a constant presence wherever they moved, before and after Wordsworth's marriage to Mary Hutchinson in 1802.

Only a week after arriving at Nether Stowey, Wordsworth and Dorothy rented Alfoxden House just four miles away from Coleridge, where they had 'a view of the sea, over a woody meadow-country'.⁷ Coleridge frequently stayed overnight at Alfoxden without his wife, and he, Dorothy and Wordsworth were inseparable during 1797 and 1798, forever raving about each other. 'His conversation', Dorothy wrote of Coleridge, 'teems with soul, mind, and spirit. Then he is so benevolent, so good tempered and cheerful, and, like William, interests himself so much about every little trifle.' Coleridge reciprocated: 'She is a woman indeed! – in mind, I mean, & heart ... her eye watchful in minutest observation of nature – and her taste a perfect electrometer – it bends, protrudes, and draws in, at subtlest beauties & most recondite faults.' His admiration for her brother, however, was beyond any he had previously felt: 'The Giant Wordsworth – God love him!' he declared, writing that 'his soul seem[s] to inhabit the universe like a palace, and to discover truth by intuition, rather than by deduction'.⁸

Together the three walked miles over the nearby Quantock Hills, often through the night, discussing and writing poetry. As Wordsworth 'mumbl[ed] to hissel' along t'roads', as one local observed, Dorothy followed behind memorizing his words and transcribing them into notebooks.⁹ Such behaviour struck the native community as extremely suspicious, however, and a government agent called Daniel Lysons was soon employed by the Home

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Office to track their activity. Their communal set-up immediately confused Lysons: 'the master of the House has no wife with him but only a woman who passes for his Sister'; he wrote, but he was equally concerned by their knowledge of French politics and literature as by their strange accents (northern, but assumed to be French).¹⁰ He was also concerned with the group's neighbours at Nether Stowey, who included the notorious 'Citizen' John Thelwall, founder of the London Corresponding Society, and feared in Britain as a potential terrorist.

While all of Lysons' accusations were unfounded, the commotion forced the group out of Alfoxden, and Wordsworth, Coleridge and Dorothy grew desperate to leave England. Wordsworth was miserable after his play *The Borderers* (1796–7) was rejected by Covent Garden; and Coleridge was deep in a feud with the poet Robert Southey, with whom he had previously studied and collaborated. Southey was both jealous of Wordsworth, and also upset that Coleridge had tasked Wordsworth, and not him, with the writing of a new Miltonic philosophic epic (which would eventually become *The Prelude*). This *Paradise Lost* (1667) for the nineteenth century was to be entitled *The Recluse or Views of Nature, Man, and Society*, 'addressed to those, who in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness'.¹¹

The idea developed partly out of Wordsworth, Dorothy and Coleridge's conception of a new kind of poetry, a hybrid of the lyric and the ballad that would speak to a broad readership on different levels. While still at Alfoxden, Wordsworth and Coleridge had decided to write a collection of these poems together called the *Lyrical Ballads* in order to raise money for a trip to Germany to research *The Recluse*. In reality, Wordsworth wrote most of the poems, but the project was undoubtedly communal, Coleridge's politics and Dorothy's journals appearing fragment-like throughout the collection. Ensuing revisions, however, notably the 1800 and 1802 editions, are dominated by Wordsworth, who added numerous prefaces and appendices that ultimately distanced Coleridge, whose poems were largely excised.

J. & A. Arch published the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* in October 1798, their friend Joseph Cottle, to whom the poems were promised, having rejected the volume as a potentially unprofitable investment. By this time, Wordsworth, Dorothy and Coleridge were already in Hamburg. While Coleridge, subsidized by a wealthy benefactor, was eager to travel to the university towns of Ratzeburg and Göttingen, Wordsworth and Dorothy longed for Alfoxden. The two struggled on insufficient savings and felt generally isolated: neither could speak German and Dorothy was almost constantly ill during the trip. Settling in the relatively cheap city of Goslar for the duration of a ferocious

German winter, the siblings had only each other, their personal memories, thoughts and feelings, and a few books for company. Deep in the Gothic poetry of Gottfried Bürger and Thomas Percy's collection of manuscript ballads, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), Wordsworth began to write a series of his own ghostly ballads, including the Lucy and Matthew poems. He also wrote over 400 lines of the poem Coleridge had set him to write, and by April he and Dorothy had found their way to Göttingen to visit their friend and make plans to return to England. Eager to re-establish the community at Racedown in the Lake District, Wordsworth toured the area with Coleridge before renting a house just north of his old school in a village called Grasmere.

Home at Grasmere

With Mary, Wordsworth and Dorothy remained resident in Grasmere for the rest of their lives. After the less than warm reception they had received in Alfoxden and Germany, Grasmere felt like a welcoming paradise, their cottage overgrown with brambles and shrubs, framed by an orchard at the back and overlooking 'the lake, the church, helm cragg [sic], and two thirds of the vale'.¹² In 1800, by which time Coleridge was almost a permanent guest, the Wordsworths' brother John had joined them, staying for much of the year and helping to furnish the cottage and develop the gardens. John was a model of sensitivity, judgement and modesty for Wordsworth, 'his eye for the beauties of Nature [as] fine and delicate as ever Poet or Painter was gifted with; in some discriminations, owing to his education and way of life, far superior to any person's I ever knew'.¹³ John promised to financially support his siblings using money earned for his work at the East India Company, and planned to build himself a cottage near to them on his return from his next trip. Energized by the familial support of Dorothy, John and Coleridge, Wordsworth continued to work on *The Recluse*, moving on from the introductory lines he had composed in Germany (referred to by modern critics as *The Two-Part Prelude*) to begin the first book on 'nature': 'Home at Grasmere' (c.1800).

Many of the poems Wordsworth wrote during this time focus either on events and people he encountered in the Lakes, or on particular objects he observed around him, a bird or a flower, for example. It was his emotional response to people and the natural world, however, which remained key for Wordsworth, who regularly made himself ill in his compulsion to fine-tune and revise his verse. He felt a great responsibility to his readers, believing that poetry might reproduce the kind of 'domestic affections' and communal love currently being destroyed by industrialization. He was himself dependent on

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the presence of a loving community of people around him, which, in 1802, included Dorothy, John, Coleridge, Mary and Mary's sister Sara. The group even carved their initials on a stone now known as 'Sara's Rock' during a walk between Grasmere and Keswick as a testimony to this bond.

Relationships within the group flourished. Coleridge fell in love with Sara (even though he was not to separate from his wife until 1806), and Wordsworth was intent on marrying Mary, but first had to settle his affairs with Annette and Anne-Caroline. Now free to travel to France due to the temporary peace established by the Treaty of Amiens (1802), Wordsworth, accompanied by Dorothy, set out for Calais to see the Vallons. Annette gracefully accepted his intention to marry Mary, and when the Wordsworths returned to Britain, they discovered that the Lowther claim that had so haunted the family since their father's death was finally settled, granting Wordsworth some added financial security.

Wordsworth married Mary on 4 October 1802, in the village church of Brompton-by-Sawdon in Yorkshire, near to the Hutchinson farm at Gallow Hill. Critics make much of Dorothy's anxious state prior to her brother's marriage, but the three adults were undoubtedly close, and Dorothy confessed to a friend that she had 'long loved Mary Hutchinson as a Sister'.¹⁴ Perhaps to placate any potential fears his sister might have felt towards his marriage, Wordsworth asked Dorothy to wear Mary's ring the night before the wedding, intimating that he would remain as loyal to her as to his new wife. On the day of the marriage, which Dorothy did not attend, she records in her journal: 'I gave him the wedding ring – with how deep a blessing! I took it from my forefinger where I had worn it the whole of the night before – he slipped it again onto my finger and blessed me fervently.'¹⁵ Any anxiety Dorothy might have felt was dispelled by the reality of events anyway: the ceremony was over soon after 8am, when Wordsworth had returned home to Dorothy to prepare for their move back to Grasmere, where the three embodied, wrote Coleridge, 'the happiest Family, I ever saw'.¹⁶

Wordsworth's relationship with Coleridge, however, was becoming strained. In the summer of 1803, the poet decided to tour Scotland with him and also Dorothy in an attempt to smooth things over, despite Mary having just given birth to their first child, John, in June. Soon into the six-week tour, Coleridge announced that he was ill and wished to travel alone, even though Wordsworth and Dorothy often ended up staying in cottages and inns only just vacated by their friend. The three felt alienated further by their surroundings, having no grasp of Gaelic and astonished by the extreme poverty apparent in the subsistence economy communities of the north. Wordsworth was once again relieved to return to Grasmere, and more so when he was presented with the