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978-0-521-89668-9 - The Cambridge Introduction to William Wordsworth

Emma Mason

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
William Wordsworth*

William Wordsworth is the most influential of the Romantic poets, and remains widely popular, even though his work is more complex and more engaged with the political, social and religious upheavals of his time than his reputation as a ‘nature poet’ might suggest. Outlining a series of contexts – biographical, historical and literary – as well as critical approaches to Wordsworth, this *Introduction* offers students ways to understand and enjoy Wordsworth’s poetry and his role in the development of Romanticism in Britain. Emma Mason offers a completely up-to-date summary of criticism on Wordsworth from the Romantics to the present, and an annotated guide to further reading. With definitions of technical terms and close readings of individual poems, Wordsworth’s experiments with form are fully explained. This concise book is the ideal starting point for studying *Lyrical Ballads*, *The Prelude* and the major poems, as well as Wordsworth’s lesser-known writings.

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For G. J. A.

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Preface

Wordsworth, wrote Coleridge, ‘both deserves to be, and *is*, a happy man – and a happy man, not from natural Temperament’, but ‘because he is a Philosopher – because he knows the intrinsic value of the Different objects of human Pursuit, and regulates his Wishes in Subordination to the Knowledge – because he feels, and with a *practical* Faith, the Truth.’¹ Coleridge, like the other members of Wordsworth’s close family group (his sister Dorothy, brother John, wife Mary and sister-in-law Sara), understood Wordsworth’s poetic project in a way modern critics sometimes overlook: eager to brand the poet an apostate, conservative or ego-driven solitary, Wordsworth’s practical and emotional commitments to his family, community, natural world, as well as to poetry, are often underplayed. His jokey, flirtatious and good-humoured side is similarly glossed over, while his vulnerability and neuroses pale before a critical focus on his assumed narcissism.

Yet Wordsworth sought to teach people how to feel and think not because he felt confident in his own efforts to do so, but rather because he did not. John Stuart Mill considered his poetic ability in similar terms: ‘Compared with the greatest poets, he may be said to be the poet of unpoetical natures, possessed of quiet and contemplative tastes. But unpoetical natures are precisely those which require poetic cultivation.’² Far from the self-involved figure conjured by those unwilling to engage with his project, Wordsworth was above all a watcher and a listener of his world. His visions, occasionally apocalyptic and sublime, are more often intimate and tender. They are concerned with starlings, sparrows, skylarks, daisies, butterflies, hedgehogs and glow-worms (often seen alongside Dorothy, who anchors his musings), or with individual human beings caught up in moments of everyday emotion – joy, affection, love, sadness, anxiety and loneliness.

That Wordsworth’s ontological vision is concerned with the everyday and domestic is borne out in his early poem, ‘The Dog: An Idyllium’ (1786). Written for the deceased pet of his landlady, Ann Tyson, the poem enables Wordsworth to claim an intimacy with the dog that elevated them both as ‘the happiest pair on earth’ (24). His poetic attentiveness to the dog is also

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suggestive of Wordsworth's investment in an imagination concerned with the emotional meaning of everyday events. As Coleridge argued, Wordsworth's ability to 'give the charm of novelty to things of every day' excites emotions in the reader that feel almost supernatural, but that are instead directed to 'awakening the mind's attention to 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

Even when immersed in profound contemplation, as we find him at the end of *The Prelude* looking up to the moon from the heights of Snowdon, Wordsworth realizes that the 'greatest things' are built up 'From least suggestions' by those 'ever on the watch, / Willing to work and to be wrought upon. / They need not extraordinary calls' (*P*, XIII.98–101). Certainly Wordsworth never recorded having any 'extraordinary calls' to the vocation of poet, obsessively revising and rewriting his poems and doubting his poetic ability into the last days of his life. He was nonetheless spurred on by a devotion to poetry and its rhythms, pauses, cadences and silences as a path to that state of reflection in which our emotional experiences, joyful and painful, begin to make sense. His prosodic style invites readers to think about how they feel after reading a poem in order that they find meaning, not from computational analysis, but from their own felt reactions synthesized with thoughts. This is what Wordsworth meant when he suggested that poetry 'is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings': the poem allows us to experience our current feelings – moral, sexual, domestic, intellectual – by rhythmically situating us in a state of contemplation where we recollect who we are, think about it, and then, as 'the tranquillity gradually disappears', acknowledge the emotion that we feel in that moment (*PW*, I.149).

Wordsworth's concept of memory, then, facilitates not nostalgic reminiscence, but the formation of a backdrop against which we can consider, and so feel, the intricacies of our present condition and how this might affect our being and that of others. For David Bromwich, one of Wordsworth's most perceptive modern readers, the only hierarchy in Wordsworth's work is between those who can feel and those who cannot: 'to be incapable of a feeling of Poetry', Wordsworth wrote, 'is to be without love of human nature and reverence for God'.⁴ This introduction to Wordsworth serves to acquaint readers with the emotional spirit of his writing, and also works to blur preconceptions of him as a 'nature poet', 'radical poet', 'Christian poet' or 'conservative poet' in order to draw out the unsettling and yet animating experience the reader undergoes by engaging with his poetry. The first

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chapter, indebted as it is to biographies of Wordsworth by Stephen Gill and Juliet Barker, offers an account of his life that is contextualized in relation to the period in Chapter 2. Chapters 3 and 4 explore his poetic theory and poetry; and the book concludes with an overview of his critical reception and some suggestions for further reading.

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The critical edition of Wordsworth's poetry is the Cornell Wordsworth, which includes an array of information on the genesis of each poem, its sources, revisions and chronology. The Cornell Wordsworth follows a prestigious line of editions of Wordsworth's work, edited by Matthew Arnold, William Knight, Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, Duncan Wu, Jonathan Wordsworth and Stephen Gill. Readers are encouraged to remember, however, that Wordsworth was so compulsively concerned with self-revision that it is difficult, not to mention unhelpful, to label certain versions of poems 'authoritative'. The Cornell editions are listed below for reference (all Cornell University Press), but for a more portable reading experience, readers can turn to Jared Curtis' abridged three-volume paperback/ebook *The Poems of William Wordsworth: Collected Reading Texts from the Cornell Wordsworth* (Humanities-Ebooks, 2009); John O. Hayden's two-volume *William Wordsworth: The Poems* (Penguin, 1977; repr. 1990); or Stephen Gill's *William Wordsworth: The Major Works* (Oxford World Classics, 2000; repr. 2008).

The critical edition of Wordsworth's prose is W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington's three-volume *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1974), also available as a paperback/ebook (Humanities-Ebooks, 2008); but Hayden's *William Wordsworth: Selected Prose* (Penguin, 1988) contains the highlights. *The Collected Letters of the Wordsworths*, edited by Ernest de Selincourt, and *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Earl Leslie Griggs, both originally for Clarendon Press, are available as searchable databases (InteLex, 2002): all correspondence is quoted from the InteLex database and individual letters are referenced by date in the endnotes. Poems are, where possible, quoted from Gill's accessible *Major Works* and dated by year of composition rather than publication, unless otherwise stated. Wordsworth's prose is quoted from the Oxford edition of Owen and Worthington's *Prose Works*, abbreviated as *PW*. References to *The Prelude*, abbreviated *P*, are to the 1805 edition, as reprinted in Gill's *Major Works*, unless otherwise stated.

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Cornell texts

The Salisbury Plain Poems, ed. Stephen Gill (1975)

Home at Grasmere, ed. Beth Darlington (1977)

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The Ruined Cottage and the Pedlar, ed. James Butler (1979)

Benjamin, the Waggoner, ed. Paul F. Betz (1981)

The Borderers, ed. Robert Osborn (1982)

Poems, in Two Volumes and Other Poems, 1800–1807, ed. Jared Curtis (1983)

An Evening Walk, ed. James Averill (1984)

Descriptive Sketches, ed. Eric Birdsall (1984)

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Last Poems, 1821–1850, ed. Jared Curtis (1999)

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The Excursion, ed. Sally Bushell, James Butler and Michael C. Jaye (2007)

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