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Introduction

Drunk with the Beauty of This World

The book rests on the chair, a family keepsake bound in gilt tooled green cloth – *Our English Lakes, Mountains, and Waterfalls, as Seen by William Wordsworth. Photographically Illustrated*, published by A. W. Bennett in 1864 with contents arranged by location: Winandermere [*sic*], Esthwaite, Langdale, The Rotha, Rydale, Grasmere, Helvellyn, Derwent-water and Ulleswater, Brougham Castle, Black Comb (Figure 1). From its pages fall cuttings from English newspapers of the early 1900s, along with slips of paper containing handwritten quotations from poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Thomas Moore, and Henry Ward Beecher – copper-plate memorials to the 'wealth and happiness of our kind', tales of despair relieved by faith, of steadfastness in the face of death.

Among the newspaper cuttings headlines swim into view: 'Unconscious Worry: Why One's Sleep Is Disturbed and Troubled'; 'Come on Shropshires'; 'Hell amid Flowers'. And the year: 1917, which is visible on a folded corner to the left of the title of 'The Haunted Garden', a descriptive prose piece by Edith Nesbit, author of *The Railway Children* (1906), clipped neatly from *The Daily Mail*:

> Soon […] it will be winter here […] and the rain will fall on the garden like tears that are never dried. Let the winter come! This garden has no more need of summer. In winter we leave it lying lonely and cowering over the hearth, drug ourselves with books; but in the summer we walk in the garden and remember. For then the garden is haunted by the shadows of those who used to laugh and linger here in long golden days and starry evenings, before the war broke up homes and made happiness only a memory.

For those who live on, summer has become unbearable, prompting thoughts of those men, lost in the war, who cannot share its 'insolent triumph':

> But autumn we can bear, because then we remember that spring is eternal and that this world is not all. Autumn lays a quiet hand on the bowed

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Figure 1 *Our English Lakes, Mountains, and Waterfalls, as Seen by William Wordsworth. Photographically Illustrated* (London 1864). Cuttings and title page.
Source: Author Photograph

> head, and we find amid the fading leaves a place for prayer […] that some of them may come back again—that we may see them with these eyes that have wept so much; see them coming, with kind, living hands held out to us, along the grassy paths of our garden.

Beside this clipping, a pressed lime tree leaf, a small card, and a sealed envelope, on which are mounted pressed flowers. The inscriptions: 'From Ervillers France June 1917'; 'Picked in Hennecourt Wood France on the March Retreat 1918 = A. H. S.='. In his concluding paragraph, the writer of the newspaper article 'Hell amid Flowers' (dated 25 May 1917) imagines the men of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry surrounded by fields of gold, 'drunk with the beauty of this world of life, so that a field all silvered with daisies means more to them than all the war, as I have heard them say'. And now, long since detached from the corncockles, pinks, and the solitary cornflower gathered in France, the remains of a common daisy slip through my fingers.

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I stare at these mementos, fallings and vanishings from a beloved volume, and allow my imagination to pursue paths of association while reason prompts me to observe at a distance, to resist the temptation to fall into an affective tone that might dishonour the volume's stark facticity. A bookplate or signature would help; as it is, the absence of these signs adds to the sense of an inaccessible, private reality, which withdraws from my effort to grasp it. For even if that reality could be accounted for – one can imagine a quantum computer able, in some distant future, to gather all these little bundles of reality together, starting with the book's provenance, its family history, the connection with A. H. S., the link with the Shropshires – still we would find ourselves overwhelmed by a flood of accidental or sensual qualities: instances of grieving, pathos, and nostalgia that swirl within, around, and far beyond the book's real qualities – fragments of a reality beyond calculation.[1]

***

Religion is spilt in the most unusual places, and at this point the book I am writing is unsure of itself. But the sense of that excess of feeling, of lives that even after death haunt the imagination, cannot be ignored. Thus, despite myself, I am drawn to the book's connection with 'old, unhappy, far-off things,/And battles long ago', elements of an affective power irreducible to quanta that speak, diffidently yet compellingly, of the afterlife of war.[2] How that afterlife should be conceived will be explored in the discussion that follows, but I am prepared to accept that no single position will account for the life that emerges in Wordsworth, so strangely and with such force, in the aftermath of Britain's victory in the war against France. At the announcement of peace, prematurely declared in 1814 and then confirmed in 1815, Wordsworth's poetry undergoes a change – these, after all, are the years in which *The Excursion* is published and the 'Thanksgiving Ode' is conceived, works that for many readers mark the end of the poet's 'great period' and the beginning of the long, slow descent into creative sclerosis. But setting aside, for now, the question of artistic accomplishment, the claim that the end of war marks a watershed in Wordsworth's poetic development should be qualified by the acknowledgement that many of the currents emerging in this period can be dated back to earlier phases in his career. Moreover, three of the most important poems that Wordsworth published between 1815 and 1822, the post-war years with which this book is largely concerned, were composed in the late 1790s and early 1800s: *Peter Bell*, *The Waggoner*, and *The White Doe of Rylstone*. To adapt a statement made at the beginning of *The Holiday* (1949), Stevie Smith's brittle and

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unsettling account of life after the Second World War, in the late 1810s, just as 'it cannot be said that it is war, it cannot be said that it is peace, it can be said that it is post-war' so for much of Wordsworth's poetry it cannot be said that it is late, it cannot be said that it is early, it *can* be said that it is post-dated – its meaning determined by a future with which it has yet to coincide.[3]

A mood of anxious imprecision – is this peace? is this war? – sits very well with the blurring of distinctions between Fancy and Imagination, early and late, that can be detected in the poems Wordsworth wrote and published between Waterloo and Peterloo, not least when the poet seeks to create an impression of his work as a 'legitimate whole', as the system of classification, introduced in the 1815 *Poems* so that 'the work may more obviously correspond with the course of human life', had attempted to accomplish (*Prose* III. 24). For the remainder of his career, Wordsworth stubbornly adhered to this system, preferring the artificial and, as it frequently turned out, labile arrangement of the poems by 'subject […] mould or form' over the chronological 'history of the poet's mind' favoured by Charles Lamb and Henry Crabb Robinson.[4] Yet, as the system advanced into a shifting mosaic of forms, thoughts, and feelings, it enabled readers to forge connections between poems that a more conventional 'history' might have precluded. A particularly resonant example is the surprising yet, as I go on to argue in Chapter 5, wholly appropriate sequential arrangement of the Immortality and Thanksgiving odes in the 1820 three- and four-volume collected *Poems*. More so, I think, than present-day readers, Wordsworth's contemporary audience understood the porosity of these great expressions of peace and war, of how delicate affirmations of recovery could bleed into plangent avowals of national triumph.

The belief, however, that Wordsworth fades into irrelevance after Waterloo maintains a firm hold on our understanding of the poet's history, and in large measure this is due to how our sense of the work that Wordsworth produced in the aftermath of war has been shaped by the reactions of a culturally significant yet statistically unrepresentative group of contemporary readers. The 1816 'Thanksgiving Ode' is usually recalled, if at all, as the poem that set the seal on Wordsworth's reputation among the second-generation poets, providing confirmation that the poet of *The Excursion* (1814) was indubitably of and for the establishment. Following its damning reception, Wordsworth, while maintaining an active interest in domestic politics, engaged very little with matters of international import, preferring instead to issue quietly authoritative pronouncements on the nature of the good life from the perspective of a Cincinnatian recluse. An

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account of this period in the poet's development might well conclude, on the basis of the complex sequence of reactions and counter-reactions that determined the publication of *Peter Bell* and *The Waggoner* (1819), followed by the wilful embrace of parochialism, dullness, and whimsy that appears to inform the *River Duddon* volume (1820), the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (1822), and the *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent, 1820* (1822), that Wordsworth at the end of war, having forgone the loftier claims of Imagination in favour of the 'embrace' of History's 'closing deed magnificent', has nothing more to say.[5]

The reasonableness of this conclusion is apparent from the dejected assessment of one of Wordsworth's staunchest allies. Writing to Dorothy Wordsworth in 1826 Crabb Robinson complained that the poet who had written 'heroically and divinely against the tyranny of Napoleon' was 'quite indifferent to all the successive tyrannies which disgraced the succeeding times'.[6] Adopting the voice of 'some future commentator' he announces, with damning sardonicism: '"This great poet survived to the fifth decennary of the Nineteenth Century, but he appears to have died in the year 1814, as far as life consisted in an active sympathy with the temporary welfare of his fellow creatures".' Robinson's judgement is directed against Wordsworth's seeming indifference to the recent Bourbon interventions in Spain, which attempted to restore King Ferdinand VII to the absolute power of which he had been deprived during the Liberal Triennium, but it addresses broader, far-reaching concerns, akin to Coleridge's frequently voiced criticisms about the poet's failure to write the grand 'philosophical Poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society',[7] about the worth of Wordsworth's work in the modern age.

Responding to Robinson in the pointedly titled sonnet 'Retirement', Wordsworth defends himself from the Thomist accusation of *recusatio tensionis* by announcing to his 'patriot Friend' (l. 3) that 'Peace in these feverish times is sovereign bliss' (l. 9), a line that manages simultaneously to function as a defence of royal prerogative while linking the transcendence of worldly agitation to the ecstasy of self-governance.[8] But the sense of joyful release afforded by the refusal of the *vita activa* in favour of the *vita contemplativa* is more aptly conveyed in 'Not Love, nor War, nor the tumultuous swell'.[9] Composed in 1821, the sonnet's opening quatrain, with its gathering of six negative comparators, emulates Shakespeare's sonnet 65 in seeking to weigh the charms of ephemeral beauty against the pains of 'civil conflict' and 'the wrecks of change' (l. 2). But while Shakespeare converts dissension and conjecture into a confident closed couplet declaration of artistic endurance ('O none, unless this miracle have might,/That in

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black ink my love may still shine bright', ll. 13–14),[10] Wordsworth, drawing on the fluid resources of the Petrarchan form, counters negativity though a technique of patient insistence, effacing the not/nor constraints of the conflicted world by linking together images of 'sage content' and 'placid melancholy' (l. 10), by instilling a sense of protracted ease through the use of hendecasyllables and a closing alexandrine, through the repetitive insistence of the verb *to be*, and the lulling effect of the correspondent double rhymes. Thus, the muse watches 'the blue smoke of the elmy grange,/ Skyward ascending from the twilight dell' (ll. 6–7):

> She loves to gaze upon a crystal river,
> Diaphanous, because it travels slowly;
> Soft is the music that would charm for ever;
> The flower of sweetest smell is shy and lowly. (ll. 11–14)

Such poetry might easily be dismissed as a mode of reactionary escapism – Peterloo, after all, had only recently raised the spectre of a return to civil conflict – but the verse is informed by memories of an earlier phase in Wordsworth's development, the period in which, as a young radical, the poet envisaged the triumph of the meek. In this new world of peaceable delight, shared alike by all forms of life, discord through love and war is accepted as the origin of history but is effectively cordoned off from the ensuing state of beatific languor. In the absence of a governing 'I', the sonnet surveys the changing nature of things with unselfconscious equanimity, released from the violent ardour of self-definition.

'Not Love, nor War' is a poem of the Fancy, and in the pages that follow I examine more closely how this aesthetic category, along with its counterpart Imagination, came to be associated in Wordsworth's poetry with the dialectical relation between peace and war, a notion that raises the spectre of Hegel's account of the violent underpinnings of individuation in the *Philosophy of Right* (1821). If, as the sonnet implies, peace consists in self-abnegation, allowing the self to melt into a fanciful dream of unity with the world, then war, as Hegel maintains, can be seen as a form of self-definition, for it is only through the disruption of passivity that individuals may attain self-consciousness, insofar as war confronts the individual with the finitude of his existence.[11] In this, Hegel follows in a tradition of radical enlightenment thought that, even as it seeks to institute peaceful co-existence in the struggle for individuation, ends up granting, and at times even applauding, the necessity of war.[12] In 'The State of War' (*c.* 1750s), Rousseau, for instance, condemns the effects of state-sanctioned violence ('I see fire and flames, countrysides deserted, and towns sacked […] I see

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a scene of murders, ten thousand men slaughtered, the dead piled up in heaps, the dying trampled underfoot by horses, everywhere the image of death and agony') only to admit that conflict is 'the fruit' of those 'peaceful institutions' on which society is founded.[13] The state of nature in which man dwells in peace turns out to be illusory, since to live this way, all men must agree to do so. In other words, the state of nature demands a social contract, which entails the creation of institutions to regulate the relations between 'land, money [and] men' – 'all the spoils that can be appropriated thus become the principal object of mutual hostilities'.[14]

In related manner, Kant, in the *Critique of Judgement* (1789), suggests that war enhances the vitality of civil society, going so far as to declare that 'war has something sublime about it'.[15] War for Kant is sublime because the struggle of a people in the face of danger mimics the way in which reason stands its ground in the encounter with excessive magnitude and power. Elsewhere, Kant avers that war may act as 'an incentive' for the growth of 'culture'. 'Though war', he argues, 'is an intentional human endeavour (incited by our unbridled passions), yet it is also a deeply hidden and perhaps intentional endeavour of the supreme wisdom, if not to establish, then at least to prepare the way for lawfulness.'[16] Since 'a prolonged peace […] tends to make prevalent a mere commercial spirit, and along with it base selfishness, cowardice, and softness, and to debase the thinking of that people', periodic outbreaks of hostilities with rival nation states are not only historically inevitable but also desirable if a nation is to maintain its integrity.[17] A few years later, however, at a time when Europe had suffered the destabilising impact of France's revolutionary struggle, Kant, in what appears to be a swerve from the militant fatalism of the third *Critique*, turns his attention to 'Perpetual Peace' (1795). But Kant's title, as the opening paragraph declares, is taken from a Dutch inn keeper's sign on which a graveyard is painted.[18] Here, as Peter Melville points out, Kant is attuned to the ironies of perpetual peace, aware of how, as an 'intolerant universal law', perpetual peace must strive to eliminate not only all existing but all possible forms of opposition, including 'its own opposition to opposition as such'.[19] However, the self-defeating logic of perpetual peace conceals a deeper truth: that peace must open itself to its own constitutive violence. By remaining hospitable to opposition, perpetual peace may be refigured as an '"impure" regulatory ideal': a promise that aspires towards (but cannot attain) a state of harmony that, in the Derridean sense, is always to come.[20]

In the letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, written in the spring of 1793, Wordsworth advances remarkably similar arguments for the impossibility

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of peace, declaring that 'Liberty' 'in order to reign in peace must establish herself by violence' (*Prose* I. 33). A year later he had reversed his opinion, announcing: 'I recoil from the bare idea of a revolution […] I am a determined enemy to every species of violence […] I deplore the miserable situation of the French' (*EY* 124). Abandoning the instrumentalist framework that, in the Llandaff letter, provided justification for revolutionary violence, Wordsworth nevertheless identifies as an 'enemy' of violence, thereby replicating the cycle in which pacific ends founded on relations of antagonism perpetuate violence. He goes on to advance similar arguments for the maintenance of enmity as a mode of individual and collective self-preservation, a position that would place him at odds with radical critics of Kant, such as Thomas Beddoes, who despaired of the German philosopher's pessimistic account of the ability of political institutions to furnish lasting peace, as well as later positive peace campaigners, such as William Cobbett, William Roscoe, and Leigh Hunt.[21] Yet, despite the drift towards acceptance of the necessity of war, there remains in Wordsworth's writing a lingering attachment to the dream of irenic fulfilment, typically manifested in poems like 'Not Love, nor War' that, in their Ovidian voluptuousness, query Virgilian ideas of duty, discipline, and self-restraint, the politico-affective qualities most associated with the later poems.

That Wordsworth's later verse does not always conform to our presuppositions concerning the distinctions between sensual and austere, playful and authoritarian, tranquil and combative is deepened further when we attempt to frame this poetry in terms of its relations with contemporary political philosophy.[22] In the search for conceptual affinities in Wordsworth's writings scholars have long been in the habit of negotiating a tricky path between radical and conservative thinkers, finding, for example, in the 1793 Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff Rousseaustic influences and clear affinities with Burke in *The Prelude*. Note has also been made of Coleridge's influence on Wordsworth's political development, which in the 1790s had embraced revolutionary pacifist and pacificist thought before transitioning in the 1800s to pro-war conservatism.[23] In designating the point at which Wordsworth moves from radical enlightenment poet to reactionary Tory bard, critics inspired by one or more of these readings isolate *The Excursion* as the poem in which the poet finally abjures his earlier Jacobin self, in the guise of the Solitary, to embrace the role of a loyal supporter of the conservative establishment.[24] Unsurprisingly, it is in *The Excursion* that Wordsworth presents his most sustained poetic critique of revolutionary pacifism; yet, as I go on to argue in Chapter 1, it

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is in this poem and more vividly in 'The Recluse' fragments that precede it that Wordsworth delivers some of his most persuasive and touching descriptions of how peace might appear in a post-war world. Not insignificantly, many of these descriptions, such as the radically panpsychist account of the 'active principle alive in all things' that initiates Book IX of *The Excursion*, have their origins in a much earlier phase of Wordsworth's poetic development, suggesting again how stark chronological distinctions obscure how poems have 'properties which spread/Beyond themselves, a power by which they make/Some other being', perhaps a later poet or a later reader, 'conscious of their life'.[25] Later, most concertedly in *The White Doe* and *The Waggoner*, sporadically in the *River Duddon* poems and *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent, 1820*, and even, at times, in the Thanksgiving volume and *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, we find renewed stirrings of this early, radical desire for peaceable existence, a desire not wholly expunged by the poet's shift towards reactionary bellicosity.

Wordsworth After War is, then, not a book about Wordsworth's later poetry; nor, for that matter, is it a book that argues concertedly for a singular view of the late Wordsworth as a poet of war or as a poet of the peace. Barring his friendship with the Quaker Thomas Clarkson, a founding member of the Society for the Promotion of Universal and Perpetual Peace, there is no evidence to suggest that Wordsworth held any sympathy with views that, even after Waterloo, continued to be associated with revolutionary politics.[26] By the same token, setting aside his correspondence with the military theorist Sir Charles William Pasley, it would be reductive to portray late Wordsworth as an ardent supporter of the '*War-faction*'.[27] Rather, as will become clear, my concern is with the persistence in the poetry of attitudes, orientations, and affective states that, from their emergence earlier in his career, marked Wordsworth out as a poet driven towards the complication of what can be expected of life and art in the aftermath of war. Instead of seeing the termination of the war with France as an opportunity to hymn the triumph of legitimacy over tyranny, we see in Wordsworth's poetry a fascination with the failure or incompletion of the revolutionary experiment, a fascination that homes in on thoughts and feelings that cannot be accommodated within the cultural framework of the post-war settlement. In this sense, the poetry Wordsworth writes after war is haunted by revolutionary 'traces', to adopt a word used by Hazlitt to affirm a form of radical nostalgia in his review of *The Excursion*.[28] As I go on to explore, it is precisely as a result of its ghostliness, its recollection of older, revolutionary impulses, of those aspirations to a better life, free from sanguinary competition, as well as the atavistic promptings

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of warlike counter-currents, that this poetry, so often dismissed as slight, anti-climactic, socially conservative, and artistically constrained, speaks so volubly to the present age, an age that shares with the post-war culture of Regency England a combustible mood of impatience and anxiety, disillusionment and despair.

Where Have All the Flowers Gone?

In concert with those supplementary paper figures, tied to yet detached from *Our English Lakes, Mountains, and Waterfalls*, sibylline predictions of weal and woe drift through Wordsworth's post-war poetry, driven by gusts that create momentary attachments, complicating affinities that might, in less accomplished hands, appear close-minded, anti-climactic, or straightforwardly banal. Work will need to be done to capture the precise forms of strangeness that inhabit this poetry,[29] but we might already see, in the unfinished, contested, and infinitely suggestive form of this mid-Victorian keepsake, an indication of how this work should proceed. Although the focus of this book is on work published in the wake of the defeat of imperial France, from the outset of his career Wordsworth was, in a sense, always writing *after* war – looking ahead, that is, to a possible future when war would be either relinquished or retained as a lamentable but necessary element in the march and progress of human history. Before proceeding to address how these possible futures emerge in Wordsworth's writing and at how this book will develop, I want to look at a set of poems that bear directly on the material evocation of peace with which this discussion began.

Pages 158–68 of *Our English Lakes, Mountains, and Waterfalls*, at the head of a selection of Wordsworth's 'Poems on Flowers': 'To the Daisy' ('In youth from rock to rock I went'), 'To the Same Flower' ('Bright Flower!'). Composed shortly after the announcement of the Treaty of Amiens (25 March 1802–18 May 1803), the brief cessation of Britain's conflict with France seems to have provided Wordsworth too with a breathing space, an interval in which 'the mind should be permitted to recover from its perturbation or astonishment'.[30] If, as Jerome Christensen has argued, the peace offered respite, not only from the socio-economic and moral shocks of war but also from the daily bombardment of cultural astonishment, then we can perhaps begin to see how Wordsworth should find in 'To the Daisy' a means to suspend those 'stately passions' that 'in me burn' (l. 49).[31] Relief from war provides the poet with an opportunity to observe and, as it were, become absorbed by an object of 'less ambitious aim' (l. 29) than those

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