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THE POET
WOKDSWORTH

THE POET WORDSWORTH

THE CLARK LECTURES

Trinity College, Cambridge, 1949

by

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PREFACE

I OWE a great debt of gratitude to the Master and Council of Trinity College, Cambridge, who honoured me with an invitation to deliver the Clark Lectures in 1949, and who thus gave me the £ stimulus to gather together some of my findings and reflections upon the poet Wordsworth. The Master's letter reached me at Grasmere, where I had been spending the best part of three years in the heart of Wordsworth's country, reading his manuscripts in Dove Cottage, and immersed in his poetry. I had thought that I should never again talk or write about Wordsworth (so thoroughly had I learnt a lesson from the hills his lesson of silence)—but when the opportunity came of lecturing to a singularly intelligent and sensitive audience in Cambridge, I was in the end glad of it. Wordsworth, I found, has something to say to the younger generation.

I wish to thank the Secretary and Syndics of the Cambridge University Press for their courtesy in allowing me to publish these lectures with the Oxford University Press, who have had charge of my other work in connexion with Wordsworth.

I am grateful to the editor of *The XIXth Century and After* for permission to include in this volume

the substance of an essay on the two versions of *The Prelude* which I contributed to that periodical in 1926.

I would like to associate my small book with the name of a great Wordsworthian scholar, Ernest de Selincourt, my teacher, colleague, and lifelong friend. Our labours and pleasures lay in the same field. I owe more to his mind and spirit than can be said.

H. D.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE NOTES

E.L. *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth.*
Oxford, 1935.

M.T. *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth.*
Middle Tears. Oxford, 1937.

Mem. *Memoirs of Wordsworth*, by Christopher Wordsworth.

Prel. *The Prelude*, 1860.

PreL (1805) *The Prelude*, edited from the manuscripts by
E. de Selincourt. Oxford, 1926.

I

THE MAKING OF THE POET

IT has become customary to distinguish two Wordsworths. The natural distinction is between the early, the young Wordsworth—and the late, the elderly and old; the revolutionary, radical, and semi-atheist—and the conservative, the orthodox, the defender of Church and State. Coleridge, always a little uncomfortable on the subject of Wordsworth's religious position, writes to Allsop that he regrets Wordsworth's 'vague, misty rather than mystic, confusion of God with Nature—while', he continues, 'the odd introduction of the popular, almost the vulgar, religion in his later publications, the popping in, as Hartley says, of the old man with a beard, suggests the painful suspicion of worldly prudence carried into religion. At least it conjures up to my fancy a sort of Janus head of Spinoza and Dr. Watts, or I and my brother the Dean

Others have preferred to distinguish the Man and the Mask, the true personality and the assumed, 'not youth and age, not Energy and Decay, but Reality and Myth', as Mr. Herbert Read has it. The episode of Wordsworth's early love-affair with Annette Valon takes on enormous, and to my mind quite wrong, proportions in this view.

My concern is with the poet and his poetry, and with Wordsworth himself only in so far as knowledge of his life and character deepens understanding of his poetry. Literary criticism has in our time shown a dangerous tendency. The private life of the author has become a favourite theme; some flaw in his character, some discreditable episode in his life is discovered (and such things are easy to find, since human nature is what it is)—psychological interpretation is applied, first to his actions and private correspondence, then to his writings, and we are asked to see the author in a flood of new light. But in fact and in truth we see no farther into what he wrote, we are no nearer to the heart of his mystery, or, to put it prosaically, the secret of his art. We have no further insight into what makes his poetry what it is. Too much has been written about Wordsworth's personality, enough perhaps about his doctrine, but I believe there is something more to be said about his poetry and his poetic art. I shall confess in a moment that I also recognize two Wordsworths.

Wordsworth has taken his place among the great English poets. His contemporaries put him next to Milton: if Coleridge is considered a prejudiced witness, Southey may be taken to represent them. Matthew Arnold corroborated that judgement, and our critics of the twentieth century have set the seal

upon it. Dr. T. S. Eliot has said that Wordsworth belongs to history.

Now his claim to the title of great poet rests upon the work of a single decade: his poetic genius expressed itself in what he wrote between 1798 and 1808. This is my subject. What he wrote before and what he wrote after that period, and it is a solid and a heavy output, is, with very few exceptions, the work partly of a lesser poet, partly of a capable and practised versifier, shot through in occasional lines and passages with a ray of genius. I think that if nothing had survived but the work he produced before and after the great decade we should rank him as a minor poet—a distinguished but unequal minor poet, who promised to be something better.

In the early days of his great creative period Wordsworth had thought much about the nature and function of poetry, and he and Coleridge together had worked out something like a comprehensive theory. Wordsworth, whose practical sense, as Henry Adams has said, equalled his intuitive genius, bent his mind upon carrying his ideas into practice. This was his steady endeavour. Coleridge, with an incurable weakness of will, admired Wordsworth for just that steadiness of concentration. In a letter to Richard Sharp he writes:

Wordsworth is a happy man because he is a Philosopher, because he knows the intrinsic value of different objects of pursuit, and regulates his wishes in strict subordination to that knowledge; because he feels, and with a *practical* faith, the truth of that which you, more than once, my dear Sir, have pressed upon me, that we can do but one thing well, and that we must therefore make a choice.

[Coleridge, who did many things well, made the choice too late, and then, the Devil's advocate might say, he chose to be a talker.]

He, Wordsworth, has made that choice from his early youth, has pursued and is pursuing it; and certainly no small part of his happiness is owing to this unity of interest and that homogeneity of character which is the natural consequence of it.

Wordsworth's choice, deliberately made, tenaciously held, was to be a poet. Coleridge wrote that character of Wordsworth in January 1804 when Wordsworth, at the height of his powers, was midway in the writing of *The Prelude*. But soon the living stream was to flow less freely. Impulse and intuition were to give place to careful art; the *Ode. Intimations of Immortality* . . . was to be followed, at a distance, by *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. Clough wrote of Wordsworth:

Certain it is that he did bestow infinite toil and labour upon his poetic style, and that in the nice and

exquisite felicities of poetic diction he specially surpassed his contemporaries. . . . With his hardy unflinching North country spirit he set himself manfully to his work, and through good report and evil, patiently and perseveringly kept to it.

We have now come to the two Wordsworths whom I am obliged to recognize. They meet, they often join forces, but they are not, alas! one: Wordsworth the man of genius, who had inspiration if ever a poet had it, and Wordsworth the man of strong will, and, as he claimed, worthy purpose, who laboured in his poetic vocation—laboured the more assiduously the less the inspiration came. Wordsworth himself, a practical man of good sense, could not but be aware, in some trepidation, of the other Wordsworth who wrote his great poetry. American admirers were sometimes deeply moved, sometimes highly amused, at the spectacle of the elderly poet reciting his own verses with awe and reverence as if they were the work of another man. The poet Bryant used to give amusing imitations of this procedure. And Lowell remarked, 'William Wordsworth, Esq. of Rydal Mount is *one* person, and the William Wordsworth he so heartily revered quite another

Critics have explained the evident decline in Wordsworth's poetic powers after the great decade in various ways: some attribute it to his conversion

to orthodox Christianity, others to his failure to adopt the full Christian faith; some to his break with Coleridge, others to his abortive love-affair with Annette, which ought to have led to marriage; a recent writer thinks that his marriage with Mary Hutchinson was a cardinal mistake, and that he would have fulfilled his destiny if he had stuck to Dorothy. The question they are all trying to answer is: Why did he not go on writing great poetry till the end of his life? It may be that there is a psychological or a physiological answer to such a question. (The relation between gout and great poetry has been examined: Milton is here a stand-by.) But the answer cannot be more than what we call nowadays anybody's guess. Even psychologists are not infallible. I am thankful to believe that the connexion between artistic creation and the physical and mental state of the artist remains a mystery. My answer to the obstinate questioning about Wordsworth's poetic decline is simply, *The spirit bloweth where it listeth.* When it ceases to blow, or blows but feebly and fitfully, what is a poet to do? Like Coleridge, plunge into metaphysics? Wordsworth took the way that was inevitable for him: he doggedly pursued his vocation, pursued it as a man with a moral purpose and as a self-respecting craftsman. 'Every great poet is a teacher', he wrote, 'I wish either to be considered as

a teacher or as nothing And 'I yield to none in love for my art. I therefore labour at it with reverence, affection and industry

Our concern is with the poet, and we must take our own way to the heart of his mystery: we cannot pass over either his teaching or his craftsmanship, but we must, to begin with, see him in his time and place, if we are to estimate him as a poet in his own right, original and unique. Some knowledge of what he did and wrote before 1798 is the best introduction to his poetry.

Wordsworth was a poet of the Revolution, and he was also the poet of a mountain district in the north of England. Hazlitt in one of his brilliant pages of rhetoric gives a telling picture of the revolutionary subject-matter and style adopted by Wordsworth and the Lake School of poets.

They founded the new school on a principle of sheer humanity, or pure nature void of art. It could not be said of these sweeping reformers and dictators in the republic of letters that 'in their train walked crowns and crownets'—but they were surrounded, in company with the Muses, by a mixed rabble of Botany Bay convicts, female vagrants, gypsies—of idiot boys and mad mothers, and after them 'owls and night-ravens flew'——— According to the prevailing notions all was to be natural and new. Nothing that was established was to be tolerated. All the commonplace figures of poetry, tropes,

allegories, personifications, with all the heathen mythology were instantly discarded—kings and queens were dethroned from their rank and station in legitimate tragedy or epic poetry, as they were decapitated elsewhere : rhyme was looked upon as a relic of the feudal system, and regular metre was abolished along with regular government.¹

We shall return later to consider the truth of this picture.

'Lake School' is a misnomer: Wordsworth and Southey and Coleridge trod different paths and belonged to no school, but Wordsworth was, as the other two were not, indubitably a poet of the Lake country of Cumberland and Westmorland. He spoke with a strong Cumbrian burr. He used dialect words in his poetry—*ghyll* for 'ravine'; *bye-spot* for an 'out-of-the-way place'; *canty* for 'lively', one of Burns's words, and Wordsworth said of Burns's poems: 'Familiarity with the dialect of the Border counties of Westmorland and Cumberland made it easy for me not only to understand but to feel them.' We can catch an echo of his speech and especially of his vowel sounds in his poetry:

I heard a thousand blended notes (*pronounced
nawts*)

As in a grove I sat reclined,

¹ *The English Poets. The Lake School.*

In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

This pronunciation *of note* is corroborated by a letter of Wordsworth's where he expresses anxiety about another kind of note, a note for £20: 'If the nought should happen to be lost upon the road', he writes. Wordsworth was brought up among peasants. Matthew Arnold told John Morley he would not really have liked Wordsworth—'he was too much of a peasant for you'. Miss Martineau's friend, W. R. Greg, an ultra-Radical, a Unitarian, and a factory-master, also thought Wordsworth in manner and habit too much of a peasant, and complained that he would talk of nothing but gravel. Carlyle noticed a fine wholesome rusticity about him. Hazlitt gives a picture of this country born and bred Wordsworth which is as fresh and telling as any:¹

There was something of a roll, a lounge in his gait, not unlike his own Peter Bell. There was an intense high forehead—cheeks furrowed by strong purpose and feeling, and a convulsive inclination to laughter about the mouth, a good deal at variance with the solemn, stately expression of the rest of his face. He sat down and talked very naturally and freely with a mixture of clear gushing accents in his voice, a deep guttural intonation, and a strong tincture of the Northern burr, like the crust on wine.

This 'convulsive inclination to laughter' that his mouth betrayed is a thing not to be forgotten in any attempt to take the measure of Wordsworth's poetry. He is said to have no sense of humour, but there is no doubt at all that he had the robust broad humour that belongs to the peasant and to the boy brought up among peasants. Shakespeare had it. Wordsworth would have revelled in Bottom the Weaver and his friends. He loved a rogue. He tells us of the origins of *Peter Bell*:

The countenance, gait and figure of Peter were taken from a wild rover with whom I walked from Builth as far as Hay. He told me strange stories. It has always been a pleasure to me to catch at every opportunity of becoming acquainted with this class of people. . . . In the woods of Alfoxden I used to take great delight in noticing the habits, tricks and physiognomy of asses; and I have no doubt I was thus put upon the writing of the poem out of liking for the creature that is so often dreadfully abused.

The broad, thick-edged humour that plays over *Peter Bell*, often grim and savage, is of the peasant type:

There 's some of you, my Friends, perhaps
There 's some of you in yawning weather
Who may have seen an ass's grin,
'Tis uglier far than death and sin
And all the devils together.¹

¹ Manuscript reading 8201.

It is amusing to think of Wordsworth intently watching the asses in Alfoxden Park. A Wordsworthian friend of mine insists that *The Prelude* is a topographical poem, and that for full enjoyment of Wordsworth's poetry we must know his country. Certain it is that if we know Esthwaite with its bordering fields shaped like ears, Grasmere with its morning mists, and also know something of the dalesmen, we have a fuller delight in Wordsworth's poetry than without that knowledge—just as Shelley's *To a Skylark* is a richer poem to those who know the skylark's song.

Wordsworth's poetic life began, he would tell us, on the banks of the Derwent in Cockermouth, when he was a babe in arms:

Was it for this [that is—to fail to make me a poet]
Was it for this,
That one the fairest of all rivers loved
To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song?

It began consciously in the Vale of Esthwaite when he attended Hawkshead School. As a schoolboy he was encouraged by his masters in the writing of English verse, for which he showed a natural talent.¹ What mattered more, he fell in love with poetry, and admired to intoxication verses which with a school-friend he delighted to repeat, "chanting with

¹ Vide *Prel.* x. 551.

one voice" on their early morning rambles. De Quincey, whose memory was retentive, and who must, I think, have seen an early manuscript of *The Prelude*, tells us that the verses they chanted were Goldsmith's and Gray's. Perhaps these were the favourites. In Wordsworth's final text no names are mentioned; he admits that the objects of their love were 'often false and in their splendour overwrought': -it was enough that his ears began to open to the charm

Of words in tuneful order, found them sweet
For *their own sakes*,—a passion and a power—

This was not all. He adds that as a boy who had been intimate with living Nature, 'a wanderer among the fields and woods', he was not only stirred to ecstasy by glittering verse, but he received 'enduring touches of deep joy From the great Nature that exists in works Of mighty Poets':

Visionary Power
Attends upon the motions of the winds
Embodied in the mystery of words.

In plain prose, he began to delight in the craft of verse, and also to feel in great poetry, and especially, we may guess, in Shakespeare and Milton, a visionary power like that which came to him from the stirring life of Nature. What survives of his own

youthful verse is of two kinds: formal exercises, like his lines written in Popian couplets for the centenary of the foundation of Hawkshead School, and some translations from the Classics; secondly, freer verse either in ballad-form or in octosyllabics, with subject-matter partly natural, partly romantic.

One poem stands out: he calls it *The Vale of Esthwaite* and describes it as 'a long poem running on my own adventures and the scenery of the country in which I was brought up. The only part of it which has been preserved', he tells us, 'is the conclusion which stands at the beginning of my Collected Poems':¹

Dear Native regions! I foretell,
From what I feel at this farewell,
That, wheresoever my steps may tend,
And whensoever my course shall end,
If in that hour a single tie
Survive of local sympathy,
My soul will cast the backward view,
The longing look alone on you.

Thus, while the Sun sinks down to rest
Far in the regions of the west,
Though to the vale no parting beam
Be given, not one memorial gleam,
A lingering light he fondly throws
On the dear hills where first he rose.

¹ Autobiographical Memoranda. *Mem.* i. 13.

The beautiful image with which this poem concludes, he said in his seventy-third year, suggested itself to him when he was resting in a boat on the shore of Coniston. The lines were a farewell to the Lake country when he left for Cambridge. He placed them at the beginning of his collected poems with a clear intention. The whole of his poetry was rooted and grounded in his native vales and mountains. *The Vale of Esthwaite* ran into many hundreds of lines. Most of it survives in two note-books out of which many pages have been torn, so that the text, as Professor de Selincourt has skilfully reconstructed it, is still fragmentary. His subject-matter is of two kinds: first the romantic stuff of Seattle's *Minstrel*—

There would he dream of graves, and corpses pale,
And ghosts that to the charnel dungeon throng,
And drag a length of clanking chains, and wail—

(this phase of gloomy dreaming was a sort of poetical measles which young poets of his generation were bound to contract); and second, scenes and incidents in Wordsworth's own life. The poem makes strange reading. Page after page in the poet's rapid youthful hand is filled with Gothic scenery, haunted castles with their wailing spectres, shrouded in mist or lit by gleams of moonlight, dark woods, and dreary moors. But from time to time we suddenly emerge into daylight:

And see the mist, as warms the day,
From the green vale steals away,
Yet round the mountain-top it sails
Slow borne upon the dewy gales,
And on yon summit brown and bare,
That seems an island in the air,
The shepherd's restless dog I mark
Who, bounding round with frequent bark,
Now leaps around the uncovered plain,
Now dives into the mist again.

This is Wordsworth, unmistakably. The images are true and clear: Wordsworth's keen eye is on his object. He treats the same incident of the shepherd and his dog in *An Evening Walk*, and again, but no better, in *The Prelude*.

Of *An Evening Walk*, published in 1793, he said, "There is not an image in it which I have not observed, and now in my 73rd year I recollect the time and place where most of them were noticed. He quotes one of them:

And, fronting the bright west, yon oak entwines
Its darkening boughs and leaves, in stronger lines.

He remembered the very spot in the road between Hawkshead and Ambleside where this first struck him. The moment was important in my poetical history; for I date from it my consciousness of the

¹ *Prel.* (1805), viii. 94-101.

infinite variety of natural appearances which had been unnoticed by the poets—and I made a resolution to supply in some degree the deficiency. I could not have been at that time more than 14 years of age¹

What he is saying is fundamental to his poetry. In his considered list of 'the powers requisite for the production of poetry' it is significant that he puts first 'those of observation and description—i.e. the ability to observe with accuracy *things as they are in themselves*'. The particular image he has been speaking of occurs first in *The Vale of Esthwaite*, and he says that that poem 'contained thoughts and images most of which have been dispersed through my writings'.

An Evening Walk holds many of those images, and indeed it was probably written as a careful full-dress version in heroic couplets of the earlier easy-going octosyllabics of *The Vale of Esthwaite*. But Wordsworth here mistook his way. The octosyllabics had a good tradition; they were in the line of the loco-descriptive poems (as Wordsworth calls them) of the eighteenth century—Dyer's *Grongar Hill* the one he cared for most—and they had the best possible

¹ That he commenced poet at fourteen years is corroborated by these lines in *The Idiot Boy* (1798):

I to the Muses have been bound
These fourteen years by strong indentures.

progenitor in Milton's *L'Allegro*. But in *An Evening Walk* Wordsworth was, as he saw later, 'under the injurious influence of Erasmus Darwin's dazzling manner'. The earlier poem is not only more Wordsworthian than the later: it is, at its best, far better poetry. In both, Wordsworth is under literary influence. In any night-scene composed at that date the owl and the moon are bound to feature, and Gray's 'moping owl' that 'doth to the moon complain' from his 'ivy-mantled tower' is sure to be remembered.

Here is Wordsworth's attempt in a manuscript of *An Evening Walk*:

From his grey tow'r the moping owl shall soon
Sob long and tremulous to the rising moon,
Frosting with hoary light the pearly ground,
And pouring deeper blue to Ether's bound,
Rejoic'd her solemn pomp of clouds to fold
In robes of azure, fleecy white and gold.

He is balancing his lines in the Darwinian manner with ornamental epithets, 'hoary light', 'pearly ground'; and giving a lift to simple statement by splendid phrases, 'Ether's bound', and 'solemn pomp of clouds'. And here is his first clean shot at the owl in moonlight in *The Vale of Esthitaite*:

The moaning owl shall soon
Sob long and tremulous to the moon,
Who soon the dark grey cloud shall fold
In robes of azure, white and gold,

And to the sky, a blue restore
Deeper than in the day it wore.

No solemn pomp, no Ether's bound, no conventional epithets. Ten years later, when he has found his way into his own style, his poetic owls, delight now of the idiot boy, have become owls indeed, owls as Wordsworth knew them. They mope no more, they need no ancient towers, they are completely at home among the hills:

The owlets through the long blue night
Are shouting to each other still:
Fond lovers! yet not quite hob nob,
They lengthen out the tremulous sob,
That echoes far from hill to hill.

Wordsworth knew the behaviour of owls in the night better than most of us know the ways of black-birds in daytime. No poet ever had happier school-days. Out of school there were no restrictions on the hours he kept: he was skating by the light of the stars, snaring woodcocks at dead of night, watching the sun rise after a long ramble. Throughout life he was an inveterate walker by night. Dorothy's Journal tells of their night habits in the early days, and later she records her hope that he will get down to his work of composition in the winter, for 'starlight walks and winter winds are his delight'. His great poetry owes much to the night. He acknowledged

his debt in lines which are an early version of a famous passage in *The Prelude*:

Ah, not in vain ye Beings of the hills,
And ye that walk the woods and open heaths
By moon and starlight, thus from my first dawn
Of childhood did ye love to intertwine
The passions that build up our human soul
Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,
But with high objects, with eternal things,
With life and Nature.

Even without *The Prelude* to give us the authentic record of Wordsworth's early intense delight in Nature and reckless absorption in her companionship, we should still know from an attentive reading of these early poems that De Quincey was right when he said: 'Wordsworth had his passion for Nature fixed in his blood; it was a necessity of his being, like that of the mulberry leaf to the silkworm, and through his commerce with Nature did he live and breathe. Hence it was from the *truth* of his love that his knowledge grew

The Vale of Esthwaite and *An 'Evening Walk* give an earnest of what was to come later when he found himself as a poet, most of all in the abundance they offer of true, clear images of Nature. But what of human nature, and what of the inner life of Nature, the life that speaks to man's own deeper feelings?

For human nature we have the touching picture in *An Evening Walk* of the forlorn widowed woman, now wandering houseless with her children, a picture derived from a favourite poem with Wordsworth, Langhorne's *Country Justice*. This literary origin becomes clear in the first printed version of Wordsworth's lines, where the soldier-husband was slain 'on Minden's Plain', as in Langhorne. But Wordsworth's handling of the scene is his own. Langhorne describes the mother

Bent o'er her babe, her eye dissolved in dew,
The big drops mingling with the milk he drew.

Wordsworth's mother comforts her children, not by dropping tears into their food (Langhorne here carried his pathos a step too far) but by encouraging them to look at a shooting-star, or to play with glow-worms. In Wordsworth's early note-books there are several abortive 'tries' at this scene, and the outstanding feature is always the glow-worm. It is a night-scene:

Regardless of her woes another babe
Sat by and smiled delighted, for it held
A glow-worm in its little gleaming hand.
He touched it with his finger, while his face
Was bright with laughter; wildly did he talk
With the pale fire, and toss'd it to and fro,
Then gazed up to the stars that in the night
Dim-twinkled—

The image of the child, his hand lit up in the darkness by the glow-worm, is for Wordsworth the centre of the scene, not the dying mother and her feelings for her children. We are nowhere near the heart of such a conception as that of *The Forsaken Indian Woman* of the *Lyrical Ballads*:

My child they gave thee to another,
A woman who was not thy mother.

And for the deeper life of Nature there is nothing in the *Vale of Esthwaite* but the shuddering sense of mystery in darkness, in the sullen roar of streams and "wild winds' wailing"—in all this his feelings of awe translated into the terms of Gothic tales of horror. Nor in *An Evening Walk* as printed in 1793 is there anything that goes farther; but in the additions he was working at in 1794 a striking passage survives in manuscript:

Harmonious thoughts, a soul by truth refined,
Entire affection for all human kind,
A heart that vibrates evermore, awake
To feeling for all forms that Life can take,
That wider still its sympathy extends,
And sees not any line where being ends;
Sees sense, through Nature's rudest forms betrayed,
Tremble obscure in fountain, rock and shade,
And while a secret power those forms endears
Their social accents never vainly hears.

He seems to be groping in stumbling phrases after what he was to say triumphantly in the *Lines composed above Tintern Abbey* four years later:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

There is a similar change in his description of natural images. Like every lover of the mountains he delighted in the movement of cloud shadows across the hills on a day of sun and wind.

In *An Evening Walk* he renders the image thus:

And shades of deep embattled clouds were seen,
Spotting the Northern cliffs with lights between.

We should perhaps not notice it at all but for the irritating wrongness of the word 'Spotting'.

In *The Prelude* the same image takes its final, unforgettable form:

Oh soul of Nature! excellent and fair!
That didst rejoice with me, with whom I too
Rejoiced through early youth, before the winds

And powerful waters, and in lights and shades
That marched and countermarched about the hills
In glorious apparition.

The change is not only a change in poetic language, though that is of vital importance: some profound alteration has come about in Wordsworth's inner life. What had happened to him between the writing of these early poems and the extraordinary flowering of his poetic genius in 1798?

The French Revolution for one thing. He had lived through that, and the effects of the year he spent in France had penetrated to the recesses of his mind and heart. He had met Coleridge, and his sister Dorothy had been restored to him.

Wordsworth has described twice over with acute psychological insight the effect upon him of the French Revolution—in *The Prelude*, and again in a part of the Solitary's story in *The Excursion*. The general result is well told by De Quincey.

Mighty was the transformation which it wrought in the whole economy of his thoughts; miraculous almost was the expansion it gave to his human sympathies; chiefly in this it showed its effects—in throwing his thoughts inward into grand meditations upon man, his final destiny, his ultimate capacities of elevation; and secondly, in giving to the whole system of the thoughts and feelings a firmer tone, and a sense of the awful *realities* which surround the mind; by comparison with

which the previous literary tastes seemed fanciful and trivial.¹

The change in Wordsworth's poetry is felt through and through, in every aspect of subject-matter and form. He tells in *The Prelude* that until his twenty-third year man was in his affections and regards subordinate to Nature:

—a passion she,
A rapture often and immediate joy,
Ever at hand; he distant, but a grace
Occasional, his hour being not yet come.

He had, as he said, approached human nature from the golden side,

And would have fought, even to the death, to attest
The quality of the metal which I saw.

He inherited from the eighteenth century a belief in the essential goodness of man's nature. But more than this, what he knew of shepherds on his native hills led him to love and revere human beings. And so, when in France he was plunged into the first flood of revolutionary ardour, he abandoned himself with all the zest of a generous lover to the new faith.

Europe at that time was thrilled with joy,
France standing on the top of golden hours,
And human nature seeming born again.

The Lake Poets : William Wordsworth.

O pleasant exercise of hope and joy!
For mighty were the auxiliars which then stood
Upon our side, we who were strong in love!
Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven!

He was carried away by the abstract ideals of liberty and equality and by the doctrine of the perfectibility of man. But his nature was firm and practical, and the abstract ideals would soon have evaporated if they had remained in the air. It was when he came to know Beaupuis, the Republican officer, who showed him the sharp realities of the suffering poor under the old regime, that he realized the necessity of revolution. 'I became a patriot', he says, 'and my heart was all Given to the people and my love was theirs. He was within an ace of throwing in his lot with the Girondins when he was recalled to England by lack of funds and perhaps through the force of personal claims which had become pressing. For he had been swept away by other tides. Strong in his passions as in his affections (his sister speaks of a certain violence in his affection) he had fallen in love with a French girl, Annette Vallon. She returned his love, and bore him a daughter. His sudden withdrawal to England was perhaps partly forced upon him by the need to get money for their support. Certain it is that on his return he suffered rebuffs and reverses which

reduced him to a state of mental suffering as acute as it was far-reaching. We shall not understand Wordsworth nor the motive powers of his poetry till we accept up to the hilt the depth and force of his feeling for humanity: it lay at the core of his nature and lasted his lifetime. I think we must recognize that the fate of France preyed upon his mind as much as the fate of Annette. He returned to England 'a Patriot of the World'. When England declared war upon France early in 1793 the shock struck down to the very foundations of his moral nature. His intense love for England and belief in her as the stronghold of liberty came into violent conflict with his faith in France as the deliverer—no less—of humanity. This faith in its turn was to be rudely overthrown. In Paris a despotic government had been supplanted by a tyranny yet more cruel. Napoleon was rising to power, and the French armies were changing a war of self-defence into one of conquest. Wordsworth's feelings were 'soured and corrupted upwards to their source'. In his desperate, obstinate effort to cling to his central belief in human nature and its hope of redemption, he sought succour in a creed which banished feeling and took its stand on reason. Godwin's *Political Justice*, appearing early in 1793, appealed to him irresistibly. But it could give no more than temporary relief. Godwin's Man was a feelingless

abstraction. Wordsworth's beliefs had their roots in passionate feeling. He turned from Godwin and 'gave up' moral questions in despair. But his nature was fundamentally robust and sane. He found his way back from torturing mental conflict to peace and health in the society of his devoted sister and that of his new friend Coleridge, in a country life which seemed to bridge over a gulf and join itself to his early days in the mountains. For a time his love for Annette and misery at his separation from her and their child must have troubled him deeply, but I think it is clear that the separation inevitably meant a gradual drifting apart both of Annette from him, and of him from her. He undoubtedly meant to marry her, but as certainly her family would oppose the marriage. In politics their division was growing wider. She became more and more involved in the Royalist cause, and, as Legouis has shown, took an active part in helping Royalists to escape. By the time he was able to go over to France during the Peace of Amiens in 1802, ten years after their brief intimacy, they had mutually agreed that their relation was not to be permanent. Wordsworth and Dorothy spent a month with her and his daughter, before his marriage to Mary Hutchinson.

The extraordinary tumult and excitement of his year in France was in one sense an interruption in

the steady sequence of his development, but in the result, as De Quincey saw, it was a powerful stimulus to the growth of his mind and of his poetic faculty. Hazlitt touched the surface of the matter in his lively picture of the new revolutionary mode in poetry. True it is that Wordsworth took for his heroes tramps, beggars, and pedlars, and for his poetic models the humble ballads, but the inner necessity that impelled him had its source in himself. The revolutionary creed told him that every human being was intrinsically great, and capable of infinite development. He knew it intuitively already. The French Revolution promised to translate the idea into fact, and in the event disastrously belied its promise. But Wordsworth set himself, with the hard tenacity of his nature, to examine the facts for himself. He would not give up his hopes for man till he had tested human nature in its elements. How was this to be done? 'By stripping our own hearts naked, and by looking out of ourselves towards men who lead the simplest lives, and those most according to Nature, men who have never known false refinements, wayward and artificial desires, effeminate ways of thinking and feeling'¹ In his wanderings on the country roads he found in the humblest human beings a strength and energy that surprised him.

He saw into the depths of human souls,
Souls that appear to have no depth at all
To careless eyes.

He bent in reverence
To Nature and the power of human minds,
To men as they are men within themselves.

The power that surprised him in tramps and beggars and outcast women was not the thing that Godwin valued in man. It was feeling, not reason, that Wordsworth found when he groped to the bottom. The elementary feelings, the essential passions of the heart are at their purest and simplest, he found, in humble and rustic people. These are the powers in human nature which are like the primal energies of Nature: their strength, force, and beauty seem to spring from the same source; through them man and Nature are one. This was his discovery. When he reached this truth, and it remained truth for him to the end, his mind had recovered its tone, his imagination was released, and the poetry of the *Lyrical Ballads* and the *Lines composed above Tintern Abbey* followed.

He has told feelingly of the part played by his sister and by Coleridge in his restoration. Both gave him what he sorely needed, devoted affection and faith in his genius. I think we ought to stress what he does not himself speak of explicitly, Coleridge's

SO

THE MAKING OF THE POET

contribution to his understanding of the human mind, and especially of his own mind. Coleridge says of this period of his own life when he settled at Nether Stowey: 'I now devoted myself to poetry and to the study of ethics and psychology. Now these were precisely the topics over which Wordsworth had been tormenting himself. There can be no doubt that Coleridge's subtle all-embracing mind brought help to Wordsworth in his struggle to adjust and repair his thought from the damaging effect of his recent experiences in France. He had witnessed there and become obsessed by the perversion of good men to crime. On his return to England he was deeply disturbed by the hard conditions of the poor, now to be aggravated by the effects of war. The poems of this period bear the marks of his tortured state of mind. Of the *Salisbury Plain*, later published as *Guilt and Sorrow*, he said: 'Its object is partly to expose the vices of the penal law and the calamities of War as they affect individuals. It is a tale of cruel wrongs suffered by an innocent woman, chiefly as the result of war, and by a technically guilty but essentially good man, who ends on the gallows as a confessed murderer. Of *The Borderers* he wrote: 'The study of human nature suggests this awful truth that, as in the trials to which life subjects us, sin and crime are apt to start from their very oppo-

site qualities, so there are no limits to the hardening of the heart and the perversion of the understanding to which they may carry their slaves. Now Coleridge's praise of Wordsworth's *Salisbury Plain* was directed, not to his psychological study of crime and suffering, but to the powers of the poet's mind revealed in it. This gave a new turn to Wordsworth's thoughts and must have gone far to relieve him of his gloomy obsession. Again, Coleridge's enthusiasm for *The Borderers* went necessarily hand in hand with a cordial understanding of Wordsworth's convalescence from the disease of Godwinism, from which Coleridge had himself by this time triumphantly recovered.

One of Godwin's humanitarian ideas did, however, appeal to them both, his suggestion of a measure of penal reform which should substitute 'colonization' (we should say transportation to the colonies) for the gallows. Wordsworth's poem, *The Convict*, echoes this thought:

My care, if the arm of the mighty were mine,
Would plant thee where yet thou might'st blossom
 . again.

Coleridge's *The Dungeon* enlarges on the idea that Nature might reform the criminal.

There is a lost poem of Wordsworth's belonging

to the early Quantock days which shows a surviving interest in the theme of penal injustice, or the good man made criminal. This poem, which has been called *A Somersetshire Tragedy*—Wordsworth gave it no title—was upon an incident reported by their friend Thomas Poole to Wordsworth and Coleridge, in connexion with a spot marked on the ordnance map, 'Walford's Gibbet', about half-way between Nether Stowey and Alfoxden. Here, Poole told the poets, a good high-spirited man, John Walford, was hanged for a murder, certainly committed on that spot, but, according to Walford's confession, 'not fore-intended'. A summary of the story, a moving human document, is told in *The Quantocks and their Associations* by a certain William Luke Nichols, who relates that he has seen a poem on the subject by Wordsworth, sent to Poole with other poems in a manuscript book. The manuscript book is now in Dove Cottage: it evidently came into Mr. Gordon Wordsworth's hands, who, thinking to guard his grandfather's reputation, has cut out and destroyed, as he states in his own hand, this nameless poem on the Quantock story. I wish the poet's grandson had not been so scrupulous. I should like to have read the poem, inchoate and unfinished as it is said to have been. What interests me is that Wordsworth should still, in the autumn of 1797, have felt irresistible

attraction in this subject of crime and undeserved punishment. He says of his own nature that he was 'slow somewhat, and stern of temperament'. His return to complete spiritual health was slow, and it was not till the spring of 1798, a full year after the beginning of his intimacy with Coleridge, that he poured out the joyous poetry of the *Lyrical Ballads*. Another point that interests me in the Quantock poem is the name of its hero, John Walford. Now Robert Walford was the name Wordsworth adopted for the hero of his *Salisbury Plain* at one stage of its revision. This linking in his mind of the two stories is significant. It is to be noted that Wordsworth betrayed a remarkable lack of invention when it came to providing names for his poetical characters. Lucy Gray is a name taken from a poem by the Cumbrian poet, Robert Anderson. Most surprising of all is his choice of the name Martha Ray for the heroine of *The Thorn*. Martha Ray, mistress of Lord Sandwich, was Basil Montagu's mother, murdered in conspicuous circumstances by a jealous lover in 1779. Now Wordsworth was on intimate terms with Basil Montagu when he wrote *The Thorn*. How could he out of all possible combinations of names have chosen that precisely of Montagu's unfortunate mother? The thing remains inexplicable. His introduction of the name Walford into

a manuscript of *Salisbury Plain* in 1799 shows that by that time he had abandoned all idea of publishing the Quantock tragedy.

In the *Lyrical Ballads* we hear undertones of tragic suffering, but the prevailing notes are exultant and happy. Both poets afterwards spoke of the time of their composition as one of a marvellous happiness. For Wordsworth it was a year of joyful discovery. He found his poetic theme and he found the right language for it.

II

LYRICAL BALLADS AND POEMS OF 1807

THE *Lyrical Ballads* were published anonymously in 1798. Wordsworth's experience had led him inevitably to make a revolution in poetry. English poetry has known many leaders of revolt. Wordsworth's was a revolt of a nature and importance which perhaps no literary revolt had before. It was a revolt against literature, or the literary element in poetry, an assertion of the supreme value of life at all costs in poetry. In his Advertisement to the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, he said: 'The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure. He deals this blow at contemporary prejudice, from the shoulder, in the very forefront of his preface. He then begs his readers to ask themselves whether the book contains 'a *natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents*', and if the answer be affirmative, to 'consent to be pleased, in spite of that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision',

We have been shivering on the brink of the
Lyrical Ballads. Let us now take the plunge.

1.

There is a thorn; it looks so old,
In truth you'd find it hard to say,
How it could ever have been young,
It looks so old and grey.
Not higher than a two-years' child,
It stands erect, this aged thorn;
No leaves it has, no thorny points;
It is a mass of knotted joints,
A wretched thing forlorn.
It stands erect, and like a stone
With lichens it is overgrown.

2.

Like rock or stone, it is o'ergrown
With lichens to the very top,
And hung with heavy tufts of moss,
A melancholy crop:
Up from the earth these mosses creep,
And this poor thorn they clasp it round
So close, you'd say that they were bent
With plain and manifest intent,
To drag it to the ground;
And all had joined in one endeavour
To bury this poor thorn for ever.

3.

High on a mountain's highest ridge,
Where oft the stormy winter gale

Cuts like a scythe, while through the clouds
It sweeps from vale to vale;
Not five yards from the mountain-path,
This thorn you on your left espy;
And to the left, three yards beyond,
You see a little muddy pond
Of water, never dry;
I've measured it from side to side;
'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide.

What in the name of poetry is this? It is, Wordsworth would reply, a lyrical ballad.

It has a simple ballad theme, the common story of a woman whose lover has betrayed her and married another. On the day of his wedding the betrayed woman goes out of her mind. Afterwards her baby is born and mysteriously disappears. No one knows how it died, but everyone believes that it lies buried under a little mound by an ancient thorn-tree. In an early note-book of Wordsworth's I find the following lines copied out from a ballad in *Hurd's Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs*:

Ah there she's lean'd her back to a thorn
O and alas-a-day, O and alas-a-day
And there she has her baby born.
Ten thousand times good-night and be wi' thee.

She has houked a grave ayont the sun,
O and alas-a-day, O and alas-a-day

And there she has buried the sweet babe in.

Ten thousand times good-night and be wi' thee.

Wordsworth takes this ballad theme and treats it lyrically, or to use his own words, he has taken a natural subject from common life and looked at it through an imaginative medium. His favourite way of telling his story is to make someone else speak. In *The Mad Mother* and *The Forsaken Indian Woman* it is the woman herself who speaks. In *The Thorn* it is an old sea-captain of the neighbourhood. Wordsworth's object is truth and life: he wants to be as close as he can to the thing itself, to get away from poetic diction, artifice, and ornament, and to use language as people use it when they talk to one another, repeating words and phrases, circling round the point of interest. In *The Thorn* the old man tells what seems a rambling inconsequent tale, but is in reality a circling of the imagination round one centre—something that happened and the place where it happened. Places are as important to Wordsworth as people. The poem, he says, was suggested by the sight of an old stunted thorn on the ridge of the Quantock Hills, and that image must have been fertilized in his mind by his memory of the ballad I have quoted. The centre of the poem is the thorn-tree, with the little pond and the hill of moss beside it, the strange haunting scene of a human tragedy.

Here the wretched woman comes, and here her misery finds utterance—finds in some inscrutable way fulfilment. Her babe is dead, and for her agony there is no cure.

Now would you see this aged thorn,
This pond and beauteous hill of moss
You must take care and choose your time
The mountains when to cross.
For oft there sits, between the heap
That's like an infant's grave in size,
And that same pond of which I spoke,
A woman in a scarlet cloak,
And to herself she cries,
'Oh misery! oh misery!
'Oh woe is me! oh misery!'

At all times of the day and night
This wretched woman thither goes;
And she is known to every star,
And every wind that blows;
And there beside the Thorn she sits
When the blue daylight's in the skies
And when the whirlwind's on the hill
Or frosty air is keen and still,
And to herself she cries,
'Oh misery! oh misery!
'Oh woe is me! oh misery!'

Nature seems to sympathize with her love and suffering. She has covered with beautiful mosses the little mound where the child lies buried;

And close beside this aged thorn,
There is a fresh and lovely sight,
A beauteous heap, a hill of moss,
Just half a foot in height.
All lovely colours there you see,
All colours that were ever seen;
And mossy network too is there,
As if by hand of lady fair
The work had woven been,
And cups, the darlings of the eye,
So deep is their vermilion dye.

Ah me! what lovely tints are there!
Of olive-green and scarlet bright,
In spikes, in branches, and in stars,
Green, red, and pearly white.
This heap of earth o'ergrown with moss,
Which close beside the thorn you see,
So fresh in all its beauteous dyes,
Is like an infant's grave in size
As like as like can be:
But never, never anywhere,
An infant's grave was half so fair.

The old sea-captain is superstitious, as such men are, Wordsworth says. His tale, after touching on the birth of the baby, ends thus:

No more I know, I wish I did,
And I would tell it all to you;
For what became of this poor child
There's none that ever knew:

And if a child was born or no,
There 's no one that could ever tell;
And if 'twas born alive or dead,
There 's no one knows, as I have said,
But some remember well,
That Martha Ray about this time
Would up the mountain often climb.

.
But that she goes to this old Thorn,
The Thorn that I've described to you,
And there sits in a scarlet cloak,
I will be sworn is true.
For one day with my telescope,
To view the ocean wide and bright,
When to this country first I came,
Kre I had heard of Martha's name,
I climbed the mountain's height:
A storm came on, and I could see
No object higher than my knee.

'Twas mist and rain, and storm and rain,
No screen, no fence could I discover,
And then the wind! in faith, it was
A wind full ten times over.
I looked around, I thought I saw
A jutting crag,—and off I ran,
Head-foremost, through the driving rain,
The shelter of the crag to gain,
And, as I am a man,
Instead of jutting crag, I found
A Woman seated on the ground.

I did not speak—I saw her face,
Her face!—it was enough for me;
I turned about and heard her cry,
'Oh misery! Oh misery!'
And there she sits until the moon
Through half the clear blue sky will go,
And when the little breezes make
The waters of the pond to shake,
As all the country know,
She shudders, and you hear her cry,
'Oh misery! Oh misery!'

I've heard the scarlet moss is red
With drops of that poor infant's blood;
But kill a new-born infant thus!
I do not think she could.
Some say, if to the pond you go,
And fix on it a steady view,
The shadow of a babe you trace,
A baby and a baby's face,
And that it looks at you;
Whene'er you look on it, 'tis plain
The baby looks at you again.

And some had sworn an oath that she
Should be to public justice brought;
And for the little infant's bones
With spades they would have sought.
But then the beauteous hill of moss
Before their eyes began to stir;
And for full fifty yards around,

The grass it shook upon the ground;
But all do still aver
The little babe is buried there,
Beneath that hill of moss so fair.

I cannot tell how this may be,
But plain it is, the Thorn is bound
With heavy tufts of moss, that strive
To drag it to the ground.
And this I know, full many a time,
When she was on the mountain high,
By day, and in the silent night,
When all the stars shone clear and bright,
That I have heard her cry,
'Oh misery! Oh misery!
Oh woe is me! Oh misery!'

The Thorn is a great and remarkable poem. It is easy to see the elements out of which it was made: the 'elementary feelings' or 'essential passions of the heart', love of maid for man, agony at the lover's desertion, love of mother for child, misery of the distraught mind which seeks relief in the wild or calm companionship of Nature. But the kind and quality, the deeper implications of the poetry composed from these elements, are not so easy to see. *The Thorn* has its weak places, its crudenesses, its tiresome redundancies—the old sea-captain's rambling style stumbles at times on the edge of bathos, perhaps tips over in Tve measured it from side to

side, 'Tis three feet long and two feet wide'—but the poem remains alive, powerful, able to capture the imagination. Its triumph is in its fusion of the elements, the human passion and the natural scene, so that each expresses itself in and through the other: the misery and love of the woman, and the bleakness yet beauty of the tree, pond, and mound. We see the wild desolate scene *through* the human passion, whilst the stark human passions are lifted into permanence, even beauty, by the setting of earth, air, and sky.

Ballads had a vogue in the eighteenth century. Collectors published anthologies of traditional ballads, and threw in modern lyrics; poets of the day 'restored' old ballads and wrote new ones in up-to-date form. Wordsworth, with no antiquarian interest, created a new form of his own, and in so doing achieved poetry of highest value both in its intrinsic power and in its far-reaching influence. Crude and ineffective, even ludicrous, as the *Lyrical Ballads* seemed to critics and seasoned readers of the day, they have held their own and justified Wordsworth's belief in them. Crabb Robinson notes that 'Wordsworth was of opinion that posterity will value most those Lyrical Ballads which were most laughed at'. He said this when Robinson had remarked that no metrical form of his various poems gave *him* so much

pleasure as the sonnets. 'You are quite wrong Wordsworth replied.

Wordsworth surely knew that the composition of these ballad poems had required a supreme and daring effort of imagination. What he had tried to do was to leave the world of his own mind with all its gathered experience, and to *enter into* the minds and hearts of simple people so as to render their thoughts and feelings with naked truth. His attempts later to improve the style of the *Lyrical Ballads* only reveal the intrinsic purity and Tightness of what he tampered with. There is no better example than this stanza from *The Forsaken Indian Woman*:

My child! they gave thee to another,
A woman who was not thy mother.
When from my arms my babe they took,
On me how strangely did he look!
Through his whole body something ran,
A most strange something did I see;
—As if he strove to be a man,
That he might pull the sledge for me:
And then he stretched his arms, how wild!
Oh mercy! like a little child!

For 'A most strange something' he substituted 'A most strange working'; and in the last line he changed 'Oh mercy, like a little child' to 'Oh mercy, like a *helpless* child'.

Wordsworth had the power to project himself into the woman's mind, and to express what he found there in words she herself might have used; 'like a little child' is what *she* would have thought and felt: 'a helpless child' is the onlooker's phrase.

To find a language fit to express the elementary feelings of simple people he listened to the words that came from their lips, and to find a poetic form to fit them he went back to the ballads. In doing so he thought to discard altogether the dress of poetry—poetic diction, elaborate metres, finished literary style, and this becomes highly significant when we recall his earlier poetry, soaked as it is in verbal reminiscence and echoed cadences of other poets. It is hard to see in the *Lyrical Ballads* any literary influence at all except that of the ballads. But the ballads, of which he became a devoted reader, left clear traces on his style. In his essay supplementary to the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* he pays a glowing tribute to Percy's *Reliques*. He says that English poetry has been absolutely redeemed by it. I do not think there is an able writer of the present day who would not be proud to acknowledge his debt to the *Reliques*. I am happy to make a public avowal of my own. The collection was not confined to traditional ballads: it contained dressed-up ballad tales and modern lyrics. Wordsworth evidently knew them

all. He quotes from *The Children in the Wood* in his famous preface, and there is a phrase from that poem, belonging certainly to the poetic diction he despised, which seems to have stuck in his head.

The babes in the wood are described thus:

The one a fine and pretty boy
Not passing three years old,
The other a girl more young than he
And framed in beauty's mould.

Wordsworth followed suit in *The Anecdote for Fathers*. This is his picture of little Basil Montagu, the boy whose practice of lying he watched with such lively interest:

I have a boy of five years old,
His face is fair to see,
His limbs are *cast in beauty's mould*,
And dearly he loves me.

Again he borrowed an image for his *Mad Mother* from the *Frantic Lady* of Percy's group of mad songs (the contrast of titles is significant):

I burn—my brain consumes to ashes!
Within my heart there glows a solid fire,
Which in a thousand ages can't expire.

Thus the Frantic Lady. The Mad Mother simply says

A fire was once within my brain.

We are reminded, too, of Martha Ray in *The Thorn*:

A cruel, cruel fire, they say,
Into her bones was sent:
It dried her body like a cinder,
And almost turned her brain to tinder.

'The disyllabic rhymes, so natural in the naive ballad, so apt in mock-heroic, may have in serious poetry a jiggling effect which tends to the ridiculous. And indeed, this tendency in the style of the ballad has been noticed by good authorities. Scott pointed out that 'the simplicity of the ballad involves an inconvenience fatal to the continued popularity of any species of poetry, by exposing it in a peculiar degree to ridicule and parody'. And Coleridge wrote of his own single experiment in homely ballad style, *The Three Graves* (a poem begun by Wordsworth), that it was not a poem but a common ballad tale, and he doubted 'whether this is a sufficient justification for adopting the style in a composition not professedly ludicrous'.

Wordsworth wrote lines which would grace a parody of his own muse; best of all, of the little pond in *The Thorn*,

I've measured it from side to side,
'Tis three feet long and two feet wide.

Crabb Robinson told Wordsworth he dared not read

those lines aloud for fear of ridicule (the good man was bent on converting his friends to Wordsworth's poetry). Wordsworth replied, *They ought to be liked*. And for two decades he stood up to the laughter. Then, in 1820, he substituted lines of a more conventional poetic type. The pond becomes

Though but of compass small, and bare
To thirsty suns and parching air.

All very well, but the lines take us outside the poetic world he has created in *The Thorn*. So do those he substituted for the artless couplet:

And she was happy, happy still
Whene'er she thought of Stephen Gill.

Here they are:

While friends and kindred all approved
Of him whom tenderly she loved.

Alas! poor Wordsworth! He had become sensitive about one of the features of ballad style which had earlier appealed to him: the repetition of single words.

And first there crew the red, red cock,
And then there crew the grey.

So runs the ballad.

Alice Fell's cloak was first 'A wretched, wretched rag indeed', but Wordsworth must needs alter it to

'A miserable rag indeed'. The repetition was in the true ballad style, familiar to Keats when he wrote the best of all literary ballads:

And then I shut her wild, wild eyes
With kisses four.

(The ballads always tell us the exact number of things.)

Repetition of phrases belongs as inevitably to the ballad way of telling a story. Coleridge adopts the trick in *The Three Graves*:

And hither too the old man came,
The maiden and her fear;
Then *tell me*, Sexton, *tell me why*
The toad has harbour here.

We remember Wordsworth's tiresome insistence on extracting a lie from little Basil Montagu:

And five times to the child I said
Why, Edward, *tell me why*.

He wrote a subtle defence of tautology in a note to *The Thorn*, pointing out the psychological reason for verbal repetition. Coleridge and he came to see that they had used it to excess in this period, as their later revisions in *The Ancient Mariner* and in many of the *Lyrical Ballads* show.

Another feature of the true ballad style came happily to Wordsworth's aid—the swift short ballad

simile, which has its origin in the proverbial phrases of the people: 'red as a rose was she', 'green as the grass', 'light as a leaf on tree'. These ballad similes fell in pat with his idea at this time of the form poetic imagery should take.

The mad mother speaks to her babe:

My pretty thing, then shalt thou sing,
As merry as the birds in Spring.

In one of his rare love-songs:

She I loved was strong and gay
And like a rose in June.

Wordsworth knew how much he owed to the ballads, but he was still more conscious of his debt to real speech. He liked to draw into his poetry spoken phrases that he himself had heard, or that his friends reported to him. The words in the last stanza of *The Idiot Boy*.

The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,
And the sun did shine so cold,

the foundation, he tells us, of the whole poem, were reported to him by Tom Poole. Of *Simon Lee* he says, the expression 'I dearly loved their voices' was word for word from the lips of the old huntsman. Wordsworth's belief in the vital power of the language really used by men in a state of strong feeling is something that we must accept up to the hilt. It

leads him to a strange paradox: there is no doubt, he says, that 'the language of the greatest poet must in liveliness and truth fall far short of that which is uttered by men in real life under the actual pressure of those passions, certain shadows of which the Poet produces in himself'. And 'while the Poet describes and imitates passions, his situation is altogether slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering'.

Has any other poet at any time held this perverse belief that poetry has *less* freedom and power to express human feeling than the human actors and sufferers themselves whose experience the poet tries to render? The only writer whom I recall as expressing a similar conviction is that master of prose, the naturalist W. H. Hudson, who says he can never feel that the great music of our composers compares in power and beauty with the music of nature. I think there is a similar experience behind the two pronouncements. To Wordsworth, as to Hudson, the most vital and intense apprehension he has ever known comes from life and nature itself, not through thought, not through art, but directly, as if in a moment, by a shaft of light, he penetrated to the very core of life. To communicate this intense experience to others the poet must use words. Let him,

says Wordsworth in effect, trust to the words that belong to the experience itself, the simple words human beings use when they feel strongly, and let him shun, as altogether irrelevant and estranging, the literary phrase and traditional apparatus of poetry. Now there is clearly some self-deception here. When people suffer deeply they will express their inmost feelings, if at all, in a sob, a gulp, or a wringing of hands, not in words.

We live in a sophisticated age and our language has no exuberance. The poet Yeats was troubled that his verse for drama was not, like Shakespeare's, a natural growth out of contemporary speech—'People to-day', he wrote, 'have no artistic and charming language except light persiflage, and no powerful language at all, and when they are deeply moved they look silently into the fireplace Wordsworth, like Scott, believed that simple and humble people, less restrained by the habit of suppressing their feelings, can express them in powerful language. Scott with his strong sense for character could render this expressive language in prose, as he tells us he means to do, and does, in *The Antiquary*. Wordsworth gropes after it, and has a strong sense of its value.

—Is there not pie asks]

An art, a music and a strain of words

That shall be *life*, the acknowledged voice of life,
Shall speak of what is done among the fields—
More grateful, more harmonious than the breath,
The idle breath of softest pipe attuned
To pastoral fancies?¹

But to catch this language of life is, he seems to conclude, 'a task above my skill'.

When Wordsworth lifts a fragment of real speech into the *'Lyrical Ballads'* he gives it poetic power by its context. In the poem *Simon Lee* the words that he heard the old huntsman speak, 'I dearly love their voices', draw their right poetic significance not, as Wordsworth would have us think, from the fact that they were actually spoken by the hero of the poem, but from the rhyming lilt of the lines and the imaginative epithet he gives to the hounds:

And still there 's something in the world
At which his heart rejoices;
For when the chiming hounds are out,
He dearly loves their voices.

There is nothing here of the effect that Browning sometimes achieves triumphantly of an echo of real speech. What Wordsworth does is to frame his language to the needs of the poetic world that he creates, and it is a world of poor and humble folk who feel and suffer in close touch with the earth and

¹ *The Recluse*, 401-9.

near the margin of sheer necessity. Hence, the words used, but not the way he uses them, belong to the vocabulary of such people:

And she was known to every star
And every wind that blows.

This language of which we have tried to analyse the elements belongs, as Wordsworth said, to the 'majority' of the poems of 1798, the lyrical ballads proper. There are other poems in the volume which might be called philosophical or meditative lyrics, written in ballad-like metres with a more accomplished touch. In *Expostulation and Reply* Matthew expostulates with William:

Why William, on that old grey stone
Thus for the length of half a day, ,
Why William, sit you thus alone
And dream your time away?

You look round on your Mother Earth
As if she for no purpose bore you,
As if you were her first-born birth,
And none had lived before you!

And William replies:

The eye it cannot chuse but see,
We cannot bid the ear be still,
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against or with our will.

Nor less I deem that there are Powers,
Which of themselves our minds impress,
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.

This is not the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society. Would that it were! Yet it owes its unashamed simplicity to the discipline of the ballad experiment. Wordsworth's discovery of a new poetic world and the revolution he brought about in revealing it are taken now as a matter of course, so much have his successors profited by the changes he wrought. 'It is the honorable characteristic of poetry', he said, in the Advertisement to the *Lyrical Ballads*, 'that its materials are to be found in every subject that can interest the human mind. He emancipated the poetic subject; and he brought back poetic language to its source in the living tongue. Thanks to Wordsworth, Browning could take as subject Mr. Sludge the medium no less than Fra Lippo Lippi. Tennyson could develop a rustic theme with even a banal simplicity:

'Take your own time, Annie, take your own time

And our twentieth-century poets can sweep, as we know, from Byzantine glories to damp housemaids on area steps, and can freely explore the possibilities of a poetic language which may range from

the charged words of inscrutable nursery rhymes through every compelling idiosyncrasy of elliptical speech to the allusive lingo of learned scholarship.

But to read Wordsworth aright we must enter his poetic world as if we entered it for the first time, and I would urge that we should enter first into the world he reveals in that volume of 1798. It breathes the freshness of mountain air, the poetry seems to come from the earth like a mountain spring: its language is as colourless as water. The poet is looking into the heart of man and into the life of nature as if indeed he saw things for the first time:

You look round on your mother earth . . .
As if you were her first-born birth,
And none had lived before you.

If he cannot give you this sense of the miracle of life, he gives you nothing.

A beginner might be advised to start at the end of the volume and read first the poem that was written last, *Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey*, where Wordsworth reveals what lies behind the sturdy faith in truth and fact of the *Lyrical Ballads*. Now in any of these ballad poems we may catch at moments a glimpse of something behind and beyond the story and its scene: it will generally come at the point where man and nature meet, the

point in Wordsworth's inner experience where poetry is born. In 'one of the rudest of the ballads', as Wordsworth called *Goody Blake and Harry Gill*, it comes when Goody kneels beneath the moon, and curses Harry Gill:

The cold, cold moon above her head,
Thus on her knees did Goody pray.
Young Harry heard what she had said,
And icy cold he turned away.

'The cold, cold moon above her head': there is a strange vibration here, as if the veil of reality were lifting, as if we not only saw an old woman caught stealing, but felt the whole universe in sympathy with her, as if for a moment we were living in another dimension, the dimension of the infinite.

Wordsworth said himself, 'In poetry it is the imaginative only, viz. that which is conversant with, or turns upon, infinity, that powerfully affects me.' In *Tintern Abbey* he takes us to the source of this element in his own poetry. It lies in a particular mood of his mind:

that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul;

While with an eye made quiet with the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

Other poets have expressed the idea of the spiritual harmony of the universe: Pope in admirably phrased and balanced lines:

All are but parts of one stupendous whole,
Whose body Nature is, and God the soul.

But truth is not thus 'carried alive' into the heart. Wordsworth's expression of the same idea has the authentic power of the poet's whole mind and personality. He tells what he knows.

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

This is the first poem in which Wordsworth's genius finds full expression: the blank verse, low-toned and familiar, yet impassioned, moves with a sureness and inevitable ease from phase to phase of his mood. It has the quiet pulse, suggesting 'central peace',

which is felt under all his great poetry. From his own significant comment we learn that he had in mind an elaborate literary form: 'I have not ventured to call this Poem an Ode; but it was written with a hope that in the transitions and the impassioned music of the versification, would be found the principal requisites of that species of composition. Yet he composed it, as he said, on that four-days ramble from Tintern to Bristol, the last twenty lines being completed as he walked down the hill from Clifton. Not a word of it was altered and not any of it written down till he reached Bristol.

It is a piece of highly accomplished verse, conceived and composed in a full flood of creative activity. It opens the new phase in his poetic life, which is recorded in the second volume of the *Lyrical Ballads*, in the *Poems* in two volumes of 1807, and in the first version of *The Prelude*—that short, glorious period of creation when, at the height of his powers, he drew upon the manifold resources of his literary experience, as well as upon the stored riches of his inner life.

He told Landor later that there was a time when he thought the sonnet an egregiously absurd form. This would have been the period of the *Lyrical Ballads*, when he tried to release poetry from the bonds of elaborate metre and stereotyped diction. The

volumes of 1807 include sonnets of the more difficult Italian pattern, odes of both forms favoured in the eighteenth century, and poems in a great variety of metres. The diction as well as versification of these poems harks back to his favourite poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth had turned his back on his personal life and had made something like a strenuous voyage of discovery, a sort of arctic expedition, into a region where life was reduced to its elements, the outward trappings to their simplest: his aim to penetrate to the heart of man and the inner life of nature. In the *Poems* of 1807 he is back in the world of his own personal life and thought. Many of his studies of human nature, as in the *Lyrical Ballads*, are in narrative form, but the story is not stark and naked, it is told lyrically from the impulse of the poet's mood and in its atmosphere. Simon Lee was set ruthlessly before us with his patched coat and 'swoln' ankles: the Leechgatherer must have been no less decrepit and poorly clad, but Wordsworth sees him as a strange half-alive feature of a desolate landscape:

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie ,
Couch'd on the bald top of an eminence.

Lucy Gray of the second volume of the *Lyrical Ballads* has for its sub-title *Solitude*. Wordsworth told

Crabb Robinson that his object in it was to exhibit poetically entire solitude, and that he represented the child as observing the day-moon which no town or village girl would ever notice. The theme of solitude is worked out in naked ballad-style in the bare bones of the lonely child's story. *The Solitary Reaper* of the 1807 volume treats the same theme with a difference. The human figure is seen in its beautiful setting, as we see things in a dream: solitude is set to a lovely verbal music in a lyrical stanza:

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

The note of solitude sounds and swells through this opening stanza till it fills our mind as her song fills the deep valley. She is single in the field, solitary, singing by herself, alone:

O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

In the *Lyrical Ballads* there was no word of politics (unless we class as a political reflection the lines

And much it grieved my heart to think
What man had made of man).

In the *Poems* of 1807 we have the first magnificent series of his comments on public affairs in the *Sonnets dedicated to Liberty*. And no less significant than the outward movement of his mind towards the events of the time is its inward concentration upon the problems of the moral and spiritual life. His thought now moves freely in its natural orbit. The moral problem pressing on him at this time has a universal significance. A young man comes to the end of his youth: the vigour and confidence which seemed to guide him inevitably in the paths of love and truth are ebbing away: how is his moral being to be sustained? Wordsworth's answer is an *Ode to Duty* on the model of Gray's *Ode to Adversity*, following its model in a blend of personal feeling and general reflection. Duty is invoked as the law of the universe:

Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong
And the most ancient heavens through thee are fresh and
strong.

These lines stigmatized by Jeffrey as utterly without meaning held for Wordsworth the kernel of the poem. He said that 'in his character of philosophical poet having thought of morality as implying in its essence voluntary obedience and producing the effect of order, he transfers in the transport of imagination the Law of moral to physical natures,

and contemplates through the medium of that order, all modes of existence as subservient to that spirit'. Wordsworth, like Shelley, believed imagination to be the prime mover in the moral world. Far from advocating blind submission to a moral code he is champion of the human will, and in a stanza afterwards withdrawn he presses his point:

Yet not the less would I throughout
Still act according to the voice
Of my own wish; and feel past doubt
That my submissiveness was choice:
Not seeking in the school of pride
For 'precepts over dignified',
Denial and restraint I prize
No farther than they breed a second Will more wise.

In his character of philosophical poet he has presented us with a doctrine. This raises a crucial question. How are we to take philosophy expressed in the terms of poetry? The other ode of these volumes, the great 'Immortality' ode, poses the same question in a yet livelier form. Is the underlying thought of this 'poem on the Immortality of the Soul', as Wordsworth called it, to be taken seriously? Undoubtedly it is, for the thought is as vital a part of the poem as its imagery and its music. But this is not to say that the doctrine of pre-natal existence is set forth deliberately by Wordsworth as an accepted belief.

Southey tilted the balance awry when he called the poem 'The Ode on Pre-existence—a dark subject darkly handled'. Wordsworth's prosaic and scrupulous statement is a good answer to the question we are often constrained to ask of a poet: Do you really believe what you say? He says that he has not meant to inculcate a belief in a prior state of existence. 'It is far too shadowy a notion to be recommended to faith as more than an element in our instincts of immortality/ But he adds—

there is nothing in Revelation to contradict it, and the fall of man presents an analogy in its favour. A pre-existent state has entered into the popular creeds of many nations—and it is an ingredient in Platonic philosophy. Archimedes said he could move the world if he had a point whereon to rest his machine. Who has not felt the same as regards the aspirations of his own mind? Having to wield some of its elements when I was impelled to write this poem on the Immortality of the Soul, I took hold of the notion of pre-existence as having sufficient foundation in humanity for authorizing me *to make for my purpose the best use I could of it as a Poet.*

His answer is, in essence: I am not a man standing upon oath, I am a poet making a poem; the poem is true to itself: it contains within itself the law of its own integrity. Wordsworth was apt to think more than a poet should of his moral purpose, but he knew as well as another that a poem is a poem: a work of

art, not a piece of doctrine. When Miss Martineau told him that *The Happy Warrior* was Dr. Channing's favourite poem, 'Ay', said Wordsworth, 'that is not on account of the poetic conditions being best fulfilled in that poem; but because it is (solemnly) a chain of extremely *valooable* thoughts'. When, we may ask, are the poetic conditions best fulfilled in a poem? Surely when imagery is as important as thought, and sound as important as either, when sensuous and intellectual elements are fused in a compelling harmony. This means—the poet must choose the right subject, the right imagery to express the subject, the right metre and language for both. The right subject, for Wordsworth, that which will set his imagination working at highest power is, in his own words, 'What in man is human and divine' and, we must add, what in Nature answers to the mind of man; but man and nature must be the man and nature that he, Wordsworth, knows. He always goes astray when he wanders off his native heath. Witness *The Egyptian Maid* and *The Russian Fugitive*, negligible poems with romantic themes, in settings completely foreign to Wordsworth, and in metres that would be the undoing of any serious poem. *The White Doe*, *Hartleap Well*, and *The Song of Brougham Castle*, romantic in subject, are saved by having their roots in Wordsworth's known country-

side, thus supplying him with the natural imagery that fits his theme; In no poem are the poetic conditions more perfectly fulfilled than in *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*. The theme is for him the central theme, the immortal nature of the human spirit, intuitively known by the child, partly forgotten by the growing man, but to be known once more in maturity through intense experience of heart and mind. The imagery in which the theme is unfolded is inseparable from it—so much one with it that it may be said to *be* the theme as truly as the underlying thought.

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.

As the poem opens the vision of the earth we know is bathed in a divine radiance of light, and the imagery of light presides over the whole ode.

The line 'Apparelled in celestial light' has a sheer loveliness of musical phrasing, not found at all in the *Lyrical Ballads*, and rare in Wordsworth anywhere: it is touched with the poetic magic which he could invoke when a visionary beauty demanded it. His thought is carried from stanza to stanza and from phase to phase in images of light.

In childhood celestial light played over the earth;
there was splendour in the grass and glory in the
flower; but now, in manhood,

The Rainbow comes and goes,
And lovely is the Rose,
The Moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare;
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair;
The sunshine is a glorious birth; . . .

All these different radiances of colour and light are
beautiful: rainbow, moon in a cloudless sky, star-
light on water, sunshine itself—

But yet I know, where'er I go,
That there hath past away a glory from the earth.

The poet feeling himself in isolation on a happy May
morning tries to join in the general rejoicing of
birds, lambs, streams, and children. But there is a
tree and a field that remind him of something that is
gone.

The Pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

Here the first part of the poem ends. Wordsworth
did not take it up for more than a year. The second
part opens on a note both deep and sure:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,
 And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
 From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
 Upon the growing Boy,
 But He
Beholds the light, and whence it flows,
 He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
 Must travel, still is Nature's priest,
 And by the vision splendid
 Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

Wordsworth clung stubbornly to his earlier intuitions. He had an invincible belief in life and growth; he knew that all that truly lives is continuous, subject to change and development, but not to dislocation and discontinuity. The spiritual life of the child had its source, he thought, behind birth, and its goal beyond death. Immortality, that unearthly light that broods over the child, a 'Master o'er a slave', is for the child a truth—a truth which we are toiling

all our lives to find, lost in the gloomy obsession of mortality, 'in darkness lost, the darkness of the grave'.

But the spark, if we knew it, is still alive:

Oh joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth *live*,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!

And he gives thanks and praise not for the simple creed of childhood, delight and liberty, but 'for those obstinate questionings of sense and outward things', for the feeling of pure spirituality, the 'all-soulness as he called it, that he had as a child—

But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
Are yet a master light of all our seeing.

This light, this spiritual revelation, can to the end give us sight of that immortal sea that brought us hither. And for the earthly light that once transformed our world of every day,

What though the radiance that was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;

We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be,
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

And once more an image of light sets the seal on the
thought:

The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.

The child entered intuitively into the dream-like
wonders of the natural world, and there slaked his
thirst for the divine: man must learn through his
suffering heart and his thinking mind another way
into the abiding world of the spirit.

Along with the predominating imagery of light
there is a humbler image, alive with meaning, that
emerges from time to time. A flower is the natural
symbol of the beautiful growths of earth, of that
Nature which is the 'breath of God', which gives
back to man an answering assurance of his own
spiritual life. The image in one shape or another—
lovely is the rose, the pansy at my feet, fresh flowers

that children gather in the mountain valleys, the splendour in the grass, the glory in the flower— keeps threading its way through the poem till it comes to rest in the quiet inevitable lines of the close:

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

As a piece of poetic art no poem of Wordsworth stands up better to critical inspection. The thing is a triumph. The metrical form deserves close analysis no less than the imagery. Wordsworth had a surprising natural mastery of metre when he was in the poetic vein. A poet who could proceed in one stride from *Alice Fell* with its simple four-lined ballad stanza to the first part of this elaborate *Ode* (the composition of the two lies within a single fortnight) could have achieved anything he wished in metrical variety. In the *Ode* he launched upon an English Pindaric of the irregular form popularized by Cowley. He had never tried such a metre before, and he takes to it like a duck to water. Each stanza has its own shape and length, its own rhyme-scheme, its own subtle arrangement of the varying lengths of line: five foot, four foot, three foot, two foot, closing often on the slow-moving Alexandrine (once it is a

fourteener), in which the thought settles and crystallizes. De Quincey said that Wordsworth had difficulty in rhyming. But here the rhymes, playing into the varying movement of the stanzas, seem refreshingly easy and natural: sometimes there are internal rhymes; and the end-rhymes are here and there disyllabic. In Wordsworth's printed text there is one blind rhyme—it is in line 66, 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy'. But in the manuscript which Wordsworth prepared for the press¹ he has with his own hand put this right, allowing himself for once a line of one foot

But He

Beholds the light and whence it flows.

I have printed the lines thus in our Oxford text, and I hope the correction will be accepted.

The diction, like the metre, is supply moulded to his purpose as his thought moves from stage to stage. Matthew Arnold found something declamatory in the *Ode*, but those phrases which might, taken in isolation, deserve that epithet:

The cataracts blow their trumpets to the steep,—
The heavens laugh with you in their jubilee,—
My head hath its coronal,

will be found to be right in their context, where the

¹ The Longman manuscript now in the possession of Mr. E. H. W. Meyerstem.

poet is forcing a joy which he does not feel, and his language accordingly receives a rhetorical heightening. When he cuts himself short with

But theres a Tree, of many, one,
A single Field which I have look'd upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone,

he is once more in the vein of bare simplicity in which for him the bare truth is best told. The varied language of the *Ode*, released as it is from the experimental purpose that purged that of the *Lyrical Ballads*, has touches of splendour and of magic that belong to another mode altogether; yet it has upon it the stamp of that earlier ascetic discipline. The words tell his thought with a truth and simplicity that remains the groundwork of his poetic style. As with Milton, his deepest meaning can distil itself in monosyllables. This is the genius of the English language. 'While yet we live', pleads Milton's Eve to Adam,

While yet we live, scarce one short hour perhaps,
Between us two let there be peace.

And so Wordsworth ends his *Ode*:

Thanks to the human heart by which we live. . . .

With Wordsworth, Coleridge said, words mean all of their possible meaning.

III

THE *PRÉLUDE*

THE CHRONOLOGY OF ITS COMPOSITION

THE finest fruit of Wordsworth's great creative period is the poem published after his death in 1850 under the title of *The Prelude*. The title was then chosen by Mary Wordsworth. Wordsworth had given it none: it was known to his family and friends as 'the poem to Coleridge', or "the poem on his own early life'. Coleridge generally writes of it in his letters as *The Recluse*, but he refers to it in *The Friend* as 'an unpublished Poem on the Growth and Revolutions of an Individual Mind, by Wordsworth'. It is, I think, the most vital work of Wordsworth's genius. Anything that can be revealed of the history of its composition is worth knowing.

When did Wordsworth begin to write it, and what relation has it to the great projected philosophical poem, *The Recluse* which we hear so much about from both Wordsworth and Coleridge? These matters have been closely investigated and with true insight by Professor Garrod in his illuminating lectures and essays, and by Professor de Selincourt in his great edition of *The Prelude*. I have addressed myself to the same problems, and after a prolonged

study of the manuscripts at Dove Cottage, I find myself in general agreement with these two scholars, with some more light to throw upon one or two places. We are a little nearer, I think, to the whole truth.

To clear the decks we must first deal with Wordsworth's own statement in his Preface to the first edition of *The Excursion* in 1814. He begins by saying that *The Excursion* is only a portion of a poem: it belongs to the second part of a long and laborious work to consist of three parts and to be called *The Recluse*. He then explains the origin of this title of *The Recluse*:

Several years ago, when the Author retired to his native mountains, with the hope of being enabled to construct a literary Work that might live, it was a reasonable thing that he should take a review of his own mind, and examine how far Nature and Education had qualified him for such employment. As subsidiary to this preparation, he undertook to record, in verse, the origin and progress of his own powers, as far as he was acquainted with them. That Work, addressed to a dear Friend, most distinguished for his knowledge and genius, and to whom the Author's Intellect is deeply indebted, has been long finished; and the result of the investigation which gave rise to it was a determination to compose a philosophical poem, containing views of Man, Nature and Society; and to be entitled, "*The Recluse*", as

having for its principal subject the sensations and opinions of a poet living in retirement.—The preparatory poem is biographical, and conducts the history of the Author's mind to the point when he was emboldened to hope that his faculties were sufficiently matured for entering upon the arduous labour which he had proposed to himself; and the two Works have the same kind of relation to each other, if he may so express himself, as the ante-chapel has to the body of a gothic church. . . . The first and third parts of 'The Recluse' will consist chiefly of meditations in the Author's own person; and in the intermediate part ('The Excursion') the intervention of characters speaking is employed, and something of a dramatic form adopted.

Now it must be confessed that Wordsworth has given here a somewhat confusing account of the origins of *The Prelude*. He tells us that he retired to his native mountains in the hope of constructing a work that would live, but then decided that in preparation for this he must investigate his qualifications; and thus he was led on to write a poem recording the origin and progress of his powers (*The Prelude*; and the result of this investigation was the resolve to compose the philosophical poem, to be called *The Recluse*? Now his retirement to his native mountains dates from 21 December 1799 when he and his sister moved into Dove Cottage, but we know from the evidence of manuscripts and letters

that the *idea* of the great philosophical poem was already fully fledged in the spring of 1798; and we know further that the first tentative draft of Book I of *The Prelude* was made in the winter of 1798 during his sojourn in Germany. Wordsworth, as so often, has got his chronology wrong. Let us try to piece together the true story with the aid of all the first-hand evidence we have.

It begins, I think, as far back as 1788, his second year at Cambridge. 'The Poet's soul was with me at that time', he writes in *The Prelude* (1805, vi. 64).

. . . Those were the days
Which . . . first encourag'd me to trust
With firmness . . . that I might leave
Some monument behind me which pure hearts
Should reverence.

This follows upon his dedication to poetry in the long vacation among the mountains, described so movingly in *The Prelude* (iv. 323-38). After leaving college he wavered irresolutely in the choice of a profession. He contemplated the Law, then the Church: But 'all professions are attended with great inconveniences', he said, 'that of the priesthood with most'. He had a passion for wandering, and perhaps the necessity of staying in one place was the inconvenience he dreaded most. At any rate he spent the next four years in what must have seemed to his

guardians wilful idleness: first in London with occasional wanderings in the country, then in Orleans, Blois, and Paris. 'France lured me forth', he tells us. It was an exciting period in the French Revolution. In all this Wordsworth was driven on by an impelling desire to see life. He believed that his destiny was to be a poet, but he knew that he lacked experience, and that he must somehow or other get it without chaining himself to a profession. On his return to England he busied himself with getting published the two poems he had written, *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*. He did not think highly of them, but he hoped that they would show his guardians that he was capable of something. He was once more in anxiety about his future, having now the further responsibility of Annette and their child upon his shoulders. He seriously contemplated making a living by journalism, but he was saved from plunging into an uncongenial career by a legacy from his friend Raisley Calvert, who had had the discernment to see that this wayward, strong-willed young man with the passion for wandering, who defied his guardians and would settle to no profession, had something in him that was destined to be of benefit to mankind: he recognized in him the poet he was to become. Tributes in hard cash have a genuine ring. He left him £900, 'having hope',

Wordsworth tells us in *The Prelude* (the later text reads 'in firm belief')—

That I had some endowments by which good
Might be promoted . . . [He]]
By a Bequest sufficient for my needs
Enabled me to pause for choice, and walk
At large and unrestrained, nor damp'd too soon
By mortal cares . . .
He clear'd a passage for me and the stream
Flowed in the bent of Nature.¹

(*Prelude* (1805), xiii. 352-67.)

Calvert died in January 1795; it was not till the autumn of that year that Wordsworth was able to carry out the plan that he and Dorothy had long cherished of settling down together to a frugal life in the country. At midnight on 26 September they arrived at Racedown in Dorset, and Wordsworth was free to begin his serious life as a dedicated poet.

We now take up the tale as Wordsworth tells it in the first book of *The Prelude*. Professor Garrod has, to my mind convincingly, shown that the first fifty-four lines of *The Prelude* which Wordsworth referred to later as the 'glad Preamble', must have

¹ 'This bequest was from a young man with whom, though I call him friend, I had but little connexion; and the act was done entirely from a confidence on his part that I had powers and attainments that might be of use to mankind' Letter of W. W. to Sir G. Beaumont, 20 February 1805.

been composed in 1795 as a joyful outpouring when he set out for Racedown on his release from a disagreeable sojourn in London.

'Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze', so *The Prelude* opens.

.

O welcome Messenger! O welcome Friend!
A captive greets thee, coming from a house
Of bondage, from yon City's walls set free,
A prison where he hath been long immured.
Now I am free, enfranchised and at large

.

The burthen of his own unnatural self is shaken off:

Enough that I am free; for months to come
May dedicate myself to chosen tasks;
May quit the tiresome sea and dwell on shore,
If not a Settler on the soil, at least
To drink wild water, and to pluck green herbs—
Nay more . . . this hour
Hath brought a gift that consecrates my joy;
For I, methought, while the sweet breath of heaven
Was blowing on my body, felt within
A corresponding mild creative breeze,
A vital breeze which travelled gently on
O'er things which it had made.

This breeze, he says, is breaking up a long-continued frost and brings with it vernal promises, the hope

Of active days, . . .

Of prowess in an honourable field,

Pure passions, virtue, knowledge and delight,

The holy life of music and of verse.

And then he makes a very significant statement:

Thus far, O Friend! did I, not used to make

A present joy the matter of my Song,

Pour out, that day, my soul in measur'd strains

Even in the very words which I have here

Recorded.

And he proceeds with the tale of his walk to the chosen cottage and his sojourn there.

We are to take it then that those first lines were composed extempore on that very autumn day—he explicitly says it was autumn—which was, he hoped, to inaugurate his life as a poet. Critics have recently been trying to prove that the occasion was not the setting forth to Racedown in 1795, but the setting forth to Dove Cottage, Grasmere, in 1799. Without going into all the details of the proof, I would simply point out: first, that Wordsworth's words about quitting the sea and dwelling on shore,

If not a Settler on the soil, at least

To drink wild water, and to pluck green herbs,

imply that he is only looking to a temporary residence. Now the house at Racedown, lent them by the Pinneys, was exactly that. When they took Dove

Cottage they meant to settle down permanently. Secondly, the phrase about the 'Vital breeze', the new poetic impulse breaking up a long-continued frost—that is, a long dead period in his poetic life—applies aptly to September 1795,¹ but not at all to the autumn of 1799 when he could look back to one of his most fertile periods of poetic production, in Germany, and in England after his return.

After the preamble the poet goes on to tell of his journey to the cottage, and of what happened when he got there. As he approached the chosen vale he had

. . . assurance of some work
Of glory, there forthwith to be begun,
Perhaps too there performed.

Raisley Calvert's legacy brought a promise of release, but it brought also a burden of responsibility. I do not think this has been sufficiently realized. Calverthad bequeathed it with the express hope that his friend might produce a great work which should benefit mankind. Wordsworth must have tried now to harness himself to the purpose of

¹ The only puzzling factor in this dating of the *Preamble* is that some of its phrases appear in an apparently tentative form in the note-book Wordsworth used at Goslar. Perhaps the explanation is that Wordsworth composed but did not write down the 'glad preamble' in 1795, and was going over its phrases in memory at Goslar.

the great poem. He proceeds in the next lines, which we may call the post-preamble, to confide to Coleridge, whom he begins to address as soon as the preamble is over, the difficulties that beset him. He thinks of different themes, epic, romantic, and more personal and variegated narrative, and finally—

My last and favourite aspiration!—
I yearn towards some philosophic Song
Of Truth that cherishes our daily life;
With meditations passionate from deep
Recesses in man's heart, immortal verse
Thoughtfully fitted to the Orphean lyre;
But from this *awful burthen* I full soon
Take refuge, and beguile myself with trust
That mellow years will bring a riper mind.

He is baffled, he says, by a mind that every hour
'turns recreant to her task'.

I recoil and droop, and seek repose
In listlessness from vain perplexity,
Unprofitably travelling towards the grave,
Like a false steward who hath much received
And renders nothing back.

Here the post-preamble ends, but the line goes straight on—

—Was it for this
That one, the fairest of all Rivers, lov'd
To blend his murmurs with my Nurse's song . . .

and his reminiscences of childhood start from this point.

This long passage of the post-preamble with its recurrent appeals to Coleridge is written in the present tense. I think we shall be obliged to admit that it cannot all have been written at Racedown. It was not till the summer of 1797, just before the Wordsworths removed to Alfoxden, that the intimacy with Coleridge began, and, as we shall see, the idea of addressing the poem to him did not occur to Wordsworth till the summer of 1798. We shall return ^{tr} — this, and to the puzzling problem of the post-preamble's date, in its place in the story.

After iiaceciown came Alfoxden and the *annus mirabilis*, 1797 to 1798, when the two poets met every day, sharing their ideas and kindling each other to poetry. The *Lyrical Ballads* were conceived and written, and in the spring of 1798 Wordsworth, under Coleridge's genial and compelling influence, made the momentous decision to embark upon a long philosophical poem. On 11 March he writes to James Losh: 'I have written 1300 lines of a poem which I hope to make of considerable utility. Its title will be *The Recluse* or views of Nature, Man, and Society. It seems probable that he wrote at this time the memorable lines 'On Man, on Nature, and on human life . . .' which he appended to his Preface

to *The Excursion* as 'a kind of Prospectus' to *The Recluse*.

In another letter of the same month he seems full of confidence about the project, wants books, and says of *The Recluse* that he 'knows not anything that will not come within the scope of his plan'. But clearly he has not worked it out, and apart from the 1,300 lines which he has written, he gets no farther: he is soon involved in preparing *Lyrical Ballads* for the press.

In the winter he is in Germany, and here, in exile, it is natural that his thoughts should turn back to his childhood in his native hills; the letters which pass between him and Coleridge show him writing passages of blank verse—Dorothy speaks of 'the mass that William has written'—which record early experiences afterwards to appear in the first and fifth books of *The Prelude*: the skating passage, 'There was a Boy', and the episode of the stolen boat. A note-book of Dorothy's, in which she was practising her German, has been appropriated by Wordsworth for writing down some of these pieces along with others;—they include some of the cardinal passages of Book I, and they make nearly a continuous narrative. Professor de Selincourt gives a careful account of this manuscript, naming it JJ, in pages added to his great edition of *The Prelude*. The first passage begins:

Was it for this
 (That one the fairest of all riyers lpvI,
 To blend KT's murmurs with my Nurse's song. . . .

His theme in the whole sequence is: Nature singled me out and educated me—Was it for this? That is, was it to produce a poet who failed after all in his vocation? The phrase opens four of the passages, and alternative repeated phrases are—'Ah not in vain . . . , "Ah not for this At the end of the first book as we know it in its final form, he tells us:

My hope has been that I might fetch . . .
 Reproaches from my former years whose power
 May spur me on.¹

It is clear that at Goslar in that winter of 1798—9 he set to work to spur himself on to the writing of his great poem by recalling all that Nature had done for him in childhood.

Among these refreshing reminiscences of his early life there is one passage that stands out, seeming to suggest that he is not merely jotting down separate incidents, but that he has in mind an underlying plan.

¹ Cf. a reading of MS. V, i. 305:
 Nor without kindred self reproach can I
 Recall to mind how in a later day, &c.

Nor while, though doubting yet not lost, tread
The mazes of this argument, and paint
How Nature by collateral interest
And by extrinsic passion peopled first
My mind with beauteous objects, may I well
Forget what might demand a loftier song—

He is, I suppose, thinking of *The Recluse* which he had for the time being abandoned.

The rest of the passage I shall quote later, when I try to sift out some of the vital elements in his thought. My point here is that he was perhaps beginning to realize when he wrote those lines that a poem on his own early development might make an introduction to the master-work, the great philosophical poem, which he still could not get under way. At any rate the manuscript JJ makes it for the first time certain that Book I of *The Prelude* was substantially drafted in the winter of 1798-9 in Germany. This manuscript contains no allusion to Coleridge. It was after Wordsworth's return to England in May 1799 that the inspiration came to him to dedicate the poem on his early life, now shaping in his mind, to the friend who had prompted and aided him at every turn to study his own poetic genius.

The first we hear of this is in a letter of Coleridge to Wordsworth of 12 October 1799 in which he says:

I long to see what you have been doing. O let it be the tailpiece of 'The Recluse', for of nothing but 'The Recluse' can I hear patiently. That it is to be addressed to me makes me more desirous that it should not be a poem of itself. To be addressed, as a beloved man, by a thinker *at the close* of such a poem as 'The Recluse', is the only event, I believe, capable of inciting in me an hour's vanity.

This clearly means that Wordsworth has revealed to him his idea of composing a poem, which shall be dedicated to *him*, on the growth of his own mind, and that he hesitates as to whether it should be an independent poem or a sort of appendix to *The Recluse* upon which he knows Coleridge's heart is set. Coleridge evidently makes up his mind that it *is* to be a part of *The Recluse*, and he goes on referring to it as *The Recluse* in his letters. Wordsworth accepts the idea that it is to be somehow attached to the main structure of the greater poem, but hesitates at first as to how. Coleridge begged that it might be the tailpiece. Dorothy Wordsworth, writing in February 1804, calls it an 'appendix to the Recluse'; Wordsworth, on 6 March, writes of it as 'tributary to the Recluse', but a little later as 'introductory to' and as 'a portico to The Recluse', and this is evidently the idea that he settles down to. In the Preface to *The Excursion*, as we have seen, he calls it 'the preparatory poem'.

The dedication to Coleridge was indeed an inspiration. Without this, I believe, he would not have been able to carry the poem through to completion. Coleridge told Wordsworth he looked forward to *The Recluse*, the great tripartite poem, as the only true philosophical poem in existence. It was Coleridge's plan 'that Wordsworth should assume the station of a man in repose, one whose principles were made up, and so prepared to deliver upon authority a system of philosophy'. But this was what Wordsworth could not do. He had plenty of fertile ideas, but he had no constructive plan; it may be said without flippancy that in the event all that was accomplished of the great philosophical poem, apart from Book I and the magnificent Prospectus, was a Prelude to the main theme, and an Excursion from it. Wordsworth's genius could not express itself in Coleridge's terms: he could not write the true philosophical poem. Perhaps no poet can. At any rate he was right to follow his own bent. His poetic thought sprang out of the living body of his experience and could only be delivered through images and incidents and characters which belonged to the life of man and nature as he knew it: the autobiographic form of *The Prelude* fitted his genius. But even to carry through this congenial project he needed Coleridge's constant support and stimulus. His dependence on

him is recorded throughout *The Prelude* a typical appeal is this, from Book III:

O honor'd Friend
Who in my thoughts art ever at my side,
Uphold as heretofore my fainting steps.

There is a still more poignant personal note in a few deleted lines in Wordsworth's hand (they have not been published) which I found in an early note-book of Dorothy Wordsworth's. They follow upon a draft of the last lines of Book I of *The Prelude* and are headed *2nd Part*: thus they are an abortive beginning of Book II.

Friend of my heart and Genius, we had reach'd
A small green island which I was well pleased
To pass not lightly by, for though I felt
Strength unabated, yet I seem'd to need
Thy cheering voice, or ere I could pursue
My voyage, resting else for ever there.

Coleridge was the friend of his genius as well as of his heart. It was Coleridge who made him believe in the value of what he had to say as a poet, and who helped him to understand it in terms of thought. Wordsworth never forgot it.

We must now put together such evidence as the manuscripts give us of the next stages in the process of composition. The note-book of Dorothy's to

which I have just referred has many pages torn out, which must have contained most of Book I. And another similar note-book of the same period contains a copy in Wordsworth's hand of the first thirty lines of the passage beginning 'Was it for this . . . (*Prelude*, i. 271 et seq.), followed by stubs of torn-out pages which again probably held a draft of the remaining lines of the book. Both these note-books were used for copying out poems between 1798 and 1800. Professor de Selincourt notices two manuscripts, V and U, which contain Book II as well as Book I, and I agree with him that both of them, the one copied by Dorothy, the other by Mary Hutchinson, must have been written in the summer of 1799 when the Wordsworths were staying with the Hutchinsons on their return from Germany. I have found another manuscript of Book II, chiefly in Wordsworth's own hand, with a slightly earlier version than these two. We may conclude then that when Wordsworth moved into Dove Cottage in December 1799 he took with him the first two books of *The Prelude* in coherent fair copy. But Book I contained no preamble, and no post-preamble: it began in all the copies we have noticed so far with the half-line 'Was it for this'.

Once settled at Grasmere Wordsworth became absorbed in his new life, which linked itself so closely

with his affections and hopes of the past, and he wrote *Poems on the Naming of Places*, and started a series of Pastorals with local settings, of which *Michael* and *The Brothers* have survived. He also felt moved to write a record of the first months of his sojourn in a blank-verse poem called *Home at Grasmere*. This he afterwards adopted as the first book of the first part of *The Recluse*. *The Prelude* was for the time being laid aside. Coleridge writes in February 1800, 'I grieve that *The Recluse* sleeps'. He clearly means *The Prelude*. In the next three years we hear nothing at all of it, except for two notes of Dorothy Wordsworth in her Journal—26 December 1801: 'William wrote part of the poem to Coleridge'; and 11 January 1803: 'William working at his poem to Coleridge'. It is clear from more than one letter of Coleridge's that he continued to urge Wordsworth to get on with *The Recluse* and not to be led astray into writing short poems. Wordsworth somehow could not get on, and kept composing sonnets and other small things, till at last in October 1803 Coleridge reports triumphantly to Poole:

He has made a Beginning to his *Recluse*. . . . The habit of writing such a multitude of small Poems was hurtful to him—I rejoice therefore with a deep and true Joy that he has at length yielded to my urgent and repeated,

almost unremitting—requests and will go on with *The Recluse* exclusively. A great Work in which he will sail on; an open Ocean and a steady wind; unfretted by short tacks, reefing and hauling—great Work necessarily comprehending his attention and Feelings within the circle of great objects and elevated Conceptions—this is his natural Element. The having been out of it has been his Disease—

Now I am inclined to take Coleridge literally when he says Wordsworth has made *a Beginning to his Recluse*, understanding by *Recluse*, *The Prelude*. I think Wordsworth at this time wrote, in some coherent form, the first 271 lines of Book I leading up to 'Was it for this'. The Preamble he must have written down, at least in rough draft, long before this, and of the post-preamble, the long confession of his difficulties and delays in a period of baffled effort, I suppose that he would have made a few notes at Racedown. I suggest that at the close of this second baffled period at Grasmere, he at last pulled himself together and composed an account which combined the experience of the two periods. Coleridge is addressed in it, as he would not have been before the summer of 1799. At any rate it is in the early spring of 1804 that for the first time the preamble and the post-preamble (lines 1-271) form the opening of a manuscript copy of the poem. This is MS. M., the

companion volume to that which Mary and Dorothy prepared for Coleridge to take with him to Malta; both volumes contained the first five books of *The Prelude* with the first book for the first time complete.

From now on the history of the writing of *The Prelude* is plain sailing, and it is satisfactorily told in Professor de Selincourt's Preface. Under the stimulus of Coleridge's approaching departure Wordsworth made rapid advance in the early months of 1804, altered his plan for a poem of five books ending with his dedication to poetry in his nineteenth year, 1788, to the fuller project of a poem including his experience in France, and bringing his story down to 1798, when he felt his genius ripe for expression. The composition was brought to a close in 1805. Between 1806 and 1814 he was at work upon *The Excursion*, which was to form Part II of *The Recluse*. It was published in 1814. Coleridge found it very disappointing. Part I and Part III, to consist of 'meditations in the Author's own person', remained unwritten, burdening Wordsworth's conscience, and engaging the hopes of his friends for the next thirty years.

THE SUBJECT

(in *The Prelude* "Wordsworth gives a record—and he will vouch for the truth of it—of that inner life out

of which his poetry grew. He reveals a strange world, and the deeper we dive into it the stranger it becomes. It is the full intense life which he lived through his senses as a child and youth that he first tries to recapture and record; and the quality of that life that makes it invaluable—this is the surprising thing—is its sheer unquestionable spirituality. Most of us are moved at times by some beautiful aspect of Nature, a radiant sunset, or a moonlit cloudy sky] to ask: What is the meaning of this sense that Nature gives me of a life beyond sense, this feeling of an extraordinary beauty and mysterious power? Is there an ultimate spiritual power, and have I a spirit that can unite with it? Wordsworth never asks the question. The eternal spirit was revealed to him through his senses, and his spirit was aware of it from the first. So he believed, looking back). The deepest layers of his experience are often exposed in roughly written drafts of passages afterwards abandoned, or much clarified and reduced, before he found a place for them in his text. Here is one, leading up to the lines at the end of the first book of *The Prelude* which follow his description of the sports and pastimes of his schooldays: "

Nor while I paint
How nature by collateral interest
And by extrinsic passion peopled first

My mind with beauteous objects, may I well
Forget what might demand a loftier song;
For oft the Eternal Spirit, He that has
His Life in unimaginable things
And He who painting what He is in all
The visible imagery of all The World
Is yet apparent chiefly as the Soul
Of our first sympathies—O bounteous power,
In Childhood, in rememberable days
How often did thy love renew for me
Those naked feelings which when thou wouldst form
A living thing, thou sendest like a breeze
Into its infant being! Soul of things,
How often did thy love renew for me
Those hallowed and pure motions of the sense
Which seem in their simplicity to own
An intellectual charm, that calm delight
Which if I err not surely must belong
To those firstborn affinities that fit
Our new existence to existing things,
And in our dawn of being constitute
"The bond of union betwixt life and joy.

Yes, I remember when the changeful earth
And twice five seasons on my mind had stamp'd
The faces of the changeful year, even then,
A Child, I held unconscious intercourse
With the eternal Beauty, drinking in
A pure organic pleasure from the lines
Of curling mist, or from the level plain
Of waters colour'd by the clouds of Heaven.

This is to say that in his schooldays among the mountains Nature filled his mind with beautiful images. But more than this, the Eternal Spirit who reveals himself in all the visible imagery of the world, yet has his life in unimaginable things, spoke directly to Wordsworth's spirit even in his infancy by sending naked feelings into him like a breeze. The feelings are those same 'hallowed and pure, motions of the sense' which he can *remember* having known at the age of ten years. He wrote later of 'the powers of soul and sense mysteriously allied', and of 'the incumbent mystery of sense and soul'. But in his early years there was no mystery, no division, no double process. Soul and sense were one. As he drank in with his senses the lovely sight of morning mists over the lake, his soul was in communion with the eternal beauty. The visionary power, he has just told us, is somehow concerned both with *images* that flow in to his mind through his senses, and with *unimaginable things*, to which he reaches by communion with the Eternal Spirit. This visionary power, the natural gift of childhood, is what he commemorated in his great ode. In *The Prelude* he writes:

Our simple childhood sits upon a throne
That hath more power than all the elements.
I guess not what this tells of Being past,
Nor what it augurs of the life to come,
But so it is.

He is not going to argue that this visionary power proves the pre-existence of the soul, nor its survival hereafter; but the fact that the child possesses it, the momentous, unescapable fact remains. So it is. '

In another rejected passage which I find in an early manuscript of Book II he penetrates to an inner chamber of experience, empty of images:

By such communion I was early taught
That what we see of forms and images
Which float along our minds, and what we feel
Of active or recognizable thought,
Prospectiveness, intelligence or will,
Not only is not worthy to be deemed
Our being, to be prized as what we are
But is the very littleness of life.
Such consciousnesses seemed but accidents,
Relapses from the one interior life
Which is in all things, from that unity
In which all beings live with God, are lost
In God and Nature, in one mighty whole
As indistinguishable as the cloudless east
At noon is from the cloudless west, when all
The hemisphere is one cerulean blue.

What he is trying to express here is nothing less than the central experience of the mystic. Images are nothing; definable thought is nothing. These belong to the surface of the mind's life: there is something far more vital within. What is the meaning and

essence of life? We all ask the question. The mystic answers: It is *being*, it is *what we are*. The words *being* and *to be* have for Wordsworth the profound meaning they must always have for the mystic. What words can mean more? Wordsworth tells of 'the abyss of infinite Being'; of

Those mysteries of being that have made
And shall continue evermore to make
Of the whole human race one brotherhood.

He will rouse the sensual from their sleep

By words
That speak of nothing more than what we are.

The central experience of the mystic is something he himself can never describe; it is his plunge into the eternal Being, the merging of his spirit with the divine spirit—and that divine spirit has its life, as Wordsworth says, in 'unimaginable things'. '

'I beheld', said Angela of Foligno, 'the ineffable fullness of God, but I can relate nothing of it—inasmuch as it was a supernatural thing I cannot describe it in words, nor give any image thereof. So Wordsworth pleads 'the sad incompetence of human speech', and speaks of his 'elevated mood, by form or image unprofaned'. It has been rightly said that the language of mysticism is a negative language: 'The entry of the soul upon spiritual experi-

ence is an entry into a Cloud of Unknowing, a Divine Darkness, a fathomless abyss

In a moving passage in the most beautiful novel of our generation, Virginia Woolf's best-loved character, Mrs. Ramsay, has a respite from her family cares: 'She could be herself, by herself. And that was what she now often felt the need of—to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, into being oneself, a wedge-shaped *core of darkness*, something invisible to others. Our apparitions, our external selves, are simply childish, she thought. 'Beneath, it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is all unfathomably deep. This, she might add, is Being: it is what we are. She has spoken in the authentic language of the mystic.' Wordsworth uses that language, too, but he is something more than a mystic, he is *a poet*, and the poet cannot create his world out of nothing, out of darkness and the suspension of life. He has what the mystic may lack, he has creative imagination. Wordsworth calls it 'the vision and the _N faculty divine'—the faculty, that is, both of vision and creation. Now this faculty of imagination, the poetic faculty *par excellence* is really the hero, the leading figure, the presiding genius of *The Prelude*. I do not propose to expound this theme, pregnant as

it is, but merely to go behind the scenes and throw a little light, if I can, upon some of Wordsworth's subtle and sometimes obscure statements. The most mysterious and the most haunting of the passages that tell of the imagination is that in the sixth book of *The Prelude*. It follows the narrative of the travellers' crossing of the Alps: they are eagerly inquiring for the right path over the ridge, still hoping to press on and up, when the peasant tells them that their way is all down hill: all their inquiries ended in this—'that we had crossed the Alps'. As Wordsworth reaches this point in his narrative—

Imagination—here the Power so called
Through sad incompetence of human speech,
That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss
Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost;
Halted without an effort to break through;
But to my conscious soul I now can say—
'I recognize thy glory:' in such strength
Of usurpation, when the light of sense
Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
There harbours; whether we be young or old,
Our destiny, our being's heart and home,
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.

He has given us one of the authentic moods, or divine moments of the mystic: here is the cloud, the darkness, the mind's abyss, the entry into the sphere of the infinite. And what is imagination doing here? The clue to the whole operation is in the words 'the light of sense Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed The invisible world'. It is through the senses that the poet is brought to the threshold. It is his imagination that takes off from the world of sense into the world of spirit. This brings us very near to the source of all the power there is in Wordsworth's poetry.' In some of the note-books he used in the years 1798 and 1799 he has jotted down tentative passages describing the moods that lay behind the poetry he was trying to write at the time. Some of this alas! he never did write, for it was *The Recluse* he was preparing for, and *The Recluse* failed to be realized. The passages are intensely interesting for the revelation they give of the part played by the senses in the subtle processes of poetic thought. Here are two:

Oh 'tis a joy divine on summer days
When not a breeze is stirring, not a cloud,
To sit within some solitary wood,
Far in some lonely wood, and hear no sound
Which the heart does not make, or else so fits
To its own temper that in external things

No longer seem internal difference;
All melts away, and things that are without
Live in our minds as in their native home.

To gaze
On that green hill and on those scattered trees
And feel a pleasant consciousness of life
In the impression of that loveliness,
Until the sweet sensation called the mind
Into itself, by image from without
Unvisited, and all her reflex powers
Wrapped in a still dream of forgetfulness.
I lived without the knowledge that I lived,
Then by those beauteous forms brought back again
To lose myself again, as if my life
Did ebb and flow with a strange mystery.

These fragments, taken together, record an experience most significant for Wordsworth's poetic Life. Its foundation is a scene of quiet beauty (the element of stillness is essential) of which the images affect the poet with sensations of delight. His deeper consciousness is stirred and the first phase is marked by the presence of the images *within* his mind, as though they had passed from external to internal existence. So in *The Prelude* (ii. 348):

What I saw
Appeared like something in myself, a dream,
A prospect in the mind.

The second phase is the passage from a dreamlike consciousness of images to a deeper state in which the mind is called 'into itself, by image from without unvisited'. The pulse of physical life is suspended: 'I lived without the knowledge that I lived'. From such a trance-like mood springs the mystic vision, as he records it in Tintern Abbey, when

. . . the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

We must face here one of Wordsworth's hard paradoxes: he knew the power of 'the godlike senses', as he calls them, to lead straight into the life of things:

There is creation in the eye,
No less in all the senses; powers
They are that colour, model and combine
The things perceived with such an absolute
Essential energy that we may say
That those most godlike faculties of ours
At one and the same moment *are the mind*
And the mind's ministers; (MS.).

But he also knew the despotic power of the senses to shut off the mind from the deeper experience. He

thought the eye 'the most despotic of the senses'.
And we have the paradox thrust upon us in two pairs
of rejected lines in the great 'Immortality' ode.

And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills and Groves, . . .
I only have relinquished one delight,
Divine indeed of sense
A blessed influence.

in contrast with—

But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Throw off from us, or mitigate, the spell
Of that strong frame of sense in which we dwell.

To understand the two attitudes we must accept up to the hilt what he tells us himself of his youthful experience. In the Preface to his *Poems* of 1815 he speaks of his youth as a time 'when images of nature supplied to his mind the place of thought, sentiment, and almost of action'. Mathematics at Cambridge brought relief to 'a mind beset with images'. Thronging his brain, they were almost an obstruction. Yet, as we know, they were to him in those early days the very substance of poetry, and they remained its feeding source. '

Inevitably those first incomparable experiences of his childhood, when sense and soul were one, grew less and less frequent. The sense-experience began

to separate itself from the spiritual. But he deliberately cultivated memory—he could live intensely in the past, he could revive and re-create; and it is a chief part of his purpose in *The Prelude* to recall and quicken into permanent life those pregnant moments. For they were, he well knew, the making of him as a poet. He defined genius as 'the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe. . . . Of Genius in the fine arts the only infallible sign is the widening the sphere of human sensibility for the delight, honour and benefit of human nature'. With genius he significantly associates power. 'Every great poet if he is to be enjoyed must call forth and communicate power

Of Genius, Power,
Creation, and Divinity itself
I have been speaking, for my theme has been
What passed within me.

So he writes in *The Prelude*. He was deeply conscious of the power which fostered his genius, and when he probed into its sources he found that it came to him originally through a special awareness of Nature; it was there that a shaft opened which reached down to a new world of life. Now Wordsworth's senses were remarkably acute and strong, and like other men of genius he could recall the intense joy they brought him in childhood.

Hudson the naturalist insists rightly on the acuteness of the senses in children, and writes of his own experience: 'I rejoiced in colours, scents, sounds, in taste and touch: the blue of the sky, the sparkle of sunlight on water, the smell of dry and moist soil, the taste of honey, the feel of a blade of grass made me happy—and there were above all certain colours in flowers, in the plumage of birds, and their eggs which intoxicated me with delight

Wordsworth had an unusual endowment, especially in eye and ear (he had almost no sense of smell). The bodily eye (a common phrase with him, for he must distinguish it from the inward eye) was preternaturally sensitive in his youth, and preternaturally active. He speaks of 'the power of a peculiar eye' and says it 'could find no surface where its power might sleep. Equally sensitive was his ear: images of sound mean as much in his poetry as those of sight.

Here is his unforgettable account of the boy who hooted to the owls:

There was a Boy; ye knew him well, ye cliffs
And islands of Winander!—many a time,
At evening, when the earliest stars began
To move along the edges of the hills,
Rising or setting, would he stand alone,
Beneath the trees, or by the glimmering lake;
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands

Pressed closely palm to palm and to his mouth
Uplifted he, as through an instrument,
Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls,
That they might answer him.—And they would shout
Across the watery vale, and shout again,
Responsive to his call,—with quivering peals,
And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud
Redoubled and redoubled; concourse wild
Of jocund din! And, when there came a pause
Of silence such as baffled his best skill:
Then sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain-torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven received
Into the bosom of the steady lake.

Wordsworth placed this passage in 1815 first under the head of 'Poems of Imagination'. I have begun', he says in his Preface,

with one of the earliest processes of Nature in the development of this faculty. Guided by one of my own primary consciousnesses, I have represented a transfer of internal feelings, co-operating with external accidents, to plant for immortality images of sound and sight *in the celestial soil of the Imagination*. The Boy, there introduced, is listening with something of a feverish and restless anxiety for the recurrence of those riotous sounds

which he had previously excited; and at the moment when the intenseness of his mind is beginning to remit, he is surprised into a perception of the solemn and tranquillizing images which the Poem describes.

He has said something which will throw light on his idea of imagination: he has also made a lively contribution to the psychology of the senses. De Quincey has a story of Wordsworth, which comes in aptly here: unlike many anecdotes of the poet it is both evidently true and highly significant. During the Peninsular War Wordsworth was so intensely anxious for news from Spain that he and De Quincey would often walk four or five miles up the Keswick road towards midnight to meet the carrier's cart which brought the *Courier*. On one occasion they had waited on Dunmail Raise for more than an hour. At intervals Wordsworth had stretched himself at length on the high road, applying his ear to the ground, so as to catch any sound of wheels that might be groaning along at a distance. Once, when he was slowly rising from this effort, his eye caught a bright star that was glittering between the brow of Seat Sandal and of Helvellyn. He gazed upon it for a minute or so, and then made the following explanation:

I have remarked, from my earliest days, that if the

attention is energetically braced up to an act of steady observation, or of steady expectation, then if this intense condition of vigilance should suddenly relax, at that moment any beautiful, any impressive visual object falling upon the eye, is carried to the heart with a power not known under other circumstances. Just now my ear was placed upon the stretch, in order to catch any sound of wheels that might come down from the Keswick road; at the very instant when I raised my head from the ground, in final abandonment of hope for this night, when the organs of attention were all at once relaxing, the bright star hanging in the air above those outlines of massy blackness fell suddenly upon my eye, and penetrated my capacity of apprehension with a pathos and a sense of the infinite that would not have arrested me under other circumstances.

De Quincey comments that Wordsworth's attachment to Nature grew out of solitude and the character of his mind. 'What happened to the Boy in mimicking the Owls happened also to him/ It certainly did, for an early manuscript of the passage is written in the first person: the boy was Wordsworth.

To another passage from *The Prelude* which he selected for publication in *The Friend*, he gave the significant title *Growth of Genius from the influence of natural objects on the mind in a boyhood and early youth*.⁷

Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!
Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought,
That givest to forms and images a breath
And everlasting motion, not in vain
By day or star-light thus from my first dawn
Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me
The passions that build up our human soul;
Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,
But with high objects, with enduring things—
With life and nature—purifying thus
The elements of feeling and of thought,
And sanctifying, by such discipline,
Both pain and fear, until we recognize
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.

I take my courage in my hands and try to put in pedestrian prose the gist of what Wordsworth has said poetically in those lines. He is addressing the eternal spirit as the great creative intelligence who informs the universe and whom he recognizes in his own mind as the principle of thought; judging by his own experience images which have excited strong feelings in us move through our minds with a continuous life. If the images are great and beautiful, the feelings themselves will be purified. This is a recurrent theme with Wordsworth: images of the senses are joined with feelings—joy, fear, pain; and 'feeling comes in aid of feeling if but once we have been strong'; such feelings become a part of the

whole united personality built up by the mind's linking of past and present in a living chain of experience. Again and again in *The Prelude* he returns to earlier experiences, 'their spectacles and sounds', to 'drink as at a fountain'. He speaks of

the curious props
By which the perishable hours of life
Rest on each other, and the world of thought
Exists and is sustained.

Coleridge explains the idea in *The Friend* and rightly quotes Wordsworth to clinch it:

If men laugh at the falsehoods that were imposed on themselves in childhood, it is because they are not good and wise enough to contemplate the past in the present, and so to produce by a virtuous and thoughtful sensibility that *continuity in their self-consciousness*, which Nature has made the law of their animal life. . . . Men are ungrateful to others only when they have ceased to look back on their former selves with joy and tenderness. They exist in fragments. Annihilated as to the Past, they are dead to the Future, or seek for the proofs of it everywhere, only not (where alone they can be found) in themselves. A contemporary Poet has exprest and illustrated this sentiment with equal fineness of thought and tenderness of feeling:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;

So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.¹

This continual movement of the image through the life of the mind, which we have found abundantly illustrated in his poetry, is, Wordsworth thinks, in the special charge of the imagination. He spoke of images '*planted for immortality in the celestial soil of the imagination*'.

And what in the end is imagination?

When Wordsworth defines it in set terms he does not help us much.

. . . Imagination which in truth
Is but another name for absolute power
And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
And Reason in her most exalted mood.

He has forgotten or does not care to remember Coleridge's careful distinction between imagination and reason. His point is that imagination is the highest intellectual power. He set little store by abstract terms and had small use for them. His way is to probe and record, approaching his theme first through one vital experience, then another. He has shown us imagination as the faculty that apprehends

¹ *The Friend*, No. 6, 10 August 1809.

the infinite and as the faculty that deals with images. Finally, in the last book of *Tht Prelude* he reveals it in its various aspects as the faculty of creation, the poetic faculty *par excellence*. The revelation is made through an impressive natural scene—a mountain scene once more. The poet with two companions starts out one night, in a thick mist, to climb Snowdon from Beddgelert with the purpose of seeing the sun rise. After a stiff climb in the fog, suddenly there is a light upon the turf,

and lo! as I looked up,
The Moon hung naked in a firmament
Of azure without cloud, and at my feet
Rested a silent sea of hoary mist.
A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved
All over this still ocean; and beyond,
Far, far beyond, the solid vapours stretched,
In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,
Into the main Atlantic, that appeared
To dwindle, and give up his majesty,
Usurped upon far as the sight could reach.
Not so the ethereal vault; encroachment none
Was there, nor loss; only the inferior stars
Had disappeared, or shed a fainter light
In the clear presence of the full-orbed Moon,
Who, from her sovereign elevation, gazed
Upon the billowy ocean, as it lay
All meek and silent, save that through a rift—
Not distant from the shore whereon we stood,

A fixed, abysmal, gloomy, breathing-place—
Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams
Innumerable, roaring with one voice!
Heard over earth and sea, and, in that hour,
For so it seemed, felt by the starry heavens.

When into air had partially dissolved
That vision, given to spirits of the night
And three chance human wanderers, in calm thought
Reflected, it appeared to me the type
Of a majestic intellect, its acts
And its possessions, what it has and craves,
What in itself it is, and would become.
There I beheld the emblem of a mind
That feeds upon infinity, that broods
Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
Its voices issuing forth to silent light
In one continuous stream; a mind sustained
By recognition of transcendent power,
In sense conducting to ideal form,
In soul of more than mortal privilege.
One function, above all, of such a mind
Had Nature shadowed there, by putting forth,
'Mid circumstances awful and sublime,
That mutual domination which she loves
To exert upon the face of outward things,
So moulded, joined, abstracted, so endowed
With interchangeable supremacy,
That men, least sensitive, see, hear, perceive,
And cannot choose but feel. The power which all
Acknowledge when thus moved, which Nature thus

To bodily sense exhibits, is the express
Resemblance of that glorious faculty
That higher minds bear with them as their own.
This is the very spirit in which they deal
With the whole compass of the universe:
They from their native selves can send abroad
Kindred mutations; for themselves create
A like existence; and, whene'er it dawns
Created for them, catch it, or are caught
By its inevitable mastery,
Like angels stopped upon the wing by sound
Of harmony from Heaven's remotest spheres.
Them the enduring and the transient both
Serve to exalt; they build up greatest things
From least suggestions; ever on the watch,
Willing to work and to be wrought upon,
They need not extraordinary calls
To rouse them; in a world of life they live,
By sensible impressions not enthralled,
But by their quickening impulse made more prompt
To hold fit converse with the spiritual world . . .

You may say that this is a very vague account of the functions of the imagination, but it is the best you will ever get from Wordsworth. It grows out of an intense experience, sifted and clarified by memory, and it is clear as well as rich in its implications.

Nature in this marvellous scene is acting as a powerful mind acts: the power which she exhibits is,

he says, the express resemblance of that glorious faculty, imagination, which higher minds possess. First, there is the mysterious link with infinity, imaged in the chasm that divides the mist, the fixed, abysmal breathing-space from which arises the roar of streams as one voice, heard over earth and sea, reaching to the starry heaven. The imaginative mind is one that 'feeds upon infinity' and 'broods over the dark abyss—the mystical element again. Then there is the creative power by which imagination transforms objects ('communicating its creative energies to the images of the external world').¹ 'And the effect of this is not elaboration and variety but the exaltation or drawing into intense significance of the simple and ordinary. Imaginative minds 'build up greatest things from least suggestions'. And thirdly, they are not caught and kept in the world of the senses but use the senses as gateway for the soul.

in a world of life they live,
By sensible impressions not enthralled,
But by their quickening impulse made more prompt
To hold fit converse with the spiritual world.

One vital thing he omits to emphasize in his interpretation of the imagery, but it pervades the scene and we cannot miss it.

In the early version of the passage about the

chasm he used a strange expression which he afterwards excised—I suppose as too vague—but it tells us what he meant.

in that breach

Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,
That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodg'd
The soul, the *Imagination* of the whole.

We have in that *one voice* emerging from the chasm, which penetrates to earth, sea, and sky, the mysterious token and pledge of unity. Imagination perceives and creates unity.

The whole passage should be read closely in the two versions of 1805 and 1850: the first rougher, but alive with the impulsive movement of the experience itself. Both give an unforgettable impressio of the beauty, power, and mystery which Wordsworth found in the human mind. *The Prelude* is full of it, and it inspires closing lines. He and Coleridge, 'Prophets, of Nature, will speak to men a lasting inspiration,

sanctified

By reason and by truth, what we have loved
Others will love, and we will teach them how;
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this frame of things
In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of substance and of fabric more divine.

If we find this hard to swallow, we must remember

that as usual Wordsworth speaks from his own knowledge. He knew intimately three rare imaginative minds: Coleridge's, Dorothy's, and his own.

THE FIRST AND LAST VERSIONS

The Poem in its first complete form is preserved in two manuscript copies which Dorothy Wordsworth and Sara Hutchinson made in the winter of 1805-6. This early version was first published by Professor de Selincourt in 1926 side by side with the version which we all know in the posthumous edition of 1850. Wordsworth had, as we saw, intended this autobiographical record as an introduction to *The Recluse*, the great tripartite philosophical poem which he sketched in his Preface to *The Excursion*. When it became clear to him that the great poem would never be completed, he set himself to revise *The Prelude* so as to leave it in a fit state for publication after his death. The most important revisions were made in 1828, 1832, and 1839. A final copy embodying his last corrections was taken by his executors as the basis for the printed text of 1850. A comparison of the poem as it was completed in 1805 with the final version printed in 1850 is invited by Professor de Selincourt's great edition.

I shall not delay over stylistic changes; these revisions, and Wordsworth was an inveterate reviser,

follow a familiar course: bald simplicity gives place to a more decorative, more conventionally literary form. (An innocent, flat line, 'The day before the holidays began', is lifted into 'On the glad eve of those dear holidays'.) Rough and crude expression is smoothed and clarified; faults of ambiguity and loose repetition carefully amended. A more interesting change which affects the whole decorum of the poem springs from a change in his personal life. When he wrote and dedicated the poem to Coleridge the two were on terms of closest intimacy. In 1810 an unhappy estrangement divided them, and the old loving friendship was never regained. Many altered or omitted passages in *The Prelude* bear silent witness to the change. The tender address to Coleridge, 'most loving soul', is altered to 'capacious soul'; his 'gentle spirit' becomes a 'kindred influence'. The daring phrase in which Wordsworth claims their close intellectual kinship, 'though twins almost in genius and in mind', is struck out. And, most telling of all, the allusion to Dorothy, 'thy treasure also', is changed to the less poignant 'dear to thee also'. Further, the whole manner of the poem is altered. He had addressed himself to Coleridge heart to heart:

I speak bare truth
As if to thee alone in private talk,

he writes. In revising he changes the intimate and personal form, substituting general for particular expressions, replacing the pronoun *T* by impersonal constructions. In short, with a touch here and a new patch there, he turns what was a glorified private letter to Coleridge into a poetic confession fit for the medium of cold print.

But the most vital changes lie deeper still; they touch what we should now call the psychology of the poem. The inspiration of Wordsworth's poetry had its source in the power with which he realized a peculiar experience. The experience begins in sensation and ends in thought. It begins in such an adventure of the senses as that of his boyish bird's-nesting:

Oh! when I have hung
Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass
And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock
But ill sustained, and almost (so it seemed)
Suspended by the blast that blew amain,
Shouldering the naked crag, oh! at that time
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ear! the sky seemed not a sky
Of earth—and with what motion moved the clouds!—

(a passage whose power and significance is inexplicable; for what can we say of those last bare words except that they 'carry alive into the heart' some-

thing we have all heard with our ears and seen with our eyes, yet never felt with so strange a thrill?). It ends in such thought as that of the famous invocation:

Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!
 Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought,
 That givest to forms and images a breath
 And everlasting motion, not in vain
 By day or starlight thus from my first dawn
 Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me
 The passions that build up our human soul;
 Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,
 But with high objects, with enduring things,—
 With life and nature—

The experience was peculiar simply in its intensity. So pure and strong was the life his senses led that it passed on a tide of feeling into the life of his spirit. In the early *Prelude* Wordsworth told the inner workings of his mind as nakedly and truthfully as he could. The changes most to be deplored in his later text are those which overlay and obscure that naive immediate expression: they often mar the poetry; they more often disguise the truth.

The poet, Wordsworth has said elsewhere, is one

Contented if he may enjoy
 The things which others understand.

That was written in 1800. The early *Prelude* insists

again and again on the primacy and self-sufficiency of feeling. Of his Cambridge days we read:

I lov'd and I enjoy'd, that was my chief
And ruling business, happy in the strength
And loveliness of imagery and thought.

In the final text these lines go out and a single line stands in their stead:

Content to observe, to admire, and to enjoy.

Again, of his unsophisticated childhood he first wrote:

I felt, and nothing else; I did not judge,
but rewrote:

I felt, observed, and pondered, did not judge.

That bold trust in feeling meant a belief also in the value of sensation out of which such feeling springs. Seeking to tell how in London, living amongst thousands of nameless human beings, he was at times overpowered by the consciousness of 'the unity of man', he put it simply thus:

When strongly breath'd upon
By this sensation, whencesoe'er it comes
Of union or communion doth the soul
Rejoice as in her highest joy: for there,
There chiefly, hath she feeling whence she is,
And, passing through all Nature rests with God.

The conception came to him as a powerful sensation

out of which grew a profound feeling. The physical image 'strongly breathed upon', and the naked language,

There chiefly, hath she feeling whence she is,
And, passing through all Nature rests with God,

seem to spring straight out of the experience itself. In revising the lines he replaced the living fact by an intellectual statement about it:

The soul when smitten thus
By a sublime *idea*, whencesoe'er
Vouchsafed for union or communion, feeds
On the pure bliss, and takes her rest with God.

The simple truth about his inner life which he set out to tell in *The Prelude* was often strange and surprising. Two sides of it I have already touched upon: the power of images in the poet's mental life, and the deeper phase of experience known to the mystic, in which with a deep drop into himself he seems to join the inner life of the whole universe. The early text of *The Prelude*, bold and crude as it is, gives us a further insight into these strange things. Poets, like lunatics and lovers—and, we might add, like children—differ from the rest of us in their power not only to see and hear images but to feel and think them. Thus breath, air, or breeze is not for Wordsworth merely a symbol for spiritual life—it actually becomes it. His use of the image seems natural and

innocent enough, as when he writes (in a cancelled passage) of the babe drinking in through its senses the tender passion of its mother:

Such feelings pass into his torpid life
Like an awakening breeze,

or of the 'gladsome air' (significantly altered later to 'absolute wealth') 'of my own private being'.

But under the image lay for Wordsworth a living fact. *The Prelude* opens with the blowing of a breeze 'froifpthe green fields and from the sky' to greet him as he issues from the city. It does more than refresh him physically, for while it blows upon his body he feels within

A corresponding mild, creative breeze,
A vital breeze which travelled gently on
O'er things which it had made, and is become
A tempest, a redundant energy
Vexing its own creation.

That is, the air blowing from without passed within him and became a spiritual and creative energy. Other passages in the early *Prelude* tell in plain terms the same tale. Turning from his story of the Revolution, he invokes once more the powers of Nature:

Ye motions of delight, that through the fields
Stir gently, breezes and soft airs that breathe
The breath of Paradise, and find your way
To the recesses of the soul!

To place beside these lines the version of 1850 is to measure how much was lost in psychological truth when Wordsworth revised his poem:

Ye motions of delight, that haunt the sides
Of the green hills; ye breezes and soft airs,
Whose subtle intercourse with breathing flowers,
Feelingly watched, might teach man's haughty race
How without injury to take, to give
Without offence.

The bold fact of the first statement is omitted if the influence of the breeze expressly moralized.

'Motions of delight' is an arresting phrase, and Wordsworth's use of the word 'motion' is worth watching. Physical movement was to him, as it is perhaps to every imaginative mind, stimulating in a high degree. In Nature he was alive to the perpetual energy of motion. The poet in *The Excursion* longs to surrender his body to the elements,

and reckless of the storm
Be as a presence and a motion,—one
Among the many there.

Wordsworth seems to find in motion the very essence of life. God Himself, the divine principle in things, *is* motion.¹

¹ Cf. also his idea of 'truth as
a motion or a shape
Instinct with vital functions' (*Prel.* viii. 298).

a motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

When he says,

I felt a kind of sympathy with power,
Motions raised up within me,

the word takes on a new meaning. If a breeze or a 'motion of delight' passes into the inner being, then a motion is a feeling as well as a physical movement. And so, indeed, he calls his first impulses of love towards man 'those motions of delight'; and again his early sensations of sympathy with Nature 'the first and earliest motions of my life'. These phrases occur in cancelled passages which first saw the light in 1926; but readers of Wordsworth were already familiar with 'those hallowed and pure motions of the sense' in the first book of *The Prelude*. The word in the sense of impulse or emotion was used by Shakespeare and by Milton, but was moribund in Dr. Johnson's day. Wordsworth's revival of it was necessary to his thought. It illustrates tellingly that fusion of physical with mental life, that direct, startling passage of image into thought or feeling, which he so freely expressed in his first draft of *The Prelude*. If life was motion, and breeze, the suspension of that life was a strange stillness. A cancelled

passage, recalling his preoccupation with superficial interests at Cambridge, ends significantly thus:

Hush'd, meanwhile,
Was the under soul, lock'd up in such a calm,
That not a leaf of the great nature stirr'd.

The soul lives a life of its own, shut away from our ordinary conscious life. Wordsworth even invents a new word for it, the under-soul, a word of which the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives no example before 1868.

Another passage, which I have already quoted as expressing the central experience of the mystic, gives the simplest possible statement of 'the one interior life',

In which all beings live with God, themselves
Are God, existing in one mighty whole,
As indistinguishable as the cloudless East
At noon is from the cloudless West, when all
The hemisphere is one cerulean blue.

There is no escape from the meaning of this—God is in the soul of man as He is in Nature. The only times when we truly live are those in which, with no effort of will or intelligence, no consciousness of forms or images, the soul merges into the life of the universe and we *are God*. The great mind, Wordsworth says, is one

That is exalted by an underpresence,
The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim
Or vast in its own being.

Again, there is much significance in the word 'underpresence', altered in another manuscript to 'underconsciousness', neither word recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

The experiences here described have a character which he later shrank from allowing them. They were involuntary; they had nothing to do with his conscious will or intelligence. Again and again he tampered with his early record, cutting out words that tell of involuntary action in the mind—things happening of themselves—and substituting other words either nugatory or expressly making the mind itself the agent. Thus his gift as a poet, first described as an 'influx' vouchsafed to him, becomes an 'insight'. 'Motions raised up within me' become 'motions not treacherous or vain'. Of the vision on Snowdon in Book XIV he first wrote:

A meditation rose in me that night
Upon the lonely mountain when the scene
Had pass'd away, and it appear'd to me
The perfect image of a mighty mind,

but altered it significantly:

When into air had partially dissolved
That vision, given to spirits of the night

And three chance human wanderers, *in calm thought*
Reflected, it appeared to me the type
 Of a majestic intellect.

Perhaps the most interesting piece of psychology in the early *Prelude*—no trace of it remains in 1850—is found in the lines leading up to his midnight encounter with the old soldier in Book IV. He is returning, tired from an evening's revelry, along a solitary mountain road:

On I went
 Tranquil, receiving in my own despite
 Amusement, as I slowly pass'd along,
 From such near objects as from time to time,
 Perforce, intruded on the listless sense
 Quiescent, and dispos'd to sympathy,
 With an exhausted mind, worn out by toil,
 And all unworthy of the deeper joy
 Which waits on distant prospect, cliff, or sea,
 The dark blue vault, and universe of stars.
 Thus did I steal along that silent road,
 My body from the stillness drinking in
 A restoration like the calm of sleep,
 But sweeter far. Above, before, behind,
 Around me, all was peace and solitude.
 I look'd not round, nor did the solitude
 Speak to my eye; but it was heard and felt.
 O happy state! what beauteous pictures now
 Rose in harmonious imagery—they rose
 As from some distant region of my soul

And came along like dreams; yet such as left
Obscurely mingled with their passing forms
A consciousness of animal delight,
A self-possession felt in every pause
And every gentle movement of my frame.

Why did he strike the passage out? The mental exhaustion, the gradual restoration of the mind through the body, the involuntary images that rose as from some inner recess of his being, the consciousness of animal delight, make up a state which, reviewed in the cold light of reason, must have seemed to him confused, irrelevant to the purpose in hand. He was wrong. The passage is strictly relevant to his purpose. The sudden vision of the old soldier, still, uncouth, majestic, rising up as from another world, gets much of its sublime effect from its contrast with the mood that preludes it. This mood itself, described with an intimacy unparalleled elsewhere in Wordsworth's writings, belongs to that undefined borderland between the physical and mental life which rational minds distrust. What makes the passage important to us is that it lets us see into his mind in a state not rapt and mystical, but shallow and calm—a mood that reveals, as distinctly as clear water shows pebbles in a brook, the simple elements of sensation that underlie thought and feeling. Who but Wordsworth would have dared to say that

dreamlike visions rising from some distant region of the soul are bound up with, if they do not actually spring from, 'a consciousness of animal delight'? Who, at any rate, would have dared to say so in the year 1798? From such passages 'the incumbent mystery of sense and soul receives illumination.

From the experiences which they record sprang his philosophy or faith. And of this again the first *Prelude* gives a first-hand statement. Wordsworth's creed may be said in three words: God, Man, Nature. These three were divine: it might almost be said that they were one divinity. God was necessarily greatest, Man came next, and Nature, which had taught him to know the divinity in man, was last yet first, the source of his inspiration and first step in all his vital knowledge. When he first confessed his faith in *The Prelude* he had only to use these words, simply and passionately, and all his meaning was conveyed. He had only to speak, in the lines already quoted, of the soul that 'passing through all Nature rests with God', and he had uttered the first article of his creed. The words were charged with power. What greater things can be said than God, Man, Nature? But the middle-aged Wordsworth who revised *The Prelude* was betrayed by the ineradicable weakness of civilized man; he had to explain, to rationalize, to moralize. Moreover,

since he was not only a civilized, but a deeply religious man, and a devout adherent of the Anglican Church, he had to translate his thought into the terms of an orthodox Christian creed. Thus the phrase 'to think with admiration and respect of man becomes

to think

With a due reverence of earth's rightful lord
Here placed to be the inheritor of heaven.

'God and Nature's single sovereignty' is amplified to
presences of God's mysterious power
Made manifest in Nature's sovereignty.

'Great God!' gives place to 'Power supreme!' and in another context, ludicrously, and lamentably, to 'How strange!'—'Living God!', simplest sublime address to the Deity, becomes 'Righteous Heaven!' At the time when he wrote *The Prelude* Wordsworth's faith, in one aspect a simple form of pantheism, in another a Hegelian belief in the power of the human mind, bore little, if any, trace of dogmatic Christianity. If he gave it afterwards a carefully Christian colouring, was this only, to use his own phrase of a famous expunction in *Peter Bell*, 'not to offend the pious'? Or did it portend some vital change of mind?

To answer that question we must examine some of the patched places in the *Prelude* text.

In the early version of Book V, lines 11-18 ran:

Hitherto,

In progress through this Verse, my mind hath look'd
 Upon the speaking face of earth and heaven
 As her prime Teacher, intercourse with man
 Established by the sovereign Intellect,
 Who through that bodily Image hath diffus'd
 A soul divine which we participate,
 A deathless spirit.

In revising this, he cut out the line which holds the essence of his meaning, 'A soul divine which we participate', and substituted an apologetic phrase to fill the gap, so that the triumphant passage now ends lamely thus:

Who through that bodily image hath diffused,
 As might appear to the eye of fleeting time,
 A deathless spirit.

Again his apostrophe in Book X:

Great God!

Who send'st thyself into this breathing world
 Through Nature and through every kind of life,
 And mak'st man what he is, Creature divine,

is reworded:

O Power Supreme!

Without Whose care this world would cease to breathe,
 Who from the fountain of Thy grace doth fill
 The veins that branch through every frame of life,
 Making man what he is, creature divine.

The early versions here show a vital difference in

thought, not only in expression. The great God who sends Himself into the world through Nature, who diffuses through her 'a soul divine which we participate', is more like the God of Spinoza than the God of Dr. Watts. What Wordsworth has ejected in the process of revision is the naked fact of the soul of man meeting God in Nature.

One more passage will throw light. He altered the lines

The feeling of life endless, the great thought
By which we live, infinity and God,

to

Faith in life endless, the sustaining thought
Of human being, eternity and God.

The verbal change is slight, but its import great. 'The feeling of life endless', his own personal intuition, comes to be called 'Faith in life endless', a faith which he shares with the Christian Church; the great thought by which we live, infinity and God, becomes the Christian thought of human immortality. Strange that the words 'infinity' and 'eternity' should mean the same thing with such a difference. 'The sustaining thought of human being' indicates the deeper knowledge he attained of human nature. The truth is that he both changed and did not change. That central experience, the merging of his soul

with the divine soul in Nature, remained the core of his religion, 'the masterlight of all his seeing'; but it came to him more and more rarely: he distrusted its sufficiency, and he backed it up with the support of a traditional creed. Moreover, he had no intention of offending the pious, or of being himself misjudged. At no time of his life, except perhaps at the brief period of disillusion after his return from France in 1793, was Wordsworth other than a believing Christian. 'There is no such thing as "natural piety"' said Blake, commenting on Wordsworth's phrase; 'because the natural man is at enmity with God'. But Wordsworth did not think so. For him natural piety was not inconsistent with Christian piety. The two creeds stood by him side by side: when one failed the other helped. But they never quite merged. In spite of all the tinkering to which his text was submitted, many bold and challenging passages in *The Prelude* remain intact to vindicate the persistent strength of his early thought. The *Prospectus* to *The Excursion* remains; the *Lines composed above Tintern Abbey* remain. The passage which is the core of that poem,

a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,

And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things,

is quoted by Coleridge as an expression 'in language but not in sense or purpose' of a doctrine which he condemns with pain, the conception of God as the *anima mundi*. It was a poor compliment to Wordsworth to say that his language expressed what was not his sense and purpose. Whatever his other faults, Wordsworth always meant what he said.

Here, then, are two layers of thought, one superimposed upon but not displacing the other, a passionate intuition of God in the universe and a sincere belief in the God of the Anglican Church: here, also, are two modes of expression, the one naive and immediate, fitting the utterance of strong personal feeling, the other dignified and general, coloured by the language of a familiar creed.

In another direction his thought at once changed and did not change. Everyone knows what Wordsworth thought of the human mind. Hegel could go no further in exalting it than Wordsworth went in his *Prospectus* to *The Excursion*:

For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink
Deep—and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds
To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.

All strength—all terror, single or in bands,
 That ever was put forth in personal form—
 Jehovah—with his thunder, and the choir
 Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones—
 I pass them unalarmed. Not Chaos, not
 The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
 Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
 By help of dreams—can breed such fear and awe
 As fall upon us often when we look
 Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man—
 My haunt, and the main region of my song.

Blake, speaking of this passage (to him so upsetting that it gave him a bowel complaint of which he nearly died), asked, 'Does Mr. Wordsworth think his mind can surpass Jehovah?' This belief in the greatness of the human mind is at the very centre of Wordsworth's thought. As a young man he exulted almost to arrogance in the strength and power of his own mental life. In the early *Prelude* he uses such phrases as 'majestic thoughts', 'sovereignty within', 'religious dignity of mind', 'majesty of mind', 'majestic intellect'. In his revision these phrases are thrown out, or their fangs drawn. His 'majestic thoughts' become 'exalted thoughts'; 'sovereignty within' and 'religious dignity of mind' go out; 'majesty of mind' is displaced by 'a creed of reconciliation'; 'majestic intellect' becomes 'unfolding intellect'. A particular passage more closely scanned

will show how his mind was working. It follows upon the account of his failure to fit into the students' life at Cambridge.

But wherefore be cast down?
Why should I grieve? I was a chosen Son.
For hither I had come with holy powers
And faculties, whether to work or feel:
To apprehend all passions and all moods
Which time, and place, and season do impress
Upon the visible universe, and work
Like changes there by force of my own mind.
I was a Freeman: in the purest sense
Was free, and to majestic ends was strong.
I do not speak of learning, moral truth
Or understanding; 'twas enough for me
To know that I was otherwise endow'd.

The meaning of these lines is unequivocal. The holy powers in which he exulted were the powers of his own mind freely communicating with Nature and drawing thence mysterious strength. They had nothing to do with intellectual training or moral worth, still less with religion in the orthodox sense, which he does not so much as refer to.

The passage appears in our known text shorn of all its daring, and deliberately touched with Christian thought:

But wherefore be cast down?
For (not to speak of Reason and her pure

Reflective acts to fix the moral law
 Deep in the conscience, nor of Christian Hope,
 Bowing her head before her sister Faith
 As one far mightier), hither I had come,
 Bear witness, Truth, endowed with holy powers
 And faculties, whether to work or feel.

Hope bows before Faith: both are expressly Christian. Reason is tied to a moral function. Majesty, dignity, sovereignty, freedom, give place to a studious humility of mind. And here once more we touch a radical change in Wordsworth's thought. The pressure of the years and crushing personal sorrows had taught him the inherent weakness of human nature, a weakness from which neither mind nor spirit was exempt. When we find him after a magnificent eulogy of man, 'as of all visible natures crown', adding the words 'though born of dust and kindred to the worm', we are put out by what seems an irrelevant concession. But the words, out of key as they are with his earlier mood, were strictly relevant to his later position. They stand for something not only sincerely thought, but passionately felt. This will be acknowledged when we reflect upon some other lines in his final text, themselves magnificent and, as we thought, inevitable:

Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
 Like harmony in music,—

which originally ran:

The mind of man is fram'd even like the breath
And harmony of music,—

with no reference to our dusty origin. The altered version vindicates itself. "Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows . . . Thought and feeling have been transmuted into pure poetry. The question 'Did Wordsworth mean what he says?' simply cannot be asked in the face of it.

In thought, then, the later *Prelude* records an inevitable change of mind. The increasing rarity of certain passionate experiences of his own lent force to his friends' warnings about the taint of pantheism; and he omits, or rewrites in a Christian sense, lines that record those passionate and possibly pantheistic experiences. Again, his exultant pride in the greatness of the human mind gives place at times to a truly Christian humility. At times only is that pride displaced. For here again, in certain passages, his earlier thought survives untouched. No terms could be stronger than these:

Of genius, power,
Creation and divinity itself,
I have been speaking, for my theme has been
What passed within me.

Wordsworth could not help himself. When his religious thought flowed into the channel of Angli-

can doctrine he had to retouch his autobiography, and incidentally tamper with its poetry, in the spirit of that doctrine. But even in the interests of his creed he was wrong. If anyone has been converted to Christianity by *The Prelude*—and everyone who has really read it must have undergone conversion of some kind—it was not the Christianized passages that converted him, not the allusions to 'fountain of Thy grace', 'man inheritor of Heaven', 'Righteous Heaven', 'Tower Supreme', but rather the poetry of a spiritual experience so intense, so pure, and so profound that it holds the essence of all religion. The text of the early *Prelude* gives us that elemental experience freed from the gloss of later interpretation. And it shows us, further, how its roots lay, where Wordsworth did not shrink from finding them, in the sensuous life which is our common heritage. The poets of our own era have attempted to explore this region of the senses, with something, perhaps, of Wordsworth's daring. But he knew things which they do not know; and he kept himself severely aloof from knowledge that he did not need. His extraordinary purity of mind and heart kept strong and pure to an almost supernatural degree those senses of his to which, as he is never tired of telling us, he owed in the beginning everything that mattered.

IV

POETIC ACHIEVEMENT

The Prelude represents the height of Wordsworth's poetic achievement in one direction. It is a long poem, and a great poem, conveying high meditation on a basis of personal experience. It has a unity of design which depends upon the essential integrity of its subject. That subject is not 'My Life', but 'The Making of a Poet'. Its virtue lies in its power to express what Edward Irving, speaking of Wordsworth in one of his sermons, called 'the deep unfathomable secrecies of human thought! The instrument he used for this purpose was a kind of blank verse, familiar yet impassioned, which could rise with a natural ease from simple personal narrative to exalted meditation.] This mode of blank verse which he had perfected at one stroke in *Tintern Abbey*, with its long well-knit paragraphs and inevitable transitions, deserves to be called Wordsworthian as surely as Milton's in *Paradise Lost* to be called Miltonic. *The Excursion* was composed from some of the same material upon which Wordsworth drew for *The Prelude*, and indeed incorporates many passages which were written when he contemplated the comprehensive poem, *The Recluse*, and before the happy idea of *The Prelude* released his

genius is a disconcerting great poem. It contains passages as good, or nearly as good, as the best of *The Prelude*. But apart from the first book which embodies 'The Story of Margaret', written as a whole when Wordsworth was at the height of his powers between 1798 and 1802, the great poetic passages of *The Excursion* suffer from their somewhat prosaic contexts. The framework of the whole poem, a series of only very faintly dramatic conversations between two old men and the poet, serves well for didactic discourse—Professor Muirhead called it 'one of the finest ethical discourses in the world'—but not so well for poetic revelation. The memorable lines do not flower like those in *The Prelude*—out of their natural soil, but seem set in a stiff frame. 'Access for you', says the Wanderer, doing his best for the cynical Solitary,

Access for you

Is yet preserved to principles of truth,
Which the imaginative Will upholds
In seats of wisdom, not to be approached
By the inferior Faculty that moulds,
With her minute and speculative pains,
Opinion, ever changing!

I have seen

A curious child, who dwelt upon a tract
Of inland ground, applying to his ear
The convolutions of a smooth-lipped shell;

To which, in silence hushed, his very soul
Listened intensely; and his countenance soon
Brightened with joy; for from within were heard
Murmurings, whereby the monitor expressed
Mysterious union with its native sea.
Even such a shell the universe itself
Is to the ear of Faith; and there are times,
I doubt not, when to you it doth impart
Authentic tidings of invisible things;
Of ebb and flow, and ever-during power;
And central peace, subsisting at the heart
Of endless agitation. Here you stand,
Adore, and worship, when you know it not;
Pious beyond the intention of your thought;
Devout above the meaning of your will.

We are carried away by the central passage about the sea-shell, with its 'authentic tidings of invisible things', but brought to earth by the concluding lines, excellent as they are:

Pious beyond the intention of your thought;
Devout above the meaning of your will.

There is something in the ordered balance of the lines (they read almost like a couplet) which rings the knell to Wordsworth's earlier freedom of poetic utterance, and throughout *The Excursion* we are aware of a shift in style towards the conventions of traditional diction and rhythm which he had repudiated. He writes of 'feathered kinds', 'punctual

stars', and 'conglobated bubbles'. We are indeed emerging from the golden period.

There are three outstanding short-long poems, each of a different kind, which represent new phases of his genius: two belong to the great decade, *The Waggoner*, 1805-6, *The White Doe*, 1807-8; one, *Laodamia*, 1814, stands on the margin of the later period, and was hailed by Lamb as a new departure.

I wish Lamb had written a critical study of *The Waggoner*: we know how he rejoiced in it, and in its dedication to him. Southey was particularly fond of it. No one indeed who is familiar with the road between Rydal and Keswick could possibly fail to be. Sara Coleridge gave rein to her love of it in a note to the chapters on Wordsworth in her edition of the *Biographia Literaria*, and justly praised its admirable descriptions of the local landscape. But the critics have cold-shouldered it, though they have come to do justice to *Peter Bell*. With this poem it is inevitably compared. Both are studies of rustic characters who made a special appeal to Wordsworth, both are set in natural scenery which is the right context to the characters, and upon both themes Wordsworth's humour, a gift generally denied him, is allowed to play—in *Peter Bell*, somewhat crudely and grimly, in *The Waggoner*, delightfully.

Mr. Justice Coleridge records that *The Waggoner*

was a favourite poem of Wordsworth's: 'He read me splendid descriptions from it. He said his object in it had not been understood. It was a play of the fancy on a domestic incident and a lowly character: he wished by the opening descriptive lines to put his reader into the state of mind in which he wished it to be read

The poem opens with an excellent description in Wordsworth's lighter style of a stifling sultry June evening in the Rydal valley:

'Tis spent—this burning day of June!
Soft darkness o'er its latest gleams is stealing;
The Night-hawk is singing his frog-like tune,
Twirling his watchman's rattle about,
On restless pinion wheeling.
That solitary bird
Is all that can be heard
In silence deeper far than that of deepest noon!

The glow-worms are glimmering on the banks.

But where the scattered stars are seen
In hazy straits the clouds between,
Each, in his station twinkling not,
Seems changed into a pallid spot.
The mountains against heaven's grave weight
Rise up, and grow to wondrous height.
The air . . .
Is close and hot;—and now and then
Comes a tired and sultry breeze

With a haunting and a panting,
Like the stifling of disease.

Reading these lines we cannot doubt for a moment that a thunder-storm is brewing. No poet, I believe, is more sensitive than Wordsworth to conditions of weather and their signs in sky, air, and earth, and no poet can render them more perfectly in verse. A masterly true touch here is the appearance of the mountains which seem to rise to a portentous height under the heavy sky. The silence is invaded:

Hush, there is someone on the stir!
'Tis Benjamin the Waggoner.

Benjamin is a character after Wordsworth's heart, a consummate driver, completely in accord with his horses, loved by them, and able to master them with a word. He has one weakness; like Lamb he was too fond of the cheerful glass. In his long toilsome drive from Ambleside to Keswick he has several inns to pass, and pass them he must if he is to deliver up his waggon in good time to his employer at Keswick. The ancient 'Dove and Olive-Bough' is no longer a danger, for it is now, as the poet modestly says, the home of a simple water-drinking bard. The famous 'Swan' is triumphantly passed. And then comes the storm, one of those sudden, violent, absolutely drenching storms that we get in the mountains. It is

Ben's undoing. For out of the storm comes the piteous voice of a woman begging for shelter. Benjamin stows her with her baby in the waggon, and is joined by her husband, an old sailor. They now reach Wythburn, and from the Cherry-Tree Tavern cheerful sounds greet them. It is the village Merry-Night. The call is irresistible. The jolly tar and the waggoner go in and pledge each other in foaming tankards. The scene is inimitably described. But better still the sequel: the two heroes, on the road once more, are now in the height of Bacchic rapture, and the poet is with them:

And, while they coast the silent lake,
Their inspiration I partake;
Share their empyreal spirits—yea,
With their enraptured vision, see
O fancy—what a jubilee!
What shifting pictures—clad in gleams
Of colour bright as feverish dreams!
Earth, spangled sky, and lake serene,
Involved and restless all—a scene
Pregnant with mutual exaltation,
Rich change and multiplied creation!
This sight to me the Muse imparts;—
And then, what kindness in their hearts!

Has any poet described better than in the lines that follow, the absurd manifestations of maudlin affection that belong to this phase of drunkenness?

What tears of rapture, what vow-making,
Profound entreaties, and hand-shaking!
What solemn, vacant, interlacing,
As if they'd fall asleep embracing!

Here followed originally a significant passage which Wordsworth cut out as irrelevant and too personal, for its ultimate object was to introduce the 'Rock of Names', a place of meeting for Coleridge and the Wordsworths half-way between Keswick and Grasmere. On the rock were cut ^vthe initials of the Wordsworths, including John—of Sara and Mary Hutchinson, and S. T. Coleridge. But the description of the rock was led up to by an incident that is an integral part of the story—the breaking in upon the raptures of the exalted pair by an intolerable burning thirst. What resource have they? Well, there is the lake. They see it, a noble cup, offering as good a draught as they can wish. But they have some sense left. They cannot trust themselves to drink without falling in.

But wise are they; and self-denial
Prefer to such a desperate trial—
Once in (I put the question plain)
Who is to help them out again?

It is precisely the peasant caution of Bunyan's Mrs. Timorous. You will remember her parting words to Mercy: 'Well, I see you have a mind to go a fooling

too, but take heed in time and be wise: while we are out of danger, we are out: but when we are in, we are in

Benjamin then remembers the rock close to the highway, which always offers a trickle of water.

I am sorry Wordsworth cut the passage out. It gives us one more touch of that racy, obvious humour that belongs to the peasant, or to the man who lives among country folk. This is one element in a poem compounded of many. It is the peasant in Wordsworth that enjoys the naked incidents and the characters of the poem, as he enjoyed *Tarn O'Shanter*, and indeed we can recognize more than one trace of Burns's influence here—but it is after all the well-read poet applying his intellect and imagination who sets the story in its frame. The humour that enlivens it is partly the peasant humour I have indicated (a humour that delights in drunkenness and is amused by the village idiot), partly the sportive irony of the mock-heroic poet. The sailor is called 'the old Familiar of the Seas', Benjamin 'a Caesar past the Rubicon'; and the waggon dragging up the last hill in early morning mist, making its own radiant cloud from the sweating, hard-breathing horses, to wrap Benjamin from view, suggests the happy image of Apollo throwing round some favourite on earth 'a veil of celestial sheen', to make a

screen between him and his enemies. At intervals the poet invokes the Muse, who is particularly wayward in the early morning. He remembers Milton's appeal to the Holy Spirit for aid to his 'adventurous song', and himself appeals in all humility to Lamb:

Accept, O Friend, for praise or blame,
The gift of this adventurous song;
A record which I dared to frame,
Though timid scruples checked me long;
They checked me—and I left the theme
Untouched;—in spite of many a gleam
Of fancy that thereon was shed,
Like pleasant sunbeams shifting still
Upon the side of a distant hill:
But Nature might not be gainsaid;
For what I have and what I miss
I sing of these;—it makes my bliss!
Nor is it I who play the part,
But a shy spirit in my heart,
That comes and goes—will sometimes leap
From hiding-places ten years deep.

The Waggoner was one of the poems which that unaccountable shy spirit made him write, and is to be cherished as such. Wordsworth said that *The Waggoner* could not be printed without disadvantage along with *Peter Bell* because of 'the higher tone of imagination and the deeper touches of passion' aimed at in the latter poem. True—*The Waggoner*

must stand by itself and on its own feet. It is a masterpiece in its kind. A rustic character and a rustic story set in its natural landscape is the subject; the handling is light, yet warmly sympathetic—Lamb remarked in it 'a spirit of beautiful tolerance'; the medium, free octosyllabic verse with something of Chaucer's easy undulation between serious and gay. The poem is a unique but characteristic product of his genius.

The White Doe has been better served by the critics. It belongs to a recognized literary kind, the modern version of the medieval romance, inaugurated for Wordsworth's generation by Coleridge in his *Christabel*, and fully exploited by Scott. The free octosyllabic is the staple of the verse, as in *Christabel* and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*; the story, as in these poems, has its centre in a lovely innocent lady, living in the castle of a noble family, and standing for peace and love in the midst of warring hates. The setting is architectural and the architecture is Gothic. The atmosphere and the scenery follow common form—moonlight for the most thrilling scenes, and 'a mossy, old oak tree', as a piece of stage property, which starts in *Christabel* and strays into *The Lay* as 'an oak mossed o'er with eld', and is here, sure enough, in *The White Doe* as 'the mouldered tree', 'a self-surviving leafless oak', for Emily to sit

under after her wanderings. Wordsworth pointed out that the comparison of his poem with Scott's romances can only be superficial:

Sir Walter Scott pursued the customary and very natural course of conducting an action, presenting the various turns of fortune, to some outstanding point on which the mind might rest as a termination or catastrophe.. The course I attempted is entirely different. Everything that is attempted by the principal personages in *The White Doe* fails, so far as its object is external and substantial. So far as it is spiritual it succeeds.

He is adopting a known form, and pouring into it an original conception. Wordsworth said he devoted much labour to 'the mere business parts of the poem', the story of the fate of the Nortons, but they do not come to life. It is only when the white doe enters that the lines begin to stir and throb with poetry.

This is her first entry: the scene is Bolton Abbey, and the congregation have just poured into the church and sung their first hymn:

A moment ends the fervent din,
And all is hushed, without and within;
For though the priest, more tranquilly,
Recites the holy liturgy,
The only voice which you can hear
Is the river murmuring near.
—When soft!—the dusky trees between,
And down the path through the open green,

Where is no living thing to be seen;
And through yon gate-way, where is found,
Beneath the arch with ivy bound,
Free entrance to the church-yard ground—
Comes gliding in with lovely gleam,
Comes gliding in serene and slow,
Soft and silent as a dream,
A solitary Doe!
White she is as lily of June,
And beauteous as the silver moon
When out of sight the clouds are driven
And she is left alone in heaven.

The verse is unique in Wordsworth: in no other poem of his does it move like this, with lovely assonances and alliterations making melody and spreading magic. It recalls rather the most pious passages in *Christabel*. And the same thing happens whenever the white doe draws near.

The fourth Canto opens with a moonlight scene—

The Moon from cloudless ether sees
A Camp and a beleaguered town,
And Castle like a stately crown.

But the verse does not begin to take on magic till the white doe is at hand.

A soft and lulling sound is heard
Of streams inaudible by day;
The garden pool's dark surface, stirred
By the night insects in their play,

Breaks into dimples small and bright;
A thousand, thousand rings of light
That shape themselves, and disappear,
Almost as soon as seen:—and lo!
Not distant far, the milk-white Doe—

The sympathy between Emily and the doe, symbolizing the sympathy between man and nature, is the inspiration of the poem. The doe is supernatural: it survives through the centuries to haunt the places where the tragic story was enacted. Yet Wordsworth makes its supernatural character seem natural. The doe is always shown us as a part of Nature. Her radiant whiteness is the whiteness of familiar natural things:

White she is as lily of June,
And beauteous as the silver moon.

Lying under the cypress tree by moonlight, she is

Like a patch of April snow—
Lingering in a woody glade.

Emily from her cavern sees her gliding by

White as whitest cloud on high
Floating through the azure sky.

What Wordsworth is saying in this romantic tale of an earlier time is simply this: The 'primary laws of our nature', the fundamental spiritual truths, remain the same in all ages: love and suffering,

fortitude and faith, are far greater things than the warlike virtues.

Action is transitory—a step, a blow,
The motion of a muscle—this way or that—
Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,
And has the nature of infinity.

That is the motto at the head of the poem. The mysterious, endless, quickening power of suffering is a cardinal theme of Wordsworth's poetry. And the seventh canto, in which the white doe is restored to Emily, has for its motto these lines:

Powers there are
That touch each other to the quick—in modes
Which the gross world no sense hath to perceive,
No soul to dream of.

Such are the sympathies between man and the humblest children of the earth. The paraphernalia of romance meant little to Wordsworth. But a human tale, told of a particular place, with a solitary woman and a solitary animal for its chief characters, set his imagination alight. It is significant that each of his successful romantic poems, *The White Doe*, *Hartleap Well*, and *Brougham Castle*, was written soon after he had visited the place that was the scene of the story. Places haunted his imagination as much as people.

Laodamia stands in contrast to *The White Doe* as

Wordsworth's most important exercise in the classical mode. Landor admired it, and makes Southey say of it in his *Conversation with Porson*, 'Pindar himself would not on that subject have braced one to more vigour, nor Euripides have breathed into it more tenderness and passion. The subject is Virgilian, and so is the style, or it is an English adaptation of the Virgilian style, reminding us now of Milton, now of Pope. It achieves a noble ease and dignity, with smoothly moulded phrases and many echoes of the Greek and Latin poets.

The verse has a balance and symmetry unusual with Wordsworth, as different as can be from the frolicsome variety of *The Waggoner*, or the lyrical lilt of *The White Doe*.

He spake of love, such love as Spirits feel
In worlds whose course is equable and pure;
No fears to beat away,—no strife to heal—
The past unsighed for, and the future sure;
Spake of heroic arts in graver mood
Revived, with freer harmony pursued;

Of all that is most beauteous—imaged there
In happier beauty; more pellucid streams,
An ampler ether, a diviner air,
And fields invested with purpureal gleams.

What set Wordsworth upon writing a poem so far outside his chosen field both in style and subject? He

says himself it was the incident of the trees growing and withering that put the subject into his thoughts. That was the seed, the germ; and, as nearly always in Wordsworth, it lay in the sympathy between nature and man. But the classics had had a strong appeal for him from his schooldays, and he now returned to them with a new zest, and an instinctive feeling, perhaps, that they offered a fresh inspiration to his flagging poetic style. Certain it is that, from now on, his poetic art appears more studied and deliberate, and his diction more conventional. Watch a straw that shows the way the wind is blowing: the epithet 'purple' applied to light. There is purple light at morning or evening in *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*, but never—though light abounds—in the *Lyrical Ballads*, nor in the *Poems* of 1807, never in the original *Prelude*. In *Laodamia* Elysian fields are 'invested with purpureal gleams', an echo of Virgil's 'et lumine vestit purpureo'. Wordsworth's later style takes off from this point. I follow no farther. It has been no part of my plan to dissect the poetry of his decline. My purpose has been to examine that of his great creative period with the hope in the end of making some estimate of his poetic art.

I have no new theory to apply. I hold to the simple truth that outward form can only be judged as the

expression of what is within. What does an artist express in his art? His mind, surely, and his vision of life. In Wordsworth we have to reckon with a mind and a vision that made a powerful impression on all his great contemporaries. I have made no attempt to define Wordsworth's philosophical position. It could not easily be done. He was a poet with a powerful mind, not a trained philosopher, and his thought does not lend itself to analytical exposition. It was itself the expression of a richly endowed nature; it grows with his growth, and is full of complexities and contradictions. Certain significant elements in it have, I hope, emerged: its vindication of sense-experience as the foundation of knowledge, its assertion of the life of the spirit in relation with the infinite as the supreme truth that the human mind can apprehend. These things must be reckoned with if we seek to estimate Wordsworth's poetic achievement.

One other strand of his thought is, for this purpose, of special significance—his adherence to the doctrine of necessity. Coleridge said, in 1804, that Wordsworth had been 'even to extravagance a Necessitarian'. So had Coleridge, and perhaps in curing himself he thought he had cured Wordsworth. But Wordsworth's mind was slower and more retentive, and an idea once rooted in it would

grow, but was not easily thrown out. This idea of necessity took the form in Wordsworth's mind of the conception of the necessary movement of mankind towards perfection, an idea which in 1793 he rejoiced to find in Godwin's *Political Justice*. The idea was for him bound up with the beneficent effect of a close communion of man's mind with Nature. Hazlitt writes, 'Perhaps the doctrine of philosophical necessity was never more finely expressed than in the lines

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting SUNS,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things

'Impels' is a key-word. It occurs again in a passage in the fourth book of *The Excursion* which makes his idea clearer:

So build we up the Being that we are;
Thus deeply drinking in the soul of things,
We shall be wise perforce; and, while inspired
By choice, and conscious that the Will is free,
Shall move unswerving, even as if impelled

By strict necessity, along the path
Of order and of good.

The word 'impelled' here accompanies 'strict necessity', yet the idea is significantly yoked with free will. Here is another of Wordsworth's paradoxes. Godwin's idea of necessity is bound up with an inherited Calvinistic strain in his thought. With Wordsworth it goes with a natural identification of himself with the forms and movements of Nature. He recalls 'the breeze of Nature stirring in my soul', and speaks of the river of his mind: 'Whate'er I saw, or heard, or felt, was but a stream, that flowed into a kindred stream.' He has a strong sense of the *inevitability* of this deeper life that he shared with the universe. This is the paradox: to live according to the order of Nature is to be free. He found the idea corroborated by Spinoza.

These three strands in his thought seem to be, of many strands, the most important, and they are naturally interwoven in the form as well as the content of his greatest poetry: the vital significance of sense-experience, the assurance of the mind's intuition of the infinite, and a conviction of the inevitable, resistless movement in nature and man towards some unseen spiritual goal.

The gospel of eye and ear, as Professor Garrod calls it, is brought home to us all through the

Lyrical Ballads; and in *Tintern Abbey*, where he unfolds his thought explicitly, Wordsworth concludes that he is

Well-pleased to recognize
In nature and *the language of the sense*
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

All poetry draws its life from images of the senses: Wordsworth's poetry is steeped in these-images, and his words carry them so naturally that we hardly notice them. The word cleaves to the thing like flesh to bone. When he wrote of

the giddy bliss
That like a tempest works along the blod,

he used a strangely living expression. The emotion sweeps through his body as a sudden storm sweeps along a lake—more than sweeps—works along it. We have seen this, as Wordsworth often did, on Windermere.

In *Tintern Abbey* he speaks of
those sensations sweet
Felt in the blood and felt *along the heart*.

And again, of the sound of the Derwent that entered his infant slumbers,

The fairest of all rivers sent a voice
That flowed *along my dreams*.

Something comes into him, flows through him, flows along his blood, along his heart, along his dreams. In *Lines Written in Early Spring* he says:

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that *through me ran*

—another strange expression. Sometimes it seems that the mind *drinks in* what Nature gives. From strange sounds in the night,

Thence did I drink the visionary power;
and in the early morning he held unconscious intercourse with beauty old as creation,

drinking in a pure
Organic pleasure from the silver wreaths
Of curling mist.

On another unforgettable spring morning he calls his sister out into the woods and tells her,

Our souls shall drink at every pore
The Spirit of the Season.

All these phrases tell of spiritual life as if what happened to the spirit was a physical process, a flowing along, a running through, a drinking in at the pores.

This way of using images belongs to all language: our own speech is full of dormant, or dead, or half-alive metaphors. With the poet they are intensely alive, and it is no good reading poetry unless we take pains to be aware of that life.

We are more likely to be aware of the fuller use of imagery that the poet makes, in what the rhetoricians classify as figures—such as the simile. In the *Lyrical Ballads* the similes are of the Ballad kind, swift and short. Harry Gill's cheek is 'ruddy as clover'. Wordsworth was always addicted to such similes. In *The Excursion* the wanderer reflects:

The good die first,
And those whose hearts are dry as summer dust
Burn to the socket.

Is this the kind of thing Hazlitt had in mind when he said, 'His style is vernacular: he delivers household truths'? The pedlar has the memory of dusty roads that he knows only too well in his summer tramps, and of the humble household candle that is offered him in his cottage lodging at the end of the day. Wordsworth's short similes, simple though they be, are singularly apt—right for the speaker that uses them, right for the character or scene they are applied to. The effect of the intense piercing cry that falls on Peter Bell's ear from the wood, is described thus:

The Ass is startled—and stops short
Right in the middle of the thicket,
Ajd Peter, wont to whistle loud,
Whether alone or in a crowd,
Is sileit as a cricket.

How absolutely right! We all know the uncanny

effect of silence when a cricket suddenly ceases his interminable chirp. Peter Bell deserves a sharp, true simile, but a homely one.

When the white doe appears in the churchyard she

Comes gliding in serene and slow,
Soft and silent as a dream.

That tells us all we need to know of her natural-supernatural life and being. And how true it is to the noiseless tread of the deer! Another kind of silence is that of Old Matthew in his final rest:

Poor Matthew, all his frolics o'er,
Is silent as a standing pool.

In that silence the sound is in our ears of the stream • which stirred Matthew's thoughts in the poem of *The Fountain*. He has the simile he deserves.

'Silent as a cricket', 'silent as a dream', 'silent as a standing pool'—all the phrases seem natural and inevitable in their context, but the imagination that supplies them is no ordinary imagination.

Memorable and haunting images that are crystallized in forms more elaborate than the one-word ballad simile are equally Wordsworthian, because equally true and revealing. He had a fondness for flowers and plants which has enraged some of his critics, from Clough onwards. Does the *Osmunda* fern deserve the simile he gives it? I am sure it

did when it grew on the solitary shores of Grasmere,
'Plant lovelier in its own retired abode

than Lady of the Mere

Sole-sitting by the shores of old romance,

a line which, Andrew Bradley says, Keats need not have been ashamed of. Rarer with Wordsworth is the long-tailed simile which Spenser inherited from Homer and Virgil through the Italian poets. Now the classical simile starts from a simple point of comparison, and then the new image brought in for illustration is elaborated for its own sake. In *The Faerie Queen*, Una's joy at recovering her knight suggests to Spenser a sea-captain returned to port after storm; his simile launches out into a description of the past voyage and of what happens on board when Harbour is sighted: the mariners drink together, the mates pledge the captain. We are far enough by this time from the modest Una and her maidenly joy.

In *Resolution and Independence*, where Wordsworth adopts a form of the Spenserian stanza, he introduces a simile which is a fine example of the modern handling of this classical type.

On the desolate moor he is suddenly aware of a solitary figure:

Beside a pool, bare to the eye of heaven,
I saw a man before me unawares,
The oldest man he seemed who ever wore grey hairs.

Now follows the simile:

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie
Couched on the bald top of an eminence;
Wonder to all who do the same espy,
By what means it could thither come, and whence;
So that it seems a thing endued with sense:
Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf
Of rock or sand reposeth, there to sun itself;
Such seemed this Man, not all alive nor dead,
Nor all asleep—in his extreme old age:

The images of the stone and sea-beast, not beautiful nor arresting in themselves, are not developed independently. They act and react vitally upon each other, and upon the original conception of the still, solitary figure of the old man in the midst of bare nature. As the stanza moves on we are more and more conscious of that strange stillness of his which seems to suggest both death and life. Moreover the simile contributes—no analysis can quite show how—to the inwardness and deep spiritual meaning of the whole poem. The poet is left at the end with a sense of the indomitable, the wellnigh insuperable power of the human spirit revealed to him through his encounter with a derelict old leech-gatherer. 'Motionless as a cloud the old Man stood The lonely moor and endless sky surround him. Once again, as in so many of his poems, the mysterious

depth of Nature's life enhances and reveals without any exposition the spiritual quality of the human character.

Wordsworth's sense of the infinite and the life of the human mind in its relation with infinity, finds a natural expression in his poetic style in certain obvious ways, and in others not so obvious. A fragment of blank verse which he calls *A Night Piece* tells of a vision of the sky when the moon suddenly breaks through a screen of clouds:

There, in a black-blue vault she sails along,
Followed by multitudes of stars, that, small
And sharp, and bright, along the dark abyss
Drive as she drives: how fast they wheel away,
Yet vanish not!—the wind is in the tree,
But they are silent: still they roll along
Immeasurably distant; and the vault,
Built round by those white clouds, enormous clouds,
Still deepens its unfathomable depth.
At length the Vision closes; and the mind
Not undisturbed by the deep joy it feels,
Which slowly settles into peaceful calm,
Is left to muse upon the solemn scene.

The images physically seen are described with Wordsworth's customary grave veracity. The sense of infinity which they invoke is given partly by words such as Milton taught him to use to contradict earthly limitation: 'immeasurably distant', 'un-

fathomable depth'. (Wordsworth's phrases in this kind are unforgettable: 'man's unconquerable mind', the 'incommunicable sleep' of death, the 'unimaginable touch of time'.) But there is something else in the lines of *A Night Piece* which contributes to the intangible effect: the simplest possible statement of what *is*.

The wind is in the tree,
But they are silent.

We remember, from another poem of his,

The silence that is in the starry sky.

This potency of the verb 'to be' lies latent in many of his most memorable lines: 'The light that never was on sea or land'—that is to say, *is*, by *not being* in the physical sense.

Nor know we anything more fair
Than is the smile upon thy face; . . .

Sure beyond all physical security is for Wordsworth the smile on duty's face. But there is no need to elaborate.

Let good men feel the soul of nature,
And see things *as they are*

—that is the core of what he has to tell us.

In all the supreme passages of Wordsworth's poetry there is a sense of inevitability, of something

that is there because in the resistless movement of life it came there, it was there.

There is a comfort in the strength of love;
'Twill make a thing endurable, which else
Would overset the brain, or break the heart.

Those lines from *Michael* crystallize the quiet certainty of thought and feeling that are found in all his studies of simple men and women who are moved by the great emotions—who suffer through love, 'that is not pain to hear of', Wordsworth thinks,

for the glory that redounds
Therefrom to humankind, and what we are.

There is the same inevitability in the line which Swinburne thought the greatest in all English poetry:

The sleepless soul that perished in his pride,
as in the quiet, simple line which Matthew Arnold took as representative:

And never lifted up a single stone.

Wordsworth's vision of life took a wide sweep: it embraced the mind of man, the inner life of Nature where the mind of man meets it, the sphere of the elementary passions revealed in humble life, the world of high actions in the national and inter-

national arena, and that personal world of passing things and lasting truths which his own mind lived in from day to day.

To express all this in a poetic medium he needed an elastic style, and he acquired it by assiduous labour in his art. Coleridge praises the *curiosafelicitas* of his diction, and his austere accuracy in the use of words. In the maturity of his powers he could at one stroke master a style new to him, when occasion called. Witness the great Miltonic verse of *The Tew Trees*:

But worthier still of note
Are those fraternal Four of Borrowdale,
Joined in one solemn and capacious grove;
Huge trunks! and each particular trunk a growth
Of intertwined fibres serpentine
Up-coiling, and inveterately convolved;
Nor uninformed with Phantasy, and looks
That threaten the profane;—a pillared shade,
Upon whose grassless floor of red-brown hue,
By sheddings from the pining umbrage tinged
Perennially—beneath whose sable roof
Of boughs, as if for festal purpose decked
With unrejoicing berries—ghostly shapes
May meet at noontide; Fear and trembling Hope,
Silence and Foresight; Death the Skeleton
And Time the Shadow;—there to celebrate,
As in a natural temple scattered o'er
With altars undisturbed of mossy stone,

United worship; or in mute repose
To lie, and listen to the mountain flood
Murmuring from Glaramara's inmost caves.

The lines have the resonance and splendour of Milton's verse and some of his tricks of style, and yet—listen again to the close:

To lie and listen to the mountain flood
Murmuring from Glaramara's inmost caves.

The quietness and mysterious magic of those last lines is Wordsworth's inalienably.

As poetic artist Wordsworth was a bold experimenter, and he had his resounding failures as well as his supreme successes; but his skill and range are great, and have not been fully recognized. In diction he moves from the low familiar style of *The Idiot Boy*, where the owls hob-nob, and Betty Foy fiddle-faddles, to the majestic Miltonic heights of *The Recluse*,

above the fierce confederate storm
Of sorrow, barricadoed evermore
Between the walls of cities.

Though he reaches supreme expression in the simplest of metres—

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years—

he had an instinctive liking for elaborate metrical forms; he excelled in the sonnet, and it has been noticed that, out of the 523 that he published, only one is in the easy Shakespearian form: all the rest are in one variety or another of the difficult Petrarchan—the best possible metre for the braced heroic strength of his political utterances. He wrote good Popian couplets as a schoolboy, and though he reverted to ballad forms at the beginning of his great creative period, he proceeded after that to experiment with a variety of metres learnt principally from the Elizabethans and Jacobeans. To my mind he is only unsuccessful in the trisyllabic measures, familiar to him in the Chapbooks (I am speaking of the poetry of his great period).

An Orpheus! an Orpheus! yes, Faith may grow bold
And take to herself all the wonders of old;—
Near the stately Pantheon you'll meet with the same
In the street that from Oxford hath borrowed its name.

Wordsworth's thought does not move easily in this jiggling measure. When he has something gay to express he fares better with the four-beat couplet:

There liveth in the prime of glee
A woman whose years are seventy-three.

And, as *The Waggoner* shows, he could sustain this

measure with pleasant variation through a long poem.

Like all good artists he knew the meaning and necessity of decorum, 'the grand masterpiece to observe', as Milton said. His choice of metres for the *Ode to Duty* and the *Ode. Intimations of Immortality*, betray it. In his great experiments in short blank-verse poems, where the metre tempts an inexperienced writer to go on and on, Wordsworth knows where to stop; he has a true sense of scale and proportion. Witness *The Tew Trees* or any of the *Poems on the Naming of Places*.

It is hard to find a last word to say on the achievement of Wordsworth as a poet.

He said himself of his cherished theme,

the might of souls

And what they do within themselves,

that in the main 'It lies far hidden from the reach of words'. If that is so for the poet, how can a humble critic hope to do justice to him in the un winged words of prose? I fall back on the nai'Ve but penetrating question with which the engaging Audrey roundest upon Touchstone: 'I do not know what poetical 4s. Is it honest in deed and word? Is it a true thing?'

For Wordsworth we may answer: Yes, it is a true thing. What he has to express, the inner heart of man, the deepest secrets of the human mind] the

mysterious responses of heart and mind to Nature, is perhaps the most difficult thing that any poet has tried to express. But Wordsworth set about it with the conviction that poetry can be a true thing. His method, as he said, was to keep his eye upon his object, to 'look steadily at his subject': he watched intently the surfaces of things so as to read their inner meaning, listened to the words of simple people, beggars, children, rustics, even idiots, to draw from them hints and signs of the ultimate truths that he was after. He developed the power to register the most evanescent movements, the most delicate outward manifestations of the inner life. Louisa is not a propitious name for a spirited girl, who 'winds along the brook' and 'hunts the waterfalls', but Wordsworth gives us something of the magic charm of this young haunter of the mountain streams, in lines unsurpassed, I think, for sensitive portrayal of the human spirit through the bodily form:

And she has smiles to earth unknown,
Smiles that with motions of their own
Do spread, and sink, and rise:
That come and go with endless play
And ever as they pass away
Are hidden in her eyes.

That poem begins simply,

I met Louisa in the shade.

Wordsworth's simplicity has been mocked at, over-emphasized, and misunderstood. But it lies at the very core of his art. He sought the truth and tried to express it with the least possible deviation. In all his artistic experiments his salvation lay in the integrity of his imagination and in his single-minded devotion to what he knew within. Under this severe discipline words answered his need.

Love had he known in huts where poor men lie;
His daily teachers jbarc'teen woods and rills,
The silence tjia't is in the starry sky,
The sleep that is among the lonely hills.

Another poet might have written: 'The peace that lies among the lonely hills'—and it would have been a good line. But Wordsworth, out of his deep long knowledge of thlnountains, writes,

The sleep that is among the lonely hills.

Dr. T. S. Eliot speaks of 'the element of surprise so essential to poetry'. Superficially Wordsworth's poetry has none of this. It is only at a deeper level that you find it. You have to take his lines into whatever quiet recess is left in your mind and let them lie there, before you feel that stir of the imagination which is like surprise—for it comes with the discovery of something known, but not realized, before.

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