

THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
WORDSWORTH

EDITED BY
STEPHEN GILL



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press 2003

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Sabon 10/13 pt *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 64681 2 hardback
ISBN 0 521 64116 0 paperback

CONTENTS

<i>List of contributors</i>	page vii
<i>Chronology of Wordsworth's life and works</i>	x
<i>Wordsworth on poetry and imagination</i>	xiv
<i>Sources and short forms of citation</i>	xix
Introduction	I
STEPHEN GILL	
1 Wordsworth: the shape of the poetic career	5
NICOLA TROTT	
2 Wordsworth's poetry to 1798	22
DUNCAN WU	
3 Poetry 1798–1807: <i>Lyrical Ballads and Poems, in Two Volumes</i>	38
JAMES A. BUTLER	
4 'The noble living and the noble dead': community in <i>The Prelude</i>	55
LUCY NEWLYN	
5 Wordsworth and <i>The Recluse</i>	70
KENNETH R. JOHNSTON	
6 Wordsworth and the meaning of taste	90
FRANCES FERGUSON	
7 Wordsworth's craft	108
SUSAN J. WOLFSON	

CONTENTS

8	Gender and domesticity JUDITH W. PAGE	125
9	The philosophic poet STEPHEN GILL	142
10	Wordsworth and Coleridge SEAMUS PERRY	161
11	Wordsworth and the natural world RALPH PITE	180
12	Politics, history, and Wordsworth's poems NICHOLAS ROE	196
13	Wordsworth and Romanticism PAUL HAMILTON	213
14	Wordsworth and America: reception and reform JOEL PACE	230
15	Textual issues and a guide to further reading KEITH HANLEY	246
	<i>Index</i>	265

I

NICOLA TROTT

Wordsworth: the shape of the poetic career

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The shape of the poetic career

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(W. H. Auden's phrase) who went on tinkering long after age and habit had atrophied the body and closed the mind – a slow fade that bears a striking resemblance to Wordsworth's own self-diagnosis in the 'Ode' and elsewhere. Secondly, the recent shape-shifting has tended to privilege the poet of process. In terms of Wordsworth's own metaphors, its model is the river, its method a chronology of writing which itself assumes the rivery course of an on-going, linear development through time. A minute attention to the historical details of composition, year-by-year, and almost hour-by-hour, would seem to fit in, not only with our own prejudices in favour of the open-ended, the undogmatic, and the inconclusive, but also with the facts of the case as we now know them. After all, *The Recluse* was never completed. By a supreme irony, the Wordsworthian church turned out to be a castle in the air. What survives are the ruins of that dream – or, to put it more positively, a 'body' that is forever in process: 'Who that shall point, as with a wand, and say, / 'This portion of the river of my mind / Came from yon fountain?'' (*Prel.* 1805 ii 213–15).

And yet the rivery form has its limitations. As an exclusive shape, it is seriously distorting. In foregrounding the design of *The Recluse*, *The Excursion* signalled a turn, which Wordsworth's remaining years largely confirmed, towards the finished product, and away from the process of its making. Modern textual scholarship has enabled readers' preferences to run in the opposite direction; and we have very good aesthetic reasons for this preference. But it is nevertheless crucial to our understanding of the shape of the career that the emergence of the second metaphor – the church – be acknowledged. Its practical meaning as a principle of organization is revealed almost immediately, by the publication of the two-volume *Poems* (1815), Wordsworth's first collected edition, and the first in which his works are, as the Preface to *The Excursion* anticipates, 'properly arranged'. This arrangement introduces the categories under which, with modifications, he will group all future collections.

The chronological sequence has taught us a great deal about composition (and has its apotheosis in the work of Mark Reed). It has had less to say about publication, or the carefully orchestrated dissemination of the works, by volume, by class, and by genre. The four corner-stones of the Wordsworthian church are *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807), *The Excursion* (1814), and *Poems* (1815). (For those who lack the originals, facsimiles of all four have recently appeared under the Woodstock Books imprint.)

As Wordsworth's first substantial single-author publication, *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) is of the greatest symbolic importance. It does away with the anonymity and partnership of the 1798 volume, and indicates Wordsworth's

discovery of his settled vocation as a poet, which came about when he and Dorothy moved into Dove Cottage at the end of 1799. This moment was the fulfilment of a cherished ideal in which poetry and the Lake District fuse. Wordsworth's hour of 'dedication' is always set in the Lakes; in the Fenwick Note to *An Evening Walk* it is dated to his fourteenth year, and in *The Prelude* iv 314–45 to the Cambridge summer vacation. The ambitious new start is apparent from the substantial essay prefacing the 1800 volumes, which as a statement of poetical principles and declaration of a specific mission was an unwitting hostage to Wordsworth's critical fortune, and passport to his lasting influence. However, since Volume I more or less reproduces the contents of 1798, only the second of the 1800 volumes contains fresh material. Here, the novelty is partly generic, involving a Lake District take on the ancient forms of pastoral and fable. To the psychological dramatizations of 1798 are added the new varieties of Goslar and Grasmere: the provocative enigma of the Lucy poems, the quelled tragedy of 'Michael' and 'The Brothers', the significant inconsequentiality of the 'Poems on the Naming of Places', the bizarrely poignant Mathew poems, the exemplary mind-and-nature interchange of 'There was a Boy', and the disturbing sexuality and spirituality of 'Nutting' and 'Ruth'.

Poems, in Two Volumes (1807) is nothing if not mixed. Volume I leads off by juxtaposing the mercurial lyrics of 1802, whose poet is prepared to fraternize with birds and flowers, with the high-mindedness of the 'Ode to Duty', whose poet 'suppliate[s]' for the 'controul' of a 'Stern Lawgiver'. Volume II, for its part, moves from the butterfly 'Moods of My Own Mind' to the baffling heights of the 'Ode'. Between these two voices lies a conscious recognition of change – a recognition that is already underway in 'Resolution and Independence', and is summed up, in 'Elegiac Stanzas', the penultimate poem of the collection, by the terrible fracture caused by the drowning of Wordsworth's seaman brother John: 'I have submitted to a new controul: / A power is gone, which nothing can restore'. The new seriousness of temper has a public dimension also: Wordsworth's first venture in the sonnet-sequence, and in a consciously Miltonic persona, is dedicated to 'Liberty', under whose banner all who oppose the Napoleonic regime must enlist.

For all this, the reception of *Poems, in Two Volumes* nearly destroyed Wordsworth's reputation. It was here, ironically, that his 'jacobinical' past, and the critical animus generated by his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, caught up with him. The collection was judged by the slighter lyrics with which it opened, and by the Augustan criteria which still persisted among periodical reviewers. Significantly, these criteria united the liberal Lord Byron and the Whig Francis Jeffrey in common disdain: both used a mock-nursery rhyme, 'namby-pamby', to ridicule what they saw as the 'puerility' and 'affectation'

of the Wordsworth system (Byron, *Monthly Literary Recreations*, July 1807; Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, October 1807).

After the 1807 disaster, Wordsworth fell silent. His next major production, all of seven years later, was seemingly designed to be critic-proof. *The Excursion* could not be less childish. It is, perhaps, the nearest thing we have to a Wordsworthian church (indeed, it has a pastor for one of its central characters). It also marks Wordsworth's arrival socially: the work was dedicated to Lord Lonsdale. None of this prevented Jeffrey from mounting a further attack; but his famous and devastating opener, 'This will never do', is belied by the fact that it *did* do, both at the time of publication (Keats called *The Excursion* one of 'three things to rejoice at in this Age', letter to Haydon, 11 January 1818) and beyond: for the Victorians, *The Excursion* was *the* long Wordsworth poem. Dissenting voices were raised, privately, by Coleridge, who blamed *The Excursion* for not being *The Recluse* (letter to Wordsworth, 30 May 1815); by Blake, who refused 'to believe' the Wordsworth doctrine of mind and world 'fitting and fitted' (annotation to the Prospectus to *The Recluse*); and by the Shelleys, who categorically pronounced 'He is a slave' (Mary Shelley's Journal, 14 September 1814) – thus beginning the 'lost leader' syndrome that culminates in Robert Browning's 1845 poem of that name, where the Distributor of Stamps is glibly conflated with Judas Iscariot: 'Just for a handful of silver he left us.'

The Excursion alters our sense of Wordsworth's shape in three main ways: it uses the peripatetic form of a Tour to organize a long series of interlocking narratives; it adapts both Lake District pastoral and philosophical blank verse to a wide-ranging survey of contemporary society; and it introduces, in the story of the French Revolution and the ideological debate surrounding its events, the master-narrative of the age (which we know from *The Prelude* to have been shaped by a personal experience unique among the major Romantic writers).

Poems (1815), dedicated to Beaumont, hopes to replace the discredited system of *Lyrical Ballads* with one that will make the works invulnerable to the 'senseless outcry' of the critics ('Essay, Supplementary'). To this end, Wordsworth introduces a new theory and a new order: a Preface, and an 'Essay, Supplementary' to it, open and close the first volume; and the poems are given the canonical treatment advertised in the Preface to *The Excursion*. (Even so, Wordsworth cannot resist raising the standard of the old dispensation: the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is smuggled in, at the back of Volume II.) *Poems* (1815) begins with 'My heart leaps up' and ends with the 'Ode'. A chronological arrangement would tell us that these works were being composed within days or hours of one another in March 1802; the categorical

arrangement insists that they are first and last in an order which represents the shape of human life. The collection starts with 'Poems Referring to the Period of Childhood', and comes to a close with those 'Referring to the Period of Old Age'. In between these two ages of man, further categories suggest a process of mental maturation: 'Poems Founded on the Affections' lead, via 'Poems of the Fancy' and 'the Imagination', to a synthesis of thought and feeling in 'Poems Proceeding from Sentiment and Reflection'. Yet a third level of categorization matches a biological to a poetic and generic order: the 'Poems Referring to the Period of Childhood' are succeeded by 'Juvenile Pieces'; those 'Referring to the Period of Old Age' by 'Epitaphs and Elegiac Poems'. The 1815 arrangement throws one category above all into prominence. Spanning both volumes, and divided equally between them, the 'Poems of the Imagination' recognize the centrality of the imaginative faculty to the Wordsworth canon. And, as a group, it too reflects the maturing mind, opening with 'There was a Boy' and ending with 'Tintern Abbey' (where, we may recall, a transition from 'glad animal movements' to 'elevated thoughts' was first observed). A final complexity, and circularity, is implied by the fact that the 'Ode', which stands alone as an uncategorizable conclusion to the whole, has as its epigraph lines from 'My heart leaps up', the first piece in the collection.

As these multiple orderings suggest, the life of the body, the mind, and the work, all converge in the single shape of Wordsworth's new arrangement. When the rivery consciousness gets to thinking of the total effect of its meditative, meandering, overflowing courses, it does so in terms of an order of architecture. But, in the 1815 *Poems* at least, it is an order that is sympathetic to the human scale and the human lifespan. Remarkably, the architectural form retains within it a sense of the rivery process of existence, flowing from birth to death, and reflecting upon itself at every stage. Perhaps, then, it is in combining the two analogies that the shape of the career reveals itself most fully. Indeed, the 1815 edition seems to recognize as much, since, as well as categorizing the poems, its table of contents tabulates some of the dates of composition and first publication. Elsewhere, too, river and cathedral are allowed to share a common form: both *The River Duddon* (1820) and *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (1822) are groups of sonnets. Collectively speaking, each sonnet is part of a rivery sequence; individually, it is a 'narrow room', one of the church's 'little cells... and sepulchral recesses' ('Nuns fret not'; Preface to *The Excursion*).

The shape of the river has a lifelong persistence in Wordsworth, thanks to its pedestrian form, the Tour. Appropriately enough, it is in *The River Duddon* that we find the first outing, under his own name, of Wordsworth's

Topographical Description of the Country of the Lakes. Originally published anonymously as an introduction to Joseph Wilkinson's *Select Views in Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Lancashire* (1810), this prose work appeared in a bewildering variety of formats: it was known to the public mainly in the form of *A Guide through the District of the Lakes* (1835), though it also extends to 'An Unpublished Tour' and an incomplete essay on 'The Sublime and the Beautiful' (1811/12; available in *Prose II*). Far more than a 'Description', these writings together make up a kind of sacred text about the region in which Wordsworth had chosen to live and dedicate himself. For a man who is popularly regarded as an unbudgeable Grasmere fixture, however, Wordsworth spends a surprising amount of time away from home. The confirmed ruralist is also an avid metropolitan, making regular sorties to London throughout his life (he last visited in 1847). Quite apart from his almost daily Lakeland rambles, there is his peripatetic youth (in Cambridge, France, London, the Isle of Wight, Wales, Keswick, Racedown, Alfoxden, Goslar, and Yorkshire), and the innumerable deliberate waywardnesses of later years: the Lakes in 1799 and 1807; Calais in 1802; the Continent in 1790 and – *en famille* this time – in 1820; North Wales in 1824; Ireland in 1829; Scotland, repeatedly, from the brief trip in 1801, to the extended tours of 1803, 1814, 1831, and 1833; Belgium, Holland, and the Rhine in 1828, when Coleridge came too, and the two men were finally reconciled; and, last but not least, Italy in 1837, to which Wordsworth had been longing to return since his first glimpse in 1790, and which brings his career full circle. With impeccable symmetry, the Tour is the route taken, both by his first major publications, *An Evening Walk* (the Lakes, 1789–9) and *Descriptive Sketches* (the Continent, 1790), and by his last separate collection (1842), containing his *Memorials of a Tour in Italy*, 1837.

These journeys are best seen, perhaps, not as random holidays, but as an intrinsic element of the poetic life, and as forays into mental, quite as much as geographical, territory. Scotland, Wordsworth told Scott, 'is... the most poetical Country I ever travelled in' (7 November 1805, *WL* 1 641). One way in which it becomes poetical is that it is not only literally but imaginatively revisited. Just as *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent*, 1820 (1822) retraces the steps of his ecstatic 1790 Tour, so Scotland is four times recorded, with each layer of writing referring back to earlier inscriptions. *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807) makes muses – the Highland Girl and the Solitary Reaper, Rob Roy and Burns – of the 1803 tour, Wordsworth's first lone trip with Dorothy since his marriage; *Poems* (1815) places the unvisited Yarrow of 1803 (and 1807) alongside its visited sequel, from the 1814 tour; *Yarrow Revisited, and Other Poems* (1835) turns the

1831 Tour, during which he said a last goodbye to Scott, into his best-selling single title volume; and, finally, 1835 sees the publication of forty-odd sonnets *Composed or Suggested during a Tour in Scotland . . . 1833*. For the venture-some reader, each visitation yields rich and relatively neglected pickings.

Wordsworth's tourism enacts the principles of return and renewal which are embedded at the heart of his imaginative self-conception and development, in the so-called 'spots of time'. It also, more often than not, imposes a period of delay between having the experience and writing about it. In its memorializing, the Tour conforms exactly to the deep structure of Wordsworth's creative life: 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', impressions which are stored up, to lie dormant 'Until maturer seasons called them forth' (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads, Prose* i 148; 1805 i 623). Travel is of vital importance in prompting and inspiring new work, providing the resources for long sequences, and the occasion of many individual poems ('Tintern Abbey', notably, a tribute to the Wye, revisited in 1798, and *The White Doe of Rylstone* (1815), which came of a trip to Bolton Abbey, in 1807). The Tour is one of the most self-consciously innovative shapes of Wordsworth's career: prose Tours were commonplace in his day, poetic ones much less so. The latter first emerges as a coherent sub-genre in the 1807 volumes: a sequence of 'Poems, Composed During a Tour, Chiefly on Foot' (actually a product of several different occasions) is followed by 'Poems Written During a Tour in Scotland'. Once again, the pedestrian or linear form is brought within a defining architectonic structure.

Wordsworth's aims are at once mutual and divided. River and church coincide; but they are most vitally metaphorical in their reciprocal contradictoriness. They point to kinds of contrariness which may be seen throughout the canon. To take an example that textual scholarship has recently brought to the fore: Wordsworth toiled repeatedly to give his poems a fixed final form, both verbal and organizational; yet his doing so involved him in constant, harassing, even neurotic, revision. His last collected edition was issued only in 1849–50. There is a sense in which the poet's mind compulsively resisted the closure his professionalism tirelessly sought. When *The Prelude* welcomes the return of inspiration, it is as a marvellously 'shapeless eagerness' (1805 ix 11); when it allegorizes the death of mental process, a self-wounding simile describes the elusive 'Tendencies to shape' as being 'Exposed and lifeless, as a written book' (viii 721–7). But fixity is by no means a consistent evil, or mobility a certain good. Wordsworth, at his most subtle, is neither dualist nor monologist. Rather, what look like the simplest and stables of verbal structures are fraught with a destabilizing vigour. Take, for instance,

'Resolution and Independence', where the decrepit Leech-Gatherer is said to be 'Motionless as a Cloud', a comparison that only gradually yields its counter-intuitive wit – namely, the settling on a cloud, of all things, as an immovable image. Conversely, in preceding lines, the man's 'extreme old age' has been animated into an eerie half-life by the still more improbable similes of 'a huge Stone' and 'a Sea-beast' (lines 82, 64–72). All such devices, meanwhile, register the narrating eye, disconcertingly and equivocally at work on its subject. 'I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject', proclaims the realist poet of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (*Prose* i 132); but that 'subject' everywhere includes the enhancing, dimming, or transforming of outward things by mind itself.

Many critics have remarked upon Wordsworth's extraordinary power of animating the world by seeing it from the perspective of our perceptions: that skater who is the centre of his own whirling universe in *The Prelude* (i 474–86); the thinker whose solitariness enables the 'cliffs' of 'Tintern Abbey' to 'impress / *Thoughts* of more deep seclusion' on an already 'secluded scene' (lines 6–7, my emphasis); the boy whose transforming receptivity is mirrored by, and yet distinct from, the tremulous instability of 'that uncertain heaven, receiv'd / Into the bosom of the steady lake' ('There Was a Boy', 24–5). From a technical point of view, there is a comparable subjectivizing of poetics: metre, diction, rhythm, are all re-conceived as being driven by 'passion', and the dramatic projections of feeling.

As a 'border' figure (a name devised by Geoffrey Hartman, in *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787–1814* (1964), and explored by Jonathan Wordsworth, in *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision* (1982)), the Leech-Gatherer is emblematic of the divided impulses which shape the career. The most fundamental of these has also had the profoundest influence on the tradition: the Wordsworth who declared, disarmingly, that the poet 'is a man speaking to men' (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads, Prose* i 138), was also perceived, by Keats, as 'a thing per se' which 'stands alone' (a revealing moment, this, for showing how a Wordsworthian subjectivity is felt to acquire the hard resisting outline of an object). The advocate of a poetry whose subjects are drawn 'from common life', and whose diction approximates 'the real language of men', was also the inventor of an idiom Keats christened 'the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime' (*Prose* i 150; Keats, letter to Woodhouse, 27 October 1818). Both poetics were revolutionary, both have come to seem exemplarily modern (in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, De Quincey runs away from school carrying two books: the tragedies of Euripedes for the ancients, *Lyrical Ballads* for the moderns). These split yet shared poetries are seeded as early as the first, anonymous *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798. Here, we find *both* the

ballads and lyrics which anticipate the enormous profusion of Wordsworth's 'small poems' (which Coleridge despaired of as counter to *The Recluse*); and the 'exquisitely elaborate'¹⁰ blank verse of 'Tintern Abbey', a work whose self-concentration and contestation look towards the epic 'Growth of a Poet's Mind'. This kind of division becomes inescapable – and, to contemporary critics, inescapably provocative – in *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807). Looking back, the edition may be read for its incessant, if eccentric, variety; at the time, it was proof of Wordsworth's giddiness, swinging wildly 'from sublimity to silliness' (Montgomery, on *Poems in Two Volumes*).

Crucially, the division falls within poems as well as between them: Wordsworth conjures one of his greatest moments, the first of the *Prelude* 'spots of time', out of the bizarre proximity of 'ordinary sight' and 'visionary dreariness'. His 'high argument' is almost always cheek-by-jowl with 'humbler matter'. To Coleridge, this instability amounted to an illegitimate mixing of different kinds of writing, not just degrees of poetic register: his mature reservations about Wordsworth cohere around the perplexity induced by an oxymoronically 'daring humbleness' – the deflationary and inflationary antitheses and inequalities of the style (*Biographia Literaria*, ch. 22). William Hazlitt, meanwhile, diagnosed that the difficulty for readers of the *Lyrical Ballads* lay in their 'unaccountable mixture of seeming simplicity and real abstruseness' ('Mr Wordsworth', *The Spirit of the Age*); and Richard Mant turned the same mixture, in *Poems, in Two Volumes*, to parodic use: *The Simpliciad* (1808) brought Augustan standards of decorum to bear on the Romantic disproportion of 'Poets, who fix their visionary sight / On Sparrow's eggs'. With his ear for political nuance, Hazlitt detected another sort of discrepancy, identifying on separate occasions both a 'levelling Muse' and, later, deplorably, a poetry whose 'language . . . naturally falls in with the language of power'.¹¹

Taking up important statements by A. C. Bradley and Matthew Arnold, M. H. Abrams has made a shape out of such divisions, in an essay called 'Two Roads to Wordsworth'. He and others have concentrated especially on the poet's joint reputation for social amicability (much enhanced by the discovery of his love letters to his wife), and for solitary and even misanthropic musings. Another – and, for my purposes, final – way of stating the fruitfulness of the problem is to say that the poet of nature and the natural man is also the mind-centred figure of whom Wilde astutely said, 'Wordsworth went to the Lakes, but he was never a Lake poet' (*The Critic as Artist*). In both these Wordsworths, the Victorians, Arnold and Mill especially, recognized a great spiritual doctor or healer of minds. But the apparently reassuring and naively continuous self, whose days are 'Bound each to each by natural piety', involves a startling and unsettling inversion of biological priority – 'The

The shape of the poetic career

Child is Father of the Man' ('My heart leaps up') – or requires an electrifying and radical purgation of experience:

Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realized . . .
(‘Ode’, lines 146–8)

What both the joyous child of the lyric and the alienated figure of the ‘Ode’ have in common is their newness before the world. Their strength of response is owing to a paradoxical or effortful primitivism, which hopes to return the self-estranged and -forgetful adult to an uncluttered, undiminished version of himself. The ‘spots of time’, Wordsworth’s core doctrine of renovation, are dated to ‘our first childhood’, the ‘twilight of rememberable life’ (1799 i 296–8); and were themselves arrived at astonishingly early, while Wordsworth was in Germany in 1798–9. In the long *Prelude*, they acquire the idealist function of illustrating that the ‘mind / Is lord and master’ over ‘outward sense’ (1805 xi 270–1). Here, the ‘spots of time’ serve to rescue the poet both from his own self-destructive and secondary habits of mind, and from the anarchy and ruin of the historical process he has witnessed in France (it seems no accident, then, that the *Prelude* ‘spots’ were being revised into their new, purgative role, in spring 1804, just as the ‘Ode’, including the lines quoted above, was being completed).

The principle of self-renewal radiates throughout the work: immaculate miniature versions of the ‘spot’-process are available in the famous ‘Daffodils’ (‘I wandered lonely as a Cloud’) and ‘The Solitary Reaper’. The ‘spots of time’ are also the exemplary case of those Wordsworthian antinomies, of shaping spirit and shapeless impulse, of spontaneity and self-control, and of the ‘overflow of powerful feelings’ that is produced only ‘by one who has thought long and deeply’. By virtue of their combined permanence and temporality, stasis and mobility, they are emblematic of the ambiguously insubstantial bedrock of imaginative life. That co-existence of weight, solidity, and material presence, with the impalpable, ethereal, and incorporeal – ‘a real solid world / Of images’ (1805 viii 604–5) – is one of Wordsworth’s most suggestive, and quietly unnerving, legacies. A prime, if slightly off-beat, example occurs in the fantastic, yet somehow incontrovertibly realized, opening of Wordsworth’s *Guide to the Lakes*. Seeking a perfect view of ‘the main outlines of the country’, the guide asks his reader to adopt an imaginary and ideal ‘station’ on a cloud:

I know not how to give the reader a distinct image of these more readily than by requesting him to place himself with me, in imagination, upon some given point; let it be the top of either of the mountains, Great Gavel, or Scawfell;

or, rather, let us suppose our station to be a cloud hanging midway between those two mountains, at not more than half a mile's distance from the summit of each, and not many yards above their highest elevation; we shall then see stretched at our feet a number of vallies, not fewer than eight, diverging from the point, on which we are supposed to stand, like spokes from the nave of a wheel. (Prose ii 171)

'Hanging midway' in the sentence, the cloud-station perfectly exemplifies its ambiguous place in a Wordsworthian universe, between land and sky, real and imaginary, fixed and ephemeral, shapely and formless. Diaphanous itself, it nonetheless gives shape to the District below, which from its vantage-point gains the coherence and unity of a wheel, with spokes radiating from a substantial centre. As the 1815 Preface reveals, the verb 'hang' was fraught with complex associations for Wordsworth, both in and of itself – as registering a permanently undecided ambivalence of shape, direction, or posture – and by its appearance in *King Lear* and *Paradise Lost*, and a corresponding inclination towards or away from a Shakespearean or Miltonic order of language (Prose iii 31). Coleridge imagined Milton and Shakespeare as twin peaks of poetic glory; in this passage from the *Guide to the Lakes*, Wordsworth's amalgam of present-participle–adverb–preposition finds him 'hanging midway between' the rival mountains of his own region.

NOTES

- 1 'Autobiographical Memoranda', 1847; Prose iii 372.
- 2 See Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 248–62.
- 3 See *ibid.*, pp. 158–9, 182–7, 276–9; and Kenneth R. Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1998), pp. 427–67.
- 4 Coleridge, letter to Thelwall, 13 May 1796; *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*, ed. Edith J. Morley, 3 vols. (1938), 1, pp. 887, 158.
- 5 *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
- 6 John Taylor's gossip, as reported in Joseph Farington's *Diary* iii 249 (entry for 17 June 1806).
- 7 'Said Secrecy to Cowardice and Fraud', first pub. 1838 in a note to *Protest Against the Ballot* ('Forth rushed, from Envy sprung and Self-conceit, / A Power misnamed the SPIRIT OF REFORM...').
- 8 *The Faerie Queene* v ii 36, noted by Wordsworth as the model for his own line, 'Perilous is sweeping change, all chance unsound' ('Blest Stateman He', 1838).
- 9 Johnston, *Wordsworth and 'The Recluse'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Jonathan Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), Epilogue.

The shape of the poetic career

- 10 James Montgomery, reviewing *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807) in the *Eclectic Review* (January 1808).
- 11 'Coriolanus', *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*: Hazlitt is responding to Wordsworth's 'Ode: 1815', which caused such a stir because it located God's 'pure intent' in 'Man – arrayed for mutual slaughter, / – Yea, Carnage is thy daughter' (lines 106–7).