

WORDSWORTH'S PHILOSOPHIC SONG

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Abbreviations

William Wordsworth, The Borderers, ed. Borderers

Robert Osborn (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell

University Press, 1982)

Dove Cottage manuscript DC MS

FYThe Letters of William and Dorothy Words-

> worth. The Early Years, 1787-1805, arranged and ed. Ernest De Selincourt (2nd edn, rev. Chester L. Shaver, Oxford: Clarendon Press,

1967)

Fourteen-Book W. J. B. Owen, ed., The Fourteen-Book Prelude Prelude

(Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985)

Home at Grasmere Home at Grasmere. Part First, Book First of

'The Recluse', ed. Beth Darlington (Ithaca,

N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977)

Last Poems Last Poems, 1821-1850, ed. Jared Curtis with

> Apryl Lea Denny-Ferris and Jillian Heydt-Stevenson (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University

Press, 1999)

Lyrical Ballads "Lyrical Ballads", and Other Poems, 1797–1800,

ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca,

N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992)

OED The Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition,

prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner

(20 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989)

Poems, in Two Volumes 'Poems, in Two Volumes' and Other Poems,

1800-1807, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca, N.Y.:

Cornell University Press, 1983)

ix

Reed, Early Years Mark L. Reed, Wordsworth: The Chronology of

the Early Years, 1770-1799 (Cambridge, Mass.:

Harvard University Press, 1967)

Reed, Middle Years Mark. L. Reed, Wordsworth: The Chronology of

the Middle Years (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard

University Press, 1975)

Reiman Donald Reiman, ed., The Romantics Reviewed.

Part A. The Lake Poets (2 vols., New York and

London: Garland, 1972)

Ruined Cottage Wordsworth, The Ruined Cottage and the

Pedlar, ed. James Butler (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell

University Press, 1979)

Shorter Poems Shorter Poems 1807–1820, ed. Carl H. Ketcham

1807–1820 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989)

Salisbury Plain Stephen Gill, ed., The Salisbury Plain Poems of

William Wordsworth (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell

University Press, 1975)

Thirteen-Book Prelude The Thirteen-Book Prelude, ed. Mark L. Reed

(2 vols., Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press,

1991)

Tuft of Primroses Joseph S. Kishel, ed., The Tuft of Primroses,

with Other Late Poems for The Recluse (Ithaca,

N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986)

Wu, 1770–1799 Duncan Wu, Wordsworth's Reading, 1770–1799

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

1993)

Wu, 1800–1815 Duncan Wu, Wordsworth's Reading, 1800–1815

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

1995)

Contents

Acknowledgements		viii
List of abbreviations		ix
	Introduction: poetic thinking	1
COUNTER-SPIRITS		33
I	Old idolatry	35
2	From idolatry to ideology	56
3	Materialism of the beautiful	84
C	OMMON DAY	109
4	Happiness	III
5	Infinity	133
6	Life	153
7	Light	195
	Conclusion: imagination	214
Notes		224
Bibliography Index		252
THUEX		263

Introduction: poetic thinking

When Wordsworth is trying to get started on his projected long poem, 'The Recluse', he reviews the fantasies of major poetic achievements which he has at various times entertained. The catalogue culminates in this:

Then, last wish,
My last and favourite aspiration! then
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 mellower years will bring a riper mind
And clearer insight.

(i. 229-39)1

How important, and in what ways, was this 'favourite aspiration' to what Wordsworth actually did in the end write? For one of the most illuminating among recent readings of Wordsworth, it was not very important at all. Or rather: not only was it important only in so far as it was harmful, but it was not even fully Wordsworth's own aspiration:

Coleridge wanted to believe for reasons of his own, and he persuaded Wordsworth also to believe, that a young poet's gradual development toward self-consciousness was his major theme, and that its truth for morals was gratitude to nature for having made him what he was. With that description of the poet's work came the burden of a special project, of which Wordsworth was the destined executor – a theodicy, both metaphysical and historical in scope, whose leading evidences would come from the receptive and infinitely associable mind of the poet. . . . But his friend's ambitions were mismatched to his own talents. When you have

disposed of the philosophy of *The Prelude*, you have not disposed of Wordsworth but only of a notion someone once had of him, which he unfortunately came to share. The long poem he withheld for most of his life is a record of accidents, to which the author hoped to give coherence.²

It is easy to go along with these remarks when we read what Coleridge himself later said about the matter. Coleridge remembered that in the poem envisaged by them together, Wordsworth

should assume the station of a man in repose, whose mind was made up, and so prepared to deliver upon authority a system of philosophy. He was to treat man as man – a subject of eye, ear, touch, and taste, in contact with external nature – informing the senses from the mind and not compounding a mind out of the senses – then the pastoral and other states, assuming a satiric or Juvenalian spirit as he approached the high civilization of cities and towns, and then opening a melancholy picture of the present state of degeneracy and vice – thence revealing the necessity for and proof of the whole state of man and society being subject to and illustrative of a redemptive process in operation – showing how this Idea reconciled all the anomalies, and how it promised future glory and restoration. Something of this sort I suggested – and it was agreed on. It is what in substance I have been all my life doing in my system of philosophy.³

We should indeed be grateful that Wordsworth never completed any such pandect. The poet's mind is to be 'made up'. He is to deliver ('upon authority'!) a 'system of philosophy'. And, in the end, everything is to come out right. All the 'anomalies' are to be reconciled. Here, just as Bromwich says, is an entire theodicy. Worse, it is *Coleridge*'s theodicy. Wordsworth, it appears, is to do little more than just add verse.

This in turn may raise doubts about the way Wordsworth writes about his 'last and favourite aspiration' at the beginning of *The Prelude*. Perhaps this aspiration was an 'awful burthen' just because it was not really his own? And perhaps he kept taking refuge from it just because of the inadequately imagined relationship between thinking and versifying which surfaces in the very expression of that aspiration?

This line of thought is attractive for a number of reasons. Bromwich feels keenly that some recent Wordsworth criticism traces a path of misrecognition – in which, he implies, an over-philosophized conception of Wordsworth has been an important instrument in turning his writing into an object suitable to the purposes of suspicion. If the systematic or metaphysical or epistemological aspects of Wordsworth's writing can be regarded as in large part an alien growth, then it will be harder for the

systematizing or metaphysical or epistemological readings which have so dominated Wordsworth criticism to take reductive purchase on his authorship. Whether such philosophizing readings are concerned with leading Wordsworth back to some set of epistemological or metaphysical sources, or whether they wish to see him as anticipating or violating some more recent set of epistemological or metaphysical ideas, any such approach would risk at once disqualifying itself from primary interest, because it would take Wordsworth to be interesting chiefly in so far as he thinks or writes like someone else. In such a case whatever might be singular in Wordsworth's writing must be overlooked.

But perhaps Wordsworth's aspiration to 'philosophic Song' was not quite the same as Coleridge's later picture of a verse theodicy? Curiously, impatience with Wordsworth's philosophizing can also find a Coleridgean point of departure. Stanley Cavell has seen in Coleridge's treatment of the 'best Philosopher' passage of the great Ode a moment at which the critic's insight falters: 'It is this sudden', for Cavell, '- when Wordsworth flies his philosophical colours, then Coleridge's seemingly limitless capacity for sympathetic understanding toward other writers he thought genuine is stripped away, his tolerance for mysticism and his contempt for reductive empiricisms forgotten, and he starts firing at will.'4 Bromwich draws a sharp distinction between the interesting accidents and the tedious generalities in Wordsworth's writing, and we can all think of passages in the poet's work of general reflection lacking vital interest. Yet what Wordsworth writes when he talks about his aspiration to philosophic song seems to suggest that he does not think of the relationship between singular experience and general truth in quite that way. What is yearnt towards is a song 'Of Truth that cherishes our daily life'. It appears not to be the kind of aspiration which seeks to shake off 'the accidents of nature, time, and place' (x. 822) but the opposite: one which can 'incorporate itself with the blood and vital juices of our minds'.5 The question at issue is whether, as Bromwich suggests, the philosophical aspirations in Wordsworth's writing are adventitious, superimposed upon a steady look at the subject which already contains all that is of vital interest; or whether that steady look at the subject itself developed as it did partly because of, rather than in spite of, Wordsworth's aspiration to be a philosophical poet.

If that last possibility were true, what could be meant by 'philosophic Song' might be something quite different from a system, a method, a theodicy, or any other kind of philosophical edifice from which '[a]ll the anomalies' would have been removed. It might mean, not that philosophy gets fitted into a song – where all the thinking is done by philosophy

and only the handiwork by verse - but that the song itself, as song, is philosophic. It might mean that a different kind of thinking happens in verse - that instead of being a sort of thoughtless ornament or reliquary for thinking, verse is itself a kind of cognition, with its own resistances and difficulties. If that were so, Wordsworth's verse would not be 'philosophic Song' chiefly in so far as it exemplified or anticipated some already existing or future philosophical system or authorship. Quite the reverse: it would be philosophic song precisely in so far as driven - by the felt need to give utterance to non-replicable singular experiences in the collectively and historically cognitive form of verse - to obstruct, displace or otherwise change the syntax and the lexicons currently available for the articulation of such experience. Driven to truth, that is, less by topquality ratiocination than by attention to problems of poetic making: provided that such making be understood not as sheer craft, but as itself already a cognitive matter. And, in this, it would, after all, rejoin at least in part another Coleridge: not the one who wanted all the anomalies to be reconciled, but the one who understood that 'in Shakespeare's poems, the creative power and the intellectual energy wrestle as in a war embrace. Each in its excess of strength seems to threaten the extinction of the other.'7

This book attempts to explore this last possibility. The remainder of this introduction investigates what Wordsworth himself understood by the phrase 'philosophical Poet', and where we might find elements of such philosophical poetry in his verse.

The structure of the main body of the book requires a word of explanation, because its two parts pursue very different kinds of enquiry, and with very different methods. The first part, 'Counter-spirits', constitutes a kind of extended philosophical introduction, but one which continually returns, at varying intervals, to Wordsworth himself. In it, I argue that it is mistaken to assume that poetic thinking and materialist thinking must be opposites. I proceed by scrutinizing some of the reasons which have been or might be given for discounting the possibility of philosophic song: scrutinizing, that is, both the reasons for discounting the possibility that any poetry might bear truth, and the reasons for arguing that Wordsworth's in particular does not. The chapters in this part of the book therefore range widely, both across Wordsworth's authorships and across other authorships anterior to, contemporary with, and post-dating his. They are concerned not only with literary and aesthetic material, but also with fundamental arguments in the sphere of social theory.

I begin this attempt sideways on, by looking at a motif which might at first sight appear to be of marginal importance both to this author and to this period: the motif of idolatry and of idol-breaking. Wordsworth comes to feel that these apparent opposites are mutually dependent. His verse and prose trace this dependence steadily and subtly. This matters more broadly. I then suggest in the second chapter, because of the way in which our ubiquitous social-scientific concept of 'ideology' has developed out of the older Christian concept of 'idolatry'. I show that this is not merely a matter of ancient history but very vitally concerns weaknesses in the concepts of 'ideology' and 'ideology-critique' as they are applied today. Here I defend Marx against some of his admirers. I contrast Marx's comic and restricted conception of 'ideology' with some of the literal and generalized ones prevalent today. Marx's conception was not primarily an assault on mystifying ideals. It was an assault on the idea that assaulting mystifying ideals would make you free. Its subsequent extension to domains such as poetry is therefore in need of consideration, rather than self-evidently legitimate. Smashing up an idol is not necessarily a less superstitious act than venerating it. What we now call 'ideology-critique' is what Marx meant by 'ideology'; essential to what I am tempted to call Marx's romantic materialism is an emphatic and unbridgeable distinction between the living and the non-living which would now in most quarters figure as 'romantic ideology' or as 'metaphysics' (chapter 3).

If, then, we are not free to draw upon a polar opposition between a supposedly disenchanted 'materialism' and a supposedly deluded 'ideology', we are free to reconsider the range of questions brought up by the idea of materialism in relation to Wordsworth's writing. In the following chapter I suggest that would-be 'materialism' has too often relied upon an economistic framework for thinking about the experience and social organization of need, desire and pleasure: a framework, that is, which generalizes to all experience the common sense associated with a particular mode of production, distribution and consumption. I argue that Wordsworth was able to attend to experiences of need, desire and pleasure which could not be properly described or understood according to an economistic framework. The idea that these acts of attention are 'ideological' can be sustained only if a historically particular notion of an opposition between disinterested giving and interested exchange is converted into a universal economic anthropology.

In these chapters which make up the first part, I am attempting to call into question a number of philosophical, historiographical and social-theoretical assumptions familiar from some recent approaches to

Wordsworth's poetry, as well as from some other contexts; but I am not mainly interested in the question of whether some group or other of critics might be right or wrong. Instead I am attempting to limit the powers of some large and imposing conceptual arrays which are sometimes applied as if they required no philosophical scrutiny. I am attempting to do this in the first place on the basis of my own arguments and evidence; and, in the second place, on the basis of my argument that Wordsworth's own writing provides resources for truer apprehensions of some of the problems which these assumptions concern. I am also suggesting that the 'historical' 'contexts' necessary to a consideration of any modern poetry extend back through centuries, and even millennia, rather than decades.

Having thus, as I hope, shown that the possibility that Wordsworth's poetry might bear truth cannot, at least, be ruled out in advance, I turn in the second main part of the book, 'Common day', to attempt an interpretation of some aspects of the truth-content which I hope to find in it. These four chapters each take a narrower and more consecutive form than their predecessors. Each is principally concerned with a single reading, around which readings of other work and sources are in each case clustered.

A recent work of subtle phenomenology sets as its goal a quality of attention which 'might cease to rule out of court the appearing of those phenomena which exceed us, which surprise us, and which most closely affect us'.8 There could be worse analogies for the wish animating Wordsworth's acts of poetic attention. His writing is always breaking through to some experience for which the available lexicons fail to allow. Each of these chapters, then, attempts to bring to light the way in which the experience of attending closely to some poem or passage of a poem in Wordsworth's authorship leaves inoperable the series of philosophical or commonsensical idées reçues by means of which the experiences concerned are usually suppressed, obliviated, or ruled out of court. Each thus moves gradually towards opening up some of the meanings in Wordsworth's poetic thinking of some central concept or concepts. This is more and less than a philological task, because it is concerned with exceptional rather than with typical or unexceptional moments in Wordsworth's authorship. Instead it is a task for philosophical poetics. These chapters deliberately concern themselves with conceptual constellations which seem to be amongst the most rebarbative and least redeemable for many contemporary readers: those around happiness ('The Tuft of Primroses'), infinity (books 7 and 8 of the 1804-5 Prelude), life (book 5 of The Prelude) and light (Ode ('There was a time')); and they deliberately seek 'philosophic Song' not only in reflective or speculative poems and passages, but also in those where the poet collides with or cherishes quotidian particularities. In their course, some other fundamental concepts of Wordsworth's poetic thinking are also interpreted: *human*, *gift*, *thinking*, *glory*, *bliss*, in particular. Together, these chapters lead to a conclusion in which a possible reinterpretation of Wordsworth's Imagination is suggested.

A word is needed here about the practice adopted in this book in relation to proper names. As would be expected, all quotations are attributed, and given precise references. 10 But on a few occasions, and especially when I quote from the works of authors not contemporary with Wordsworth, the author's proper name is given only in the accompanying note, and is not mentioned in the main text. The reason for this is as follows. One serious obstacle to the vitally necessary exchange between philosophy and literary criticism – an obstacle which has made many good literary critics wish that the exchange would cease altogether has been the unphilosophical practice of allowing the name of an authorship to usurp the consideration which should be given to the thoughts contained in it. The reliance on the proper names of the philosophers or of the star theorists creates a situation in which their thoughts are 'always already read', in the sense that as soon as we see those names a pre-interpreted series of 'positions' tends to be marshalled. In these circumstances, readers' eyes readily slip from the words quoted to the proper name taken to be in possession of them. The name is read instead of the thoughts. The proper names are not suppressed here - all may be found in the relevant notes - but they are sometimes deprived of prominence where it is judged that such prominence might tend to divert attention from the thoughts themselves.

It is also necessary to say why substantial passages of this book, and especially of Part I, are devoted not only to authors other than Wordsworth, but, in many instances, to authors whose works he could not have read. Much of what we think of as simple common sense is yesterday's unintelligibly avant-garde social science, or metaphysics or epistemology. Primary discussions of concepts determined by those fields are essential, not so that we shall have a new set of tools to apply to Wordsworth, nor (still worse) so that Wordsworth can be made to fit in with some contemporary or social-scientific position – but simply in order to have a chance of recovering some of what is peculiar to Wordsworth from the frameworks used to contain him. All the humanities are philosophical through and through – except where they expect some other discipline to do their thinking for them. In this sense it is my contention that no book

which does not renew epistemological, metaphysical, aesthetic, social-scientific and other ideas for itself is likely to be able to hope to interpret Wordsworth's *singularity* at all.

THE TRUTH IN POETRY?

'According to Democritus, truth lies hidden at the bottom of a well; and, according to Schopenhauer, it gets a rap on the knuckles when it tries to come out.' The aphorism is comic and faintly sinister. Personified, but only enough so to have knuckles, truth looks less like a goddess than like the half-human monster everyone is trying to push back into the well. Here 'truth' may be, not what is arrived at when all error shall have been deleted, but what gets *blurted out* when the usual defences are down.

This sense of the word 'truth' as something which is blurted out might seem to be at the furthest remove from the kind of truth-effect which, if any, is to be found in Wordsworth's poetry. Schopenhauer's idea relies on a sense of puncturing, of the material breaking in upon the ideal. So its most comfortable element, if anywhere in verse, might seem to be in satire: in a medium which allows for or indeed may even be structured around the kind of bathos exemplified in Schopenhauer's aphorism. In particular, much critical attention to Wordsworth over the last two decades has understood what is happening in his poetry as the very reverse of any such process: as the concealment, sublimation, occlusion or effacement of minute socio-historical-material specificity in an idealizing or aestheticizing 'ideology'. It is then reserved to materialist or historicist criticism to perform the kind of truth-effect imagined by Schopenhauer: to bring to light the inconvenient particularities which an idealizing poetry has been shoving back into the well. If, however, the reader can (as I hope he or she later may) be persuaded that the description of Wordsworth as an idealist has limitations, then it may be that this sense for truth is not closed to his poetry either. What that blurting-out might mean in poetry could be, for example, a moment at which a loss of control over a language which it is precisely the poet's art to master, to turn into an instrument, appears to testify to some specific emotional or intellectual (and necessarily and quite trivially material, historical and particular) pressure which makes that instrumentalism break down.

It could be this kind of moment:

Stern Lawgiver! yet thou dost wear The Godhead's most benignant grace; Nor know we anything so fair
As is the smile upon thy face:
Flowers laugh before thee on their beds;
And Fragrance in thy footing treads;
Thou dost preserve the Stars from wrong;
And the most ancient Heavens through Thee are fresh and strong.¹²

The connection between stars and duty had been made more famously, and in a rather different way, before:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not need to search for them and merely conjecture them as though they were veiled in obscurity or in the transcendent region [im Überschwenglichen] beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence.¹³

This passage has the power that it does partly because its suddenly concrete evocation of wonder and amazement comes at the end of a closely reasoned and difficult account of the a priori grounds of moral theory. Yet there is more to it than this. Perhaps the power which the passage has had for readers of Kant partly results from the faint hint of a transgression which this phrase contains of Kant's prohibition upon 'stray[ing] [ausschweifen] into intelligible worlds', a prohibition obedience to which, in Kant's mind, critically distinguishes his thought from dogmatic metaphysics.¹⁴ By saying in passing that he sees the moral law before him, it feels as though Kant is treating the reality of the moral law as known not merely by practical but also by theoretical reason. When he says that he sees the stars before him it is as though what we know to be true of cognition from the first critique - that the manifold of intuition presented by sensibility to the understanding has no determinacy until determinacy is bestowed by the categories - is momentarily bypassed, and we just are really seeing the stars: I see them before me. It is as though, then, in this phrase, 'I see them before me', we experience the temptation of getting our hands on a continually re-prohibited immediacy of experience. Yet at the same time, the passage testifies to an irreparably split life. The moral law is inside, the stars are outside. What creates a wondrous effect here is the vertiginous contrast which is compressed into the single emphatic phrase: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. It is vertiginous not because it is a contrast in scale: because, for example, we pass from something infinitely large to something

infinitesimally small; but because it is a contrast between 'two things' which cannot in fact be compared with each other at all. Each is immeasurable; both are mutually incommensurable. Yet here our perception of both is represented as absolutely immediate.

Wordsworth's lines were first received in print not as wondrous but as ridiculous. 'The two last lines seem to be utterly without meaning; at least we have no sort of conception in what sense *Duty* can be said to keep the old skies *fresh*, and the stars from wrong.' Whatever we might think of Jeffrey's implied valuation, he has put his finger on an important part of what it is like to read these lines. It really is hard to know what is meant by them. Before rushing to defend them by supplying such a meaning, and perhaps in the process rushing to destroy just what is interesting about them, I want to consider some of the metrico-rhythmic questions they raise, not with the foolish hope of reasoning the reader into finding them beautiful, but rather, starting from my singular and perhaps non-universalizable experience of their pathos, to search in the manner of reflective judgement for the possible concepts which they may require. ¹⁶

There is a suggestion of hypermetricality about that last line: 'And the most ancient Heavens through Thee are fresh and strong.' The stanza shape adopted by Wordsworth, in fact, produces of itself the sense of an excess or overspill since, in each, seven four-foot lines culminate in a closing hexameter. All of these final closing hexameters, except this and the last line of the first stanza, have twelve syllables. In the closing line of the first stanza and in this line the syllable count is uncertain:

From strife and from despair; a glorious ministry.

And the most ancient Heavens through Thee are fresh and strong.

Standard practice in the century before Wordsworth would have removed any ambivalence by reading with a clear elision on 'glorious' ('glor-yus') in the first instance and 'Heavens' ('Heav'ns') in the latter, so as to make both of these words into disyllables rather than trisyllables. In a penetrating recent study of Wordsworth's metrical practice, Brennan O'Donnell has shown the importance of such words. To O'Donnell shows that much of Wordsworth's thinking about metre implies the importance of keeping open a separation between rhythm and metre which much prosodic thinking of the period wished to close in favour of the former. Whereas John Thelwall, for example, developed a theory of prosody based on musical categories, in which syllable counting and the concept of abstract metrical feet were both rejected, Wordsworth's statements