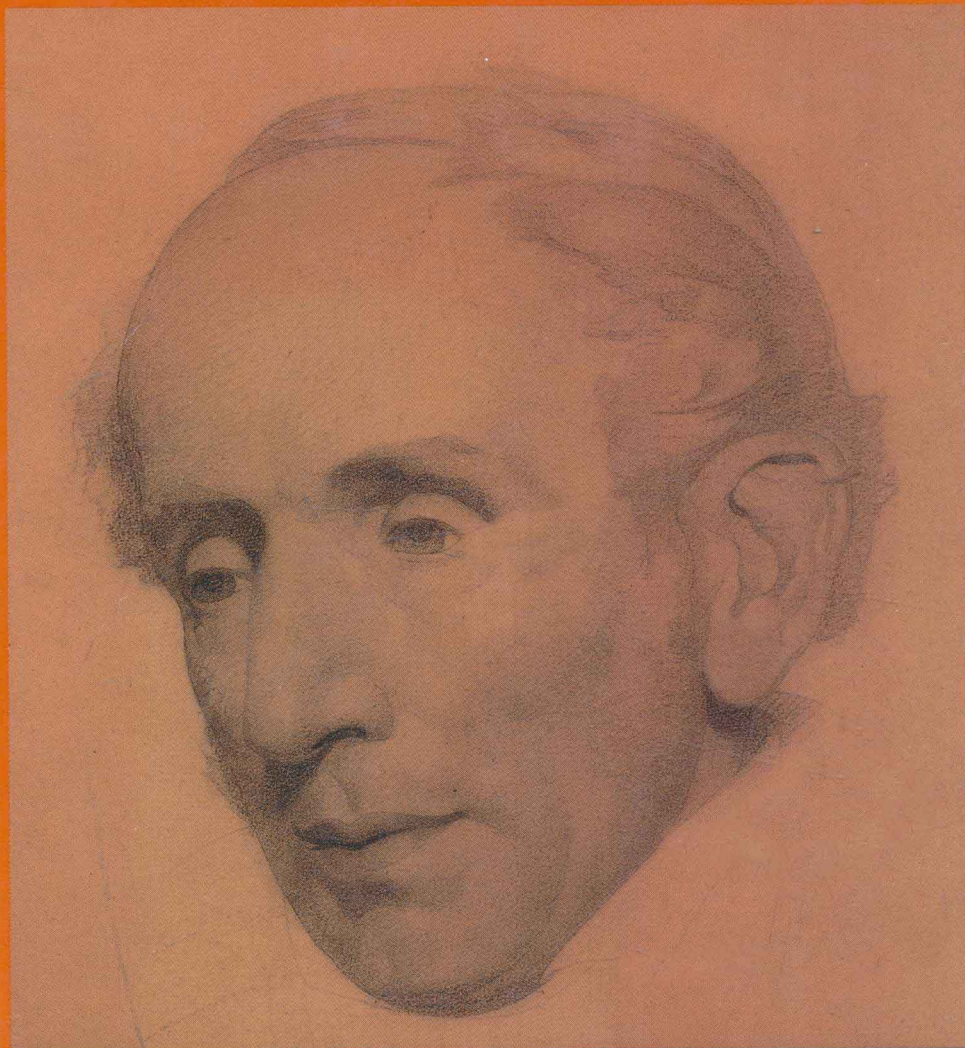


# WORDSWORTH AND THE CRITICS

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CRITICAL REPUTATION

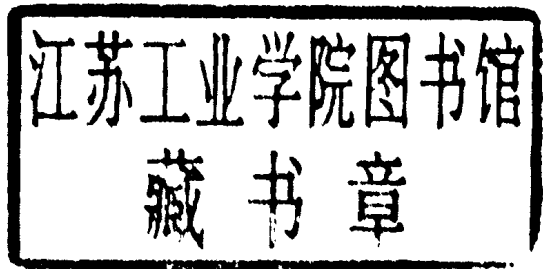


JOHN L. MAHONEY

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CAMDEN HOUSE

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WHILE IT MAY NOT TAKE A VILLAGE TO MAKE A BOOK, it clearly took the hard work, devotion, and helpful advice of many to write this modest history of a literary reputation, especially the reputation of such a formidable and long-lived poet as William Wordsworth. Following the course of his critical reception from early journal, review, and magazine notices to the most recent scholarship on the life and work is a great challenge.

I would be remiss indeed if I neglected to offer thanks to the many scholars who have been there before me in this task of studying Wordsworth's critical reception. N. S. Bauer, Dan Crosby, Marilyn Gaull, John Hayden, James Logan, David Perkins, Thomas Philbin, Thomas Raysor, Steven Sharp, Donald Reiman, David Stam, and Nathaniel Teich have done major work in the field, and I am in their debt. At the same time I must not neglect the painstaking tracing of Wordsworth reviews in the M. A. theses, Ph.D. dissertations, and essays of Olive Paralee Burchfiel, Robert Stone Christian, Thomas J. Gavagan, Elton Henly, and Essie Scott Liggins. They have been truly laborers in a fertile and complex vineyard, and I have reaped many benefits from their work.

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J. L. M.  
Chestnut Hill, MA  
May 2000

## Introduction

TRACING THE HISTORY of any writer's critical reputation, of a writer's reception both by fellow writers and by those who ply the crafts of reviewing, critiquing, or, especially nowadays, theorizing, is a daunting but important task. There is the obvious problem of time: the farther removed the writer from the present, the more massive the body of material responding to the author's work. There is the added factor of the length of the writer's career. Wordsworth, for example, wrote steadily from his earliest schoolboy days in the 1780s almost to the end of his life in 1850. The better-known the writer in his lifetime, the closer to a circle of literary friends and colleagues, the fuller the correspondence and the commentary. Then there is the matter of availability of print material, of books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and a well-established body of literary reviews. The greater the availability of such material, the more formidable the challenge to the contemporary scholar to insure that he or she is in touch with a large and representative body of such material.

Shakespeare is removed from us by almost four hundred years, and yet, considering a number of factors such as technology, manuscript preservation, cultural priorities, indeed the very ideas of authorship itself, nothing like a literary reputation and a continuing tradition of critical response to *his* work really developed until the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century.

The coming of the printing press and of Gutenberg's movable type in the mid-fifteenth century were to provide the engines of criticism, although the first printed books were Bibles, religious treatises, and some of the humanistic writings recovered in the Renaissance revival of learning. The early sixteenth century witnessed the rise of a vernacular language after the dominance of Latin, the competing claims of science and religion, the growth of literacy (however slow) and the accompanying development of public and private libraries. These phenomena certainly paved the way for a widening reading audience, interested in news and, eventually, in literary news. J. A. Downie and Thomas Corns, noting the end of pre-publication censorship with the expiration of the Licensing Act in 1695, contend that "the most striking periods

of growth in newspaper and periodical publishing in England happened during years of political unrest" (1-2).

The years following the Restoration of 1660 saw an evolution from "crude newsbooks" and "two-page essay papers and simple miscellanies" (Hurd 5) to a full-blown development of the periodical, foreshadowed perhaps by publications such as L'Estrange's *Observer*. Papers such as Defoe's *Review* (1704) and Steele's *Tatler* (1709) appeared, with the *Tatler* becoming a regular publication geared for a coffee-house audience of both men and women. And even though *The Tatler* ceased publication in 1711, Steele remained an important presence and influence, launching with his friend and colleague Joseph Addison the enormously successful *Spectator* which reached an impressive daily circulation of three thousand copies.

What followed amounted to a torrent of publication: Oliver Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World*, Henry Fielding's *The Patriot*, Tobias Smollett's *Critical Review*, Samuel Johnson's papers (the *Idler*, *Adventurer*, and *Rambler*) and Edmund Cave's *Gentleman's Magazine*, for which Johnson did Parliamentary reports. Much of this ranged beyond literary criticism to include essays on politics, religion, manners, and morals. Daily, monthly, and yearly literary reviewing will be the first concern of this study. Well before Wordsworth's entrance into the literary scene, such reviewing was alive and indeed flourishing, often taking on a savage tone. One need only remember Pope's *Dunciad* and *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* to see a poet taking sharp umbrage at what he could only regard as the most vicious *ad hominem* criticism.

The eighteenth century also saw the development and flourishing of reviews such as the *Monthly Review*, the *Critical Review*, the *Analytical Review*, the *British Critic*, the *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*, the *Christian Observer*, the *Eclectic Review*, the *Annual Review* and many others, each with a particular political or religious slant. All of these kept an ever-widening audience abreast of news and information of all kinds. When one Ralph Griffiths brought out the *Monthly* in 1749, there was hardly any other journal of its kind, dealing as it did not only with the usual material, but also with commentary on scholarly works and on a variety of literary forms previously ignored. Like the modern literary editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, the *New York Review of Books* or many local literary pages, Griffiths tried to provide full reviews of major publications, but also brief notices of less notable works with the modest disclaimer, cited by Derek Roper, that his ambitions were "to enter no farther into the province of criticism, than just so far as may be indispensably necessary to give some idea of such

books as come under our consideration." Modesty aside, *The Monthly* succeeded impressively, and with a number of able reviewers such as Smollett, competitors soon spied a market, with Smollett himself founding the *Critical Review* in 1756. As Roper puts it, in the period before the coming of the *Edinburgh Review*, "these Reviews stood at the height of their power and prestige. The 'cultural explosion' of the eighteenth century had meant a vast increase in the number of persons eager to learn about books. The rising not only brought prosperity to the *Monthly* and *Critical*, but supported other successful Reviews: between 1793 and 1796 five notable Reviews were being published" (19–21).

All of the above notwithstanding, in 1802, as Marilyn Gaull notes, "periodical criticism entered a new era with the founding of the *Edinburgh Review*" (17). Published in Scotland at the height of an intellectual renaissance, it was handsomely funded by Archibald Constable the bookseller, attracted the most talented writers and reviewers, and provided them with the kind of freedom that good criticism requires. The *dramatis personae* of the founding and early development were truly impressive, some of them leaving their mark on literary history and literary reputations from the beginning. Most notable, especially in a study of the making of Wordsworth's reputation, were the renowned Francis Jeffrey, editor for 26 years, and later a judge and a Lord; Henry Brougham, a longstanding member of Parliament who led the movement for the abolition of the slave trade and later became Lord Chancellor; and Sidney Smith, the noted Anglican minister who eventually became Canon of St. Paul's. With decidedly liberal, progressive leanings, the *Edinburgh Review* seemed bound to encourage rivals, and rivals were forthcoming. As Gaull argues, "it was so liberal, so intellectually audacious and politically uncommitted that, following a review in October 1808, that appeared opposing the war against France, the Tories, led by Sir Walter Scott, defected to start the London based *Quarterly Review*" (18–19). Its conservative bent is immediately apparent as one finds a new cast of characters on its staff: William Gifford, editor of the politically conservative *Anti-Jacobin* and a critic unhappy with the state of contemporary literature; John Wilson Croker, First Secretary of the Admiralty; George Canning, who was to become Prime Minister in 1827; card-carrying conservatives such as Southey and Scott; and the patron and good angel of the *Quarterly*, the publisher John Murray. John Hayden, a distinguished student of nineteenth-century British reviewing, regards the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly* as quite simply "the two greatest periodicals in the history of Eng-



lish journalism and the two greatest critical influences on English Romantic literature" (38).

Magazine publication was at the same time exploding, and according to Gaull, it had become "the dominant form of periodical publication by 1815" (9). Here was the perfect medium for an increasingly aware and demanding middle-class reading public eager for news and amusement. The *London Magazine*, with its great array of talent including Lamb, Hazlitt, Clare, and DeQuincey; *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*; and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* — these are just a few examples of many such publications.

Add to these media the daily newspapers, especially those of the editor Daniel Stuart and his *Morning Post*, which included Coleridge, Wordsworth, Southey and Lamb among its contributors, and one gets the sense of the vitality of the print medium in Wordsworth's early writing years. Coleridge, of course, had two papers of his own — *The Watchman* and *The Friend: A Literary, Moral, and Political Paper*. *The Times*, according to Gaull, had a daily circulation of 5,000, and Stuart's *Evening Courier* "ran from 10,000 to 16,000 as the public awaited news of war" during the years between 1793 and 1815 (43). Leigh Hunt, who along with Keats had suffered the slings of outrageous labeling when dubbed the leader of the Cockney School of Poetry in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, proceeded to launch in 1808, with his brother John, what Gaull describes as the most influential London paper, the *Examiner: A New Sunday Paper upon Politics, Domestic Economy, and Theatricals* (31). Hayden sums up the flourishing of journals and suggests the intertwining of literature and politics in his comment that "the early nineteenth century was in fact the heyday of political reviewing; never before or since has it been so energetic and widespread" (1).

Such was the situation in which the young William Wordsworth, or for that matter any young writer, found himself as he began to ply his wares in the early 1790s, a situation that needs to be fully understood and appreciated by any student of the poet and his work. This book will, however, not simply attempt to follow the course of a life and career, as many admirable standard and recent biographies have done, but rather the course of a reputation as it evolved from the poet's earliest probes to his first celebrity, to notable critical attacks, to his position as a recognized major poet in the first half of the nineteenth century. T. M. Raysor makes the interesting point that "the study of Wordsworth's early reputation has attracted a great deal of attention not only as part of his life, but as a chapter in literary criticism to which

Coleridge, Hazlitt, Lamb, Leigh Hunt, DeQuincey, Jeffrey, Wilson, and almost every famous or infamous literary critic of the early nineteenth century has contributed" (61).

The words "fifty years" of a century sound ominous: the sheer volume of Wordsworth's work and the length of his writing career present the late twentieth-century scholar with a formidable task. Almost from the beginning his work attracted the attention of the journals, magazines, and newspapers, which focused on a broad range of themes. These included the experimental nature of his earliest poetry and poetic theory; the development of a new kind of self-centered and challenging autobiographical/philosophical poetry; his political and religious leanings as they developed over a lifetime of eighty years; and finally his established status as Squire of Rydal Mount, receiver of honorary degrees from Oxford and Durham, and his crowning as Poet Laureate. The sheer volume of materials surrounding the reception of his work during his lifetime is in many ways quite enough for a volume such as this one. Indeed another volume — Stephen Gill's brilliant new study *Wordsworth and the Victorians* comes to mind — might be devoted to the responses of his fellow nineteenth-century poets, critics, and philosophers. The curious windings of twentieth-century criticism from the early literary and intellectual history to the New Criticism to more recent developments such as Deconstruction, Feminism, New Historicism, and Cultural Studies already have the potential, for anyone so brave to consider it, for a formidable critical anthology. Wordsworth has been loved and despised, canonized and questioned, yet he remains part of the much maligned Pantheon, the Literary Canon. He is still very much with us — in the Academy and beyond — as readers of poetry, poets, teachers, philosophers and cultural critics. And this is a strategic time for one of the company of Wordsworthians to study how his work has been, is, and — possibly — will be received.

There are, of course, a number of ways of proceeding, many of which, I suspect, would be helpful in coming to terms with the evolution of Wordsworth's reputation as a writer. But in keeping with the purpose of the Camden House Series, the present writer has chosen to follow a narrative route rather than constructing a descriptive bibliography of reviews or a chronology or a summary of critical viewpoints. The following pages will, to be sure, suggest the sheer volume of publications in the hustle and bustle of the literary world, from a time when newspapers, reviews, and magazines were the key vehicles for reaching audiences, to a later era that favored more formal essays, to the twentieth century with its early phenomenon of books on Wordsworth and its

later lodging of critical opinion in the large enterprises of university and commercial presses as well as the enormous variety of journals devoted to British Romantic poetry in general and to William Wordsworth in particular.

I have already suggested the folly of attempting a definitive study of Wordsworth's reputation in a volume this size, in a series of this kind. Anyone close to Wordsworth studies can attest to the fact that the scholarship of even one year is a major challenge. So, with proper, indeed unavoidable, humility I propose to be as comprehensive as possible in presenting a representative sample of important critiques of Wordsworth from the beginning. But, more important and I hope more useful, I want to look for large themes and trends, the ups and downs of attitudes towards the poet's work from that wide audience that includes professional academic critics, journalistic critics with special literary interests and competence, and those more general readers and their personal responses to poetry as part of the experience of an educated man or woman.

Such an approach is in keeping with the spirit of the Camden House *Literary Criticism in Perspective* series which traces literary scholarship and criticism on major and neglected writers alike, or on a single major work, a group of writers, a literary school or movement. In so doing the authors, authorities in their fields, address a readership of scholars, students of literature at the graduate and undergraduate level, and the general reader. One of the key purposes of the series is to illuminate the nature of literary criticism itself and to reveal the impact of social and historical contexts on aesthetic judgments once considered objective and definitive.

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## 1: Early Responses

WORDSWORTH'S WORK WAS NOTED almost from the beginning. No sudden wonder, no unrecognized laborer in literary vineyards was he. He was associated early on with poets and critics who, praise him or blame him, kept his name fairly prominent in contemporary discussions of literature. Elsie Smith contends that it was "chiefly due to Coleridge, too, that Wordsworth achieved any contemporary fame" (13). Coleridge writes to John Thelwall in 1796 that Wordsworth was "the best poet of the age" (1.215–216). And looking back on Wordsworth's earliest work, Coleridge notes in his *Biographia Literaria* that "year after year increased the numbers of Wordsworth admirers. They were found too not in the lower classes of the reading public, but chiefly among young men of strong sensibility and meditative minds; and their admiration (inflamed perhaps in some degree by opposition) was distinguished by its intensity, I might almost say, by its *religious* fervour" (2.9).

While Wordsworth wrote poems as early as his schoolboy days at Hawkshead School, his first poems of note were *An Evening Walk Addressed to a Young Lady* and *Descriptive Sketches Taken During a Pedestrian Tour Among the Alps*. Kenneth Johnston most recently has said that by the end of 1793 "the poems were well enough regarded to be discussed at avant-garde student literary groups at Cambridge" (332). The first poem, with his sister Dorothy as listener, is very much in the tradition of Sensibility. Composed at Cambridge and during his first two vacations from the university in 1788 and 1789, it moves geographically from his Cockermouth birthplace and Keswick to his true homes in Windermere and Grasmere, catching the sights and sounds, the lights and shades of the walk. Yet it is in many ways more than the standard poem of Sensibility, associated with writers like Thomson, Beattie, and Collins, as the visual is touched by a certain meditateness and awe in the presence of nature.

*Descriptive Sketches*, composed in 1791 and 1792 and published in 1793 after his experiences in Revolutionary France, recounts a summer journey to the Continent with his friend and fellow walker Robert Jones. This poem, too, is richly descriptive and strongly emotional, with its spectacular scenes from Switzerland — the crossing of the Alps

in particular — and its reflection on the power, politics, and violence of the events in France.

It is important in a study such as this one to attend, however briefly, to what might be considered lesser poems of Wordsworth. While written about less often by later critics, these poems received a fair amount of attention, much of it favorable, in their time, and a brief overview of positive and negative responses in journals and magazines provides valuable insights into dimensions of Wordsworth's writing that continue to be objects of critical attention in the years ahead. Some reviewers are quick to associate the poems with the picturesque conventions of eighteenth-century poetry. The *Critical Review* for July 1793 praises the new and picturesque imagery of *An Evening Walk* (347–48). Later in the same *Review*, the critic is harsh on *Descriptive Sketches*, saying that the poet has caught “few sparks from these glowing scenes,” that Wordsworth's “lines are often harsh and prosaic; his images ill-chosen, and his descriptions feeble and insipid” (472–74). Thomas Holcroft in the *Monthly Review*, irritated by the self-consciousness he detects, is sarcastic in his “How often shall we in vain advise those, who are so delighted with their own thoughts that they cannot forbear putting them into rhyme, to examine those thoughts till they understand them.” Or, even more sharply expressed, “More descriptive poetry? Have we not yet enough? Must eternal changes be rung on uplands and lowlands and nodding forests and brooding clouds, and cells, and dells, and dingles? Yes; more and yet more: so it is decreed” (216–18).

The *Analytical Review* offers a mixed but significant review, praising *Descriptive Sketches* thus: “The diversified pictures of nature which are sketched in this poem could only have been produced by actual and attentive observation with an abundant store of materials.” Yet the poem “has a certain laboured obscurity and artificial cast of expression which often involves the poet's meaning in obscurity.” One detects a certain pattern already emerging in this earliest criticism. Wordsworth, we hear, is a reasonably good descriptive poet whose work is often weakened by “obscurity,” an increasingly used word, along with “metaphysical,” more often than not suggesting excessive philosophizing. In a word, he is successful to the extent that he tempers his self-centeredness and his tendency to ruminate even in poems such as *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* and continues in the descriptive vein of the Poetry of Sensibility (294–96).

The “Peregrinator” in the *Gentleman's Magazine* has strong praise for *An Evening Walk* in what he regards as the first full review of the poem. He finds a very practical value in the pleasure he has received

from the tour described and wishes the same for “others who shall have to make, or who have already made, the same tour.” A reader of the poem will find added pleasure in the “general imagery of the country enumerated and described with a spirit of elegance which prove that the author has viewed nature with the attentive and warm regard of a true poet.” Though not without faults, there is much to anticipate from this “first production of Mr. W.’s name,” says the reviewer, noting the poet’s mention of the forthcoming *Descriptive Sketches* (253).

But Wordsworth, like fortunate young writers in any age, had a major rooter, a fellow poet with strong philosophical leanings and a growing reputation, who took a measured approach to *Descriptive Sketches* but ultimately offered the kind of praise that was bound to catch the attention of readers. It was Coleridge, and in the “Notes” to his own *Poems on Various Subjects* he calls attention to problems with the rhythm of the poem and, here is the word again, a diction that is “too frequently obscure,” but, saving the best for last, offers praise for the poem as superior in “manly sentiment, novel imagery, and vivid colouring” (185). More impressive is his retrospective look at *Descriptive Sketches* in his *Biographia Literaria*. Recalling that he had become acquainted with the poem in his last year of residence at Cambridge (December 1794), he recalls that for him “seldom, if ever, was the emergence of an original poetic genius above the literary horizon more evidently announced.” With the same critical rigor Coleridge expresses some reservations about the language and imagery and about a certain notable “obscurity,” but he nevertheless concludes that “it is remarkable how soon genius clears and purifies itself from the faults and errors of its earliest products” (1.77–78).

## A New Kind of Poetry: Theory and Practice

It is Coleridge who also recounts in his *Biographia Literaria* Wordsworth’s and, to some extent, his own plan for the first major literary effort of Wordsworth’s career, the *Lyrical Ballads* project. Here was the plan for a new kind of poetry, one that was to move beyond philosophical description and meditative sensibility to deal with men and women living close to the land, away from the drawing room and salon, and to represent them in a language free of conventional poetic diction and closer to the language of their daily lives. “In this idea,” writes Coleridge, “originated the plan of the ‘Lyrical Ballads’; in which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and



characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief that constitutes poetic faith" (2.6).

Wordsworth, the real master spirit of what reviewers will quickly come to call, for better or worse, a new "system" of poetry, was to have a different aim, "to give the charm of novelty to things of everyday, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness of the world before us" (2.7). Such was the plan resulting in a 1798 edition with a brief "Advertisement," followed two years later by a second edition, with additional poems and with the celebrated "Preface" that became for many the manifesto of the new experiment or system.

The "Preface" announces a poetry truer to the people, with settings, language, and characters he knew best: mendicants who drew their sustenance from the kindness of others and who in turn evoke the generosity of others; abandoned women and their plight; and children alert and alive, and untouched by the corruptions of the world. "It was," as John Jordan puts it, "a much more sophisticated kind of description based on an almost mystical awareness of an interaction in observation between the scene and the observer, so that the quality of the experience became the significant thing, and the feeling gave importance to the action" (163-64).

There is, as I've noted in my *Wordsworth: A Poetic Life* (67-68), a quite classical-neoclassical dimension to the developing version of the "Preface" although, as Kenneth Johnston has noted, Wordsworth is ultimately trying to reconcile the mimetic and expressive dimensions. Johnston's crisp sentence is most perceptive: "What had been hypothesized in 1798 was theorized in 1800, and now retheorized for 1802" (765). As Wordsworth retheorizes, he would have poetry be faithful to nature, but he views nature as a living and organic process and emphasizes the importance of mind in shaping the materials of experience and the need for a freer, more direct, and more natural expression.

Poetry for Wordsworth is "the most philosophic of all writing . . . its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative." Taking his place with the great apologists for poets, he contends that, unlike the biographer and the historian, the poet "writes under one restriction only, namely, the necessity of giving pleasure to a human being possessed of that information which may be expected of him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a natural philosopher, but as a Man" (1.139). Yes, he has been more narrowly mimetic