WORLD'S CLASSICS

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

SELECTED POETRY

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Edited with an Introduction and Notes by
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Introduction

In June 1797 Coleridge arrived at Racedown Lodge in Dorset, where William and Dorothy Wordsworth had been living since 1795. 'We have both a distinct remembrance of his arrival', Wordsworth recalled in old age, 'He did not keep to the high road, but leapt over a gate and bounded down the pathless field, by which he cut off an angle. We both retain the liveliest possible image of his appearance at that moment.' It was the beginning of a unique relationship, which was to produce a revolution in literature. Throughout the 1790s Coleridge had responded more actively than Wordsworth to political events, even entering with Robert Southey into plans for an egalitarian society to be founded in America by a few like-minded idealists. After the collapse of that scheme he wrote, lectured, preached, drawing no line between religion and politics and bringing to bear on every subject the resources of a genuinely philosophic as well as a naturally poetic mind. Personal attraction between him and Wordsworth warmed to a love that, however tested by later misunderstandings, remained with both for their lifetimes.

To Coleridge, Wordsworth was 'a very great man—the only man to whom *at all times* and *in all modes of excellence* I feel myself inferior' (17 July 1797). To Wordsworth, Coleridge was always 'The rapt One, of the godlike forehead',[1] one of the two beings, he later declared, 'to whom my intellect is most indebted' (25 June 1832). It was a love that fused their minds during the *annus mirabilis* 1797–8 into a symbiotic creative power.[2] In summer 1798 Joseph Cottle was anxious to publish some of Wordsworth's longer poems, but Wordsworth resisted and it was a joint volume, *Lyrical Ballads*, which finally appeared.[3]

'The Ruined Cottage', 'Tintern Abbey', and other less obviously

[1] The phrase is from the tribute to Coleridge in 'Extempore Effusion . . .' (1835). Occasioned by the death of James Hogg, this, the most moving of Wordsworth's later verse, is a lament for a whole generation of friends.

[2] For an invaluable account, see Thomas McFarland, 'The Symbiosis of Coleridge and Wordsworth', *Studies in Romanticism*, 11 (1972), 263–303.

[3] The events which led to the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* are confusing. For the best unravelling see Mark L. Reed, 'Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the "Plan" of the *Lyrical Ballads*', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 34 (1964–5), 238–53 and the introduction to Owen's edition of *Lyrical Ballads 1798*, (Oxford, 1967, 1969).

ambitious poems in *Lyrical Ballads* embody the convictions which Wordsworth was struggling both to express in poetry and to live by. What were they? The philosophical verse beginning 'Not useless do I deem . . .' offers a sequential exposition: the universe is not mechanical and dead, but alive and vitally connected with the human mind; awakened consciousness leads to an awakened moral sense and must lead to communion with the divine. In the profoundest sense, love of nature leads to love of Man and awareness of God. Such philosophical verse, however, was not Wordsworth's real strength. The power of the other poems of 1797–8 is that they do not propose a chain of reasoning but draw the reader to share Wordsworth's thought through lyrical utterance and dramatic narrative which embody a sense of reverence for Man and nature. They everywhere assert the vital significance of feeling both as a bond between men and as a means of discovering truth and declare as in 'Tintern Abbey' the unity of the individual consciousness with the divine. Above all these poems declare by their very form as poetry Wordsworth's newly confident belief in poetry's special power to teach by incorporating 'itself with the blood & vital juices of our minds'[4] and by appealing to the imagination and to the 'grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which man knows, and feels, and lives, and moves'. Much in these poems, especially their emphasis on the inherent worth of simple men, can be related to the political and social ferment of the times. Hazlitt was not the only one to see that Wordsworth's poetry 'partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age . . . His Muse . . . is a levelling one'.[5] Much of the thought can be traced to eighteenth-century philosophy and psychology. The particular nature of many of the poems is determined by Wordsworth's quarrel with prevailing literary modes. But what made the achievement of 1797–8 so great and, when all the scholarly footnotes have been written, still a new beginning in English poetry, is that the poems of whatever kind embodied a coherent and unified vision of man and nature which had been tested and found firm by a man searching not only for poetry but for a basis to his life. Turbulent years of conflicting experience brought, finally, not the somnolent peace of a closed mind, but

[4] From W's *Essay on Morals* (Prose, i. 103), in which he takes as impotent 'such books as Mr Godwyn's, Mr Paley's, & those of the whole tribe of authors of that class'.

[5] William Hazlitt, 'Mr Wordsworth', in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825).

certain calm assurances. It is not surprising that Wordsworth should have ended this first period with thanks for his 'more than Roman confidence' and hymns of praise to the Power that gave him 'A never-failing principle of joy | And purest passion'.

When Wordsworth entered Dove Cottage in December 1799 he began a new phase of life which was to be, in essentials, the pattern until he died. Financial uncertainty remained, but the years of wandering were over. Grasmere and then nearby Rydal was to be his home, and domestic life with an extended family which included Dorothy Wordsworth and his wife's sister Sara, was to be the secure personal base on which his creative life rested. Greater shocks than most families have to suffer tested them: the overwhelming blow of John Wordsworth's death by shipwreck in 1805; the deaths of two infant children in 1812; the bitter breach with Coleridge in 1810–12; the recurrent mental illness in later life of Dorothy; the death in 1847 of the beloved daughter named after the beloved sister. But it has always been clear from Dorothy's Journal and from Wordsworth's recorded tributes how strong the Dove Cottage community was, and the recent discovery of the letters which passed between William and Mary in 1810–12 has provided further evidence of the power of the love that united them.

Crossing the threshold of Dove Cottage marked a new phase in Wordsworth's creative life as well. From one point of view 1800–15 might be called the years of *The Recluse*. This philosophical poem was conceived in 1798. Wordsworth's announcement on 6 March that he has already 'written 1300 lines of a poem in which I contrive to convey most of the knowledge of which I am possessed. My object is to give pictures of Nature, Man, and Society. Indeed I know not any thing which will not come within the scope of my plan', suggests both the speed with which he embraced the idea of a comprehensive philosophic work and the grandeur of the conception which was, undoubtedly, Coleridge's. In later life he recalled the 'plan laid out, and, I believe, partly suggested by me', that 'Wordsworth should assume the station of a man in mental repose, one whose principles were made up, and so prepared to deliver upon authority a system of philosophy'.[6]

Wordsworth always suspected and resisted *systems* of any sort, however, and it is not surprising that after the summer at Alfoxden

[6] *Table Talk*, 21 July 1832. C's fascinating recollection, which is too long to quote here, is reprinted in *PW*, v. 364.

sustained composition towards *The Recluse* eluded him. First came the 1799 autobiographical poem—welcomed by Coleridge to whom it was addressed, but only if it were to be 'the tail-piece of "The Recluse!", for of nothing but "The Recluse" can I hear patiently' (21 October 1799). Work on *Home at Grasmere* in 1800 included the lines 'On Man, on Nature, and on human Life', which give substance to what was only vague ambition in March 1798, 'I know not any thing that will not come within the scope of my plan'. But *Home at Grasmere* proved a false dawn at that time, as did extensive revision to 'The Ruined Cottage' and 'The Pedlar'. *The Prelude* itself reveals the poet's consciousness of a greater mission yet to be accomplished. In the opening section this consciousness is an 'awful burthen' from which the poet takes refuge, beguiling himself 'with trust | That mellower years will bring a riper mind | And clearer insight' (i. 235–8). At the end of the poem it has become a beacon, beckoning both Wordsworth and Coleridge, 'Prophets of Nature', to the fulfilment of their vocation. Only after *The Prelude* was completed did work on *The Recluse* take first place. But when *The Excursion* (the only part of *The Recluse* to be published) appeared in 1814 it fell far short of achieving what had been hoped for in 1798. The Preface announced the design of the whole work for the first time and offered the lines 'On Man, on Nature, and on human Life' as a 'kind of *Prospectus* of the design and scope of the whole Poem', but the poem only really lives in passages which Wordsworth had retrieved from poetry written long before in 1798. Though to Keats *The Excursion* was one of the 'three things to rejoice at in this Age', it disappointed Coleridge and remained for Wordsworth a life-long reminder of unrealized ambition.[7]

Looked at from another point of view, however, and judged not by what Coleridge wanted Wordsworth to achieve but on what he actually did achieve, the years 1800–15 are years of triumph. By 1815 the poet who had echoed in 1800 Milton's 'Fit audience let me find though few' had declared his purpose, won an audience, and demonstrated in his own way the rightness of Coleridge's perception that he was 'a thinking feeling Philosopher habitually—that your Poetry was your Philosophy under the action of strong winds of Feeling—a sea rolling high' (23 July 1803).

[7] References to *The Recluse* in progress crop up long after the project had in reality died. In November 1829, for example, Dora Wordsworth wrote of their mixed feelings about *On the Power of Sound*: 'We all think there is a grandeur in this Poem but it ought to have been in the "Recluse" . . .'

Most important of all, perhaps, these are the years of 'Resolution and Independence', Ode ('There was a time'), 'Ode to Duty', 'Elegiac Stanzas . . . Peele Castle', and *The Prelude*. In this series of poems—closely linked in origin to Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode'—Wordsworth explores both as private man and as Poet the dark passages of anxiety, self-doubt, and imaginative weakening. *The Prelude* explicitly traces the growth of the poet's mind from birth to that never-to-be forgotten summer of 1798 when 'on Quantock's grassy hills | Far ranging, and among the sylvan coombs' Wordsworth and Coleridge had 'Together wantoned in wild poesy' (xiii. 393–4, 414). But it is also implicitly a record of Wordsworth's intellectual journey between 1799 and 1805. In its growth from two, to five, to eight and finally to thirteen books it expands to include developing ideas about the nature and function of the creative imagination and about the powers and limitations of language, and becomes the triumphant embodiment of Wordsworth's 'last and favourite aspiration . . . some philosophic song | Of truth that cherishes our daily life' (i. 229–31). It was not *The Recluse* and so it remained unpublished in Wordsworth's lifetime, always anticipating the never-to-be-written work, but it was, as M. H. Abrams has said, a poem of 'radical novelty',[8] the first truly great achievement of a new era in English poetry.

[8] M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), 74.

Chronology

1770	W born 7 April at Cockermouth.
1771	Dorothy Wordsworth born 25 September at Cockermouth.
1778	Mother, Ann Wordsworth, dies *c.*8 March.
1779	W enters Hawkshead Grammar School, lodging with Hugh and Ann Tyson.
1783	Father, John Wordsworth, dies 30 December.
1787	W's first published poem, 'Sonnet, on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress' appears in *The European Magazine* in March. October: W enters St John's College, Cambridge.
1788–9	Composition of 'An Evening Walk', published 1793. Storming of the Bastille, 14 July 1789.
1790	Walking tour in France and Switzerland with Robert Jones, July–October.
1791–2	W in London. In November 1791 returns to France and sees Revolutionary fervour in Paris. Is influenced by Michel Beaupuy. Love affair with Annette Vallon and birth of their daughter, Caroline, 15 December 1792. Returns to England to seek a livelihood.
1793	Louis XVI executed in January. War declared between England and France in February. W feels an outcast in his own country. Writes, but does not publish, a seditious *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* and after wandering penniless across Salisbury Plain into Wales composes 'Salisbury Plain'. Sees Tintern Abbey. William Godwin's *Political Justice* published, as Government repression of dissent intensifies.
1794	W reunited with DW in stay at Windy Brow, Keswick. In August-September stays at Rampside and sees Peele Castle. Nurses Raisley Calvert, who leaves W £900 on his death in January 1795. Execution of Robespierre 28 July.
1795	C lectures in Bristol on politics and religion. W a familiar figure in radical circles in London in spring and summer and regularly visits Godwin. Meets C and Southey in Bristol in August. Settles with DW at Racedown in Dorset and rewrites 'Salisbury Plain'.
1797	Completes play, *The Borderers* and moves to Alfoxden to be nearer C, with whom period of greatest intimacy begins. First

version of 'The Ruined Cottage' and plans for joint composition with C.

1798 The *annus mirabilis*. W completes 'The Ruined Cottage' and composes the bulk of the verse published anonymously in September as *Lyrical Ballads*. Plans for *The Recluse* first mentioned. W, DW, and C go to Germany and over winter W writes autobiographical verse, the foundation of *The Prelude*.

1799 By end April W back in England. Move into Dove Cottage, Grasmere in December.

1800 Begins *Home at Grasmere* and probably composes lines printed in 1814 as a 'Prospectus' to *The Recluse*. Works on poems for second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, published January 1801, and writes *Preface*.

1802 Much lyrical poetry composed. Publication in April of further edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, with revised *Preface*. Peace of Amiens enables Ws to visit Annette and Caroline in August. W marries Mary Hutchinson (b. 1770, d. 1859) 4 October.

1803 War begins again and fear of invasion grows. Birth of first son, John. W, DW, and C tour Scotland from mid-August. The Ws meet Sir Walter Scott 17 September. C ill and planning to leave for better climate.

1804 Much composition, especially on *The Prelude*, enlarged after March from planned five-book structure. 'Ode to Duty' and completion of Ode ('There was a time'). C sails to Malta.

1805 5–6 February: John Wordsworth (b. 1772), Captain of the *Earl of Abergavenny*, drowned. W circle very deeply affected. W completes *The Prelude*.

1806–7 Visits London. Sees Sir George Beaumont's picture of Peele Castle in a storm. C at last returns, much changed by ill-health. W reads *The Prelude* to him. *Poems in Two Volumes* published in 1807 and ridiculed in reviews.

1808–9 Ws leave Dove Cottage for larger house in Grasmere, Allan Bank.

1810 Son, William, born 12 May. Misunderstanding leads to breach with C—healed in 1812.

1811–12 Deaths of Children, Thomas (b. 1806) and Catherine (b. 1808). Ws move from Allan Bank to Rectory, Grasmere.

1813 Becomes Distributor of Stamps for Westmorland, a post in the revenue service. Moves to Rydal Mount, home for the rest of his life. Completes *The Excursion*.

1814 *The Excursion* published, prefaced by an account of the plan for *The Recluse*. Further attack by reviewers.

1815–20 First Collected Edition of Poems published, with Preface, in 1815. W moves more widely in London circles and meets Keats in 1817. For the General Election of 1818 W campaigned hard in the Tory interest to the distress of many admirers.

1820–8 Publishes *The River Duddon* sonnet sequence in 1820. Tours Europe and revisits places last seen in 1790. Enlarged Collected Editions published 1820 and 1827. Tours the Rhine with C and much loved daughter Dora (b. 1804).

1829–35 Catholic emancipation issue greatly troubles W. Tours Scotland again September–October 1831 and sees Sir Walter Scott (d. 1832) for last time. Further Collected Edition 1832. C dies 25 July 1834.

1836–43 Further Collected Edition, revised as always, 1836. Tours France and Italy 1837. In 1839 W revises *The Prelude* for the last time. Resigns Stamp distributorship in 1842 and becomes Poet Laureate on Southey's death in 1843. Dictates Fenwick Notes. W now a widely celebrated figure, receiving honorary degrees from Durham and Oxford. Steady increase in American reputation.

1844–50 Supervises with great care one-volume Collected Edition of 1845 and the final edition in six volumes of 1849–50. W deeply stricken by the death of Dora, 9 July 1847. W dies 23 April 1850. *The Prelude* published in July by his wife and executors.

Note on the Text

'A correct text is the first object of an editor,' Wordsworth declared to Sir Walter Scott (7 November 1805), and he is clearly right. Deciding on a 'correct text' and an order of presentation for Wordsworth's own poems, however, is not a straightforward matter. Stephen Gill has discussed the issues at length in 'Wordsworth's Poems: The Question of Text', *Review of English Studies*, NS 34 (1983), 172–90 and we can only outline them here.

The Collected Edition of 1849–50 must be regarded as the poet's final authorized text, and Wordsworth's view of such texts was stated firmly to Alexander Dyce: 'You know what importance I attach to following strictly the last copy text of an author' (*c.*19 April 1830).

For the reader interested in the development of Wordsworth's art, however, this last edition is most unsatisfactory. Many poems have been considerably revised from their first published state, altered moreover not in one creative burst of revision, but at various times throughout Wordsworth's lifetime. Some poems which were not published soon after composition only appear in a text which fundamentally changes the original conception. Others, such as 'The Ruined Cottage', are incorporated into other works or dismembered to make new ones. Some poems which were published are excised from the canon, while others, much excellent poetry which includes *The Prelude*, were not published by Wordsworth at all. The 1849–50 edition might have canonical status from some bibliographical points of view, but it does not present all of the poetry, nor the poems as they appeared to Wordsworth's first readers.

There is a further objection to the last authorized edition, namely that its organization deliberately prevents a chronological reading. From 1815 onwards Wordsworth arranged his poems in groupings designed to 'assist the attentive Reader in perceiving their connection with each other', as he explained in the *Preface*. New categories were added after *Poems* (1815) and poems were moved from one to another, but overall this remained Wordsworth's preferred arrangement. What determines the relation of poems within his classification is not chronology of composition, but the powers of mind predominant in their creation, or relationship of subject-matter.

In the belief that a chronological presentation can best reveal the growth of the poet's mind (the subject, after all, of his greatest poem, *The Prelude*) and the unfolding of his imagination, this volume is ordered according to date of composition. It follows—and here we break with all of the editorial pioneers, Dowden, Knight, Hutchinson, De Selincourt, Darbishire—that one *must* print a text which comes as close as possible to the state of a poem when it was first completed.

The decision to break with the poet's wishes both as to text and arrangement means that for the majority of the poems we have taken the text of the first appearance in a Wordsworth volume, i.e. not in a newspaper or magazine. When a significant time elapsed between the completion of a poem and its publication we have returned to the manuscript text. For poems which Wordsworth did not publish at all, a category which includes *Home at Grasmere* and *The Prelude*, our text is similarly drawn from the first completed manuscript. Obvious printing errors have been silently corrected. Ampersands and 'd have been expanded, but Wordsworth's spelling has been retained. The punctuation of published texts has only been altered when absolutely necessary and in texts taken from manuscript we have punctuated lightly, trying to follow our source wherever possible. [ ] indicates a word missing in the manuscript; [word] indicates material supplied by the editors.

The date of composition for many of the poems can be established quite accurately. Some, on the other hand—'Yew-Trees' or *Home at Grasmere* for example—pose problems, the major one being that surviving manuscripts are not contemporaneous with what seems a likely date for first composition. We have relied heavily and with immense gratitude on the scholarship of Mark L. Reed, Jonathan Wordsworth, and the editors of the individual volumes in the Cornell Wordsworth series.

The Prelude has been printed outside the chronological sequence to emphasize the fact that its composition spanned 1799–1805, Wordsworth's greatest years. The text is that of the first completed thirteen-book version of 1805, but to place it under 1805 would have been as misleading as to place *The Prelude* under 1799 or 1803–4. In this edition it stands apart, but it is, of course, closely related to all the poems in the chronological sequence 1799–1805.

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Contents

Old Man Travelling

ANIMAL TRANQUILLITY AND DECAY, A SKETCH

The little hedge-row birds,
That peck along the road, regard him not.
He travels on, and in his face, his step,
His gait, is one expression; every limb,
His look and bending figure, all bespeak
A man who does not move with pain, but moves
With thought—He is insensibly subdued
To settled quiet: he is one by whom
All effort seems forgotten, one to whom
Long patience has such mild composure given,
That patience now doth seem a thing, of which
He hath no need. He is by nature led
To peace so perfect, that the young behold
With envy, what the old man hardly feels.
—I asked him whither he was bound, and what
The object of his journey; he replied
'Sir! I am going many miles to take
A last leave of my son, a mariner,
Who from a sea-fight has been brought to Falmouth,
And there is dying in an hospital.'

The Ruined Cottage

'Twas summer and the sun was mounted high.
Along the south the uplands feebly glared
Through a pale steam, and all the northern downs
In clearer air ascending shewed far off
Their surfaces with shadows dappled o'er
Of deep embattled clouds: far as the sight
Could reach those many shadows lay in spots
Determined and unmoved, with steady beams
Of clear and pleasant sunshine interposed;
Pleasant to him who on the soft cool moss
Extends his careless limbs beside the root