Wordsworth and the Formation of English Studies

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WORDSWORTH AND THE FORMATION OF ENGLISH STUDIES

For Gale MacLachlan

And certain hopes are with me, that to thee
This labour will be welcome, honoured Friend!
—Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1.646-47

The Nineteenth Century Series General Editors' Preface

The aim of the series is to reflect, develop and extend the great burgeoning of interest in the nineteenth century that has been an inevitable feature of recent years, as that former epoch has come more sharply into focus as a locus for our understanding not only of the past but of the contours of our modernity. It centres primarily upon major authors and subjects within Romantic and Victorian literature. It also includes studies of other British writers and issues, where these are matters of current debate: for example, biography and autobiography, journalism, periodical literature, travel writing, book production, gender and non-canonical writing. We are dedicated principally to publishing original monographs and symposia; our policy is to embrace a broad scope in chronology, approach and range of concern, and to both recognize and cut innovatively across such parameters as those suggested by the designations 'Romantic' and 'Victorian'. We welcome new ideas and theories, while valuing traditional scholarship. It is hoped that the world which predates, yet so forcibly predicts and engages, our own will emerge in parts, in the wider sweep, and in the lively streams of disputation and change that are so manifest an aspect of its intellectual, artistic and social landscape.

Vincent Newey
Joanne Shattock

University of Leicester

Preface

Ours is a forgetful era, often oblivious to ways in which past cultural practices have shaped the foundations of much that we think and do. Today it takes an imaginative effort to recognize how extensively the writings of William Wordsworth (1770-1850) permeated attitudes and activities of many prominent people in the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century English-speaking world, across diverse fields — including science, religion and politics as well as literature and education. A pair of brief examples can illustrate something of this. That the leader of a Western nation could have an enduring preoccupation with any literary figure, let alone a seemingly unworldly nature poet from an earlier period, is scarcely thinkable now. Yet less than a century ago Wordsworth's writings were still providing personal guidance and political inspiration not only to several statesmen within Britain but also to others further afield, such as American President Woodrow Wilson and Australian Prime Minister Alfred Deakin. Wilson had a life-long respect for Wordsworth's poems, used to read them to his family at the end of a day, and quoted them in print to support his strongly held view that the study of literature should focus on values and imagination. Deakin, though one of Australia's most successful politicians, declared in private 'My heart is always in the highlands of literature', and his sense of Wordsworth's dominant place in that region is reflected in a book-length essay on 'The Gospel according to Wordsworth' that he wrote as a young man and revised over the course of many years. While such devotion may seem extraordinary, there are many other instances (some to be sketched in the following chapters) of the powerful impact of Wordsworth not just on individuals but also on institutions that have helped to form the culture we have inherited — particularly educational institutions.

This is not a book about Wordsworth's general influence; others have documented much of that. Its subject is the percolation of Wordsworthian images and ideas, whether explicitly acknowledged or unconsciously absorbed, through a range of discursive practices that came to constitute the academic discipline known as English. A quarter of a century ago, discussing the problems that faced him as an English teacher, Allen Grossman pointed primarily to 'the inveterate inability of literary studies to take its own nature as a subject of rational attention'.[1] In the intervening period, this has changed considerably. Self-reflexiveness about the discipline is now common in the way teaching and research are conducted, and knowledge about its historical emergence is readily available. It is no longer startling to remark that discursive practices forming the academic study of English came together gradually in the mid-nineteenth century, and took their normative shape in places unencumbered by Oxbridge traditions. We know that within

England itself the University of London was the cradle for this new discipline, and that similar developments emerged not long afterwards in far corners of Britain, its colonies and former colonies. In recent years most of these nativity stories have been told in detail.[2] But some important aspects of the institutionalization of English literary studies have not been fully recognized — in particular, how it emerged from certain Wordsworthian tendencies in Romantic thought and continued to take its bearings from them.

The term 'discursive practices' was made familiar by Foucault; but in his usage it tends somewhat confusingly to indicate, as Norman Fairclough remarks, structural rules and resources underlying practices rather than 'real instances of people doing or saying or writing things'.[3] Without due attention to the latter, the concept of 'practice' tends to become homogenized. The present book maintains a focus on those things that have actually comprised the not-always-uniform practices of literary studies in English. It refers frequently to mundane sources such as lecture notes, examination papers and personal letters, and recounts in detail how teachers and students in specific institutional settings underwent their professional formation. The argument situates this formation vis-à-vis Wordsworth, whose most characteristic poetry was described in 1851 by a pioneer Professor of English as the exemplary expression of 'all that self-building process' in which many literary and religious figures were then engaged.[4] What Wordsworth had written became variously appropriated and mediated (through the writings of others, through the influential membership of the Wordsworth Society and its inheritor the English Association, through certain scholarly protocols, and so forth) and thus served eventually to forge a normative curriculum and pedagogy for English.

In pursuing this argument my aim has been to suggest without either nostalgia or disdain what involvement in those processes has meant for the people concerned. To some extent I have done this by letting them speak often in their own words, while trying to avoid assimilating uncritically the Romantic assumptions that directed their practice. It is not easy to decontaminate one's analysis; I would not have wanted to write this book if I had not experienced myself the attraction of Wordsworthian thinking. Clifford Siskin contends that academic literary discourse in our own time is still generally addicted to a Romantic lexicon and to basic Romantic concepts.[5] He thinks we should kick the habit. But regarding Siskin's only explicit alternative — the confessionally disenchanted literary history exemplified by his own book — Don Bialostosky comments that this would enrol critics addicted to Romanticism 'in something like a Romanticists Anonymous where they will hear over and over the 'tale of their need to be cured' and recognize at each hearing the 'ongoing power' of Romantic Discourse'.[6] I hope my book escapes that sad compulsion.

Peter Widdowson has argued that the discipline of literary studies seriously needs to include what (on the analogy of historiography) he wants to call *critiography*. This would involve, he envisages, an inquiry into (1) the constitution of the field of study itself, its critical methods, theoretical premises and institutional practices; and (2) the constitution of the material that literary criticism usually takes as a primary given — literary texts.[7] The present book

concentrates on the first of these critiographic questions, though it also deals with the second by asking how 'Wordsworth' arrived at a certain place in literary studies, which texts are identified with this figure, and how they have been read in support of certain purposes.

If this investigation has indeed succeeded in evading the traps that await the critiographer, several colleagues and institutions deserve much of the credit. I have been shown remarkable generosity by a number of people, and have benefited greatly from the research resources of the three universities on which the project focuses as well as of the two that have employed me during the time I have worked on it. While my choice of a particular trio of institutional sites for investigation has its own historical rationale (to be explained in chapter 1), it also rests on the confidence that comes from plenty of first-hand knowledge: I have spent a considerable amount of time at Cornell University (initially as a Fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies), the University of London (in particular as a recurrent visitor to its Institute of Education), and the University of Melbourne (as an honorary professor). Each place acquainted me with its distinctive framing of 'English' and allowed me to observe a different version of Romantic ideology at work. Having been teaching and publishing on Wordsworth for many years, I became especially aware of the pervasiveness of his influence, direct and indirect, on these various institutional forms of literary studies and indeed on my own shaping as student, teacher and scholar. Lines from Wordsworth's autobiographical poem seem aptly to adumbrate this recognition of the ways in which one's personal story can merge with larger narrative patterns:

> How shall I trace the history, where seek
> The origin of what I then have felt?
> Oft in those moments ...
> what I saw
> Appeared like something in myself, a dream,
> A prospect in my mind.
>
> (*The Prelude*, 2.365-71)[8]

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[1] Allen Grossman, 'Criticism, Consciousness and the Sources of Life: Some Tasks for English Studies,' in Monroe Engel (ed.), *Uses of Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 19-48 (p. 19).

[2] Franklin E. Court, *Institutionalizing English Literature: The Culture and Politics of Literary Study, 1750-1900* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1992); Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848-1932* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983); Brian Doyle, *English and Englishness* (London, Routledge, 1989); Richard Ohmann, *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1976); Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987); Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1989); Henry A. Hubert, *Harmonious Perfection: The Development of English Studies in Nineteenth-Century Anglo-Canadian Colleges* (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1994); Leigh Dale, *The English Men: Professing Literature in Australian Universities* (Toowoomba, Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1997); Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992); Robert Crawford (ed.), *The Scottish Invention of English Literature* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[3] Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992), p. 57.

[4] F.D. Maurice, letter to Charles Kingsley; an extract is quoted in William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York, Norton, 1979), p. 560. Maurice was Professor of English Literature and History at King's College, London, from 1840 to 1853, and will be discussed in chapter 2.

[5] Clifford Siskin, *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1988).

[6] Don H. Bialostosky, 'Wordsworth, New Literary Histories, and the Constitution of Literature', in Kenneth R. Johnston et al. (eds), *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 408-422 (p. 411).

[7] Peter Widdowson, 'Hardy in History: a Case Study in the Sociology of Literature,' *Literature and History*, 9.1 (Spring 1983), pp. 3-16.

[8] Wordsworth composed several versions of *The Prelude*, the more extended of them running to many books of several hundred lines each. Unless otherwise indicated, all references will be to the 1850 version as it appears in the Norton Critical Edition (see note 4 above).

Contents

Chapter 1

Framings

> If literary criticism is ever to conceptualize a new disciplinary domain, it will have to undertake first a much more thorough reflection on the history of the category of literature.
> —John Guillory, *Cultural Capital*

> Histories of literary studies are crucial in the rethinking of the discipline currently under way.
> —Gerald Graff and Michael Warner (eds), *The Origins of Literary Studies in America*

After holding for many decades an apparently secure place in the curriculum of universities around the world, the study of English literature began to lose its sense of disciplinary identity from the 1970s onwards. Significant tremors were occurring long before that, and in retrospect some instability seems inherent in the very framework of principles and practices that first constituted 'English'.

English will never be the same again; but whether it is moribund, or even in poor health, is not a question explored directly here. Few people educated in any Anglophone country in the twentieth century could readily imagine a school syllabus in which some form of English does not remain central, and no doubt most also think that beyond the compulsory schooling years the study of vernacular literary culture will continue to figure prominently as an academic pursuit, albeit blended with a broader Cultural Studies project. Be that as it may, current debates about the decline or redefinition of literary education can benefit from a clear understanding of earlier formations of the discipline, or would-be discipline, of English. What shapes has it taken, and why, since its academic beginnings? How similar has its development been in different cultural settings? Do current assumptions about English look steadfast when seen in an historical perspective?

Cross-national comparison provides a proper context for answering such wide-ranging questions. While there have been other books on aspects of the invention and reinvention of English, the present one is distinctive in its attempt to situate that variegated history in comparative relation to different systems of higher

education. Three countries are chosen, and for each a particular institution is taken as an exemplary case: in the United States, Cornell University; in Britain, the University of London; in Australia, the University of Melbourne. Reasons for selecting those three as the main sites for investigating continuity and change in the function of literary studies will emerge shortly.

The following chapters attempt to explain the imagined (but makeshift and precarious) identity of English in terms of a process whereby nineteenth-century Romantic writings, ideas, images, assumptions and attitudes exerted a normative influence on the humanities curriculum in educational institutions. More particularly the argument is that the poet William Wordsworth has been appropriated again and again as an agent in efforts to establish the nature and purpose of English.

The 'centrality' of Wordsworth

That proposition will not be immediately plausible in the eyes of those for whom Wordsworth is reducible to the facile caricature of a daffodil-struck recluse, a fitfully lyrical but mainly sermonical exponent of rusticity and religiosity. Even the remaining admirers and serious students of his poetry know that it no longer has wide popular appeal, and the ideas generally attributed to him have little mainstream currency now. The ordinary educated person today would probably be perplexed to learn that only a few decades ago Wordsworth was still a supremely powerful influence for a multitude of writers, literary critics, philosophers, scientists, ministers of religion, educational and social reformers. Yet this will be unsurprising to those who understand something of the complex process whereby the intellectual substructure of certain modern cultural institutions was laid down during the nineteenth century and fortified in the early twentieth, a process during which the university as we know it and literature as we know it developed in tandem.

For it was in relation to this same process that Wordsworth acquired and long retained the status of a major cultural icon, not least because so many perceived in his work a reconciliation of apparently conflicting positions — political, philosophical, literary. Just a few examples: he has been hailed in the past as one who can induce people to 'look within for those things in which they agree, instead of looking without for those things in which they differ' (F.D. Maurice in 1828), as the producer of poetry 'not partisan or temporary, but national and imperishable' (Henry Newbolt in 1917), as 'one of those central minds which belong to no party and no creed' (John Dover Wilson in 1939); and more recent critics continue to represent him as having articulated 'a central Romantic enterprise', altering 'not only our poetry, but our sensibility and our culture' (M.H. Abrams in 1971 and 1972) because as 'the central Romantic poet' (W.J.T. Mitchell in 1986) he 'speaks of the commonality of our privacy' in a way that seems to alleviate this 'contradiction at the centre of modernity' (Antony Easthope in 1993).[1]

A capacity to hold opposite tendencies together is supposedly embodied in his major literary work. From his contemporary Coleridge, who believed that

Wordsworth's *Recluse* would demonstrate 'a redemptive process' that 'reconciled all anomalies', to our own contemporary Abrams, for whom *The Prelude* 'collects and resolves the contrary qualities' that comprise human experience, Wordsworth's multitude of disciples have invested him with a transcendent, unifying authority and a pivotal role unmatched by any other writer in the language except in some respects Shakespeare and Milton — and both of them, according to Harold Bloom, are brought together in Wordsworth, who 'invented modern poetry' in an achievement that subsumed both 'Shakespearean' and 'Miltonic' qualities.[2]

Some parts of the historical background to Wordsworth's extraordinary status are well known. Why so many leading nineteenth-century men of letters attached special significance to the poetry of Wordsworth is a question investigated by Richard Bourke in his incisive book *Romantic Discourse and Political Modernity: Wordsworth, the Intellectual and Cultural Critique.* Bourke traces the lines of thought through which poetry became invested in the Victorian period with a 'privileged independence' and a 'redemptive facility' that allowed it to provide an illusory kind of consolation for the loss of political efficacy. In this regard, Wordsworth was positioned as 'a figure of incomparable importance to the British cultural tradition'.[3] As an explanation of Wordsworth's pre-eminent place in the intellectual history of his own country, Bourke's study is entirely cogent. Its focus however, is on the intellectual, the theorist, the cultural critic, rather than on institutional structures. Bourke views the compromised political legacy of Romanticism in terms of the preoccupations of individuals for whom Wordsworth was a prototypical exemplar. He does not attempt to explore the extensive infiltration of Wordsworthian thinking into academic practices, which is the subject of the present book.

This does not mean that the following chapters are preoccupied with ways in which Wordsworth's poetry itself became a major object of scholarly teaching and research, though its appeal for those purposes will call for comment because it has indeed been remarkably durable and various. More pervasive still, and more significant, is the frequent naturalizing and normalizing of what he represented: 'Wordsworth' has generally served as the taken-for-granted embodiment of a set of hermeneutic and pedagogic principles, even to such an extent that these principles often ceased to be consciously associated with his name and instead became regarded as self-evidently fundamental for the study of literature, needing no particular attribution.

Nevertheless the standing of Wordsworth's poetry within the academically defined canon of English literature has been highly visible during most of the last century, and the exceptional prestige it has enjoyed is one of the phenomena to be considered. Many factors contributed to it. Some are closely linked with the cultural transformation effected by the Romantic movement as a whole, as will be seen later. Others are more accidental, having to do with various particular circumstances of his life and work: his longevity for instance, and his personal identification with the Lake District, and the complex textual status of his writings.

The simple fact that he outlived all other major Romantic writers and became for many decades a remote yet august figure gave him eventually the aura of an elderly sage linking the Victorian era to the period of the French Revolution. In

1793, just weeks after the execution of Louis XVI, he had written a passionate defence of republicanism in his 'Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff'; in 1845, in courtly attire, he knelt before young Victoria as a guest at the Queen's Ball and kissed her hand. His first two volumes of poetry had also appeared in 1793, when he was completely unknown in literary circles; his magnum opus *The Prelude* came out 57 years later, a few months after his death as England's Poet Laureate. The careers of younger contemporaries such as Keats lasted only a small fraction of that period; and although the judgment of posterity tends to be that Wordsworth's own best work belongs to just a few years, the nature of his influence is nevertheless bound up with his longevity and what that made possible.

His intimate association with Cumbria, about which he wrote so extensively and evocatively in poetry and prose, was another element in his iconic reputation, for the Lake District acquired during the nineteenth century considerable symbolic value as the antithesis of, and antidote to, the negative effects of the Industrial Revolution.[4] Thirty years after the death of this man who had so persistently celebrated the secluded delights of the nation's northwest region and inveighed against the pernicious consequences of 'the increasing accumulation of men in cities', a group explicitly devoted to 'the English Lake District as interpreted in the Poems of Wordsworth' formed the Wordsworth Society with the aim of promoting that district which one enthusiast among them described as 'Nature's own English University'.[5] It was this same group that planned 'the establishment, somewhere in the Lake Country, of an institution ... in which all the memorials of Wordsworth that can be collected may be brought together'. The eventual choice was Dove Cottage, Grasmere, which had been home to the poet and his family during his most productive years and which, managed by a special Trust and incorporating a priceless scholarly resource in the Wordsworth Library, has been open to the public for more than a century now. During much of this time (to apply in general terms a remark that John Beer makes about a particular case of discipleship), 'It was as if Wordsworth had so powerfully appropriated the local scenery that to anyone familiar with his writings it could hardly be seen in any other way — as if he had not just produced poems about it, but in an important sense had composed the Lake District itself'.[6] The mythologizing of Wordsworth has continued to involve a conflation of quintessential Englishness with features of the Lake District. For example, in a book called *The Character of England*, published in 1947 and a favourite British Council gift item for years afterwards, Wordsworth is described as 'a representative Englishman' not only because 'poetry is yet a natural — almost, indeed, a normal — mode of expression for the English race' but also because his 'thinking was home-made, like the butter and cheese that he and his family ate at Rydal Mount'.[7]

Also helping to establish him as a salient literary figure was the plethora of manuscripts and printed variants that constituted 'Wordsworth'. Nothing is more conducive to critical attention and scholarly industry than tangled textuality. Wordsworth's writings were not only voluminous, they were intricately mediated through a series of drafts, copies and revisions extending over decades. Wordsworth relied increasingly on patient copyists in the circle of family and friends. These amanuenses had to cope with his poor eyesight and worse

handwriting, with his fondness for composing orally and dictating amendments, and with his compulsive need to keep rewriting as the nature of the projects changed along with his opinions. Some work, most notably his huge autobiographical poem *The Prelude*, underwent decades of manuscript revision before seeing the light of day, and even compositions that went to press more quickly were always likely to be changed and changed again until the last possible moment: Wordsworth was, as Stephen Gill comments, 'a printer's nightmare'.[8]

As early as 1880 the Wordsworth Society recognized a need to address the consequent textual problems, undertaking a series of publications that served at the time both as a practical resource and as a model of scholarship for the newly emerging company of academic professionals: bibliographical, critical and historical essays on Wordsworth, a biography, a *Wordsworthiana* anthology, and (as well as selections for the general reader) elaborate formal editions of his poetry, prose and letters. These in turn soon stimulated rival and supplementary textual labours. From 1888 to 1897, for example, four separate major editions of his *Poetical Works* were issued (the two largest, compiled by Dowden and by Knight, extending to seven and eight volumes respectively), along with other collections.[9] Together these efforts did much to demonstrate and reinforce Wordsworth's claim to serious scholarly attention just when English literature was pressing for full admittance to the repertoire of academic subjects. But the exacting task of establishing a definitive set of texts supported by adequate critical apparatus could not quickly be accomplished. Intrinsically recalcitrant, the Wordsworth corpus has continued to nourish a huge editorial and critical industry right up to our own time, culminating in the monumental Cornell Wordsworth editions that started to appear in 1975.

In passing, one should not overlook the fact, less trivial than it may seem, that few writers have been blessed with such an auspicious patronymic. The very name 'Wordsworth' reverberates with literariness, its assonantal syllables connoting what is valuable in language and almost inviting incantatory repetition. An essay on the poet by one of his most eminent critics, Geoffrey Hartman, recognizes something of that resonance in its title: 'Words, Wish, Worth'.[10] (How much less evocative is the name of the Yorkshire village, Wadsworth, from which the poet's family line derived![11]) And when in 1992 a new publisher burst into the paperback market with simple editions of canonical British writers, selling over 30 million books within three years, its spectacular success may have had something to do with the brand label chosen: 'Wordsworth Classics'. Seeming virtually synonymous with literary canonicity, the name of Wordsworth dilated further after his lifetime because several relatives who shared that name kept adding to the corpus of writings about the person whose autobiographical compulsion had already led him to remark that it was 'a thing unprecedented in literary history that a man should talk so much about himself'.[12] Thus the 'Wordsworth on Wordsworth' phenomenon continued posthumously, beginning with the publication in 1851 of *Memoirs of William Wordsworth* by his nephew Christopher, and extending to our own time with a number of books, articles and editions produced by Jonathan Wordsworth (a descendent of the poet's brother Christopher).[13] Moreover, the general role of the extended Wordsworth family in