

SELECTED
POETRY
WORDSWORTH



WILLIAM
WORDSWORTH
Selected Poetry

EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION,

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INTRODUCTION

BY MARK VAN DOREN

WHATEVER Wordsworth's rank may be among the poets of the world, he holds a special position which will never cease to be secure. It is special with respect to both place and time; he is the first great modern poet of England and Europe, and by extension, of America. This is not to say that his importance is historical, for he lives and will continue to live. But he still speaks for a special world — our world — that has great need of him, and to say this is to define the modern age. It is an age that has lost, curiously, the knowledge of how to feel. For Marcel Proust it was an age that had lost the power to remember. And there are other simple things which it would appear we had forgotten how to do. Only by intense effort, and in fortunate cases, can the springs of life be made to flow again. Proust was such a case, and he put forth such an effort. But a century before him Wordsworth had strained and triumphed in an equivalent if not an identical fashion. Indeed he was the first to do so; and since his world is still our world, and since his gifts as a poet were pure and great, we more than ever benefit by his achievement.

His poems, chronologically considered, tell an exciting story. They show him, after an undistinguished start, learning how to feel, to see, and to remember; and then they show him losing all those powers. He had them in their fullness for no longer than ten years, as Matthew Arnold, writing in 1879, was the first to point out. Wordsworth's best poems all belong to the decade 1797-1807. It was the decade of his intimacy with Coleridge, and it was the period of his struggle to come to an understanding with the French Revolution. Also, and mysteriously, it marked the limits of his inspiration.

He both knew and did not know this; or rather, as time passed, he tended to forget it. He lived to be eighty, and can-

not be said to have enjoyed success or fame till he was sixty. So he may be pardoned for the humorless complacency of his old age, which meant among other things that he could not distinguish between his good and his bad poems. Neither could his disciples, the Wordsworthians, who found equal value in all of their master's utterances. They were defending a poet who had survived more obloquy and contempt than any other modern poet has had to live through; for the modern world has never enjoyed being told that it is dead, and for a longer or shorter time has punished those who ventured to expose the agony of their search for the primary sources of being. In any case, Wordsworth lasted into the second half of the nineteenth century under the handicap of too copious an output, impossibly arranged. The collection of his poems which he left behind him at his death in 1850 contained no clues leading into its heart, and the categories into which he had divided it were meaningless to other men. Matthew Arnold's selection of 1879 served therefore an excellent purpose, and subsequent selections have worked toward the same end.

The present selection is generous to the limit. It does not confine itself to the great decade, and there are two reasons for that. In the first place, it is not true that Wordsworth was only then an interesting poet. He continued after 1807 to be interesting in a variety of ways, even if never again on his highest level. And in the second place there is much to be learned, about poetry and about him, by watching him throughout his career. A serious student of Wordsworth will want to know how he began and ended, and will not be content to take the world's word for it that "The White Doe of Rylstone" or "The Waggoner" or "The Excursion" is the worst poem ever written. Or the best. For both things have been said, not only about these poems but about every other poem by Wordsworth that is known at all. The selection to come, then, provides the reader with all the work of Wordsworth he is likely ever to want, and by its chronological arrangement permits him to follow the story of one poet's development, high glory, and decline.

William Wordsworth was born at Cockermouth, Cumber-

land, in the Lake Country of England, on April 7, 1770. He passed his boyhood there, and in Hawkshead and Penrith not far away. At twenty-nine he returned to the Lake Country and identified with it the remainder of his long life. Meanwhile he had gone to study at Cambridge, spending his vacations at home or on the Continent; had lived in France, in London, and in the West of England; had met Coleridge; and had settled upon the ideas he was to keep with him, with some natural changes, till his death.

It had not been easy to come by these ideas. For at least five years, from 1792 to 1797, Wordsworth lived in doubt and despair. The French Revolution, whose effects he saw at close range both in the summer of 1790, when he walked with his friend Robert Jones through France and Switzerland, and in 1791 and 1792, when he lived in France, was the great event of his time, and all of his thought was somehow connected with it. Being by nature an open and free spirit, devoted to liberty and justice, he took the Revolution almost for granted in its early stages; and it was only because his funds gave out that he left Paris at the end of 1792, relinquishing the role of revolutionary leader which for a moment he had thought he might fill. He also left in France an illegitimate daughter, the fruit of an attachment to Marie-Anne (or Annette) Vallon. If he had plans for returning, he was prevented from doing so early in 1793, when England declared war on France. This was a blow to Wordsworth comparable with the fact that the Revolution itself had in a sense lost his allegiance; the first pure impulse of it seemed to him to have died, and France had begun an imperial career for which he could have no sympathy. He joined his sister Dorothy and prepared for publication two poems in heroic couplets which he had written: one, "An Evening Walk," during his first two college vacations, in 1787-9, and the other, "Descriptive Sketches," during his residence in France. He was to abandon their eighteenth-century style as soon as he could, but the rural observations in "An Evening Walk" and the revolutionary speculations in "Descriptive Sketches" anticipated the subject matter with which he was always to be concerned. Coleridge, reading "De-

scriptive Sketches" at Cambridge, thought its author a very promising poet.

In the same year, 1793, William Godwin published his famous treatise on individual reason called "Political Justice." This became the bible of innumerable persons for a generation to come, and until 1797 these persons included Wordsworth, whose poem "Guilt and Sorrow" and whose tragedy in verse, "The Borderers," are thoroughly Godwinian in feeling. Or in lack of feeling, as Wordsworth finally understood the term. For his struggle during the next few years was to free himself from Godwin — not from the Revolution, whose initial impulse he was to cherish in its essence, but from this philosopher who maintained that no revolution and no society is real by comparison with the reason of individuals. It was a barren and heartless faith from which poetry could not spring; or at least it was so for Wordsworth, who in London and elsewhere sought to think his way out. In 1795 he was saved from further effort by a legacy of 900 pounds, left him by Raisley Calvert to whom he had been companion and nurse. At once he decided to send for Dorothy and live with her.

Their happy life at Racedown Lodge, Dorsetshire, was soon made happier by Coleridge's coming to see them from Nether Stowey, Somersetshire. The three of them became enthusiastic friends, and it was not long before the Wordsworths moved to Alfoxden, near Nether Stowey, so that they could see more of this brilliant man who was to mean so much in William's life. Dorothy was good for him, but Coleridge was necessary. The great poet in him slept till Coleridge woke him up, by conversation and example. In their walks over the Quantock Hills the two discussed everything under the sun, including the possibility of a new poetry; and late in 1797 they hatched between them the idea of the celebrated book we now know as "Lyrical Ballads." Published in 1798, this book contained such masterpieces as "The Ancient Mariner" and "Tintern Abbey"; but William and Dorothy had already gone with Coleridge to live for a year in Germany, and only by indirect means did they hear how poor its critical reception was at home.

In Germany, in 1799, Wordsworth wrote some magnificent passages of blank verse which eventually were to find their place in his masterpiece "The Prelude"; and in addition he wrote the Lucy poems which for many readers are now his simplest, most perfect work. Returning to England with Dorothy, he found his way back to the Lake Country as if by instinct and settled at Grasmere, in Dove Cottage, for the happiest period of his life. The influence of Coleridge was still with him, and the presence of Dorothy assisted him at every turn. He had come into his own, as "The Prelude," begun at Racedown four years ago and now continued with interruptions till it was completed in 1805, makes beautifully clear.

The great theme of Wordsworth is joy. Joy literally breathes through all of his best lines. And the joy he had known at Racedown and Alfoxden was nothing to that which now at last he had learned in absolute simplicity to feel. He had his answer to the Revolution and to Godwin who had spoiled it for him. Tranquillity so pure that it was passionate—that was what he could communicate, and in hundreds of fine poems he did. The finest of these is autobiographical; "The Prelude" traces the "growth of a poet's mind" through dark regions of intellect from which at last a total escape was found in feeling. If its author unconsciously invented a being called Nature who had always presided over his life and conducted him toward his present bliss, if "The Prelude" is less history than apologetics, if it is more about a secret that has been discovered than about one that was lost and restored, no difference appears in its final effect, or in its matchless renderings of scenes and occasions which by some miracle Wordsworth remembers in their original freshness. How Wordsworth got his wisdom, his "gift to be simple," matters less than that he did get it, and poured it into the poems of his prime—poems which seem, as Matthew Arnold said, to have written themselves; though in his admirable prefaces Wordsworth was at pains to state the theories he thought had produced them.

No theory had produced them. They came rather out of an extraordinary, even an abnormal, organization of the poet's senses. Wordsworth tells us he kept his eye on the object; but

he also tells us that he saw more than the object — indeed, the object could sometimes dissolve so that in a kind of terror he clutched at trees and stones in order to confirm his knowledge of their presence. The object dissolved in light, in an unearthly light that never was on sea or land. It was a celestial gleam, an abstract radiance, a state of the soul as well as of the senses. Doubtless it was chiefly of the soul, but Wordsworth never forgot to be grateful for his eyes and ears, for his capacity to dignify sights and sounds until they seemed to be emanations from another world.

The experience, in other words, was mystical. Wordsworth was inspired. And like all mystics he could be puzzled by the fact that the experience not only came but went. He was in and out of ecstasy. His ode called "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" is his best-known record of this, but there are other records; and "Tintern Abbey" is an attempt to write the history of one great moment, early in the poet's manhood, when the vision first came in full force. "The Prelude" gives us the whole history — so important a theme for Wordsworth that he kept this poem by him all his life, never publishing it for fear it was incomplete. Wordsworth's great subject is himself. He is modern in this, though he is not vain. He has a story to tell of how one man found the way to feeling, and he does not hesitate, since the discovery is precious, to celebrate it in the light of his own experience, which for him is a gift from something better than himself.

Both "Tintern Abbey" and "The Prelude" tell us how Wordsworth learned to connect his feeling with humanity. Once it had been an animal thing, exultant and private; but then it deepened into a vision of man, a still, sad vision, accompanied by music and melancholy. For man's fate is complex and tragic; it is not the fate of the roebuck or the lark, the daisy or the eglantine. Wordsworth had a keen sense of this, and this sense had been whetted by his thoughts about the Revolution. It was the Revolution, and his need to conquer it in his mind, that moved him at the climax of his career to take mankind for his subject.

He did not do so in Shakspeare's way, or Homer's, or Dante's. Those greater poets demonstrated in act the complexity and tragedy of men — not Man, as Wordsworth put it. Wordsworth did not know men, and so he could not tell great stories, which is the highest business of poetry. He could merely state his reverence and affection for the species; and in a few instances, such as his pastoral tales of "Michael" and "The Brothers," he could movingly relate the pathetic ends of simple lives. He was restricted by his very nature to the contemplation of undeveloped persons, or at any rate of persons so simple that he must treat them in lyric, not drama. Mankind was most real to him in the child, and in the man who has never ceased to be one. Even idiots, and persons crazed by grief until they were all one image of sorrow or pain, interested him as Hamlet, Orestes, Macbeth, or Achilles never could have done.

Thus he is limited; yet within his limits he is accurate and grave and sweet. He is in some primary way humane, so that although we learn little about his people we share with him a deep, disturbing, loving concern for them. The little girl in "We Are Seven," the mysterious Lucy of the poems written in Germany, the idiot son of Betty Foy, the old leech-gatherer in "Resolution and Independence," Matthew, and Michael — they are as simple as butterflies and sparrows, as brooks and thorn trees; yet we believe in their existence and are glad that Wordsworth has told us of it. Nor do we need to believe him when he insists that just because they are simple and ignorant they know more than we do. Their wise passiveness, their ability to educate themselves by receiving impulses from the vernal wood — this was Wordsworth's faith, in reaction to the intolerable burdens which the Revolution and William Godwin had sought to place upon his intellect, but it need not be ours unless we too are in flight from revolution and the difficulties it imposes. We can simply take his human figures as he presents them to us in lines of an unexampled naturalness.

Wordsworth was master of the natural line. Often enough, and indeed too often, it relaxes with him into mediocrity and

flatness; but at its best it is metrically a miracle. Wordsworth's condescension to meter in his critical Appendix of 1802, where he calls it merely "adventitious to composition," should not lead us to ignore his knowledge of verse. Had he not been a great writer of verse he could not have been a great poet. Other things were required, and he was right in placing them first; but the blank verse of "Tintern Abbey" and "The Prelude" is in itself a beautiful accomplishment, as is the management of a shorter line, with rhyme, in "The Solitary Reaper" — whose subject, incidentally, came to him not from observation but from the pages of a prose book he was reading. The first two stanzas of "Resolution and Independence" alone would prove Wordsworth a perfect writer of verse. And so would any of his best sonnets — for instance, the one "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, Sept. 3, 1802." Wordsworth says it was "written on the roof of a coach, on my way to France." It was probably composed in his head, without pencil or paper, as most of his poems were; but in any event it was composed with a skill such as only Shakspeare and Milton have had.

Milton was Wordsworth's master in the sonnet, as generally in his blank verse. In 1801, at Grasmere, Dorothy read Milton's sonnets aloud one afternoon. "I had long been well acquainted with them," says Wordsworth, "but I was particularly struck on that occasion by the dignified simplicity and majestic harmony that runs through most of them. . . . I took fire, if I may be allowed to say so, and produced three Sonnets that afternoon, the first I ever wrote except an irregular one at school." This was the beginning of a long and noble career in the form, a career that declined in "The River Duddon" and "Ecclesiastical Sonnets" yet never altogether lost its first momentum.

But the decline of Wordsworth, in this and other respects, seemed far off in 1800, when at Grasmere, living happily with his sister, he wrote the proud Preface to the second edition of "Lyrical Ballads." For the next seven years, with Dorothy and Coleridge as his companions and, after 1802, with Mary Hutchinson as his devoted wife, he put forth the bulk of his

great work. In 1808, because his four children were too many for Dove Cottage, he moved to Allan Bank, where an estrangement between him and Coleridge, for some time possible, became actual at last. It was disastrous for both poets, as Wordsworth for one well knew. He continued with "The Excursion," a long poem to which "The Prelude" had been but preliminary, and which in turn was to have been but a portion of a still longer work, "The Recluse," that he hoped would be the work by which his name might live; but "The Excursion" has never been much read since its publication in 1814. Only the first Book is reprinted here, for the sake of its story of Margaret — a story, significantly, written as early as 1795-8, at Racedown and Alfoxden. The persons in "The Excursion" are Wordsworth himself, who has fallen in love with his own opinions. He has lost both the animal and the angelic spirits of his youth and early manhood. The "years that bring the philosophic mind" have brought him no access of poetic power; and "natural piety" has become indistinguishable from piety in its ordinary form.

In 1813 he moved to Rydal Mount, where he lived until his death in 1850. Here he grew into the venerable figure whom Emerson visited from America, and whom many others sought out as time passed. He kept on writing poems and editing his past works; he traveled when he could, on the Continent and in his beloved Scotland; he defended his theory of poetry against the critics who still despised both it and him; he accepted honours from universities and the laureateship from the Queen; but the poet we now read had already died, and only an old man was left to remember that he once had written "to teach the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think, and feel."

To see and feel. Let us leave the thinking out and say again that Wordsworth, in a world which had forgotten the very alphabet of emotion, taught it to read again. So at any rate was the conviction of John Stuart Mill, whom Wordsworth's poems saved from the depths of intellectual depression. So with Matthew Arnold, who first spoke of Wordsworth's power to soothe and console an age fallen victim to philosophic despair.

And so in subsequent generations has Wordsworth been praised by those who found in him the reassurance they required. The reassurance that human life is still worth living, though most events and some men can make us doubt it. It is this minimal need that Wordsworth has met. In a happier world he might have been free to aim at maturer ends. Yet in that happier world his lack of humor, a serious defect for one who would be a complete poet, might have weighed more heavily against him than it does in this one. We no longer require humor in poets. We demand salvation. Of that commodity, Wordsworth still supplies the purest sort; and since he was an artist, it will continue to be available in any world.

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