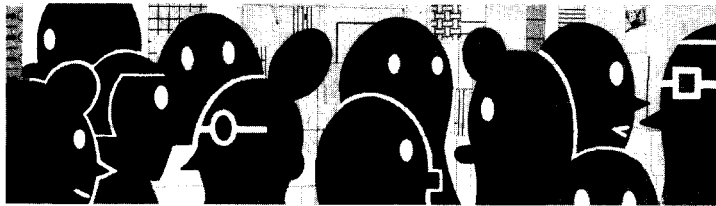


THE CRITICS



BOOKS

STRANGE FITS OF PASSION

Wordsworth's revolution.

BY ADAM KIRSCH

Has there ever been a great poet as tempting to laugh at as William Wordsworth? The tradition of mocking him is as old as the tradition of revering him. In 1807, when Wordsworth published "Poems, in Two Volumes," the fashionable reviewers competed in the ingenuity of their scorn. Francis Jeffrey, the critical dictator of the *Edinburgh Review*, declared that "if the printing of such trash as this be not felt as an insult on the public taste, we are afraid it cannot be insulted." Jeffrey remained the chief bane of Wordsworth's career—in 1814, his review of "The Excursion," a nine-thousand-line epic, began with an airy "This will never do"—but he was just one of many who felt the need to cut the poet down to size. "For nearly twenty years," Samuel Taylor Coleridge complained in "Biographia Literaria," Wordsworth's poems "have well-nigh engrossed criticism, as the main, if not the only, butt of review, magazine, pamphlet, poem, and paragraph."

But the urge to make fun of Wordsworth has always been a guilty one. For his first critics, it was a nervous response to the poet's intense seriousness, like the giggling of children during a sermon. What discomfited them was not just the defiant humility of Wordsworth's subjects—an old beggar, a madwoman, a retarded child—but the revolutionary scope of his claims on their behalf. He demanded for the ordinary and the damaged not a grudging pity but the full sympathy that recognizes "that we have all of us one human heart." Words-

worth's faith in the heart, in fact, has something of the paradoxical, frightening absoluteness of the New Testament. He believed that the soul, uncontaminated by wealth and unperverted by extreme poverty, is essentially good; more, that it is part of a universal frame of goodness, which can also be glimpsed in mountains and rivers, animals and plants. Sin and death have no dominion over this goodness, which lies just underneath the surface of things, always ready to receive us:

'Tis Nature's law

That none, the meanest of created things,
Of forms created the most vile and brute,
The dullest or most noxious, should exist
Divorced from good—a spirit and pulse
of good,

A life and soul, to every mode of being
Inseparably linked.

Poetry, for Wordsworth, was nothing other than the expression in language of this "spirit and pulse." To consider it a mere bourgeois entertainment was to violate its high calling. Wordsworth had no patience with those "who will converse with us as gravely about a taste for Poetry, as they express it, as if it were a thing as indifferent as a taste for rope-dancing, or Frontinac or Sherry." It is because he was so hostile to the idea of poetry as a taste that he could write in a style that his first readers regarded as tasteless. He even came to believe that the neglect or incomprehension of the majority of readers was itself proof that he was on the right path. No more than any prophet could he expect to be honored in his own country. "It is an awful

truth," he wrote to his patron Lady Beaumont, "that there neither is, nor can be, any genuine enjoyment of Poetry among nineteen out of twenty of those persons who live, or wish to live, in the broad light of the world." If the definition of the avant-garde is that it is validated by contempt, then Wordsworth was the first avant-garde writer in English literature.

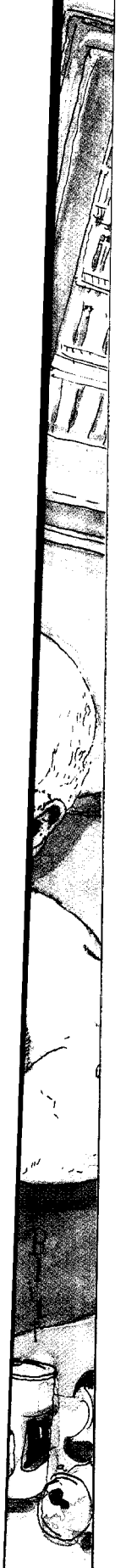
The growth of his reputation established what has become the familiar pattern for experimental artists. Initial neglect is compensated for by a cult of admirers, a select few who take special delight in the sense that they alone understand the artist's worth. Coleridge remarked on the apostolic quality of Wordsworth's readers, who were found "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* fervor." When these admirers are rich, they see it as their duty to help the artist survive: Wordsworth had no regular employment until he was middle-aged, surviving instead on a small inheritance and the remarkable generosity of his patrons. His Calverts and Beaumonts are the direct ancestors of Yeats's Lady Gregory and Joyce's Harriet Shaw Weaver. Finally, as if overnight, the minority view turns into conventional wisdom, and the object of ridicule becomes a national treasure.

For Wordsworth, this transformation began in the eighteen-thirties. Wordsworth told the young Matthew Arnold that his poetry "had never brought him in enough to buy his shoe-strings"; suddenly, he was selling out multivolume sets and cheap editions. In 1843, Queen Victoria named him Poet Laureate. Trainloads of day-trippers, following a vogue for the Lake District that Wordsworth helped create, showed up on the lawn at Rydal Mount to pay their respects. Juliet Barker's new biography, "Wordsworth: A Life" (Ecco; \$29.95), is especially good at evoking this phase of Wordsworth's career: the lion in winter, submitting to be petted and gawked at. Barker quotes a letter written by his wife, Mary, in 1847, when the poet was seventy-seven years old: "At this moment, a group of young Tourists are standing before the window (I

GERALD SCARFE



A visit to France made Wordsworth an ardent supporter of the Revolution, but his best work came when his ardor started to cool.



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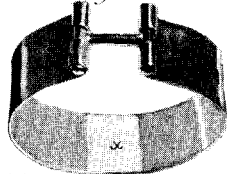
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am writing in the Hall) and Wm reading a newspaper—and on lifting up his head a profound bow greeted him from each.”

In that bow, Wordsworth's admirers were doing homage to more than a poet. “I wish either to be considered as a Teacher, or as nothing,” he wrote, and it was his teaching that his readers cherished so highly. His influence on the younger generation of writers was profound; indeed, many of what we now see as the Victorian virtues—earnestness, mature optimism, easy authority—are first incarnated in his poetry. Above all, he offered a doubting generation the example of his confident spiritual health. Wordsworth's faith in the goodness of the universe made a detour around the question of Christ's divinity, which tormented so many of the best minds of the mid-nineteenth century. Instead, he simply affirmed, in the famous words from “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” that “Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her.”

One after another, the great Victorians speak of Wordsworth as a doctor of the spirit. Emerson wrote that “he has done more for the sanity of this generation than any other writer”; Ruskin, that “Wordsworth may be trusted as a guide in everything”; Leslie Stephen, that “he seems to me to be the only consolator.” His most famous patient was John Stuart Mill, who testified in his “Autobiography” that reading Wordsworth saved him from a nervous breakdown: “What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of.”

It has been a long time, however, since we have been in quest of the sort of cure that Wordsworth has to offer. If his first readers turned against him because he was undignified, today we are more likely to turn away from him because he is too dignified. He knows what he knows so surely, so completely, that he cannot think against himself; no poet besides Milton is as devoid of humor. This quality is indispensable to his poetry at its best, but also played a part in its

shockingly rapid decline. Wordsworth kept writing almost until his death, in 1850, but virtually all of his lasting poems were written in the ten years after 1797. “Tintern Abbey,” “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” the “Lucy” poems, “Michael,” “Expostulation and Reply” were written before the poet had turned thirty-five. The works that came later—“The Excursion,” “The River Duddon,” “Ecclesiastical Sonnets”—have become bywords for tedium.

This is the real quandary of Wordsworth's life, and Juliet Barker's reluctance to address it keeps her very informative biography from becoming truly revealing. It would seem that only a powerful interest in Wordsworth's poetry could draw a biographer to his well-established story, first told by the poet himself in his autobiographical masterpiece “The Prelude,” and filled out by a long chain of biographers, including the excellent Stephen Gill, whose biography appeared in 1989. But Barker's comments on Wordsworth's poetry are perfunctory, and she is generally uninterested in the literary dimension of his life. What she brings to the story is a thorough knowledge of Wordsworth's day-to-day activities and an admirable common sense, which allows her to dismiss the wilder speculations with which other biographers have tried to spice up the poet's usually plain existence.

Wordsworth's life, like most lives perhaps, makes for a lopsided narrative; everything exciting that happened to him happened between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. He was born in the Lake District in 1770 to a middle-class family, whose prosperity flowed from his father's work as law agent to the local magnate, James Lowther, Earl of Lonsdale. When John Wordsworth died, in 1783, leaving William and his four siblings orphans, their future suddenly became much more precarious. Lowther owed his employee's estate huge sums, and though money was found to send William to school and then to Cambridge, the whole of his early life was shadowed by the need to recover the debt. The Wordsworth family's endless, Jarndyce-like lawsuit against the hated nobleman—known to his neighbors and tenants as Wicked Jimmy—was not resolved until 1802, when the Earl finally had the good grace to die.

Given the family's cloudy finances, the four Wordsworth sons had to find ways to support themselves, and William's brothers applied themselves to this task with exemplary dedication. Richard Wordsworth became a London lawyer, Christopher the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, John the captain of an East India merchantman. Only William seemed to languish, compiling a mediocre record at university and refusing to prepare for the clergyman's career that awaited him.

Worse still, when he did find a calling, it turned out to be the dangerous one of revolutionary politics. During a trip to France in 1791-92, Wordsworth fell under the idealistic spell of the French Revolution, which was only just beginning to slide into its violent, regicidal phase. Under the tutelage of Michel Beaupuy, a charismatic aristocrat who abandoned his class to join the Revolutionary army (and died a hero's death fighting the Austrians, in 1796), Wordsworth came to share the ecstatic hopefulness of the time. More than any political theory, what seduced the twenty-one-year-old was the emotional climate of Revolutionary France: he "believed," he remembered in "The Prelude," "That a benignant spirit was abroad / Which might not be withstood." Part of his elation, too, had a more private source: during his stay in Orléans, Wordsworth fell in love with a Frenchwoman, Annette Vallon, and fathered an illegitimate daughter with her. (While Wordsworth acknowledged his daughter Caroline, and intermittently helped support her, he saw her and Annette only twice more, on quick visits to France.) By the time he returned to England, in December, 1792, he seemed to have disqualified himself, deliberately and permanently, from conventional bourgeois success.

For most of his early manhood, William Wordsworth looked certain to become the black sheep of his family, rather than its claim to immortality. The turning point came in 1795, when the poet left London to set up house-keeping at Racedown, in Dorset, with his sister, Dorothy. The fact that brother and sister had seldom seen each other since their father's death, when they were sent to live in different places, only made their adult relationship closer. For

the rest of their lives, they lived together, the core of an expanding household that came to include William's wife, Mary Hutchinson, her sister Sara, and, at intervals, his friend and collaborator Coleridge.

The remainder of Wordsworth's story can be told, like any other writer's, in publication dates and family milestones. Barker gives an impeccably complete record of these, sticking close to her subject and seldom venturing to provide any wider literary or political context. We see Wordsworth move from Racedown to Alfoxden, then to Dove Cottage, in Grasmere, and finally to Rydal Mount—the sacred addresses that are still sites of literary pilgrimage. He grows close to the brilliant Coleridge, collaborates with him on their reputation-making volume of "Lyrical Ballads," in 1798, and eventually breaks with him, fed up with his neuroses and addictions. He has five children with his beloved Mary, three of whom he buries, to his tremendous grief. And through it all he rises slowly from cult author to national institution.

The problem with Barker's method is that the writing of poems becomes just another of Wordsworth's many activities—paying calls on friends, taking hikes in the mountains, dealing with publishers, and so on—instead of the center and purpose of his existence. This approach cannot do justice to Wordsworth, the poet of "wise passiveness," whose life was largely empty of outward incident. The other Romantic luminaries—the demonic Byron, the angelic Shelley, and the tormented Coleridge—had much more exciting biographies. Wordsworth's story is compelling not as an adventure but as a parable. His emergence as the great, challenging poet of natural sympathy and his subsequent decline into dull institutional benevolence form one of the key instructive dramas of modern poetry. But the drama is mostly internal, and can be approached only through the poetry that was its product and record.

The central event of Wordsworth's life, without which his poetry cannot be fully understood, was the French Revolution. When the Bastille fell, he was a nineteen-year-old idling his way through Cambridge. In the summer of 1790, he took a walking tour through

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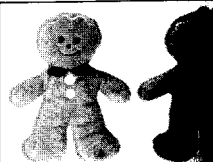
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France and the Alps, where he was first exposed to the world-renewing promise of the Revolution. When he returned to France, the next year, the hopeful scenes he witnessed led him to declare his allegiance to the Revolution and its principles. In "The Prelude," he recalled the experience in some of the most famous lines in English poetry:

For which were the auxiliars which then stood
Upon our side, us who were strong in love!
Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven! O times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!

For the next four years, Wordsworth remained an ardent fellow-traveller of the Revolution, at a time when this was not more popular in England than it was to be a Communist in America after 1917. He associated with some of the leading radicals of the day, and wrote, but wisely did not publish, essays and poems that would certainly have got him prosecuted for sedition. In 1797, Wordsworth's house at Alfoxden actually came under government surveillance, after the village began to gossip about newcomers so odd they could only be foreigners: "The French people kept no Servant, but they were Visited by a number of persons, and were frequently out upon the heights most part of the night."

Just as Wordsworth was being denounced as a Frenchman, he was, ironically, in the process of making the final break with his early Jacobinism. "The Prelude," the autobiographical epic that he had completed by 1805 but refused to publish in his lifetime, was written primarily in order to make sense of this apostasy from the revolutionary faith. A kind of bildungsroman, which seems to look back to "Paradise Lost" and forward to "In Search of Lost Time," "The Prelude" is usually remembered as a collection of vivid epiphanies, what the poet named "spots of time": stealing a boat by moonlight, crossing the Alps, climbing above the clouds on Mt. Snowdon. These scenes of natural instruction are presented as critical stages in the "growth of a poet's mind," to use the po-

et's subtitle. But Wordsworth also cherished them as sources of true wisdom, next to which political reason is merely a dangerous counterfeit. By the late seventeen-nineties, when he had left London and activism behind, his brief career as an ideologue came to seem a betrayal of his real, poetic self. "The Prelude" was written as an act of convalescence from and penance for politics, which he finally comes to see as "a degradation" fortunately "transient":

I had known
Too forcibly, too early in my life,
Visitings of imaginative power
For this to last: I shook the habit off
Entirely and for ever, and again
In Nature's presence stood, as now I stand,
A sensitive being, a *creative* soul.

In time, his evolution was so nearly complete that radicals of the younger generation denounced him as a sell-out, especially after he agreed to take a political-patronage job as a tax collector. "Just for a handful of silver he left us," Robert Browning mourned in "The Lost Leader," "Just for a riband to stick in his coat." Even today, Wordsworth's "betrayal" of his early principles continues to damage his reputation among academics. The evidence that his increasing Toryism went hand in hand with the decline of his talent makes it easy to argue, as William Hazlitt did about Wordsworth and the other Lake poets, that "their Jacobin principles indeed gave rise to their Jacobin poetry. Since they gave up the first, their poetical powers have flagged."

But this is to mistake the complexity of Wordsworth's thought, and the motive forces of his best poetry. In fact, Wordsworth's turn away from politics was responsible for the extraordinary flourishing of his poetry after 1797. What animates his best work is his struggle to transcend the radicalism of his youth, to rescue its benevolent impulses while escaping its shallowness and intolerance. In a sense, Wordsworth's intellectual trajectory is simi-

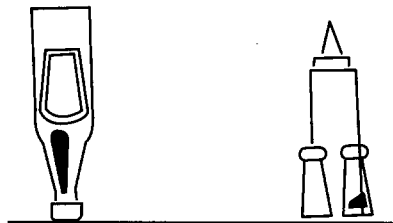
lar to that of the American Trotskyists of the nineteen-thirties, who became the liberal anti-Communists of the nineteen-fifties. Like them, Wordsworth found his revolutionary hopes betrayed by history—the Terror of Robespierre and the rise of Bonaparte. His eloquent hatred of Napoleon, like a later generation's hatred of Stalin, came from his realization that he had wagered his highest hopes on a bloody fraud. Returning to France in 1802, after ten years of terror and war, he saw only the corpse of a revolution:

When faith was pledged to new-born Liberty:
A homeless sound of joy was in the sky:
From hour to hour the antiquated Earth
Beat like the heart of Man: songs,
garlands, mirth,
Banners, and happy faces, far and nigh!
And now, sole register that these things were,
Two solitary greetings have I heard,
"Good morrow, Citizen!" a hollow word,
As if a dead man spake it!

Though little written evidence survives from the early seventeen-nineties, what does remain, and what Wordsworth himself tells us in "The Prelude," suggests that he was a doctrinaire ideologue, certain that no one could oppose the Revolution "Who was not lost, abandoned, selfish, proud, / Mean, miserable, wilfully depraved, / Hater perverse of equity and truth." By the time Napoleon fell, however, he had convinced himself of another, equally iron-clad set of principles: that the lower classes were not ready to be trusted with political power, that only tradition and hierarchy could insure social peace.

Even then, Wordsworth was not indifferent to the plight of the poor; he remained an advocate of educational reform and an opponent of the workhouse. But by 1814 he had developed the narrow certitude that makes "The Excursion," the poem he intended as his moral testament, so exasperating. In the central dialogue of that book, the embittered Solitary—a Jacobin turned misanthrope by the failure of the French Revolution—is hectored into submission by the self-righteous Wanderer, who knows that the answer to every problem can be found in pious resignation:

One adequate support
For the calamities of mortal life
Exists—one only; an assured belief



That the procession of our fate, how'er
Sad or disturbed, is ordered by a Being
Of infinite benevolence and power;
Whose everlasting purposes embrace
All accidents, converting them to good.

But between Wordsworth's early principles and his late principles came a period of about ten years when he had no firm principles, only questions and intuitions; and it was from these that his great poetry was born. If Wordsworth survives as a living possibility for today's readers and poets—and he should—it is thanks not to his teaching but to his use of verse as a medium for introspection and self-questioning. No poet before him paid such close attention to the way the mind actually works, the odd jumps that connect our ideas and perceptions.

Take "Strange fits of passion have I known," one of the weird and moving series known as the "Lucy" poems. The important thing about Lucy, whom the poet treats at once as a child, sister, and lover, is not whether she was modelled on a real person, or what she suggests about Wordsworth's feelings for Dorothy. (Barker, with her customary good sense, dismisses the modern critical speculation that the "Lucy" poems are a clue to incest: "The post-Freudian world is incapable of believing that there could be anything innocent about intense sibling affection.") The poem is not really about Lucy at all but about the way the poet's love leads him beyond logic. When the moon disappears from sight behind Lucy's cottage, he immediately fears that it is an omen:

What fond and wayward thoughts will
slide
Into a Lover's head!
"O mercy!" to myself I cried,
"If Lucy should be dead!"

There is no reason for the Lover to connect the moon with Lucy's death; but this is just the kind of "fond and wayward thought" that makes up so much of our inner lives, and which no one before Wordsworth had discovered as a subject for poetry. This discovery, grounded in a deep compassion for human frailty, is what gives Wordsworth's best narrative poems their moving simplicity. There is Timothy, in "The Childless Father," who shuts his front door and thinks, "The key I must take, for my Ellen is dead"; there is Michael, the old shepherd who kept going



"Next."

back to the sheepfold he started to build with his vanished son, but "never lifted up a single stone"; there is the child in "Anecdote for Fathers," who insists that he does not like his new house because it has a weathercock on the roof.

In learning to listen to these quiet, undefended truths, Wordsworth came to trust them more than the Truth Militant he saw in France. There grew up in him a feeling that became a conviction: that the heart partakes of the holiness of Nature, that it needs sympathetic attention, not ideological correction. Finally, he tried to make this insight the basis for a quasi religion, in which a benevolent Nature takes the place of a loving God. In his most elevated rhetorical passages, especially in "The Prelude," he often writes as though setting forth a metaphysical proposition that demands intellectual assent: "Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows / Like harmony in music; there is a dark / Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles / Discordant elements."

But this is not the kind of statement that can be argued for or against, any more than Keats's "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." It is the spontaneous praise uttered by a man who has had a certain experience, and will be persuasive only if the poet has shared that experience with the reader.

In his great poems, Wordsworth does exactly that. His downfall was that, convinced as he was of the truths that blos-

somed from his experience, he finally could not imagine that other people might need convincing. As he grew older, he tended to view all criticism of his poetry as a sign of moral turpitude, and was abetted in this by the obvious flippancy of so many of his detractors. In the uselessly combative essay he included in the 1815 edition of his poems, designed as a counterblast to Jeffrey and all his other critics, he consoled himself with the thought that "there are select Spirits for whom it is ordained that their fame shall be in the world an existence like that of Virtue, which owes its being to the struggles it makes, and its vigour to the enemies whom it provokes."

This is not just unattractive; it courts the very ridicule it is intended to silence. We do not come to art for virtue, though we may come to it for wisdom. The difference is the one between "Resolution and Independence," in which the poet's moral crisis is beautifully enacted and resolved, and the "Ode to Duty," in which his moral instruction is handed down from on high. The instruction, which the Victorians so valued, sounds false to us now, full of unearned confidence about the benevolence of man and nature. But the intrepidity with which Wordsworth explored his own inner life and the generosity with which he shared it remain more than convincing: even now, they continue to define the highest aspirations of modern poetry. ♦