

## WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

1770–1850

William Wordsworth was born in Cockermouth in West Cumberland, just on the northern fringe of the English Lake District. When his mother died, the eight-year-old boy was sent to school at Hawkshead, near Esthwaite Lake, in the heart of that sparsely populated region that he and Coleridge were to transform into one of the poetic centers of England. William and his three brothers boarded in the cottage of Ann Tyson, who gave the boys simple comfort, ample affection, and freedom to roam the countryside at will. A vigorous, unruly, and sometimes moody boy, William spent his free days and occasionally “half the night” in the sports and rambles described in the first two books of *The Prelude*, “drinking in” (to use one of his favorite metaphors) the natural sights and sounds, and getting to know the cottagers, shepherds, and solitary wanderers who moved through his imagination into his later poetry. He also found time to read voraciously in the books owned by his young headmaster, William Taylor, who encouraged him in his inclination to poetry.

John Wordsworth, the poet's father, died suddenly when William was thirteen, leaving to his five children mainly the substantial sum owed him by Lord Lonsdale, whom he had served as attorney and as steward of the huge Lonsdale estate. This harsh nobleman had yet to pay the debt when he died in 1802. Wordsworth was nevertheless able in 1787 to enter St. John's College, Cambridge University, where four years later he took his degree without distinction.

During the summer vacation of his third year at Cambridge (1790), Wordsworth and his closest college friend, the Welshman Robert Jones, journeyed on foot through France and the Alps (described in *The Prelude* 6) at the time when the French were joyously celebrating the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. Upon completing his course at Cambridge, Wordsworth spent four months in London, set off on another walking tour with Robert Jones through Wales (the time of the memorable ascent of Mount Snowdon in *The Prelude* 13), and then went back alone to France to master the language and qualify as a traveling tutor.

During his year in France (November 1791 to December 1792), Wordsworth became a fervent supporter of the French Revolution—which seemed to him and many others to promise a “glorious renovation” of society—and he fell in love with Annette Vallon, the daughter of a French surgeon at Blois. The two planned to marry, despite their differences in religion and political inclinations (Annette belonged to an old Catholic family whose sympathies were Royalist). But almost immediately after their daughter, Caroline, was born, lack of money forced Wordsworth to return to England. The outbreak of war made it impossible for him to rejoin Annette and Caroline. Wordsworth's guilt over this abandonment, his divided loyalties between England and France, and his gradual disillusion with the course of the Revolution brought him—according to his account in *The Prelude* 10 and 11—to the verge of an emotional breakdown, when “sick, wearied out with contrarities,” he “yielded up moral questions in despair.” His suffering, his near-collapse, and the successful effort, after his break with his past, to reestablish “a saving intercourse with my true self,” are the experiences that underlie many of his greatest poems.

At this critical point, a friend died and left Wordsworth a sum of money just sufficient to enable him to live by his poetry. In 1795 he settled in a rent-free house at Racedown, Dorsetshire, with his beloved sister, Dorothy, who now began her long career as confidante, inspirer, and secretary. At that same time Wordsworth met Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Two years later he moved to Alfoxden House, Somerset-

shire, to be near Coleridge, who lived four miles away at Nether Stowey. Here he entered at the age of twenty-seven on the delayed springtime of his poetic career.

Even while he had been an undergraduate at Cambridge, Coleridge claimed that he had detected signs of genius in Wordsworth's rather conventional poem about his tour in the Alps, *Descriptive Sketches*, published in 1793. Now he hailed Wordsworth unreservedly as “the best poet of the age.” The two men met almost daily, talked for hours about poetry, and wrote prolifically. So close was their association that we find the same phrases occurring in poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge, as well as in the remarkable journals that Dorothy kept at the time; the two poets collaborated in some writings and freely traded thoughts and passages for others; and Coleridge even undertook to complete a few poems that Wordsworth had left unfinished. This close partnership, along with the hospitality the two households offered to another young radical writer, John Thelwall, aroused the paranoia of people in the neighborhood. Already fearful of a military invasion by France, they became convinced that Wordsworth and Coleridge were political plotters, not poets. The government sent spies to investigate, and the Wordsworths lost their lease.

Although brought to this abrupt end, that short period of collaboration resulted in one of the most important books of the era, *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems*, published anonymously in 1798. This short volume opened with Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and included three other poems by Coleridge, some lyrics in which Wordsworth celebrated the experience of nature, and a number of verse anecdotes drawn from the lives of the rural poor. (The verse forms and the subject matter of this last set of poems—which includes “Simon Lee,” “We Are Seven,” and “The Thorn”—make evident the debt, announced in the very title of *Lyrical Ballads*, that Wordsworth's and Coleridge's book owed to the folk ballads that were being transcribed and anthologized in the later eighteenth century by collectors such as Thomas Percy and Robert Burns.) The book closed with Wordsworth's great descriptive and meditative poem in blank verse, “Tintern Abbey.” This poem inaugurated what modern critics call Wordsworth's “myth of nature”: his presentation of the “growth” of his mind to maturity, a process unfolding through the interaction between the inner world of the mind and the shaping force of external Nature.

William Hazlitt said that when he heard Coleridge read some of the newly written poems of *Lyrical Ballads* aloud, “the sense of a new style and a new spirit in poetry came over me,” with something of the effect “that arises from the turning up of the fresh soil, or of the first welcome breath of spring.” The reviewers were less enthusiastic, warning that, because of their simple language and subject matter, poems such as “Simon Lee” risked “vulgarity” or silliness. (For a sampling of these reactions, see “Self-constituted judge of poesy: Reviewer vs. Poet in the Romantic Period” in the NAEL Archive.) Nevertheless *Lyrical Ballads* sold out in two years, and Wordsworth published under his own name a new edition, dated 1800, to which he added a second volume of poems. In his famous Preface to this edition, planned in close consultation with Coleridge, Wordsworth outlined a critical program that provided a retroactive rationale for the “experiments” the poems represented.

Late in 1799 William and Dorothy moved back permanently to their native lakes, settling at Grasmere in the little house later named Dove Cottage. Coleridge, following them, rented at Keswick, thirteen miles away. In 1802 Wordsworth finally came into his father's inheritance and, after an amicable settlement with Annette Vallon, married Mary Hutchinson, whom he had known since childhood. His life after that time had many sorrows: the drowning in 1805 of his favorite brother, John, a sea captain; the death in 1812 of two of his and Mary's five children; a growing rift with Coleridge, culminating in a bitter quarrel (1810) from which they were not completely reconciled for almost two decades; and, from the 1830s on, Dorothy's physical and mental illness. Over these years Wordsworth became, nonetheless, increasingly prosperous and famous. He also displayed a political and religious conservatism that disappointed readers who, like Hazlitt, had interpreted his early work as the expression of a “levelling Muse” that promoted

democratic change. In 1813 a government sinecure, in the position of stamp distributor (that is, revenue collector) for Westmorland, was bestowed on him—concrete evidence of his recognition as a national poet and of the alteration in the government's perception of his politics. Gradually, Wordsworth's residences, as he moved into more and more comfortable quarters, became standard stops for sightseers touring the Lakes. By 1843 he was poet laureate of Great Britain. He died in 1850 at the age of eighty. Only then did his executors publish his masterpiece, *The Prelude*, or *Growth of a Poet's Mind*, the autobiographical poem that he had written in two parts in 1799, expanded to its full length in 1805, and then continued to revise almost to the last decade of his long life.

Most of Wordsworth's greatest poetry had been written by 1807, when he published *Poems, in Two Volumes*. After *The Excursion* (1814) and the first collected edition of his poems (1815), although he continued to write prolifically and to work on the revisions for additional collected editions, his powers appeared to decline. The causes of that decline have been much debated. One seems to be inherent in the very nature of his writing. Wordsworth is above all the poet of the remembrance—also the reinterpretation—of things past. He frequently presents his poetry as the outgrowth of occasions on which objects or events in the present trigger a sudden renewal of feelings that he has experienced in youth, often without then realizing their import. In his prose portrait of Wordsworth for *The Spirit of the Age* William Hazlitt noticed this: for Wordsworth, he observed, there "is no image so insignificant that it has not in some mood or other found the way into his heart: no sound that does not awaken the memory of other years." But the memory of one's early emotional experience is not an inexhaustible resource for poetry, as Wordsworth recognized almost from the start of his career. In book 11 of *The 1805 Prelude* he already seems to be entertaining a premonition of future loss, in the lines that describe the recurrence of "spots of time" from his memories of childhood:

The days gone by  
Come back upon me from the dawn almost  
Of life: the hiding-places of my power  
Seem open; I approach and then they close;  
I see by glimpses now, when age comes on  
May scarcely see at all.

The simple (maybe even prosy) lines, on the perplexities of memory, on the mystery that the self poses for the self, and on the sorrows and losses brought by time, announce an imminent imaginative failure. At the same time, contrariwise, they also suggest the reason Hazlitt in the same essay would declare Wordsworth's poetry preeminent among that of the living poets: "he has communicated interest and dignity to the primal movements of the heart of man."

## FROM LYRICAL BALLADS

### Goody Blake and Harry Gill

#### A True Story

Oh! what's the matter? what's the matter?  
What is't that ails young Harry Gill?  
That evermore his teeth they chatter,  
Chatter, chatter, chatter still.  
5 Of waistcoats Harry has no lack,

Good duffle grey, and flannel fine;  
He has a blanket on his back,  
And coats enough to smother nine.

In March, December, and in July,  
10 'Tis all the same with Harry Gill;  
The neighbours tell, and tell you truly,  
His teeth they chatter, chatter still.  
At night, at morning, and at noon,  
'Tis all the same with Harry Gill;  
15 Beneath the sun, beneath the moon,  
His teeth they chatter, chatter still.

Young Harry was a lusty drover,  
And who so stout of limb as he?  
His cheeks were red as ruddy clover,  
20 His voice was like the voice of three.  
Auld Goody! Blake was old and poor,  
Ill fed she was, and thinly clad;  
And any man who pass'd her door,  
Might see how poor a hut she had,

25 All day she spun in her poor dwelling,  
And then her three hours' work at night!  
Alas! 'twas hardly worth the telling,  
It would not pay for candle-light.  
—This woman dwelt in Dorsetshire,  
30 Her hut was on a cold hill-side,  
And in that country coals are dear,  
For they come far by wind and tide.

By the same fire to boil their pottage,  
Two poor old dames, as I have known,  
35 Will often live in one small cottage,  
But she, poor woman, dwelt alone.  
'Twas well enough when summer came,  
The long, warm, lightsome summer-day,  
Then at her door the *canty*<sup>o</sup> dame  
40 Would sit, as any linnet gay.

But when the ice our streams did fetter,  
Oh! then how her old bones would shake!  
You would have said, if you had met her,  
'Twas a hard time for Goody Blake.  
45 Her evenings then were dull and dead;  
Sad case it was, as you may think,  
For very cold to go to bed,  
And then for cold not sleep a wink.

Oh joy for her! when e'er in winter  
50 The winds at night had made a rout,

1. Term of civility applied to a woman in humble life. "Auld": old.