

Wordsworth among the romantics

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Chapter 44

Wordsworth among the Romantics

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I

On 28 December 1817 William Wordsworth was invited to dinner at the painting room of the artist Benjamin Robert Haydon off Lisson Grove in Marylebone. He was in London to help Christopher Wordsworth with the winding up of the estate of their eldest brother, Richard, and was staying a short distance away on Mortimer Square. Haydon had several reasons for organising a post-Christmas dinner party. In part, he wanted to show off his new studio in which he had his latest massive work, *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem*, a painting that contained portraits of a number of historical figures as well as friends of his, including Wordsworth. But he also hoped to introduce Wordsworth to a new acquaintance, with whom he was much taken, the young poet John Keats, who also features in the painting. Alongside Keats, there were several other guests including the essayist Charles Lamb, an old friend of Wordsworth, and Tom Monkhouse, a financier who was known to the forty-seven-year-old poet through his wife, Mary. It was an all-male gathering, full of drink and gossip, and has remained ever since as the *locus classicus* of the literary anecdote for the Romantic period: 'The Immortal Dinner'. Rarely was such a remarkable gathering of British creative minds drawn together in the period, except perhaps—to borrow an idea from John F. Kennedy—when Wordsworth himself dined alone.

Haydon's account of the evening is full of the comedy of Lamb misbehaving drunkenly amid serious discussion of some literary forebears: Homer, Shakespeare, Milton and Virgil. At one memorable point, as he records it in his diary, Lamb 'in a strain of humour beyond description, abused me for putting Newton's head into my picture; "a fellow", said he, "who believed nothing unless it was as clear as the three sides of a triangle." And then he and Keats agreed he had destroyed all the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to the prismatic colours. It was impossible to resist him and we all drank "Newton's health and confusion to mathematics."'¹ The episode has a famed legacy in Keats's powerful assertion in his poem 'Lamia', written two years later, that the 'charms' of the natural world 'fly / At the mere touch of cold philosophy'; a charge, as it becomes clear, directed at the natural science of the Enlightenment:

There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:

We know her woof, her texture; she is given

In the dull catalogue of common things.

Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,

Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,

Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—

Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made

The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade. ('Lamia', II, 231-238)²

Keats may have felt that the explanations of Newtonian science undermined the wonder of the rainbow but, as Stephen Prickett has observed, Wordsworth's reaction

to the toast was rather ambiguous.³ Indeed, a letter of 1842 from Haydon to the poet recalled the earlier incident, observing that Wordsworth had sought clarification of the pair's purpose before joining in. Nevertheless, it is still easy to see Keats's own enthusiasm at the dinner as an attempt to curry favour with someone who was perceived to be out of love with the march of scientific progress. Wordsworth was keenly alive to the scientific discoveries of the time—a friend to both Humphrey Davy and Thomas Beddoes—and yet he was not instinctively scientific. Indeed, Isaiah Berlin was more or less right in stating bluntly that when 'Wordsworth said that to dissect is to murder, this is approximately what he meant'.⁴ Moreover, Berlin's assertions about the nature of Romanticism are useful as a guide to discovering the place of Wordsworth within it. His account has Romanticism as a rejection of an earlier submission to the science of facts. It is suspicious of any 'understanding' of the universe that isn't grounded in the vagaries of the individual human subject, as constructed within the fallible historical institutions of class, nation, religion and myth.

We have a quick sense of where Berlin helps us with Wordsworth and also where he is generalising about the period if we turn to a fabulous early moment in the latter's writing. It comes as he is contemplating some looming Cumbrian clouds that appear to him to be physically continuous with the vast yet indeterminate mountains over which they hang—the whole an analogue for the sublime of internal consciousness. 'The mind of man is fashioned and built up/Even as a strain of music,' he observes in the first version of *The Prelude*, written in 1799.⁵ The connection between the building abstractions of music and the growth of the mind's imaginings is common enough, music being after all a human product, but the relation of this to the

apprehension of natural phenomena that are at once firmly physical and also shifting and half-perceived, vanishing into vaporous nothingness, feels mysterious and quintessentially Romantic. And yet it is not entirely surprising to discover a similar metaphor appearing in T. S. Eliot's poem *The Dry Salvages* (1941) when he describes a waterfall, the distillation of cloud, as 'music heard so deeply/That it is not heard at all, but you are the music/While the music lasts'.⁶

The change of person is key here, unlocking the relationship between the two poems in ways that are somewhat surprising. Wordsworth's universal mind of man becomes personal, and Eliot lays down an implicit challenge, for there are presumably some among us who do not hear the music as Eliot and his ideal reader do. The essence of his claim is similar, however: the strange power of nature is such that we not only recognise it in itself as remarkable but we also recognise its capacity to make us aware of the extraordinary perceptual apparatus with which we have been gifted in the first place to enable that very act of recognition. The mind marvels not only at the things outside it that are remarkable but it also marvels at itself. This is a very Romantic phenomenon: a wondering not only at the world but also at the self—the very thing that orders that world such that we apprehend and understand it at all. What is most striking about connecting the two observations is that despite what we might expect from one of the greatest of the Modernists, a group who are taken generally to be suspicious of the potential solipsism of Romanticism, Eliot feels not less but in fact more Romantic than Wordsworth.

This encourages us surely to ask about the extent to which Wordsworth is exemplary as a Romantic. In this chapter, I shall develop the idea that Wordsworth is at once the most significant ‘Romantic’ thinker in the English tradition (one whose only rivals in terms of their influence on the thought of the period are three figures none of whom are exactly Romantics in period terms: Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe) and also someone who overwhelms Romanticism as an aesthetic and psychological movement *tout court*. It is easy to see obvious Romantic topics throughout Wordsworth’s writing such as the Gothic, the supernatural and the ballad, all of which he is at least in part responsible for developing as hallmarks of Romanticism. Yet there are aspects of Wordsworth’s writing that complicate our conception of him as a Romantic; indeed his ‘Neoclassicism’ might be said to emerge in a poem such as ‘Laodamia’ (1815). More importantly, however, Wordsworth’s highest achievements—‘Tintern Abbey’, the Immortality ‘Ode’ and *The Prelude*—investigate Romanticism’s central concerns (subjectivity, imagination, the relationship between the individual and the natural world) but they do so in profound ways that far exceed their character as mere exemplars of high Romanticism in England. While the poetry of John Clare, for instance, might be said to contribute to our understanding of Romanticism as an aesthetic movement concerned with the local and its traditions grounded in rural culture, Wordsworth expands that movement into a rare shift in human consciousness.

Nevertheless, the idea that Wordsworth was exemplary of the age in which he lived was already current within his lifetime. William Hazlitt in his portrait of the poet,

‘Mr. Wordsworth’, in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825) went so far as to say that ‘Wordsworth’s genius is a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age,’ though he followed this up with a characteristic barb: ‘Had he lived in any other period of the world, he would never have been heard of’.⁷ The qualifying comment is plainly unfair, reflecting Hazlitt’s sense of disillusion at what he felt was Wordsworth’s political apostasy, but the essential notion is one caught earlier in a famous remark of Keats. In a letter on January 10th, 1818, he wrote to Haydon:

Your friendship fo{r} me is now getting into its teens--and I feel the past. Also every day older I get--the greater is my idea of your achievements in Art: and I am convinced that there are three things to rejoice at in this Age--The Excursion Your Pictures, and Hazlitt's depth of Taste.⁸

For all that they make rather a peculiar trio in retrospect, Keats’s grouping provides a useful key to Wordsworth’s place within British Romanticism. Associated naturally with the other writers of the first generation and in particular with the ‘Lake School’, Wordsworth’s connections to Hazlitt and Haydon go some way to demonstrating the extent to which he was also part of a longer, more metropolitan and multi-disciplinary Romanticism. He had important friendships with painters other than Haydon, including notably his sometime patron Sir George Beaumont, whose painting of Pelee Castle lies behind the elegy for his brother John, ‘Elegiac Stanzas’, which is one of the most profound and moving poems in his 1807 collection. He remained keenly aware of developments in literary London through his acquaintance with figures such as Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt and Henry Crabb Robinson; and it was through the last

of these, aided by Lamb, that an association with the older William Blake was made. The two poets exhibited many similar concerns in their early poetry with its apparently simple form and deep political purpose. For all their many differences, as detailed by Heather Glen, it remains a remarkable coincidence of literary history that two collections of poetry sharing as much in common as *Lyrical Ballads* and the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789-94) should have been produced in the same decade by writers who at that point knew nothing of one another.⁹ Crabb Robinson read Wordsworth to the aging Blake, who though quaintly horrified by parts of the rather Christian *Excursion* (1814), pronounced the former ‘a pagan, but still [...] the greatest poet of the age’.¹⁰ Blake died shortly thereafter and so the two never met, but Wordsworth would live on to become, at Rydal Mount, a site of literary pilgrimage for writers of the next generation. Notably, he was visited by Ralph Waldo Emerson and, as a fundamental influence upon Henry David Thoreau, was ultimately central to the development of Romanticism in America. In short, Keats’s letter reminds us that it is wrong to imagine Wordsworth pursuing an isolated and independent poetic project or to see him merely as the most important member of a movement whose spiritual home was Grasmere.

Keats was very young when he wrote this, and no doubt star-struck by Haydon, who for all his paranoia was intimate with many of the important figures of the time, but there is enough in the expressions of sincere admiration elsewhere in his sonnets to the painter that it is reasonable to think that he is not merely flattering him. Still, beyond their lack of appeal to present taste, it is relatively difficult to see much common purpose in Haydon’s monumental canvases, slightly camp, depicting distant

historical or biblical episodes and Wordsworth's occasionally lugubrious philosophical epic, set against the backdrop of a Lake District that is at once timeless and deeply affected by contemporary concerns. Wordsworth himself, however, plainly saw them both embarked on a similarly elevated aesthetic enterprise. 'High is our calling, Friend!—Creative Art', he declared to Haydon in an 1815 sonnet that goes on speak of the artist's 'pencil pregnant with ethereal hues'.¹¹ Haydon was certainly at his best as a draughtsman, as is clear from a poignant pencil study of Wordsworth for *Christ's Entry* that is held at Dove Cottage. In the sonnet, however, Wordsworth exhorts Haydon not to allow his spirit to sink in the face of the adverse criticism, something he had of course faced himself in the wake of the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, and rather than bending to fashion to hold fast to his ambition to reinvigorate historical painting. The three figures of Keats's letter might therefore be brought together as aesthetic outsiders, though ironically in Wordsworth's case only retrospectively. The idea that the artist should stand outside the conventions of society as a critic of the establishment, and indeed as a radical figure, is quintessential to Romanticism but Wordsworth was by this time becoming part of the established literary world and doctrinally rather conservative. It is an idea that had been fostered in William Hazlitt, a friend of Haydon and an old acquaintance of the poet, during the time he spent with the Wordsworth circle in the late 1790s. Hazlitt's account of the shifting self, an unstable, changing entity over time that is held together only by the memory of transformational moments of imaginative intensity in youth, owes a great deal to the thoughts that Wordsworth was working out as he began the project that would lead eventually to *The Prelude* with its spots of time. In his *Letter to William Gifford* (1819), a startling piece of invective, Hazlitt would later say that this early

philosophical discovery, which underpinned his thoughts on natural disinterestedness and the innate benevolence of mankind, had coloured all his later thought, and indeed he remained committed to maintaining the principles of those early times, often by highlighting the distance that Wordsworth and Coleridge had moved away from them.

II

Hazlitt should have been present at 'The Immortal Dinner' but he was excluded at the last moment after having upset Wordsworth with his review of *The Excursion*.

Modern taste has been kinder to Hazlitt's critique than it has been to the poem. Keats presumably had it in mind when he remarked in a letter to Richard Woodhouse of

October 27th, 1818 that for all his genius Wordsworth was also the poet of the 'wordsworthian egotistical sublime'.¹² It is evidence of Keats's critical brilliance that

he caught this in a lengthy and rather unapproachable narrative poem that is pretty characteristic of the age and yet nothing like as egotistical and hence 'Romantic', in

the modern sense, as Wordsworth's most autobiographical work, *The Prelude*. This is

not a trivial point. In as much as Wordsworth helps us to understand the historical movement of Romanticism, he also transcends it considerably. Critics are not willing

to speak about an age of Wordsworth in the way that they might of Dryden, Johnson or Goethe, and yet he is rather clearly the most considerable figure of the period.

Harold Bloom has described Wordsworth, alongside Petrarch, as one of the two transformational poets of Western literature.¹³ One created the Renaissance love lyric,

Bloom contends, while the other was the original poet of interiority—the fundamental

topos of modern poetry. Yet at times Wordsworth's writing is consistent with the norms of the Romantic period but is not terribly 'Romantic'. On other occasions by contrast, it is astonishingly unusual but highly significant to the critical construction that is 'Romanticism'.

'Character of the Happy Warrior' and the 'Ode to Duty', both from his *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807), have formal elements that link them to the classical conventions of canonical eighteenth-century poetry while also displaying some of the slightly stolid values that might be more easily associated with Victorianism. It is relatively straightforward to situate them on a literary historical bridge between the two periods but they are not obvious guides to Wordsworth's place within Romanticism. 'My Heart Leaps up', from the same collection meanwhile, a poem whose implicit disavowal of the Newtonian rainbow Keats must surely have recalled when he joined in Lamb's toast, is fragmentary and apparently torn off from a larger thought. Superficially trivial, its implications run to the very heart of Romanticism precisely for these reasons. The thought at the heart of the poem, that the adult must hold onto a childlike sensibility, is one formed when an apparently contained act of imagination—one demonstrated and yet half-constrained by the deliberate syntax and grammar of the poem's two sentences—is confronted by a rainbow, the extraordinary strangeness of natural beauty at its most acute. It seems at first to be simple and carefully controlled within the almost childish form of its nine short lines. But as the poem comes to rest on its final words, 'natural piety', the reader is forced to recognize the necessity for spiritualism in an age of reason, or at least the need for a power that will restore the link between the seeming endlessness of human life that is always

latent within the inexorable power of consciousness and a knowledge of the inescapable cycle of too rapid growth and too imminent death:

My heart leaps up when I behold

A Rainbow in the sky:

So was it when my life began;

So is it now I am a Man;

So be it when I shall grow old,

Or let me die!

The Child is Father of the Man;

And I could wish my days to be

Bound each to each by natural piety.¹⁴

It is at the very point that we recognize the charm of the short poem's discretion that it explodes to threaten us with the reminder of the inevitable loss of consciousness that awaits us all, and it is for this exact reason that the final word 'piety' has such power. It is a quintessential Romantic question that remains: of course we must be pious to something but, in a world of at best unconventional religion, where is the God that we might venerate beyond the very unforgiving Nature that will inevitably take life from us and leave us, without consciousness, as nothing?

These are grim thoughts and it is as well not to allow them to become dominant, not least because Wordsworth is first and foremost a poet who celebrates the potentially emancipatory qualities of intense moments of private consciousness, when they free

us both from the slavery of social strictures and also from the binds of the reflective mind's awareness of its own temporality. It is at such moments that his poetry makes us aware of a connection to something more awesome than ourselves, whatever that may truly be. In the passage that I mentioned earlier from the two-book *Prelude* (1799), Wordsworth describes his stealing of a boat and rowing it beneath a crag that anthropomorphizes into a moral presence, which is, in a powerful phrase from 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', a 'silent monitor' (l. 115) for the morality of his behaviour:

She was an elfin pinnacle; twenty times
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my Boat
Went heaving through the water, like a swan,
When, from behind that rocky steep, till then
The bound of the horizon, a huge Cliff,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head: I struck, and struck again,
And, growing still in stature, the huge cliff
Rose up between me and the stars, and still
With measured motion, like a living thing,
Strode after me. (*Prelude*, 1799, I, ll. 103-114)¹⁵

There is clearly a religious power in his conception of the natural world here but the word 'thing' taxes us if we want to give it ecclesiastical form. Hazlitt, in his superb essay 'My First Acquaintance With Poets' (published in Leigh Hunt's extraordinary

periodical *The Liberal* in 1823), recalled a conversation with Coleridge in 1798 in which the latter complained of a ‘matter-of-factness’ in Wordsworth’s poetry—an idea upon which he would later build in his own criticisms of Wordsworth in the second volume of *Biographia Literaria* (1817)—and it is easy to see something of this in the use of the word.¹⁶ The natural world, at least in its archetypal Romantic guise, isn’t obviously made of ‘things’—of dull objects of fact that have an almost machine-like capacity to come after one. It is as though Wordsworth has absorbed the language of industry and turned it back upon itself. The young poet—here swan-like—is a thing of nature at odds with its very essence. But the word also points to something else, which is the thought that for all its superficial beauty, the natural world is made fundamentally from brute matter, its surface lying like an enchanted covering on that more elemental substance. Wordsworth often has, as Peter Swaab once observed, ‘fears about the evanescence of the supernatural both in himself and in the perceived world’, fears that are of a piece with wider anxieties in the period that the great hope for aesthetic experience—that it may provide redemption from a general disenchantment with the immanent by transforming it into the transcendent—is held in vain.¹⁷ An interesting thing about this passage, however, is not that it speaks of the evanescence of the supernatural but rather of the way in which two versions of the supernatural appear to compete with one another: one is the rather jejune realm of fairyland in which the boy rows forward on his funny little boat, the ‘elfin pinnacle’; the other is the more awesome, intuited but unseen power of Nature. The passage might be said to contain two forms of wonder that are very characteristic of Romantic thought. First, there is a childlike marveling at the unfamiliar, which is attached to the suspicious logic of the fairytale. Then there is a deeper, potent and philosophical

wonder that suggests a fundamental moral responsibility for an external world whose essence cannot be fully grasped.

It is significant that the word 'elfin' has slightly suspicious connotations too when it appears in the poetry of Keats. His *Belle Dame sans Merci* whisks the knight off to 'her elfin grot' (l. 29) in that ballad, with terribly emasculating consequences. In his slightly earlier 'Eve of St Agnes,' meanwhile, it is 'an elfin storm from faery land' (l. 343) that provides the immediate cover for the lovers to escape into the night, though the suggestion at the end of the poem is that tricked by illusion it is not in fact an escape for Madeline at all but rather a fall from grace. More than in Wordsworth, elves in Keats's poetry are 'deceiving' ('Ode to a Nightingale', l. 74), 'meddling' ('On Fame (II), l. 7'), 'fog-born' (*Endymion*, II, l. 277) and purveyors of trickery ('Lamia', I, l. 55; 147), but the sense of their belonging to a world of the marvelous disobedient to the logic of the ordinary but intuited nevertheless through acts of imagination—such as the elves who control the windows of the Claude Lorrain-inspired Enchanted Castle that Keats imagines in the dream he relates in 'To J. H. Reynolds Esq.' (l. 50)—is similar. It is useless, of course, to talk of the earlier passage exerting an influence upon later Romantic writers since it remained unpublished during Wordsworth's lifetime but the connection remains suggestive. William Empson wrote perceptively half a century ago that 'readers tend to make too much of one author influencing another, whereas at the time Romantic sentiment was an obvious force, pervading Western European society, and often giving people decisive instructions though they could not have told us why.'¹⁸ While we should guard against bundling up our critical conception of Wordsworth's achievement within a

general definition of Romanticism for some of the reasons suggested already, his influence on the poets of the second generation was immeasurable. In particular, the extraordinary qualities of Keats's late great odes—a balance of exquisite refinement and economy of form alongside poised philosophical reflection—draw deeply upon Wordsworth's own extraordinary achievements both in that genre and beyond.

In Haydon's copy of *The Excursion*, now at Cornell University, he dolefully marked a particularly nostalgic passage from Book Four with the annotation, 'Poor Keats used always to prefer this passage to all others':

Once more to the distant Ages of the world
Let us revert, and place before our thoughts
The face which rural Solitude might wear
To the unenlightened Swains of pagan Greece. (*Excursion*, IV, ll. 843-846)¹⁹

The imagined construction of ancient Greece as an enchanted pastoral ideal in which herdsmen lived in unselfconscious bliss is a commonplace from neoclassicism but in the wake of early industrialization it returns with renewed force in British and European Romanticism. We can trace similar thoughts in the work of Shelley and Byron as well as throughout the poetry of Keats, culminating in the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. Within that ideal, mankind is at one with a similarly unselfconscious Nature whose creatures suffer neither from an awareness of their ultimate death nor from an apprehension of the wider degeneration of the fabric of society. It is the divorce from Nature however and the arrival of self-consciousness, bringing with it an acute

apprehension of mortality, that drives Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' forward, as is clear from the third stanza:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
 What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
 Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
 Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
 And leaden-eyed despairs;
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
 Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow. ('Ode to a Nightingale',
ll. 21-30)²⁰

John Barnard has remarked that the reading of a slightly earlier passage from Book IV of *The Excursion* lies discreetly behind these lines.²¹ It is a stunningly poignant moment, one that seems almost to stand alone, and upon which John Ruskin dwelt at some length in *Fors Clavigera* (Letter V, May 1871).²² It comes at the close of one long verse paragraph and the beginning of the next:

And, doubtless, sometimes, when the hair was shed
Upon the flowing stream, a thought arose
Of Life continuous, Being unimpaired;

That hath been, is, and where it was and is
There shall be,—seen, and heard, and felt, and known,
And recognized,—existence unexposed
To the blind walk of mortal accident;
From diminution safe and weakening age;
While Man grows old, and dwindles, and decays;
And countless generations of Mankind
Depart; and leave no vestige where thy trod.

We live by admiration, hope, and love;
And even as these are well and wisely fixed,
In dignity of being we ascend. (*Excursion*, IV, ll. 753-766)

The cadence of the ninth line quoted here is clearly recalled in the sixth of Keats's stanza but there is an added gloom in the latter as it deals with death in youth, and this jars with the rhythm of Keats's lines, which is lighter and fleet of foot than the regularity of Wordsworth's, reminding us, lest we forget, of the speed with which the time of life trips by. Keats certainly knew this passage, with its rather obvious allusion to the faith, hope and charity of 1 Corinthians 13.13, and what is significant surely is that while the two feel similar in ethos, they betray striking differences of philosophical emphasis. If there is redemption from death in Keats's poem then it comes in two ways. First is the sense that aesthetic experience is an end in itself, something that makes us aware of the very complexity of the perceptual apparatus with which we have been temporarily gifted and that encourages us to pause and ask

questions about the structure of a conscious mind that is potent and rewarding but whose workings are evasive, being at once receptive and creative. Then, supplementary to this but in its way no less significant, there is a feeling of selflessness that we derive from aesthetic experience as it forces upon us an awareness that ours is not the first such experience. The hearing of the song of the nightingale, the reading of Homer, the seeing of the Elgin Marbles are all experiences that press upon us a sense of being human within a tradition of other reactions to the world around us, both to those cultural things that are the product of the ways in which the world has been received and modified by human consciousness and those that are simply the stuff of nature, of which we too are momentarily a part. The first of these ideas of redemption is certainly one that Keats learns from Wordsworth but the second, if we are to take his comment about Wordsworth's egotism seriously, is one that he makes for himself.

Wordsworth is at his most high-minded in these lines from *The Excursion* and they remind us perhaps of the sonnet to Haydon, mentioned earlier. That he took the moral purpose of his poetry very seriously indeed is apparent from his earliest comments upon it in prose. For all that they are embedded deeply within what Byron, in the dedication to *Don Juan* (1819), called 'a rather long "Excursion"' (l. 25), the three emotions highlighted here (admiration, hope and love) run to the heart of what he had placed at the centre of his ethical project from the start. Romanticism as a cast of mind may feel rather pessimistic in its account of humanity if we highlight its obsession with madness, the irrational and the extremes of emotion that follow from the vagaries of life. Wordsworth is, however, in essence an optimist determined to

hold onto the idea that human beings are naturally benevolent and well disposed towards one another. From this follows his faith in hope and love as cornerstones of the life well lived that may save us from the fear of death. The third emotion, admiration, is more difficult to define but it grows, I think, out of the Enlightenment's desire to explain the world in rational, scientific terms and yet combines with this a form of the penetrating wonder that I described earlier—a fascination with and care for a world around us that necessarily eludes understanding. It is for this reason that while Wordsworth may have been suspicious of the desiccating order of Newton's arid explanations of natural beauty, he could not join Keats immediately at 'The Immortal Dinner' in dismissing their value.

III

In March 1824, Wordsworth was once again at Haydon's for another literary gathering. Present on this occasion was William Bewick, the painter, who also features in *Christ's Entry*, and Ugo Foscolo, the Italian poet and author of *Dei sepolcri*. Foscolo, a radical nationalist and near contemporary of Wordsworth, had left Milan when the fall of Napoleon brought about the return of the Austrians, and he was to live out the remainder of his life in London, contributing articles to the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly* reviews and enjoying a measure of somewhat disorganized literary celebrity. Bewick's spirited account of the party begins with Foscolo taking an uncertain cue from a chance remark of Dorothy Wordsworth to recite one of his sonnets in the Italian and goes on to describe an altercation between the two poets that

ended with Foscolo brandishing his fist in Wordsworth's face and shouting at him in broken English. The origins of their disagreement lay in their divergent views on the principles of human action. Discussion had turned to the subject of disinterestedness and Wordsworth was determined to promote the many 'acts of noble and disinterested beneficence in the history of man'.²³ Foscolo, by contrast, was adamant that any act that appears superficially to be disinterested must conceal an underlying motive that lies in the expectation of reward. For him, the individual self and self-interests stand at the heart of all action, and his list of motives makes for a rather bleak account of humanity: 'in the first instance, [...] expectancy of recompense; and in the second place, of self-gratification, vanity, pride, ambition, or the innumerable small selfish passions in the breast of man'.²⁴

Foscolo does not emerge well from Bewick's narrative and he even appears somewhat unbalanced in his misanthropy. In fact, the poets probably shared more in common than is suggested by the ferocity of their disagreement. Foscolo's view that society constrained the individual and was necessarily inimical to self-expression sounds Byronic and indeed the two writers were often compared to one another. It is worth remembering, however, that Wordsworth, the supreme poet of the self, believed that natural disinterestedness was the condition of man in an undegenerate state. We need only recall his account of London to be reminded of the extent to which he felt that contemporary society reduced individuals to an indistinguishable army of slaves:

The slaves unrespited of low pursuits,
Living amid the same perpetual flow

Of trivial objects, melted and reduced

To one identity, by differences

That have no law, no meaning, and no end; (*Prelude*, 1805, VII, ll. 700-704).²⁵

The youthful belief that society was in need of radical reform that would free individual subjects explains the enthusiasm with which Wordsworth, committed to the ideas of Rousseau, greeted the French Revolution, and it also explains the sense of dejection that he felt after the Great Terror.

Indeed, the connection to Rousseau is intriguing, not least because Wordsworth embraced Rousseau's chief antagonist, Edmund Burke, when he came to revise *The Prelude* (1850), adding a celebration of the great orator 'old, but vigorous in age' standing 'like an oak whose stag-horn branches start / Out of its leafy brow' to his description of London in Book VII (ll. 519-20).²⁶ Hazlitt was the first to draw out a comparison between the Wordsworth and Rousseau, noting that for all his significance as a political reformer who had 'overturned established systems' Rousseau's only true subject was himself. Rousseau owed his power, Hazlitt observed, 'to the tyranny which his feelings [...] exercised over himself' and the essay goes on to make a striking claim:

The writer who most nearly resembles [Rousseau] in our own times is the author of the *Lyrical Ballads*. We see no other difference between them, than that the one wrote in prose and the other in poetry. [...] Rousseau, in a word, interests you in certain objects by interesting you in himself: Mr. Wordsworth

would persuade you that the most interesting objects are interesting in themselves, because he is interested in them ('On the Character of Rousseau', *The Round Table*, 1814).²⁷

This is rather ungenerous and suggests that for all Wordsworth's ostensible belief in the natural benevolence of man as well as his stated objective in writing in the first place—to produce 'a class of Poetry [...] well adapted to interest mankind permanently'—his only true interest is himself (1800, Preface).²⁸ Nevertheless, the sense of a connection between the two writers is powerful, as Thomas McFarland has argued, not least because although it cannot be proved with certainty that Wordsworth knew Rousseau's *Confessions*, that work can be read very persuasively as a model for *The Prelude*.²⁹

Wordsworth never shared Coleridge's obsessive interest in contemporary European literature but he was not ignorant of it. In a slightly comical encounter, he met Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock with Coleridge in the autumn of 1798, when the old classical poet praised Gottfried August Bürger, whose ballad *Lenora* was popular at the time in Britain, at the expense of Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, both of whose works he knew. Wordsworth's play *The Borderers* is one of many from the 1790s to display the influence of Schiller's first drama, *Die Räuber*, and there is plenty of evidence that he was familiar with a lot of other German writing of the time. In the preface to 1800, Wordsworth refers famously to the 'sickly and stupid German Tragedies' that were currently in fashion and he has in mind works by authors such as August von Kotzebue, whose play *Lovers' Vows* is central to Jane Austen's *Mansfield*

Park.³⁰ Elsewhere, in his 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface', for example, he displays a more measured knowledge of German literature, and indeed Goethe's *Der Wanderer*, published in a translation by William Taylor in August 1798 but known earlier by Wordsworth, has often been seen as a source for *The Ruined Cottage*.³¹ From a philosophical standpoint, meanwhile, connections between Wordsworth's conception of the self, and indeed the role within this of the imagination in shaping and ordering experience, and German Idealism are intriguing. Coleridge and Wordsworth remained close during the period when the former was immersed in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and it is plausible that some of the central ideas were passed to Wordsworth.

Certainly, Coleridge quickly decided that it was in fact to be Wordsworth who would write the great philosophical poem that he had himself hoped to produce, and one of his own most brilliant poems is an address to Wordsworth composed after hearing *The Prelude* recited for the first time. Coleridge immediately recognized the philosophical depth of the work:

Into my heart have I received the Lay
More than historic, that prophetic Lay
Wherein (high theme by thee first sung aright)
Of the foundations and the building up
Of the Human Spirit, thou hast dared to tell
What may be told, to th' understanding mind
Revealable; and what within the mind

By vital Breathings, like the secret soul
Of vernal growth, oft quickens in the Heart
Thoughts too deep for words! ('To a Gentleman, Composed on the night after
his recitation of a Poem on the Growth of an Individual Mind', ll. 2-11)³²

Coleridge's influence upon Wordsworth is more profound than that of any other writer in the period and the two were inevitably associated with one another in the minds of their contemporaries even after the serious split between them in the autumn of 1810. Leigh Hunt's early satire 'The Feast of the Poets' (first published in 1811 but greatly expanded in 1814), for example, imagines the two poets being rejected from the table of Apollo:

But Wordsworth can scarcely yet manage to speak;
And Coleridge, they say, is excessively weak;
Indeed he has fits of the painfulest kind:
He stares at himself and his friends, till he's blind;
Then describes his own legs, and claps a long stilt on;
And this he calls lect'ring on 'Shakspeare and Milton' ('The Feast of the
Poets', 1811, ll. 243-248).³³

The image of Coleridge blind drunk is rather unfortunate since it was a rude remark that Wordsworth was supposed to have made about Coleridge's habitual state that had led to the rift in the first place.

In happier times, during the late summer of 1803, Wordsworth had undertaken a tour of Scotland with Coleridge and Dorothy where he met Walter Scott, who was to remain a close associate over many years. In his journal entry for 21 March 1819, George Ticknor recalled the praise with which Wordsworth spoke of Scott's works when he visited him in 1818 and one of Wordsworth's finest late poems is 'Yarrow Revisited' (comp. 1831, pub. 1836) in which he recalls a day spent with Scott in the early autumn of 1831, immediately before the latter departed on a cure for Italy.³⁴ Scott died the following September and there is a moving entry in the Fenwick Notes in which Wordsworth recalls seeing him in a drastically reduced state of health. The poem is valedictory not only of Scott himself but also of the life of writing, ending with the kind of thought that feels very much like a passing of the torch to the next generation:

Flow on for ever, Yarrow Stream!

Fulfil thy pensive duty,

Well pleased that future Bards should chant

For simple hearts thy beauty,

To dream-light dear while yet unseen,

Dear to the common sunshine,

And dearer still, as now I feel,

To memory's shadowy moonshine! ('Yarrow Revisited', ll. 105-112)³⁵

The irony of this is, of course, that most of the next generation were already dead themselves. A poem of 1835, written immediately after hearing of the death of

another Scottish poet, James Hogg, includes a roll call of other recently departed writers, including Scott, Coleridge, Lamb, George Crabbe, with whom he recalls walking on Hampstead Heath and, somewhat surprisingly, Felicia Hemans, ‘who, ere her summer faded, / Has sunk into a breathless sleep’ (‘Extempore Effusion Upon the Death of James Hogg’, ll. 39-40).³⁶

The tour of Scotland provided material for many of Wordsworth’s finest poems in the 1807 volumes, though significantly not ‘The Solitary Reaper’, which grew out of an episode described by Thomas Wilkinson. In particular, it established for Wordsworth the extent of his debt to Robert Burns, who is the subject of a number of poems and also of an important prose work, *A Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns* (1816). In one of Wordsworth’s very greatest poems, ‘Resolution and Independence’, Burns is imagined alongside Thomas Chatterton a little idealistically as a farmer-poet at his plough, the two taken together as models for Wordsworth’s Romanticism with its celebration of youth and awareness of the extent to which the extremes of passion can overthrow cold rationalism with devastating effect:

I thought of Chatterton, the marvellous Boy,
The sleepless Soul that perished in its pride;
Of Him who walked in glory and in joy
Behind his plough, upon the mountain-side:
By our own spirits are we deified;
We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;

But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness. ('Resolution and Independence' ll. 43-49)³⁷

The stanza stands as a rejoinder to the ephemeral appeals of self-obsession and goes some way to refuting Hazlitt's claim in *The Round Table* (1814) that Wordsworth was, alongside Rousseau and Cellini, one of the three greatest egotists in human history. To focus attention on the self, it suggests, is only provisionally to deify oneself; the ultimate result is solipsism and sadness.

A poem that expands upon this idea to brilliant effect is Shelley's masterpiece, *Julian and Maddalo*, which is his most Wordsworthian work and which speaks of the solitary suffering of the poet's art: "Most wretched men / Are cradled into poetry by wrong / They learn in suffering what they teach in song" (*Julian and Maddalo*, ll. 544-546).³⁸ It sets up a rivalry between two figures whose originals are Shelley himself as Julian, the enlightened optimist committed to the ideals of the universal benevolence of man, and Byron as Maddalo, the speaker of these lines and a darkly pessimistic Romantic, convinced only of the alluring irrationality of human self-interest. Building upon his earlier poem, 'Mont Blanc', which has suggestive links to 'Tintern Abbey', *Julian and Maddalo* contains an account of the expanse of the human mind as analogous to the natural world at its most sublime:

I love all waste

And solitary places; where we taste

The pleasure of believing what we see

Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be (*Julian and Maddalo*, ll. 14-17).³⁹

In this case, Shelley is invoking the Lido at Venice though it could as easily be the Lake District or indeed the Alps, which are described in the most Wordsworthian poem by any of the second generation writers, Canto III of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, a poem which was unwillingly inspired, if we are to believe Byron, by Shelley's filling his head with Wordsworth during the summer of 1816 as he was composing it. Certainly, it is true that as a very young man, Byron had been critical of Wordsworth's 1807 volumes in a review for *Monthly Literary Recreations* and that at both ends of his poetic career in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809) and *Don Juan* he satirized what he evidently took to be an excessive high-mindedness in Wordsworth. Nevertheless, the influence of 'Tintern Abbey' and parts of the recently published *Excursion* is so palpable in Canto III, when Byron describes escape from human society into the unspoiled Alps, that it led Thomas Medwin—thinking of the lines, 'I live not in myself, but I become / Portion of that around me;—and to me / High mountains are a feeling!' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto III, ll. 680-682)—to remark that some of the stanzas 'smell strongly of the Lakes.'⁴⁰ Most interesting, however, is not presence of the sublime in the poem, for which Shelley's presence in Switzerland must to some extent account, but rather the description of creative consciousness as being an awareness of another self at variance from that of the writer, an idea that Wordsworth captures in Book II of the 1805 *Prelude* when he describes himself as being aware of 'Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself / And of some other being' (II, ll.32f). In one of the most arresting passages of Romantic poetry,

Byron, who could not of course have known *The Prelude*, appears to mirror

Wordsworth's haunting thought as he writes:

'Tis to create, and in creating live
A being more intense, that we endow
With form our fancy, gaining as we give
The life we image, even as I do now.
What am I? Nothing: but not so art thou,
Soul of my thought! with whom I traverse earth,
Invisible but gazing, as I glow
Mix'd with the spirit, blended with thy birth,
And feeling still with thee in my crush'd feelings' dearth. (*Childe Harold's
Pilgrimage*, Canto III, ll. 46-54)⁴¹

¹ Eric George, *The Life and Death of Benjamin Robert Haydon: Historical Painter, 1786-1846* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1967, pp. 115-116.

² John Keats, *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. by Jack Stillinger (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 1978, pp. 472-473.

³ Stephen Prickett, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Poetry of Growth*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 10.

⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 139.

⁵ Prelude 1799 *

⁶ T. S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages*, (London: Faber, 1941), p. 15.

⁷ Hazlitt, XI, p. 86.

⁸ John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press), 1958, I, p. 203.

⁹ Heather Glen, *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's Songs and Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

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- ¹⁰ Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake Studies: Essays on his Life and Work* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 103.
- ¹¹ Haydon sonnet *
- ¹² *Letters of John Keats*, I, p. 387.
- ¹³ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (London, Picador, 1995), p. 239.
- ¹⁴ My Heart *
- ¹⁵ Prelude 1799 *
- ¹⁶ Hazlitt, XVII, p. 117 and *BL*, II, p. 129.
- ¹⁷ Peter Swaab, 'Vanishings,' *The London Review of Books*, 11. 8 (1989), pp. 18-19, (p. 18).
- ¹⁸ William Empson, *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by John Haffenden (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987), p. 323.
- ¹⁹ See note in *21st-Century Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 780 and Excursion *
- ²⁰ *Poems of John Keats*, 370.
- ²¹ See note 26 in John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by John Barnard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 679.
- ²² John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn in 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903-12), XXVII, p. 156. See also the reference to the same passage of *The Excursion* in 'Studies in the "Discourses" of Sir Joshua Reynolds' at XXII, p. 505.
- ²³ E. R. Vincent, *Ugo Foscolo: An Italian in Regency London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 17.
- ²⁴ *Ugo Foscolo*, 18
- ²⁵ Prelude 1805 *
- ²⁶ Prelude 1850, *
- ²⁷ Hazlitt, IV, pp. 89; 92.
- ²⁸ *PrW*, I, p.120.
- ²⁹ Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Heritage of Rousseau* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1995, pp. 68-70. On Wordsworth's reading of Rousseau, see *WR*, 1770-1799, pp. 119-20; 181-185.
- ³⁰ *PrW*, I, p. 128.
- ³¹ See, for example, Quentin Bailey, "'Dangerous and Suspicious Trades": Wordsworth's Pedlar and the Board of Police Revenue,' *Romanticism*, 31 (2007), pp. 244-56, (p. 244).
- ³² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson and Raimonda Modiano (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 200.
- ³³ Leigh Hunt, *The Reflector, a quarterly magazine on subjects of philosophy, politics and the liberal arts* (London: John Hunt, 1811), II, p. 321.
- ³⁴ George Ticknor, *Life, Letters and Journal of George Ticknor*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1876), p. 278.
- ³⁵ Yarrow Revisited *
- ³⁶ Hogg *
- ³⁷ Resolution and Independence *

³⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley: Volume II, 1817-1819*, ed. by Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews (Harlow: Pearson, 2000), p. 691.

³⁹ *The Poems of Shelley*, p. 664.

⁴⁰ Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. by E. J. Lovell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 194 and George Gordon, Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works, Volume II: Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 103.

⁴¹ *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, p. 78.