# William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

William Wordsworth visited France in 1791 during the height of the revolutionary fervour and fathered a child called Caroline with a French woman called Annette Vallon. In later life he supported both of them but married Mary Hutchinson, a childhood friend, in 1802—following a short visit to France to settling matters with Mlle Vallon.

In a poem of 1805 he wrote of the earlier period in France: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, Butto be young was very heaven!" Unspoken, though implicit, in those verses is the idea that the substitution of internecine revolutionary violence for the pacific idealism of "milder" minds celebrated in the poem brought an end to his admiration for the French utopia.

Wordsworth's formal education was that of a upper-middle class young man, being the son of a lawyer who served as estates manager to a English lord (Earl of Lonsdale). He proceeded from Grammar School to Cambridge University where he took an Arts degree.

As a child he was encourage to read and memorise English poetry by his father, the owner of a fine library. In one way, however, his childhood was exceptional for a child of his class: living in the Lake District (in the county of Cumberland), he developed an intense feeling of love and awe for Nature, which was to become a mystical power for the Romantics—often replacing the God of Christianity, who did not fare well in this period.

He also developed a keen sense of the dignity of the ordinary people whom he encountered in that landscape and whose attitude of mind inspired in him an admiration of their resilience and their good natured acceptance of fate.

In this way he became the first major English poet to turn the "real language of men" and their actual experience into a subject of poetry — although others such as Thomas Gray had made poems *about* the many "roses" and "dumb Miltons" who were "born to live "unseen" in rural landscapes.

Indeed, Gray and others such as William Blake and John Clare, though writing in the 18$^{th}$ century, often called the "pre-Romantics" in view of their taste for common sentiments and their sympathy with ordinary people.

Together with his close friend and literary collaborator Samuel Taylor Coleridge—whom he met in 1795—and accompanied by his own sister Dorothy (a diarist), Wordsworth settled in Dove Cottage in the Lake District parish of Grasmere in Autumn 1799, having moved from Coleridge's neighbourhood in Nether Stowey (Somerset).

In Dove Cottage, working closely with Robert Southey—the third of the so-called "Lake Poets"—heand Coleridge published their poems as a collection called *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) which would become the foundation stone of the English Romantic Movement.

The second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, issued in 1800, contains a Preface in which Wordsworth set out the linguistic and aesthetic principles of the new poetical movement while disowning any pretension to a theory of poetry—which he knows to be too large a subject.

In that Preface, he identified the source of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [which] takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility", and further stipulated that the idiom should be "the real language of real men in a state of vivid sensation", being "fitt[ed] to metrical arrangement".

He also expressed his dislike for conventional poetic diction and cast doubt on the widely-accepted distinction between poetry and prose as forms of language and expression since both, in a practicalview, used descriptive terms and rhythm in order to convey meanings and feelings.

It is clear from his manner of discussing poetry, moreover, that he regards it as the higher and more essential form of thought since it is the imagination of the poet which first conceives of the ideas by which the scientist gives us a knowledge of the physical world and its laws—the chief of these being the very idea of a rational universe.

It can readily be seen that Wordsworth's thinking entails a considerable degree of pantheism—a modeof thought and feeling which would inform much of the work of future generations.

In a Pantheist perspective, the world of culture is entirely immanent in us and rhymes with the

feelings which are instilled in us by Nature. This stands in stark opposition to the idea of culture as something instilled by preachers and by teachers, or priests and philosophers, which prevailed in the 18th century.

In this regard, the Romantic movement displayed a constant tendency towards Agnosticism and Atheism from the outset, with a corresponding hostility to the doctrines and dogmas of formal religion, with its cathecism, its 'Institutions', and its precepts. Similarly, the Romantic Movement bestows value on the idea of the "noble savage"—an indigenous and semi-naked type who has not been corrupted by "civilisation".

Wordsworth's inversion of the usual hierarchy of Reason and Imagination which prevailed during theEnlightenment—with Reason in the dominant position and Imagination occupying a place alongside mere Fancy—thus privileged ordinary experience, humble people, and chiefly the poet who could capture in realistic words and images the quality of lived experience. .

While the actual poems in *Lyrical Ballads* are about childhood, death, grief, nature and the art of poetry under its influence, the radical impact of the collection had to do with its creation of a new

taste in literature based on democratic and universal feelings rather that the 'heroic' modes which haddominated the previous century.

In this sense, Wordsworth and Coleridge's works—though very different—where the English answerto the French Revolution, an answer which broadly celebrated democratic impulses but which saw noneed to change the social and political institutions of the day.

Indeed, Wordsworth himself became a celebrated conservative who adhered increasingly to the Church of England and became the epitome of respectability when he was appointed Poet Laureate in 1843. He died of pleurisy in 1850 and was buried in Grasmere, where his gravestone is still to be found.

Addendum: the following sonnet written by James Kenneth Stephen (1859-92) illustrates a later generation's facetious attitude towards the elderly William Wordsworth.

TWO voices are there: one is of the deep;
It learns the storm-cloud's thunderous melody,
Now roars, now murmurs with the changing sea,
Now bird-like pipes, now closes soft in sleep:
And one is of an old half-witted sheep
Which bleats articulate monotony,
And indicates that two and one are three,
That grass is green, lakes damp, and mountains steep:
And, Wordsworth, both are thine: at certain times,
Forth from the heart of thy melodious rhymes
The form and pressure of high thoughts will burst:
At other times—good Lord! I'd rather be
Quite unacquainted with the A. B. C.
Than write such hopeless rubbish as thy worst.

In 1806 Wordsworth had written:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. *Great God! I'd rather be*
*A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;*
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.