# THE ROMANTIC POETS

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### CHAPTER II: WORDSWORTH AND COLERIDGE

#### 1. The Young Wordsworth

The scientific and philosophical revolution of the seventeenth century bore its fruit in the eighteenth. Its most obvious result was a general sense of reassuring certainty, a sense that many dark corners had been thoroughly swept and illuminated by clear daylight. Newton had laid bare the nature of the physical world, Locke that of the human mind, and henceforth, though there might be many details to fill in, it was felt that the general scheme of things was pretty well understood. Understood in much the same way as the working of a machine could be understood; Newton's physics was essentially mechanistic in outlook, and later writers such as Hartley developed from Locke's premises a mechanistic psychology to match. In philosophical and even in religious discussion mechanical imagery was common. A favourite simile for the universe was "this great machine", and Pope observed with gratification that a machine which worked so satisfactorily could not be without a plan. This mechanistic tendency was not necessarily irreligious—where there was a plan there must be a planner, and writers like Paley who endeavoured to prove the existence of God from the evidence of the visible creation commonly began with the simile of a watch. If you found one lying on the ground you might not understand its purpose, but you would certainly, as you came to examine it, be obliged to acknowledge in it the evidences of conscious design; and from there you would be led inevitably to the hypothesis of a designer. So it was with the natural world. The more you studied it the more exquisitely it appeared to be contrived, and the more certainly you were led to a reverence and admiration for its Contriver.

This type of argument, and the evidence on which, in the [26] eighteenth century, it was based, is seen at its clearest in Paley's celebrated *Natural Theology*, an admirably written work, of cheerful and commonsense piety, which afforded the utmost satisfaction to many solid believers, and certainly did nobody any harm. It is, however, possible to object that it affords very little satisfaction to man's deeper religious apprehensions. If Nature is an excellently contrived machine, then God becomes an extremely skilful Mechanic; and indeed, as has often been remarked, there is little in the rationalistic theology of the eighteenth century to suggest that God is other than the great Engineer who originally designed the machine, set it in motioiy and then left it to run by itself. This is in fact the Deist position; and though Theism and Revelation held their own, I,ism is probably the central religious movement of the age.[1]

Locke's general philosophical attitude, the cool dry light of his intellect, his preference for clear and distinct ideas, led also to a sharpening of the distinction between what was believed as truth and what was merely enjoyed as fiction. In a writer like Sir Thomas Browne it is commonly hard to be sure in which realm we are moving; mythology and science not only rub shoulders, but often, it appears, enter into some illicit congress. After the beginning of the eighteenth century this is no longer possible; it becomes increasingly necessary to distinguish fancy from philosophy and fable from fact. This becomes clearly evident in poetry and the criticism of poetry. The whole symbolical machinery of earlier poets is now only available as an avowed fiction or an agreeable toy. The business of the sylphs in *The Rape of the Lock* is satisfactory and successful because nobody was in any sense asked to believe it. Johnson dislikes mythology and the pastoral convention, and condemns *Lycidas* on that ground. "Its form is that of a pastoral, easy, vulgar and therefore disgusting ... Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief." And we have seen the difficulties Gray got into in trying to write poetry other than that of reasonable reflection.

The fact is that the concept of Nature, which seemed at first to offer a liberation from so many barbarous and obscurantist [27] errors, had become by the end of the century a prison-house for the emotions. Nature meant human nature, which the eighteenth century already knew all about, since the Ancients had described it rightly by instinct, and the modern philosophers had further illuminated it by science. It also meant the visible frame of things, whose workings w,ere becoming steadily more familiar. Yet as the universe became ever more well paved and brightly lit there seemed td be less and less on which the emotions could fix themselves with satisfaction. The great machine aroused after all only, temperate reverence, and its Architect a rather distant respect. Those who felt an instinctive need for a stronger and more intimate response to experience were often driven to seek it in fiction, failing to find it in the great world. This is the ultimate motive behind much exploration of mediaeval, Norse and Celtic tradition, behind such literary deceptions as Chatterton's poems and Maepherson's *Ossian*. Yet they were unsatisfactory because they were after all no more than fiction, and some of them plain forgery.

Those born wholly within this well-cultivated garden could hardly expect to find their way out of it; their feet had grown too accustomed to the gravelled footpaths. The experience of the few solitary eccentrics, like Blake, who lived on the shaggy heath outside was too peculiar to be generally accessible to their fellows. The real poetical revolution could only be accomplished by one whose birth and education was within the eighteenth- century cultural pattern, yet on the edge of it, within sight of other kinds of experience. This was Wordsworth's position. Born at Cockermouth, and early removed to school at Hawkshead on Esthwaite, he grew up on the fringe of a wilder, less tidily economic country than most of rural Britain, and in a society materially and spiritually different from the normal English squirearchy. The "statesmen" of the Westmorland and Cumberland valleys were a race of independent yeomen, the last survivors of an English peasantry, something very different from the tenant-farmers or the landless cap-touching labourers which was all that the enclosures had left in most Independence and equality were the keynotes of this society; in his boyhood experience Wordsworth, as he [28] tells us, had hardly met the notion of a social superior. The early experience of a social hierarchy no doubt predisposes the mind to the notion of a hierarchy of accepted ideas. In his remote upland valleys Wordsworth knew neither. All good North-countrymen know that the south (which begins at about Derby) is decadent and feebly conformist. Wordsworth had his share of this feeling, and it helped to create the sturdy individuality without which he could never have transformed the face of English poetry.

On the other hand, at Cambridge a little and more in France, Wordsworth came fully into contact with the most vigorous intellectual life of his day. He inherited eihteenth-century cultural tradition and received the full impact of contemporary, philosophic and political movements. The combined influences of solitude and society, of nature and the converse of men, in forming his mind are described in *The Prelude* that incomparable poetic autobiography, which is a better source of information on Wordsworth's life than anything that has been written about him by others. More than that, and besides being one of the greatest reflective poems in the language it gives us a strongly drawn contemporary picture of the impact of the Revolution on the young sensibilities of the age.

The *Prelude* was to have been the introduction to *The Recluse*, a vast philosophical work, of which *The Excursion* forms the first part, and of which otherwise only a fragment under the original title survives. It is to be suspected that the most vital parts of what Wordsworth had to say were said in *The Prelude*, and that that is why the design was never completed. It is perhaps best read in the earliest version, that of 1805, for Wordsworth continued to revise it throughout his life; and although the alterations were often improvements, he also, alas, often falsified his own early ideas and impressions to suit the cautious conservatism of his later years. It is no accident that the most beautiful and most spontaneous passages in *The Prelude* occur chiefly in the first two books, 'Childhood and Schooltime', for the impressions of his early years formed the deepest and most significant layer of Wordsworth's later thought. The picture of a childhood on the shores of Windermere and [29] Esthwaite is an idyllic one, and it would be idle to paraphrase what has been said perfectly once and for all. The central idea

of this part of the poem is to show the powerful and necessary bond between nature and the human mind. But nature is no longer the great machine of the eighteenth century; it is a being with a soul and purpose of its own, linked inevitably with the human soul and its purposes. Wordsworth is not writing as a philosopher—he does not set out to explain this relationship, and we do not know whether he sees the soul of the world and the soul of man as separate substances, yet akin and capable of communication, or whether he really holds a kind of pantheism—that the soul of man is a temporarily separated fragment of the totality of being, to which in the end it will return. This pantheist view seems to be suggested by *A Slumber did my spirit seal*, the last of the Lucy poems, and we find traces of it in *Tintern Abbey*, and elsewhere. Later, Wordsworth tended to disguise it in the interests of Christian orthodoxy, but it always remained, perhaps, the real groundwork of his religion.

The most memorable passages in the early books of *The Prelude* are not analytical: they are incomparable descriptions of incidents in his childhood where it seemed that he actually felt in Nature a moral and spiritual presence, moulding and working on his mind as a human teacher might have done, though more mysteriously and profoundly. Alone, for instance, on the hills at night, engaged in trapping birds, he fell to the boyish temptation of taking a bird from another's snare. But the invisible monitor is watchful over even this venial fault, and as soon as the deed was done

> I heard among the solitary hills
> Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
> Of undistinguishable motion, steps
> Almost as silent as the turf they trod.
> (I. 329)[2]

Though Wordsworth insists constantly, both here and elsewhere, on the moral influence of Nature, the dominant [30] impression is not of being watched over by a censorious mentor, but of communion with a vast invisible presence, felt perhaps at the most unlikely times, when climbing rocks after birds' nests, for instance, an object which he admits to be a mean one: yet the danger of the slippery crags and the closeness of his contact with them brings a half-physical, half-spiritual sense of communion with something beyond the visible frame of things.

> Oh at that time
> When on the perilous ridge I hung alone
> With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
> Blow through my ears. The sky seemed not a sky
> Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds.
> (I. 346)

Rowing on the lake one night, he observed before him a huge peak which suddenly appeared to him as an animated presence, 'as if with voluntary power instinct' and seemed to stride after him 'with measured motion, like a living thing':

> and after I had seen
> That spectacle, for many days, my brain
> Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
> Of unknown modes of being; in my thoughts
> There was a darkness, call it solitude,
> Or blank desertion, no familiar shapes
> Of homely objects, images of trees,
> Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
> But huge and mighty Forms that do not live
> Like living men, mov'd slowly through the mind
> By day and were a trouble to my dreams.
> (I. 417)

The occasion itself is trivial: yet what is being described is evidently close to mystical experience: and it is such experience that is at the source of Wordsworth's most living work. Wordsworth, too, is

being led to God by the contemplation of Nature: but by a different route from Paley's *Natural Theology*. [31]

It is a temptation to linger among these early scenes, to dwell particularly on the incomparable descriptions of simple animal joys, of skating, fishing, exploring the islands on Windermere. But if we did there would be no end to quotation. It is noticeable that there is little mention of intellectual influences; when in a later section he writes ostensibly of books the only ones actually mentioned are *Don Quixote* and *The Arabian Nights*, He goes out of his way to depreciate scientific thought; addressing Coleridge, the friend for whom the Prelude was written, he says with satisfaction

> to thee
> Science appears but what in truth she is,
> Not as our glory and our absolute boast.
> But as a succedaneum, and a prop
> To our infirmity.
>
> (II. 216)

The third book, on residence at Cambridge, has a pious interest for Cambridge men, but is plainly written with a lower degree of intensity than what precedes it. Wordsworth's most vivid experiences did not come to him in his undergraduate days, which appear mostly as an interlude of careless and cheerful companionship and some uncertainty of purpose—

> And more than all, a strangeness in my mind,
> A feeling that I was not for that hour,
> Nor for that place.
>
> (III. 80)

In those spacious and unregenerate days the demands of a formal syllabus were not exacting, and if mediocrity was given little stimulus to screw itself up a few painful inches higher, genius was left to its own devices. Wordsworth studied English and Italian poetry, and showed some aptitude though little love for mathematics. It is noticeable that whenever the springs of Wordsworth's emotional life temporarily fail he can fall back on a perfectly competent logical intellect. For all the apparent aimlessness of his youth, there was a strong element of hard northern common sense in Wordsworth: and though he was [32] never one of those who mainly approached the world through the channels of a formal education, he made himself perfectly capable of using the goods of the mind for his own purpose. What that purpose was became clear to him in his first long vacation, when in a walk on the mountains, returning home after a cheerful party, he realized as dawn broke that he was going to be a poet.

A holiday journey to France and Switzerland in 1790 provided the material for *Descriptive Sketches*, written in couplets in the manner of the eighteenth-century topographical poets, and written well enough, but without much sign of Wordsworth's individual power. More important than the scenery, however, was the political atmosphere; and it is from now onwards that political and public events begin to play a major part in Wordsworth's development. The air of Cambridge is commonly sympathetic to other people's revolutions, and Wordsworth and his fellow-traveller Jones were already prepared to be excited by what was going on across the Channel. The new-born Revolution was at its phase of sublime hopefulness, when all things seemed possible

> France standing on the top of golden hours,
> And human nature seeming born again.
>
> (VI. 353 )

They actually landed in Calais on the eve of the day when the king was to swear fidelity to the new constitution, and the whole nation was mad with joy. Abstract political feeling was not yet much in Wordsworth's line, but the scenes they actually witnessed on this journey gave his mind a bias from which it was afterwards only turned away at the cost of half his poetic life. A short and indeterminate return to London was followed by another visit to France at the end of 1791. After his childhood in the

Lakes this was the most formative period of his career. At this time Wordsworth lived more intensely than he was ever to do again.

His first sympathies with the Revolution were mainly sentimental, and he was actually far more engrossed by the [33] daily novelty of life and manners. He settled first at Blois, then at Orleans, moving first in the kind of respectable society where the turmoil of the times was not mentioned, and himself remaining ignorant of what was really going on. Becoming bored with this company, he began to mix with the common world, which was better suited to his natural cast of mind. Born in a district where manners had a homely natural equality, he had never felt the claims of wealth and blood as anything very real, and the social ethics of the early revolution excited him less than they might,

> Seemed nothing out of nature's certain course,
> A gift that rather was come late than soon.
> (IX. 253)

Thus without any formal adoption of a creed, by natural sympathy, Wordsworth became what was then called a Patriot, and felt the people's cause as his. He was confirmed in his position by a solitary Patriot among his early friends, one Beaupuy, the only one among the otherwise royalist officers Wordsworth had first consorted with to support the popular cause. He has his honourable place in Book IX of The Prelude, but even from these lines it would probably be easy to underestimate his effect on Wordsworth's mind. Beaupuy was evidently a man of great maturity and force of character. A combined impression of nobility and charm emerges from the passages in *The Prelude* where he is described; also the sense that the young Wordsworth, perhaps for the only time in his life, indulged the generous sentiment of hero-worship. A rather stuffy arrogance is undoubtedly the defect of the later Wordsworth; but at this stage love, friendship, admiration, intellectual and moral excitement combined to make the current of his life flow more freely than it had done since his boyhood. If in Cambridge he had been out of his due place and time, here in France he felt himself at the centre of things. Through Beaupuy he felt himself vicariously a patriot and a man of action, and he contrasts his phase of abstract political discussion 'in academic groves' with the sense of participation in a great historical [34] process that his present situation gave him. Many men who were of Wordsworth's age in the 1930s had similar experiences in Spain, and some carried their engagement in the struggle much farther. But nothing in modern literature communicates the experience with the fullness and nobility of these books of The Prelude,

Wordsworth and Beaupuy were Jacobins by temperament, and were not among those desiccated sectarian progressives in whom political passion destroys the sense of the past. Walks in the neighbouring forest and along the castled banks of the Loire aroused memories of days gone by, partly historic, partly fanciful.

> Imagination, potent to enflame
> At times with virtuous wrath and noble scorn,
> Did also often mitigate the force
> Of civic prejudice, the bigotry
> So call it, of a youthful Patriot's mind.
> And on these spots with many gleams I looked
> Of chivalrous delight.
> (IX. 495)

Yet this coincided with the steady formation, under Beaupuy's direction, of liberal and republican principles, and a clear view of what the essentials of the political struggle were. When the two friends met one day a wretched peasant girl, languid with hunger, Beaupuy exclaimed in agitation,"'Tis against *that* that we are fighting": and both believed that within a little time misery of that kind would have vanished from the earth.

At the same time something else was happening, of crucial importance in Wordsworth's emotional life, which *The Prelude* nevertheless does not record. Wordsworth fell in love with a French girl,

Annette Vallon, had a daughter by her, but parted from her on his eventual return to England in 1792. The affair was not clandestine in the obvious sense: Wordsworth's sister Dorothy was in his confidence, both of them corresponded with Annette after his return to England, and went to visit her in Calais on the eve of his marriage. Later, [35]

Wordsworth's wife and her family also seem to have known of the facts. But no direct reference to it appears in his writings. Which of the various circumstances that commonly prevent young Englishmen from making their attachments abroad more permanent was active in Wordsworth's case we cannot say. An impulse of strictly limited candour led him to incorporate a disguised and greatly modified version of the story as an interpolated tale in the first version of *The Prelude*, This was later taken out and printed separately as *Vaudracour and Julia*, The feebleness of the poem, poetically and morally, does not necessarily show that he had any grave sense of personal embarrassment in the matter, but it does seem to show that he was trying to cut this experience out of his poetic career. Nevertheless, the political excitement of the French part of *The Prelude* is obviously accompanied by an emotional excitement for which we may suspect a more than political cause. Mr. Herbert Read has argued that Wordsworth's really creative period is simply the afterglow of this one patch of intense emotional experience. I think this is overstated, but if we ask for the reasons for Wordsworth's 'fifty years' decay', one of the answers will certainly be this deliberate cutting himself off from the emotional springs of his young manhood.

What does appear, clearly analysed as well as powerfully communicated, in *The Prelude*, is the progress of Wordsworth's political sympathies. Details of time, place and circumstance are confused, and neither need we trace them any more minutely. His close contact with the revolution at work began in October 1792, when he moved to Paris. It was two months after the deposition of the king, and a month after the September massacres, the thought of which gave him a foretaste of the horrors to come. Paris was for the moment quiet,

> But at the best it seemed a place of fear,
> Unfit for the repose which night requires,
> Defenceless as a wood where tigers roam.
> (X. 80)

Then followed the conflict between the Jacobins and the Girondins; and Wordsworth suffered the distress of seeing the [36] growth of the tyrannical Jacobin power at the expense of the Gironde which to him stood for the ideals of human and rational liberty with which the Revolution had started. He was deeply troubled, and for a time considered abandoning his status as an Englishman, identifying the cause of France with that of humanity, and throwing in his lot with the Girondins. To what extent he did so is not quite clear; at any rate the connexion did not last long; and compelled probably by a mixture of motives (though in *The Prelude* he reduces them to one—lack of money) he returned to England at the end of 1792.

The confused and powerful impressions of his stay in France had all been received, but they had not yet been digested. A period of real mental stress, even of torment, began on his return to England. In February 1793 England joined the allies and declared war on the French republic. This was the first violent shock ever received by Wordsworth's moral nature. The Revolution had been to him almost a thing of course, in tune, as it seemed, with the nature of things and the bent of liis own mind. Even its premonitory terrors had been what the less intense and immediate kinds of fear often are, something of a stimulus. Now he was exposed to a violent conflict of loyalties. He encountered the real agony (the extremities of this position are little known to Englishmen, and better known to the twentieth century than to Wordsworth's day) of having to abandon either loyalty to his own country or his deepest intellectual and moral convictions. He describes the confused misery of sitting in church, where a village congregation to which by all local and natural sympathies he is bound, are praying for English victories; and he alone is unable to join in.

Before any solution to this impasse, the Terror started in France. Wordsworth describes it in one of the most powerful passages of *The Prelude*, and describes too the desolating effect it had on all who had placed their ideal hopes in the Revolution. We know more about how revolution works in these days, and have been forced to blunt our minds to horrors. Wordsworth writes, without self-dramatization, in a passage of simple veracity, that for months and years after the end of the atrocities [17]

> I scarcely knew one night of quiet sleep,
> Such ghastly visions had I of despair
> And tyranny, and implements of death,
> And long orations which in dreams I pleaded
> Before unjust tribunals, with a voice
> Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense
> Of treachery and desertion in the place
> The holiest that I know of, my own soul.
>
> (X. 374 )

The horrors were ended by the execution of Robespierre in 1794. Wordsworth's hopes, hopes in the people rather than in their leaders, took on a new lease of life, countered only by the bitter scorn and indignation against the English political leaders who insisted on fighting what seemed the inevitable course of nature and justice. The whole of this development is summarized in a retrospective passage in Book X of the Prelude (74 et seq,). But from the time that 'with open war, Britain opposed the liberties of France' a change began to take place, not only in Wordsworth's opinions but in his whole attitude to the world. The gradual transformation of revolutionary France, through the exigencies of war, into an oppressive and conquering power was a further shock to his susceptibilities. Until this time the current of his feelings had run undisturbed, and his development had been mainly a natural development of feeling. Now that his emotional unity was torn apart he was obliged to fall back on the rationalizing intellect. At first he felt a sense of pride and triumph

> To look through all the frailties of the world,
> And, with a resolute mastery shaking off
> The accidents of nature, time and place,
> That maxie up the weak being of the past,
> Build social freedom on its only base,
> The freedom of the individual mind,
> Which, to the blind restraints of general laws
> Superior, magisterially adopts
> One guide, the light of circumstances, flashed
> Upon an independent intellect.
>
> (X. 820) [38]

The mentor whom he chose to guide him along this difficult path was probably William Godwin, the chief of a group of writers whose main historical function was to translate the principles of French revolutionary thought into English. But Godwin was also a far from negligible independent thinker, admirable for the integrity of his system, and for the consistency with which he pushed philosophic anarchism to its last conclusions.

The passage quoted above is a fair description of his doctrine as it appears in *Political Justice* (1793). His powerful influence on the liberal opinion of his day, notably on Wordsworth and Shelley, is well known; but Political Justice is a book more talked about than read. We shall have to return to it in speaking of Shelley, and it has been admirably summarized elsewhere,[3] so I will not spare space to analyse it here. It is easy, however, to see its attraction for a young intellectual. Its unbounded confidence in reason, its clear and rigid argument, might well seem to provide a sure foothold for one like Wordsworth whose original emotional faith had been shaken.

For a time the sense of being cut loose from painful emotional ties was a liberation; Godwin's uncomprising spirit corresponded to a sternness in Wordsworth's own nature; as he says,

I took the knife in hand.
And stopping not at parts less sensitive.
Endeavoured with my best of skill to probe
The living body of society
Even to the heart.
(X. 874)

However, Godwin is violently unhistorical, he is completely without the natural piety that is the foundation of Wordsworth's being, his only emotion is a sombre exaltation at the ultimately inevitable triumph of his principles. Wordsworth was not formed by nature for this kind of mental activity, yet not daring to trust to the emotions that had been so harshly [39] betrayed, he continued grimly the attempt to base a faith on abstract reasoning.

Thus I fared,
Dragging all passions, notions, shapes of faith,
Like culprits to the bar, suspiciously
Calling the mind to establish in plain day
Her titles and her honours, now believing,
Now disbelieving, endlessly perplexed (X. 889)

The result might have been foreseen. Wordsworth had been through a period of great moral and emotional strain. He had come, as it seemed, to an impasse, and was trying to get out of it by a method for which, indeed, he had plenty of intellectual toughness, but for which temperamentally he was quite unsuited. He continued to work against the grain

till, demanding proof,
And seeking it in ever3rthing, I lost
All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,
Sick, wearied out with contrarieties.
Yielded up moral questions in despair.
(X. 897)

It was a moral crisis about whose details we have very little information, even its exact date and duration remaining obscure. What is clear is that it marked the end of a road for Wordsworth. The revolutionary fervour and the doctrines of the age of reason had played their part in forming his mind, but they could carry him little further. It is in the nature of things that revolution can never be a permanent ideal, and any attempt to make it so transforms it into something else. Wordsworth was beginning to learn by bitter experience what has become a commonplace to our generation. Having received his dusty answer he seemed for a time to have nothing to look forward to: but, after how long an interval we do not exactly know, it became apparent that new life and new hope were flowing in upon liim from entirely different sources. [40]

The agents of Wordsworth's regeneration were his sister Dorothy, and Coleridge. After his return to England he spent a time in uncertain wanderings; then, in 1795, he established himself first in Dorset, then in Somerset with Dorothy, who had been his childhood companion and at all times a devoted friend and confidante. Late in that year the first meeting with Coleridge took place, and so began the enchanted period when the 'three persons with one soul' walked, talked and lived together, in one of those rare associations that combine exhilaration and serenity. The effect of this new-found happiness on Wordsworth was gradual. It was perhaps two years before the Godwinian ice was entirely melted out of his heart; the feeling of the period is of a grateful and blessed return to what he now recognizes to be his own proper path. Dorothy not only loved Wordsworth perhaps more deeply than anyone else ever did; she was also the exquisitely receptive sharer of all his deepest ioys. Dorothy was a direct link with his childhood, and her presence carried him back both to the homely earth-bound affections and the mystical exaltations of that time. In a lovely passage of the Prelude he tells how her influence

like a brook
That did but cross a lonely road, and now
Seen, heard and felt, and caught at every turn,
Companion never lost through many a league,

Maintain'd for me a saving intercourse
With my true self.
(X. 911)

The influence of Coleridge is less easy to define. It was in the first place intellectual, and showed Wordsworth another road to travel than the Godwinian one. The enormous reading of Coleridge's studious youth had given him a mind far more richly stored, of far greater range and variety than Wordsworth's. His bent was towards philosophy of an idealist and speculative kind, infinitely richer in poetic suggestion than the rationalism of the revolutionary thinkers. Coleridge's soaring fancies were anchored by Wordsworth's deep-rooted alliance with nature and common experience. So began the most fruitful association in the history of English poetry.

## ii. The Great Decade

The Wordsworths first came to visit Coleridge at Nether Stowey in 1797, and charmed with the neighbourhood and the company, found a house for themselves at Alfoxden near by. From then began the series of walks and talks out of which grew the idea of Lyrical Ballads. It is hard to reproduce the state of mental excitement that gave rise to this revolutionary collaboration. Much of it must have been in Coleridge's talk, and no surviving document has been able to do justice to that. It may seem that Wordsworth had had enough mental excitement in his recent period of storm and stress: what came now, however, was excitement of the steadier and slower-burning kind, involving the whole of a man's nature, from which creative work is most likely to arise. Up to now Wordsworth had written little really good poetry:[4] since we must, I think, describe *The Borderers* as a failure, and *Descriptive Sketches* and *Guilt and Sorrow* as abortive attempts to deliver the essential Wordsworthian truth. Coleridge provided a torrent of new and exciting ideas, some of them concerned with poetry and criticism, but some of them going far beyond this; for he was already beginning to develop what was ultimately to be his chief message to the nineteenth century—that no way of thinking could be adequate that did not involve the whole of a man's nature, his moral and metaphysical as well as his empirical experience. Wordsworth, on the other hand, a slower and more silent partner, contributed a far greater weight and depth of moral experience. He had been swept away on a turbulent flood and was now beginning to feel his feet on the ground— a sensation which remained unknown to Coleridge throughout his life. In all that we read of the origin of *Lyrical Ballads* this spiritual division of labour is apparent. During the first year of their association, as Coleridge tells us,

> —our conversation turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination [42]
> In this idea originated the plan of Lyrical Ballads: in which it was agreed that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment that constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object to give the charm of novelty to the things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonder of the world before us.[5]

This is the classic passage in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* that announces the opening of two new roads in English poetry. Coleridge's psychological and philosophical interests are sufficiently prominent both here and in Wordsworth's preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, For Wordsworth tells us that the aim was "above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement." Experiments were to be made in using, not the conventional diction of poetry, but "the real language of men" (we shall discuss the implications of that phrase in the next section); and the subjects were to be taken from humble and rustic life, because in such circumstances the essential passions of the heart developed more freely and fully, and were enriched by mingling with "the beautiful and permanent forms of nature"—this last item being clearly

Wordsworth's contribution to the declaration of faith. When we turn to the volume itself we find at first little sign of these theoretical preoccupations, but it is not out of place to mention them briefly in advance, for there is no doubt that a good deal of theorizing of this Idnd preceded the actual composition of the poems. [43]

A word or two on the bibliography of this period will be helpful. The first edition *of Lyrical Ballads* appeared in 1798, anonymously. Coleridge's contribution was *The Ancient Mariner*, the most considerable poem of the collection, and three minor fragments— *The Foster-Mother's Tale*, *The Nightingale* and *The Dungeon*. A second edition appeared in 1800, under Wordsworth's name alone, with one additional poem by Coleridge— *Love*, and a large number by Wordsworth. This edition also contains the first form of Wordsworth's famous preface expounding his poetic faith. A third edition of 1802 greatly expands the preface and adds an appendix on Poetic Diction; the fourth edition of 1805 has only textual changes. *The Prelude* was probably begun in 1799, and was complete in the first version by 1805. And in 1807 Wordsworth published *Poems in Two Volumes*, consisting entirely of new work, including the *Immortality Ode*, Memorials of a tour in Scotland and many of the best sonnets. It was in this decade, from 1797-1807 that nearly all his best work was done. Coleridge's *Christabel* was intended for inclusion in *Lyrical Ballads*, but was not finished in time, and did not in the end appear till 1816.

The aspect of *Lyrical Ballads* that presented the most obvious challenge to the general poetry-reading habits of the age was the choice of modest and familiar themes, subjects drawn from "humble and rustic life" expressed in "the real language of men". It was on Wordsworth's part quite a conscious challenge and suffers at times from the defects of all such conscious challenges. The whole question of the proper material of poetry is a difficult one; one might put it crudely by saying that any subject is possible if you can get away with it. Themes such as *The Idiot Boy* and *Goody Blake* and *Harry Gill* had not formerly been celebrated in English poetry: the question of whether they should have been is a vexed one, since there are no categorical imperatives in the arts. Coleridge, whose' criticism of *Lyrical Ballads* we shall shortly discuss, probably said the last effective word when he doubted whether the emotional tension in such pieces was sufficiently great to justify their being written in verse. One cannot help feeling that [44] Wordsworth sometimes followed a doctrinaire opinion about humble and rustic life rather than his own real poetic impulse —in *Goody Blake*, or *Simon Lee*, for instance. In *The Idiot Boy* a real imaginative intuition about the strangeness and incommunicability of the poor crazy child's moonlight adventures seems to be struggling in a waste of garrulity and trivial expression. In *The Thorn* triviality of expression is deliberately assumed as a dramatic device, but as Coleridge pointed out, gives way to a sudden magnificence in the seventh stanza—a magnificence which is out of character, yet almost manages to cast its pervasive radiance over the whole poem. It is when he is least anecdotal, when he relies most on a straight unanalysed impression, that Wordsworth succeeds best in conveying the pathetic simplicities that have moved him. The fragment *Animal Tranquillity and Decay*, for instance, is a small nugget of Wordsworth which one might very well use as a sample to show the essential quality of the whole.

In the greatest of the rustic poems no such questions arise. They are mostly found in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, and include *Michael* and *The Brothers*, *Michael* is described as a pastoral poem; and it is indeed a poem about shepherds; but the label seems puzzling if we think of earlier senses of "pastoral'; for though Dr. Johnson might quite likely have found *Michael* "easy, vulgar and therefore disgusting", it would certainly have been so in a very different sense from *Lycidas*, It is completely without the conscious literary artifice that we associate with pastoral poetry, and free from the trick of using rural simplicities to light up some sophisticated situation. But it has the essential quality of pastoral—the imaginative sympathy for a life of unselfconscious simplicity from which the poet, merely by being a poet, is detached.

> It was the first off those domestic tales that spake to me
> Of shepherds, dwellers in the valleys, men
> Whom I already loved; not verily
> For their own sakes, but for the fields and hills

Where was their occupation and abode. [45]

And hence the tale had a special importance in Wordsworth's life, for it marks the stage when he was led on from the pure passion for nature to feel for passions that were not his own

and think
(At random and imperfectly indeed)
On man, the heart of man, and human life.

Arnold wrote of Wordsworth that his greatest strength was in his powder of making us feel "the simple primary human affections and duties"; and it is noticeable that the poems of rural life generally deal with the simplest and most primary of all—the bond between parents and children. Wordsworth rarely writes much about love between man and woman, and when he does it is often broken and unhappy. The figure of the forsaken mother often occurs in his poetry—perhaps because of the misadventure in his own biography. In *Michael* the theme is love of a father for his son: it is told in blank verse of a rather stiff simplicity, and much of it is straight narrative so unelaborated that it treads on the verge of the prosaic. But the grave movement of the blank verse avoids the sudden slippery descents of some of the stanza poems. Equally it avoids the interspersed, detachable splendours and beauties that we find elsewhere, the obviously lovely lines and stanzas that stand out from passages of less intensity and make an immediate effect. The effect of *Michael* is not immediate: more prolonged acquaintance with the poem reveals it as that most characteristic Wordsworthian achievement—a poem where a long familiar emotion, that has been absorbed into the personality and is no longer clamorous or importunate, is evenly diffused throughout. Its sublime or moving passages do not call attention to themselves and might easily pass unnoticed— for example, the famous line describing how the old man, broken down by the absence and the failure of his son, went out to work on the sheepfold they had begun together, but had not the heart to add to it

And never lifted up a single stone [46]

Many of these poems, however, can hardly be said to describe affections and passions: they are records of chance encounters, unimportant in themselves, yet transfigured by some sudden moment of illumination. *The Leech Gatherer* is one of these, and the core of the poem is in the stanzas (XVI- XIX) in which the old man ceases to be an individual old man and becomes a vague archetypal figure, symbolical of—what? Wordsworth says Resolution and Independence, and tags on a neat moral to give the poem a clear significance. As often, however, the neat moral is an afterthought and is soon forgotten, since Wordsworth was easily misled about the source of his inspiration, and the heart of the experience was not an ethical intuition that can be explained, but a mystical one that can hardly be explained at all, only presented. Readers of Wordsworth must learn to expect a good deal of material and circumstantial detail in his poetical experiences: it is sometimes obstructive, but it is also what gives us the sense that he has his feet on the ground far more firmly than any other poet of his age. When the experience is less cluttered up with circumstance and explanation it can find expression in flashes of that magical and immediate loveliness in which Wordsworth is sometimes supposed to be deficient. This is so in *The Solitary Reaper*, where there is no narrative thread and no moral—just a girl singing as she reaps a field:

A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird
Breaking the silence of the seas.
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings? ,
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things.
And battles long ago:

—lines which catch the *lacrimae rerum* more memorably than those of any poet since Virgil.

The five Lucy poems were written in Germany in 1799 and [47] appeared in the third edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. The most probable suggestion about their origin is that they represent a transmutation of Wordsworth's feeling for his sister Dorothy. No poems illustrate more clearly than the first three Wordsworth's power of conveying emotion by the simplest and most reticent means. And the last two are brief and pregnant expressions of two of the foundations of Wordsworth's thought Three years she grew of the influence of Nature on the formation of human life, and the epitaph, *A slumber did my spirit* steal of his austere pantheism.

> No motion has she now, no force,
> She neither hears nor sees,
> Rolled round in earth's diurnal course
> With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Theories about the language of common life do not prevent Wordsworth using the rich and unusual word 'diurnal', which seems to cast a glow over the almost monosyllabic simplicity of the rest of the poem.

As we have seen, one of the objects of *Lyrical Ballads* was a psychological one—not merely to describe interesting or pathetic incidents, but to use them to illustrate what Wordsworth rather grandly calls "the primary laws of our nature", and the way in which we "associate ideas" in the presence of emotion. This last phrase is a relic from the philosophical doctrine held strongly by Wordsworth and Coleridge at this time—the associationism of Hartley, Hartley was an estimable, but now outmoded writer, who had developed, basically from the thought of Locke, an elaborate system of psychology, deriving all human emotions, passions and thoughts from the mechanical association of sense impressions. These sense impressions are received passively by the mind, and character and mental life are built up entirely from them. Hartley's great influence at the close of the eighteenth century is hard to understand today, but he is worth mentioning here, for though both Wordsworth and Coleridge progressed to other philosophies of life later on, associationism left an abiding mark on Wordsworth's [48] thought. It is Hartley's contention that since our minds are built up entirely by "association", it is extremely important to make the right impressions and associations in early life. This provides the philosophical background for Wordsworth's belief in the influence of natural objects in the formation of character, and perhaps too goes far to account for his sturdy reliance on immediate sensuous experience, his abstention from the fanciful and arbitrary, his feeling that his verse must "deal boldly with substantial things". Which does not mean important or impressive things. Many of the puzzlingly trivial poems in *Lyrical Ballads* were significant to Wordsworth for precisely these psychological reasons. The child in *We are Seven* has not yet experienced death as a fact, it is merely a word to her, so she still feels that she is one of seven brothers and sisters. The child in the *Anecdote for Fathers* is pressed to give an intelligible reason for preferring one place to another, long before he has formed any such reasons, and when he is conscious only of a confused sense of well-being; so he is eventually driven to take refuge in fabrication. And as the sub-title of the poem suggests, this innocent fabrication can lead easily to lying. These are, perhaps, interesting case-histories, but not very successful poems. In the first of the Lucy poems, however, the beautiful *Strange fits of passion have I known*, the motive is the same. The sudden dropping of the moon behind the cottage roof brings into the lover's mind, by an association that is at once natural and lovely, the fear that his Lucy may too have disappeared from mortal eyes.

This reliance on the immediate experience, the belief that this, rather than any intellectualizing power, is the agent of education and the father of poetry, is explicitly stated in what are, perhaps, the two key poems of *Lyrical Ballads*, from the doctrinal point of view— *Expostulation and Reply* and *The Tables Turned*. In the first the poet is reproached by a friend for sitting idly on a stone dreaming his time away. He replies in lines which sum up the Wordsworthian version of Hartley's doctrine, and illustrate, too, the state of contemplative calm that Wordsworth had come to rely on after the storm and stress of the Revolution and Godwinian intellectualism. [49]

The eye, it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against or with our will.

Nor less I deem that there are powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.

In *The Tables Turned* the poet retorts upon his friend, exhorts him to leave his books and come out into the open, since he can learn more about man and about moral good and evil from the spring woods than from all the sages. We might object that an impulse from a vernal wood cannot in fact teach us anything at all about good and evil, and that Wordsworth is only getting back from Nature the moral values that he himself has put in. Science and the philosophies derived from it have accustomed us to thinking of Nature as morally neutral, and indifferent to the desires and purposes of man. However, the lines that follow are more easily acceptable.

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things:
We murder to dissect.

Beneath a half-playful and even superficial opposition to science and philosophizing, there is the wholly serious demand, central to Wordsworth's faith, for a total response by man's nature to the non-human nature around him. Those who are worried by Wordsworth's habit of finding sermons in stones are free to give up that side of his work, but they would also be wise to remember the remark of a later poet, Yeats, extremely unlike Wordsworth, that in the poet's church there is an altar but no pulpit; and that morals drawn from the lesser celandine not the core of Wordsworth's belief. Another poem, the *Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, is needed to I supplement those just discussed. [50]

In *Tintern Abbey* it is at once apparent that we have a poem written in an altogether higher style. The air of familiar anecdote is abandoned, and the embarrassing playfulness that sometimes appears in Wordsworth's domestic pieces totally disappears. Reading *Tintern Abbey* in conjunction with the slighter pieces in *Lyrical Ballads* we feel that they are the data on which this great reflective poem is based, that the intellect has been used, not for meddling or dissecting, but to fuse into a whole the scattered impressions for which commonly 'in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand". The occasion of the poem is a visit to the Wye, already visited five years before: this gives rise to reflections on the significance that the landscape has had for him in the interval. Wordsworth first restates his moral doctrine: the memory of this beautiful scene has been not only calming and restorative, but has aroused almost unnoticed sensations of pleasure, which have had their results in impulses of kindness and love. This seems truer and more adequate than saying that a wood in spring can teach you all about ethics. But he has also owed to these recollections another and sublimer gift:

—that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery.
In which the heavy and the weary weight Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul.

Wordsworth does not explain or defend this doctrine; he merely states it as experience, in verse of such serene loveliness that it carries with it its own guarantee of authenticity. This is the part of the

Wordsworthian religion that no change in the intellectual concept of nature is likely to invalidate, and that [51] *pace* Mr. Aldous Huxley[7], can be as active in tropical jungles as in the dales of Westmorland. However, Wordsworth does not stop here: he goes on to trace the stages through which his response to nature has passed. First the "glad animal movements", the mainly muscular pleasures of his boyhood; then, in youth, the purely visual delight in natural beauty,

> That had no need of a remoter charm,
> By thought supplied, nor any interest
> Unborrowed from the eye:

—then in maturity the development of a sense, which is only the full realization of something obscurely experienced all along—

> —a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns
> And the round ocean and the living air.
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
> A motion and a spirit that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought.
> And rolls through all things.

This is a profound and undoctrinal pantheism, unfettered by moral accretions at a more superficial level. Wordsworth felt obliged to play it down in later life, in the interests of orthodoxy; and others have felt bound to abandon it in the face of the scientific 'neutralization of nature'. But it remained after all the most deeply based of all Wordsworth's experiences; it is after all wholly independent of any particular belief about the nature of the physical world, even of any particular culture; and it is likely, therefore, to remain an important part of modern religious experience.

In *Tintern Abbey* Wordsworth is far more willing than his theories would suggest to use the full resources of the English vocabulary. In the more exalted passages of this, as of most of the reflective blank-verse poems, the influence of Milton is apparent. A little later this becomes more obvious and we [52] sometimes find Wordsworth using a Latinized and abstract vocabulary, commonly supposed to be most uncharacteristic of his work, and directly due to Miltonic influence. We can see it in *Yew-Trees*:

> Huge trunks! and each particular trunk a growth
> Of intertwisted fibres serpentine,
> Upcoiling and inveterately convolved;
> Nor uninformed with Phantasy, and looks
> That threaten the profane.

So much for the language of humble and rustic life.

In 1802-3 Wordsworth's political interests revived, as we can see from the sonnets of that year, which was important to him both for its public and its private events. In 1802 he married Mary Hutchinson and, before the wedding, paid another brief visit to France, apparently for the purpose of seeing his daughter and making a final settlement with Annette. The sonnet on Westminster Bridge was composed on the way, and his meeting with his child is recorded in *It is a beauteous evenings calm and free*. These are followed by a series of political sonnets which form a new and important development of Wordsworth's work. In this year, the Peace of Amiens was concluded with France, and this was on the whole welcomed by liberal sympathizers; but disillusionment was soon to follow. It became evident, as, sooner or later, in most revolutions it becomes evident, that what had begun as a movement of liberation was ending in a personal despotism. In August 1802 Napoleon was made consul for life, and to the upholders of the early Revolutionary ideal, this was a betrayal. Wordsworth attacks it, from the standpoint of the old guard of liberal idealists; the other sonnets written at Calais in this year record his sense of shame and scorn for what was going on. In the course of the same year, the new Italian republics and the German states became obviously mere satellites of the Napoleonic power; a French army suppressed an attempted revolt in Switzerland; and an attempt by France to recover San Domingo was

resisted by the negro patriot Toussaint L'Ouverture whose [53] heroism and misfortunes aroused much liberal sympathy throughout Europe. No doubt there are other views of these events than those held by Wordsworth, who saw them in terms of simple black and white—liberty and serfdom; not having the benefit of the Marxist-Hegelian dialectic which would have taught him to subsume them both in the higher synthesis of a universal dirty grey.

In 1803 the war broke out again, and this time an attack on England was expected; so to the motives of disillusioned political idealism were added those of alarm and straightforward patriotism in the face of a national danger. All these phases of opinion are reflected in Wordsworth's sonnets of 1802-3, are combined too with an apprehension about the stagnant worldliness that he felt in the England of that time. These poems mark the end of another period in Wordsworth's biography. After this time it was hardly possible for an Englishman to preserve the pristine faith in the revolutionary mission of France. It is customary to reproach Wordsworth with abandoning it, which is absurd; even Romantic poets must be permitted to grow up. What we can legitimately regret is that he abandoned so much with it, so many of the ideals that should have been immune to historical disappointment. The word liberty becomes gradually emptied of its former content, and is identified with English national security: a proper object of solicitude indeed: but it must be confessed that the exhortation to

> Save this honoured Land from every Lord
> But British reason and the British sword

falls somewhat tamely on the ear after the ardours of *The Prelude*.

The effect of this second injection of political feeling on Wordsworth's poetry is debatable. Conventionally, his sonnets on public affairs are numbered among the great ones of the language. Gerard Manley Hopkins once complained that there was too much white neckcloth about them—meaning too much sententious moralizing; a view with which I cannot help agreeing. If we compare them with the French parts of *The Prelude* [54] we feel that Wordsworth is now simply telling us about his political opinions, not re-creating his political passions. His model was Milton rather than the earlier Renaissance sonneteers. Milton had tended to depersonalize the sonnet, to substitute a kind of abstract dignity for the sensitiveness to all the complexities of feeling that had been the glory of the earlier sonnet-writers. It is possible that the effort was a mistaken one, that a poem as short and as formally complex as the sonnet needs complexity and delicacy of feeling to correspond, unless it is to become empty. But Milton has always a secure and unshakable sense of style. This Wordsworth has not. When he is writing from the more superficial layers of his mind he is capable of horrid flatnesses which he apparently does not notice. (These are particularly damaging in the sonnet, which is too small to be able to afford waste matter.) Hence, after the panegyric on Venice in which the imagination has been really touched, the wretched dilution of the closing lines—

> Yet shall some tribute of regret be paid
> When her long life has reached its final day.

Hence the vague and somewhat fusty exhortations of the *Men of Kent* sonnet, and even, if I may dare to say so, of *Milton thou should'st be living at this hour*. The Calais sonnets are free from this, and it is tempting to suggest that it is because they were touched with the power of the ancient flame: the visit to Calais was a link with the ardour of his youth: the sonnets composed on his return were part of the process of settling down. But great sonnets of the personal and reflective kind are found throughout Wordsworth's work—among the finest being *Surprised by Joy, impatient as the wind*, written in 1815 and the exquisite *Mutability*, from the late and mostly dismal series of *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*.

The sonnets mark the development of a more conscious, more literary manner which was to grow on Wordsworth in later years, though he was always to use it somewhat uncertainly. But when the emotional springs are deeply tapped he now becomes as capable of deliberate grandeur as any poet in [55] the language—as we can see in the *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*. Like so much of the best of Wordsworth, it is a piece of spiritual autobiography, composed between 1803 and 1806. That is

to say, it was partly contemporary with the *Prelude*, of which its substance might have formed a part. But it is composed with far more literary artifice, in long strophes with varied line-lengths of the kind that were supposed, in remote imitation of Pindar, to be peculiarly suitable for odes. Wordsworth handles this difficult scheme magnificently, and the poem has a sustained lyric splendour of which we have hardly any other example in his works. It is also notable because it is built on a piece of poetic faith that is something less than whole-hearted, nearer to Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" than is usual with Wordsworth. The theme is the gradual decline in keenness of imagination as we pass from childhood to maturity.[6] Wordsworth connects it with a sort of Platonic belief in pre-existence, a belief that

> Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting,
> The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
> Hath had elsewhere its setting
> And cometh from afar.

And this is certainly something that Wordsworth did not hold as an article of faith. But if he is here presenting his subject, as he rarely does, in an almost mythological guise, he has lost none of his power of dealing plainly with the facts of experience. The development described is as true to the movements of his own heart as the least elaborated passages of the Prelude, and beneath the quasi-Platonic myth is the essential truth that the deepest springs of his inspiration are in his childhood.

But we must not go too far with Wordsworth before returning to Coleridge's poetry of this time. [...; ]