

*W. J. B. Owen*

# *Understanding The Prelude*

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# Contents

Preface

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

|     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 1.  | Understanding <i>The Prelude</i>       | 12  |
| 2.  | The Sublime and the Beautiful          | 31  |
| 3.  | Literary Echoes in <i>The Prelude</i>  | 57  |
| 4.  | Wordsworth's Aesthetics of Landscape   | 74  |
| 5.  | 'A Shock of Mild Surprise'             | 91  |
| 6.  | Two Wordsworthian Ambivalences         | 112 |
| 7.  | Wordsworth's Imaginations              | 131 |
| 8.  | 'The Charm More Superficial'           | 155 |
| 9.  | The Object the Eye and the Imagination | 174 |
| 10. | 'The Ascent of the Mind'               | 188 |
| 11. | 'The Poetry of Nature'                 | 215 |
| 12. | 'The Most Despotic of our Senses'      | 237 |
| 13. | 'Such Structures as the Mind builds'   | 258 |
| 14. | 'The Perfect Image of a mighty Mind'   | 274 |
| 15. | The descent from Snowdon               | 292 |
| 16. | 'A Sense of the Infinite'              | 313 |
| 17. | 'Prose'                                | 333 |

## Preface

With one exception, the essays in this volume have appeared hitherto only in the pages of *The Wordsworth Circle*, Professor Owen having been little given to self-promotion. They are collected here as a service to students and to scholarship. W. J. B. Owen was a scholar to his fingertips, and his quiet assurance in any matter to do with Wordsworth's texts could be relied upon implicitly. Like many habitués of the Wordsworth Summer Conference, founded in 1970 by Richard Wordsworth, I have long felt that they deserved a wider audience, and re-reading them in the process of formatting raw scans into finished text, I came across numerous reminders of why I did so. On the surface they share little with the critical procedures dominant in the 70s and 80s of the last century, and they are mercifully free of theoretical jargon, yet their refusal to submit passively to the poet's claims, is a strength Professor Owen's work shares with such sceptical methodologies as deconstruction or new historicism.

The essays dwell on a limited range of themes, mostly to do with matters of aesthetic definition, or of psychological exactitude in pinning down just what it is that given Wordsworth passages—usually the absolutely central passages—are about. They frequently return, ruminatively—as do the essays of many other critics—to the same teasing problems. Their style is quiet, unflamboyant, methodical, and flavoured with a dry humour which is sometimes barely detectable, and is most evident, perhaps, in the opening essay of this collection—a starting point nominated by Professor Owen himself when considering such a collection. Yet their substance bears, very often, upon the most debated aspects of Wordsworth's mind and art.

They probe deeply into questions that most readers of Wordsworth would never have formulated, or recognized as problematic. What is meant by 'the poetry of nature'? How exactly does the symbolism of the Snowdon episode work? What does Wordsworth mean by 'Imagination', and what reflections led him to place one poem under 'Poems of Imagination' while another, equally imaginative, appears under 'Poems dealing with the Affections'? Do the processes involved in writing or experiencing 'A Night-Piece' deserve the term Imagination as defined by either Wordsworth or Coleridge? Exactly how does the great English poet of the natural