William Wordsworth

‘Lyrical Ballads’ (1798)

by Richard Gravil
William Wordsworth: ‘Lyrical Ballads’

Richard Gravil

A Note on the Author

Richard Gravil took his BA in Wales and his PhD at East Anglia. He has taught in the University of Victoria, B.C., the University of Łódź, Poland, and the University of Otago, New Zealand. His books include *Romantic Dialogues: Anglo-American Continuities, 1776–1862*, (St Martin’s, 2000) *Wordsworth’s Bardic Vocation, 1787–1842* (Palgrave, 2003), and edited collections of essays on Swift, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Nineteenth-Century Novel. He is managing director of Humanities-Ebooks, and Convenor of the Wordsworth Summer Conference and Winter School.
Poems treated in this insight

‘We are seven’
‘Anecdote for fathers’
‘Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree which stands near the lake of Esthwaite, on a desolate part of the shore, yet commanding a beautiful prospect’
‘Lines written at a small distance from my House, and sent by my little Boy to the Person to whom they are addressed’
‘Lines written in Early Spring’
‘Expostulation and Reply’
‘The Tables Turned’
‘The Female Vagrant’
‘Goody Blake and Harry Gill’
‘The Last of the Flock’
‘The Mad Mother’
‘The Complaint of a forsaken Indian Woman’
‘The Convict’
‘Old Man travelling’
‘Simon Lee’
‘The Idiot Boy’
‘The Thorn’
‘Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey’
‘Hart-leap Well’
‘There was a boy’
‘Nutting’
The Lucy Poems
‘The Brothers’
‘Michael’
Part 1: Life, Times, Themes

1.1 General Introduction

William Hazlitt (1778-1830), the leading literary critic of the Romantic era, wrote about Wordsworth’s style (in *The Spirit of the Age*, 1825) that:

> It is one of the innovations of the time. It partakes of and is carried along with the revolutionary movement of our age: the political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiments. His muse … is a levelling one…. it takes the commonest events and objects, as a test to prove that nature [i.e. what is natural, including human nature] is always interesting … without any of the ornaments of dress or pomp … to set it off. Hence the unaccountable mixture of seeming simplicity and real abstruseness in the Lyrical Ballads. Fools have laughed at, wise men scarcely understand them.

This is by no means a favourably prejudiced account: by 1825 Hazlitt and Wordsworth were political opponents. But he had met Wordsworth in 1798, while visiting the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and he gave in his famous essay ‘My first Acquaintance with Poets’ one of the most vivid accounts of the poet.

> The next day Wordsworth arrived from Bristol at Coleridge’s cottage. I think I see him now. He answered in some degree to his friend’s description of him, but was more gaunt and Quixote-like. He was quaintly dressed ...in a brown fustian jacket and striped pantaloons. There was something of a roll, a lounge in his gait, not unlike his own Peter Bell. There was a severe, worn pressure of thought about his temples, a fire in his eyes (as if he saw something in objects more than the outward appearance) an intense high narrow forehead, a Roman nose, cheeks furrowed by strong purpose and feeling, and a convulsive inclination to laughter about the mouth, a good deal at variance with the solemn stately expression of the rest of his face …. He sat down and talked very freely and naturally, with a mixture of clear gushing accents in his voice, and a strong tincture of the Northern burr, like the crust on wine.
Wordsworth (shown here at 35 in a portrait by Henry Edridge, reproduced by courtesy of The Wordsworth Trust) is not normally thought of as a man with ‘a convulsive inclination to laughter’, but whether one responds to that hint of Wordsworth as a man of profound humour, and perhaps habitually ironic in his view of things, as well as distinctly unconventional, is crucial to one’s response to his poems. Hazlitt was one of the first to notice that Lyrical Ballads announced a revolution in literature. When he heard some of the poems read aloud, he said later, ‘the sense of a new style and a new spirit in poetry came over me’, and the same feeling ‘that arises from the turning over of fresh soil, or of the first welcome breath of spring’.

### 1.2 Wordsworth’s Early Life

William Wordsworth was born in Cockermouth, in the English Lake District, in 1770. He grew up in a rather grand house, with a magnificent walled garden fronting the river Derwent. The earliest memory of his childhood recorded in his poetry is of playing in the shallows of that river, ‘a naked savage in the thunder shower’. Still earlier, he conjectures, his ‘infant thoughts’ were soothed by the sound of the same waters. He lost his mother in 1778 (shortly before his eighth birthday) and his father in 1783 (at 13), leaving himself, his brothers and his sisters dependant at first on relatives and later on each other. His father was an agent to Lord Lonsdale, the most powerful aristocrat in the region, and a man notorious for the abuse of power—a fact which prejudiced Wordsworth against the nobility in the early years of his life not least because it required a lengthy suit, over many years, to extract from His Lordship the substantial sums owing to the orphaned family.

In 1779, shortly after the death of their mother, Wordsworth and his brother Richard entered Hawkshead Grammar School, on Esthwaite, where they not only lodged during the teaching year but also spent several of their summer vacations. This meant that he was separated from his beloved sister Dorothy, apart from a summer vacation in 1787 which is referred to in Book 6 of The Prelude. Their fuller reunion in April 1794 when they briefly lived together at Windy Brow in Keswick, coincided with his first steps towards maturity as a professional writer. The fact that Dorothy is really the subject of the last paragraph of ‘Tintern Abbey’ (the final poem in Lyrical Ballads 1798), as Wordsworth looks to the future as a writer, is not coincidental: from
an early date he took it on himself to provide a roof for his sister, a commitment he maintained for the rest of their lives.

His autobiographical poem *The Prelude* gives the impression that neither Hawkshead Grammar School nor Cambridge University left any deep impression on him. This is probably unfair. Hawkshead sent him to Cambridge with a far better than average grasp of the classics and of mathematics, and having been taught by a man with a real interest in recent (i.e. late eighteenth-century) English poetry, whose death he records in *The Prelude*, as of a friend and major influence. But it is impossible to read *The Prelude* without feeling that his most significant growth experiences did take place outside formal education, and especially in the kind of escapades in the fells or on the lakes that he describes in the first two books of that poem. Some of these experiences were beautiful, some frightening (in retrospect he believed he was ‘fostered alike by beauty and by fear’)—climbing crags in search of raven’s eggs, poaching, rowing on Windermere, skating on Esthwaite, watching a drowned man recovered from the lake, making horseback excursions as far as Furness Abbey, rowing a stolen boat on Ullswater, and so forth. These adventures involved exertion and adventure, and lead to self-knowledge and deeply felt experiences of nature. When the earliest version of that poem was belatedly published in 1926, these episodes had an enormous impact of poets such as Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney, and it is largely through Wordsworth’s influence that the best known and best loved pieces of post-war poetry, when British life was overwhelmingly urban, are not only concerned with country experience but tend to be based on childhood memories—they involve significant encounters with nature (in Hughes’s case with a fox or pike; in Heaney’s case with angry frogs or blackberry picking).

### 1.3 Wordsworth in France

Certainly the most significant thing that happened to Wordsworth at Cambridge (where he studied from October 1787 to January 1791) was his first long vacation from it. In 1790, with a college friend Robert Jones, he *walked* to Italy and back, via France and the Swiss Alps. Wordsworth and his friend Jones arrived in Calais on 13 July 1790. On the next day France celebrated the first anniversary of the Fall of the Bastille. Their object was to see the Alps (which they did) but the major legacy of this trip was a sense of ‘human nature seeming born again’.

Wordsworth, having seen that France was engaged in renovating human nature and political institutions, went back to France for his post-graduation ‘gap year’ from
November 1791 to December 1792. He visited Paris at the start and finish of this period, where he may have lodged with one of the revolution leaders, Gorsas, and lived mostly in Orleans and in Blois, where he had two formative relationships. The first, a friendship with a future General of the French Revolutionary Armies, Michel Beaupuy, converted him to radical politics. The second, a love affair with Annette Vallon (whose family was staunchly Royalist) left him with an illegitimate daughter, Caroline, and a real crisis of conscience—in fact three crises of conscience. First, he was emotionally tied to a Royalist family, whose members suffered much at the hands of functionaries of the revolution, which Wordsworth supported. Second, he had to return home in December 1792—before Caroline was born—in order to make arrangements to marry Annette, and while he was at home Britain declared war on France, making return impossible. (He did not see his daughter until 1802, during the peace of Amiens, by when his purpose was to square things with Annette so as to marry Mary Hutchinson). Third, he spent the years from 1792 to at least 1799 deeply estranged from his own country. He describes himself sitting in country churches in 1793 praying for the defeat of British forces in their encounters with the French.

There is a highly romantic story, which has never been confirmed (and cannot be disproved), that in October 1793 Wordsworth did in fact manage a secret return to France, in an attempt to see Annette, and that he got as far as Paris where on October 7th he may have witnessed one of Robespierre’s first executions of Girondin leaders. The legend is based on Thomas Carlyle’s (possibly faulty) recollection that Wordsworth claimed to have known Gorsas (he may have lodged in the same house in Paris in 1792) and (though this is less likely) witnessed his execution.

What we do know about that year is that he made a solitary journey across Salisbury Plain in August 1793 on his way to stay with Jones in North Wales (he made use of this experience in numerous poems including ‘The Female Vagrant’); watched the British war fleet gathering near the Isle of Wight, visited Tintern Abbey and Goodrich

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1 Kenneth Johnston’s treatment of this issue in *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy* (New York: Norton, 1998) makes two telling points. Wordsworth seems to have believed that his friend Michael Beaupuy died fighting counter-revolutionaries in 1793. He didn’t, in fact, but at the time of Wordsworth’s supposed visit there were rumours in France to that effect—rumours which were never published in England and which (Johnston persuasively argues) he could only have heard if he had been in France at that time. There are also passages in The Prelude about fugitives from the French authorities sleeping in fields and ditches which don’t have much to do with Wordsworth’s known experience but do seem to have the ring of truth. If he did make such a journey, it would have been highly dangerous as all foreigners were at that time banned. He could not have travelled by public roads, since they were constantly watched and he could have had no valid papers.
Castle (where he met the little girl he writes about in ‘We are seven’) and that none of his biographers know where he was for a six week period in September / October 1793.

We also know that while in France, and afterwards, he read what he called ‘the master pamphlets of the day’, and came close to participating in the war of words. 1793 was the year of his unpublished radical pamphlet *A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, in which Wordsworth justified regicide and revolutionary violence and made it clear from his arguments and phraseology that he was a convinced follower of the principles of Tom Paine, the most successful radical propagandist of the age, and the most eloquent voice in *The Revolution Debate in England*. For a while in 1794 he contemplated taking part in radical journalism, and he may even have done so in 1795 during his time in London. If so, he may have become disillusioned by what, in his poem ‘Tintern Abbey’, he called ‘evil tongues / Rash judgments, …the sneers of selfish men / [and] greetings where no kindness is.’

### 1.4 Towards *Lyrical Ballads*

Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy were reunited in Keswick, in the Lake District, in April 1794, where Wordsworth spent the time revising one of his first published poems, ‘An Evening Walk’ (he had also published a poem based on his continental tour with Jones, called *Descriptive Sketches*). Towards the end of 1794 Wordsworth spent his time in Penrith, nursing a friend called Raisley Calvert, who died early in 1795. As an admirer of Wordsworth’s literary powers, Calvert left him a legacy of £900—a generous legacy designed, Wordsworth told his brother, ‘to secure me from want, if not to render me independent’. Wordsworth then spent part of the year in London, mixing in radical circles, including the philosophical anarchist William Godwin (he called on Godwin seven or eight times in February March and April of that year). In September 1795, he and Dorothy moved to Racedown in Dorset, where they were visited by Coleridge in June 1797.

This momentous meeting between two young poets began one of the most productive of literary partnerships. The Wordsworths moved to Alfoxden in Somerset the next month, in July 1797 to enjoy the company of Coleridge. They were visited there by the celebrated political orator, John Thelwall, also a very capable poet, and by August the stream of suspicious visitors to Alfoxden house had attracted the attention of a government spy. A year later, Wordsworth completed ‘Tintern Abbey’, and paid a return visit to John Thelwall.
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