



William Wordsworth

*The Excursion  
and The Recluse*

## About this Book

This is, in effect, the first edition of *The Recluse*. It contains all that Wordsworth wrote for the intended three-part ‘philosophical poem’, rather than for its autobiographical ‘portico’ long known as *The Prelude*.

Completed in 1806, ‘Home at Grasmere’ was published in 1886 as *The Recluse, Part First, Book First*, this being the optimistic title inscribed upon its manuscript. Further composition, in 1808 (principally ‘The Tuft of Primroses’) and 1825–26 (some luminous verses on Nab Well), was also intended for a subsequent Book or Books of *The Recluse, Part First*.

The only instalment of *The Recluse* published in Wordsworth’s lifetime was its second part, *The Excursion* (1814), which Keats considered one of the glories of the age, and Lamb referred to as ‘a day in Heaven’. Nothing is known of Wordsworth’s intentions for *The Recluse, Part Third*, except that it must have addressed the numerous issues left conspicuously unresolved at the end of *The Excursion*.

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William Wordsworth

*The Excursion and The Recluse*

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First published by *Humanities-Ebooks, LLP*,  
Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE.

Cover image, the Langdale Pikes from above the Solitary's Cottage  
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The reading texts are also collected in *The Poems of William Wordsworth: Collected Reading Texts from the Cornell Wordsworth*, 3 vols, edited by Jared Curtis (Humanities-Ebooks, 2009).

A one volume PDF Ebook containing the three volumes and an Addendum is available exclusively from [humanities-ebooks.co.uk](http://humanities-ebooks.co.uk).

ISBN 978-1-84760-342-5 PDF Ebook

ISBN 978-1-84760-343-2 Paperback

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## Preface

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This book contains all that can be confidently assigned to Wordsworth's final conception of his unfinished philosophical poem, 'The Recluse'. Its contents are selected from Jared Curtis's *The Poems of William Wordsworth: Collected Reading Texts from the Cornell Wordsworth*, published by Humanities-Ebooks in 2009.

Writing to James Tobin on 6 March 1798, Wordsworth made his first epistolary reference to 'The Recluse, or Views of Nature, Man and Society' (the poem's working title being bestowed five days later in a letter to James Losh):

I have written 1300 lines of a poem in which I contrive to convey most of the knowledge of which I am possessed. My object is to give pictures of Nature, Man, and Society. Indeed I know not any thing which will not come within the scope of my plan. . . . the work of composition is carved out for me, for at least a year and a half to come.<sup>1</sup>

What became of that grandiose ambition over the next thirty years is too complex a story to follow here. It has been told by John Alban Finch, Mark Reed, James Butler, Jonathan Wordsworth, Sally Bushell, and others in works listed in this book's Select Bibliography.

Essentially, it was to be a poem in three parts, prefaced by a fourth poem of epic length, *The Prelude*. The three Parts of 'The Recluse' proper would have been unified by an attempt to flesh out the remarkable view of mankind's potential outlined in the so-called 'Prospectus to The Recluse', which forms the climax of 'Home at Grasmere' and was published with some revision in the Preface to *The Excursion*.

According to that Preface, 'The Recluse' would have had 'for its principal subject the sensations and opinions of a Poet living in retirement', which account harmonises with Coleridge's judgment,

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1 *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. The Early Years*, 2nd edn, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 212.

in 1804, that ‘I prophesy immortality to his “Recluse”, as the first and finest philosophical poem, if only it be ... a faithful transcript of his own most august and innocent life, of his own habitual feelings and modes of seeing and hearing.’<sup>1</sup> ‘The Recluse, Part First, Book First’, also entitled ‘Home at Grasmere’, was indubitably such a ‘transcript’.<sup>2</sup> It occupied Wordsworth intermittently from 1800 to 1806, spanning most of the period during which *The Prelude* was also composed, which may explain why *The Prelude* pre-empts much of the argument intended for ‘The Recluse’. It is, altogether, one of Wordsworth’s most ecstatic performances, but it proved a very hard act to follow. It has never been clear to anybody how Wordsworth would have tackled another six, seven, or eight Books of ‘The Recluse, Part First’.

In 1808, however, Wordsworth did produce some further pieces of composition, ‘To the Clouds’, ‘The Tuft of Primroses’ and ‘St. Paul’s’, which appear to have been intended for one further ‘Book’ of ‘The Recluse, Part First’. Later still, in 1826, having composed some verses on Nab Well (‘Composed when a probability existed’), Wordsworth told Henry Crabb Robinson that these lines were ‘to be an introduction to a portion of his great poem’ containing ‘a poetical view of water as an element in the composition of our globe’.<sup>3</sup> All four of these shorter pieces, included in this volume, are as edited by Joseph F. Kishel in *The Tuft of Primroses and other Late Poems for ‘The Recluse’* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

To these I have added two further poems. The ‘1300 lines’ referred to in Wordsworth’s letter of March 1798 included ‘a version of ‘The Ruined Cottage’, ‘A Night Piece’, ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’, and ‘The Discharged Soldier’.<sup>4</sup> Of these, ‘The Ruined Cottage’ found a place in Wordsworth’s masterly tripartite version of Margaret’s and

1 *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71), 4: 574.

2 The text of ‘Home at Grasmere’ presented in this volume is that of the Cornell Wordsworth *Home at Grasmere*, edited by Beth Darlington (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

3 Henry Crabb Robinson, *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence*, ed. Thomas Sadler, 3rd edn, 2 vols (London: Macmillan and Co., 1872), 2: 364.

4 Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and ‘The Recluse’* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 5–6.

her narrator's tale in Book I of *The Excursion*, while 'The Discharged Soldier' was assigned to Book IV of *The Prelude*. Since, however, Wordsworth's first conception of 'The Recluse' was clearly dominated by a poetry studying human beings in extreme situations, it seems reasonable to find room in this volume for 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'. And 'A Night Piece', though somewhat extraneous among the '1300 lines', seems like a dress rehearsal for 'To the Clouds' and 'St Paul's'. I have therefore included both of these 'ur-Recluse' poems under the general rubric of 'Poems from the 1798 Recluse'.

'The Recluse, Part Second' was published in 1814 as *The Excursion*. It adopts, as Wordsworth's preface says, 'something of a dramatic form' in narrating, first, the tragedy of Margaret, and then in eight further Books, the attempts of three characters, a Poet (who is and is not Wordsworth), a Wanderer (ditto) and a Pastor, to cure a fourth character, the Solitary (to whom Wordsworth gifts much of his own darkest experience) of his 'dejection' and as the Solitary himself puts it (3: 694) his dependence. In this second 'Part', Wordsworth appears to be responding to Coleridge's somewhat confusing exhortation in September 1799, that apart from, or alongside, or even as part of, writing 'The Recluse', Wordsworth should embark on

a poem, in blank verse, addressed to those, who in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind ... It would do great good, and might form a part of 'The Recluse'.<sup>1</sup>

'The Recluse, Part Third' has not even vestigial existence. Wordsworth confessed to George Ticknor in 1838 that all extant composition for 'The Recluse' was intended for 'Part First' and that 'Part Third' was 'untouched'.<sup>2</sup> It would appear logical to suppose that 'Part Third' must have taken up on personal and philosophical grounds the problems left unresolved in the dialogue of 'Part Second', as indeed the concluding lines of *The Excursion* (9:782–95) suggest, but no sketch is known to have existed. Interestingly, however, Wordsworth

1 *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71), 1: 527.

2 *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years*, 2nd edn, ed. Alan G. Hill, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978–88), 3: 583n.

excuses himself for publishing Part 2 before Part 1 or Part 3 on the grounds that ‘as the second division of the Work was designed to refer more to passing events, and to an existing state of things, than the others were meant to do, more continuous exertion was naturally bestowed upon it, and greater progress made here than in the rest of the Poem’. It may be legitimate to deduce from this way of putting things that ‘Part Third’ might have set out to portray a better ‘state of things’ and to justify the optimism about mankind’s potential indulged so rapturously in ‘Home at Grasmere’. It must also have shown how, as promised in the ‘Prospectus’, to a mind wedded to this world, ‘paradise and groves elysian’ may be ‘a simple produce of the common day’.

‘Home at Grasmere’ itself appears to ground its optimistic faith in a vision or ‘trance’ experienced at Hart-Leap Well, while William and Dorothy were journeying to Grasmere. There they received, or so ‘Home at Grasmere’ claims, ‘The intimation of the milder day / Which is to come, the fairer world than this’. For this reason, ‘Hart-leap Well’, first published in *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), and the only poem mentioned in either ‘Home at Grasmere’ or *The Excursion*, is included here as a poetical epigraph to ‘The Recluse’.

It remains to express my gratitude to Jared Curtis, whose three-volume collection of *The Poems of William Wordsworth: Collected Reading Texts from the Cornell Wordsworth* (Humanities-Ebooks 2009–14) has made possible what is, in effect, this first edition of *The Recluse*, and of course to the editors and publishers of the Cornell Wordsworth. This volume has no ‘editor’, because it has involved no editing.

Richard Gravil, Tirril, 2014

## Hart-leap Well<sup>1</sup>

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Hart-leap Well is a small spring of water, about five miles from Richmond in Yorkshire, and near the side of the road which leads from Richmond to Askrigg. Its name is derived from a remarkable chace, the memory of which is preserved by the monuments spoken of in the second Part of the following Poem, which monuments do now exist as I have there described them.

The Knight had ridden down from Wensley Moor  
 With the slow motion of a summer's cloud;  
 He turn'd aside towards a Vassal's door,  
 And, "Bring another Horse," he cried aloud.

"Another Horse."—That shout the Vassal heard, 5  
 And saddled his best steed, a comely Grey:  
 Sir Walter mounted him; he was the third  
 Which he had mounted on that glorious day.

Joy sparkled in the prancing Courser's eyes;  
 The horse and horseman are a happy pair; 10  
 But, though Sir Walter like a falcon flies,  
 There is a doleful silence in the air.

A rout this morning left Sir Walter's Hall,  
 That as they gallop'd made the echoes roar;  
 But horse and man are vanish'd, one and all; 15  
 Such race, I think, was never seen before.

Sir Walter, restless as a veering wind,  
 Calls to the few tired dogs that yet remain:

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1 This poem is included in the volume because of its privileged mention in *Home at Grasmere*, lines 236-239. The text is from *POems of William Wordsworth, Volume 1*, and is that of *'Lyrical Ballads' and other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

Brach, Swift and Music, noblest of their kind,  
Follow, and up the weary mountain strain. 20

The Knight halloo'd, he chid and cheer'd them on  
With suppliant gestures and upbraidings stern;  
But breath and eyesight fail, and, one by one,  
The dogs are stretch'd among the mountain fern.

Where is the throng, the tumult of the chase? 25  
The bugles that so joyfully were blown?  
—This race it looks not like an earthly race;  
Sir Walter and the Hart are left alone.

The poor Hart toils along the mountain side;  
I will not stop to tell how far he fled, 30  
Nor will I mention by what death he died;  
But now the Knight beholds him lying dead.

Dismounting then, he lean'd against a thorn;  
He had no follower, dog, nor man, nor boy:  
He neither smack'd his whip, nor blew his horn, 35  
But gaz'd upon the spoil with silent joy.

Close to the thorn on which Sir Walter lean'd  
Stood his dumb partner in this glorious act;  
Weak as a lamb the hour that it is yean'd,  
And foaming like a mountain cataract. 40

Upon his side the Hart was lying stretch'd:  
His nose half-touch'd a spring beneath a hill,  
And with the last deep groan his breath had fetch'd  
The waters of the spring were trembling still.

And now, too happy for repose or rest, 45  
Was never man in such a joyful case,  
Sir Walter walk'd all round, north, south and west,  
And gaz'd, and gaz'd upon that darling place.

And turning up the hill, it was at least  
Nine roods of sheer ascent, Sir Walter found 50

Three several marks which with his hoofs the beast  
Had left imprinted on the verdant ground.

Sir Walter wiped his face, and cried, 'Till now  
Such sight was never seen by living eyes:  
Three leaps have borne him from this lofty brow, 55  
Down to the very fountain where he lies.

I'll build a Pleasure-house upon this spot,  
And a small Arbour, made for rural joy;  
'Twill be the traveller's shed, the pilgrim's cot,  
A place of love for damsels that are coy. 60

A cunning artist will I have to frame  
A bason for that fountain in the dell;  
And they, who do make mention of the same,  
From this day forth shall call it Hart-leap Well.

And, gallant brute! to make thy praises known, 65  
Another monument shall here be rais'd;  
Three several pillars, each a rough-hewn stone,  
And planted where thy hoofs the turf have graz'd.

And in the summer-time when days are long  
I will come hither with my paramour, 70  
And with the dancers, and the minstrel's song  
We will make merry in that pleasant bower.

Till the foundations of the mountains fail  
My mansion with its arbour shall endure;  
—The joy of them who till the fields of Swale, 75  
And them who dwell among the woods of Ure."

Then home he went, and left the Hart, stone-dead,  
With breathless nostrils stretch'd above the spring.  
And soon the Knight perform'd what he had said,  
The fame whereof through many a land did ring. 80

Ere thrice the moon into her port had steer'd,  
A cup of stone receiv'd the living well;

## POEMS FROM THE 1798 'RECLUSE'

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