

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Possibilities for Wordsworth

IN 1950, WHEN THE CENTENARY OF WORDSWORTH'S DEATH was celebrated at Princeton, one of the speakers, Lionel Trilling, stated what he took to be a perception current at the time that Wordsworth was "not an intellectual possibility, not attractive." "Intellectual possibility" seems an odd phrase to use about a poet, as if it were somehow a primary determinant of whether the poet could be read with pleasure. Much of Trilling's essay "Wordsworth and the Iron Time" was devoted to comparing Wordsworth's "quietism" with the *Pirke Aboth*, a book of Jewish wisdom-sayings Trilling had been impressed by as a young man, but there was little by way of demonstrating convincingly that, as Trilling himself believed, Wordsworth was still very much alive as a poet. The editor of a recent volume of essays on Wordsworth,¹ Stephen Gill—himself a biographer and editor of the poet—assured us that all this has changed, that since 1950 the biographies, scholarly editions, and shifts in intellectual concern (the "linguistic turn" of theory, the return to history, politics, and society that has situated Wordsworth's poems anew) have combined to make him what Gill calls "a fully 'intellectually possible' figure." Whether this also means that, aside from the scholars and critics in the academy who edit and write about him, Wordsworth is read with eagerness and passion, is another story. When Matthew Arnold wrote his "Memorial Verses" upon Wordsworth's death in 1850, the unanswerable question Arnold asked, now that the poet had gone, was "But who, ah! who, will make us feel?" For Arnold, Wordsworth's ministrations to our feelings was paramount and overwhelming:

He found us when the age had bound
Our souls in its benumbing around;
He spoke, and loosed our heart in tears.
He laid us as we lay at birth
On the cool flowery lap of earth,
Smiles broke from us and we had ease;
The hills were round us, and the breeze
Went o'er the sunlit fields again;
Our foreheads felt the wind and rain.
Our youth return'd; for there was shed
On spirits that had long been dead,

¹ *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. by Stephen Gill (New York, 2003).

Spirits dried up and closely furl'd,
The freshness of the early world.

Such a power was, at least for Arnold, to be described in terms that had nothing to do with “intellectual possibility.” Yet Arnold pre-empted the “feeling” vocabulary so fully that its terms are unlikely to help readers coming to the poems a century and a half later.

To my knowledge no one believed that what we were all waiting for, in order to stimulate fresh interest in Wordsworth’s poetry, was a new biography. Mary Moorman’s meticulous two-volume one of 1957 has all the facts one is likely to require; and Stephen Gill’s shorter, more critically acute one of 1989, is an excellent treatment in under 500 pages. But biographies have to keep coming, evidently, even of a figure like Wordsworth, who—unlike his friend Coleridge and his younger contemporaries Keats, Shelley, and Byron—seems a particularly uninviting subject to read about at length. Juliet Barker, who has previously produced a massive book about the Brontë family, now gives us a biography of Wordsworth originally published in England in 2000.² The American version is streamlined: 548 instead of 961 pages, 160 of which pruned pages consisted of notes. Evidently Ecco Press decided American readers wouldn’t want or need those notes, so it’s impossible to check the source of anything Barker says or quotes—a curious way for a biography to present itself. But the major problem, one that surfaced here and there in the Brontë book, is that although the English blurbs insist how substantial, accessible, and readable is Barker’s work, she has some crucial flaws, such as an absence of literary taste and an inability to listen to her own sentences.

As a recipient of an Oxford doctorate in Medieval History (she is an authority on medieval tournaments), there is no reason why Barker should be versed in English poetry, and this absence is confirmed early on when she describes Wordsworth’s relation to eighteenth-century poet-predecessors: “His favorites were from what is known as the ‘graveyard school,’ poets such as Gray, Chatterton, Collins, Beattie, Young and Thomson, whose work was driven by an affectation of melancholy and musings on the grave.” Such a “school” would surely contain Robert Blair, author of “The Grave” (unmentioned by Barker), but just as surely not Thomson or Beattie or Chatterton. Are Gray’s “Elegy in a Country Churchyard” and Collins’ gloomy musings driven by an “affectation” of melancholy, or could it be the real thing? Barker’s “accessible” writing style is in fact a consistently vulgarized one: when Wordsworth is introduced to his future wife, Mary Hutchinson, “he was instantly bowled over,” and when his sister Dorothy met Coleridge, she was “quite simply, bowled over” by him. We hear that Wordsworth “had fallen head over heels in love with” Annette Vallon on whom he would father a child. We hear also of Coleridge’s “sexual hang-ups” and how,

² WORDSWORTH: A Life, by *Juliet Barker*. The Ecco Press. \$29.95.

apropos of his wife Sarah, “he slapped her down for being narrow-minded.” Barker describes Richardson’s *Clarissa* as “an overpoweringly dull exposition . . . in seven ponderous volumes.” In a rare burst of mischievous play, she calls Wordsworth’s early poem “An Evening Walk. An Epistle; in Verse. Addressed to a Young Lady, from the Lakes of the North of England” as one of the “snappy titles so beloved by eighteenth-century poets.” In Wordsworth’s great preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), she detects only “an aura of elitism and exclusion” and speaks of the writing as “verbose and otiose.”

Her favorite adjective to describe Wordsworth poems she admires is “wonderful,” as with the Westminster Bridge sonnet (“his wonderful hymn to a still and silent London”) or his poem about St. Paul’s, “Press’d with conflicting thoughts of love and fear” (“a wonderful meditative poem”) or “Composed upon an Evening of Extraordinary Splendor and Beauty” (“a wonderful evocation of a sunset”). She calls “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” “quite simply, the greatest William ever wrote.” Maybe so, but surely not quite simply. If you want to find out all the details of Wordsworth’s finances or how his brother John’s ship *The Earl of Agergavenny* sank with her captain aboard, Barker provides them unsparingly and is relentless in tracking every move in Wordsworth’s itinerary year by year. And in case you wanted inside information on Coleridge’s many health problems, the following a is a memorable consequence of the rheumatic fever he suffered in 1800:

When he was eventually carried home in a chaise, he retired once more to his bed, this time with a swollen testicle which, astonishingly, responded to the application of three leeches and a homemade poultice of grated bread mixed up with a strong solution of lead.

This recipe may come in handy in time of need.

No English poet invites parody and satire among his admirers as does Wordsworth. Lewis Carroll’s send-up of “Resolution and Independence” and “We Are Seven” in *Through the Looking-Glass* is unsurpassable; Max Beerbohm’s drawing of a black-froaked old-ladyish clergyman-like gentleman questioning a little girl (“William Wordsworth in the Lake District at Cross Purposes”) is similarly priceless; and the reworking by J. K. Stephen of Wordsworth’s sonnet “Thoughts of a Briton on the Subjugation of Switzerland” (“Two Voices are there; one is of the sea”) can never be quoted enough, especially its first eight-and-a-half lines:

Two voices are there: one is of the deep;
It learns the storm-cloud’s thunderous melody,
Now roars, now murmurs with the changing sea,
Now bird-like pipes, now closes soft in sleep:
And one is of an old half-witted sheep

Which bleats articulate monotony,
 And indicates that two and one are three,
 That grass is green, lakes damp, and mountains steep:
 And, Wordsworth, both are thine . . .

F. W. Bateson, who opened his still lively *Wordsworth: A Reinterpretation* (1954) by quoting Stephen's sonnet, went on to entertain the possibility that the two voices weren't always separate in Wordsworth, thus the sheeplike one couldn't be extirpated by winnowing out the good poems from the bad, as Arnold did in his selection in 1879. Bateson's notion is a plausible one if we think of two of his greatest poems by common consent—"Resolution and Independence" and the Immortality Ode—in both of which passages of great power are juxtaposed with others deficient in such power.

Neither "Resolution" nor the Ode receives anything like critical treatment in the *Cambridge Companion*, as if there were a consensus about each that left no more to say. In fact the book's essays aren't mainly concerned with providing new, revisionary readings of Wordsworth's poems. Two main issues appear to have dominated recent Wordsworth criticism: first the argument as to whether the final, authorized version of the poems should be adhered to, or whether the poems as they were originally published should take precedence. Stephen Gill has led the "originists" when he edited the Oxford Major Works volume in which the poems are arranged chronologically in their original versions, except for *The Prelude* which concludes the volume in its version of 1805, never published in Wordsworth's lifetime.³ The other issue among Wordsworth critics is their sympathy toward or distaste for new historicist revisionism, as most notably practiced by Marjorie Levinson, whose infamous (to my mind) readings of "Tintern Abbey" and "Michael" in terms of what is absent from them (contemporary history, politics, concern for the laboring poor) have generated forceful counterstatements.⁴ This way of reading Wordsworth by looking at what the finished poem has "suppressed" or evaded or sublimated presumably gives the critic license to avoid dealing with the poem the poet in fact actually wrote, with all its actualities of diction and rhythm.

None of the contributors to the *Companion* practices such new historicist kidnappings of poems; yet for all their good sense, their commitment to seeing Wordsworth in relation to larger thematic units—Romanticism, gender and domesticity, the natural world, America—results in slighting matters of poetic technique, and as T. S. Eliot

³ The distinguished textual scholar Jack Stillinger makes the case for the 1850 *Prelude* in *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (New York, 1991). See also Zachary Leader's *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (New York, 1996).

⁴ Levinson's essay on "Tintern Abbey" is in her *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* (New York, 1986). Notable counterstatements are David Ferry's review of Levinson's book (*Studies in Romanticism*, Boston, 1991) and Helen Vendler's "Two Assaults" (in *Wordsworth in Context*, Bucknell University Press, 1992).

reminds us, we cannot say where “technique begins or where it ends.” For example, what is to my mind a still unanswered question, unasked by contributors to the volume, is how Wordsworth, after publishing in 1793 poems in pentameter couplets—“An Evening Walk,” “Descriptive Sketches”—and in Spenserian stanzas—the Salisbury Plain poem that later became “The Female Vagrant” and finally “Guilt and Sorrow”—suddenly, in about 1797, began composing blank verse that is dazzling in its extraordinary invention. Consider lines from “A Night-Piece” (1797) in which a musing traveler is suddenly startled by a natural phenomenon:

he looks up—the clouds are split
 Asunder,—and above his head he sees
 The clear Moon, and the glory of the heavens.
 There, in a black-blue vault she sails along,
 Followed by multitudes of stars, that, small
 And sharp, and bright, along the dark abyss
 Drive as she drives: how fast they wheel away,
 Yet vanish not!—the wind is in the tree,
 But they are silent;—still they roll along
 Immeasurably distant; and the vault,
 Built round by those white clouds, enormous clouds,
 Still deepens its unfathomable depth.

Or consider the following from “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” composed at about the same time:

He travels on, a solitary Man;
 His age has no companion. On the ground
 His eyes are turned, and, as he moves along,
 They move along the ground; and, evermore,
 Instead of common and habitual sight
 Of fields with rural works, of hill and dale,
 And the blue sky, one little span of earth
 Is all his prospect. Thus, from day to day,
 Bow-bent, his eyes for ever on the ground,
 He plies his weary journey; seeing still,
 And seldom knowing that he sees, some straw,
 Some scattered leaf, or marks which, in one track,
 The nails of cart or chariot-wheel have left
 Impressed on the white road,—in the same line,
 At distance still the same.

Both these sequences—and others could be adduced notably from “Tintern Abbey”—exhibit the most delicate subtlety in their handling of

blank verse rhythms. (I quote from Wordsworth's final 1849–50 edition of his poems.) Samuel Johnson's complaint about unrhymed iambic pentameter in Milton, that it was "verse to the eye only," is refuted by these lines of Wordsworth's whose appeal and challenge to the ear is central. The varying of pauses within individual lines, the surprising extensions from one line to the next, the inclusion of full stops in places other than at line ends, all contribute to the movement, the "drive" of the moon and stars of "A Night-Piece" and the "bow-bent" pace of the beggar's weary and prolonged journey.

Any reader of *The Prelude* knows how much Wordsworth owed to Milton, both technically and morally, but one can't account for the distinctiveness of blank verse such as quoted above by ascribing it to the study of Milton's practice. What may be called Wordsworth's dramatic syntax in them has no obvious eighteenth-century antecedents either; we know he read and admired Cowper, but nothing in *The Task* prepares us for Wordsworth's originality. Compared to it the unsubtlety of Coleridge's blank verse in his "Conversation poems" (even though "Frost at Midnight" has a fine ending) is evident. Moreover the contemporaneous blank verse of "The Ruined Cottage" is, in its quiet, unobtrusive behavior, quite distinct from the psychologically energized verse of "Tintern" and the 1798 "Two-Part *Prelude*" as it is now called. Meanwhile at the same time and with his other hand, Wordsworth was turning out poems as unaccountable for as "The Idiot Boy" and others that make up *Lyrical Ballads*. There is astonishing variety in the verse of end-of-the-century Wordsworth, to say nothing of the about-to-come Lucy poems and "Michael."

In the *Companion*, Lucy Newlyn has a good essay treating *The Prelude* as a "deeply Protestant poem" in the dissenting tradition of confessional autobiography of Bunyan, the Quaker George Fox, and John Wesley. Coming fresh from a reading of the poem in its 1805 version, I was struck by something Newlyn doesn't consider: the great disparities in poetic quality between sequences in which the verse is active, alive, vibrant with passionate conviction, and other stretches—most notably in the later books—where one sympathizes with Macaulay who found the poem, for all its fine things, filled also with "dull, flat, prosaic twaddle." Some of the dullness, the flatness, comes when Wordsworth attempts to look back on the growth of his mind and find fit language to describe what happened. A couple of such retrospective accounts occur late in the poem (I quote from the 1850 *Prelude* Macaulay read). In the first he tells Coleridge what his poem has been about:

This narrative, my Friend! hath chiefly told
Of intellectual power, fostering love,
Dispensing truth, and, over men and things,
Where reason yet might hesitate, diffusing
Prophetic sympathies of genial faith.

Or he tells of how his imagination and taste were restored:

Thus moderated, thus composed, I found
 Once more in Man an object of delight,
 Of pure imagination, and of love;
 And, as the horizon of my mind enlarged, . . .
 Knowledge was given accordingly; my trust
 Became more firm in feelings that had stood
 The test of such a trial; clearer far
 My sense of excellence—or right and wrong.

How quickly one's own imperfect mind glazes over in navigating such stuff (what Macaulay would have called "twaddle") as compared with one of the great "spots of time" moments that come thick and fast near the poem's beginning. For example, there is the remembered singing of the bird in the nave of Furness Abbey, which the young Wordsworth has just visited:

Our steeds remounted and the summons given,
 With whip and spur we through the chauntry flew
 In uncouth race, and left the cross-legged knight,
 And the stone-abbot, and that single wren
 Which one day sang so sweetly in the nave
 Of the old church, that—though from recent
 Showers the earth was comfortless, and touched by faint
 Internal breezes, sobbings of the place
 And respirations, from the roofless walls
 The shuddering ivy dripped large drops—yet still
 So sweetly 'mid the gloom the invisible bird
 Sang to herself, that there I could have made
 My dwelling place, and lived for ever there
 To hear such music.

Here, in the language of Milton's note to the second edition of *Paradise Lost*, is a beautiful example of "the sense variously drawn out from one Verse into another," and it has very little to do with the "intellectual power" or "sense of excellence of right and wrong" he claims later in the poem to have increasingly informed his mind.

"Wordsworth was about strange things," Christopher Ricks once wrote in his discussion of the odd genius manifested in another *Prelude* passage. If anything, both Barker's biography and the *Companion* essays, in the process of making him more available to us, make him look less strange, so that an essay or book which confronts the contradictions that gave Wordsworth's great poems their energy would be more than welcome, even at this late date in the critical tradition. It's therefore

unfortunate that there is an egregious omission from the comprehensive list of books and articles mentioned by Keith Hanley in his closing essay, “Textual Issues and a Guide to Further Reading.” The omission—and there is similarly no reference to it in any of the other essays—is a book published nearly a half-century ago, David Ferry’s *The Limits of Mortality: An Essay on Wordsworth’s Major Poems* (1959). This strongly argued, wholly original essay studies the way what Ferry calls “sacramental” and “mystical” attitudes toward nature were at war within the poet, and how Wordsworth’s attempt to demonstrate “Love of Nature Leading to Love of Man” (as he titled the eighth book of *The Prelude*) was not at all the straightforward “progress” toward, in language quoted earlier, “prophetic sympathies of genial faith.” Ferry argues rather that a central and continuing fact of Wordsworth’s temperament was a hostility toward man and his works as representing a disastrous falling away from the nature that had fostered the young Wordsworth “by beauty and by fear,” thus in some way making him unfit for the world and vice versa. “Not a great lover of man but almost a great despiser of him,” Ferry says at one point.

Ferry’s capsule characterization of Wordsworth’s later poetry hasn’t been bettered. Although he still wrote the occasional beautiful poem, mainly, as it continued to pour out, his work exhibited “shocking debilitation”:

a flat and moralistic and not often very passionate adaptation of Christian and classical vocabularies; a tendency to increased garrulity; a soberly cheery optimism about the relations of man and nature, man and God, combined with a sort of peevishness against railroads and a zeal for capital punishment.

Given the force of Wordsworth’s early “mystical” yearnings and combined with increasing pessimism about their possible fulfillment, he turned to “other interests and other attitudes” in which, alas, he couldn’t fully participate. Ferry ends his book with two sentences that on first reading seem almost to be about some other poet than the one Arnold celebrated as the laureate of human feeling: “His genius was his enmity to man, which he mistook for love, and his mistake led him into confusions which he could not bear. But when he banished his confusions, he banished his distinctive greatness as well.” Rather than an overstatement forgivable at the conclusion to a book, it seems to me profoundly true about Wordsworth as well as making that poet very much a possibility, intellectually and otherwise, for twenty-first-century readers.