

*Wordsworth and biography**Stephen Gill*

In Wordsworth's first published poem, 'Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress' (1787), the possessive pronoun 'my' appears five times in the first six lines (*EPF* 396). It was an augury of what was to become habitual practice. It was a practice, however, that evolved in a very important way over the formative period of Wordsworth's writing life. Although the name and status of the author were blazoned on the title page of his next publication, *An Evening Walk*, in 1793, the 'I' of that poem, the voice of the loco-descriptive wanderer, revealed little about him. When 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey' appeared in the anonymously published *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, however, the unidentified 'I' by contrast invited, almost insisted on, the piecing together of inferences about the actual childhood and youth of this real person, the speaker of this poem – whoever he might be. Within two years, the title page of the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* gave that information away. The man roaming the banks of the Wye five years after a first visit there, a man who had suffered in the city but was now ready to announce to the world the foundation of the soul of all his moral being, a man eager to share his most vital experience with his dear, dear Sister, was the William Wordsworth whose status as a graduate of St John's College, Cambridge, had been advertised on the title page of *An Evening Walk*.

Once the mask of anonymity had been discarded, the autobiographical foundations of this poet's work became ever more apparent. The weighty Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) offered a bold analysis of the ills of contemporary society, not as a poetic fiction but as the firmly held opinion of the 'I', William Wordsworth, and this intervention in prose in public debate was complemented by a lengthy introduction to the pastoral 'Michael', which explained how it was that the poet had come to choose subjects from 'low and rustic life' to serve in his campaign to rectify public taste. The identity of this poet – not his name but his nature, his concerns, his habitual attitudes – emerged more fully with each new publication. The expanded Preface to the next edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1802 revealed that

he entertained the loftiest vision of the nature and function of the poetic vocation, that of binding 'together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time'. The Poet, it was claimed, 'rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him' (*Prose* 1: 137–41). Evidence for this claim was forthcoming in Wordsworth's next collection, *Poems, in Two Volumes* in 1807 in the form of a cluster of lyrics presented as 'Moods of My Own Mind'. Not surprisingly, Francis Jeffrey amongst others became impatient of the pretension of this Mr Wordsworth and his Laker friends. It was not just the lyric poems with their *faux* simplicity that were an offence; it was the character and situation of their maker that offended, a self-appointed moralist who insisted on offering nostrums for the greater good of society at large from the standpoint of rustic seclusion.<sup>1</sup> And from Jeffrey's point of view there was worse to come.

Wordsworth was deeply wounded by the reception of *Poems, in Two Volumes* and he fell silent, publishing no new collection of verse for some years. When he did issue new work, however, *The Excursion* of 1814, it was much more than a demonstration in thousands of lines of blank verse that this poet was resilient and had not been silenced by critical hostility. It was a public announcement, through a prose Preface and a lengthy manifesto in verse presented as a 'Prospectus' to a newly announced philosophical poem, *The Recluse*, that its author conceived of himself as a prophet for his generation and that his life was being shaped by honouring his vocation and the holy service it entailed. The poem, so it was claimed, came into being from a specific choice of life and prolonged self-examination. The poet had retired to his native mountains in the hope of producing literary work that might live; he had conducted a rigorous examination of his own life to date; the present offering was only a part of a grand project. And the ambition of that project was sensational: to reconceive Paradise; to celebrate the wedding of 'the discerning intellect of Man' and 'the goodly universe'; to create verse of 'genuine insight' that might shed with 'star-like virtue' 'benignant influence'. It appeared, moreover, that all of the poet's minor work was vitally connected to the larger design, to the completion of which the author's remaining years would be dedicated. It was an extraordinary declaration of purpose from a poet who clearly had a sense of the shape of his own life and of its significance artistically. Here was someone who clearly thought of himself as equal and successor to Milton, 'the Bard, / Holiest of Men'.<sup>2</sup>

To some degree the Preface to *The Excursion* did lift the veil on its creator. By 1814 the location of Wordsworth's 'native mountains' was no mystery and the publication in 1800 of poems such as 'Michael' and 'The Brothers',

clearly set amongst them, would have provided a rough date for the poet's retirement there 'several years ago'. It would not have been difficult either for anyone in touch with contemporary letters to work out who was the 'dear Friend, most distinguished for his knowledge and genius . . . to whom the Author's Intellect is deeply indebted' and some idea of the nature of the autobiographical poem referred to in the Preface to *The Excursion* would have been gained by attentive readers of Coleridge's *The Friend*, in which excerpts from it were published in 1809. What none but those closest to him knew, however, was that private engagement with the biography so tantalizingly glanced at in the 1814 Preface had preoccupied Wordsworth throughout the period in which his public persona was being created – that is, 1793 to 1814 – and that a great deal of other poetry existed, unpublished, in which the poet examined 'the origin and progress of his own powers'.

In March 1798, Dorothy Wordsworth reported that her brother had revised a recent composition, *The Ruined Cottage*, so radically that the character of the Pedlar who relates the story of the sad victim Margaret, had become 'a very, certainly the *most*, considerable part of the poem' (EY 199). Working through a large body of blank verse – some of which would eventually find lodging in *The Excursion* and *The Prelude* – to depict the character of the Pedlar, Wordsworth was in fact drawing together ideas about the formation of a child of Nature, of one nurtured by her ministry of love and fear, which led via 'Tintern Abbey' directly into his first attempt at avowedly autobiographical self-examination – the so-called *Two-Part Prelude* of 1799.<sup>3</sup>

This poem, addressed to Coleridge, explores how infant consciousness is formed and developed; the place of childhood joys and fears in the creation of the adult; what it means that some of them are remembered into later life as restorative 'spots of time'; how it might be that the influence of natural objects could give succour to the human spirit at a time of 'dereliction and dismay' (1799 *Prelude* Part 2, line 487). It is a remarkable, highly original achievement, which furnished Wordsworth with the language to analyze as well as evoke his most important experiences and which also beckoned him to push still more adventurously into a territory of poetic subject matter which he had only begun to enter so far.

The *Two-Part Prelude* opens with a question, 'Was it for this?' It is a question which serves as the unspoken introduction to the next autobiographical exploration, *Home at Grasmere*, for in this poem Wordsworth attempted to grapple with the implications of the question, now posed afresh, in effect as, 'What am I doing here?' At the end of 1799 Wordsworth had at last settled, taking a cottage with his sister, Dorothy, in Grasmere,

amongst the 'native mountains' where he was to spend the rest of his life. But was retirement there a retreat from social pressures and political engagement or an expression of confidence in his poetic vocation? Recognition that he had been granted 'genuine wealth / Inward and outward' (*HG* 42; lines 90–1) surely demanded something more than acknowledgement and thanks. Exactly: because 'the boon is absolute' and 'surpassing grace' (*HG* 44; lines 122) had been given beyond that known 'among the bowers / Of blissful Eden' (*HG* 44; lines 123–4), the chosen son must reciprocate with work worthy of the place, the people, and of his own holy calling. Declaring, 'Yet in this peaceful Vale we will not spend / Unheard-of days, though loving peaceful thoughts; / A Voice shall speak, and what will be the Theme?' (*HG* 98–100; lines 956–8), the poet concludes his celebration of homecoming with a manifesto of poetic intent. The answer to the question, 'what will be the Theme?', couched in nearly a hundred lines of impassioned blank verse, makes huge claims about the poet's vision of a new Paradise, but they were not claims which he chose to broadcast then and for the moment work on the greater philosophic poem, *The Recluse*, of which *Home at Grasmere* was supposed to be the first book, faltered. Wordsworth was writing and publishing lyric poems: privately he was also expending enormous energy on yet further autobiographical writing.

When work resumed on what would eventually be called *The Prelude*, it was to expand the poem's historical reach well beyond that of the 1799 two books. Coverage included Wordsworth's years at Cambridge, 1797–90, his two sojourns in France, 1790–2, his life in London and the West Country, 1793–8, with certain experiences highlighted, such as his crossing of Salisbury Plain. Between early 1804 and mid 1805 Wordsworth composed thousands of lines of autobiographical blank verse. It was, he confessed to Sir George Beaumont in May 1805 as he was nearing the end, 'a thing unprecedented in literary history that a man should talk so much about himself' (*EY* 586). Perhaps not quite unprecedented, but certainly astonishing. Why did he do it?

For a possible answer one needs to return to the question with which the *Two-Part Prelude* began, 'Was it for this?' A deft rhetorical figure, yes, but one acutely relevant to Wordsworth's situation in 1799. By the end of the summer of 1798 the poet who had just written 'Tintern Abbey' had recognized his vocation. It was to speak to his generation through a philosophic poem of majestic ambition: 'My object is to give pictures of Nature, Man, and Society. Indeed I know not of any thing which will not come within the scope of my plan' he told James Tobin in a letter of 6 March 1798 (*EY* 212). So the answer to 'Was it for this / That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved / To

blend his murmurs with my Nurse's song?' (1799 *Prelude* Part 1, lines 1–3), was at one level a confident yes. The aspirant poet had recognized his calling and identified what would surely be a life's work.

But a confident answer to the question on one level co-existed with troubled self-questioning on another. This was the vocation, but could the poet be certain it was not a delusion? He was 28 years old. What authority did he have to pronounce on 'Nature, Man, and Society'? Clearly he would have to draw on his own experiences, but which? And how could they provide a ground for assurance in his calling and choice of life?

The mass of Wordsworth's autobiographical blank verse shows him making the attempt 'in his poetry to take full possession of his own life' – *for a purpose*.<sup>4</sup> This last phrase is important. The poet who could announce his intentions so confidently in the summer of 1798 already knew (or thought he knew) what his purpose in life now was; what he was not sure about was how he had come to that knowledge and why he felt so secure in it. In repeated attempts at autobiographical modeling, Wordsworth sought to work it out – that is, to understand how his own powers had come into being.

The *Two-Part Prelude* picks up from ideas formulated to account for the authority of the Pedlar in *The Ruined Cottage*. In the first part the poet's childhood is evoked, its joys and fears, to convey a sense of how the coarser pleasures of boyish days and their glad animal movements feed imaginative growth and emotional well-being. In the second, the development of consciousness, from the babe at the mother's breast to the youth rhapsodically joining in the song of the One Life, is traced as prelude to a lengthy passage (1799 *Prelude* Part 2, lines 465–96) in which the poet, affirming his 'more than Roman confidence' in human nature, even 'in this time / Of dereliction and dismay' (lines 489, 486–7), declares:

The gift is yours,  
Ye Mountains! Thine, O Nature! thou hast fed  
My lofty speculations, and in thee  
For this uneasy heart of ours I find  
A never-failing principle of joy  
And purest passion.

(lines 491–6)

The lines are amongst the most important Wordsworth ever wrote, but their meaning is not self-evident. How can mountains feed speculation and provide never-failing principles, one might ask? The Wordsworth dedicated to the work of *The Recluse* knew from his own experience that they did, but quite how he had come to that certainty demanded further investigation.

The evolution of the autobiographical poem from two books to five and finally to thirteen tracks it.

The model established in the *Two-Part Prelude* consisted of an account of development from babyhood to late youth followed by a jump directly to the poet's frame of mind in 1798–9. But passing over the years 1787 to 1798, which is what this model does, elides the most turbulent years of Wordsworth's life, the experiences which formed the mature man. The thirteen-book *Prelude* makes good the elision and in so doing offers an explanation of how the poet came to be possessed of a 'never-failing principle of joy'. The impact of academic life on the youthful imagination, of London, of returning home and of foreign travel – all of these topics and more fill out the portrait of the poet in youth, but what matters most is the way in which the years 1792 to 1797 are presented. Wordsworth's engagement with national politics as war with France is declared in 1793, his sense of bitter alienation from his own country and countrymen, his clinging to false hopes and eventual despair, and finally his restoration not just to intellectual and emotional equilibrium but to a sense of vocation, all of these topics are shaped as a drama of Fall and Redemption. The agents of redemption are human – primarily Dorothy Wordsworth – but also, and crucially, Nature, as her ministry of love and fear is recalled in never-fading 'spots of time'. The poem ends with moving recollections of the *annus mirabilis* of 1798 and *Lyrical Ballads* and the rededication of Coleridge and himself as fellow labourers in the task of nothing less than mankind's redemption. By the end of the thirteen-book poem, Wordsworth had made sense of the current of his life that had led him to *The Recluse* and retirement to his native mountains, 'with the hope of being enabled to construct a literary Work that might live' (*Excursion* 38).

*The Prelude* is a magnificent achievement, but Wordsworth's examination of the pattern and meaning of the formative years of his life did not end with the completion of the poem on the 'Growth of a Poet's Mind' (the subtitle to *The Prelude* in its posthumously published form in 1850). In *The Excursion* (1814), the only part of *The Recluse* published, Wordsworth dramatized the encounter between three figures, the Poet, the Wanderer, and the Solitary. The first two are what Wordsworth thought himself to be now – a poet and a wisdom figure – but the Solitary clearly represents all that he could see that he might have become. Disappointed by the failure of political hope, battered by life's hurts and losses, the Solitary has retreated to the Lake District. Surrounded by the beauties of Nature, he is neither healed nor strengthened by them and it is the Wanderer's task to try to alleviate his despondency. What is very striking is that in Book Four, to

provide the Wanderer with persuasive formulations about the moral dimension to the Active Universe, Wordsworth returned to blank verse that he, Wordsworth, had laboured over when the character of the Pedlar was first conceived many years earlier. Some of that verse had found its way into *The Prelude*. Now some more of it was being drawn on for *The Excursion*.<sup>5</sup> Unpublished work of 1798 comes together with published work in 1814. It was a conjunction that marked the end of the most productive years of Wordsworth's sustaining meditation on his own life. As if he recognized that fact, he issued a year later his first collected poetical works. The *Poems* of 1815 consist of two handsome volumes, containing all the lyric poetry to date and a new Preface to complement the long familiar prefatory material from *Lyrical Ballads*. They bear the authority of a poet who at last knows he has arrived.

### Notes

1. For Jeffrey's campaign against Wordsworth in the *Edinburgh Review* from 1802 to 1814, see *CH* 153–9, 185–201, 224–9, 381–404.
2. Quotations from the Preface to *The Excursion* (1814) and from the lines generally referred to as the 'Prospectus' to *The Recluse* (*Excursion*, 38–41).
3. This title was never used by Wordsworth. *The Prelude* was the title given to the poem in fourteen books by his executors when it was published in 1850.
4. The phrasing is Robert Rehder's in *Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 43.
5. Lines which describe the Pedlar as a 'chosen son' (*RC* 46) were incorporated into *The Prelude* (1805), Book 3, lines 122–67, now referring to the poet himself at Cambridge, but not, of course, published in his lifetime. Passages of verse which appeared in revised form in 1814 as *The Excursion*, Book 4, lines 1207–71; Book 8, lines 203–305, 315–32; Book 9, lines 1–26, 128–52, were all written in 1798.