

Introduction

ALTHOUGH ‘THE LURE OF a general theory appears too tempting to resist’, this reading of Wordsworth’s poetry tries to avoid that temptation.¹ From critics who have adopted other methods I have gained insights that I would have been happy to consider.² But had I thus engaged, I would have written something nearer a history of Wordsworth criticism than a book on his poetry. I also know that the principle or method I have tried to adopt may be considered a theory.³ If so, it is this: that poems will provide most of their pleasure, as well as share most of their insights, principally by reading and reflection, by establishing connections between different poems – not only by the same author – and by listening to what the author says, if anything, about their own poetry and that of others. Nevertheless, there are many poems for which we have little more than the poem itself, and which must therefore stand by themselves. In short, I am wary of importing theories derived from other disciplines.

In this book there are two principal exceptions to my use of this renewed method.⁴ It depends, in some measure, on biographical sources that tell us of the states of mind that might have informed Wordsworth’s poems. For instance, it would be difficult to realize all the implications of *Resolution and Independence* without knowing something about his relationship with Coleridge in 1802, and their wholly different attitudes to the impasse that both then faced.

¹ Seamus Perry, ‘Coleridge, the Return to Nature, and the New Anti-Romanticism: An Essay in Polemic’, *Romanticism on the Net*, Vol. 4 (November 1996), # 26.

² Like the devil, these theories are legion; but unlike those that possessed the sufferer in St Mark, they are not coexistent, but serial, and each requires a separate act of exorcism, the next usually trying to push the previous over the cliff.

³ Christopher Ricks discusses the distinctions between theory and principle in the *LRB*, Vol. 3, no. 7 (16 April 1981).

⁴ In effect, practical criticism, resurgent in respect of more recent theory: ‘New Historicism is considerably dated now and some revival of interest in close reading, of formalism and prosody for poetic meaning, is more up to date’ (Peter Larkin, in an email, 9 March 2022).

More importantly, the premise of this reading is that Wordsworth and Coleridge wanted to reunite what they perceived as divided – the power of mind and the power of nature – a division Coleridge attributed to Descartes. Wordsworth came to realize that in his childhood and youth he had had some experience of that unity, subsequently lost. To recover a power reinstating that union was the principal impetus of his work, and of the *Ode* in particular.

Thus a reading of no more than the poems is modified by reference to a biographical and cultural history.⁵ As Coleridge said of Newton, any system of thought dependent on the passivity of mind, that is, originating principally from the information of the senses, is likely to be false in itself (*CL* II 709). Independently of the impressions of sense, Wordsworth, like Coleridge, believed that the mind has its own truths, which he considered powers not concepts. Methods of interpretation that forget this are unlikely to do his work full justice.

A Philosophical Framework

What I take as the foundations of Wordsworth's thinking, and the primary impetus of his poetry, are set out in the first chapter, beginning with the particular importance he attached to the words 'intelligible' and 'unintelligible'. Aristotle's works bequeathed to European culture the notion that nature could be fully understood not primarily by observation, but through certain general principles – which he described as the four causes.⁶ Doubts about the validity of Aristotle's methods grew throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, coming to a head in the work of Copernicus, Descartes, Bacon and others – who, in essence, all proposed that the physical world should be understood by observation, not through the conception of causes and categories. An old word, reason, was put to a new purpose, quite different from the syllogistic logic inherited from Aristotle. The empirical laws thus discovered challenged the Aristotelian premise that intellectual conceptions could explain the physical world. This was the beginning of the soul and body, mind and nature distinction formalized by Descartes. The new method

⁵ For a discriminate evaluation of New Historicism see the Introduction to Nick Roe's *The Politics of Nature* (Basingstoke, 2002). For an example of its discriminate use, see Tim Fulford's *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1815-1845*, Chapter 2, 'The Politics of Landscape' (Pennsylvania, 2019). For a subtle dismantling of New Historicism, see Seamus Perry's 'An Essay in Polemic'.

⁶ For a succinct resumé of the four causes, see <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-natphil/>.

was exciting – it promised to understand ‘the great automaton of the world, by observing how one part moves another’⁷ – something we still believe. A group of theologians, the Cambridge Platonists, initially took up Cartesian methods, but soon spotted a serious flaw, evident in Patrick’s remark: separating the mind from the workings of nature, it led to a mechanical view of nature wholly at odds with the powers and ideas they attributed to God – wisdom, grace, justice and freedom among others. God thus became the maker of a world extraneous to his being, which functioned perfectly well in his absence. Theists were untroubled, satisfied with God as creator, asking no more. But God *ab extra*, set apart from his creation, not *ab intra*, or the power by which his creation lived, disturbed the Cambridge Platonists. Yet they were not willing to abandon the reason that was proving itself such a success in understanding the material world.

They therefore posited a deeper function of that power which, perhaps deliberately, they did not distinguish by a separate term. They asserted that reason was also the root of spiritual truths and in accord with divine revelation, claiming it was continuous with Cartesian reason, and therefore the life of the mind (or God) had a potential presence in nature. Then, by various modes of mediation, of which Cudworth’s ‘plastic nature’ is the best-known example, God was understood as a power in the created world, not left outside twiddling his thumbs – or, as my wife put it, playing on his Xbox.

The principles behind this massive and confusing claim were wholeheartedly adopted by Wordsworth and Coleridge. On the one hand there is deductive and inductive reason, ratiocination, the kind of logic we use daily, which applied to the observation of phenomena educes what we now call the laws of nature. On the other is the belief that the laws of nature are at one with the qualities of mind we associate with God, that the truths or ideas of that mind in some manner inform the being of nature. That now seems barely comprehensible to us, and we are astonished when we hear Wordsworth remembering that he gave a moral life to stones, saw them feel or linked them to some feeling (1805 III 124 ff.). What possible link can there be between the ratiocination that Coleridge called the Understanding, and the Reason that he, Wordsworth and the Cambridge Platonists all associated with God?

The answer lies in mathematics, specifically geometry. It works something like this: the mind can intuit the theorems of geometry without

⁷ Simon Patrick, *A Brief Account of the new Sect of Latitude-Men together with some reflections upon the New Philosophy* (London, 1662), p. 12.

beginning with observation or reliance on the senses. Once formalized, those intuitions are unalterable and permanent truths. Derived *from* the mind, or what Wordsworth called 'pure intelligence', they are truths *of* the mind. They are also truths that help predict or explain the behaviour of natural bodies. So the intuitions of the mind may reveal, at least in part, the laws of nature. Wordsworth speaks of meditating 'Upon the alliance of those simple, pure / Proportions and relations, with the frame / And laws of Nature' (1805 VI 143-46). If that alliance holds good for one mode of intuition, why not of another? Why not look in nature for 'the ideas of ... eternity, freedom, will, absolute truth, of the good, the true, the beautiful, the infinite' – 'the *peculia* of our humanity'? Partly because theorems are not ideas, though Coleridge acknowledged that he initially conflated the two (*FI* 177). Partly because it was simply a step too far, although Wordsworth's willingness to find morals in stones and sermons in everything was an indication of how far he was willing to go.

They both retreated a little, and instead of searching for exact relations between mind and nature, they looked to the idea of a common power, probably not dissimilar to the search that took Cudworth to plastic nature. However, a key feature of the highest Reason, as Wordsworth called it, by which it differs fundamentally from intuitive reason, is that it is a power existing only in the moment of disclosure – that it is always a power and never a state – never an argument won or an intuition verified. Although Wordsworth imagined it might be a continuous power, his experience of it was always momentary. Nor is it a power fully within the voluntary control of the individual. It must be willed in some sense, but requires a patient waiting for 'the vision and the faculty divine', and if it comes at all it comes athwart our consciousness at surprising moments, and is habitually suppressed by the dominance of the senses. Like all power, it is known through its effect, principally experienced as feeling – or the lack of it, as Wordsworth so plangently put it in the *Ode*, 'I see, not feel'. And for Wordsworth, as for Coleridge, the world is intelligible if imbued with that power, and unintelligible if not – 'blank' or 'barren' as they separately said. To both of them there was no power greater than Reason, and Imagination was but 'reason in her most exalted mood' – a phrase quoted several times in this book.⁸

If that power lives in nature, then one might expect it to be expressed by nature. To what degree was a matter Coleridge and Wordsworth debated. Nevertheless, how a more or less singular power informs the

⁸. 1805 XIII 167-70.

infinite variety of sense impressions is one of the principal questions that Wordsworth's poetry asks. He constantly looked for that unity, and was distressed when he saw the reasoning of 'minute analysis' looking not for the single power common to all phenomena, but 'still dividing, and dividing still / Break down all grandeur'.⁹ On several occasions, Wordsworth characterized that grandeur or singular power as 'infinity' – a remarkable assertion in itself – but astonishing when he declared that in its absence there is no poetry.¹⁰ The chapter closes with a consideration of how the idea of the infinite and the existence of the phenomenal might relate.

Patterns

With the framework of Wordsworth's thought in some measure established, the rest of the book can be summarized more succinctly. The debate between the powers of the mind, the powers of nature, and the value that can and can't be attached to sense impressions, is the essence of Chapter 2, which looks at Expostulation and Reply and The Tables Turned. I have taken these two short, even apparently slight poems as primary exemplars of Wordsworth's quarrel with himself because I think they epitomize the problems he faced. He affirmed their importance by presenting them as the opening poems of the two-volume *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800. Stephen Gill noted that The Tables Turned 'is so central that reference from it could be made to almost all of Wordsworth's mature works' (*MW* 691). Such authorities are good enough for me.

Chapter 3, on Tintern Abbey, follows the deepening of this debate, finding what was tentative in The Tables Turned now more clearly espoused, and also delineates some patterns of thought structural to Wordsworth's poetry: the belief that love of nature leads to love of man; that there is a human form sublime, and also 'something more sublime', transcending mortality; that, paradoxically, suppression of the senses is essential to seeing into the life of things; that the memories of childhood represent an ideal condition to be recovered; and less evident, that his assertion of belief or experience is followed by doubt, which is then followed by a re-expression of faith in similar but less assertive terms.¹¹ This is a

⁹ RC; additions to MSD, pp. 373-74.

¹⁰ *The Diary, Reminiscences and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson* (London, 1869), vol. II, p. 22.

¹¹ See Alan Rawes's reference to Susan Wolfson's *Questioning Presence* in his 'Romantic Form and New Historicism', in his *Romanticism and Form* (Basingstoke, 2007), pp. 99-100.

pattern central to the Ode. And as Wordsworth felt it was written in that spirit, Tintern Abbey is discussed as a five-part ode.

Chapter 4 pauses to find the pattern beginning with love of nature, through the sublime of man, to something more sublime, in several other poems. As mentioned above Wordsworth asserts that the truths of geometry, and of intuitive reason, are the laws of nature; and yet they also pass beyond nature, surpassing life, to a world out of space and time, an independent world created by 'pure intelligence'. Euclid's *Elements*, truths not limited to space and time, provide the 'purest bond' for the wedding of man to man. These truths are the foundation of every act of nameless, unremembered kindness. How the beauty of nature, or 'Such stores as silent thought can bring', arising from a 'wise passiveness', leads to compassion for our fellows, and may then pass through all nature to rest with God, is traced out in three of Wordsworth's archetypal figures: the Discharged Soldier, Simon Lee and Margaret. Finally, the Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree warn of the tragedy ensuing if this intermediate stage towards something more sublime is bypassed.

Principles

The next two chapters first consider how the poem gained its 1815 subtitle – 'Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' – and then the nature of those intimations and the validity of the recollections. Wordsworth's idea of immortality cannot be understood unless one understands his attitude to mortality – which is pretty ruthless – for him there was no resurrection of the body or of the self. One must take his hints – not a declaration of what immortality is, but 'intimations', suggestive only, not assertive or dogmatic. Despite the heaping of much critical doubt upon them, past and present, Coleridge included, Wordsworth hung on to the value of his recollections – indeed, in their absence one might wonder what else he could have hung on to. They are usually regarded as idiosyncratic, something few others if any have experienced. Yet they are forcefully substantiated by the work of Thomas Traherne, a poet Wordsworth could not have read as his poems were only discovered and published early in the twentieth century. Traherne's thinking was closely allied to that of the Cambridge Platonists, further evidence of their otherwise untraceable influence on Wordsworth. Chapter 6 outlines how Traherne's progress – from childhood recollections, to a subsequent loss of vision, to a proposed means of recovery, and so a return to Paradise – matches and supports

that of Wordsworth.¹² Perhaps stemming from a lost tradition, that progress is much more substantial than any parallels with Vaughan.

The Poetry of Crisis

In 1802, the year of his marriage, Wordsworth had a crisis, or several crises, the most serious of which is epitomized in the first four stanzas of the *Ode*, written in late March. He could not find in himself the power that he believed was the life of nature; equally, nature appeared beautiful but powerless. He could see the beauty but could not feel the power. His long-hoped-for marriage of mind and nature had become a divorce. Paradise was as lost as ever it was. After a brief discussion of the preliminary crises, and the grouping of the poems of 1802 in relation to each – of which his impending marriage and his relationship with Dorothy was the most important – this chapter reads the apparently modest poems about flowers, birds and butterflies as Wordsworth trying to reconcile, or find a relationship between, the divine and the terrestrial, between heaven and earth – an analogy of the mind and nature debate. These poems are much more than a rest and a ‘refreshment’ from his long labour on *The Recluse*. They are his struggle with profoundly conflicting impulses that will both inform and find a degree of resolution in the *Ode*.

Reading the Ode

The chapters in this section are more or less self-explanatory. That on origins begins with the first mention of the *Ode*, an entry in Dorothy’s journal, its relationship with Coleridge’s Verse Letter and the debate the two men had about how to cope with the impasse both faced. Chapter 10, on verse, grammar and imagery, discusses how surface simplicity belies profundity of intent, that we should not be deceived into thinking that the high rhetoric is only bombast or marvellous, meaningless music. The mostly plain declarative sentences almost always present plain, uncomplicated images – for instance ‘I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng’ – which gain their significance in relation to their use elsewhere in Wordsworth’s poetry – something considered in more

¹² A re-creation of or a return to Paradise is a vision central to the works of both poets, a vision embedded in seventeenth-century thought, as evident in Milton’s two epic titles, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. A brief survey of the pervasiveness of the idea in all circles of seventeenth-century life can be found in Richard Wilmott’s *The Voluble Soul*, chapter 3, (Cambridge, 2021).

detail in Chapter 11. The chapter on competing forces first discusses Wordsworth's conflicting attitudes to the notices of sense in the *Ode*, reiterating some of what was discussed in 'Patterns', then the syncopated rhythms of lamentation and celebration, finally outlining what I take as the tripartite structure of the poem – loss, analysis and recovery – discussed separately in the three following chapters. The last chapter of this section considers the last stanza of the *Ode*, and how its resolution follows the suggested patterns of Wordsworth's thought.

Looking Forward

This is a speculative section, a sketchy potted history, which looks forward from the completion of the *Ode* and of *The Prelude* to Wordsworth's Victorian reception, and thence to his influence on twentieth-century poetry. It first considers Wordsworth's wayward publication record and the peculiar organization of his poems, and its influence, or lack of it, on the next generation of poets; then suggests a method of reading his poetry based on the patterns and principles earlier established, and how differently his work might have been received had he coordinated composition and publication; finally proposing that that failure, via the Victorians, led to Eliot's serious misreading of Wordsworth, and so to his writing of neo-romantic odes. That brief conclusion may be developed in a future book, which will focus on the idea of the Word in the writings of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hopkins and Eliot.

A Note to the Reader

I doubt that many readers of academic books begin at the beginning and work through to the end. Each section of this book will more or less stand alone, and therefore I have permitted myself some repetition of quotations and ideas across the sections. There are also repetitions, principally of ideas, within chapters – largely the result of my own struggle with those ideas, but perhaps useful as a form of reinforcement.

A very long and careful examination of the *Ode*, and several other poems, may help reveal layers of latent meaning, but it also destroys elusive qualities that can only come from the reading or recitation that make a poem the poem it is. Therefore I advise readers to take away as much as they find valuable in this book, then let it sink into the mind forgotten, returning to the poems. And if on listening to the *Ode* they weep as Philip Larkin wept – dangerously – while driving down a motorway, then it is doing the work it should.

The titles of poems are not in inverted commas, a convention I don't feel necessary. Very occasionally there might be a confusion – as between The Leech-gatherer, and the leech-gatherer, or the ancient mariner, and The Ancient Mariner, but they can usually be thus distinguished. On the other hand, I have decided to italicize the *Ode*, so as not to confuse it with other odes. Inverted commas are retained where first lines are titles.

Much of this book was written during the 2020-22 lockdown, without access to a library. So references are not always to standard works, and quite often to online sources. As long as readers can find the quotation, then I think, whatever the mode of reference, it has served its purpose. Poems are given solely by their titles, Dorothy's Grasmere journal by date, and the Fenwick Notes simply as *FN*.

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Overall, what do I think I have done? At best I have connected the principles of Wordsworth's thinking to that of a small group of seventeenth-century theologians, who reacted against the leading method of European thought, taking exception to the division of mind and nature. They were subsequently dismissed to the backwaters of cultural history. Nonetheless my suggestion is that, whatever the mode of transmission, their thought is the informing power of both Wordsworth's and Coleridge's romanticism. I have traced that mode of thinking in some detail through Wordsworth's poetry, how that poetry failed to have the influence it could have had, and consequently how that failure affected the history of English poetry. At worst, I have presented close readings of several of Wordsworth's best known poems, readings which successful or not, more or less free of literary theories, could furnish material for essays and classroom discussion.

Finally, I know that some of the chapters that follow involve quite close reading – particularly that on Tintern Abbey. Any struggle the reader may have reflects the struggle I had in the writing.