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William Wordsworth, the Worldly Recluse

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Keywords

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Abstract

The literary career of William Wordsworth (1770-1850) spans nearly sixty years, charting not only his evolution from disaffected radical to Victorian sage, but also the events and changes that shaped his generation, and ultimately the British nation. At once a poet of the Lake District and, from 1843 onwards, the Poet Laureate, Wordsworth explored the concept of sociability on both local and national levels. His engagement with public debates throughout his life highlights the political tension that informs Wordsworthian sociability, which is tied to notions of domesticity, community, and nation-building.

In a letter of 27 October 1818 to Richard Woodhouse, John Keats famously distanced himself from ‘the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime.’¹ In coining the phrase, Keats initiated a tradition of regarding Wordsworth as a solitary, if not self-involved, poet. The poems for which he is best remembered, such as ‘Daffodils’ or *The Prelude*, tend to confirm this opinion. Other contemporaries were keen to emphasise Wordsworth’s idiosyncrasies. From the publication of *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807) onwards, Francis Jeffrey, a prominent critic of the *Edinburgh Review*, relentlessly excoriated Wordsworth in his reviews over his singular style and choice of themes. Even the more flattering portrait (pictured above) by Benjamin Haydon depicts him as a man absorbed in his own musings.

Wordsworth’s contemporaries, whether sympathetic or hostile, tended to cast him as a solitary, but the representations of Wordsworth that they passed on to subsequent generations of readers overlook the place that sociability holds in his life and works. Sociability serves at once as a poetic resource, a concept in his prose writings, and a way of mapping his career.

During the intellectual and political ferment of the 1790s, Wordsworth travelled to revolutionary France twice – in 1790 and 1791 – where he moved in revolutionary circles and came to embrace republicanism, which he later recorded in books VI and IX-X of *The Prelude*. When he returned to London in 1792, he associated with supporters of radicalism. Subsequent years reflect his revolutionary sympathies, which were partly guided by his acquaintance with the philosopher William Godwin and his influential *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793). Wordsworth came close to participating directly in the pamphlet war that was then raging in Britain: he wrote, but did not publish, the vitriolic *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* (1793), in which he defended the French Revolution in the wake of the Terror; in the same year, he wrote *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, a poem of social and political protest; he planned in 1794 to launch *The Philanthropist*, a journal dedicated to serving the common good and to promoting democratic ideals.

Although he eventually lost faith in revolutionary France, Wordsworth carried much of his radical beliefs over into his poetry of the late 1790s and early 1800s. Both his prose and verse writings register deep concerns about the proximity of the poet to other men. In the Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), he accordingly asserts himself as ‘a man speaking to men’ and endeavours to speak in ‘the real language of men in a state of vivid excitement’.² The linguistic and sociological ‘experiments’ (*Prose* I, 116) that he conducts in *Lyrical Ballads* give expression to his social awareness, with a number of poems exposing the devastating effects on rural communities of enclosure and the Poor Laws. His attitude towards the lower classes reveals that his sympathy for the most deprived members of society is politically charged. The *Lyrical Ballads* also hallmark his personal and creative friendship with S. T. Coleridge, who co-authored the volume. The poems of this period thus materialise the poetic experimentations, mutual influence, and intellectual creativity that united both poets.

Wordsworth’s friendship with Coleridge runs deeper than literary collaboration, in that it fashioned Wordsworth’s perception of his career. Coleridge was the main source of

inspiration and encouragement for Wordsworth's project *The Recluse*, which was designed to unify his entire *oeuvre*. The title of *The Recluse* is misleading. When Wordsworth publicly announced its existence in the Prospectus of *The Excursion* (1814), it proclaimed not his retreat from society, but a meditation 'On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life'³ that he had sustained since 1798 and which he repeatedly sought to complete until the last decade of his life. His attempt to reconcile nature, man, and society formed a cornerstone of his works. Wordsworth gradually became more conservative, but despite the changing nature of his politics, his social concerns persisted for the rest of his life. *The Excursion* illustrates this with its interest in innovations in education and its condemnation of unregulated child labour, while the *Postscript* he added in 1835 to *Yarrow Revisited and Other Poems* (1834) voices his fear that the destitute would no longer be adequately supported after the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 was passed.

Wordsworth had spent his childhood in the Lake District, and his native region exerted a lifelong hold on his imagination. Once his degree in Cambridge was completed, his early adult years were characterised by a lack of permanent residence, as he lived in London and then in France, subsequently drifting to Racedown in Dorsetshire, and finally to Alfoxden in Somerset. In 1798, he embarked for Germany, with his sister Dorothy and Coleridge. The experience proved unsuccessful: unlike Coleridge, who went to Göttingen to mix with scientists and students, Wordsworth was pressed for money, refused to learn German, and stayed at the isolated town of Goslar. His 'violent hatred of letter-writing'⁴ only compounded his sense of exile. This explains why his move to Grasmere at the very end of 1799 marks a major turning point in his career. His return to the Lake District tapped important imaginative resources that informed his writings and that set the course for the rest of his career: if Wordsworth came to be recognised, and later remembered, as a national poet, he also established himself as a poet of place, as the bard of the Lake District.

The rootedness of Wordsworth's poetry signals the strong connection between nationality and locality.⁵ This tension between the local and the national indicates that his poetry, even that of the most inward-looking kind, engages with public issues and explores various forms of community. *The Prelude* (1805) celebrates 'Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind' (book VIII) and declares that the love for local landscape is 'To patriotic and domestic love / Analogous'.⁶ The affinity of local and national attachments shows the influence of his domestic life on his poetry. His domestic sociability is both a location and an idea: Dove Cottage, the house he shared with his sister Dorothy, and later with Mary Hutchinson, whom he married in 1802, stood for his new-found stability as much as for moral and political values. Domesticity moreover highlights the numerous connections that Wordsworth fostered from his home at Grasmere, and later at Rydal Mount. Dorothy's *Journals* record the many ways in which the composition of poetry was deeply embedded in an eventful social and domestic life that involved shared experiences as much as household chores or encounters with local villagers and the poor. Living in Grasmere placed him in a network of writers and thinkers like Coleridge, Thomas de Quincey, and Robert Southey, who had also settled nearby and with whom Wordsworth maintained strong creative and personal relationships.

The return to the Lake District also serves as an index of Wordsworth's evolving political identity. A fervent supporter of the French Revolution in the early 1790s, Wordsworth now

viewed the military and political threat that Napoleon posed to Great Britain and the rest of Europe with increasing alarm. In 1803, Wordsworth started drilling with local volunteers in preparation for a potential invasion from France. In his *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807), written with the patronage of Sir George Beaumont, Wordsworth correspondingly addresses the political situation of the country from the perspective of both private meditations and public issues. Later, in 1809, he wrote the *Convention of Cintra* to protest against the government's military policy, after the government had failed to negotiate a treaty that would curb France's military power and protect the independence of Spain and Portugal, invaded by Napoleon's armies the previous year. His deep interest in international politics and his defence of the sovereignty of other countries suggest continuities with the political idealism of his youth. This sense of solidarity and moral responsibility find notable expression in the *Convention*, in which he articulates a simultaneously local, national, and global vision of community:

The outermost and all-embracing circle of benevolence has inward concentric circles which, like those of the spider's web, are bound together by links, and rest upon each other; making one frame, and capable of one tremor; circles narrower and narrower, closer and closer, as they lie more near to the centre of self from which they proceeded, and which sustain the whole. (*Prose I*, 340)

The individual, Wordsworth argues, is not only tied to his Burkean 'platoon',⁷ he or she is also caught up in a nest of 'concentric circles' that connect them to the nation, and ultimately to the countries that lie beyond national borders. The integration of the various forms of community thus highlights the political dynamics that underlie Wordsworthian sociability, which is founded not on the independence, but on the *interdependence* of private and public concerns, of nature, man, and society.

In 1813, Wordsworth was granted a position as Stamp Distributor for Westmorland by Sir William Lowther, Earl of Lonsdale, to whom *The Excursion* is dedicated. Though his appointment to a tax-collecting profession was met with the disapproval of his poetic peers, such as Byron,⁸ it secured much needed financial support for his growing family. It also brought him closer to Lord Lonsdale, an important figure of Toryism in the north-west of England. In the general election of 1818, when the radical Henry Brougham contested Westmorland, the Lowthers' political stronghold, Wordsworth began electioneering strenuously to defend the Lowthers' influence. He canvassed in person, helped set up a pro-Lowther newspaper, and published the partisan *Two Addresses to the Freeholders of Westmorland* (1818). The stakes, Wordsworth believed, were much higher than those of a local election, as he thought the political fate of the country was being played out in his county. In his opinion, Brougham revived the dangers of the French revolutionary politics of the 1790s, which led him to warn against a 'ferocious revolution!' in his second *Address to the Freeholders* (*Prose III* p.189). Though Brougham was defeated,⁹ this flurry of activism

sealed Wordsworth's shift to conservatism.

Wordsworth's later years reinforced the overlap of creativity and literary and intellectual connections. His travels abroad bring this into focus: he was notably accompanied by Henry Crabb Robinson both on his 1833 tour of Scotland, which directly fed into *Yarrow Revisited, and Other Poems* (1835), and on his Italian tour of 1837, which strongly influenced *Poems, Chiefly of Early and Late Years* (1842). The final decades also witnessed friendships with scientists like William Whewell and Adam Sedgwick, with whom he discussed poetry and scientific discoveries alike. Wordsworth's success even spread beyond national borders; Ralph Waldo Emerson went to meet Wordsworth in 1833 at Rydal Mount, his home, as did Charles Sumner in 1838, a future American senator (Gill 449-451). His growing recognition was confirmed when John Keble, a prominent Tractarian, commended Wordsworth for an honorary degree from Oxford University in 1839. His fame was sealed in 1843 when he was appointed Poet Laureate.

1. Quoted in Robert Woof (ed.), *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), vol. 1, p.980.
2. William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), vol.1.
3. William Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere: Part First, Book First, of The Recluse*, ed. Beth Darlington (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1977), MS. D, ll.754, p.101.
4. Coleridge to Thomas Poole, 20 November 1798, in *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956-1971), I: 445.
5. Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (New York, NY; London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1991)
6. William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), vol. 1, AB-Stage Reading Text, ii.195-196, p.129.
7. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.47.
8. George Gordon Noel Byron, *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, Vol. 5: *Don Juan*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 'Dedication', ll. 24-48, p.4-5.
9. Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p.378-388.

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