

Thoughts on William Wordsworth: A Commemorative Essay

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This year will mark the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of William Wordsworth, who was born on April 7, 1770, in the little town of Cockermouth, situated on the river Derwent in the lovely Lake District of northwestern England. Upon the death of his mother when Wordsworth was only eight, the family was scattered, Wordsworth himself going southward about fifteen miles to school at Hawkshead, near the center of the Lake District. In this beautiful region of lush greenness with its rolling hills, peaceful lakes, and quiet streams, Wordsworth spent most of his life and wrote most of his poetry. Schooling at Cambridge, a year of study in France, long walks through Scotland, and occasional travels elsewhere took him briefly away from his beloved lake country from time to time, but always he was drawn back, and there he died on April 23, 1850. A simple headstone in the country cemetery in the small village of Grasmere still marks the place of his burial.

Everyone now knows Wordsworth, though not everyone likes him. Almost everyone, including even those who don't like him, acknowledges that he holds a special place in literature, perhaps more at the heart of the Romantic Movement than any other poet. Among Mormon readers, both in the Church generally and at BYU particularly, he has found a large audience through the years because of the special appeal of the philosophy and ethics of his poetry. The collection of

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Wordsworth books in the BYU Library, started years ago by Professor Ed. M. Roe, Dr. P. A. Christensen, and others, is extensive. And even the BYU student literary publication, the *Wye Magazine*, took its name some thirty years ago from Wordsworth's association with the Wye River and the Wye Valley in England.

It seems appropriate, therefore, that in this two-hundredth anniversary year of his birth a commemorative essay should be published on Wordsworth in *BYU Studies*. Perhaps it is also appropriate that I should be the one to write the essay. When I joined the BYU faculty in 1950, I came as a replacement for Professor Roe, then just retired, who for many years had been the principal Wordsworth lover and teacher at BYU. I found to my chagrin that I was scheduled to teach one course in the longer poems of Wordsworth, one in the shorter poems of Wordsworth, one in romanticism with Wordsworth as the central figure, and a fourth course called simply "Introduction to Poetry" that by tradition was mostly Wordsworth. This was just too much Wordsworth for me, and I did some rapid combining of courses. Nevertheless, I have continued to teach Wordsworth for twenty years, and I am pleased to say that he wears well. I enjoy him more now and find him greater and deeper than I did when I started to teach him twenty years ago—which is more than I can say for some writers, who grow thin after a few years of teaching. It is with delight, therefore, that I accept the invitation to write an essay on Wordsworth, drawing my comments in part from things I have written about him in other places through the years.

Fifteen years ago, when I was a young bishop in the Church, and was also caught up in the early excitement of teaching Wordsworth and romanticism, I wrote a short essay on Wordsworth which began as follows: "Occasionally in the world of literature there is a writer so gifted and so wise that he seems to speak with a voice of divine inspiration. Such a writer was William Wordsworth, who, a century and a half ago, created poems of such simple beauty and such enduring truth that their appeal and greatness seem forever assured. If we Latter-day Saints take seriously the Lord's commandment to seek words of wisdom out of the best books (D & C 88:118 and 109:14), we will do well to study the poems of Wordsworth, for in all English literature there is perhaps no other poet who shaped so many religious and ethical truths into works of literary art."

Reading those words now, fifteen years after they were written, I realize that I got a bit carried away in praise of Wordsworth. In fifteen years my language has mellowed somewhat, with fewer superlatives—but I still find Wordsworth great, even inspiring still. Perhaps one needs to get in the right mood to respond to Wordsworth. He is not clever and witty, he does not rip and tear us with the power of raw emotions such as we find in modern realism, nor does he particularly challenge our skills of analysis through elusive symbols and complex allusions. His poetry is not even beautiful in the way that some poems are beautiful with subtle music and startling imagery. But after all the cleverness and brute power and artistic brilliance of other writers, there is a place for Wordsworth, especially when as readers we are in a mood of serious contemplation, trying to separate the things that really matter from the things that don't. So it was that a year ago, when doing an essay on romanticism generally, I wrote the following three paragraphs on Wordsworth, placing him at the head of all the other romanticists:

"All things considered, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) is probably to be regarded as the most important of all the English romanticists, at least in shaping the movement of romanticism in western-world literature. His poems are not so challengingly mystical as Blake's, nor so artistically symbolical as Coleridge's, nor so soaringly lyrical as Shelley's, nor so exuberantly variable as Byron's, nor so enchantingly musical as Keats's, nor so stingingly satirical as Burns's—yet he is greater than all these, for more than any of them he spoke enduring truths in words of beauty, and that is the essence of great poetry. His poetry—not individual poems but his work as a whole—has more breadth, more depth, more psychological and ethical richness, and a more impressive combination of lofty thought and eloquent music than that of the others. Wordsworth is less humorous, less exciting than the other romanticists, to the extent that many readers wish he weren't quite so solemn and wonder whether he has any sense of humor at all; but from him more than from any of the others we learn, as Ernest Bernbaum says, 'the beauty and happiness of plain living and high thinking.'¹ In the words of Russell Noyes, 'Wordsworth was the most truly original genius of his age and

¹Ernest Bernbaum, *Anthology of Romanticism* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1948), p. 187.

exerted a power over the poetic destinies of his century unequalled by any of his contemporaries.² Coleridge called him 'friend of the wise and teacher of the good' and was so moved when first hearing certain passages of *The Prelude* that, he said, 'I found myself in prayer.'³ Even Matthew Arnold, who in many ways was critical of the Romantic Movement, described Wordsworth as one who came to a world of 'doubts, disputes, distractions, fears', and brought stability through the 'healing power' of his poetry.⁴ Later Arnold referred to Wordsworth as 'this great man, whom I, for one, must always listen to with the profoundest respect.'⁵

"As a poet Wordsworth has obvious faults: he is sometimes sentimental, sometimes sing-songy, sometimes dull, sometimes wordy ('wordy Wordsworth' his enemies have called him), sometimes pompous in trivialities. If one judges him by the poorest of his poems, as he is often judged, he is little better than a shallow rhymester, a composer of doggerel. Indeed, in the entire history of English poetry there is probably no other great poet who wrote so much mediocre poetry. Yet judged by his best work, Wordsworth stands highest of all in an age of great poets and may well be, as Dr. P. A. Christensen used to tell us, the greatest English poet between Milton and Browning.

"What, then, are his best poems? Not the dozens of easy little nature and story poems by which he is often known. These range from bad to good but are not really great. Instead his very best, mostly in blank verse, where he is one of the world's masters, are such poems as 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,' a beautiful meditative-descriptive ode of rich music and thought; *The Prelude*, which in spite of its unevenness Mark Van Doren calls one of the ten great poems of western-world literature;⁶ 'Michael,' the finest of his narrative poems, telling with Old Testament dignity and simplicity the tragic story of an old man and his love for a son who be-

²Russell Noyes, *English Romantic Poetry and Prose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 237.

³See Coleridge's poem "To William Wordsworth."

⁴See Arnold's poem "Memorial Verses."

⁵Arnold in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time."

⁶See Van Doren's *Great Poems of Western Literature* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 236-248. Van Doren also calls *The Prelude* the first great "modern" poem of the ten he is discussing because it turns inward for its substance. Indeed, says Van Doren, Wordsworth "created modern poetry when he decided that the man who writes is more important than the man and the things he writes about."

trays a father's trust; 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,' another richly musical descriptive-philosophic work; and a dozen or so sonnets, including 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge,' 'The World Is Too Much With Us,' and 'London, 1802.' Wordsworth wrote a great deal of second-quality poetry, especially in his later years, but he still wrote more first-quality poetry than most of our other major poets. In the finest of his passages we find dignity of tone, sonority of phrase, and loftiness of thought such as we seldom find elsewhere—'high seriousness' as Arnold liked to call this combination of qualities. First and last, Wordsworth was a nature poet, describing the relationship between the inner world of man and the outer world of nature. But he was also deep-thinking in other matters, leading us in his poetry to extraordinary psychological, philosophical, and religious insights that draw us, as he himself concludes near the end of *The Prelude*, to 'Faith in life endless, the sustaining thought of human Being, Eternity, and God!'

Years ago Dr. P. A. Christensen wrote an essay called "The Bad, Better, Best of Literature." I have often thought that I too would like to write an essay discussing good, bad, and in-between poetry—but drawing all of my examples from Wordsworth. The poems just named in the paragraph above could surely serve as examples of great poetry. Such well-known pieces as "We Are Seven," "Lucy Gray," "To a Highland Girl," "She Was a Phantom of Delight," "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," and "The Old Cumberland Beggar" might be used to illustrate in-between poetry—not great, but not bad either. His worst poems are, fortunately, not so well known, but, unfortunately, there are dozens of them—prosaic in diction, sentimental in emotion, sing-songy in rhythm, and obvious in substance. Wordsworth should have followed Coleridge's advice and canceled many of these from print. But he wasn't as self-critical as he should have been, and so he published them, even insisting that some of the bad ones were good. I don't want to spend more time discussing them here, but it would also be a mistake not to admit that they exist. Any reader interested in seeing Wordsworth in bad form can turn to such a poem as "The Pet-Lamb," which Wordsworth insisted on publishing alongside the great "Michael" in edition after edition of his poetry, and which in sentimental doggerel describes a motherless lamb wagging its tail in joy while a little girl feeds it milk from a

bottle. No wonder James Kenneth Stephen, a Victorian parodist, wrote a satiric sonnet on Wordsworth which reads:

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: at certain times,
 Forth from the heart of thy melodious rimes
 The form and pressure of high thoughts will burst;
 At other times—good Lord! I'd rather be
 Quite unacquainted with the A.B.C.
 Than write such hopeless rubbish as thy worst.

During more than half a century of writing poetry, Wordsworth composed hundreds of poems that are less than great. Even in these, however, there are things that will interest the reader. For example, Wordsworth was especially interested in abnormal psychology and wrote dozens of folk-story poems describing people with warped minds or twisted personalities—"Peter Bell," "The Idiot Boy," "Andrew Jones," "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," etc., etc. He seemed especially drawn to writing stories about an abandoned girl who bore a child out of wedlock and then went insane or suffered great hardship—poems such as "The Thorn," "Her Eyes Are Wild," and "Ruth." One wonders how closely all of this may relate to Wordsworth's own youthful liaison with Annette Vallon during his year in France. He avoids any direct reference to her in *The Prelude* and other autobiographical poems, yet he was so deeply concerned ten years later that he did not feel free to marry Mary Hutchinson in 1802 until he went to France with his sister Dorothy to seek out Annette and their little daughter Caroline and make an emotional-financial settlement with them.⁷ Wordsworth's life was on the whole very admirable, built on high principles and ideals, but he made one serious mistake in his youth, and one wonders whether a number of his story-poems do not grow out of a guilt-stricken conscience that stayed with him for many years.

⁷One of the loveliest of his sonnets, beginning "It is a beauteous evening, calm and free," was written to his ten-year-old daughter Caroline after he met her on this occasion and took her walking on the seashore.

Other things touched on in some of the lesser poems interest us too. As in *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*, so in a variety of little poems, Wordsworth was much intrigued by all the nuances of despondency and how it might be overcome, and by the imagination and how it is quickened or stifled.⁸ Wordsworth agrees with Coleridge that the creative imagination is the highest of human faculties and that, whatever else a poem may say or do or be, its main purpose should be to give pleasure—both to the one who reads it and to the one who creates it. As a literary critic Wordsworth is not nearly so important as his great friend Coleridge, but his most original thoughts are, like Coleridge's, on the nature of the imagination and on the creative process itself. In his 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth gave his now-famous definition of poetry—that it is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” taking its origin “from emotion recollected in tranquility.” Wordsworth was as firm as T. S. Eliot in insisting that there should be sufficient time between an experience and the transformation of that experience into poetry to permit both emotional and artistic objectivity. A study of the great “Tintern Abbey” ode as well as little poems such as “To a Highland Girl” and “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” are rewarding in this regard. Even though it should be written “in tranquility,” however, Wordsworth insists that poetry at all times should be spontaneous, honest, and “free.” Some of his strongest words, both in his essays and in poetry, lash out against those who would compose poems more by rules and regulations than by inward feeling and outward inspiration.⁹ Many people associate this criticism mostly with Wordsworth's early career, but he was still saying the same thing at age 72 when in the following sonnet he lambasts some unidentified poet or poets of the day who had aroused his indignation:

A Poet!—He hath put his heart to school,
Nor dares to move unpropped upon the staff
Which Art hath lodged within his hand—must laugh
By precept only, and shed tears by rule.

⁸See Professor Thomas E. Cheney's comments on Wordsworth and the imagination in “Imagination and the Soul's Immensity” in *BYU Studies*, Vol. 9 (Summer 1969) pp. 407-420.

⁹In his 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth criticized neo-classicists, who, he felt, had smothered creativity by adhering too rigidly to restricted patterns and conventional poetic diction. The poet's responsibility now, he argued, was to free poetry from these restrictions and return it to creative variety and natural language.

Thy Art be Nature; the live current quaff,
 And let the groveller sip his stagnant pool,
 In fear that else, when Critics grave and cool
 Have killed him, Scorn should write his epitaph.
 How does the Meadow-flower its bloom unfold?
 Because the lovely little flower is free
 Down to its root, and, in that freedom, bold;
 And so the grandeur of the Forest-tree
 Comes not by casting in a formal mould,
 But from its *own* divine vitality.

Seeing this sonnet serves as a reminder that of particular concern to readers who are interested in prosody and poetic form is Wordsworth's fascination with the sonnet. Much of his greatest poetry is written in blank verse, but he also used a variety of rhymed patterns and forms—including more than 500 sonnets! Many of the world's great poets—and even more of its lesser ones—have been drawn to the sonnet. There is something about its brevity, its simplicity and complexity, its limitations yet limitlessness, that has challenged each generation of poets to see what they might do within the sonnet "rules." Not many poets, however, have written more than 500 sonnets as Wordsworth did, and he also conducted some interesting experiments with the sonnet as an art form. It is intriguing that Wordsworth, who was so set against strict rules and regulations in poetry, should have been so attracted to writing sonnets; but it is significant that, while not violating the basic form of the sonnet, he did introduce interesting variations and "freedoms" within that form and was especially concerned, as a poet should be, with synthesizing form and meaning. Granted that many of Wordsworth's sonnets are undistinguished, nevertheless several dozen of them are first-quality poems, and at least a dozen are among the great sonnets of English literature.

Probably the best way to appreciate Wordsworth as a poet and to understand the special appeal he has had to LDS readers is to go directly to several of his major poems and study them one by one.

Wordsworth's poem best known to LDS readers is the famous "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," once referred to by one of my confused students as the "imitations of immorality" ode. The title, though rather cumbersome in wording, is very suggestive in meaning to LDS readers, for the poem is probably the fullest expression in non-LDS literature harmonious with the unique

Latter-day Saint doctrine of pre-existence, which extends immortality in both directions, not only forward into post-mortality following death, but also backward into pre-mortality before birth.¹⁰ All Christian churches recognize life after death, and many people have a sort of intuitive feeling that there is life before birth; but The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stands almost alone in teaching as an official doctrine that people existed as spirit children with God in a pre-mortal state. Wordsworth was not, of course, a Latter-day Saint and perhaps never heard of "Mormonism," for, born in 1770, he was an old man when the Gospel came to England and he died, in 1850, when the Church was still very young. But he speaks as if he were an inspired forerunner of the Gospel when in 1805, the very year of Joseph Smith's birth, he wrote:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.

These eight lines are lifted out of the middle of the poem, and it is a mistake to use them, as is often done, in isolation from the rest of the work. To understand fully what Wordsworth is saying, and to appreciate the ode as a work of art with a beautiful synthesis of form and meaning, we need to study the entire poem.

We need also to know that Wordsworth was endeavoring to lift his friend Coleridge out of the despondency into which Coleridge was plunged because of the personal tragedy of his life and because he could no longer respond to the beauties of nature around him, which heretofore had been the source of his creative inspiration. "I see, not feel, how beautiful they are," said Coleridge in his sadly beautiful "Dejection: An Ode." Coleridge was not only Wordsworth's great friend but also a brilliant poet and literary critic, probably the most learned poet

¹⁰When criticized by his Anglican Church leaders for teaching the "heretical" doctrine of pre-existence in this poem, Wordsworth retracted and said that he did not mean to press the idea as a serious doctrine but wished only to suggest it as a poetic license. Apparently he did not want to argue the issue, but there is considerable evidence in his writing as a whole to indicate that belief in pre-existence was a consistent part of his general philosophy.

of his generation. His skill as a poet and his powers of the imagination were astonishing, and yet his personal life was shattered by an agonizing marriage failure, years of excruciating physical sickness, and a woeful lack of self-discipline that threatened to wreck him spiritually and mentally as well as physically. All of this anguish is reflected in Coleridge's "Dejection" ode. And Wordsworth's "Immortality" ode was written as a direct answer to Coleridge's poem, especially to the central problem of the poem—Coleridge's spiritual despondency caused by a lack of responsiveness to the inspiring beauties of nature.

But back to Wordsworth's poem itself. The 204 lines of the poem are grouped into eleven stanzas, but in idea-development the work has really only three sections. The first four stanzas comprise the first section, in which Wordsworth agrees with Coleridge that as we grow older we can no longer respond spontaneously to the beauties of nature as a child does. Then in the next section, stanzas 5 through 8, Wordsworth endeavors to explain why this is so: that when we were young we were close to God and hence close to the creations of God in nature, but that as we grow older the "prison house" of mortality closes around us and we seem to grow apart from nature. But, continues Wordsworth in the closing section (stanzas 9 through 11), we should not grieve over our loss of spontaneous joy in nature, for in the wisdom of maturity that gives us thoughtful insight into the truth of immortality we have rich rewards that more than compensate for all our loss:

What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

And so, through the contemplation of God-created beauty in nature, there comes a greater and more compassionate understanding of man in relation to eternity, and of eternal life

itself. The language is appropriate and lovely, other aspects of form harmonize closely with the ideas being developed, and the ideas themselves are attractive and significant. Rhythm, rhyme, sound, and imagery are expertly controlled and harmoniously related to meaning so that the result is a rich work of art.

Although the "Intimations of Immortality" ode is well known in our Church, most of Wordsworth's other poems are not so well known, yet several of them are at least as important poetically.

Ezra Pound once said (in *The ABC of Reading*): "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree." Some of Wordsworth's poems are prosaic and flat, but two that are especially "charged with meaning" in their language are "Composed upon Westminster Bridge," a sonnet, and "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," a somewhat longer ode. In language that vibrates with inner power the sonnet describes the huge city of London asleep in early morning, touched on all sides with the beauties and wonders of nature—the gliding river, the open fields, the streaming early-morning sun, and the clear smokeless air in the sky overhead. Artistically the language is beautiful—liquid sounds of rhyme and rhythm; clean, clear images; simple yet dignified diction. The words, however, are also charged with meaning, portraying a city personified as a sleeping giant, wearing the beauty of the morning like a garment, with a mighty heart beating as it sleeps, and with the pure world of nature (the "smokeless air") encircling everything, washing away the smoke and grime of the day's industrial activities as the great city lies still asleep, bathed in the early-morning beauty of the rising sun:

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did the sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:

Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

I hope I am not reading more into the poem than Wordsworth intended to put there. I hope, too, that I am not going overboard in praise of Wordsworth. Not all of his poems touch me. Some of them, however, including the sonnet just quoted and the ode I am about to discuss, move me deeply.

When we talk about words "charged with meaning" we do not refer merely to meaning that can be paraphrased into other words. There is a kind of locked-in meaning in the words of a poem that is felt by every perceptive reader but cannot be paraphrased. To paraphrase is to make shallow and destroy. So it is with the great "Tintern Abbey" ode. Except for certain passages of *The Prelude*, probably Wordsworth's finest blank verse lines are in this ode. As Wordsworth tells of re-visiting the banks of the Wye River after a five years' absence and looking again upon all of the natural beauties of the landscape, reflecting how the memory of the scene has been with him to enrich his imagination and deepen his thinking, we are drawn into the extraordinary beauty of this poem. The descriptions are sharp, rich, and vivid, the language is majestic, and the whole poem builds into a harmonious symphony of sound, imagery, feeling, and thought perhaps never achieved quite so successfully by Wordsworth in any other poem. For any who would understand Wordsworth, this is a "key" poem, *The Prelude* in miniature, not merely telling, but *showing*, how his imagination has been quickened and his soul deepened through responsiveness to nature, maturing him from a young animal bounding almost unconsciously in nature's freedoms to a deep-thinking adult contemplating the relationships between humanity, divinity, and eternity:

That time is past,
And all its aching joys are now no more,
And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts
Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
Abundant recompense. For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy

Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

There is a falling off of poetic power in the closing fifty lines of the poem as Wordsworth, big-brother-like, expresses hope that his sister Dorothy, for whom he had great affection, might follow him in his maturing responsiveness to nature. But the poem as a whole is one of Wordsworth's greatest achievements, all the more remarkable if it was composed, as he said, on a four or five days walking tour with his sister, composed orally and published almost immediately, with "not a line of it altered." Surely here was an outpouring of spontaneous creativity the like of which not even Wordsworth experienced very often.

Wordsworth's greatest long poem is *The Prelude*—that massive, unique, and poetically uneven autobiographical poem concerned with the "growth of a poet's mind," as its subtitle indicates.¹¹ Written, at least in its best passages, in dignified, stately, sonorous blank verse, it is the fullest poetic treatment in our language of how childhood experiences and attitudes during the "seedtime"¹² of one's life gradually shape the personality, character, and habits of adulthood. A powerful message on the importance of proper environment and training in childhood is implied throughout this long poem, for, as Wordsworth says in one of his short lyrics, "The child is father of the man." Some people think of Wordsworth as an old-fashioned poet, and in some ways he is, but psychologically he is very modern, even Freudian, recognizing that each adult personality is the product of all that has gone before, especially way back in childhood, including experiences, thoughts, and feelings that may have been long forgotten, but made their permanent mark upon a growing personality. Thus "I grew up," says Words-

¹¹Long though *The Prelude* is, Wordsworth intended it only as the personal introduction to an even longer work, to be called *The Recluse*, which was never completed. That it is "poetically uneven," all who read it will recognize. Its great passages are very great; but it also has sections that are flat, tedious, and wooden.

¹²*The Prelude*, Book I, line 301. See Sherwood Anderson's short story "Seeds" for a modern treatment of this same psychological theme.

worth, "fostered alike by beauty and by fear." (I, 301-02) And thus also, out of all the miscellaneous and sometimes discordant experiences of mortality, gradually the "immortal spirit grows like harmony in music." (I, 341)¹³

Throughout *The Prelude* we find Wordsworth repeatedly paying tribute to the power of nature to dignify and ennoble man. Contrary to what some have imagined, however, he was never merely a describer of pretty flowers and babbling brooks. Nature for him was the great handiwork of God's creative power, and the closer one gets to nature in genuine understanding, the more one knows God and embraces God-like qualities as a way of life. Here Wordsworth especially traces what he feels was his own development in relation to nature: from the "vulgar joy" and "giddy bliss" of youth (I, 581-83), through an artistic appreciation of the beauties of nature (Book II especially), to a mystical insight into the truths of the universe. He talks in particular of the innate nobility that he feels is men's heritage as children of God, and of how, when they conquer the base animal instincts within themselves, men can move toward the potentiality of godlikeness that is their finest possibility, "for there's not a man that lives who hath not known his godlike hours." (III, 190-91)

In the remaining books of *The Prelude*, fourteen long books in all, Wordsworth talks of many further things that shape one's life for good or bad, especially of the qualities of imagination, of liberty, and of how faith in immortality can lift one to dignity and achievement in mortality.

I had inward hopes
And swellings of the spirit, was rapt and soothed,
Conversed with promises, had glimmering views
How life pervades the undecaying mind;
How the immortal soul with God-like power
Informs, creates, and thaws the deepest sleep
That time can lay upon her; how on earth,
Man, if he do but live within the light
Of high endeavours, daily spreads abroad
His being armed with strength that cannot fail.
(Book IV, lines 162-71)

As a climax to this lengthy meditation on life and the universe,

¹³This section of Book I, especially lines 288-400, is an excellent example of Wordsworth's telling how certain childhood incidents deeply impressed his sensitive young nature and made permanent impact upon his personality, character, and creative imagination.

Wordsworth says that all his experiences and thoughts build ultimately to the one conclusion previously mentioned:

Faith in life endless, the sustaining thought
Of human Being, Eternity, and God.
(Book XIV, lines 204-05)

Obviously these few comments on *The Prelude* do not do justice to a poem as long, rich, and complicated as this poem is. Space here will not permit a fuller discussion. Rather than merely accept my judgment, and the judgment of most other readers who have studied Wordsworth at length, that *The Prelude* is his masterpiece and one of the great psychological-philosophical poems of our language, readers of this essay are invited to go to the poem and let it speak for itself. But they should be prepared to live with it for a few months because no hasty dip into it will discover what it has to offer. Like most great works, it demands a good deal of the reader in time and thought and will seem increasingly great the longer one studies it.

Three closely related ideas come out again and again in Wordsworth: (1) the sacredness of life in any form, (2) the dignity and nobility inherent in human life, (3) the power of nature to elevate and ennoble man. In "Michael," Wordsworth's greatest narrative poem, we find his most *dramatic* treatment of these three ideas. Here Wordsworth was successful in blending simple yet dignified language with moving story in such a way that many readers find this the most appealing of his poems. It is like a parable of Christ—both in the eloquent simplicity of its style and in the memorable message of its story—or perhaps even more like an incident out of Old Testament history. Since the theme of the poem is inseparable from the narrative, perhaps a brief summary will be helpful here. The poem tells of the shepherd Michael, "an old man, stout of heart, and strong of limb, whose bodily frame had been from youth to age of an unusual strength." Although imperfect enough in wisdom and judgment to be believably human, Michael is fundamentally noble and good. Like Abraham of old, he has been blessed in his old age with a son, whom he loves deeply and with whom he forms a beautiful comradeship as the son becomes a young man. When the son, named Luke, is eighteen, and Michael eighty-four, financial difficulties press upon the family in the form of a "debt of

honor" to the extent that Luke is sent to work for a distant kinsman to relieve the financial stress. But before old father and young son separate, Michael takes Luke into the hills where they lay the cornerstone of a sheepfold as a covenant of their love for and faith in each other. Michael counsels his son to be faithful, but promises: "whatever fate befall thee, I shall love thee to the last." Then they separate. At first good reports come of the son, but months later Luke "began to slacken in his duty" and "in the dissolute city gave himself to evil courses: ignominy and shame fell on him, so that he was driven at last to seek a hiding-place beyond the seas." Old Michael is somewhat sustained in his grief by his love, for

There is a comfort in the strength of love;
'T will make a thing endurable, which else
Would overset the brain, or break the heart.

But partly his love is in very fact responsible for his grief, for there is no grief more harsh than that of faith betrayed. Thus, bearing the burden of his sorrow, Michael goes about his daily work suffering in silence, often sitting in numb loneliness at the site of the unfinished sheepfold, anguishedly disappointed in his erring son, but still loving him, for the poem is partly a portrayal of the nature of genuine love, which does not withdraw even when the one who is loved betrays that love. It is a powerful and beautiful story of a man deepened, dignified, and made heroic through suffering. It is also probably Wordsworth's clearest success in what he said was one of his principal goals—to dramatize the lives of ordinary people by telling their story in the language of ordinary men. Here, however, we should remember what Coleridge said of Wordsworth: that he practiced better than he preached. If Wordsworth had merely written in the language of common people, said Coleridge, he would not have been the great poet that he is, because common people don't speak great poetry in their day-to-day language. Only when he transcended the language of common people, as he did in the simple yet elevated language of "Michael," did he become a great poet, added Coleridge. And I agree.

Others of Wordsworth's poems might be discussed if space permitted, but the finest of his achievements have already been mentioned. *The Excursion* is as long and full as *The Prelude*, but the poetry in it is not of the same quality. "We Are Seven"

is a famous poem describing a little girl's insistence that neither distance nor death can break apart the family unit, but it tends towards oversimplicity and sentimentality. "Character of the Happy Warrior" is an admirable portrait of the qualities needed to make an ideal leader of men, but the work is heavily didactic and prosaic, hardly poetry at all. And so on and on. I am not saying that only the poems referred to in this essay are worth reading, simply that these are probably the ones most rewarding to study as works of art. Many of Wordsworth's poems not discussed here also deserve attention, especially for their portrayal of ideas and ideals.

In most of what he wrote Wordsworth was a champion of ethics and spirituality. He scorned materialism and hated selfishness. In a mood of indignation he wrote several memorable sonnets exposing selfishness and the pursuit of wrong goals. The best known and strongest of these is the famous attack on worldly materialism which begins:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.

For Wordsworth believed that most of the evils in the world stem from the mind of man ("Much it grieved my heart to think what man has made of man"¹⁴), and he likewise believed that the solution to these evils must come from within, from the very heart of man, a great outpouring of unselfish love. He knew that sometimes out of grief and difficulty comes wisdom ("A deep distress hath humanized my soul"¹⁵), that to do evil is worse than to endure evil (see "Guilt and Sorrow"), that the greatest, most unselfish love is love of that which seems not to deserve love (see "The Idiot Boy"), that the sweetest moment of life is that filled with genuine repentance (see "Peter Bell," Part III), and that the greatest source of strength is the inner resource of the immortal human spirit in harmony with God's teachings (see "Resolution and Independence"). Wordsworth is a serious poet, and we need to be in a serious mood to respond to him. There will come a time, however, in the lives of most of us when we can respond to the "healing power" of his genius, this "friend of the wise and teacher of the good" as his great friend Coleridge called him.

¹⁴"Lines Written in Early Spring"

¹⁵"Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm"