William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

LIFE.

William Wordsworth was born at Cockermouth, Cumberland, on April 7, 1770, and was educated at Hawkshead Grammar School and at Cambridge. In the summer vacation of 1790 he made a pedestrian tour through France and Switzerland, and in November 1791 returned to France to study, spending nearly a year at Orleans and Blois. He formed liaison with a Frenchwoman during his stay, and by her had the daughter who is probably addressed in the famous sonnet beginning

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free.

He was now an ardent supporter of the Revolution, and was deterred only by the interference of friends at home from joining the Girondins and probably sharing their fate. Returning to England he published (1793) An Evening Walk, dealing with the landscape round Hawkshead and Ambleside, and Descriptive Sketches, the materials of which were furnished by his Continental travels. Both these poems are in classic couplet and in the current poetic style, though the large amount of specific detail in the descriptions separates them from the common run of 18th-century landscape verse. Meanwhile the course of events in France alienated his sympathies, and the rise of Napoleon completed the overthrow of his revolutionary faith. A legacy of 900 pounds (1795) made him independent, and he resolved to devote himself entirely to literature. He went to live at Alfoxden in Somerset, and there formed a close friendship with Coleridge, with whom he published a volume of verse, Lyrical Ballads, in 1798. After a winter in Germany (1798-9), he settled in the Lake district, first at Grasmere, then at Allan Bank, and finally (1813) at Rydal Mount. He had married Mary Hutchinson in 1802. For many years he continued to write and publish poetry, though the public was indifferent and the critics were contemptuous. Little by little, however, opinion began to change in his favour. The universities of Durham and Oxford honoured him with degrees, his name was placed on the Civil Pension list, in 1843 he succeeded Southey as poet laureate. He died March 23, 1850.

WORKS (principal publications):
VERSE
An Evening Walk (1793)
Descriptive Sketches (1793)
Lyrical Ballads (1798)
The Excursion (1814)
Poems (first collective eds., 1807 and 1815)
The White Doe of Rylstone (1815)
Peter Bell (1819)
The Waggoner (1819)
The River Duddon, a series of sonnets (1820)
Memorials of a Tour on the Continent (1822)
Ecclesiastical Sonnets (1822)
The Prelude (1850)
The Recluse (posthumous, 1888).

PROSE
Apology for the French Revolution, in a Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff (1793, posthumously published)
Concerning the Relations of Great Britain, Spain, and Portugal to each other, and to the common enemy, at this crisis, and specifically as affected by the Convention of Cintra (1809)
Two Addresses to the Freeholders of Westmoreland (1818)
A Description of the Scenery of the Lakes (1822, 5th ed., 1835, as A Guide through the District of the Lakes)
Kendal and Windermere Railway: Two Letters (1844).

CHARACTER

Wordsworth was a man of austere temper, self-centered, a little stiff and hard, a little too conscious of his genius and his mission, and not rich in the saving grace of humour. His extreme preoccupation with himself and his own work, and his want of varied contact with men in the broad highways of public life, narrowed his outlook. While his solitary habits, his long contempt of the critics, and the adulation of a few worshippers combined to make him more and more self-centered. Yet this isolation was itself part of his greatness. He remained to the end simple and utterly transparent of soul, calmly indifferent to wealth and vulgar ambitions, with a fine wholesome of rusticity about him fresh as his own mountain breeze, as
Ruskin put it. Absolute sincerity was the keynote of his character, and the plain living and high thinking which he taught were the rule of his own life. Little of a bookman, he spent his days in open air, and most of his poetry was composed outdoors.

**VIEWs.**

Wordsworth believed in the didactic power of poetry. In a *Letter to Beaumont* he stated that “Every great poet is a teacher: I wish either to be considered as a teacher, or as nothing”. He had the firmest faith in the moral influence of his own poems as attested by his lines written in a *Letter to Lady Beaumont*. “To console the afflicted, to add sunshine to daylight, by making the happy happier, to teach the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think, and feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous: this is their office.”

As poet-moralist he kept his attention fixed steadily on his two great themes Man and Nature as attested by the *Recluse*:

“On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life,
Musing in solitude …”

**NATURE.**

Very early in life he resolved to become a poet of Nature in a new and distinct sense. Of a description in his Evening Walk he writes:

“I recollect the very spot where this struck me. … The moment was important in my poetical history, for I date from it my consciousness of the infinite variety of natural appearances which had been unnoticed by the poets of any age or country, so far as I was acquainted with them, and I made a resolution to supply, in some degree, this deficiency.”

To this resolution he remained faithful, his poetry everywhere testifying to the minute care with which he watched and brooded over every detail of the landscape amid which his life was spent. Remarkable as is the fidelity of his nature poetry, however, this is not its most characteristic feature. What is distinctive in his interpretation of Nature is its highly religious quality of a great novelty. Mystical in temper and fundamentally opposed to all forms of philosophy which assume the intellect to be the only organ of truth, he believed that the
spiritual faculty in man gives immediate access to a world of divine reality which mere reason can never reach. Such access is found through communion with Nature.
The child, holding the shell to his ear, hears in it the murmurs of the great ocean.
Even such a shell the universe itself
Is to the ear of faith – *Excursion*, IV.
Or even more sophisticated, poetry is a new religion where the poet can transcend Nature and multiply the possible perspectives as a kind of divinity in *I wandered lonely as a cloud*.
Thus if we go to Nature in the right mood – the mood of wise passiveness, or in pensive mood- taking with us not only the meddling intellect, but a heart that watches and receives, we shall find Nature the greatest of all teachers

**MAN.**

As a youth Wordsworth was carried away by the humanitarian promises of the Revolution. The collapse of his early utopian faith was followed by a period of great mental disturbance, and though through the influence of his sister Dorothy and the soothing power of nature he was won back to confidence in God and men, he never returned to his radical creed. The extreme conservatism of his later life is shown in his profound distrust of material progress and the new industrialism, in his opposition to the Reform Bill of 1832 and Catholic emancipation, and his protest against the Kendal and Windermere Railway. Yet notwithstanding his complete change of front, his work to the end remained essential part of the democratic movement of the age, for it was fed by a constant desire to get back to nature and reality, and by the deepest reverence for the worth and dignity of plain, simple manhood.

**THE SUBJECT AND LANGUAGE OF POETRY.**

His chosen theme was indeed no other than the very heart of man and men as they are within themselves and this essential humanity he sought among the humble rustic classes – types, like his own dalesmen of unspoilt manhood-because he held that these were nearest to the elemental and permanent realities of human life. In the treatment of this theme he advocated the rejection of all artifices and conventions of 18th –century verse, and the substitution of the language of actual life.
“The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems, was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe these throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language actually used by men. … Humble and rustic life was generally chosen because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are under less restraint, and speak plainer and more emphatic language, because in that condition of life elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently can be more accurately be contemplated and more forcibly communicated, because the manners of the rural life germinate from these elementary feelings, and from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable, and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. (Preface, Lyrical Ballads. 1st ed.)

His speculations regarding poetic diction convinced Wordsworth that there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition. The true opposition is not between poetry and prose, but between poetry and matter of fact, or science. “The man of science seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor, he cherishes and loves it in his solitude; the poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion. Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science.” His aim was to bring the subject of poetry, and with it the language of poetry, long the artificial dialect of a caste, back to the realities of life.

POEMS.

The Prelude; or Growth of a Poet’s Mind, is an attempt “to record in verse the origin and progress of his own powers, as far as he was acquainted with them” (Preface to The Excursion). Wordsworth traces minutely his intellectual history from childhood to early manhood, and deals at length with the development of his love of Nature and the influence of the Revolution upon him. Often prolix but seldom dull, it is of great interest as an autobiography, and indispensable as an introduction to the study of his work.
The Excursion is an extremely discursive philosophical poem, in nine books of blank verse. The framework is provided by an account of a three days’ ramble in the Cumberland vales;
into this are introduced incidents, stories, reflections, conversations; the whole forming a vehicle of the poet’s views on Man, Nature, and Society. Much of the poem is flat, prosaic and moralising; but there are oases in the desert, like the story of Margaret in Book I.

*The White Doe of Rylstone.* In this romantic poem Wordsworth came to some extent into rivalry with Scott. He was anxious, however, to have it understood that whereas Scott was always concerned with external incident, he was primarily interested in the moral and religious side of his subject. *Michael*, the first of the many domestic tales to express sympathies, may be taken as a typical example of his narrative poems of humble life. He himself calls it a pastoral poem, thus challenging the long standing conventional pastoral tradition. It is a pathetic story of an old shepherd, his only son and an unfinished sheepfold.

The ode, *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, epitomizes briefly the Wordsworthian philosophy. The poet uses the Platonic fancy of our pre-natal existence as a premise. The soul comes into earthly life, not a blank (as Lockian empiricism declared), but endowed with divine instincts and powers. Mundane and temporal interests encroach upon these, but cannot wholly stifle them. Even amid the distractions of the world the shadowy recollections of childhood mystically attest our divine origin and destiny. His sonnets form perhaps the greatest body of poetry in that form in the English letters.

**CHARACTERISTICS.**

Wordsworth was an unequal writer, and gains by selection. Even at his best his style rarely meets the threefold requirement of the Miltonic criterion: it is simple, except when it consists of mere philosophic musing not fused into poetry; more seldom it is sensuous or passionate. On the other hand, it has the fine austerity of his character, and on occasion supreme beauty, majesty, and strength. His aim was pleasure, but his moral bent was often destructive of aesthetic effect; when, as in his greatest moments, the thought of the moralist is suffused with the inspiration of the poet, he produces didactic poetry of the highest kind.

With all his limitations, therefore, he is secure of the very high and distinctive place among English poets. That place he owes in particular to his winning power as revealer of the beauty and happiness which lie about us and which himself in the quest for utopian fancies, nor did he wonder far afield after the exceptional and the romantic. He is the poet of reality—the interpreter of the divine possibilities of common people and common things.