

## Wordsworthian Communication

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In a world where communicational dysfunction may easily exacerbate already dangerous divisions between different political and cultural constellations, the poetry of Wordsworth has a particular interest, even if the tradition of appreciative commentary would tend to suggest the opposite. Although a long line of sensitive critics have offered insights and vocabulary which permanently affect the way we talk about him, they inevitably seized on features which seemed important to them as representatives of their own particular historical formation. For over a century and a half his idea of the poet as a man speaking to men came in for much attention, but within an ideological framework which rather toned down the difference between one grouping of human beings and another. As a result, the extent to which he tried to engage his readers in genuine communication, the kind of communication which enlarges the scope of community precisely by recognizing and embracing such differences, was underestimated, and so were his efforts to promote such communication in the world at large. True, his achievement here was more modest than he himself would have hoped, but only because his hopes were pitched so high that their realization would have completely changed the course of history and long ago nipped our present conflicts in the bud. His attempts were none the less impressive for being inspired by a dream, and were underwritten by his own generosity of spirit and sheer loving kindness. These virtues, which partly neutralized his considerable egotism, make him now a poet for our time, a poet much tempted by coercive modes of discourse, yet at his best most signally declining them.

On an older view of his work, the egotism was more damaging. Up until the middle of the twentieth century he was praised for having provided beauty, sublimity, imaginative power, art (sometimes with a capital "A"), and poetry (sometimes with a capital "P"). And the dominant liberal humanist assumption, in line with some of his own claims in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, was that these qualities were

open to appreciation by humankind at large.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, however, when his work came in for blame it was said to fall below that high level of universality, weighed down by the impurities of an overly intrusive authorial selfhood. That his poetry expressed his own feelings and was extensively autobiographical was acceptable only as long as it maintained an exalted degree of human representativeness. Often it did satisfy this criterion, and sometimes met the demand for impersonality in even its most stringently Modernist form, lending itself to discussion in terms of “symbol”, “image”, “epiphany”, “haiku.”<sup>2</sup> But as early as 1805

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<sup>1</sup> Among the interests and types of subject-matter which critics such as Leslie Stephen (“Wordsworth’s Ethics”, *Cornhill Magazine*, 34 (1876) 206-226), Matthew Arnold (“Wordsworth”, in his *Essays in Criticism: Second Series* (London, 1888), pp. 122-162), A. C. Bradley (“Wordsworth”, in his *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London, 1909), pp. 99-148), Helen Darbishire (“Wordsworth’s *Prelude*”, *The Nineteenth Century* 99 (1926) 718-31, rep. in W. J. Harvey and Richard Gravil (eds), *Wordsworth: The Prelude: A Casebook* (London, 1972), pp. 81-98), F. R. Leavis (*Revaluation: Tradition and Developments in English Poetry* ([1936] Harmondsworth, 1964), pp. 130-169), and Geoffrey Hartman (*Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787-1814* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Haven, 1971)) discerned as permanent and far-reaching were:- particular kinds of story, perception, introspection, emotion; the beauty and sublimity of nature; the idea of a human life in harmony with nature; other philosophical interests, shading sometimes into religious intuitions, and sometimes into ethics, as the writing came to be taken as a criticism of life in some more general sense. With no less conviction, William Empson (“Sense in *The Prelude*”, in his *The Structure of Complex Words* (London, 1951), pp. 289-305), Donald Davie (“Syntax in the Blank Verse of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*”, in his *Articulate Energy: An Enquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* ([1955] London, 1976), pp. 106-116), Christopher Ricks (“A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines” and “A Sinking inwards into Ourselves from Through to Thought”, in his *The Force of Poetry* ([1984] Oxford, 1987), pp. 89-116, 117-134) and Susan Wolfson (*Formal Changes: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, 1997)) detected timeless subtlety and force, timeless pleasurable and beauty, in Wordsworth’s use of language and versification.

<sup>2</sup> For Modernist admirers, the best of Wordsworth’s verse resembled, as one might put it, the prose of Henry James as described by T.S. Eliot. It was poetry which, at its most impersonal, was indeed “a baffling escape from [...] Ideas”, the work of mind “so fine that no idea could violate it” (T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (London, 1975), p. 151), a poetry so unmarked by authorial intrusion that it was always going to appeal to Modernist sensibilities,

he himself could see that *The Prelude* in particular might be accused of “self-conceit.”<sup>3</sup> For Keats, his egotism actually detracted from his sublimity, which in marked contrast to Shakespeare’s negative capability was nothing short of unethical: his readers were “bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist”. Much too prone to “brood and peacock” over his own speculations, he failed to realize just how much “[w]e hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us.”<sup>4</sup> For many commentators, the intrusiveness was fussily preachy or banal, an allegation lodged against “The Thorn”, for instance, where he says of the little muddy pond beneath the tree that “I’ve measured it from side to

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even if Eliot himself was apparently unenthusiastic. Judging from “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, Eliot thought that Wordsworth’s talk of the overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity came too close to seeing poetry as personal self-expression, and he may have felt that Wordsworth’s own verse illustrated the shortcomings of poetry so conceived. But if this early view was partly based on *The Prelude*, he would have relied on the version of 1850, the only one available in print until Ernest de Selincourt’s edition of the 1805 version in 1926, and, even so, he set in motion no equivalent to the Modernist “dislodgement” of Milton (F.R. Leavis’s word, in *Revaluation*, p. 42). Reviewing de Selincourt’s edition, Helen Darbishire, at any rate, immediately found in the 1805 *Prelude* a “poetry of spiritual experience so intense, so pure, and so profound that it holds the essence of all religion. [...] [It] gives us [...] elemental experience freed from the gloss of later interpretation [...] . And it shows us, further, how its roots lay [...] in the sensuous life which is our common heritage” (“Wordsworth’s *Prelude*”, p. 98). In 1970 Jonathan Wordsworth went back a few years further still, drawing attention to the Two-Part *Prelude* of 1799, “a poem of much smaller scope but also much more concentrated power than the thirteen-Book version of 1805” (“The Two-Part *Prelude* of 1799”, *The Cornell Library Journal* 11 (1970) 3-24, rep. in *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York, 1979), pp. 567-585, esp. 568). The twentieth century’s progressive discovery in the earlier drafts of *The Prelude* of the pure, the intense, the elemental, and of all this “freed from the gloss of later interpretation”, brought that poem into line with well established perceptions of all of Wordsworth’s best writing.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Sir George Beaumont, 1<sup>st</sup> May 1805, in *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, p. 534.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to George and Thomas Keats, Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> December 1817, and letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1818, in *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Frederick Page (Oxford, 1954), pp. 51-54, 71-72.

side: / 'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide".<sup>5</sup> Coleridge numbered this couplet among the "unpleasant sinkings from the height to which the poet had previously lifted" his readers,<sup>6</sup> for whom such conspicuous personal interventions certainly could turn the sublime into the ridiculous, the beauty-imagination-poetry-art into prosaic bathos. As James Kenneth Stephen put it, the impression could arise that Wordsworth basically had two voices, the one which "learns the storm-cloud's thunderous melody", the other that of "an old half-witted sheep / Which bleats articulate monotony".<sup>7</sup> And in some places Wordsworth himself came to be unsure of his own touch. In the 1798 version of "Old Man Travelling; Animal Tranquillity and Decay, A Sketch", the arresting description of the old man is followed by a passage in which Wordsworth himself comes into the poem to ask him where he is going and why, and so learns that he is on his way to Falmouth, where his mariner son has been hospitalized after a sea-fight. But in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* he shortened the poem's long title so as to concentrate on "Animal Tranquillity and Decay" and converted the old man's reply from direct to indirect speech. In 1815 he went much further, entirely deleting both his own intervention and the old traveller's response, so whittling the poem down to an uncannily suggestive epiphany that was bound to appeal to Modernist readers.

On the one hand, then, critics' talk of poetry at its most impersonally ideal tended to suggest that his addressee was a correspondingly ideal and universalized humanity. On the other hand, their talk of egotism conveyed the quite contrary impression of an extreme solipsism on Wordsworth's part. There was no critical middle ground where they could have spoken of his writing as it actually worked and works in the real world, of its role, that is, as a form of communication between the real Wordsworth and particular real readers or groups of readers.

The consequences of this discursal impasse were especially unfortunate for *The Excursion*, as when Hazlitt remarked that Wordsworth's "intense intellectual egotism [here] swallows everything

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<sup>5</sup> *Lyrical Ballads: Wordsworth and Coleridge*, eds R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London, 1976), p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. George Watson (London, 1956) pp. 194-195 [Chapter XVII].

<sup>7</sup> James Kenneth Stephen, *Lapsus Calami*, (Cambridge, 1891).

up. [...] It is as if there were nothing but himself and the universe,”<sup>8</sup> and Jeffrey that the poet who here betook himself to “retirement” was not so much above society as out of touch with it.<sup>9</sup> But elsewhere, too, Wordsworth’s community-making was either misrepresented or quite unmentioned in traditional criticism. Commentary sometimes failed to recognize that there is *not* an absolute dichotomy between the self and the ideal, or between Wordsworth and Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s capability is *not* so negative as to leave us entirely to our own devices, and Wordsworth’s sublime is *not* so egotistical as merely to force upon us his own selfhood. Although we are more aware of Wordsworth’s presence in the passage about crossing the Alps (*The Prelude*, Book VI) than of Shakespeare’s during the heath scenes in *King Lear*, this is partly a consequence of Shakespeare’s writing in a dramatic as opposed to an autobiographical mode, and does not mean that Shakespeare’s sublime bears no imprint of his own sensibility, as if it were not clearly distinguishable from the sublime of other writers, and of painters. The conventional wisdom did recognize that Shakespeare’s work might have autobiographical vibrations, but in Shakespeare’s case, said Dowden, “to pass through the creation of the artist to the mind of the creator [...] by no means prevents our returning to view the work of art simply as such, apart from the artist, and as such to receive delight from it,” partly because Shakespeare, “[j]ust when we have laid hold of him, [...] eludes us, and we hear only distant ironical laughter”. To Shakespeare, then, Dowden more than once applied the line from *Troilus and Cressida*, “The secrets of nature have not more gift in taciturnity”,<sup>10</sup> but the same could hardly be said of Wordsworth, whose personal appearances in his writing were quite blatant, and far more difficult to reconcile with lofty notions of beauty-sublimity-imagination-poetry-art. As for less lofty notions which might have exculpated them, it did not help that Wordsworth and Coleridge’s own idealist theorization was inducing readers to forget the eighteenth century’s sense of polite letters. As a result, their ears were closed to Wordsworth’s positive extension of literature so conceived, not only beyond Pope’s proud elitism, for

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<sup>8</sup> William Hazlitt, “Character of Mr Wordsworth’s New Poem, The Excursion”, *Examiner*, 21<sup>st</sup> August 1814.

<sup>9</sup> Discussed by Juliet Barker, *Wordsworth: A Life* (London, 2001), p. 328.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Dowden, *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (13<sup>th</sup> ed., London, 1906), pp. 3, 6, 429-430.

example, but beyond the more affable cosiness of Cowper (in *The Task*). A writer who came before them as somebody prepared to be a good-humoured friend, frankly saying what he thought and felt as a person of his own background and temperament, but with varying degrees of certainty, and deferentially inviting them to compare notes: such a writer could not be explicitly welcomed in the standard terminology, even if he presumably had a communicational impact which it did not register.

The theoretical upheavals within literary scholarship of the past thirty years or so have improved this situation, but not straightforwardly. As with postmodern criticism in general, so in Wordsworth criticism from the late 1970s onwards, there was a strong element of historical re-contextualization, precisely as a way of bringing universalist accounts of authorship and readership into question. Some criticism now went to the opposite extreme, however, heavily stressing the difference between one sociocultural formation and another, and tending to suggest that the chances of communication between different formations were deterministically restricted. Jon Klancher, for instance, argued that the traditional view of Wordsworth as a quintessential “Romantic” quite unsituated in social space and time was an ideological construction designed to conceal the fact that Wordsworth’s attempt to bridge “social and cultural difference in a powerful act of cultural transmission” had run up against a deepening division within audiences themselves.<sup>11</sup> Marilyn Butler attempted a similar demystification by adducing the context of England after the French Revolution. Wordsworth, she said, successfully “adopted the public mantle of the poet of counter-revolution, celebrating the Burkean conservative ideology of personal humility and service, domesticity, hearth and home, the English plot of ground.”<sup>12</sup> Critics such as Mary Jacobus and John Barrell saw specific gender limitations in Wordsworth’s writing,<sup>13</sup> while for Thomas McFarland Wordsworth’s devotion, in both his daily life and his poetry, to his own nearest and

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<sup>11</sup> Jon Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences 1790-1832* (Madison, 1987), p. 150.

<sup>12</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 65-66.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Jacobus, *Romanticism, Writing and Sexual Difference: Essays on The Prelude* (Oxford, 1994); John Barrell, “The Uses of Dorothy: ‘The Language of the Sense’ in ‘Tintern Abbey’”, in his *Poetry, Language and Politics* (Manchester, 1988).

dearest (something also increasingly interesting to biographers)<sup>14</sup> was “in one way [... a] deepening [... of] human commitment, [but also] involved [...] a lessening of concern with what, from our twentieth century perspectives, may be called the liberal myth of the *a priori* value of mankind in general.” Under the pressure of personal sorrows and political disillusionment, Wordsworth’s strong feeling for humanity came in McFarland’s view to be “more and more concentrated in the idea not of people in general but in that of a *significant group* of people”,<sup>15</sup> significant for him personally, that is to say, and sharing his own sometimes conservative views, plus a background in upper-middle-class culture.

Such historicizations did start to bring Wordsworth’s poetry down to earth, and in recent times there have also been other accounts which, by turning fresh attention to concerns dealt with in the poems themselves, have qualified the postmodern tendency to drive wedges between Wordsworth and readers not made in exactly his own sociocultural image. Wordsworth himself, as it happens, was significantly bi-cultural: a gentleman and Cambridge graduate, whose dead mother’s place had been taken by Ann Tyson, formerly a draper, at whose cottage fireside he drank in tales of shepherds and their sheep. So he was fully conscious of the facts of social variation, and despite his prefatory manifestos did not expect them to disappear in some glorious consensus.<sup>16</sup> That is why, as Frances Ferguson explains, he placed a particular value on epitaphs, in effect seeing them as the archetype of all poetic communication. An epitaph, he wrote, is not “shut up for the studious: it is exposed to all—to the wise and the most ignorant; [...] the stooping old man cons the engraven record like a second horn-book;—the child is proud that he can read it; [...] it is concerning all, and for all”.<sup>17</sup> As Ferguson remarks, “[t]he disagreement between the views of the child and the stooping old man cannot be remedied by discussion, because their views are importantly part of who they are. Yet the epitaph registers an insistence

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford, 1989), p. 203.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton 1981), p. 148, McFarland’s Italics.

<sup>16</sup> Roger D. Sell, “Wordsworth’s Cultural Flexibility”.

<sup>17</sup> *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols, (Oxford, 1974), II: 59.

that human attachment [...] continues in the absence of agreement.”<sup>18</sup> Nor could such an eclectic sense of community limit itself to the here and now. As Michael Baron points out, Wordsworth also pondered on the diachronic dimensions of difference. *The Prelude*'s dream of the Arab horseman (in Book V) laments the fragility of poetry, not only as an inscription on perishably physical paper, but as an aesthetic creation which may not withstand the vicissitudes of taste,<sup>19</sup> and Lucy Newlyn traces the same poem's own attempt to guard against this danger through self-confessed affinities with Shakespeare, Milton, Fox, Bunyan, Wesley, Paine, Priestley, Hartley, Cowper, Rousseau and Coleridge. Here Newlyn finds evidence of “the collaborative nature of Wordsworth's interaction with the audiences—past, present, and future—he imagines and addresses. It makes of the poem a vast web of literary connections, expanding from the individual imagination towards an ‘outermost and all-embracing circle’ of precursors and readers”<sup>20</sup>—the “one great society alone on earth: / The noble living and the noble dead”.<sup>21</sup> Taking all his predecessors for what they were, when and where they were, and not envisaging just one particular type of reader now or in the future, he hopes to bring about a literary community that will be large but heterogeneous.

Given the value which so wide an audience has placed on his work for such a long time, his success is striking enough. But how did it come about? Part of the answer is that he wrote in ways which appealed to the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century ideas of what literature should be like, ideas which some aspects of his own theoretical writings did so much to nourish, and whose rich heritage of commentary still enables us to put into words important aspects of our response. The other part of the answer, and what concerns me here, is that his poetry can also communicate in ways which those earlier modes of discussion were

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<sup>18</sup> Frances Ferguson, “Wordsworth and the Meaning of Taste”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 90-107, esp. 106.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Baron, *Language and Relationship in Wordsworth's Writing* (London, 1995), pp. 134-135.

<sup>20</sup> Lucy Newlyn, “‘The noble living and the noble dead’: Community in *The Prelude*”, in *Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, pp. 55-69, esp. p. 61.

<sup>21</sup> *Prelude* (1805) X 968-9



unable to capture, and to which the deterministic historicism of some more recent, postmodern commentary was programmatically deaf.

Here the theoretical spadework has been commenced by Michael Baron. Particularly relevant is the contrast he draws between Wordsworth's view of communication and Herder's notion of the *Volk*. Although both these writers saw language as a power which could bring people together, Wordsworth was less mystical and more pragmatic, very much anticipating Habermas's concept of communication as social action. Habermas stresses that, for communication to be genuine and effective, there has to be a certain social protocol over and above the Aristotelian logic which Nietzsche and Derrida took to be the cornerstone of Western civilization. What is also called for is a common willingness to be comprehensible, true, truthful, sincere, and socially appropriate. And despite Bakhtin's claim that Romanticism is essentially monologic, Baron shows in Wordsworth a strong wish to reach out across sociocultural divides, and a gut feeling that the ordinary everyday virtues of good will, honesty and tact will be communicatively decisive.<sup>22</sup> True, Baron also says that "[i]t is difficult to see what force could *produce* such a [communicational good] will on a wider basis except an appeal to political identity".<sup>23</sup> But here, I think, he is relapsing into the determinist historicism of some of his postmodern predecessors, thereby contradicting the force of his own main argument. The will to communicate does not confine itself within some pre-existent grouping of political look-alikes. As Baron's own analysis skilfully shows, Wordsworth himself saw communication as making a community beyond the grouping as presently defined. Even when in the first instance addressing what McFarlane described as the significant but socially narrow group of his own nearest and dearest, he hoped for a wide outreach, and the "Poems on the Naming of Places" were nothing less than experiments deliberately designed to test whether the place-names invented and cherished by his own loved-ones and himself could also have a resonance for other people.<sup>24</sup> His fervent desire was that his own thought- and life-world would indeed become public, the initial privacies notwithstanding. For his own part, the communicational good will could

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<sup>22</sup> *Language and Relationship*, pp. 133-134.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 133, Baron's italics.

<sup>24</sup> *Language and Relationship*, pp. 55-69.

not have been stronger, and like Habermas he sensed that this in itself was more than half the battle.<sup>25</sup>

Often the eager good will translated into an importunate urge to bring his uncustomary perceptions within the scope of customary language. Hence his glosses of later interpretation, to use Helen Darbishire's phrase,<sup>26</sup> which readers have in many cases found so overintrusive and anticlimactic. But to repeat, there is no absolute distinction between ideal poetry and self-centredness. There is rather a sliding scale, which means that verdicts on any particular instance will be a matter of taste. And since taste, in turn, is a matter of what preconceptions and expectations readers bring to their reading, their verdicts will vary depending on how much or how little they are prepared

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<sup>25</sup> Baron writes specifically about Wordsworth. For my own earlier work on literature as communication in general, and in connection with other writers, see Roger D. Sell, *Literature as Communication: The Foundations of Mediating Criticism* (Amsterdam, 2000); *Mediating Criticism: Literary Education Humanized* (Amsterdam, 2001); "A historical but non-determinist pragmatics of literary communication", *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 2 (2001) 1-32; "Henry V and the Strength and Weakness of Words: Shakespearean Philology, Historicist Criticism, Communicative Pragmatics", in Gunnar Sorelius (ed.), *Shakespeare and Scandinavia: A Collection of Nordic Studies* (Newark, Delaware, 2002), pp. 108-41; "Postmodernity, literary pragmatics, mediating criticism: Meanings within a large circle of communicants", in Fotis Jannidis et al. (eds), *Regeln der Bedeutung: Zur Theorie de Bedeutung literarischer Texte* (Berlin, 2003), pp. 103-27; "Blessings, benefactions and bear's services: Great Expectations and communicational narratology", *European Journal of English Studies* 8 (2004) 49-80; "Decency at a Discount? English Studies, Communication, Mediation", *The European English Messenger* 13 (2004) 23-34; "What's Literary Communication and What's a Literary Community?" in Sonia Faessel and Michel Pérez (eds), *Emergent Literatures and Globalization: Theory, Society, Politics* (Paris, 2004), pp. 39-45; "Literature, Cultural Memory, Scholarship", *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 21 (2005) 349-364; "Literary Scholarship as Mediation: An Approach to Cultures Past and Present", in Balz Engler and Lucia Michalcak (eds), *Cultures in Contact* (Tübingen, 2007), pp. 35-58; "Gadamer, Habermas and a Re-Humanized Literary Scholarship", in Smiljana Komar and Uroš Mozetič (eds) *Literary Criticism as Metacommunity* (Ljubljana, 2007), pp. 213-220. See also Roger D. Sell (ed.) *Children's Literature as Communication: The ChiLPA Project* (Amsterdam, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> See fn. 2.

to enjoy the sense of Wordsworth addressing them as person to person. Even the readers most willing to welcome him in this role—even I myself—will always feel that many of his interventions go too far. By any standards, bathos is fairly frequent. But if we squarely admit this, it should be that much easier to see that many passages which were bathos on a strictly idealist criterion, on a communicational criterion are perhaps not bathos after all.

If we take the full measure of Wordsworth's urge, not to create ideal poetry, not to bully or talk down to his readers, but to offer friendly communion, then the first and longest version of the poem about the old man travelling is of considerable interest. Here, without detracting from the old man's fascinating initial appearance, Wordsworth also seeks to explore his personal background, to find out what makes him tick, to see if there are, after all, similarities with other human beings. What he discovers is that the reason for the old man's tranquillity of settled purpose, and for his apparent immunity to discomfort, is his desire to see his wounded son. There have probably always been some readers who, as Wordsworth anticipated in his stout defence of the "elementary feelings" observable in "low and rustic life",<sup>27</sup> will have found such straightforward paternal love a little naive or even incredible. But to Wordsworth when he first wrote the poem, it was very real, and perhaps the most important thing of all. It was this that he wanted to share with his readers, and if they were prepared to listen to him, if they took his reported investigation as perfectly natural, if they did not want to think of the old man as just an exotic curiosity, if they wanted, with Wordsworth himself, to deepen their understanding, then the circle of community was already expanding. What was going was a process of human bonding, between Wordsworth and his readers and the old man himself, as it were, or people like him.

Wordsworth's own ideas about such processes can be deduced from the portrait of Michel Beaupuy in *The Prelude* Book IX. While living in Blois in 1792, it was from Beaupuy that Wordsworth received his most important political education. But he was not more taken by the man's ideas than by his way of treating other people.

Man he loved  
As man; and, to the mean and the obscure,

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<sup>27</sup> Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800, in *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 245.

And all the homely in their homely works,  
 Transferred a courtesy which had no air  
 Of condescension; but did rather seem  
 A passion and a gallantry, like that  
 Which he, a soldier, in his idler day  
 Had paid to woman: somewhat vain he was,  
 Or seemed so, yet it was not vanity,  
 But fondness, and a kind of radiant joy  
 Diffused around him, while he was intent  
 On works of love or freedom [...]  
 (*Prelude* (1850) IX 306-17)<sup>28</sup>

And these democratic kinds of warm-heartedness and courtesy are brought into play in Wordsworth's own communication. Partly thanks to his own bi-cultural upbringing, in everyday life he was at his ease with people from a far wider social range than Coleridge was, for instance,<sup>29</sup> and in much of his writing his joyfulness and sensitive openness come across as also a matter of temperament, springing from an irrepressible delight in human pursuits of almost any description. Indeed, the poetry draws on something which to Modernist readers under the sway of Thanatos and anomie could seem, as Lionel Trilling put it, too unabrasive to be real: the grand and elementary principle of pleasure.<sup>30</sup>

He certainly can cast himself as a solitary, and the Preface to *The Excursion* was fair game for Bagehot's delicious parody: "Now it came to pass in those days that William Wordsworth went up into the hills".<sup>31</sup> Yet what Hazlitt (perhaps a better portrait-painter than critic of Wordsworth's poetry) found in his physiognomy was a striking juxtaposition of introvert high seriousness and mirth:

There was a severe, worn pressure of thought about his temples, a fire in his eye (as if he saw something in objects more than the outward appearance), an intense high narrow forehead, a Roman nose, cheeks furrowed by strong purpose and feeling, and

<sup>28</sup> The wording of the penultimate line here in the 1805 version is less suggestive of the communicational force of Beauvuy's attitude: "a kind of radiant joy / That covered him about when he was bent / On works of love or freedom."

<sup>29</sup> Sell, "Wordsworth's Cultural Flexibility".

<sup>30</sup> Lionel Trilling, "The Fate of Pleasure", in his *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (Harmondsworth, 1967), pp. 62-86. Cf. Sell, *Mediating Criticism*, pp. 217-22.

<sup>31</sup> Walter Bagehot, "Hartley Coleridge" [1852], extract reprinted in Harvey and Gravil, *Wordsworth, The Prelude*, pp. 55-57, esp. 55.

a convulsive inclination to laughter about the mouth, a good deal at variance with the solemn, stately expression of the rest of his face.<sup>32</sup>

The fact is that Wordsworth instinctively perceives solitude as a negativity that is poignantly exceptional, a state whose inner eye may bring exquisite pleasures, but which is almost inhuman in being cut off from the responses of others. This is part of the aura of “Old Man Travelling”, as also of “She dwelt among th’ untrodden ways”, and although it is the Solitary Reaper’s very solitariness that makes her song so audible, and perhaps even gives rise to it, her music, though doubtless satisfying some private even need of her own, deserves to be “borne” in another’s heart as well. Here Wordsworth could actually be punning on “borne” / “born”. His poem itself, on subsequently emerging from his own heart’s solitude, in one sense certainly is the re-birth of the song once sung by the highland lass, inviting now a wider response, within a communicational circle which can steadily grow. When he, too, wanders “lonely as a cloud”, he is similarly drawn into a “laughing company”, albeit of daffodils, with whom, even in his imagination’s most exquisite “bliss of solitude”, he will still—of all things!—dance.<sup>33</sup> Solitude is necessary to the tranquil recollection from which his poetry flows, but does not necessarily correlate with standoffishness or selfish irresponsibility. Recent complaints that he failed to acknowledge the voice of Dorothy in his writing—for instance, her journal’s wonderful description of laughing daffodils<sup>34</sup>—overlook some of the general laws of communication and human creativity, and also his own deepest character traits. One of the ways in which communities grow is precisely through our borrowing other people’s perceptions, often quite unconsciously, and literary community-making hardly depends on poems written in committee. To appreciate Wordsworth’s loving respect for Dorothy one need only place “Tintern Abbey”, with its sheer delight in her difference from his own present self, beside Coleridge’s “The Eolian Harp”, with its clear assumption that the disagreement between

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<sup>32</sup> William Hazlitt, “My First Acquaintance with Poets” [1823], in M.H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (eds), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Seventh Edition: Volume 2* (New York, 2000), pp. 513-526, esp. 523.

<sup>33</sup> *Poems found on the Affections*, pp. 216-17.

<sup>34</sup> E.g. James A. Butler, “Poetry 1798 – 1807: *Lyrical Ballads and Poems in Two Volumes*”, in *Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, pp. 38-54, esp. 42 and 51.

Coleridge's somewhat idiosyncratic philosophy and Sarah's more responsible religion is something they have no choice but to battle out until one or the other wins.<sup>35</sup> In Wordsworth there are no such sharp disjunctions, and therefore nothing corresponding to Coleridge's professions of guilt. Instead, the poetry empathizes with, and itself expresses, different modes of being, flowing naturally between pleasurable self-withdrawal and warmly welcomed social bonds, of whose pleasures music and dancing are the archetypes. Typically, *The Prelude's* great moment of solitary self-dedication to a lofty calling immediately follows upon a jolly evening whose survival in the memory is just as vibrant:

[...] dancing, gaiety and mirth—  
 With din of instruments, and shuffling feet,  
 And glancing forms, and tapers fluttering,  
 And unaimed prattle flying up and down,  
 Spirits upon the stretch, and here and there  
 Slight shocks of young love-liking interspersed  
 That mounted up like joy into the head,  
 And tingled through the veins.  
 (*Prelude* (1805) IV 316-27)

The austerity Hazlitt noticed in the upper regions of Wordsworth's face is at its most imposing in the lines published in 1814 as the Prospectus to *The Recluse*. Clearly apparent here is his Miltonic level of ambition, as he adopts Milton's stance of addressing the entire informed world of his time. Alluding to Milton's invocation of Urania, he even seems prepared to go one better:

Urania, I shall need  
 Thy guidance, or a greater Muse, if such  
 Descend to earth or dwell in highest heaven!  
 For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink  
 Deep—and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds  
 To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.  
 All strength—all terror, single or in bands,  
 That ever was put forth in personal form—  
 Jehovah—with his thunder, and the choir  
 Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones—

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<sup>35</sup> Roger D. Sell, "Literature as Valuable Communication: The Case of Wordsworth", forthcoming.

I pass them unalarmed. Not Chaos, not  
The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,  
Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out  
By help of dreams—can breed such fear and awe  
As fall upon us often when we look  
Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man—  
My haunt and the main region of my song.<sup>36</sup>

Seen one way, the risk he runs here is of coming across as a literary braggart. The personnel and vistas of the hitherto greatest epic in the language leave him evidently unintimidated, an apparent hubris which readers may well find difficult to swallow. Seen in another light, the entire Prospectus is truly awe-inspiring, with Wordsworth setting himself up as the greatest of all prophets, and seeming to pull it off, even if we nowadays tend to look askance at claimants to prophetic vision. Yet readers who do admire him here will not necessarily have been bowled over by a sheer effrontery. His open reliance on Milton's language and style of versification, his confessed eagerness to copy Milton in appealing to the most powerful muse available, can hint at an altogether more sober self-evaluation, for as in Milton, so too in Wordsworth, the invocation itself contains an element of modesty, very like that of an apology. Neither Milton nor Wordsworth believed in the existence of muses in any literal sense. Yet both poets, in purporting to believe that their own mighty themes could emerge under the inspiration of a supernatural being, were indicating a willingness not to take personal credit. They were not putting themselves forward in order to win praise for their own achievement, but in the hope of conveying insights which they honestly believed could benefit the entire human race. And despite their afflatus, they were humble of spirit, acutely concerned lest their vision become dim, or their modes of expression prove inadequate. In the final lines of Wordsworth's Prospectus this becomes even clearer, when he entreats help, no longer from a mere creature of the literary imagination, but from the "dread Power [...] / Whose gracious favour is the primal source / Of all illumination" (or in another version: from "great God / [...] who art breath and being, way and guide, / And power and understanding"),<sup>37</sup> at which point some readers may even be inclined

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<sup>36</sup> *The Poetical Work of William Wordsworths: Volume Five: The Excursion...*, eds. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1959), pp. 3-4.

<sup>37</sup> *Poetical Works: Excursion*, p. 6.

to forgive the appearances of boasting altogether, because of the plain prose sense of what he is actually saying. Given the mighty task he proposes, he really does feel that he needs the strongest kind of support. After all, if the subject-matter of *Paradise Lost* is no longer quite so awesome, that is perhaps because Milton has already mastered it. The mind of man, by contrast, has yet to be grappled with.

The knife-edge this passage treads between self-importance and humility is very Wordsworthian. But unless I am mistaken, it is only by an exclusive adherence to the older mode of Wordsworth criticism, by simply not expecting or wanting his writing to be frank about his own ambitions and self-doubt, by requiring that the poetry be a perfected achievement of the beautiful, the sublime, imagination, poetry, art, that we can really find fault with it. If we, by contrast, take the lines as an honest statement of his own hopes and fears as a writer, as a huge promise to us, his readers, which he thinks he may never fulfil, then their power to engage our thoughts and sympathies for him as one who, despite an understandable solemnity, invites us to be his fellows in conversation is surely very considerable.

The published Prospectus to *The Recluse* had actually been written as the last section of "Home at Grasmere", the first 958 lines of which were not published during his lifetime. In some ways these unpublished lines are even more revealing than the Prospectus, making his sense of personal insecurity much clearer. One reason for not releasing them was perhaps that he planned them as an integral part of *The Recluse* itself, which he never completed. But *The Excursion*, too, was to be part of the *magnum opus*, and was published together with the Prospectus in 1814.<sup>38</sup> So another factor may have been the same hesitation about lengthy autobiography to which he confessed *à propos* *The Prelude* ("a thing unprecedented in Literary history that a man should talk so much about himself")<sup>39</sup> and which may have led him to hold that poem back as well. To *remove* himself in this way from the public view would have been a natural enough response to the accusations of egocentric intrusiveness and bathos, and in point of fact an analogous self-removal was effected through his cuts to "Old Man Travelling". "Home at Grasmere" would

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<sup>38</sup> For what is known about Wordsworth's plans for *The Recluse*, see Kenneth R. Johnston, "Wordsworth and *The Recluse*", in *Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, pp. 70-89.

<sup>39</sup> Letter to Sir George Beaumont, May 1<sup>st</sup> 1805.



obviously not have qualified as pure Poetry uncontaminated by selfhood, and his sense was perhaps that its continuities with the personalizing congenialities of eighteenth century loco-descriptive poetry, for instance, or of Cowper on domesticity would not appeal—or even be audible—to a taste now nurtured by the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.

Given the passion and philosophical depth of the poem's grasp of natural beauty, given its moments of tense soul-searching, those continuities were not of a predictable kind. But in its warm confidentiality of address there certainly was an eighteenth-century flavour, and one which called for readers who were less the devotees of consummate art than friendly, sympathetic fellow-beings. Such are the readers implied by the writing itself, and in addressing them Wordsworth's ethical sensitivity is very alert. His less articulable insights, his colossal spiritual project, and his downright honesty are all quite undiminished, for the main theme is his own desire to find a *modus vivendi* which will reconcile the world of letters with a rural life lived close to nature. For him personally, nothing was at the time more fundamentally important, since his entire future as a writer, and above all his chances of ever completing *The Recluse*, seemed to hang upon it. Yet these considerations, and all the attendant hopes and fears, are voiced with extraordinary delicacy. Although Dorothy and he have now finally returned to settle in the region where he spent his childhood, he cannot think of himself as merely returning. The experiences he has had elsewhere, and in other social circles, make him also a "Newcomer" to Grasmere. Their journey hither through the Yorkshire dales was a blustery one, and for two whole months the weather of Grasmere itself continues to test their resolve, during which time they are particularly fascinated by the birdlife of the place, and above all by two white swans who, like themselves, seem rather isolated from the rest of their kind, in a "small open space / Of blue unfrozen water, where they lodged, / And lived so long in quiet, side by side".<sup>40</sup> When one day the two swans are suddenly no longer to be seen, the human newcomer resorts to a euphemistic periphrasis which, especially to present-day readers, may seem precious and even ludicrous, but which nevertheless recalls

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<sup>40</sup> "Home at Grasmere", ll. 258-260. All quotations from the MS D, the final version, the text adopted by de Selincourt and Darbishire in *Poetical Works: Vol. V* pp. 313-339.

Augustan modes of congenial discursiveness, its rather strained attempt at fanciful urbanity perhaps also marking the awkwardness of his still incomplete re-assimilation with the countryside: what he and sister now fear is that

The Dalesmen may have aimed the deadly tube,  
And parted them [the two swans]; or haply both are gone  
One death, and that were mercy given to both.  
(“Home at Grasmere”, ll. 266-268)

According to Kenneth J. Johnston, “William and Dorothy had drastically over-invested themselves in their symbolic identification with the swans” and the poem’s “extreme symbolism” here descends to “ridiculous literalism”.<sup>41</sup> But such a reading, so exclusively the product of the older, idealist tradition of Wordsworth criticism, is irresponsible to the care with which the poem is following the newcomers’ tense period of trial, as they seek to build up relationships with both the natural and human worlds of Grasmere, passionately hoping for a welcoming embrace, yet always secretly fearing rejection as outsiders. The fantasy of one or—was it?—both of the swans being killed by the dalesmen even begins to grapple with the possibility that one of them—would it be William? would it be Dorothy?—would survive the ordeal of re-acclimatization better than the other, and that they might actually be separated, a thought so unsettling, and so out of key with his high hopes of Grasmere, that Wordsworth immediately tries to disown it:

Recal [*sic*] my song the ungenerous thought [of the dalesmen killing the swans];  
forgive,  
Thrice favoured Region, the conjecture harsh  
Of such inhospitable penalty,  
Inflicted upon confidence so pure.  
(“Home at Grasmere”, ll. 269-272)

In the full context, these lines attribute the same complete purity and innocence of intention as seen in the swans, the same need of protection, to Wordsworth and his sister themselves, yet without risking the gauche

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<sup>41</sup> Kenneth J. Johnston, “Wordsworth and *The Recluse*”, *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 70-89, esp. 81.

simple-mindedness or arrogance that might vitiate a more direct moral self-appraisal. Nor is the indirectness a form of dishonesty. For thoughtfully sympathetic readers it will not hide, but positively reveal exactly what Wordsworth and Dorothy have been feeling. It is, in fact, a fine truthfulness which is also finely modest: a frankness that is prepared to intimate their sense of vulnerability, but tempered with a decent unwillingness to overstress it, or to indulge in priggish self-pity.

A certain modesty must also underlie many of the poems which, like the first version of “Old Man Travelling”, dramatize conversations between Wordsworth himself and other characters. I say this because in the cases I have in mind the conversation comes across as real and untendentious, the longest and most impressive example being *The Excursion*, where we have Wordsworth, the Pedlar, the Solitary, and the Pastor spending a lot of time walking and eating and conversing together against a Lakeland backdrop. Coleridge was unhappy with this set-up, complaining that Wordsworth had

an undue predilection for the dramatic form in certain poems, from which one or other of two evils must result. Either the thoughts and diction are different from the poet, and then there arises an incongruity of style; or they are the same and indistinguishable, and then it presents a species of ventriloquism, where two are represented as talking while in truth one man only speaks.<sup>42</sup>

But at the risk of stating the obvious: people do have different cultural backgrounds; even people whose cultural backgrounds are similar can have different opinions; and even one and the same person can be in two or more minds at once. This last is the disposition which Keats praised in Shakespeare as negative capability—the capability of “being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”<sup>43</sup>—and although Keats was the first to pit Shakespeare’s negative capability against Wordsworth’s egotistical sublime, he may also have sensed the limitations of too absolute a distinction. Certainly he found *The Excursion* to be one of the “three things to rejoice at in this Age”,<sup>44</sup> and here he could well have been responding to what is at times

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<sup>42</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, p. 258 [Chapter 22].

<sup>43</sup> Letter to George and Thomas Keats, Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> December 1817, in *Letters*, pp. 51-54, esp. p. 53.

<sup>44</sup> Letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon, Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> January 1818, in *Letters*, pp. 57-58, esp. p. 58.

a most thought-provoking philosophical dialogue. Whereas its four speakers give vent to some very strong certainties, the poem as a whole does not. Seamus Perry's description of Book I would in fact apply throughout: it is indeed "a curiously double-minded poem"<sup>45</sup>—and "double" may be an understatement.

Granted, the Pedlar would like to cheer the Solitary up; absolutely sure that the Solitary's attitude is mistaken, he goes to great lengths to explain why; and Wordsworth-the-poet, too, rather like Milton in his report of Satan's conversation with Eve, is judgemental, for instance in describing the Solitary's unpleasantly sarcastic smile. Yet the Solitary's depression is not without cause, as the Pedlar himself recognizes in preparing Wordsworth-the-poet to meet him, and as the Solitary himself explains much more extensively. The Solitary's voice here is not authorially silenced, and in fact he speaks of sorrows which Wordsworth could all too easily understand: not only the loss of close family members, but also a bitter, life-changing disappointment with the outcome of the Revolution. Then again, the Solitary is also allowed moments when he still responds to beauty in the world of nature, and when his smiles become more amicable, as his frozen heart gradually thaws to his companions. And when the Pedlar, exasperated at his own inability to convert the Solitary to a more lasting joy, requests that the Pastor back him up, the Pastor is given some lines whose wisdom is of a very different order from that which Coleridge hoped for from *The Recluse*, because it intimates that different individuals' apprehension of the human lot can differ, and can even vary from one situation to another. Our personal sense of truth and rightness can be complicated even at best, and is relative to the particular point in life's journey at which we find ourselves:

[...] when in changeful April fields are white  
 With new-fallen snow, if from the sullen north  
 Your walk conduct you hither, ere the sun  
 Hath gained his noontide height, this churchyard, filled  
 With mounds transversely lying side by side  
 From east to west, before you will appear  
 An unillumined, blank, and dreary, plain,  
 With more than wintry cheerlessness and gloom

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<sup>45</sup> Seamus Perry, "Wordsworth and Coleridge", in *Cambridge Companion*, pp. 161-179, esp. p. 165.

Saddening the heart. Go forward, and look back;  
Look, from the quarter whence the lord of light,  
Of life, of love, and gladness doth dispense  
His beams; which, unexcluded in their fall,  
Upon the southern side of every grave  
Have gently exercised a melting power;  
Then will a vernal prospect greet your eye,  
All fresh and beautiful, and green and bright,  
Hopeful and cheerful:- vanished is the pall  
That overspread and chilled the sacred turf,  
Vanished or hidden; and the whole domain,  
To some too lightly minded, might appear  
A meadow carpet for the dancing hours.

*(The Excursion Book V, ll. 531-51)*

This is not the type of passage which attracted much praise or blame in traditional Wordsworth criticism. It is not what came to be thought of as high poetry: not beautiful-sublime-imagination-poetry-art. But neither is it exactly egotistical bullying or bathos. Moving in an area where any sharp disjunction between the ideal and the ego is quite without relevance, the writing does offer, to use the Modernist term, an epiphany of the world of nature—of the snow and the sunshine—in everyday but poignant interplay with the world of human settlement—with the rows of burial mounds—but this is interwoven with a discursiveness whose rational argument is surely interesting, and frank without being coercive. Companionably low-key, the Pastor's acknowledgement of a mind-set with which he strongly disagrees, his willingness to concede that the gloomy view from the north is just as real as the vernal revelation from the south, encapsulates the communicational ethos of the entire poem.

From the very outset, Wordsworth's own reluctance to force wisdom down his readers' throats has been unmistakably channelled in the dramatization of different voices. And here the Pedlar's voice, too, has been one of warm-hearted understanding. In Book I, he has told his tragic tale of Margaret and her ruined cottage to Wordsworth-the-poet in the here and now, much of what he says being a matter of his own earlier anguish in following the events as they unfolded in real time. Wordsworth-the-poet, as he now listens to this story, is so overwhelmed by grief that he walks away to wrestle with his feelings alone. Then he comes back to hear the story's no less disturbing climax. Yet the Pedlar also mentions how, already some time ago, he himself has come to embrace more comforting thoughts, of Margaret now resting in the

grave's peace, and of the beauty of her neglected garden's weeds, "[b]y mist and silent rain-drops silvered o'er"<sup>46</sup>—another lovely instance, this, of quiet epiphany working hand in hand with an ongoing rational argument. In the end, the Pedlar's own bitter grief for Margaret's sake simply ran its course, so that he is now that much further along in life's journey than Wordsworth-the-poet, who, though still protesting out of intense fellow-feeling for Margaret and her family, can perhaps draw strength from the older man. The younger man is helped, but not pushed. The Pedlar is just "there" for him, less of a preacher, perhaps, than in and of himself something of an epiphany, like the Old Man Travelling.

There is a close ethical kinship between *The Excursion* at its finest and other poems in which, rather than dramatizing the conversation of friends, Wordsworth directly addresses his own intimate circle—his significant group, as McFarland called it—or some particular member or members of it. One of the labels that have been used here is "conversation poem" and, even though not conversational in form, these poems are certainly conversational in spirit, with none of the agonistics of "The Eolian Harp", which Coleridge thought was the first instance of this genre. To signal the difference from Coleridgean conversation (of which Madame de Staël remarked that "[h]e is very great in monologue, but he has no idea of dialogue", and De Quincey that his talk "defeats the very end of social gatherings")<sup>47</sup> I prefer to call Wordsworth's poems of this kind by the other label sometimes used: the "poem of friendship", which can hint at relevant parallels with the undomineering affection of a friendly letter, and is true to the generous openmindedness which underlies the soliloquizing surface.<sup>48</sup>

In 1986 *The Prelude*, as the most extensive example, the poem for Coleridge as Wordsworth habitually called it, came under the scrutiny of Lucy Newlyn, who at that time saw its long series of addresses to Coleridge as reflecting an antagonism that had run through the whole

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<sup>46</sup> *The Excursion*, Book I, l. 944.

<sup>47</sup> In *S.T. Coleridge: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. Seamus Perry (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 148; *The Posthumous Works of Thomas De Quincey*, vol. 2, ed. Alexander H. Japp (London, 1893), p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> George McLean Harper, "Coleridge's Conversation Poems", in his *Spirit of Delight* (London, 1928), pp. 3-27. For the contrast between "Tintern Abbey" and "The Eolian Harp", see Sell, "Literature as Valuable Communication".

history of the two writers' relationship.<sup>49</sup> Coleridge, she said, had helped Wordsworth find his voice, and Wordsworth, still feeling a debt of gratitude, tried to preserve a myth of their continuing close collaboration and equality, as if the Alfoxden days of 1797 had never ended. In fact, though, Wordsworth was now in complete command of his art, needing no support in his solitary quest, and also very aware of Coleridge's human shortcomings. Coleridge in *The Prelude*, Newlyn said, is sometimes idealized beyond all recognition in order to preserve the fantasy of the past living on into the present, while at other times he is portrayed as altogether more flawed, and very much a second fiddle to Wordsworth himself.

Newlyn's close readings did much to support this analysis, but in a preface to the second edition of her book she has now considerably qualified the picture. Her new perception is that Wordsworth's treatment of the friendship is related to Romantic ideas about personal chemistry as illustrated in Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities* of 1809. Seen this way, temperamental opposition and intellectual disagreement might actually result in strong attractions and amalgamations. And although such talk of amalgamations risks making the communicational ethics of *The Prelude* sound coercively monological and Coleridgean, the poem certainly does describe the friendship *as* a friendship, a communion within which, as always in Wordsworth, difference is an integral part of the human other who is loved.

So in directing his words to his nearest and dearest he was endowing his poems of friendship with an implied reader towards whom his own feelings were strongly affectionate. This reader persona was an element no less crucial to these poems' construction than whatever story, ideas, perceptions, or feelings they might be dealing with, or whatever verse-form they might be written in. It was also a crucial rhetorical property, determining a poem's entire tone from start to finish, and offering any readers at all, and not just readers who belonged to the poet's own intimate circle, a generous image of themselves with which to identify for the purpose and duration of reading it. Not that members of the general public have ever mistaken themselves for Coleridge when reading *The Prelude*, or for Dorothy when reading "Tintern Abbey". The

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<sup>49</sup> Lucy Newlyn, *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford, 2004), pp. 165-94.

point is rather that the mode of address is such that, in order to read the poetry at all, you cannot help becoming a vicarious beneficiary of Wordsworth's kindness, even if, in another part of your mind, you make a firm distinction between his reader persona and the person you think you really are yourself. Especially for a writer so often moved by a sense of mission, and thereby so likely to launch into a dictatorial monologue, this text-internal dramatization of deeply friendly relations between himself and his readers was a most promising starting-point.

The poems of friendship contain some of his loftiest and most powerful passages, the lines of a visionary intensity which most closely answered to the traditional sense of poetry in its ideal purity, and for which some of the older critical vocabulary still seems unlikely to be bettered. Many of them originate from what Arnold described as the "golden prime" of the years 1798-1808; they most certainly did not belong with the "mass of inferior work", the "great deal [...] of poetical baggage" of which Wordsworth needed to be editorially "relieved".<sup>50</sup> Yet here, too, Wordsworth himself often figures within the writing in very much the same way as was so often blamed for intrusiveness and bathos. Even the short, two-part *Prelude* of 1799, in which Jonathan Wordsworth found such concentrated power,<sup>51</sup> can shift from the almost inarticulate to the far more obvious, from the virtually un-authored language of epiphany-symbol-image-haiku to the prosy terminologies of, say, psychology, aesthetics, and rhetoric.

At their best, such shifts into the mundane are deeply companionable and interesting, channelling a discussion which is neither trite nor pompous in the least, and which even takes its bearings on the more impersonal kind of observation at its most powerful. An example from *The Prelude* of 1799 is the following:

[...] I saw  
 A naked pool that lay beneath the hills,  
 The beacon on the summit, and more near  
 A girl who bore a pitcher on her head  
 And seemed with difficult steps to force her way  
 Against the blowing wind. It was in truth  
 An ordinary sight, but I should need  
 Colours and words that are unknown to man

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<sup>50</sup> Arnold, *Essays*, p. 136.

<sup>51</sup> See fn. 2.



To paint the visionary dreariness  
Which, while I looked all round for my lost guide,  
Did at that time invest the naked pool,  
The beacon on the lonely eminence,  
The woman and her garments vexed and tossed  
By the strong wind.

(*Prelude*, 1799, First Part, ll. 314-27)

The rather cerebral little disquisition on his rhetorical and linguistic difficulty, with its slightly assertive claim for the visionary dreariness of what he saw, is surrounded on either side by the imagistic impersonality of the lines in which the problem is actually solved, as his eye takes in the ordinary scene twice over, but without imposing ordinary preconceptions or conclusions. This interplay is like an engaging dialogue in which both the personal and the impersonal voice retain their distinctive quality. The primitive power of the nearly inarticulate has not been prosified away, yet has nevertheless become a topic of discussion between the intelligent and cultivated writer and readers who are taken to be no less sophisticated. The net result is a poetry which at once pierces to the marrow and takes us into the poet's friendly confidence, almost as if in mitigation of the starkness of the incident described: the total separateness of the two human existences, Wordsworth's and the girl's, each in their own desolate universe. As so often in Wordsworth, solitary individuality and social bonding are actually interwoven. Within the poem's mimetic world, Wordsworth is isolated and the girl is isolated while, in the discursal world, readers who register the visionary dreariness of this, who fully absorb this double dose of loneliness, do so in their most private being. Yet at the same time, the poet's more self-conscious and prosaic intervention can, as it were, draw readers into discussion, about the very difficulties which beset attempts to turn personal perceptions into common property.

*The Prelude* draws its readers in throughout. As readers, we are free to relate in our own personal way to both the author persona and the persona of Coleridge, the immediate addressee and loved-one. But there is also that real possibility that, in one part of our mind, we will allow the loved-one's persona to serve as our own temporary surrogate. Obviously, the poem's Coleridge, so strongly called to the religion of nature, yet so inveterately drawn back into the great city, so powerfully health-giving and inspiring in his own life-work for liberty and justice, yet so often a cause of friendly anxiety in his sufferings and illness, is uniquely the

historical Wordsworth's portrait of the historical Coleridge. Yet it has real potential as an implied reader of wider scope, precisely because Wordsworth's feelings for Coleridge are just as warm as for any other reader of his close acquaintance. In his urge to share with him something of vital interest to himself, his sheer affection for Coleridge—for all that individual's most wonderful and problematic difference from himself—is so impulsive that the question of whether or not to tolerate such a difficult friend simply never arises. Even readers other than Coleridge himself, and not even belonging to the poet's own immediate circle, can feel implicitly welcomed by a generosity so large.

So when a version of *The Prelude* was eventually published in 1850, it could first of all have positioned readers as, in one part of their minds, its Coleridge, and could then have tended to invite that Coleridge, as it were, to join in spirit with its Wordsworth. Its concluding vision of Wordsworth and Coleridge as joint labourers in the heroic work of humankind's salvation was not a nostalgic throwback to 1797, but really could be read as a hope for the future, and trod that typically Wordsworthian knife-edge between self-aggrandizement and genuine humility. Readers struck by a tendency to self-aggrandizement could have been noting that by 1850 Coleridge was long since dead, that Wordsworth was now dead as well, and that this was presumably the situation which he foresaw and planned for. After his own death, nothing was left of himself and Coleridge but the texts they had written, and although the poem apparently asked to be back-dated as addressed to Coleridge some time before his death in 1834, a more natural reading was arguably that those remaining texts continued to fuel discussion, so that both writers could still indeed be thought of as the momentous project's powerful leaders, albeit in a rather metaphorical sense. Readers more inclined to acknowledge a tendency to humility might have been responding to the fact that, in Wordsworth, the metaphorical is often less true and less surprising than the literal. More literally, less arrogantly, after the year 1850 the poem's concluding hope could apply to no one but human beings still alive or still unborn. Viewed in this way, Wordsworth's stance was a good deal less embattled. Rather than seeing his mission as unrelentingly uphill work, he had simply been hoping that future readers, having enjoyed the poem and having empathized with Coleridge and himself, would henceforth fill the gap created by the deaths of the two prime movers, and fully devote themselves to their own

spiritual well-being, all readers their own prophets, all joint labourers in a shared salvation. Democratically, salvation would start to spread among the poem's own readers by a kind of happy literary infection—a kind of radiant joy diffused.

Perhaps the egalitarian dream sometimes became too heady, veering towards euphoric bombast. Yet on the whole Wordsworth's hopes for a spread of joy by infectious diffusion went together with an awareness that, as *The Excursion's* Pedlar came to remember in his conversation with the Solitary, and as the Pastor had never forgotten, the grand and elementary principle of pleasure is not something you can just drum into people. The uplift of *The Prelude's* conclusion can be approached only by way of the immediately previous lines, which confess to “[t]imes of much sorrow, of a private grief / Keen and enduring”, and which contemplate the possibility that “too weak to tread the ways of truth, / This age [will] fall back to old idolatry”, that “men [will] return to servitude as fast / As the tide ebbs”, that they will “to ignominy and shame / By nations sink together”.<sup>52</sup> One of the most distinctive hallmarks of Wordsworth's best writing is not only that it is inalienably personal, but that, even at its most joyful, the personal voice so honestly expresses concessions and counterarguments.

A clear example is “My heart leaps up / When I behold / A rainbow in the sky”.<sup>53</sup> This poem begins with a simple enough pleasure, but is not one-track-minded, since its ostensible argument that the child is father of the man is radically and permanently problematic. By proposing it so forcefully Wordsworth is inviting dialogue with very different kinds of view. In his own day, the poem apparently agreed with Rousseau, but only by challenging centuries of Western thought, including, ultimately, the church's doctrine of original sin. In our own time, the Rousseauistic view of childhood as a quite separate spiritual and moral preserve, an idea so convincing, or at least attractive, to Victorians, has itself come under question, not only from the Freudian hypothesis of infantile sexuality, but because of growing concerns about child criminals, alterations in children's habits of play, and the accelerating onset of puberty. As for the poem's hope of a pure and happy adult life, from the

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<sup>52</sup> *The Prelude* (1805) XIV 416-417, 431-435.

<sup>53</sup> *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth.: Poems Written in Youth*, eds. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford 1963), p. 226.

moment of publication onwards this was, if anything, an even greater affront to many readers' sense of real-life possibilities. But if Wordsworth himself had not been deeply aware of such difficulties, difficulties expressed in grimly pessimistic lines allotted to *The Excursion's* Solitary, "My heart leaps up" would never have been written in the first place, because it would simply have had no point for him. As things are, the poem's optative modality ("So be it", "I could wish") is clear enough, and is an explicit resistance to what can only be the all too powerful thought of an adulthood worse than death. As he clings to his hope, such acknowledgements of the alternative, gloomier view defuse any hint of banality by gently prompting us to introspection. Despite the up-beat affirmations of a very audible lyric selfhood, a fair degree of negative capability is also at work.

With such a short lyric, this observation, once made, may seem particularly obvious. But in the longest poems, too, Wordsworth's own perceptions, feelings and thoughts are not a uniform totality that is counterposed to a greater variety of readerly views. The four speakers in *The Excursion* are so many Wordsworthian alter egos, with a wide variety of his own moods and intuitions distributed between them, an arrangement which countenances heterogeneity on the part of readers only the more gladly. As for *The Prelude*, recent analysis has often been in the spirit of Kenneth R. Johnston's remark on "Tintern Abbey", that other great poem of friendship which in so many ways anticipated it. After the famous passage about seeing into the life of things, Wordsworth suddenly breaks off: "If this / Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft / [have I returned to the River Wye in my thoughts]".<sup>54</sup> Registering this and other details, Johnston says that "Tintern Abbey", though "usually read as a deeply affirmative statement of secular or existential faith, [...] achieves its affirmation in ways that are shot through with signs of their own deconstruction".<sup>55</sup> In *The Prelude*, similarly, critics have found: a belief that paradise is the produce of the common day, but also the idea that our true home is with infinitude; a belief that as human beings we act in interchange with nature, but also the idea that what we find in nature comes from our own minds;

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<sup>54</sup> *Poems founded on the Affections*, pp. 259-63, esp. 260 (ll. 50-51).

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth R. Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy* (New York, 1998), p. 595.

Wordsworth's sense of his own calling as a prophet of nature, but also his strong belief that the mind of man is far more beautiful than nature; and so on.<sup>56</sup> One can certainly find such major alternations of opinion in Wordsworth's personal interventions. But what is happening here is not self-deconstruction. Nor is Wordsworth simply contradicting himself. First and last, he is community-making, which is seldom an entirely easy and painless process. When we are genuinely community-making, we cannot pretend that we have sorted out all of life's great questions and made ourselves mentally ship-shape. Our willingness to offer words that are comprehensible, true, truthful, sincere, and socially appropriate can extend even as far as admitting what we cannot after all deny: our puzzlement and doubts, our sorrows and fears. We freely confess that many of the disagreements we find within the community at large are also internal to our own mind, and we fully accept that any extension of the community we ourselves may bring about is likely to involve still further heterogeneity. What holds a community together is nothing more, but also nothing less, than a generous agreement to disagree when unavoidable, plus a common determination not to insist on impossible certainties. Of community in this sense, Wordsworth is one of the supreme poets, whose importance for the present phase of human history is very direct.

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<sup>56</sup> See e.g. Stephen Gill, "The Philosophical Poet", *Cambridge Companion*, pp. 142-60, esp. 150-51.