

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

THE FIGURE IN A LANDSCAPE:
WORDSWORTH'S EARLY POETRY

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THE scene of Wordsworthian studies today is one of varied and bustling activity. Thirty years ago a newspaper reviewer of the first volume of Ernest de Selincourt's edition was unduly sanguine when he declared: 'It is safe to prophesy that when this edition is complete, it will take its place once and for all as the definitive edition of Wordsworth's poems.' Continuing work on the manuscripts has spoiled that prophecy. The de Selincourt-Helen Darbishire edition has already been considerably revised; but we must await the new Cornell series to register for us the full impact of recent textual study. Already dates of composition for *The Prelude* and *The Recluse* which have been generally accepted since 1926 have been brought into question by the work of John Alban Finch and others. Meanwhile the *Letters* are being revised and many more are seeing the light; Mark Reed's *Chronology* is providing an indispensable tool for scholars; and at last we are about to receive a fitting edition of the prose. Also progress has not been confined to the field of textual scholarship: a number of interpretative critics, chiefly in the United States, have brought into sharper focus the Wordsworth who is mainly concerned with the puzzles and problems of human consciousness, and with their alleviation through the means of what has been termed 'the apocalyptic imagination'. The names that come to mind are those of Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, and David Ferry. But it might be considered that the practitioners of the new Wordsworthian phenomenology are returning in a different spirit to the insights of F. H. Bradley in his early essay on English romantic poetry and German philosophy. We close our Hartleys and reopen our Kants with Hegel and Husserl, too, thrown in for good measure.

I have taken as the subject of this lecture Wordsworth's first published poems, *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*. This may seem to be to choose a rather tame corner of the bustling scene I have described; these poems have usually been considered as little more than juvenilia. If any justification were

needed for looking fairly closely at the first work of a great poet it might be on these lines. The evidence of the manuscript drafts confirms what has already been apparent from the constant revision by the poet in the successive printed texts: Wordsworth's poetry is a vast palimpsest. Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage*, in the attempts to conclude the poem, was already the instrument of a strange consolation before the theme was treated in terms of orthodox Christian piety in *The Excursion*, Book I. On the purely stylistic level there is the whole group of revisions which might be represented by the change in the Blind Highland Boy's vessel from common household tub to turtle shell. More importantly, *Salisbury Plain* becomes *Guilt and Sorrow* which in turn produces *The Female Vagrant*. Wordsworth's themes haunt him from the start and it is their expression and arrangement which alter; *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* contain primitive and instinctive gropings towards themes for which he had yet to find a language. These two eighteenth-century topographical poems contain anticipations of the solitaries, of the lines in *The Prelude*, Book VI, on the Simplon Pass, of the central passage of *Tintern Abbey* on the unity of man and nature, and of much more in the mature poetry. I am reminded of the manner in which in Samuel Beckett's early verse his habitual themes of the imprisoned self seem condemned to ineffectiveness in the smart, abrupt modernist free verse, themes which stalk menacingly abroad in the flowing monologues of his maturity.

With most poets the inspection of immature or less mature work can lead one only forward. But with Wordsworth the poems he wrote in his early twenties have a peculiar interest; it is on account of the primacy of vivid personal experience and of youthful experience in the life of his poetry; already the process of tranquil recollection had gone some way. The poet of 1791-3 had travelled less far from the east and was nearer to the hiding-places of his power than the poet of 1802-5 who finished *The Prelude* and composed and finished the *Intimations* ode. It is surely of absorbing interest to read poems which were written in the period immediately preceding Wordsworth's first visit to the banks of the Wye in July 1793 and to see those additional passages in the poet's own copy which were probably written in during the next twelve months.

It is characteristic that Wordsworth's emergence as a poet of his loved home landscape should be when he was first away from home as an undergraduate at Cambridge. Lapse of time and

change of place were often to provide the imaginative focus for a scene or incident. The supreme instance of this creative nostalgia is the composition of the *Prelude* passages on his early childhood in the German winter of 1798–9. Cambridge seems to have worked on him like this: he was able to sort out the incoherent medley of personal and topographical fantasy which constitutes *The Vale of Esthwaite*. But the process came to a head during his first long vacation of 1788 when he could look again at well-known scenes with the eyes of his new self; one or two passages in *The Vale of Esthwaite* (I have in mind especially that on waiting for the horses before his father's death which is a first essay for the 'spots of time' passage in *Prelude*, XI) grasp blindly at the severe and mysterious significance he attached to objects in his early years and to which he was to return: this now gives way to a different emotion concerning nature, the recognition of a harmonious pattern of delight in local scenes. This is the emotion which guides *An Evening Walk* and Wordsworth was to describe it later in the fourth book of *The Prelude* which is devoted to this summer vacation:

Nor less do I remember to have felt
Distinctly manifested at this time
A dawning, even as of another sense,
A human-heartedness about my love
For objects hitherto the gladsome air
Of my own private being, and no more . . .
A new-born feeling. It spread far and wide;
The trees, the mountains shared it, and the brooks . . .
Whatever shadings of mortality
Had fallen upon these objects heretofore
Were different in kind; not tender: strong,
Deep, gloomy, were they and severe; the scatterings
Of Childhood, and, moreover, had given way,
In later youth, to beauty, and to love
Enthusiastic, to delight and joy.¹

These deeper and gloomier shadings of mortality were to return and to provide a ground-bass in Wordsworth's later poetry. We shall see that they have not been wholly eradicated from the poems published in 1793.

It has not been sufficiently noticed that, though published in the same year, the two poems are really quite different. *An Evening Walk* aims at a blended harmony of tones and impressions; *Descriptive Sketches* is a violent and slightly hysterical

¹ *The Prelude* (1805), iv. 222–7, 233–4, 240–6.

work, irregular in outline, progressing in bursts and flashes of strident description. The Wordsworth who composed this latter poem by the banks of the Loire in 1791 had more in his mind than landscape and was a different man from the undergraduate of three years before. Yet for modern readers the heroic couplet and the rhetoric of descriptive poetry provide a poetical dark night in which all cats are grey. The two poems are usually dismissed together as the work of an essentially pre-Wordsworthian Wordsworth, an imitative exercise in the eighteenth-century landscape tradition. Mary Moorman does not depart from the stock judgement on *An Evening Walk* when she brands it as a work in which Wordsworth makes no attempt to describe more than his outward eye saw and which therefore shows that he 'placed himself deliberately among the writers of the landscape school'.¹ The view of Russell Noyes is no different, if a little kinder.² I think an interesting aspect of the poem has been ignored; it is an aspect Coleridge was aware of in a comment he applied to *Descriptive Sketches* but which has a bearing on the language of both poems in spite of the differences I have mentioned:

The language was not only peculiar and strong, but at times knotty and contorted, as by its own impatient strength; while the novelty and struggling crowd of images acting in conjunction with the difficulties of the style demanded always a greater closeness of attention than poetry (at all events than descriptive poetry) has a right to claim.³

We see then that Coleridge, an eighteenth-century reader reading a new eighteenth-century descriptive poem in 1794 at Cambridge, believed that this poem was powerfully original and at the same time that, far from conforming to the established picturesque mode, its novelty of style actually worked against that mode.

Of course Coleridge can not have been unaware that *An Evening Walk* is shot through with echoes of previous topographical poetry. Up to a point it illustrates the principle advanced by T. S. Eliot in his essay on Blake: the immature great poet will catch our attention not by doing something

¹ Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth: a Biography. I. The Early Years 1770-1803* (Oxford, 1957), p. 115.

² Russell Noyes, *Wordsworth and the Art of Landscape* (Bloomington, 1968), pp. 149-60. Noyes states (p. 150) that Wordsworth had not yet found his own medium of expression; I attempt to illustrate the view that he was in process of finding one and already stumbling on phrases and ideas.

³ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. George Watson (1960), p. 46.

highly original but by producing accomplished pastiche in the forms which have provided his literary education.¹ But the interest of the poem lies in the fact that in attempting such a highly developed genre with such bravura Wordsworth has pushed the style of the landscape poem to its very limits. The concentration of the language of visual description is unusual. The diction and syntax associated with the form were designed to approximate poetic description as far as possible to a framed landscape painting or to those artificially circumscribed vistas which the handbooks of the picturesque recommended to the tourist.² Wordsworth has boldly saturated this diction, piling up epithets suggestive of every variation of colour and tone, while in many lines strained and eccentric phrasing stimulates but also overburdens the visual imagination. The carefulness of the colour scheme may be seen in the following lines:

Hung o'er a cloud, above the steep that rears
 Its edge all flame, the broad'ning sun appears;
 A long blue bar its aegis orb divides,
 And breaks the spreading of its golden tides;
 And now it touches on the purple steep
 That flings his shadow on the pictur'd deep.
 Cross the calm lake's blue shades the cliffs aspire,
 With tow'rs and woods, a 'prospect all on fire';
 The coves and secret hollows thro' a ray
 Of fainter gold a purple gleam betray;
 The gilded turf arrays in richer green
 Each speck of lawn the broken rocks between;
 Deep yellow beams the scatter'd boles illumine,
 Far in the level forest's central gloom.

The difficulty here for the reader is that the careful discrimination of the reflections of sunlight on water, cliff, and the hollows of the forest imposes too many transitions on the mind's eye of all but the most adept visualizer. This remains true even if account is taken of the probably greater visual

¹ T. S. Eliot, 'Blake', in *The Sacred Wood* (4th edn., 1934), p. 152.

² Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (1927) is informative on the tradition of English landscape painting and its offshoots in architecture and gardening; C. V. Deane, *Aspects of Eighteenth Century Nature Poetry* (1935) and R. A. Aubin, *Topographical Poetry of the Eighteenth Century* (1936) treat descriptive poetry, the latter being particularly strong on the enumeration and classification of minor poems, many of which were known to Wordsworth. John Arthos, *The Language of Description in Eighteenth Century Poetry* (Ann Arbor, 1949) analyses, with an alphabetical vocabulary, the growth of a specialized diction for the genre and its origins in scientific terminology.

sophistication of late eighteenth-century readers. The educated person of the time benefited from an alliance of the arts for the celebration of classical or native landscape and the qualities of the picturesque which might be extracted from it. Poets painted in words, and painters endowed their brush-strokes with poetic feeling while evoking the sense of locality and history. Thomson's *Seasons* and its successors, the poems of Dyer, Akenside, Langhorne, and their followers, had trained the reader in the design of scenes and the recognition of epithets for colour and shading. Such a person could also learn from guidebooks like that to the Lakes by Thomas West¹ what scenery was worth looking at and from the picturesque manuals of Gilpin and the aesthetic speculations of Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price, the canons by which to observe it. Yet to the reviewers of the time *An Evening Walk* had something strained and harsh about it.² Wordsworth seems to be aiming at an impressionist immediacy of light and feeling: the concentration of visual epithets only exposes the inadequacy of the traditional descriptive diction for achieving this effect. Coleridge, in the passage I have already quoted from, even while he praised the poem and its companion, agreed to call their outstanding quality harshness: '... in the structure of the particular lines and periods, there is a harshness and acerbity connected and combined with words and images all a-glow which might recall those products of the vegetable world, where gorgeous blossoms rise out of the hard and thorny rind and shell within which the rich fruit was elaborating.'³

A principal cause of this straining of language is the attempt to convey the exact direction of the light in the progress from afternoon to dusk. The 'shorten'd herds' are seen from a distance, shadowless, when the noonday sun is still beating directly down. The deviation of the sun's rays across the lake is marked stage by stage: 'slant wat'ry lights', 'dark slant woods', 'sunk to a curve'. Also among the numerous echoes of Milton, Collins, and Gray, and minor writers like Moses Browne, there occurs a quite different type of phrasing. In original, compressed observations Wordsworth can be seen treating the landscape

¹ Thomas West, *Guide to the Lakes* (1778). In his comments on Derwent-water he recommends at least one aesthetic experiment which Wordsworth performs: 'Dr. Brown recommends as the complement of the tour of this lake, "a walk by still moonlight (at which time the distant water-falls are heard in all their variety of sound)"', p. 119.

² 'a harshness in both the construction and the versification' (*Critical Review* quoted in R. A. Aubin, *op. cit.*, p. 218).

³ *Biographia Literaria, ut supra.*

tradition as a natural history, a flora which may be extended by fresh individual perceptions. Such is the description of the sharp definition of twigs against the sky at dusk:

Now while the solemn evening Shadows sail,
On red slow-waving pinions down the vale,
And, fronting the bright west in stronger lines,
The oak its dark'ning boughs and foliage twines.

Wordsworth was specially fond of this image because he could remember observing the effect between Hawkshead and Ambleside as a boy of fourteen: '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 . . . and I made a resolution to supply, in some degree, the deficiency.'¹ If we were to take as our standard for poetry that canon of Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites of truth to the eye at close range, then the charm of the poem would lie in visual discoveries of this kind. The char leaps for the may-fly and dissolves in circles the mirror-like surface of the water; the clock-beetle ceases its drone when it strikes against the traveller's body and falls to the ground. The mother swan rests her cygnets on her back alternately; the white trunks of the birch trees stand out in the fading light. But these single touches of truth to nature, anticipating the 'flower in the crannied wall' of Tennyson, are not always at one with the larger scheme of the poem. That larger scheme is supported by the time sequence from dawn to dusk and the record of moving and fading light across the lake. As did his predecessors of the landscape school, Wordsworth tries to weave all his particular observations into a pictorial harmony; where he differs is in cramming so much detail into the frame that it sprawls outside it: and also, his picture is a moving picture.

The crowded canvas may be illustrated from the last two paragraphs of the poem. As in a painting by Wright of Derby or Francis Nicholson, the moonlight harmonizes the dark blue tones of the hills, the waters, and the silvered wreaths of charcoal smoke. But even because of this harmony of tones one is made aware of the mass of detail barely controlled by the loose 'pictorial' form; for, after all, the poem is not a picture, and the detail includes sounds—shouts and the barking of dogs:

But now the clear-bright Moon her zenith gains,
And rimy without speck extend the plains;
The deepest dell the mountain's breast displays,
Scarce hides a shadow from her searching rays;

¹ *Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, i (1940), p. 319.

From the dark blue 'faint silvery threads' divide
 The hills, while gleams below the azure tide;
 The scene is waken'd, yet its peace unbroke,
 By silver'd wreaths of quiet charcoal smoke,
 That, o'er the ruins of the fallen wood,
 Steal down the hills, and spread along the flood.

The song of mountain streams unheard by day,
 Now hardly heard, beguiles my homeward way.
 All air is, as the sleeping water, still,
 List'ning the aerial music of the hill,
 Broke only by the slow clock tolling deep,
 Or shout that wakes the ferry-man from sleep,
 Soon followed by his hollow-parting oar,
 And echo'd hoof approaching the far shore;
 Sound of clos'd gate across the water born,
 Hurrying the feeding hare thro' rustling corn;
 The tremulous sob of the complaining owl;
 And at long intervals the mill-dog's howl;
 The distant forge's swinging thump profound;
 Or yell in the deep woods of lonely hound.¹

In this passage there is an undeniable beauty in the mingled effects of moonbeams, shadows, and muffled sounds. When at the age of seventy-nine Wordsworth drastically revised his first poem for a new edition, he only slightly altered these final lines; he must have recognized their accomplished skill. The only major change is the substitution of the line on the ferryman taking his boat to meet the approaching rider

Soon followed by his hollow-parting oar,
 by another line aiming at greater naturalistic faithfulness

The boat's first motion—made with dashing oar.

As the oar is thrust into the water to push off it makes a splash and only after that settles down to the regular motion of slap and withdrawal. The elderly poet checks the younger on a point of detail; but the charm of the passage is of the patterned whole; 'hollow-parting oar', with its record of the hollow slapping sound of the oar's withdrawal, is comparable to the kind of small detail in a landscape painting which charms us as convincingly realistic: a little tuft of grass or a puff of smoke. But the detail may not bear much close inspection since its effect is realized in the assembly of the whole composition. The older man, as his remark to Isabella Fenwick on the 'stronger lines' of the oak's branches suggests, looked back on his poem as a

¹ *Poetical Works*, i, ll. 423-46.

primitive venture in poetic natural history, the beginning of a continuous exploration of the appearance of natural forms. He might be asking, as did Constable, 'Why . . . may not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but the experiments?'¹ But though experiments of this kind are to be found in *An Evening Walk*, it is as a student of the picturesque, however subtle and innovating, that the poet of 1793 presents himself to the reader.

I come now to explain what I have called the moving picture in the poem. How can we speak of the picturesque pattern in a landscape poem when a poem is not a picture? Of course the impossible doctrine of *ut pictura poesis* had long been maintained by the critics. Du Fresnoy's *De Arte Graphica* (1665), a respected textbook translated by Dryden (1695) and later into verse by William Mason, proclaims it:

True Poetry the Painter's power displays;
True Painting emulates the Poet's lays.

Christopher Hussey has explained the factors which made the impossible less impossible and created an illusion of parallelism: in the ideal or classical landscape of Poussin and Claude Lorraine the painters were rendering scenes described by the Roman poets; their landscape was infused with poetic allusions, the Tuscan slopes and woodlands heavy with the patina of literature. When therefore Thomson and Dyer, the founders of eighteenth-century descriptive poetry, came to attempt the Alexandrian conjuring trick, their imaginations were inspired by pictures full of allusions to scenes in poetry. It was thus easier to translate their images back into that medium.²

By the time of Wordsworth English artists and connoisseurs of the picturesque had amassed a stock of landscape situations and descriptions based on the evocative hints of pre-romantic poets: the restrained, idealized, yet visually sensitive impression of Collins's *Ode to Evening* holds out the promise both of pictorial mystery and pictorial comprehensiveness:

. . . from the Mountain's side,
Views Wilds, and swelling Floods,
And Hamlets brown, and dim-discover'd Spires,
And hears their simple Bell, and marks o'er all
Thy Dewy Fingers draw
The gradual dusky Veil.

¹ Quoted from E. D. H. Johnson, ed., *The Poetry of Earth: a Collection of English Nature Writings* (1966), p. xi.

² Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque*, pp. 18-50.

Here the brownness helps to do the picturesque painter's work for him. 'Where do you put your brown tree?' said Wordsworth's friend Sir George Beaumont to Constable.¹ The personification of evening is a more subtle means of achieving compositional unity. Many poets felt the inspiration of the *Ode* and it is present in the unified moonlit scene at the conclusion of *An Evening Walk*.

I am so positive about the ultimate hopelessness of the *ut pictura poesis* ideal because I accept as we all must the supreme fact that a poem exists in time, coming from silence and returning to silence, as Valéry said. This was the great aesthetic insight of Lessing, retorted upon a glib tribe of parallelists between poetry and painting. Its importance towers far above the fashionable formulations of modes of the sublime and picturesque by English critics of the period. Lessing argues from Homer and Virgil how a description in a narrative poem is quite different from an apparently similar scene in a picture since however many descriptive epithets are used the structure of poetry is historical, not two-dimensional: one thing must happen after another, and Homer's 'picture' of the shield of Achilles turns out to be a historical account of the forging of the shield.²

Even the shortest lyric which tries to be and not to mean has a history of growth from beginning to end; the poem as aesthetic object may burn with a hard gem-like flame but it cannot be a gem. Concrete poems, like George Herbert's wings and altar, operate by means of a conceit, playing a game of being objects which poet and reader know is only a game, but which is given a serious undercurrent by the prior assumption, whether in the baroque age or in that of Ian Hamilton Finlay and contemporary concrete poets, that there is a serious dance of cosmic meaning behind the charade on the printed or typewritten page.

If the landscape poem is not a landscape picture, what does it substitute within its limited period of reading time for the movement of the beholder's eye across a canvas, for his final focusing of the whole? Poems may be broadly divided into those where the poets have boldly tried to fake a picture, and those where

¹ Hussey, *op. cit.*, p. 248. The anecdote is well known, but the point is that picturesque artists were deferential towards brown on account of its romantic literary associations. Isaac D'Israeli has described these associations and traced them to the Italian romantic epic: *Curiosities of Literature* (1817), ii. 119.

² Lessing, *Laokoon*, in *Selected Prose Works*, Bohn edn., ed. E. C. Beasley (1913), pp. 89-110.

they have admitted that their art is limited to narrative in time and so choose ways of accommodating their pictorial material to story and moral reflection. In the first group may be placed John Dyer's *Grongar Hill* (1726). Dyer, a painter himself, goes as far as he can in drawing the reader's attention from one scenic detail to another, as the eye of a connoisseur might be drawn over a Claude or Wilson landscape, moving from a human group in the foreground through wooded middle distance to peaks and towers and so back to the foreground:

Below me Trees unnumber'd rise,
 Beautiful in various Dies:
 The gloomy Pine, the Poplar blue,
 The yellow Beech, the sable Yew,
 The slender Firr, that taper grows,
 The sturdy Oak with broad-spread Boughs;
 And beyond the purple grove,
 Haunt of *Phyllis*, Queen of Love!
 Gawdy as the op'ning Dawn,
 Lies a long and level Lawn,
 On which a dark Hill, steep and high,
 Holds and charms the wand'ring Eye! . . .
 His Sides are cloth'd with waving Wood,
 And antient towers crown his brow,
 That cast an awful Look below;
 Whose ragged Walls the Ivy creeps
 And with her Arms from falling keeps.¹

The anonymous observer in *Grongar Hill* stays for long periods in the same place like a man viewing a picture. But the limitations of current poetic vocabulary in terms to denote distancing and perspective make the reader's visualization of the scene more like a series of film camera images with the camera moving in on distant shots. Gilpin, that late eighteenth-century pope of the picturesque, criticized Dyer in this passage for failing to provide a proper contrast of foreground and middle distance: if the castle is afar off the ivy creeping on its walls could not be

¹ John Dyer, *Grongar Hill*, ll. 57-71, in D. Lewis, *Miscellaneous Poems by Several Hands* (1726). William and Dorothy Wordsworth's lifelong enjoyment of Dyer is shown by a letter of his of 6 July 1835 to Crabb Robinson: 'This morning I chanced to mutter a line from Dyers Grongar Hill—she immediately finished the passage—reciting the previous line and the two following' (*The Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson with the Wordsworth Circle* (1927), p. 279).

distinguished as clearly as the shapes and hues of the trees below the mountain.¹

Another landscape poet, one much admired by Wordsworth, John Scott of Amwell, had a deeper understanding of the mode in which *Grongar Hill* operates. While substantially agreeing with Gilpin's criticism, he declares that, while the hill's extensive view might have afforded several complete landscapes, it is not clear that Dyer was intent on producing any.² Scott sees that even in as painterly a poem as *Grongar Hill* there is no fixed point of view; the observer walks from one scene to another: behind the fictitious landscape structure there is the narrative structure of a pedestrian tour:

About his (i.e. the river Towy's) chequer'd sides I wind,
And leave his Brooks and Meads behind, . . .
Now, I gain the Mountain's Brow,
What a Landskip lies below . . .
See on the Mountain's southern side . . .
Now, ev'n now, my Joy runs high,
As on the Mountain-turf I lie . . .

The poet climbs the hillside, he turns through ninety degrees to look in the other direction, he lies down on the turf; and as for Gilpin's objection to the detail of the ivy being picked out at such a distance, we begin to see that, given a journeying poet to bind the scenes together, he must have a memory able to retain the minute appearances of an earlier scene. He is not a camera but a consciousness.

It is just such a narrative pattern as this, of a walk round the lake, which, combined with the progression from afternoon to twilight, imposes a pattern on the otherwise disjointed images of *An Evening Walk*. The outline is much less clear than the ascent of the mountain in *Grongar Hill*. The rapid succession of scenes takes us away at times from the shore of the lake. There are visits to a farmyard and to a slate quarry. The main line is the contemplation of woods, rocks, and water round the lake, a tone poem of impressions from dawn to dusk comparable to Debussy's *La Mer*. There are digressions from this main line, usually obeisances towards other artists in the tradition of the local poem. A paragraph in the middle of the poem, devoted

¹ William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, &c. relative chiefly to Picturesque Beauty made in the Summer of the Year 1770* (2nd edn., 1789).

² John Scott, *Critical Essays* (1785), pp. 111-12.

like the closing lines purely to sound effects, is reminiscent of a famous passage in Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*:

The whistling swain that plods his ringing way
 Where the slow waggon winds along the bay;
 The sigh of swallow flocks that twittering sweep,
 The solemn curfew swinging long and deep;
 The talking boat that moves with pensive sound,
 Or drops his anchor down with plunge profound;
 Of boys that bathe remote the faint uproar,
 And restless piper wearying out the shore;
 These all to swell the village murmurs blend . . .

The passage on the cock strutting 'Sweetly ferocious round his native walks' is a spirited but conventional genre picture; the group of potters with their panniered pack-horses and the peasant coming down the mountain pathway by sledge give touches of the local colour which is the *raison d'être* of the local poem. So does the glimpse of the quarrymen toiling 'small as pygmies in the gulph profound'; there was a respectable tradition of topographical poetry about mining and quarrying districts: a whole section of the valuable bibliography in R. A. Aubin's study of the eighteenth-century local poem is devoted to works of this class.

These digressions emphasize that the walk round the lake is a convenient artifice for joining various episodes together. As in other examples of the genre, apparent unity of place does not prevent the local poet from launching out in every direction into specialized local colour or moral meditation. But Wordsworth has two passages of a different kind which strain the ordinary character of the local poem to breaking-point. We have seen how clotted diction and the multiplication of visual and auditory detail tend to dissolve the conventional landscape framework by filling it fit to bursting. These digressions stand outside the frame of the poem and look towards a quite different kind of poetry.

The first of these passages is that on the poor beggar woman whose children die from exposure as she tries to protect them from the cold (ll. 241-300). A tenuous link with the main body of the poem is provided by a reference to the swans who have just been described as part of the evening scene on the waters. Unlike 'hapless human wanderers' they will never have to commit their young to 'winter's winding sheet of snow'; perhaps the human mother when tottering along the road in the heat of summer has envied the good fortune of the swan and her cygnets. The mother is a widow of the American war; as a boy

Wordsworth must have seen others of her kind,¹ and discharged veterans, too, like the tall soldier encountered on a lonely road whom he was to describe in the fourth book of *The Prelude*. Pity and social indignation, without any precise political direction as yet, swell the poem so that, so to say, at this point it breaks the mould of its form:

For hope's deserted well why wistful look?
 Choked is the pathway, and the pitcher broke.
 I see her now, deny'd to lay her head,
 On cold blue nights, in hut or straw-built shed;
 Turn to a silent smile their sleepy cry,
 By pointing to a shooting star on high:
 I hear, while in the forest depth he sees,
 The Moon's fixed gaze between the opening trees,
 In broken sounds her elder grief demand,
 And skyward lift, like one that prays, his hand.

These lines look before and after in the developing experience, the increasingly better understood experience, which is the stuff of Wordsworth's poetry. In this poetry where 'the Child is Father of the man' nothing stays still; an image with its recesses in the past is already thrusting its way towards a future unknown to the poet. Mr. Jonathan Wordsworth has rightly commented on how unrealized the images of this passage appear in comparison with the stark and natural presentation of the forsaken woman in the Margaret of *The Ruined Cottage*.² But it is remarkable and less fully noticed that the images and the raw emotion are already there in 1793; it tells us something about the peculiar character of the mature poetry where creation is an intense distillation of experiences long pondered, not merely 'recollection in tranquillity' but the recasting of phrases and images that had already become memories.

¹ There is a pathetic female beggar with infant in John Langhorne's *The Country Justice* (1774-7), a poem admired by Wordsworth: *The Poetical Works of John Langhorne* (1804), ii. 71-3; see also Roger Sharrock, 'Wordsworth and Langhorne's *The Country Justice*', *Notes & Queries*, new series, i (1954), 302-3; and for Wordsworth's acknowledgement of his debt to the Scottish and Border poets of the eighteenth century, *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: the Later Years* (Oxford, 1939), i. 128-9.

² Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity* (1969), pp. 184-8. A statement of Mr. Wordsworth's elsewhere may show the difference of our approach: 'it was only by a gradual process that the scene came to have any of its later implications . . . Wordsworth at the age of twenty did not in fact feel very strongly about either landscape or people' (in *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies in Memory of John Alban Finch*, Ithaca, 1970, p. 451).

The broken pitcher and the pathway choked with weed are employed emblematically to expand the metaphor of 'hope's deserted well'. But the pitcher was already an item of Wordsworth's emotional furniture. Carried on the head of a girl, not abandoned, but found in a place of desolation near the Border Beacon, it had produced in his childhood a feeling of 'visionary dreariness'. This is later recalled in the eleventh book of *The Prelude*. We meet again the weeds choking the pathway as real, not allegorical weeds in Margaret's neglected garden in *The Ruined Cottage*. The shooting star used to lull the starving children into smiles anticipates the star which jerks Marmaduke out of his mad obsession in *The Borderers*. The moonlight shines again as an omnipresent vehicle of grace in *Lyrical Ballads*.

The other digression is among the manuscript additions which Wordsworth made in 1794 to his copy of the first edition. It was not incorporated in the revision of 1849. It is his first statement of his early pantheism, made before he had been able to talk with Coleridge of 'the one life'. The whole natural world is pulsing with life: there is no distinction possible between creator and created or animate and inanimate:

A heart that vibrates evermore, awake
 To feeling for all Forms that life can take,
 That wider still its sympathy extends
 And sees not any line where being ends;
 Sees sense, through Nature's rudest forms betrayed,
 Tremble obscure, in fountain, rock and shade,
 And while a secret power those forms endears,
 Their social accents never vainly hears.¹

The excitement of this passage is scientific rather than metaphysical. The stress is on an evolutionary progression from simpler organic and non-organic forms up to more complex ones, and even to the 'social accents' of the civilized human community. In wishing to incorporate this insight into *An Evening Walk* Wordsworth was adding to his already considerable formal difficulties in the poem. I think this is why he excluded the addition from the later printed text. The vitalism of these lines breathes the air of a new intellectual movement closely connected with radical assumptions concerning the perfectibility of man. They represent a revolt against the Newtonian picture of the universe in which mind is set over against dead matter and

¹ *Poetical Works*, i. 10.

bodies only move when they are acted upon by external forces.¹ But the intellectual affinities of the eighteenth-century school of landscape poetry are with Newtonian physics and the philosophy of Locke. The formal landscape, whether with or without figures, depends on classical geometry and classical perspective; on to the firm outline thus provided shades and colours (Locke's secondary qualities) are imposed by the connoisseur-beholder. The beauty of the scene is a celebration of natural order, not natural energy. To declare, as Wordsworth does here, that no line can be seen where being ends is to deny the distinction between landscape and figures which is a constituent principle of the landscape or prospect poem and of the whole picturesque vogue. It is to pass from the codified picturesque according to Gilpin to the tonal pageant of natural forms in Turner's last phase. These two attitudes could never blend in the same poem. Wordsworth was prepared to develop the introspective strain in the poem he had recently published even if it meant turning the original text inside out. For this digression is attached to one of the more conventional episodes of the poem as it stands in 1793: the description of the waterfall at Rydal. There is an acknowledgement of the allusion to Horace's *o fons Bandusiae* and there is a footnote in the spirit of the picturesque movement: 'The reader who has made the tour of this country will recognize in this description the features which characterize the lower waterfall in the gardens of Rydale.' And these further lines are added in the manuscript annotations:

Its sober charms can chase with sweet controul
 Each idle thought and sanctify the soul . . .
 Or through the mind, by magic influence
 Rapt into worlds beyond the reign of sense,
 Roll the bright train of never ending dreams
 That pass like rivers tinged with evening gleams . . .²

The centre of interest is becoming the mind of the observer or the invisible forces behind nature. In the period when he wrote the original version of *An Evening Walk* the strong assurances of

¹ That Wordsworth may have been influenced in the early nineties by the vitalist theories of d'Holbach, Robinet, and Diderot is plausibly argued by H. W. Piper, *The Active Universe: Pantheism and the Concept of the Imagination in the English Romantic Poets* (1962), pp. 60-84. Wordsworth's use of 'forms' for living organisms in this and other passages has parallels in Diderot and Robinet.

² *Poetical Works*, i. 9.

personal identity recorded by the 'spots of time' had been partially buried; already he could misinterpret them, converting them into fashionable exercises in the Gothic-sentimental. But the additions reveal that his submission to the tyranny of the eye was not total: there are sufficient signs in the printed poem as well as in the revisions that, as he was to tell Walter Savage Landor thirty years later, his ultimate aim was a poetry 'where things are lost in each other, and limits vanish, and aspirations are raised'.¹

Before leaving *An Evening Walk* I should like to suggest that, as *The Vale of Esthwaite* contains raw, unfermented material which reappears in *The Prelude*, so this poem stands in a much more intimate relation to *Tintern Abbey*. The occasion of the poem is professedly personal melancholy. This is caused not merely by separation from the region of the Lakes but by separation from a loved person with whom the poet desires to live; and, as in the later poem, that person is the poet's sister:

. . . that cottage . . .
 (Sole bourn, sole wish, sole object of my way;
 How fair it's lawn and silvery woods appear!) . . .
 Where we, my friend, to golden days shall rise.

At eighteen or nineteen Wordsworth is already building a poem on the plan he was to follow ten years later in *Tintern Abbey*: the celebration of a scene of natural beauty in the form of an intimate address to Dorothy. There were abundant precedents for a descriptive poem on a writer's return to his native place; but the association with Dorothy gives *Tintern Abbey* a personal, confessional character which defies formal classification.² In this first attempt the association is slight: direct, natural confession is overlaid by the picturesque walk and its 'prospects'. Freedom only came with the storing of further memories and their maturation. The best final judgement on *An Evening Walk* is

¹ Letter of 21 January 1824, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: the Middle Years* (2nd edn., 1969).

² John Scott's *Amwell* is of interest here because of references to the poet's second wife as his companion in the love of nature and his stress on the personal associations of a not very remarkable neighbourhood:

This fond desire
 Prompts me to sing the lonely sylvan scenes
 Of Amwell; which, so oft in early youth,
 While novelty enhanc'd their native charms,
 Gave rapture to my soul; and often, still,
 On life's calm moments shed serener joy.

Wordsworth's comment on his five years past earlier self on his first visit to the Wye valley:

The sounding cataract
 Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
 The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
 Their colours and their forms, were then to me
 An appetite: a feeling and a love,
 That had no need of a remoter charm,
 By thought supplied, or any interest
 Unborrowed from the eye.

The title of *Descriptive Sketches* disarmingly admits its discursiveness. We are reminded of Johnson on the landscape poem: 'No rule can be given why one appearance should be mentioned before another; yet the memory wants the help of order, and the curiosity is not excited by expense or expectation.'¹ Views of the Alps are combined with sentimental reflections and paeans on the French Revolution; the homeless mother of Wordsworth's poem on Esthwaite is re-encountered as the wandering gipsy of the Grisons; there is some rather artificial Rousseauism borrowed from Ramond de la Carbonnière's translation of Coxe's *Travels in Switzerland*.² In one or two passages the mind turns inward from the contemplation of a scene to enjoy a purely inward experience:

To viewless realms his Spirit towers amain,
 Beyond the senses and their little reign.

The experience is attributed to the 'fierce uncultur'd soul' of the Swiss mountaineer. Yet, beyond invoking a version of the noble savage, the lines show that in 1793 Wordsworth was already prepared to identify his own experience of the ideal education of nature with that of an ideal countryman. As the mountaineer, with his 'surly lion grace', gazes down from on high on the surrounding peaks, 'Great joy by horror tam'd dilates his heart': the bond of diction barely conceals that joint fostering by beauty and by fear which is the theme of the first book of *The Prelude*.

Descriptive Sketches represent a further stage in Wordsworth's self-discovery. That is why the poem is uncertain and confused.

¹ Johnson, *Life of Thomson*.

² *Lettres de M. William Coxe à M. W. Melmoth sur l'état politique, civil et naturel de la Suisse . . . augmentées des observations faites dans le même pays par le traducteur* (1781). Wordsworth praises the beauty of Ramond's account in a letter to Crabb Robinson of 28 November 1828, *The Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson with the Wordsworth Circle*, pp. 191-2.

He had now completely rejected the formal picturesque as an adequate language for what he had to say (again I would stress the difference between the two poems): he says in a note: 'I had once given to these sketches the title of Picturesque; but the Alps are insulted in applying to them that term. Whoever, in attempting to describe their sublime features, should confine himself to the cold rules of painting, would give his reader but a very imperfect idea of those emotions which have the irresistible power of communicating to the most impassive imagination. The fact is, that controuling influence, which distinguishes the Alps from all other scenery, is derived from images which disdain the pencil.' He says that his imagery cannot do justice to the 'deluge of light, or rather of fire'¹ of the Alpine sunset. He is admitting that the effort to render light now leads him to describe a state, not a scene.

The poem attempts to blend different chronological layers of personal experience. The primary material belongs to the walking tour of 1790 with Robert Jones. They had come through the Rhône valley in mid July when the first national festivals were being celebrated for the fall of the Bastille in the previous year. It was the time of

France standing on the top of golden hours,
And human nature seeming born again.

But Wordsworth was then not yet a 'patriot', a republican. In his longer visit to France of 1791-2 the images of the time with Jones were revived in a mood of intense excitement, erotic and idealistic, and this contributes to the strained and slightly hysterical tone of the poem. The impassioned conclusion on the young republic suggests that the poem was finished after the outbreak of war and about the time of the battle of Valmy. Just as Wordsworth was beginning to disentangle poetry of mood from poetry of observation a third complication entered: the spectre of the poet's political responsibility, bringing in its train a string of abstractions, Freedom, Oppression, Pride's perverted

¹ On the similarity in the treatment of shadows by Turner and Wordsworth see Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, ii. 11, chap. 3, 'Of Truth of Chiaroscuro'. But, the question of light apart, the Wordsworthian subordination of detail to a single imaginative focus has perhaps more in common with the methods of Constable; as Sir Kenneth Clark has said: 'Perhaps no other painter (except Rubens) has succeeded, as Constable did, in subordinating the infinite visual data of nature to a single pictorial idea' (Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (ed. 1956), p. 88).

ire, and so on, just as in the allegorical dumb-show of Coleridge's early odes.

The natural images which he absorbed among the mountains have been distorted but not suppressed. It is with a shock of recognition that we come to the paragraph on the sound of waterfalls in the valley of Urseren; the subject, and the core phrasing, for the desolate grandeur of the *Prelude* lines on the Simplon Pass, have already arrived:

Plunge with the Russ embrown'd by Terror's breath,
Where danger roofs the narrow walks of death;
By floods, that, thundering from their dizzy height,
Swell more gigantic on the steadfast sight;
Black drizzling crags, that beaten by the din,
Vibrate, as if a voice complain'd within.
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that mutter'd close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream . . .

It is clear that, even in style, this is nearer to *The Prelude* than *An Evening Walk* is: Wordsworth is, among other things, testing the limits of the couplet. The final version celebrates a strange unity mingled with terror in the disorder of rocks and waterfalls; in the *Sketches* the impression is of the uncontrolled variety of phenomena. Nature is violent and dangerous: the spectator may be aesthetically stirred, but this sublime is not so much the refined emotion of Burke as terror itself. There is an attempt at resolution by turning to the wayside shrines on the mountain tracks where the peasant kneels in prayer. This is curiously at odds with the sentiments of the natural man elsewhere. And even in 1793 there are lines protesting against the closing of the monastery of the Chartreuse: it is as if Wordsworth's respect for any object that was a shrine or a memorial existed independent of creeds. Perhaps in these lines on prayer in such a context the poet is struggling towards a satisfactory expression of the other-worldliness which he cannot separate from the experience of natural desolation.¹ In the later passage the expression reaches

¹ The deity is also invoked in the letter written to Dorothy from the shores of Lake Constance, 6 September 1790: 'Among the more awful scenes of the Alps I had not a thought of man, or a single created being; my whole soul was turned to him who produced the terrible majesty before me' (*Early Letters*, p. 33).

its final and splendid form in language which still alludes to religious orthodoxy:

Characters of the great Apocalypse,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

Coleridge's metaphor for the style of the poem, of gorgeous blossoms rising out of a hard and thorny rind, is singularly apt. In a chaos of postcard views and rhetorical speeches are buried certain germinal phrases and certain simple and strong thoughts which find their true direction in due time. As the peasant descends to his winter hut

Dear and more dear the lessening circle grows.

Amid much mere tourism in the surrounding sentiment this line expresses perfectly the link of common life connecting the countryman with the local people at the centre of whom is his own family. Westmorland, not Switzerland, is the strength of the poem, and Wordsworth had to write *Michael* before he was fully conscious of what he was trying to say.