

WORDSWORTH'S 'GRAND DESIGN'

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Read 15 October 1986

ANY discussion of Wordsworth's 'grand design' must begin with the publication of *The Excursion* in 1814. For it was through this poem and its Preface that Wordsworth gave an earnest of his 'work in progress' and unveiled his plans for *The Recluse*, the philosophical poem of epic scope which would embrace his entire poetic output. There would be three parts, you will recall; the first and third would be meditative in form, the second 'somewhat more dramatic'; and the whole work would resemble the body of a Gothic church, to which the antechapel was *The Prelude* and his shorter pieces so many 'cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses' added to the main building. It was the abandonment of this larger enterprise, of which *The Excursion* was only the second 'portion', that has been widely held to mark his 'great failure' and decline as a poet.¹

Old prejudices die hard, but periodically they need to be checked against advances in knowledge, and this central Wordsworthian problem is surely no exception. For, as new approaches are bringing out, the more *The Recluse* is analysed the more mysterious and fluid an entity it becomes—and the more enigmatic Wordsworth's final intentions towards it. Could it be that too much attention has been paid to what the poet did *not* complete, and too little to what he actually achieved within the larger *ambiance* of *The Recluse* programme? And what implications could this have for our sense of the shape of his career? The present occasion offers a chance to reconsider a number of Wordsworth's later poems which have been persistently neglected, although (as I shall suggest) they are part and parcel of his wider intentions for *The Recluse* and much more significant in the pattern of his development than has been thought up to now.

¹ See particularly William Minto's influential article, 'Wordsworth's Great Failure', *The Nineteenth Century* (Sept. 1889), reprinted in shortened form in *Wordsworth's Mind and Art*, ed. A. W. Thomson (Edinburgh, 1969). It appeared the year following the first publication of *Home at Grasmere*.

Within the compass of a single lecture there is only time for the briefest discussion of the central issues, which are set out at length elsewhere.¹ From its inception in the *annus mirabilis* of 1798, *The Recluse* was a conveniently vague and comprehensive cover to include a variety of blank verse compositions intended for the great poem, and possibly other—lyrical—pieces as well (Dorothy Wordsworth at least seems to have thought so).² It was to embrace ‘views’ or ‘pictures’ of Man, Nature, and Society: whatever, Wordsworth said, he found ‘most interesting’. ‘I know not any thing which will not come within the scope of my plan.’³ It was not just a stimulus to reading⁴ and composition, however, or a way of building his poetry into larger units. He *was* ‘the Recluse’ of the title, and from the grand Prospectus onwards his comprehensive vision would pervade the whole design. His strength, he knew, lay in surveying his own mental landscape, as he showed in *The Prelude*, and in *Home at Grasmere*, the greatest of the fragments of Part I of *The Recluse*, which celebrates his return to his native region and dedication to his task.

Coleridge also had a vital part to play in urging his friend some way towards the more philosophical treatment of the human predicament which was the objective of his own (unfinished) *magnum opus*, and inevitably he was disappointed with *The Excursion*. But Wordsworth could never have accepted Coleridge’s grandiose blueprint for *The Recluse*,⁵ which demanded a final synthesis of all knowledge, natural and revealed, something (one would have thought) beyond the capacities of any human being. Nor did he commit himself in print to anything remotely like it (and one must remember that Coleridge’s blueprint was unknown until after his death, as we shall see). Systems of thought, even in

¹ See *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1952–9), v. 363 ff.; *Home at Grasmere (The Cornell Wordsworth)*, ed. Beth Darlington (Ithaca, 1977), pp. 3–32; and *The Tuft of Primroses with Other Late Poems for The Recluse (The Cornell Wordsworth)*, ed. Joseph F. Kishel (Ithaca and London, 1986), pp. 3–29.

² See *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787–1805*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (2nd edn., rev. Chester L. Shaver, Oxford, 1967), p. 576. The reference is to *Elegiac Verses in Memory of My Brother, John Wordsworth (Poetical Works, iv. 263)*.

³ *Early Years*, pp. 212, 454.

⁴ The likely effect of *The Recluse* in stimulating Wordsworth’s early reading can be illustrated from James H. Averill, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering* (Ithaca, 1980), pp. 153–9 and 166–8, with reference to Erasmus Darwin’s *Zoonomia, or The Laws of Organic Life* (London, 1796), and its influence on several of the *Lyrical Ballads*.

⁵ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford, 1956–71), iv. 574–5.

poetic form, were quickly superseded, Wordsworth told Emerson later,¹ and even Newtonian physics might one day become a dead letter; whereas poetry founded on the affections was always fresh and relevant. *The Excursion* did not 'announce' a system: but, 'if [the Author] shall succeed in conveying to the mind clear thoughts, lively images, and strong feelings, the Reader will have no difficulty in extracting the system for himself.' The realm of the poem, Wordsworth explained to Coleridge afterwards, was commonplace truths, not the recondite: it was 'to remind men of their knowledge, as it lurks inoperative and undervalued in their own minds . . .'.² Coleridge's system undoubtedly helped Wordsworth to clarify the pattern of general assumptions that lay behind his poetic treatment, but his dependence on Coleridge can be grossly overdramatized; and to present Wordsworth in the guise of an insecure modern intellectual (as some critics do) is surely to ignore his stubborn Cumbrian independence and originality of mind.³ In the end he went his own way.

Letters, poetical manuscripts, even the somewhat rationalized account of *The Recluse* in the *Excursion* Preface, all suggest, therefore, that the identity and stability of the whole project was always provisional and dependent on the vagaries of Wordsworth's imagination, and that what I shall call '*Recluse* material' was already liable to spill over into other concerns. Coleridge recognized this when he likened Wordsworth's prose tract on *The Convention of Cintra* to a 'self-robbery from some great philosophical poem'.⁴ Whatever the ambiguities in *The Recluse*, however (which are indeed inseparable from all long poems of the age, as Bradley noted long ago),⁵ the progress of the whole undertaking must be judged primarily from *The Excursion* itself, the most considerable part that Wordsworth completed after some five years of labour; and here there are formidable difficulties.

One rarely has the chance to make a fresh start with a time-honoured work by a famous poet. Yet this is precisely the challenge still presented by *The Excursion*, a poem familiar for well over a century and a half, but not, for all that, better understood or appreciated. As a reassertion of traditional Christian Humanist

¹ See 'First Visit to England' in *English Traits* (Boston, 1856).

² *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years, Part II*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (2nd edn., rev. Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill, Oxford, 1970), p. 238.

³ These personal traits of Wordsworth were memorably described by A. C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London, 1909), pp. 119-20.

⁴ *Collected Letters*, iii. 214.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 177 ff.

values against the scepticism of the Enlightenment, it became one of the most influential poems of the nineteenth century long before *The Prelude* was published, and a firm favourite among humble and great alike. Yet, apart from the opening story of *The Ruined Cottage*, composed much earlier, it has been curiously neglected by professional critics. Byron's ridicule and Jeffrey's dismissive 'This will never do!' have echoed down the years, to the neglect of Charles Lamb's and Keats's more sympathetic appraisals. There has never been general agreement about the form, content, and overall significance of *The Excursion*, and the sources and analogues that are usually cited from the pastoral and contemplative poetry of the eighteenth century¹—important though they obviously are—do nothing to explain the *raison d'être* of the whole piece; for the problem is primarily one of genre and the mixture of literary modes within the poem (as I hope to show), and until these issues are settled any discussion of style and content is premature. Only when Wordsworth's method and temper of mind are grasped can we estimate his success in fusing together so many sources and traditions.

Let us look first of all at the *method* of *The Excursion*. Wordsworth's 'conversation' poem, which takes the form of a dialogue between several characters on a country walk, sets out to suggest that *on balance* the traditional optimistic interpretation of human experience is still valid, and indeed central to Man's imaginative and emotional health and well-being. The unhappy Solitary has to be re-educated to read the evidence of his senses in a new way by the Wanderer (a Wordsworthian homespun philosopher educated by Nature in his early years), helped by the Poet and the Pastor, and to come to a deeper understanding of history. To Wordsworth both Nature and History were one vast veil behind which the eye of vision could discern mysterious patterns, energies, and purposes. The conventional theologian would call these 'religious'. But Wordsworth made a distinction between 'religion in poetry' and 'versified religion'.² He saw the poet as

¹ See Judson Stanley Lyon, *The Excursion, A Study* (New Haven, 1950), pp. 29–60. Lyon's account remained substantially unmodified in Edward E. Bostetter, 'Wordsworth's Dim and Perilous Way', *Publications of Modern Language Association of America*, lxxi (1956), 433–50, reprinted in *Wordsworth's Mind and Art*, pp. 73–94; Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787–1814* (New Haven, 1971), and in *The Wordsworth Circle*, ix (Spring 1978), a number largely devoted to *The Excursion*.

² See the *Essay Supplementary to the Preface of 1815*, and his letter to Henry Alford of 21 Feb. 1840, in the forthcoming *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years, Part IV* (2nd edn., ed. Alan G. Hill).

'a man speaking to men' about truths that would come naturally to ordinary people as they responded unaffectedly and receptively to a poem, the majesty of a mountain peak, a splendid sunset, or the call of duty. For all spoke of a creative power and purpose in the universe of which the poet was the privileged interpreter. The human *instinct* of wonderment was more important than the 'forms' it takes over the ages.

So he looks in *The Excursion* for 'the innumerable analogies and types of infinity', and 'the countless awakenings to noble aspiration' in the Bible of the universe, as he told Catherine Clarkson.¹ In the course of the dialogue many of these 'types' and symbols are expounded and combined into larger patterns of significance. They all bring 'authentic tidings of invisible things'. Some of them the Solitary is aware of already—the twin peaks overhanging his vale and the 'mute agents' stirring there which shape 'a language not unwelcome to sick hearts'; and he experiences a vision of a city in the clouds, 'the revealed abode of Spirits in beatitude'. To these imaginative sympathies the Wanderer addresses himself, adding his own examples. The Pastor contributes evidence from the moral histories of his dead parishioners (as the setting changes to the *Churchyard among the Mountains*) to show the ideals and values which commonly lighten the straitened circumstances of quite humble folk.

This language of emblems and 'types' was not something new in Wordsworth's poetry. It goes back to the passage in Book VI of *The Prelude* describing the crossing of the Alps, where the scene and its impact on Wordsworth's mind assume the proportions of

Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity.

But the method is much older. In Patristic theology and Biblical exegesis, every event in Nature and History is emblematic of Providential purposes. St Basil, the source of the passage in Book III of *The Excursion* in praise of hermits and monks which Wordsworth transferred from *The Tuft of Primroses*, is a typical exponent of a method which eventually passed into standard authorities of the seventeenth century like Hooker, Jeremy Taylor, Robert Boyle—and pre-eminently Milton.

What if Earth
Be but the shadow of Heav'n, and things therein
Each to other like, more then on Earth is thought?
(*Paradise Lost*, v. 574-6)

¹ *Middle Years, Part II*, p. 188.

It is sometimes forgotten that Wordsworth was steeped in this long tradition at Cambridge. The laws of the universe may be investigated by mathematics, or shadowed forth in poetic truth. Both reflect the same creative mind and purpose embodied in the forms of Nature and the time-honoured structures of the Church, which had become a natural part of the English scene. But he is quite fresh and spontaneous in turning his typology to the everyday experiences of a country walk—or to the moving evocation of the religious cults of the ancient world in Book IV; so redolent of similar passages in Leopardi. We are indeed on the verge of modern symbolism, where the technique is radically extended, as a striking example from Dickens will show. In Chapter 31 of *Little Dorrit* the cloudy sunset, a 'type' of redemptive power in our benighted world, lights up for a moment the mission of Little Dorrit, a minister of Grace:

It was one of those summer evenings when there is no greater darkness than a long twilight. The vista of street and bridge was plain to see, and the sky was serene and beautiful. People stood and sat at their doors, playing with children and enjoying the evening; numbers were walking for air; the worry of the day had almost worried itself out, and few but themselves were hurried. As they crossed the bridge, the clear steeples of the many churches looked as if they had advanced out of the murk that usually shrouded them and come much nearer. The smoke that rose into the sky had lost its dingy hue and taken a brightness upon it. The beauties of the sunset had not faded from the long light films of cloud that lay at peace in the horizon. From a radiant centre over the whole length and breadth of the tranquil firmament, great shoots of light streamed among the early stars, signs of the blessed later covenant of peace and hope that changed the crown of thorns into a glory.

Here is the passage, at the climax of Book IX of *The Excursion*, which I believe Dickens remembered and echoed. The sunset is a local 'type' of the fatherhood and splendour of God revealed in the 'forms' of Nature:

Already had the sun,
Sinking with less than ordinary state,
Attained his western bound; but rays of light—
Now suddenly diverging from the orb
Retired behind the mountain-tops or veiled
By the dense air—shot upwards to the crown
Of the blue firmament—aloft, and wide:
And multitudes of little floating clouds,
Through their ethereal texture pierced—ere we,
Who saw, of change were conscious—had become

Vivid as fire; clouds separately poised,—
 Innumerable multitude of forms
 Scattered through half the circle of the sky;
 And giving back, and shedding each on each,
 With prodigal communion, the bright hues
 Which from the unapparent fount of glory
 They had imbibed, and ceased not to receive.
 That which the heavens displayed, the liquid deep
 Repeated; but with unity sublime!

How are these types and symbols, which speak to the heart and the imagination, explicated in the poem? They form part of the re-education of the Solitary at the hands of the Wanderer, the Poet, and the Pastor. I use that word 're-education' deliberately. The Solitary is a victim of the 'calculating understanding'; a cynic, tragic in his marriage, and disappointed by the French Revolution; a follower of Voltaire and the whole tradition of Enlightenment scepticism. He is an amateur scientist, a casualty of over-specialization, as we would say. He has lost the visionary excursive power of the mind to see the larger pattern of significance in all things. He dabbles in popular science in a disjointed way. The beginning of his cure—and it is only a beginning—takes the form of a walk in the Lakes and a conversation, in which he is invited to look about him in a new way. Wordsworth regularly invited his visitors at Rydal Mount to do the same thing. The method which the Wanderer adopts to induce the Solitary to read Nature aright has a long history, as I have shown elsewhere.¹ It goes back from Wordsworth's own early poem *An Evening Walk* and the excursion poetry of the previous century to an influential Renaissance work, the *Orbis Pictus*, or *Visible World*, of John Amos Comenius, which sees the proper exercise of the senses through experience of nature as the foundation of all learning, secular and religious. Wordsworth, like Comenius, sees knowledge as a unified field, and struggles to avoid the great divide between science and the humanities which he saw coming in his own day. It was a losing battle, as Newman, Matthew Arnold, and Mill found a little later, and the problem remains today to challenge and haunt our educators with a sense of the narrowness and futility of over-specialized curricula.

But *The Excursion* is also a dialogue, a 'conversation poem', in

¹ See Alan G. Hill, 'Wordsworth, Comenius and the Meaning of Education', *Review of English Studies*, xxvi (1975), 301-12. Wordsworth's knowledge of the *Orbis Pictus* probably dates from his Racedown and Alfoxden days. He had the 12th English edition (1777) in his library.

Wordsworth's words. It airs the problem of the human situation, looking at it from different angles and points of view, adducing different types of evidence to support the argument: it does not—like a dialogue by Plato or Berkeley—come to a triumphant conclusion in which all objections are finally refuted by logic. *The Excursion* does not proceed by logic at all—but by tentatively weighing probabilities, intuitions, and moments of illumination or 'epiphanies'. Its whole approach to the problem of belief, and the structure and temper of the poem, owe much (as I have suggested elsewhere)¹ to the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix, an early Christian dialogue which takes the form of an *excursion* by a group of friends from Rome to Ostia, during which they discuss a number of basic philosophical issues. The *Octavius* argues the case for religion by establishing the fundamental truths of Providence, immortality, and an 'active principle' in Nature, thereby bridging the gulf between pagan and Christian philosophy, and adapting the best of the one to the other. It leaves Revelation entirely on one side. In *The Excursion* the Solitary is also taken so far, and no further, and his curiosity about the technical doctrines of Christianity is cut short—not because Wordsworth did not accept them, but because the Solitary is not yet ready to receive them.² Both these works are tentative and undogmatic in temper; and both apparently inconclusive for the same reasons. Much criticism of both has been misplaced, because the tone and shape of each has been missed.

There is finally the epic or Virgilian dimension to *The Excursion* (and one might also add, the influence of Lucretius). *The Excursion* is part of a projected epic design. The life histories of the parishioners, now in their graves in the churchyard, are not only influenced by eighteenth-century graveyard poetry: they also suggest the older epic descent into the underworld of the dead, and

¹ See Alan G. Hill, 'New Light on *The Excursion*', *Ariel*, v (Apr. 1974), 37-47. The evidence strongly suggests that Wordsworth owed his familiarity with the *Octavius* to Coleridge during the Alfoxden period, when *The Recluse* was first conceived: later, he had Coleridge's copy of the Leyden edition of 1652 in his library.

² On 14 Mar. 1844 R. P. Graves sent Wordsworth a summary of their recent conversations on religion in poetry: 'In point of fact you believed that the truths developed by you would be found to be, like all other truths of natural religion, beneficially adapted to particular stages of human experience, and at the same time not only in harmony with but preparative for the higher truths of Revelation, to your own belief in which your later poems, especially, afforded abundant testimony' (*Wordsworth Library MSS.*). This reflects a quite different intention from that implied, for example, by M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (London, 1971), where the Romantic poet is preoccupied with secularized versions of traditional theological concepts and imagery.

are redolent of Virgil and Dante. The reader is meant to emerge from these encounters with a new insight and hope. The long historical sequences are also traditional features of epic. Wordsworth is here meditating on the 'might stream of tendency' in history (a phrase reminiscent of Matthew Arnold's), trying to detect a purpose and a progress that reflect his concern for the future of the English-speaking peoples at home and abroad in an age of technological change and social deprivation. Certain positive viewpoints are offered to the Solitary as he is guided towards a better frame of mind on all these issues. Virgil similarly acts as a guide to Dante in the *Divine Comedy*. George Macdonald has the same role in C. S. Lewis's *Great Divorce*, to take a modern example. It is misplaced criticism to suggest that Wordsworth is being gratuitously or insensitively dogmatic here.

If one approaches *The Excursion* in the light of these larger considerations, the poem becomes much more coherent and impressive, though there still remain problems of style, structure, and characterization, which I have no time to discuss in detail now—any more than the numerous other influences on particular parts of the work, such as Stoicism. The poem *is* slow, and uneven, with its stylized archetypal characters, and recurrent motifs which gradually flow together into larger patterns of significance. Wordsworth is weighing imponderables, following hunches and intuitions. The mixture of modes and tonal 'registers' makes an appropriate level of style difficult to maintain, but Wordsworth's creative influence on Keats's *Hyperion* should make us hesitate to condemn his presentation out of hand. It is also inappropriate to treat the characters as if they belonged to a novel,¹ or as projections of an unresolved conflict in Wordsworth himself, 'three persons in one poet' as Hazlitt complained. What the poem needs is informed reading, not depreciation, as the larger achievement of *The Recluse* is at stake; and to neglect it is to impoverish our sense of Wordsworth's significance in the wider European tradition, and the debt which the Victorians owed him.

In the comprehensive sweep of its vision, *The Excursion* is a complete poem in itself. Wordsworth is true to his own pattern of 'commonplace truths', while formally acknowledging his intellectual debt to Coleridge. What further progress with *The Recluse* was possible then? The moment *The Excursion* appeared, the

¹ Minto in *Wordsworth's Mind and Art*, p. 23, contrasts Wordsworth unfavourably with Dickens in this respect! The characterization has recently been discussed more perceptively by William Howard, 'Narrative Irony in *The Excursion*', *Studies in Romanticism*, xxiv (1985), 511-30.

framework on which Wordsworth was weaving his poetic life was modified, and the grand design took on a somewhat different shape. In the closing lines a sequel was announced (not, surely, to be identified with Part III of *The Recluse?*), and within a year, in *Poems* (1815), he completed the controversial classification of all his shorter pieces. No longer merely 'adjuncts' to *The Recluse*, they now constituted 'an entire work within themselves'. Does this mean that, in the face of the incomprehension and ridicule meted out to *The Excursion*, *Recluse* composition had been virtually abandoned? Was the whole undertaking handed back to Coleridge, as has recently been suggested,¹ to serve as an *aide-mémoire* for his own *Biographia Literaria*? Surely not: for, as Dorothy records,² Wordsworth had begun preparatory reading again, presumably in history, since he had so far only touched very briefly on one vital aspect of Coleridge's blueprint, the 'Scheme of Redemption' operating in human affairs. A historical poem was obviously the next step, given Wordsworth's pragmatic turn of mind. But he clearly hesitated to appear again in the character of the Recluse, at least for the time being. Hereafter, as his nephew and biographer states,³ no doubt on Wordsworth's own authority, 'the materials' which would have made up Part III of *The Recluse* were incorporated for the most part in Wordsworth's publications written subsequently to *The Excursion*. The proposed structure of *The Recluse* is in fact already under stress (as indeed it had been earlier), and it may no longer be clear what belongs specifically within it.

If this is so, why did Wordsworth continue to draw attention to an increasingly outmoded plan by republishing his Preface in every new edition of *The Excursion*? Primarily, I suppose, because it was inextricably bound up with his whole motivation as a poet. 'Natural piety' alone would demand that he could hardly behave as if *The Recluse* had never existed. But there was probably a more practical reason as well. His character as the Recluse was now part of his integrity and stance as a poet, and justified his retirement at Rydal Mount in spite of lucrative offers of employment elsewhere. He could not turn his back on this, especially when tributes to *The Excursion* began to pour in from ordinary readers in the 1820s and

¹ See Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse* (New Haven and London, 1984), pp. 333 ff. Johnston persuasively argues that *The Recluse* exists 'not as an unrealised idea, but as a coherent though incomplete body of inter-related texts', but his cut-off date of 1815 seems arbitrary and unconvincing.

² *Middle Years, Part II*, p. 200.

³ In the Advertisement to *The Prelude* (London, 1850).

'30s.¹ Later on, as we shall see, he had additional reasons for keeping the original conception of *The Recluse* before the reading public.

Where, among Wordsworth's later poems, are we most likely to find 'Recluse materials'? The real sequel to *The Excursion* is surely the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (1822), where Wordsworth illustrates a redemptive spirit working through the forms and institutions of organized religion in England and Scotland (the Scottish dimension is important). You will remember that, according to the Fenwick Note of 1843, the Solitary was eventually to be won back to Christian faith by witnessing a religious ceremony in his native land. The agitation for Catholic Emancipation moved Wordsworth to create an interconnected sonnet sequence of epic scope and originality which exactly fits the original *Recluse* prescription for 'meditations in the Author's own person'. But the work is so much of a closed book to most readers that this wider significance, and the relationship of the *Sketches* to the earlier *Poems Dedicated to National Liberty and Independence* and to the *Cintra* tract, have been lost sight of altogether. The title is really a misnomer; the work is neither ecclesiastical nor theological in any narrow sense, but deeply personal. Wordsworth's theme is still the life of the imagination and the affections and duties, public and private, which unite society and guide it to higher ends. He had lived through a period of moral and political turmoil in which time-honoured values had been set at naught, and he believed that the secret of national revival lay in the recovery of these traditional pieties in Church and State. The poem offers an epic excursion through history, in a series of *tableaux vivants*, recreating the ebb and flow of events, the formative movements, turning-points, and personalities which embody the spirit of religion over the ages, from the dimmest recesses of prehistory to the end of Time.

It is clear from *Tintern Abbey* and *The Prelude* that the imagination or human spirit (call it what you will) develops in association with the forms of Nature. The union of the two is Wordsworth's recipe for human well-being in general, and a necessary condition of the poet's special vision. Wordsworth gradually extended his thinking to include the time-honoured forms of human society and the Church, which were a natural part of man's heritage. The Wanderer in *The Excursion*,

Rapt into still communion that transcends
The imperfect offices of prayer and praise,²

¹ The Wordsworth Library MSS. bear abundant testimony to this.

² These lines in essence go back to *The Pedlar* of 1798, though Wordsworth clarified his meaning in a subsequent revision.

had less need of institutional props for his devotion than ordinary mortals. Normally, however, the devotional instinct, as it arises in the life of the imagination, has to be embodied in 'forms'; otherwise it is unchannelled, even wayward. This is the basic premise of the *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, which mirror the interaction of spirit and form, the charismatic and the institutional, over the ages. Sometimes it is creative, sometimes destructive, but the Christian community survives because, providentially, a new balance always emerges between formalism and superstition at the one extreme and rampant self-will or spiritual pride at the other.

Truth fails not; but her outward forms that bear
The longest date do melt like frosty rime
That in the morning whitened hill and plain
And is no more . . .

The sonnet on *Mutability*, like others which are commonly anthologized, gains immeasurably by being read in its proper place in the sequence.

Only a long study, following these themes step by step, could bring out the subtle way in which Wordsworth applies his insights to every new historical juncture.¹ The larger significances often lie hidden below the surface or scattered over the whole series. Individually, some of the sonnets that make up this unconventional little work may not be immediately striking: many of the positions Wordsworth arrives at are so much a commonplace of modern scholarship that we might overlook his originality at the time. But the quality of the work is best seen in the overall control and understanding, the way in which he discriminates between conflicting ecclesiastical positions, creating new emphases, avoiding extremes, reconciling opposites. It was left to a Unitarian, Henry Crabb Robinson, rather than a churchman, to pay tribute to these poems as 'lessons of wisdom and stimulants to enquiry'. The same could not be said of Southey's *Book of the Church*, a controversial work, ostensibly on a similar theme, which learns nothing from Wordsworth's irenic example. And yet Lord Morley in his wisdom could write that Wordsworth was 'wholly indifferent to history'!²

¹ The historical sources listed by Abbie Findlay Potts, *The Ecclesiastical Sonnets, A Critical Edition* (New Haven, 1922), constitute a small fraction of the works that Wordsworth can be demonstrated to have known or consulted, some of them familiar to him for many years. His reading in Machiavelli and Erasmus, for example, goes back to his Cambridge days.

² In his Introduction to the Globe Edition of the *Poetical Works* (London, 1888), reprinted in his *Studies in Literature* (London, 1891).

We have only time now to look at Wordsworth's thinking at two vital periods, the Reformation and the seventeenth century. Wordsworth knew that 'the flood of British freedom' predated the Norman Conquest, and he paid tribute to the achievements of Anglo-Saxon civilization. Unlike Enlightenment historians, he also does ample justice to the Church of the Middle Ages, striking a balance between its achievements in learning, art, and social organization, and the abuses and materialism of the Papal system recorded by Machiavelli. Yet he deplores the destructiveness of the Reformation. Ultimately, he sees the 'point at issue' to be an intolerable tension between spiritual aspirations and institutional forms, a tension which ought normally to be creative and dynamic. But his sonnet summarizes Erasmus's *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*, not a manifesto of the Protestant reformers; and in paying tribute to the 'gay genius' of Sir Thomas More when faced with Henry VIII's arrogance, he hints that all was not well in the anti-Catholic camp and that the spirit of reform could easily overreach itself.

In the following century it did: 'prophesying' became a babble of conflicting tongues and it was now the institutional side of the Church, its ritual and ministry, that had to be preserved. So, in the Civil War period, while deploring the abuse of episcopal power, Wordsworth sides not with the Puritans but with Archbishop Laud and his attempts to bring order into the Church. Yet after the Restoration, when victims became in their turn persecutors, he sides again with the Puritans and their latitudinarian successors. He clearly deplored the failure to bring about an accommodation between episcopacy and presbytery and a revision of the Prayer Book, whereby the Puritans could have been kept in the Church of England, and church history in Scotland seemed to provide precedents for how this might have been achieved. But it was not to be. The revolution of 1688 saw the final extinction of Papal claims in England and the triumph of Anglicanism, but at the cost of the alienation of the Nonconformists and a divided society for the future. In later additions (1842) which perfect the symmetry of the series, Wordsworth upholds the Pilgrim Fathers' flight from an abuse of power and praises the voluntary return of the American Church to episcopal order in his own day.

As an annexe to *The Recluse*, the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* are surely a remarkable achievement, even if modern critical method is not geared to dealing with it. As a recluse himself, Wordsworth's sympathies go out to the primitive hermits and that 'sublime recluse', the Venerable Bede:

Methinks that to some vacant hermitage
 My feet would rather turn—to some dry nook
 Scooped out of living rock . . .

The ruined abbeys of the Middle Ages, endeared to him by a lifetime of associations, inspire some of his mellowest meditations on Time:

Now, ruin, beauty, ancient stillness, all
 Dispose to judgments temperate as we lay
 On our past selves in life's declining day . . .

At the climax, standing in King's College Chapel, he speaks with all the authority of the Recluse himself:

They dreamt not of a perishable home
 Who thus could build. Be mine, in hours of fear
 Or grovelling thought, to seek a refuge here;
 Or through the aisles of Westminster to roam;
 Where bubbles burst, and folly's dancing foam
 melts, if it cross the threshold; where the wreath
 of awe-struck wisdom droops; or let my path
 lead to that younger Pile, whose sky-like dome
 Hath typified by reach of daring art
 Infinity's embrace . . .

This is not didactic poetry; no 'system' is announced; but the imaginative insight displayed implies radical reappraisal of historical positions and entrenched or frozen attitudes, and a wider spirit of reconciliation and magnanimity. No purely literary approach can do justice to Wordsworth's significance here, and another occasion must be found for following his influence through the conflicts of the nineteenth century to the modern ecumenical movement. But any comprehensive account of the poet must surely take account of these unsuspected dimensions to his achievement.

One could go on to identify '*Recluse materials*' among the later Odes, or in the 'Tour' poems and the *Yarrow Revisited* volume. But perhaps enough has now been said to suggest how *The Recluse* was merged with more general composition as Wordsworth further refined his classification of the *Poetical Works* in sequences to correspond with his sense of his own creative life—a process unprecedented in modern poetry but prefigured as far back as the *Poems* of 1807.¹ It seems very unlikely that he ever seriously

¹ See Robert Rehder, *Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry* (London, 1981), pp. 178 ff.

contemplated taking up the original *Recluse* again, though he carefully revised *The Prelude* and two of the fragments of Part I, including *Home at Grasmere*, for eventual publication. The only extensive piece of composition which is assigned to *The Recluse*, entirely on the strength of a remark of Wordsworth's reported by Crabb Robinson,¹ is *Composed When a Probability Existed of Our Being Obligated to Quit Rydal Mount As a Residence*. But the poet himself gave it an 'occasional' title suited to the threatened domestic upheaval of 1826, and it does not seem to mark a settled intention of resuming composition on any larger scale. Nor should too much be made of the fact that, while he published *To the Clouds*, he never brought out *Home at Grasmere* himself. Perhaps space was simply not available in one of the later collections, or he felt that it would duplicate with *The Prelude*. (After all, the only proper place for it would have been as another 'prelude' to the *Poems of the Imagination*.) Whatever the explanation, the bafflement and guilt which are often attributed to him seem a figment of the critics' imagination. Where is the evidence for it?

Other references to *The Recluse* in the later years are capable of several interpretations. Wordsworth's tongue-in-cheek letter to Landor of 20 Apr. 1822,² for example, may imply no more than that in the person of the Recluse he intends to publish more poems soon! The anxiety among Wordsworth's family and friends is an equally untrustworthy pointer to his real intentions. Though supportive in so much else, they were not willing to accept that *Recluse* materials were now appearing in what Mary Wordsworth disparagingly called 'sonnets and other trifles', and their letters show their confusion. In true Cumbrian fashion, the poet kept his own counsel. Nor should too much be made of Wordsworth's admission to George Ticknor, his American visitor, in 1838, that in *The Recluse* he had undertaken something beyond his powers to accomplish.³ Following the publication of Coleridge's *Table Talk* in 1835, a totally misleading account of the original *Recluse* project

¹ Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers, ed. Edith J. Morley (London, 1938), i. 339. See also Christopher Wordsworth, *Memoirs of William Wordsworth* (London, 1851), i. 23, where the poem is entitled *To the Nab Well*.

² *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years, Part I* (2nd edn., ed. Alan G. Hill, Oxford, 1978), p. 126.

³ *Life, Letters, and Journals of George Ticknor*, ed. George S. Hillard (Boston, 1876), ii. 167. Wordsworth's statement is perfectly compatible with his remarks to another visitor in 1842: 'What of the Recluse? . . . That is a work of too much labour and parts of it are already scattered up and down among my published poems.' (*A Greenockian's Visit to Wordsworth, from the Journals of the late Rev. Dr. Park of St. Andrews* (Greenock, 1887), p. 12.)

had been given wide currency,¹ and Wordsworth's remarks are conditioned by this. He is not talking about his own tentative 'umbrella' scheme, but about a didactic poem on Coleridge's model, as the reference to Gray's poem 'on a similar subject' makes clear. Thomas Gray's epic fragment *De Principiis Cogitandi*,² which set out to expound Locke's epistemology on the model of Lucretius, demonstrated that systematic philosophy and poetry could not mix, because systems were mutable whereas poetry dealt with the permanent. Wordsworth felt the same about Coleridge's blueprint. He had indeed seen Coleridge's poetic genius ruined by his pursuit of metaphysical chimeras. He had left on record what the original *Recluse* meant to him, and he was continuing to fill it out in his own way in the revision of his poems.

A striking example from *The Prelude*—a poem radically different in conception from Gray's—will show that Wordsworth remained true to his own scheme rather than Coleridge's. The description of Sir Isaac Newton's statue in Trinity antechapel in Book III is familiar to all of us:

And from my pillow, looking forth by light
of moon or favouring stars, I could behold
The antechapel where the statue stood
Of Newton with his prism and silent face,
The marble index of a mind for ever
Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone.

It is also well known that the last two lines, which add so much to this haunting picture, were not conceived until the revision of c.1832, though they seem so inevitable now that it is hard to imagine the passage without them. What inspired Wordsworth to make this significant addition so many years later—given that his admiration for Newton goes right back to his undergraduate days? It was apparently a conversation in 1829 with Sir William

¹ *Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London, 1835), ii. 70–1. For Wordsworth's anxieties about Coleridge's posthumous 'revelations' see *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years, Part III* (2nd edn., ed. Alan G. Hill, Oxford, 1982), p. 134. Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin* (Princeton, 1981), relates Coleridge's blueprint to his own unfinished *magnum opus*.

² *Complete Poems of Thomas Gray*, ed. H. W. Starr and J. R. Hendrickson (Oxford, 1966), pp. 156–70. Gray wrote to Richard West in 1741: 'I send you the beginning not of an Epic Poem, but of a Metaphysic one. Poems and Metaphysics (say you with your spectacles on) are inconsistent things. A metaphysical poem is a contradiction in terms. It is true, but I will go on. It is in Latin to increase the absurdity.' (*Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, ed. Paget Toynbee and Leonard Whibley (rev. H. W. Starr, Oxford, 1971), i. 183.)

Hamilton,¹ one of the greatest mathematicians of the time, who taxed the poet with omitting to pay tribute in *The Excursion* to true geniuses like Newton, while he had condemned analytical scientists for destroying Nature's grandeur and therefore the life of the imagination. The two lines added to *The Prelude* rectified the omission. But true to his remarks to Emerson, Wordsworth does not strike a didactic note by upholding Newton's great system, unlike his eighteenth-century predecessors.² He offers instead a timeless image of the unending quest of the human spirit for illumination. Newton virtually becomes a presiding 'Power' in the poem, a 'type' of the excursive mind, and a mirror image of the poet himself. Justice was done to Newton in the end, but on Wordsworth's own poetic terms, and a significant touch was added to *The Recluse*.

My unsurprising conclusion is that *The Recluse* amounted in the end to what it had always been potentially, the *Poetical Works* of William Wordsworth, according to their final arrangement. This was the goal, the final design towards which Wordsworth's poetic life had been moving; and in following his genius for 'meditations in the Author's own person' (a good description, after all, for most of his poems), he also demonstrated the limits of his constructive power to combine them into larger thematic units. To speak of 'failure' in relation to such a fluid design is (to say the least) inappropriate or misleading. But certain further thoughts suggest themselves by way of conclusion.

As the context in which all his poetry was shaped, *The Recluse* embraced all his verse. Much was achieved as part of the *Recluse* programme, much also within its wider penumbra. No final assessment of the whole project is possible until the later poems have been brought into focus and examined with the care and sympathetic insight they deserve. The history of *The Recluse* lends little support to the overdramatized polarization of Wordsworth's career which is so fashionable today. Wordsworth's classification³ and revisions also grew out of his *Recluse* preoccupations, and

¹ R. P. Graves, *Life of Sir William Hamilton* (Dublin, 1882-9), i. 313-14. Wordsworth also discussed Newton's discoveries, 'the grandest ever known', with J. P. Muirhead in 1841. See 'A Day with Wordsworth', *Blackwood's Magazine*, ccxxi (1927), 728-43.

² See particularly James Thomson, *To the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton* (1727), ll. 185 ff., and David Mallet, *The Excursion* (1728), ii. 167 ff. Both poets imagine Newton after death joining with the angelic choir in singing God's praises—a markedly more conventional emphasis than Wordsworth's.

³ See W. J. B. Owen, *Wordsworth as Critic* (London, 1969), pp. 151 ff. Owen sees the arrangement as 'curious' and somewhat illogical.

cannot be dismissed as aberrations of a later decline. His arrangement of the poems, so innovative for its time, may be open to endless debate among critics, but it was primarily intended as a practical guide to ordinary readers, embodying the poet's own creative sense of the unity of his imaginative world, and no quasi-chronological arrangement, however desirable on other grounds, can have quite the same authority. How many readers today have actually studied the poems in the order in which the author intended them to be read? Wordsworth's stylistic revisions also deserve more *systematic* study. His search for a consistent poetic rhetoric may not have been always successful, but that is no reason for ignoring such an important aspect of *The Recluse*.

In the last resort, however, we can surely take comfort from all the ambiguities and mystifications of *The Recluse*. For they are inherent in Wordsworth's Janus-like posture in relation to the poetry of the past and the future. His career is finely poised between the claims of the pre-ordained poetic modes of the Classical Renaissance and the more provisional forms in which the modern poet seeks to embody the spirit of poetry. He pioneered the path of the moderns, but his debt to the literature of the past was enormous and has still to be fully charted. Wordsworth deserves to be viewed in these broader perspectives—for it is surely a sign of the greatest poets that they finally elude all our 'period' categories and boundaries.