THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

WORDSWORTH

EDITED BY

STÉPHEN GILL
STEPHEN GILL

in the Lake District, confirming, what was already clear from the stream of visitors to the poet's home at Rydal Mount, that his work continued to be esteemed in America. Quite what the esteem amounted to, though, has been the question, one whose challenge was not adequately met by routine gestures towards Emerson and Thoreau. Recent work, however — and the pioneering studies of Alan G. Hill deserve tribute here — has begun to convey some sense of the diversity of response Wordsworth elicited in the new Republic, and Joel Pace's essay in this collection indicates how much more fascinating evidence is waiting to be investigated. But there is more work to be done, as Pace implies, not only on what Wordsworth meant to America but on what America meant to him.

What I am trying to suggest in these examples is that contemporary Wordsworth scholarship is vibrant because it is alive to its continuity with that of the past whilst being fully aware of historical distance, and in this respect it honours, in fact, a primary force in the creative powers of the poet himself. Wordsworth was obsessed with ensuring that nothing was lost from his past: 'It look into past times as prophets look / Into futurity'. Memory reaches, chains bind, bonds sustain, links link — the poetry and much of the prose celebrates whatever preserves affinities 'Between all stages of the life of man'. But the intensity of Wordsworth's gaze as he hangs 'Incumbent o'er the surface of past time' (1805 Prelude, iv, 265), is a function of his equally obsessive awareness that making sense of the past calls for a lifetime's revisiting, open to the possibility of and recognizing the necessity for reinterpretation. All of the specially commissioned essays in this Companion share something of the same awareness. Their topic, too, is Wordsworth past and present.

NOTES

1 The tribute from the dedication to Keble's Oxford lectures on poetry, De Poetica Vi Medico: Praelectiones Academicae Oxoniæ Habitae (1841), was inscribed on the plaque to Wordsworth in Granmore Church, where he is buried.
3 Biographia Litteraria, chapter xiv.
4 Alan G. Hill, 'Wordsworth and his American Friends', Bulletin of Research in the Humanities, 81 (1998), 146-60. Much freshly researched information is also compressed into the footnotes of Hill's volumes of the Wordsworth letters.
5 PW II 481.

NICOLA TROTT

Wordsworth: the shape of the poetic career

In sketching Wordsworth's life, two portraits might be drawn, almost as mirror images of one another. The first would present a child who was orphaned by the age of thirteen, and to whose family the first Lord Lonsdale refused to pay the substantial debt (over £400) that was owing to Wordsworth senior as his estate; a boy who rebelled against his guardians, slashed through a family portrait with a whip, and failed, first to gain anything more than an unclassified BA (from St John's College, Cambridge, 1791), and then to take orders or enter one of the professions; a graduate who in 1792 travelled to revolutionary France, where he was converted to its cause and fathered an illegitimate child; a 'vagabond' who returned to England and several years of apparently aimless roving, leading, in 1796, to some kind of nervous breakdown; a young 'democrat' who kept dubious, if not actually dangerous company, and in 1798 was thought worthy of surveillance by a government spy; a republican who laid plans for a radical monthly called the Philanthropist, and may have been involved in a liberal London weekly of that name, which ran for forty-two issues, 1795-6; an author of oppositional political tracts, the unpublished Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff (1793), written in defence of the rioters in France and rights of man at home, and The Complaint of China (1809), which highly critical of the deal by which a Spanish revolt ended with Britain allowing the defeated French army to evacuate Portugal without loss; a 'Semi-athiest' whom Coleridge persuaded into an unspecific form of Unitarianism, and who by 1811 still had 'no need of a Redeemer'; a would-be populist who argued that poetry was not the exclusive property of the middle and upper classes, and attributed to his own work the political purpose of showing that 'men who do not wear fine cloaths can feel deeply' (letter to Charles James Fox, 14 January 1804); a financially insecure poet who until his mid-forties lived in relative poverty, adopting a lofty defensiveness against an uncomprehending 'public' and the diffuse notoriety
provided by hostile Tory critics, among whom he was sympathetic at once with childishness and insubordination.

And yet a quite different silhouette might be drawn. This would outline a Wordsworth who was the second son of a well-to-do law-agent of the wealthiest peer in Westmorland; who, as a boy, was educated at Hawkhedger, one of the best grammar schools in the country, with a string of Cambridge entrants to its name; who, as a young man, mixed with the foremost radical intellectuals of his day, and formed a profound friendship with Coleridge, a 'seminal' mind of the age; who was learned in Latin and Italian, as well as English literature, had many thousands of lines of poetry by heart, and came to possess a substantial library; who sent his edition of the Lyrical Ballads (1800) to the leader of the Whig Opposition, was recognized as a founder of the 'Lake School' of poetry, and, on Southey's death in 1843, rose to be Poet Laureate; who had a friend in Sir George Beaumont, a leading patron of the arts, and, as a landscape, designed both the Beaumonts' winter garden at Coleretia in Leicestershire (1806-7) and his own grounds at Rydal Mount (where the Wordsworths moved in 1813); who was an influential arbiter of taste in rural scenery and who, as well as insisting on rights of way, campaigned for the Lake District to be spared the despollations of rail-borne industry and tourism; who signed up for the Granmere Volunteers when there was threat of French invasion in 1803, and addressed a sequence of sonnets to the theme of national moral and military renewal; who in 1813 accepted a government post as Distributor of Stamps for Westmorland (which made him responsible for the tax raised on the stamped paper used in legal transactions); who became intimate with the second Lord Lonsdale, and in 1818 was elected tirelessly on his behalf in the Tory interest, earning the nickname 'Bombastes Furioso' (as well as publishing Two Addresses to the Freholders of Westmorland against agitation and press freedom); who latterly emerged as a defender of the Church of England and the Anglican tradition; who lived, as Stephen Gill has shown, to be still more central to the Victorian than he had been to the Napoleonic age; who had as brothers a London lawyer and a Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, was a regular presence among the London literary and social élites, and, at long last, in his sixties, found himself world-famous.

The entire career, and with it the path from anonymity to household name, is momentarily visible in George Eliot's Middlemarch, published in 1872-4, two decades after the poet's death, and set just prior to the first Reform Bill of 1832: as chapter 3 opens, Mr Brooke is reminiscing about how he and Wordsworth missed each other as contemporaries at Cambridge (c. 1790), but dined together 'twenty years afterwards at Cartwright's', and in the company of the chemist Sir Humphry Davy. From the radical years of the 1790s to the no less turbulent period of the late 1820s, Mr Brooke has remained, albeit confusedly, on the liberal side of politics. Wordsworth, (infamously) did not; and this break in the career has made him a pivotal and controversial representative of those who came of age at the onset of the French Revolution (1789). Just lately, some powerful revisionists (Jerome J. McCants, James K. Chandler, and Marjorie Levinson, among others) have produced readings of the early poetry in terms of its hidden clues to tergiversation, or silent evasions of 'history' (the most notorious test case being 'Tintern Abbey', whose title elaborately, almost teasingly, draws attention to its composition on 23 July, and so to the very eve of the Bastille Day anniversary). Such readings have kept Wordsworth at the centre of 'Romanticism', however much the concept may have shifted its ground around and beneath him.

The conscious liberal in Wordsworth did harder than has sometimes been suggested. He was understood to be 'strongly disposed to Republicanism' and 'equality' in 1806, and advocated 'a thorough reform in Parliament and a new course of education', in 1809 (letter to Daniel Stuart, W.I 296). The Excursion (1814) drew to an end with a swinging attack on child labour (Book VIII), and a call for a system of national education (Book IX). The Prelude allowed the 'Bliss' of witnessing the 'dawn' of Revolution to stand alongside an apostrophe to the 'Genius of Burke', added in 1814 (Prel. 1850 xi 308, 512-3). Even in 1816 Wordsworth could be heard praising the Sheffield poet Ebenezer Elliott, whose Corn-Law Rhymes (1818) spoke for the impoverished labouring classes and, incidentally, was being regarded by Henry Crabb Robinson as a fellow-traveller in Whiggish politics (Diary ii 88-9, 83).

Nevertheless, the late Toryism is hard to overestimate. Wordsworth was dead with Catholic Emancipation (1829) and the 1832 Reform Bill. His lifelong sympathy with the poor and appreciation of Ebenezer Elliott did not, as we might expect, extend to support for the Anti-Corn Law League's challenge to the protectionist policy of taxing imported corn, the effect of which was to maintain the incomes of landowners at the expense of artificially high prices for bread. Nor was Wordsworth any better disposed towards the utilitarian and laissez-faire economics which sought to free trade and systematize welfare: his hostility to the 1854 Poor Law Amendment Act, which promoted workhouses over outdoor relief, gave a vivid political colouring to preferences he first articulated in The Old Cumberland Beggar, 1798. As this last example suggests, the late Wordsworth found new relevance and impetus for the radically inclined poetry of his youth. When the Salisbury Plain poems written in the 1790s were finally revised and published as Guilt and Sorrow (1842), they were placed in the context of the Sonnets upon the Punishment of Death, which argued in favour of the penalty and were
published in the Tory Quarterly Review, for December 1841. As a result, a work which began life under the shadow of William Godwin's Political Justice (1793) as an attack on war and law (that is, on human sacrifices to 'Superstition'), and a penal code which creates the crimes it punishes), instead ended by asserting the justice of sentencing a murderer to swing. The merciful – or squeamish – reader was reassured that, in this case, judgement was not marred by arbitrary cruelty, which in the eighteenth century demanded that the body be hung 'in iron case' as an entertainment, or warning, to the masses (the fate which had indeed formed the last outrage of the unpublished interim text, Adventures on Salisbury Plain, 1793–9).

Wordsworth's shifts to the right may be gauged by the fact that the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' (1807 and 1815) were progressively devoted, first 'to National Independence and Liberty', and then 'to Liberty and Order'. Among the sonnets eventually collected in this sequence, one was written against the introduction of voting by ballot; another 'recommended to the perusal of the Anti-Corn Law League, the Political Economists, and of all those who consider that the Evils under which we groan are to be removed or palliated by measures ungoverned by moral and religious principles' (1843 Fenwick Note to 'Feel for the wrongs!'); and three were offered In Allusion to Various Recent Histories and Notices of the French Revolution, the last of which addressed the nation thus:

"Long-favoured England! be not thou misled
By monstrous theories of alien growth..."

This suspicion of the foreign and theoretical was sparkled by the appearance of Carlyle's French Revolution (1837); but reached back to those patriotic and traditional allegiances which were first activated by the founding document of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790). Such tenacities of the memory, both for language and for feeling, had been the great strength of Wordsworth's writing. What became at last a panicky rigidity – a favourite line from Spenser, 'All change is perilous and all chance unsound', could well serve as the motto of old man Wordsworth – was once a lively fear of perishability, transience, and loss, a fear that may be related to the poet's acute anxiety for his own powers, and which shapes the massive achievements of 'Tintern Abbey' and Resolution and Independence, the 'Imitations Ode' and The Prelude. For all the evident dislocation between radical and reactionary Wordsworths, the poetry insists on its own revival as the evidence of undiminished imaginative life, and, faced with that vital threat of mortality, asserts a remarkable continuity of vision.

8

The shape of the poetic career

I thought of Thee, my partner and my guide,
As being past away. – Vain sympathies!
For, backward, Duddon! as I cast my eyes,
I see what was and is, and will abide;
The Form remains, the Function never dies...
('Conclusion' to The River Duddon, 1820)

Any account of the 'shape' of Wordsworth's career has to reckon with the fact that it has already been amply reflected upon by the poet himself. Wordsworth's chosen metaphors for this shape are the river and the church. The river flows through the central self-explorations, 'Tintern Abbey' and The Prelude (1805 i 272–304, ix 1–9, xii 722–843), to say nothing of Essays upon Epitaphs I and the lines just quoted. The church is publicly asserted as a model in the Preface to The Excursion (1814), where it places all the poet's works as contributions to a single evolving gothic building. Both metaphors offer themselves as organic, counter-classical modes of organization. Yet, while each is insightful on its own account, these analogies are most interesting for the conflicts that emerge between them. The one is drawn from a natural, the other from a man-made, structure. If the river self-image suggests an identity of unceasing process and free-flowing form, ever-changing and yet continuous through time, then the cathedral of works is dedicated to the idea of a completed whole, an architectonic arrangement as final and incontestable as the claims of religion itself.

As it happens, we know (as Wordsworth's contemporaries did not) that for all the confident aspirations of the architect, the edifice announced in The Excursion would never be built. Of the epic project of The Recluse, only the glorious 'Prospectus' and the – often impressive – fragments of false starts, remain: Home at Grassmere, 1800; 'St Paul's', 'To the Clouds', and 'The Tuff of Primroses', 1808; and the vital 1798 drafts, which were incorporated into The Excursion (see William Wordsworth, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 676–81). When The Recluse was first devised, with Coleridge, in 1798, Wordsworth excitedly speculated that it would prove an all-inclusive shape: 'I know not any thing which will not come within the scope of my plan!' (letter to James Webbe Tobin, 6 March 1798). By 1814, it has become the very raison d'être of the poet's enterprise, the great 'body' of the Wordsworthian church. But the 'blissful hour' never arrives.

As is now familiar from the work of Kenneth R. Johnston and others, this absence haunted Wordsworth's writing life and was fundamental in shaping his career. It also brings us to another way in which we have stolen a march on his contemporaries. Unlike them, we possess the 'biographical' poem which the Preface to The Excursion mentions as 'preparatory' to the unwritten
Recluse. The 'history of the Author's mind' had by 1814 long since assumed epic proportions, but did not get published until 1830. This second absence marks the great oddity of Wordsworth's presentation of his career: that it is a shape which deliberately refuses to reveal itself in its most important form - The Prelude - until after the poet's death. Wordsworth's longest and most ambitious work to date was kept back as merely the 'ante-chapel' to the church, as a 'prelude' to, and preparation for, the one true epic. For most of us, it is on the contrary The Prelude which seems to make Wordsworth a true poet, and of the Romantic party without knowing it, because it shows how he wrote in fetters when striving to fulfil that hard task, The Recluse, and at liberty when exploring the self in all its rich and unphilosophic perplexity. It is The Prelude that has come to seem truly 'Wordsworthian'.

A crucial aspect of this re-shaping of Wordsworth is that the results are neither universal nor uniform. For we can speak, as (once again) original readers could not, of more than one Prelude. The retrieval from manuscripts of the earliest full-length version of the poem, completed in 1805, has been followed by the two-part version of 1798-9 (the former was first presented by Ernest de Selincourt, in 1936; the latter in the Norton's Critical Edition, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill. 1979). These texts, both of which are now standard 'Preludes', were just the start of a thorough-going rejuvenation of the Wordsworth corpus. The survival of a huge archive (now preserved by the Wordsworth Trust) has enabled scholars to present reading texts of many more early versions (the Cornell Wordsworth Series, under the General Editorship of Stephen Patrick). Thanks to this new look at Wordsworth, we can observe the precise moment at which Coleridge's influence begins to be felt, in the development of The Ruined Cottage (now disentangled from its original place of publication as the first book of The Excursion); and the first stirrings of a poetry that traces the 'Growth of a Poet's Mind', in the related biography of The Pedlar. We also have a wealth of material that is newly promoted to the status of 'text' rather than being allocated to footnotes or appendices: the juvenilia; the 1794 revisions of An Evening Walk; the multiple stages of Salisbury Plain and The Prehudes; the full complexity of the early notebooks, and the drafts surrounding the Lyrical Ballads and Poems, in Two Volumes.

This versioning of Wordsworth (which far surpasses the variant readings supplied by old-fashioned editing) has altered his shape in two main ways:
First, it has assumed that early is best. That assumption has turned readers and editors into textual primitivists and archaeologists: the accretions of a lifetime's rewriting have been removed, so as to reveal the pristine, often pre-publication, and as it were unsocialised, Wordsworth. Putting it crudely, the youthful Romantic needed to be rescued from the 'bleak old bore' of W. H. Auden's phrase who went on tinkering long after age and habit had strophied the body and closed the mind - a slow fade that bears a striking resemblance to Wordsworth's own self-diagnosis in the 'Ode' and elsewhere.

Secondly, the recent shape-shifting has tended to privilege the poet of process. In terms of Wordsworth's own metaphors, its model is the river, its method a chronology of writing which itself assumes the rivery course of an on-going, linear development through time. A minute attention to the historical details of composition, year-by-year, and almost hour-by-hour, would seem to fit in, not only with our own prejudices in favour of the open-ended, the undogmatic, and the inconclusive, but also with the facts of the case as we now know them. After all, The Recluse was never completed. By a supreme irony, the Wordsworthian church turned out to be a castle in the air. What survives are the ruins of that dream - or, to put it more positively, a 'body' that is forever in process: 'Who that shall point, as with a wand, and say, 'This portion of the river of my mind/Came from yon fountain?'' (Pref. 8:57, II. 219-24).

And yet the rivery form has its limitations. As an exclusive shape, it is seriously distorting. In foregrounding the design of The Recluse, The Excursion signalled a turn, which Wordsworth's remaining years largely confirmed, towards the finished product, and away from the process of its making. Modern textual scholarship has enabled readers' preferences to run in the opposite direction; and we have very good aesthetic reasons for this preference. But it is nevertheless crucial to our understanding of the shape of the career that the emergence of the second metaphor - the church - be acknowledged. Its practical meaning as a principle of organization is revealed almost immediately, by the publication of the two-volume Poems (1815), Wordsworth's first collected edition, and the first in which his works are, as the Preface to The Excursion anticipates, 'properly arranged'. This arrangement introduces the categories under which, with modifications, he will group all future collections.

The chronological sequence has taught us a great deal about composition (and has its apotheosis in the work of Mark Reed). It has had less to say about publication, or the carefully orchestrated dissemination of the works, by volume, by class, and by genre. The four corner-stones of the Wordsworthian church are Lyrical Ballads (1800), Poems, in Two Volumes (1807), The Excursion (1814), and Poems (1815). (For those who lack the originals, facsimiles of all four have recently appeared under the Woodstock Books imprint.)

As Wordsworth's first substantial single-author publication, Lyrical Ballads (1800) is of the greatest symbolic importance. It does away with the anonymity and partnership of the 1798 volume, and indicates Wordsworth's
The shape of the poetic career of the Wordsworth system (Byron, Monthly Literary Recreations, July 1827; Jeffrey, Edinburgh Review, October 1827).

After the 1807 disaster, Wordsworth fell silent. His next major production, all of seven years later, was seemingly designed to be critic-proof. *The Excursion* could not be less childish. It is, perhaps, the nearest thing we have to a Wordsworthian church (indeed, it has a pastor for one of its central characters). It also marks Wordsworth’s arrival socially: the work was dedicated to Lord Lonsdale. None of this prevented Jeffrey from mounting a further attack; but his famous and devastating opener, ‘This will never do,’ is belied by the fact that it did do, both at the time of publication (Keats called *The Excursion* one of ‘three things to rejoice at in this Age’, letter to Haydon, 21 January 1818) and beyond: for the Victorians, *The Excursion* was the long Wordsworth poem. Dissenting voices were raised, privately, by Coleridge, who blamed *The Excursion* for not being *The Recluse* (letter to Wordsworth, 20 May 1815); by Blake, who refused to believe the Wordsworth doctrine of mind and world ‘fitting and fitted’ (annotation to the Prospectus to *The Recluse*); and by the Shelley’s, who categorically pronounced ‘He is a slave’ (Mary Shelley’s Journal, 14 September 1814) – thus beginning the ‘lost leader’ syndrome that culminates in Robert Browning’s 1845 poem of that name, where the Distributor of Stamps is glibly conflated with Judas Iscariot: ‘Just for a handful of silver he left us.’

*The Excursion* alters our sense of Wordsworth’s shape in three main ways: it uses the peripetetic form of a Tour to organize a long series of interlocking narratives; it adapts both Lake District pastoral and philosophical blank verse to a wide-ranging survey of contemporary society; and it introduces, in the story of the French Revolution and the ideological debate surrounding its events, the master-narrative of the age (which we know from *The Prelude* to have been shaped by a personal experience unique among the major Romantic writers).

*Poems* (1815), dedicated to Beaumont, hopes to replace the discredited system of *Lyrical Ballads* with one that will make the works invulnerable to the ‘senseless outcry’ of the critics (*Essay, Supplementary*). To this end, Wordsworth introduces a new theory and a new order: a Preface, and an *Essay, Supplementary* to it, open and close the first volume; and the poems are given the canonical treatment advertised in the Preface to *The Excursion*. (Even so, Wordsworth cannot resist raising the standard of the old dispensation; the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is smuggled in, at the back of Volume II.) *Poems* (1815) begins with ‘My heart leaps up’ and ends with the ‘Ode’. A chronological arrangement would tell us that these works were being composed within days or hours of one another in March 1824; the categorical
arrangement insists that they are first and last in an order which represents the shape of human life. The collection starts with Poems Referring to the Period of Childhood, and comes to a close with those 'Referring to the Period of Old Age'. In between these two ages of man, further categories suggest a process of mental maturation: Poems Founded on the Affections lead, via 'Poems of the Fancy' and 'the Imagination', to a synthesis of thought and feeling in 'Poems Proceeding from Sentiment and Reflection'. Yet a third level of categorization matches a biological to a poetic and generic order: the 'Poems Referring to the Period of Childhood' are succeeded by Juvenile Poems; those 'Referring to the Period of Old Age' by Epitaphs and Elegiac Poems. The 1815 arrangement throws one category above all into prominence. Spanning both volumes, and divided equally between them, the 'Poems of the Imagination' recognize the centrality of the imaginative faculty to the Wordsworth canon. And, as a group, they reflect the maturing mind, with opening with 'There was a Boy' and ending with 'Tintern Abbey' (where, we may recall, a transition from 'glad animal movements' to 'elevated thoughts' was first observed). A final complexity, and circularity, is implied by the fact that the 'Ode', which stands alone as an uncontroversial conclusion to the whole, has as its epigraph lines from 'My heart leaps up', the first piece in the collection.

As these multiple orderings suggest, the life of the body, the mind, and the work, all converge in the single shape of Wordsworth's new arrangement. When the reader consciously gets to thinking of the total effect of its meditative, meandering, overflows courses, it does so in terms of an order of architecture. But, in the 1815 Poems at least, it is an order that is sympathetic to the human scale and the human lifespan. Remarkably, the architectural form retains within it a sense of the rivery process of existence, flowing from birth to death, and reflecting upon itself at every stage. Perhaps, then, it is in combining the two analogies that the shape of the career reveals itself most fully. Indeed, the 1815 edition seems to recognize as much, since, as well as categorizing the poems, its table of contents tabulates some of the dates of composition and first publication. Elsewhere, too, river and cathedral are allowed to share: common form: both The River Duddon (1800) and are groups of sonnets. Collectively speaking, each sonnet is part of a rivery sequence; individually, it is a 'narrow room', one of the church's 'little cells... and sepulchral recesses' ('Nuns feet not; Preface to The Excursion').

The shape of the river has a lifelong persistence in Wordsworth, thanks to its pedestrian form, the Tour. Appropriately enough, it is in The River Duddon that we find the first outing, under his own name, of Wordsworth's

The shape of the poetic career

Topographical Description of the Country of the Lakes. Originally published anonymously as an introduction to Joseph Wilkinson's Select Views in Cumberland, Westmorland, and Lancashire (1820), this prose work appeared in a bewildering variety of formats; it was known to the public mainly in the form of A Guide through the District of the Lakes (1831), though it also extends to 'An Unpublished Tour' and an incomplete essay on 'The Sublime and the Beautiful' (1811/12); available in Prose II. Far more than a 'Description', these writings together make up a kind of sacred text about the region in which Wordsworth had chosen to live and dedicate himself. For a man who is popularly regarded as an unbuildable Grasmonde fixture, however, Wordsworth spends a surprising amount of time away from home. The confirmed ruralist is also an avid metropolitan, making regular sorties to London throughout his life (he last visited in 1847). Quite apart from his almost daily Lakeland rambles, there is his peripatetic youth (in Cambridge, France, London, the Isle of Wight, Wales, Keswick, Racedown, Allfordon, Goslar, and Yorkshire), and the innumerable deliberate waywardness of later years: the Lakes in 1799 and 1807, Caledonia in 1802; the Continent in 1790 and - en famille this time - in 1820; North Wales in 1824; Ireland in 1829; Scotland, repeatedly, from the brief trip in 1801, to the extended tours of 1801, 1814, 1831, and 1833; Belgium, Holland, and the Rhine in 1828, when Coleridge came too, and the two men were finally reconciled; and, last but not least, Italy in 1827, to which Wordsworth had been longing to return since his first glimpse in 1795, to which Wordsworth had been longing to return since his first glimpse in 1795, and which brings his career full circle. With impeccable symmetry, the Tour is the route taken, both by his first major publications, An Evening Walk (the Lakes, 1789-90) and Descriptive Sketches (the Continent, 1790), and by his last separate collection (1842), containing his Memorials of a Tour in Italy, 1837.

These journeys are best seen, perhaps, not as random holidays, but as an intrinsic element of the poetic life, and as foreshadows into mental, quite as much as geographical, territory. Scotland, Wordsworth told Scott, 'is... the most poetic Country I ever travelled in' (7 November 1805, WL 1:631). One way in which it becomes poetical is that it is not only literally but imaginatively revisited. Just as Memorials of a Tour on the Continent, 1820 (1821) retracts the steps of his ecstatic 1790 Tour, so Scotland is four times recorded, with each layer of writing referring back to earlier inscriptions. Poems, in Two Volumes (1807) makes muses - the Highland Girl and the Solitary Reaper, Rob Roy and Burns - of the 1805 tour, Wordsworth's first love trip with Dorothy since his marriage; Poems (1815) places the unvisited Yarrow of 1805 (and 1807) alongside its visited sequel, from the 1814 tour; Yarrow Revised, and Other Poems (1815) turns the
The shape of the poetic career

‘Resolution and Independence’, where the deceit Leech-Gatherer is said to be ‘Motionless as a Cloud’, a comparison that only gradually yields its counter-intuitive wit – namely, the settling on a cloud, of all things, as an immovable image. Conversely, in preceding lines, the man’s ‘extreme old age’ has been animated into an eerie half-life by the still more improbable similes of ‘a huge Stone’ and ‘a Sea-beast’ (lines 518, 64–72). All such devices, meanwhile, register the narrating eye, disconcertingly and equivocally at work on its subject. ‘I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject’, proclaims the realist poet of the Preface to Lyrical Ballads (Prose i 132); but that ‘subject’ everywhere includes the enhancing, dimming, or transforming of outward things by mind itself.

Many critics have remarked upon Wordsworth’s extraordinary power of animating the world by seeing it from the perspective of our perceptions: that skater who is the centre of his own whirling universe in The Prelude (i 474–86); the thinker whose solitariness enables the ‘cliffs’ of ‘Tintern Abbey’ to ‘impress / Thoughts of more deep seclusion’ on an already ‘excluded scene’ (lines 6–7, my emphasis); the boy whose transforming receptivity is mirrored by, and yet distinct from, the tremulous instability of ‘that uncertain heaven, receiv’d / Into the bosom of the steady lake’ (‘There Was a Boy’, 24–5). From a technical point of view, there is a comparable subjectivizing of poetic: metre, diction, rhythm, are all re-conceived as being driven by ‘passion’, and the dramatic projections of feeling.

As a ‘border’ figure (a name devised by Geoffrey Hartman, in Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1777–1824 (1964), and explored by Jonathan Wordsworth, in William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision (1982)), the Leech-Gatherer is emblematic of the divided impulses which shape the career. The most fundamental of these has also had the profoundest influence on the tradition: the Wordsworth who declared, dismayingly, that the poet ‘is a man speaking to men’ (Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Prose i 158), was also perceived, by Keats, as ‘a thing per se’ which ‘stands alone’ (a revealing moment, this, for showing how a Wordsworthian subjectivity is felt to acquire the hard resisting outline of an object). The advocate of a poetry whose subjects are drawn ‘from common life’, and whose diction approximates ‘the real language of men’, was also the inventor of an idiom Keats christened ‘the wordsworthian or epistolical sublime’ (Prose i 200; Keats, letter to Woodhouse, 27 October 1818). Both poetics were revolutionary, both have come to seem exemplarily modern (in Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, De Quincey runs away from school carrying two books: the tragedies of Euripides for the ancients, Lyrical Ballads for the moderns). These split yet shared poetries are seeded as early as the first, anonymous Lyrical Ballads of 1798. Here, we find both the
balds and lyrics which anticipate the enormous profusion of Wordsworth’s ‘small poems’ (which Coleridge despaired of as counter to The Recluse), and the ‘exquisitely elaborate’22 blank verse of ‘Tintern Abbey’, a work whose self-concentration and concentration look towards the epic ‘Growth of a Poet’s Mind’. This kind of division becomes inescapable — and, to contemporary critics, inescapably provocative — in Poems, in Two Volumes (1807). Looking back, the edition may be read for its incessant, if eccentric, variety; at the time, it was proof of Wordsworth’s godliness, swinging wildly ‘from sublimity to sleness’ (Montgomery, on Poems in Two Volumes).

Crucially, the division falls within poems as well as between them: Wordsworth conjures one of his greatest moments, the first of the Prelude ‘spots of time’, out of the bizarre proximity of ‘ordinary sight’ and ‘visionary dreariness’. His ‘high argument’ is almost always shock by shock with ‘humble matter’. To Coleridge, this instability amounted to an illegitimate mixing of different kinds of writing, not just degrees of poetic register: his mature reservations about Wordsworth cohere around the perplexity induced by an oxymoronically ‘daring humility’ — the deflationary and inflationary anatheses and inequalities of the style (Biographia Literaria, ch. 21). William Hazlitt, meanwhile, diagnosed that the difficulty for readers of the Lyrical Ballads lay in their ‘unaccountable mixture of seeming simplicity and real abstruseness’ ('Mr Wordsworth', The Spirit of the Age); and Richard Mant turned the same mixture, in Poems, in Two Volumes, to parodic use: The Simpliad (1808) brought Augustan standards of decorum to bear on the Romantic disproportion of ‘Poets, who fix their visionary sight / On sparrow’s eggs’. With his ear for political nuance, Hazlitt detected another sort of discrepancy, identifying on separate occasions both a ‘levelling Muse’, and, later, deplorably, a poetry whose ‘language ... naturally falls in with the language of power’.23

Taking up important statements by A. C. Bradley and Matthew Arnold, M. H. Abrams has made a shape out of such divisions, in an essay called ‘Two Roads to Wordsworth’. He and others have concentrated especially on the poet’s joint reputation for social amiability (much enhanced by the discovery of his love letters to his wife), and for solitary and even misanthropic musings. Another — and, for my purposes, final — way of stating the fruitfulness of the problem is to say that the poet of nature and the natural man is also the mind-centred figure of whom Wilde astutely said, ‘Wordsworth went to the Lakes, but he was never a Lake poet’ (The Critic as Artist). In both these Wordsworths, the Victorians, Arnold and Mill especially, recognized a great spiritual doctor or healer of minds. But the apparently reassuring and naively continuous self, whose days are ‘Bound each to each by natural piety’, involves a startling and unsettling inversion of biological priority — ‘The

The shape of the poetic career

Child is Father of the Man! (‘My heart leaps up!’) — or requires an electrifying...
or, rather, let us suppose our station to be a cloud hanging midway between those two mountains, at not more than half a mile's distance from the summit of each, and not many yards above their highest elevation; we shall then see stretched at our feet a number of valleys, not fewer than eight, diverging from the point, on which we are supposed to stand, like spokes from the nave of a wheel.

(Prose ii 171)

'Hanging midway' in the sentence, the cloud-station perfectly exemplifies its ambiguous place in a Wordsworthian universe, between land and sky, real and imaginary, fixed and ephemeral, shapeless and formless. Diaphanous itself, it nonetheless gives shape to the District below, which from its vantage-point gains the coherence and unity of a wheel, with spokes radiating from a substantial centre. As the 1815 Preface reveals, the verb 'hang' was fraught with complex associations for Wordsworth, both in and of itself — as registering a permanently undecided ambivalence of shape, direction, or posture — and by its appearance in King Lear and Paradise Lost, and a corresponding inclination towards or away from a Shakespearean or Miltonic order of language (Prose iii 31). Coleridge imagined Milton and Shakespeare as twin peaks of poetic glory; in this passage from the Guide to the Lakes, Wordsworth's allusion of present-participle-adverb-preposition finds him 'hanging midway between' the rival mountains of his own region.

NOTES
1 'Autobiographical Memoranda', 1847; Prose iii 379.
6 John Taylor's gossip, as reported in Joseph Farington's Diary iii 349 (entry for 17 June 1806).
7 'Sold Secrecy to Cowardice and Fraud', first pub. 1818 in a note to Protest Against the Bullets ('Forth moved, from Envy spewing and Self-conceit, / A Power missions the Spirit of Reform...').
8 The First Queen v ii 36, noted by Wordsworth as the model for his own line, 'Perilous is sweeping change, all chance unbound' ('West Stowman He', 1858).