



BOOK REVIEW JULY 29, 2020

Wordsworth: Poet of the Human Heart

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WILLIAM WORDSWORTH ENTHRALLED ME WHEN I WAS a scrawny, brooding boy. Later, during college, on a study abroad program, I visited the Lake District as well as Welsh locales associated with Wordsworth, pausing a few miles above Tintern Abbey—where I imagined the poet himself had composed his moving lines about that sylvan spot—to scribble a note on the inside cover of a crinkling paperback of Wordsworth’s poetry: “This book was bought and read at Rydal Mount, Wordsworth’s home from the age of 43 until his death.” Marginalia appear beside the Tintern Abbey poem as well: “Read for the ump-millionth time today, September 17, 2003, in the town of Windermere.”

Even now these words haunt me with their unfamiliar familiarity, or familiar unfamiliarity: I recognize the passionate, zestful youth who wrote them, but I am, at middle age, no longer that person; I remember the place where I stood that day but cannot depict or describe it. I’m tired,

and long for the energy and wonder that I had, at 20, enjoyed as I hiked Helvellyn, ponderously penned rhyming sonnets, danced in the cobblestone streets with a local beauty, and gulped cold beer with strangers in a dark and rowdy pub. Young boys look forward to becoming grown men, and having become grown men, wish they were still young boys. Reading Wordsworth, I'm neither boy nor man but both, neither past nor present but both. No biography could completely capture the force of his expressive intensity or pensive musicality.

Radical Wordsworth, however, stirred me into that curious, melancholy state that characterizes so much of Wordsworth's solemn contemplations. Biographer Jonathan Bate's stated objective for this compelling account was to supply what has been lacking in literary studies, namely an exciting, non-specialized book of modest size "that not only outlines the story of the man [Wordsworth] and examines the best of his work, but also places him in the context of his revolutionary age and traces the vicissitudes of his reputation."

In this, Bate admirably succeeds, highlighting the poet's determinative experiences, significant relationships, and seminal influences and ignoring those quotidian letters and encounters that mired earlier biographies in tedious minutiae. Bate ambulates through the formative years—the *radical* era—of Wordsworth's life in that ambling style that Wordsworth, himself a walker or hiker, employed in his verse.

Radical, here, does not mean extremist or fanatical, associations that developed long after the French Revolution to describe its most Jacobin proponents. The historical connotation of radical is elemental or fundamental, that which is original or originating. Such is the sense in which Bate renders Wordsworth's powerful vision, emotional depth, awesome imagination, and lyrical inspiration.

Bate doesn't stick to a linear, chronological line but saunters back and forth through time as if to mimic or recuperate Wordsworth's fluid, atemporal intimations. For instance, part one of the narrative recounts events from 1770-1806 but fluctuates within those fixed parameters. To make sense of the happenings during that period, moreover, Bate

consults Wordsworth's reports from decades later, lending the impression that any one of the subject experiences is greater than the sum of Wordsworth's lengthy career—that a concentration on certain defining episodes, in other words, reveals as much about him as an exhaustive catalogue of mundane occurrences would or could.

Wordsworth was born into a family of lawyers in the spring of 1770. Frustrated with his instruction at the local grammar school, he, a mere adolescent, found solace and exhilaration among the lakes and bucolic mountain landscapes near his home. At 20, he undertook a walking tour through France and the Alps, falling in love with beauty, both the concept of it and its actual manifestations in material reality.

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Initially an enthusiast for the French Revolution, he grew disenchanted with its violence and severity. “[H]e had literally,” Bate says, “walked into the French Revolution” only a year after the storming of the Bastille, with his Welsh friend and college companion Robert Jones, also the son of a lawyer. The story, alas, is complex, involving a brief and fervent affair with a French aristocrat, Annette Vallon, who bore him an illegitimate daughter. Whether this sexual indiscretion reflects his political indiscretion at the time is a matter of debate.

“It is tempting,” Bate confesses, “to portray the Wordsworth of the 1790s as the utopian radical welcoming the French Revolution’s spirit of liberty, equality and fraternity, and the Wordsworth of the 1800s as the nostalgic lover of the lakes and mountains in full retreat from his own earlier idealism.” Yet Bate avoids this trite reduction. In his account,

Wordsworth's politics, whatever they were at any moment, weren't always well developed or rigorously obtained. If Wordsworth's politics erred, it wasn't because of shrewd calculation or partisan sycophancy, but because of acute sentiment, in particular his "art of sympathy with both the poor and the natural world," to employ Bate's phrasing (out of its intended context).

Central to Wordsworth's legacy was his complicated friendship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, with whom he composed *Lyrical Ballads*. Ballads were, in a sense, "low" forms, simplistic in structure if not in message, so the title for this landmark work, recalling pastoral entertainment that privileged orality over textuality, song over writing, plot over syntax, was overtly political. Balladry appealed in the countryside and among the lower classes, echoing in taverns and pubs rather than castles and cathedrals. It wasn't the favored form of the highbrow or the highly educated. But it married Wordsworth's early republicanism, which extolled common folk and rural settings, with his later conservatism that appealed in rustic communities, which revered custom and tradition and retained, as it were, the old ways.

The insecure, drug-using Coleridge and the handsome if gangly Wordsworth had similar personalities. Both men, according to Bate, suffered "episodes of what they called dejection and we would now call depression." Sadly, the collaborative bond between them unraveled, perhaps because Wordsworth's sister-in-law, Sara, was in love with him while Coleridge was in love with her. Or perhaps Coleridge had imagined an affair between Wordsworth and Sara that never actually occurred. Or perhaps the affair *did* occur. We cannot know for sure. What we do know is that the breakup, if that's the right word, came at the expense of both men's creativity. "It cannot be a coincidence," opines Bate, "that both Wordsworth and Coleridge started writing their best poetry when they met each other, and that their verse declined in quality when they fell out."

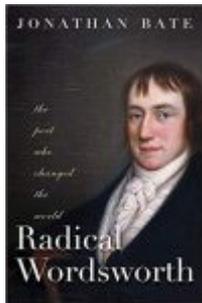
There's much to contemplate: Wordsworth's regard for his sister Dorothy, his marriage to Mary Hutchinson, his mariner brother's sudden death, his moves and visits and tours, his relationship with his children, his and Coleridge's eventual embrace of conservatism. Bate touches on it all,

accentuating his descriptions with fine and fleeting exegeses of Wordsworth's more famous poems.

Wordsworth became, in due course, the distinguished figurehead of the Romantic Age in England, a sonorous sage to whom younger poets turned for motivation and insight. His was a prophetic voice, not the kind that issued stern warnings and angry condemnations, but that, through the medium of poetry, celebrated meekness, kindness, graciousness, and compassion. He forged "a new poetry of the human heart." His ultimate, boundless subject was *the* subject: acute interiority, self-awareness or self-consciousness, the "I" that is "I," the "Me myself" as Whitman later called it. His greatest poems overcame sentimentality by rendering in everyday vernacular the energy and profundity of human emotion. Accused of spreading a cult of childhood, he might have overstated youthful innocence, neglecting or disregarding the human capacity for cruelty, rage, and hate. But he did so out of love for life and living and with almost uncontrollable compassion.

The Romantic literature and culture that Wordsworth set in motion meditated against the excesses of scientific rationalism that befell the Enlightenment and provided respite and relief during the disorienting rise of the Industrial Revolution. Without Wordsworth and his followers, there might have been no transcendentalism in the United States, and the distinctly American ethic of individualism and self-reliance, with its skepticism of big government and institutions, its emphasis on introspection and personal freedom, might have looked much different.

"Nearly all his greatest poetry," Bate says of Wordsworth, "is pervaded by a feeling of loss: the loss of childhood, of freedom, of the unmediated relationship with nature." We *all* have, and will, experience loss. Nothing and no one remains the same or lasts forever. However painful or sorrowful, loss doesn't necessarily or inexorably lead to despair. Wordsworth portrayed it as an improbable source of affection, gratitude, and goodness. During our short existence on earth, especially amid strange and trying times, we may take comfort in his timeless wisdom and understanding. We may, in his words, find strength in "the primal sympathy / Which having been must ever be."



REVIEWED

Radical Wordsworth

by Jonathan Bate

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