William Wordsworth was born in Cockermouth in West Cumberland, just on the
northern fringe of the English Lake District. When his mother died, the eight-year-
old boy was sent to school at Hawkshead, near Esthwaite Lake, in the heart of that
thinly settled region that he and Coleridge were to transform into one of the poetic
centers of England. William and his three brothers boarded in the cottage of Ann
Tyson, who gave the boys simple comfort, ample affection, and freedom to roam the
countryside at will. A vigorous, unruly, and sometimes moody boy, William spent his
free days and occasionally “half the night” in the sports and rambles described in the
first two books of The Prelude, “drinking in” (to use one of his favorite metaphors)
the natural sights and sounds, and getting to know the cottagers, shepherds, and
solitary wanderers who moved through his imagination into his later poetry. He also
found time to read voraciously in the books owned by his young headmaster, William
Taylor, who encouraged him in his inclination to poetry.

John Wordsworth, the poet’s father, died suddenly when William was thirteen,
leaving to his five children mainly the substantial sum owed him by Lord Lonsdale,
whom he had served as attorney and as steward of the huge Lonsdale estate. That
harsh and litigious nobleman managed to keep from paying the debt until he died in
1802. Wordsworth was nevertheless able to enter St. John’s College, Cambridge, in
1787, where he found little in the limited curriculum of that time to appeal to him.
He took his degree in 1791 without distinction.

During the summer vacation of his third year at Cambridge (1790), Wordsworth
and his closest college friend, the Welshman Robert Jones, journeyed on foot through
France and the Alps (described in The Prelude 6) at the time when the French were
joyously celebrating the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. Upon completing
his course at Cambridge, Wordsworth spent four months in London, set off on
another walking tour with Robert Jones through Wales (the time of the memorable
ascent of Mount Snowdon in The Prelude 14), and then went back alone to France
to master the language and qualify as a traveling tutor.

During his year in France (November 1791 to December 1792) Wordsworth
became a fervent “democrat” and proselyte of the French Revolution—which seemed
to him, as to many other generous spirits, to promise a “glorious renovation”—and
he fell in love with Annette Vallon, the impetuous and warm-hearted daughter of a
French surgeon at Blois. It is clear that the two planned to marry, despite their
differences in religion and political inclinations (Annette belonged to an old Catholic family whose sympathies were Royalist). But almost immediately after a daughter, Caroline, was born, lack of funds forced Wordsworth to return to England. The outbreak of war between England and France made it impossible for him to rejoin Annette until they had drifted so far apart in sympathies that a permanent union no longer seemed desirable. Wordsworth's agonies of guilt, his divided loyalties between England and France, his gradual disillusion with the course of the Revolution in France—according to his account in The Prelude 10 and 11—brought him to the verge of an emotional breakdown, when "sick, wearied out with contrarieties," he "yielded up moral questions in despair." His suffering, his near-collapse, and the successful effort, after his break with his past, to reestablish "a saving intercourse with my true self," are the experiences that underlie many of his greatest poems.

At this critical point a young friend, Paisley Calvert, died and left Wordsworth a sum of money just sufficient to enable him to live by his poetry. He settled in a rent-free house at Racedown, Dorsetshire, with his beloved sister, Dorothy, who now began her long career as confidante, inspirer, and secretary. At that same time Wordsworth met Samuel Taylor Coleridge; two years later he moved to Alfoxden House, Somersetshire, to be near Coleridge, who lived four miles away at Nether Stowey. Here he entered at the age of twenty-seven on the delayed springtime of his poetic career.

Even while he had been an undergraduate at Cambridge, Coleridge claimed that he had detected signs of genius in Wordsworth's rather conventional poem about his tour in the Alps, Descriptive Sketches, published in 1793. Now he hailed Wordsworth unreservedly as "the best poet of the age." The two men met almost daily, talked for hours about poetry, and composed prolifically. So close was their association that we find the same phrases occurring in poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge, as well as in the remarkable journals that Dorothy kept at the time; the two poets collaborated in some writings and freely traded thoughts and passages for others; and Coleridge even undertook to complete a few poems that Wordsworth had left unfinished.

The result of their joint efforts was a small volume, published anonymously in 1798, Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems. It opened with Coleridge's Ancient Mariner; included three other poems by Coleridge, a number of Wordsworth's verse anecdotes and psychological studies of humble people, and some lyrics in which Wordsworth celebrated impulses from a vernal wood; and closed with Wordsworth's great descriptive and meditative poem in blank verse (not a "lyrical ballad," but one of the "other poems" of the title), Tintern Abbey. In this last poem, Wordsworth inaugurated what some critics call his "myth of nature"; that is, his presentation of the "growth" of his mind to maturity, and the development of his emotional and moral life, as an interaction between his mind and the outer world. The volume of Lyrical Ballads clearly announces a new literary departure. William Hazlitt said that when he heard Coleridge read some of these newly written poems aloud, "the sense of a new style and a new spirit in poetry came over me," with something of the effect "that arises from the turning up of the fresh soil, or of the first welcome breath of spring." The professional reviewers were less enthusiastic. Nevertheless Lyrical Ballads sold out in two years, and Wordsworth published under his own name a new edition, dated 1800, to which he added a second volume of poems, many of them written in homesickness during a long, cold, and friendless winter that he and Dorothy had spent in Goslar, Germany, 1798–99. In his famous Preface to this edition, planned, like so many of the poems, in close consultation with Coleridge, Wordsworth enunciated the principles of the new criticism that served as rationale for the new poetry. Notable among the other works written in this prolific period is his austere and powerful tragic poem The Ruined Cottage.

Late in 1799 Wordsworth and Dorothy moved back permanently to their native lakes, settling at Grasmere in the little house later named Dove Cottage. Coleridge, following them, rented Greta Hall at Keswick, thirteen miles away. In 1802 Words-
worth finally came into his father’s inheritance and, after an amicable settlement with Annette Vallon, married Mary Hutchinson, a Lake Country woman whom he had known since childhood. The course of his existence after that time was broken by various disasters: the drowning in 1805 of his favorite brother, John, a sea captain whose ship was wrecked in a storm; the death of two of his five children in 1812; a growing estrangement from Coleridge, culminating in a bitter quarrel (1810) from which they were not completely reconciled for almost two decades; and from the 1830s on, the physical and mental decline of his sister, Dorothy. The life of his middle age, however, was one of steadily increasing prosperity and reputation, as well as of political and religious conservatism. In 1813 an appointment as Stamp Distributor (that is, revenue collector) for Westmorland was concrete evidence of his recognition as a national poet. Gradually his residences, as he moved into more and more commodious quarters, became standard stops for tourists; he was awarded honorary degrees and, in 1843, was appointed poet laureate. He died in 1850 at the age of eighty; only then did his executors publish his masterpiece, The Prelude, the autobiographical poem that he had written in two parts in 1799, expanded to its full length in 1805, and then continued to revise almost to the last decade of his long life.

Most of Wordsworth’s greatest poetry had been written by 1807, when he published Poems in Two Volumes; and after The Excursion (1814) and the first collected edition of his poems (1815), although he continued to write voluminously, there is an overall decline in his powers. The causes of the decline have been much debated; an important one seems to be inherent in the very nature of his most characteristic writing. Wordsworth is above all the poet of the remembrance of things past, or as he himself put it, of “emotion recollected in tranquillity.” Some object or event in the present triggers a sudden renewal of feelings he had experienced in youth; the result is a poem exhibiting the sharp discrepancy between what Wordsworth called “two consciousnesses”: himself as he is now and himself as he once was. But the memory of one’s early emotional experience is not an inexhaustible resource for poetry, as Wordsworth himself recognized. He said in The Prelude 12, while describing the recurrence of “spots of time” from his memories of childhood:

The days gone by
Return upon me almost from the dawn
Of life: the hiding places of Man’s power
Open; I would approach them, but they close.
I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,
May scarcely see at all.

The past that Wordsworth recollected was one of moments of intense experience, and of emotional turmoil which is ordered, in the calmer present, into a hard-won equilibrium. As time went on, however, he gained what, in the Ode to Duty (composed in 1804), he hoped for, “a repose which ever is the same”—but at the expense of the agony and excitation which, under the calm surface, empowers his best and most characteristic poems.

Occasionally, in his middle and later life a jolting experience would revive the intensity of Wordsworth’s remembered emotion, and also his earlier poetic strength. The moving sonnet Surprised by Joy, for example, was written in his forties at the abrupt realization that time was beginning to diminish his grief at the death some years earlier of his little daughter Catherine. And when Wordsworth was sixty-five years old, the sudden report of the death of James Hogg called up the memory of other and greater poets whom Wordsworth had loved and outlived; the result was his Extempore Effusion, written in a return to the simple quatrains of the early Lyrical Ballads and with a recovery of the elegiac voice that had uttered the dirges to Lucy, thirty-five years before.
We Are Seven

---A simple Child,
That lightly draws its breath,
And feels its life in every limb,
What should it know of death?

I met a little cottage Girl:
She was eight years old, she said;
Her hair was thick with many a curl
That clustered round her head.

She had a rustic, woodland air,
And she was wildly clad:
Her eyes were fair, and very fair;
—Her beauty made me glad.

"Sisters and brothers, little Maid,
How many may you be?"
"How many? Seven in all," she said,
And wondering looked at me.

"And where are they? I pray you tell."
She answered, "Seven are we;
And two of us at Conway² dwell,
And two are gone to sea.

1. Written at Alfoxden in the spring of 1798. . .
The little girl who is the heroine I met within the area of Goodrich Castle [in the Wye Valley north of Tintern Abbey] in the year 1793 [Wordsworth's note]. Wordsworth also tells us that he composed the last line of the last stanza first, and that Cole-ridge contributed the initial stanza.
"Two of us in the church-yard lie,  
My sister and my brother;  
And, in the church-yard cottage, I  
Dwell near them with my mother."

“You say that two at Conway dwell,  
And two are gone to sea,  
Yet ye are seven! I pray you tell,  
Sweet Maid, how this may be.”

Then did the little Maid reply,  
“Seven boys and girls are we;  
Two of us in the church-yard lie,  
Beneath the church-yard tree.”

“You run about, my little Maid,  
Your limbs they are alive;  
If two are in the church-yard laid,  
Then ye are only five.”

“Their graves are green, they may be seen,”  
The little Maid replied,  
“Twelve steps or more from my mother’s door,  
And they are side by side.

“My stockings there I often knit,  
My kerchief there I hem;  
And there upon the ground I sit,  
And sing a song to them.

“And often after sun-set, Sir,  
When it is light and fair,  
I take my little porringer,³  
And eat my supper there.

“The first that died was sister Jane;  
In bed she moaning lay,  
Till God released her of her pain;  
And then she went away.

“So in the church-yard she was laid;  
And, when the grass was dry,  
Together round her grave we played,  
My brother John and I.

“And when the ground was white with snow,  
And I could run and slide,  
My brother John was forced to go,  
And he lies by her side.”

³. Bowl for porridge.
"How many are you, then," said I,
"If they two are in heaven?"
Quick was the little Maid's reply,
"O Master! we are seven."

"But they are dead; those two are dead!
Their spirits are in heaven!"
'Twas throwing words away; for still
The little Maid would have her will,
And said, "Nay, we are seven!"

1798

1798

112. Lines Written in Early Spring

I heard a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove I sat reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,
The periwinkle trailed its wreaths,
And 'tis my faith that even' flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.

The birds around me hopped and played,
Their thoughts I cannot measure:—
But the least motion which they made,
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

The budding twigs spread out their fan,
To catch the breezy air;
And I must think, do all I can,
That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent,
If such be Nature's holy plan,²
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?

1798

1798

1. A trailing evergreen plant with small blue flowers (U.S. myrtle).
2. The version of these two lines in the Lyricá BALLADS of 1798 reads: "If I these thoughts may not prevent. / If such be of my creed the plan."
It is a beauteous evening

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea:
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder—everlastingly.
Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
And worshippst at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.

Aug. 1802

London, 1802

Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

Sept. 1802

The world is too much with us

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;

2. The girl walking with Wordsworth is Caroline, his daughter by Annette Vallon. For the event described, see Dorothy Wordsworth's Grasmere Journals, July 1802 (p. 395).
3. Where the souls destined for heaven rest after death. Luke 16.22: "And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom."
4. One of a series "written immediately after my return from France to London, when I could not but be struck, as here described, with the vanity and parade of our own country... as contrasted with the quiet, and I may say the desolation, that the revolution had produced in France" [Wordsworth's note].
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!16

This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for every thing, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be

A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton's blow his wreathed horn.

1802–04

Surprised by joy

Surprised by joy—impatient as the Wind
I turned to share the transport—Oh! with whom
But Thee, deep buried in the silent tomb,
That spot which no vicissitude can find?

Love, faithful love, recalled thee to my mind—
But how could I forget thee? Through what power,
Even for the least division of an hour,
Have I been so beguiled as to be blind
To my most grievous loss!—That thought's return

Was the worst pang that sorrow ever bore,
Save one, one only, when I stood forlorn,
Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more;
That neither present time, nor years unborn
Could to my sight that heavenly face restore.

1813–14

5. Gift. It is the act of giving the heart away that

is sordid.

6. A sea deity, usually represented as blowing on
a conch shell. Proteus was an old man of the sea
who (in the Odyssey) could assume a variety of
shapes. The description of Proteus echoes Paradise
Lost 3.603–04, and that of Triton echoes Spenser's
Colin Clouts Come Home Again, lines 244–45.

Milton and Spenser are the two English poets with

whom Wordsworth most closely allied himself.

7. This was in fact suggested by my daughter
Catherine, long after her death [Wordsworth's
note]. Catherine Wordsworth died June 4, 1812,
at the age of four.