

**WORDSWORTH'S  
EXCURSION:  
THE WANDERER**

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Wordsworth's Excursion: The wanderer by William Wordsworth & H. H. Turner

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**WILLIAM WORDSWORTH & H. H. TURNER**

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**English School-Classics**

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*WORDSWORTH'S EXCURSION*

*ENGLISH SCHOOL-CLASSICS*

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WORDSWORTH'S EXCURSION

**The Wanderer**

*EDITED, WITH LIFE, INTRODUCTION, AND NOTES*

BY

H. H. TURNER

OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

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## L I F E.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH was born in April, 1770, at Cockermouth, on the river Derwent, in Cumberland. The Wordsworths were a family of no great note, but had long held a respectable position, and the father of the poet was a solicitor, and acted as agent to Lord Lonsdale. He had five children, of whom William was the second, and his only sister, Dorothy, the third.

By the banks of Derwent the future poet passed his early childhood. Even then the mountain stream "sent a voice that flowed along his dreams," and in its waters, when only five years old, he tells us, he made "one long bathing of a summer's day."

The wise care of his mother, whom Wordsworth always lovingly remembered, made these pleasant years of infancy full of profit to him. His passionate and earnest nature showed, she tells us, some signs of sullenness, which vanished, however, under her wise training, and which have as their sole counterpart the complete lack of humour which marked his character.

His mother died when he was eight years old, and the following year he was sent, with his elder brother John, to school at Hawkshead, a market village near the lake of Esthwaite.

The one fact of Wordsworth's school-time is that it was only a continuation of his childish freedom. It is the first index of a life singular throughout for its unconven-



tionality, and for the steady and successful pursuit of its own best good. The life of an English schoolboy of the upper and middle classes in Wordsworth's time was a very hard one; and when we remember what Coleridge went through at Christ's Hospital, and Shelley,\* years later, at Brentford and Eton, it seems indeed fortunate that the genius of Wordsworth was not exposed to influences it would hardly have survived.

Wordsworth's school days, although very uneventful, were in many ways the most important season of his life. It was the seed-time of his poetic manhood. In the first and second books of the *Prelude* we can still see much of it, and trace how much of what is most beautiful in his after poems is woven from these earlier threads.

Although the death of his father, when Wordsworth was fourteen, had left the family straitened for money, he was nevertheless sent in his eighteenth year (1787) from Hawkshead to St. John's, Cambridge. His knowledge both of Latin and mathematics was above the average, but he never gave serious thought to scholastic success. The change from Cumberland mountains to Cambridge flats, from rustic solitude to the social life of a University, Wordsworth found to be not without its pleasures. He had never, even in boyhood, been reserved or hypochondriacal, and now mixed freely with other men. Beside "the pleasant mill of Trumpington," the haunt of the ancient poet, he read his favourites, Chaucer and Spenser. His long vacations he spent in visits to friends, and in walks in Wales and on the Continent. It was on a visit about this time that he first met his cousin, Mary Hutchinson, his future wife; and his last "Long" was spent in a three months' walk through Switzerland and Italy, which had the effect of deepening his interest in modern politics. This, which may be called the second

\* Cf. the Introduction to the *Revolt of Islam*.

epoch in Wordsworth's life, had quickly slipped away. In the January of 1789 he took a common degree, and left Cambridge for London.

To his friends his university life had been disappointing. It had done nothing to raise either his name or fortunes. To himself it had brought widened human sympathies, healthy social instincts, and a manly interest in public events.

And rarely has the political world been so well worth watching as at this time. The independence of the United States had been recognized in 1784, and the Republic was in the hopeful flush of infancy. The spirit of republicanism was strong in the Netherlands, and the Revolution imminent in France. In England the talents of Pitt, Fox, Sheridan, and Burke were in their full splendour; and the year in which Wordsworth left Cambridge is memorable for the impeachment of Warren Hastings for misgovernment in India.

On leaving Cambridge, Wordsworth spent some time in London. His future lay in uncertainty; and although confident in the possession of unusual powers, he felt the difficulty of even earning a living. Any immediate decision was, however, postponed to another Continental tour.

In 1791 we find him once more abroad—at Paris, at Orleans, at Blois. France was in a ferment, and Wordsworth threw himself with all his soul into the passionate longing for political freedom which was the golden dream of the time. The dawn of the French Revolution was hailed with enthusiasm by almost all the more ardent and sensitive minds.

“When France in wrath her giant limbs upreared,  
And with that oath which smote air, earth, and sea,  
Stamped her strong foot, and said she would be free.”\*

\* S. T. Coleridge.

His own feelings Wordsworth has described in a poem entitled *The French Revolution, as it appeared to Enthusiasts at its commencement*.

" Not favoured spots alone, but the whole earth  
The beauty wore of promise ; the inert  
Were roused, and lively natures rapt away."

In 1792 he was again in Paris. The September massacre had taken place some weeks, and the city was not so safe a dwelling-place as in the preceding year, which had witnessed the funeral of Mirabeau, "the people's friend," the Serment Civique, and the royal arrest at Varennes. More formidable matters were on foot than the "insurrection of women" of 1789, and towards the close of the year Wordsworth was recalled by his friends from his dangerous position.

The failure of the hopes of social regeneration with which he had greeted the fall of the Bastille was to Wordsworth the deepest sorrow he had ever known. It filled him with shame, almost with despair. He has left in the history of the "Solitary" a picture of his own hopes and disappointment—

—" Liberty,

I worshipped thee, and found thee but a shade." \*

Nor was he alone in these bitter feelings. They were fully shared by many Englishmen, among whom we may mention Robert Southey and S. T. Coleridge, both destined to be his friends for life.

On his return to England Wordsworth reached the real crisis of his life. He was exposed to a double danger, either of letting his poetic nature be smothered in attempts to solve social and philosophical problems, or, secondly, of being forced by the urgency of what Coleridge called "the bread and cheese question," to sell himself to

\* Cf. *Excursion*, bk. ii. l. 692-763.