

**WORDSWORTH'S
LITERARY
CRITICISM**

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Wordsworth's literary criticism by Nowell C. Smith

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EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION

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HENRY FROWDE

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INTRODUCTION

WORDSWORTH did not write much prose, but he wrote enough to make one inquire why he did not write more. He lived to be eighty, in full possession at least of those faculties which are requisite for producing ephemeral literature. Wholly uninterested in the gossip, the personal and party trivialities, which almost exhaust the definition of politics for the majority of those who read or write the newspapers, he nevertheless took a keen interest in the larger aspects of public affairs, in the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the Abolition of Slavery, Catholic Emancipation, Parliamentary Reform, the Poor Law, Factories, Education. He held his views strongly, and had the didactic spirit. He was no student of philosophical writers, nor trained in philosophical method; but the bent of his mind was philosophical. Facts, whether in history or within the scope of his personal experience, were of interest to him solely so far as they suggested or illustrated principles: but he had the poet's distinctive habit of embodying principles in concrete facts. He was, as his poems show, and as he stated in no ambiguous terms, before all things desirous of teaching those principles which he held himself.

Here, then, is one answer to our inquiry, which

may at first sight seem sufficient. His poetry is his teaching. His life was devoted to the cultivation and the use of this great gift, of which he was as seriously and reverentially conscious as a prophet or a saint may be of his mission. And this would be a sufficient answer, if, like Tennyson, he had written practically no prose, or had died young, like Keats. But his output in prose, though small, is not inconsiderable. As a young man, filled with the hopes engendered by the beginning of the French Revolution, he published an open letter to Bishop Watson of Llandaff, in defence of republican principles (1793). In 1798 appeared the *Lyrical Ballads*, with its short preface or Advertisement, which is the first of the writings belonging to the class of literary criticism, which form the contents of the present volume. The second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* with a long preface appeared in 1800, and to the third edition in 1802 was added an Appendix on Poetic Diction. In 1808-9 the Convention of Cintra evoked a political pamphlet, comparable to the great pamphlets of Burke in length, in earnestness, in intellectual grasp, even at times in eloquence, though far inferior in arrangement, fluency, and the mastery which comes from experience. In the same year Wordsworth contributed a moral essay to *The Friend*, dealing with the question, raised by an article of 'Christopher North,' signed 'Mathetes,' of the spiritual and intellectual dangers which beset ardent and intelligent youth on its entrance into the world

of manhood. In the following year (1810) he wrote an introduction to a book of views of the scenery of the English Lakes, which was subsequently enlarged and published separately. This is not a guide-book in the complete modern sense; but it is not merely the best guide to the appreciation of the scenery which it describes, and the source of much that is best in more recent guide-books, but the best account in existence of the principles, if we may speak so, of mountainous landscape¹. In 1810 also Wordsworth wrote an essay in three parts, *On Epitaphs*, of which the first part appeared in *The Friend*, and the others would have appeared if *The Friend* had not come to a premature end. In 1811 he wrote, in a form of a letter to the author, a critique on Captain Pasley's *Military Policy and Institutions of the British Empire*, with reference to the Napoleonic War. This was first published in the *Memoirs* edited by his nephew, Christopher Wordsworth, after his death. In 1814 and 1815 he added to his critical writings by the preface to *The Excursion*, and that to the two volumes of collected *Poems*², together with a supplementary essay on the relation between

¹ In saying this I do not forget Ruskin, who has written in his *Modern Painters* about mountains with a far more gorgeous and elaborate eloquence than Wordsworth could have used. But the very splendour of Ruskin's style, as well as his lack of a firm control over his emotions, makes him less of a guide or philosopher than of a prophet or inspirer of noble passions.

² A third volume was added to this edition in 1820 by the republication in one volume of various poems published between that date and 1815.

the merits of poems and their popularity, immediate and remote. The notes to *The River Duddon*, published in 1820, contained a memoir of the Rev. Robert Walker ('Wonderful Walker'), which deserves a substantive place among Wordsworth's prose works as one of the most beautiful pieces of biography in the language. In 1816 he wrote his remarkable *Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns*, which, though abundantly illustrated by his poems, may be commended to those who, on a superficial view, are inclined to subscribe to the judgement, so comforting to the self-respect of many dabblers in literature, that Wordsworth was something of a prig. Two years later he issued two *Addresses to the Freeholders of Westmorland*, in support of the Government and in opposition to the candidature of Mr. (afterwards Lord Chancellor) Brougham. His next prose writing of a public character, though it was not published till after his death, was a long letter to Bishop Blomfield against the Catholic Relief Bill of 1829. In 1835 he wrote a Postscript to his poems, in which he dealt with the Poor Law, with joint-stock companies, and with the question of the supply of clergy to meet the vast increments of population, especially in the north of England. In 1836 he laid the foundation-stone of new schools at Bowness, and gave an address upon education, of which he subsequently wrote a version for the local press. In 1838 he published a letter in the *Kendal Mercury* in answer to a petition against Sergeant

Talfourd's 'Copyright Bill,' a bill in the inception of which he took a considerable part. Finally in 1844, in his seventy-fifth year, he wrote two letters to the *Morning Post*, protesting against the proposal to bring a railway from Kendal to Penrith through the heart of the Lake Country. To this list ought perhaps to be added the Notes to his own poems, especially those dictated late in life to Miss Fenwick, and some of the letters, written to individuals, but, like those to Bishop Blomfield and Captain Pasley, evoked not by private occasions but by public affairs, such as his correspondence with Sergeant Talfourd and others on Copyright.

Wordsworth's correspondence does, in fact, partake largely of the character of essay-writing. No doubt when the long-hoped-for edition of his *Letters* appears, we shall find the proportion of familiar letters increased. But he was, as he often tells us, no letter-writer by predilection: consequently he does not, like Lamb or Cowper, spin his webs spontaneously out of nothing; unless his letter is an answer due to his correspondent, it is usually written with the definite purpose of discussing some question either of public moment or of literary criticism. And the same fact which made him a reluctant letter-writer accounts, perhaps as much as his self-devotion to poetry, for the comparative paucity of his prose works. The physical operation of writing was hateful to him. A letter to Sir George Beaumont, written in his thirty-fourth year,

reads almost like one of Coleridge in its record of the poet's delay in writing to acknowledge the munificent gift which was its occasion. In the course of it he writes: 'I do not know from what cause it is, but during the last three years I have never had a pen in my hand for five minutes, before my whole frame becomes one bundle of uneasiness; a perspiration starts out all over me, and my chest is oppressed in a manner which I cannot describe. This is a sad weakness; for I am sure, though it is chiefly owing to the state of my body, that by exertion of mind I might in part control it' (*Memoirs*, vol. i, p. 262). Similarly, in his forty-first year, to Captain Pasley: 'I am ashamed to say, that I write so few letters, and employ my pen so little in any way, that I feel both a lack of words (such words, I mean, as I wish for) and of mechanical skill, extremely discouraging to me' (*Memoirs*, i. 407). Again in 1831, during the discussions of the Reform Bill, in which Wordsworth took a great and painfully apprehensive interest, he was urged by his friends, in the words of his biographer, 'to exercise those powers, in writing on public affairs, which he had displayed twenty years before, in his *Essay on the Convention of Cintra*.' He would evidently have been only too glad to accede to this request; but he was now in his sixty-second year, and felt unequal to the task. He adds: 'There is yet another obstacle: I am no ready master of prose-writing, having been little practised in the art.'