

10-1992

Wordsworth and the Recovery of Hope

Michael Fischer

Trinity University, mfischer@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/eng_faculty



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Fischer, M. (1992). Wordsworth and the Recovery of Hope. *Philosophy and Literature*, 16, 292-303. doi: 10.1353/phl.1992.0001

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

MICHAEL FISCHER

WORDSWORTH AND THE RECOVERY OF HOPE

A CRISIS DOMINATES Book Eleventh of *The Prelude* (1850 edition),
where Wordsworth recalls

Dragging all precepts, judgments, maxims, creeds,
Like culprits to the bar; calling the mind,
Suspiciously, to establish in plain day
Her titles and her honours; now believing,
Now disbelieving; endlessly perplexed
With impulse, motive, right and wrong, the ground
Of obligation, what the rule and whence
The sanction; till, demanding formal *proof*,
And seeking it in every thing, I lost
All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,
Sick, wearied out with contrarities,
Yielded up moral questions in despair.

This, Wordsworth concludes,

was the crisis of that strong disease,
This the soul's last and lowest ebb; I drooped,
Deeming our blessed reason of least use
Where wanted most. . . .

(ll. 294–310)¹

Wordsworth's disappointment with reason exacerbates his disillusionment with the French Revolution, which has become for him a spectacle of woe, oppressing him

With sorrow, disappointment, vexing thoughts,
 Confusion of the judgment, zeal decayed,
 And, lastly, utter loss of hope itself
 And things to hope for.

(Book Twelfth, ll. 4–7)

At least since M. H. Abrams's wide-ranging 1963 essay "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age," critics have agreed that Wordsworth wants in *The Prelude* "to reconstitute the grounds of hope," as Abrams puts it, after the failure of the French Revolution has plunged him into despair. But exactly what Wordsworth recovers—what he now feels entitled to hope for—remains controversial. Abrams pictures Wordsworth regaining his composure, his grace under historical pressure, by turning from "overt political action" to "spiritual quietism."² "Blest in thoughts that are their own perfection and reward," Wordsworth now "seeks for no trophies, struggles for no spoils" (Book Sixth, ll. 610–12) but cultivates a seemingly imperturbable "wise passiveness." He still expects the best: mankind's deliverance from oppression is "surely yet to come," presumably aided by his writing. But he is prepared for the worst:

Though men return to servitude as fast
 As the tide ebbs, to ignominy and shame
 By nations sink together, we shall still
 Find solace. . . .

(Book Fourteenth, ll. 435–38)

Political developments cannot jeopardize his equanimity because it comes from within. He has found "freedom in himself" (Book Fourteenth, l. 131).

Recent commentators on Wordsworth have accepted this account—only to hold it against him. Jerome J. McGann's influential comments on "Tintern Abbey" in *The Romantic Ideology* also fit *The Prelude*. "What appears to be an immense gain"—the mind's triumph over its times—"is in reality the deepest and most piteous loss": "Between 1793 and 1798 Wordsworth lost the world merely to gain his own immortal soul."³ From this point of view, Wordsworth gives up his capacity to be affected by the world because his sensitivity has brought up so much pain. His composure results not from his transcendence of history but from his refusal to let its turmoil matter too much. As McGann observes, "had he merely 'yielded up moral questions in despair' . . . his case would

have been pitiful.”⁴ Instead, his case is tragic because he thinks that he is dealing with these questions—that he is carrying out his responsibilities—when in fact he is evading them. Wordsworth cannot have it both ways: his equanimity and optimism belie his claim still to take human misery seriously. McGann emphasizes the cost of a solace that can coexist with nations’ returning to servitude, ignominy, and shame. Wordsworth’s situation “is a very emblem of the tragedy of his epoch, for in that conceptualization Wordsworth imprisoned his true voice of feeling within the bastille of his consciousness. Wordsworth made a solitude and he called it peace.”⁵ Wordsworth purchases his cheerful confidence by selling off, or out, his capacity to care.

McGann raises crucial questions left dangling in Abrams’s account. How can we reconcile Wordsworth’s vaunted solace with his claim still to be concerned about history? What is “militant” about Wordsworth’s “quietism” if not its vigilant warding off of the outside world?⁶ Focusing on the moment in *The Prelude* that I cite at the outset, I want to approach these questions by arguing that Wordsworth recovers exactly what McGann feels he gives up. A wise, unruffled passiveness is not Wordsworth’s achievement or his goal. He learns not to get over his disgust with history but to maintain it.

In the passage from Book Eleventh of *The Prelude* that I started out discussing, Wordsworth most wants from reason an answer to the painful failure of the French Revolution. Initially, when “events brought less encouragement” (ll. 194–95) to supporters of the revolution, Wordsworth says he “adhered more firmly” (l. 217) to the French cause. Reading William Godwin’s *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* vindicated his steadfastness. Rightly or wrongly, Wordsworth used Godwin “to abstract the hopes of man / Out of his feelings, to be fixed thenceforth / For ever in a purer element” (ll. 225–27). Hope, in other words, was no longer to be a mere sentiment or wish subject to disappointment but a certainty grounded in the inevitable triumph of reason. The discouraging events in France thus could be written off as the “infirmities [the 1805 edition reads “accidents”] of nature, time and place” that were only momentarily delaying the progress that would occur when reason exerted its “mastery” (l. 238).

At first, then, despite the bad news from France, Wordsworth was not so much hopeless as impatient. He still wanted man to start “out of his earthly, worm-like state / And spread abroad the wings of Liberty” (ll. 253–54)—the sooner the better. Let down by the French, Wordsworth decided to take matters into his own hands by training his reason

on the depressing events in France, thereby hoping to speed up or at least to understand the stalled revolution. "I took the knife in hand"—his metaphor for rationally analyzing the failed revolution—

And, stopping not at parts less sensitive,
 Endeavoured with my best of skill to probe
 The living body of society
 Even to the heart.

(ll. 872–76, 1805 ed.)

But dissecting society in this way, coldly probing its strengths and weaknesses, murders the very hope Wordsworth was trying to keep alive and leads to the despairing passage I cited at the outset.

Before trying to figure out why his reliance on reason backfired, Wordsworth mentions his wish one day to redescribe his crisis in "some dramatic tale" (l. 283). This apparently thrown away comment alerts us to the similarities between Wordsworth and some tragic heroes. Wordsworth's violence ("I took the knife in hand"), his suspiciousness ("calling the mind, / Suspiciously, to establish in plain day / Her titles and her honours"), his turmoil ("now believing, / Now disbelieving"), his insistence on unimpeachable evidence ("till, demanding formal *proof*, / And seeking it in every thing"), his susceptibility to seductive theories like Godwin's ("wild theories were afloat, / To whose pretensions, sedulously urged, / I had but lent a careless ear"), his wish to see himself above the frailties of others, like a judge ("dragging all precepts, judgments, maxims, creeds, / Like culprits to the bar") or like a surgeon exempt from the disease he is analyzing ("I summoned my best skill, and toiled, intent / To anatomise the frame of social life")—all of these qualities bring to mind Othello, to name only one of Shakespeare's heroes that he resembles. In his crisis, Wordsworth even reaches a conclusion that Iago could endorse:

"The lordly attributes
 Of will and choice," I bitterly exclaimed,
 "What are they but a mockery of a Being
 Who hath in no concerns of his a test
 Of good and evil; knows not what to fear
 Or hope for, what to covet or to shun;
 And who, if those could be discerned, would yet
 Be little profited, would see, and ask
 Where is the obligation to enforce?"

And, to acknowledged law rebellious, still
 As selfish passion urged, would act amiss;
 The dupe of folly, or the slave of crime."

(ll. 309–20)

Virtue may not be worth only a fig here, but neither is it the solid ground that Wordsworth sought.

In this dark view of human nature, even if we had a "test of good and evil"—which we don't—we would still defy it by questioning our obligation to enforce or heed its dictates. Uncertainty is our problem (we know "not what to fear, or hope for, what to covet or to shun"), self-deception and paralysis our fate (we languish as "the dupe of folly, or the slave of crime"). Wordsworth the confident surgeon has caught the disease he thought he could cure.

McGann calls Wordsworth pitiful at this point but I would call him tragic because like a tragic hero, he excites fear as well as pity: pity, because his collapse is brought about (as McGann would concede) by "unmerited misfortune" and not by some "vice or depravity"; fear, because his fall seems "the misfortune of a man like ourselves," someone "not eminently good and just" but not horribly depraved, either.⁷ By calling his crisis a "strong disease," Wordsworth makes our judging it morally feel inappropriate. Like an illness, Wordsworth's yielding up moral questions in despair presumably can strike anyone, an Othello as well as an Iago.

This disease resembles the skepticism that troubles David Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature* and other writings. Both Wordsworth's disease and Hume's skepticism result from a scrupulous commitment to reason (much as Wordsworth insists on formal proof, Hume advises us to commit to the flames any volume that defies "experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence"); both men discover that reason is helpless to underwrite values; and both initially succumb to paralysis and depression (Hume laments his "melancholy and delirium" and Wordsworth feels "bewildered" and "depressed"). Hume goes on to call skepticism "a malady which can never be radically cured," presumably because reason can never find the objective ground of obligation that the skeptic seeks. But, according to Hume, if we cannot be cured of our skepticism, we can be diverted from it. It is in pursuit of such distraction that Hume goes off to dine, play backgammon, converse, and be merry with his friends, so that after "three or four hour's amusement" when he returns to his speculations, they "appear so cold, and

strain'd, and ridiculous, that [he] cannot find in [his] heart to enter into them any further."

Wordsworth is as interested as Hume or, for that matter, Wittgenstein in finding something that will let him stop doing philosophy when he wants (cf. *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 133). But Wordsworth implicitly rejects Hume's way out of skepticism when, after bitterly concluding that man is "the dupe of folly, or the slave of crime," he says

Depressed, bewildered thus, I did not walk
 With scoffers, seeking light and gay revenge
 From indiscriminate laughter, nor sate down
 In reconciliation with an utter waste
 Of intellect. . . .

(ll. 321–25)⁸

I wouldn't say that this is a fair reading of what Hume is doing when he goes out of his study to play backgammon and so on but it is a typically Romantic critique of social life as merely distracting or diverting—another form of the disease it would remedy, not its cure. Coleridge makes a similar point when he has the Ancient Mariner detain his listener from what turns out to be the superficial conviviality of a wedding festival and Emerson touches on a comparable dissatisfaction with public life when he notes in his *Journals* that "in my study my faith is perfect. It breaks, scatters, becomes confounded in converse with men. Hume doubted in his study & believed in the world."⁹

Unable to believe in the world, or unwilling to suspend their disbelief, all these Romantic writers want something more than diversion from skepticism. Wordsworth finds it not in the public world but in personal relationships with his sister and others that, he says, "maintained for me a saving intercourse / With my true self" (ll. 341–42). Some readers are very hard on Wordsworth for using Dorothy in "Tintern Abbey" as a photograph of his own self or using her here in *The Prelude* as a reminder of who he still is or can be. Although I wouldn't want to underrate Wordsworth's egotism, at least in *The Prelude* we hear from Dorothy (albeit indirectly). She changes from a silent observer "in whose sight / Those days [the days of his crisis] were passed" (ll. 335–36) to an outspoken judge "speaking in a voice / Of sudden admonition" (ll. 336–37). "Admonition" implies censure that Wordsworth feels he deserves. I hear her admonishing Wordsworth for evading the obligations to others that she is carrying out. Instead of demanding formal proof

of her responsibilities (as he did), she acts on them, helping Wordsworth see his own irresponsibility. It is as if Wordsworth at some level wanted to lose “all feeling of conviction” because of the pain that commitment and involvement had brought him in France. The uselessness of reason (in sanctioning values) was useful to him in letting him yield up the moral questions that he wanted to defer. In any case, “by all varieties of human love / Assisted,” Wordsworth recovers his outrage, which he expresses in the angry lines that follow on Napoleon’s summoning a Pope to crown him Emperor (ll. 355ff)—lines to which I will return.

I don’t want to idealize (really, patronize) Dorothy by exempting her from the questioning that she checks in William. As Susan Wolfson has pointed out in “Individual in Community: Dorothy Wordsworth in Conversation with William,” Dorothy had her own doubts but these involve wondering whether she can serve others, not whether she should.¹⁰ Whereas William asks what he owes others, Dorothy fears being a burden to them, a possibility that rarely crosses the mind of her more confident, or self-absorbed, brother.

In harping on the apparent uselessness of reason, I also do not want to suggest that Wordsworth leaves no room for rational analysis. Immediately after saying that he rejected walking with scoffers and seeking revenge from indiscriminate laughter, he notes that he

. . . turned to abstract science, and there sought
 Work for the reasoning faculty enthroned
 Where the disturbances of space and time—
 Whether in matter’s various properties
 Inherent, or from human will and power
 Derived—find no admission.

(ll. 328–33)

This turn to abstract science can seem like a sop to reason, as if Wordsworth were seeking work for the reasoning faculty in order to divert it from suspiciously interrogating his values. Rechanneling the energy of reason would then keep Wordsworth’s values intact—much as a parent gives a toddler something else to hammer on in order to protect the dining room table. But Wordsworth says that he took up abstract science not to safeguard his threatened commitments but to satisfy his love of “pains-taking thoughts, and truth, their dear reward” (l. 327). I see no reason for not taking him at his word. Science is not an innocuous distraction here but a valuable activity in its own right.

Instead of being saved by science or distracted by social life, Words-

worth is admonished by Dorothy and others to acknowledge the reality of those commitments he had questioned (earlier, in his crisis, he felt that human beings were terminally “rebellious” even “to acknowledged law” [l. 318]). This acknowledgment is more than a mere diversion from skepticism. Wordsworth isn’t simply forgetting the groundlessness of his commitments (say in a good game of backgammon) but rediscovering, or admitting, their force. Although more than a diversion, this admission is still less than a cure, if by a cure we mean something that allows him to get over his questioning once and for all. He follows up on what he has learned from Dorothy and others by writing poetry that celebrates what he calls the “acts of daily life” (Book Fourteenth, l. 121) and “the actual world of our familiar days” (Book Thirteenth, l. 357). As already seen, the everyday acts of others helped him through the crisis I have been describing. Wordsworth, however, is not simply commemorating their importance the way we might recall a past favor from a friend. Instead, he is trying to keep alive what he variously terms their “power,” “character,” or “tone.” He needs this power to offset the skeptical questioning that still tempts him. In his best poetry he is constantly catching himself once again giving up moral questions in despair—catching himself by holding onto those “little, nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness and of love” that have made up the “best portion of [his] life” (as he puts it in “Tintern Abbey”).

In Wordsworth, vulnerability to skepticism and appreciation of everyday acts and words go hand in hand. When Wordsworth (for whatever reason) in his later poetry seeks “repose and hope among eternal [rather than diurnal] things,” he no longer feels, or admits feeling, threatened by skepticism. This happens most famously in *The Excursion*, which I have just quoted. In Book Fourth of that poem, when the Wanderer asks “And what are things eternal?” (l. 66), his question lacks urgency because he already knows the answer. He has found his answer, moreover, by looking “above our human region” (l. 82). Deaf to the sound of his own poetry (and to so much else), Wordsworth pictures the Wanderer “stedfastly . . . answering the question which himself had asked” (ll. 67–68) but most readers hear him not so much steadfastly talking as droning on and on, his mind already made up, like a lecturer who has taught the same course too many times. Instead of yielding up moral questions in despair, the Wanderer yields them up to a higher authority (“Thou, dread source, / Prime, self-existing cause and end of all” [ll. 79–80]) and consequently remains indifferent to “the storms of circumstance” (l. 71). The tedium of *The Excursion* throws into relief

the energy of Wordsworth's earlier poetry, which derives from his constantly struggling against the temptation of skepticism by taking an interest in the ordinary world that skepticism threatens.

I have been claiming for Wordsworth what Stanley Cavell (in "On Makavejev on Bergman") has claimed for a much more recent artist, the Yugoslavian filmmaker Dušan Makavejev. According to Cavell, Makavejev holds that we can "aestheticize" the world or "taste" it. Aestheticizing the world means distancing ourselves from it, "say by converting all our experience into a mode of viewing."¹¹ Along similar lines, in Book Twelfth of *The Prelude* Wordsworth admits that during the crisis brought on by the failure of the Revolution, the "despotic" "bodily eye . . . gained / Such strength in *me* as often held my mind / In absolute dominion" (ll. 129–31). Merely viewing the world becomes a way of keeping it at bay and thereby avoiding its claim on us.¹² Like spectators at an accident, we watch rather than act.

"Tasting" the world, by contrast, means ingesting it, letting it enter our lives. Cavell notes cryptically that we must "learn to taste again, so that we can learn to maintain our disgust more easily than we learn to maintain what disgusts us."¹³ I take him to be saying that because we cannot know in advance what the world will taste like, or perhaps because of a bitter experience, we are tempted to distance ourselves from the world, perhaps by aestheticizing it. Staring at the world shields us from its possible dangers but maintains (as opposed to changes) what disgusts us, or what should disgust us. McGann faults Wordsworth for taking this kind of self-protective stance after the French Revolution soured him on political action. I have been suggesting that Wordsworth struggles against this stance along lines again suggested by Cavell. According to Cavell, learning to taste the world requires "a transformation of the five senses, a new perspective, a new aesthetics."¹⁴ Wordsworth similarly goes on to observe how nature combatted the "tyranny" of the eye by "summoning all the senses each / To counteract the other . . ." (Book Twelfth, ll. 135–36). "By all varieties of human love / Assisted," Wordsworth, in short, learned to maintain rather than yield up his disgust: hence his comparing the French reversion to tyranny to a "dog / Returning to his vomit" (ll. 363–64)—a revolting image if there ever was one.

If Wordsworth learns to taste the world again, Dorothy is one of his teachers. Paralyzed by that strong disease, he needs her to feed him. Her parental role here explains her shifting tone—now admonishing

him, now encouraging him (“She whispered still that brightness would return” [l. 345]), all in an effort to pull him out of his illness. Her carrot/stick approach not only recalls everyday parenting but brings to mind Wordsworth’s early education “by beauty and by fear” (Book First, l. 302). In his crisis, he had recoiled from uncertainty (longing to ground hope in the inevitable triumph of reason); disparaged human will and choice (“What are they but a mockery of a being / Who hath in no concerns of his a test / Of good and evil” [ll. 311–13]); and, when his “thoughts were turned to human kind,” he had “scorned” or feigned “indifference” (ll. 247–48). Now, with Dorothy, he is learning to taste the world again, which means learning once more to accept risk, make choices, and acknowledge his hunger for change.¹⁵

There remains the problem of dealing with this hunger, or acting on it, and not succumbing to nihilism or despair. In different ways Abrams and McGann suggest that writing solves the problem of achieving change for Wordsworth. In Abrams, writing for Wordsworth achieves change. Poetry fulfills the promise that the revolution betrayed; it brings about an “egalitarian revolution of the spirit,” one reason why Wordsworth’s quietism deserves to be called “militant.”¹⁶ In McGann, poetry for Wordsworth supposedly renders changes unnecessary, if still desirable, by permitting the mind to triumph not just over its times but over time.

I think that Wordsworth (at least in *The Prelude*) is much less confident about the capacity of poetry to promote change or defuse its urgency. At the conclusion of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth claims that he and Coleridge will be

Rich in true happiness if allowed to be
 Faithful alike in forwarding a day
 Of firmer trust, joint labourers in the work
 (Should Providence such grace to us vouchsafe)
 Of their deliverance, surely yet to come.

(Book Fourteenth, ll. 441–45)

Abrams encourages us to take this conclusion at face value, as evidence that Wordsworth (rightly) thinks his own writing will realize the hope political revolution has betrayed. I sense something much more tentative, taking my cue from a remark of Jacques Derrida’s: “For my part, wherever and whenever I hear the words ‘it’s true,’ ‘it’s false,’ ‘it’s evident,’ ‘evidently this or that,’ or ‘in a fairly obvious way,’ I become suspicious.

This is especially so when an adverb, apparently redundant, is used to reinforce the declaration. Like a warning light, it signals an uneasiness that demands to be followed up."¹⁷ Along with the cautious "if allowed to be" (l. 439), Wordsworth's "surely yet to come" (l. 443) signals an uneasiness with the possibility of achieving change as well as with his own role as a writer working for mankind's deliverance. He is not sure change will occur or that he will be entitled to take any credit for it if (not when) it comes.

Poetry—more exactly, *The Prelude*—thus does not so much solve the problem of achieving change as keep it alive. As we have seen, achieving change ceases to be a problem for Wordsworth when he thinks progress is inevitable or when he fears progress is impossible (in which case languishing as "the dupe of folly, or the slave of crime" is not so much our problem as our fate). When he feels that change is imminent, he grows impatient. When he fears change is impossible, he gives up. Writing *The Prelude* combats both feelings in Wordsworth—unjustified optimism as well as unearned despair.

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

1. Except where otherwise noted, all references to *The Prelude* are to Book Eleventh, 1850 edition. My text is *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979).
2. M. H. Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 65.
3. Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 88.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
6. "Militant quietism" is Abrams's description of Wordsworth's achievement. *The Correspondent Breeze*, pp. 73–74.
7. I quote from Aristotle's *Poetics*, chap. 13.
8. Richard Eldridge analyzes this passage along similar lines in *On Moral Personhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 130.
9. Quoted in John Michael, *Emerson and Skepticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 33.

10. Susan J. Wolfson, "Individual in Community: Dorothy Wordsworth in Conversation with William," *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 139–66.
11. Stanley Cavell, *Themes Out of School* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), p. 137.
12. This is akin to what Cavell calls theatricalizing the world, which I discuss in my *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), chap. 4.
13. Cavell, *Themes Out of School*, p. 137.
14. Ibid.
15. Comparable significance is attached to eating in the film *It Happened One Night*, as discussed by Cavell in *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981). Here one character coaxes another into eating a carrot and love gets defined "as the willingness to admit the satisfaction of hunger" (p. 96). It follows that anorexia, or the refusal to eat, "appears as something between a fear of being polluted or poisoned, a terror of trusting, and a wish not to have a body" (*Themes Out of School*, p. 135). While I realize that Wordsworth is not literally starving himself, a kind of emotional or spiritual anorexia overtakes him in the crisis that I have been analyzing. The "wish not to have a body" shows up in his being "inflamed with thirst / Of a secure intelligence, and sick / Of other longing" (ll. 248–50).
16. Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze*, pp. 73–74.
17. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 41.