

### WORDSWORTH, THE ROMANTICIST

Asked whether Wordsworth was a Realist or Romanticist one is tempted, after a cursory review of his works, to reply that he was both Realist and Romanticist. But after a more intense and critical survey of his poems the former term tends to fade or rather be absorbed by the latter. That is, while there are qualities or features in Wordsworth's works that definitely smack of Realism, they are, I believe, subservient to, or the extreme form of his main or most characteristic qualities, which are Romanticist. An analysis of the symptoms of both of these trends and a discussion of their relations (if any) will demonstrate the truth of this statement.

Even as a boy Wordsworth was an unruly spirit, and at that an unruly spirit in an atmosphere that did not tolerate too much of the radical (he lived much with old people, particularly during his school days.) And, while not a pauper, he felt the pinch of poverty at least to a slight degree and experienced the dullness and prosaicness of a life ill-furnished with luxury. This was accentuated by the early loss of a loving mother. The release of such a freedom loving soul as Wordsworth from the confinement of such an environment was the proper setting for radicalism or some form of revolution. And, having at about the middle of his teens an opportunity to travel on the continent, Wordsworth responded in just such a manner. Returning home he exhibited profound sympathy for the French Revolutionaries in an atmosphere partial to rather opposite sentiment. This embracing of liberalism, for such it was, might have served as a warning against a like reaction by Wordsworth when he entered the field of literature. For, so far as liberalism was a casting aside of ancient conventions and restrictions, Romanticism was liberalism in literature. Wordsworth, again submitting to the inevitable laws of logic, led such a reaction and caused himself to be known to posterity as the first and greatest Romanticist in English literature.

Wordsworth's most prominent characteristic as a Romanticist, according to many writers, is that, like most of the other great Romanticists, he was one of the "sons of Rousseau". He had the same faith in "the goodness of nature" and in "the excellence of the child" and the same preference for the cultivation of the senses as the guiding power of man rather than the cultivation of the intellect. These points are all illustrated in *Tintern Abbey* alone. To adopt such standards in the face of the Classicist extreme devotion to cold reason — receding though this cult was — was to adopt Romanticism in a radical and explosive way.



His next bombshell was the preface to his **Lyrical Ballads**. This deposal of the Classicist style of using "poetic diction" and finding inspiration in reason, and the substitution for it of the language of prose as much as possible in poetry with imagination as the source of inspiration was the final step in the establishing of Romanticism in England.

These are the two great facts supporting the claim to complete Romanticism of the great promoter and almost originator of that style in England. Certainly neither of these facts appears to contain anything of the Realistic element in it. But, nevertheless, some evidence for the claim of Realism in Wordsworth has been found.

To begin with, in the very heart of one of the strongest pillars supporting the claim to the contrary there has been detected evidence of Wordsworth's Realism. The preface to the **Lyrical Ballads** and the part Wordsworth had in them are, as is pointed out above, the foremost arguments brought forth to establish the Romanticist trend in his writings. But in studying the agreement he made with Coleridge on the part that each should take in the work we find that Coleridge was to treat "such subjects as were supernatural or, at any rate, romantic" while Wordsworth was to deal with "events of everyday life by preference in its humblest forms". Different students interpret this as clearly indicative of Wordsworth's Realism. "He could work with nothing imaginative", they say, "He has to get down to everyday facts; he cannot ascend above prosaic reality." True, he had to get down to "simple, everyday facts", but let us put the emphasis on the right words. It is not so important that his subject comprise facts as — argue those desirous of establishing Wordsworth's Realism — but rather that his subject be simple and everyday. Then (in this light) does the subject matter in the **Ballads** accord perfectly with his desires as expressed in the preface to them. This was one of the great innovations; he wanted simple, ordinary things as subjects for poetry—not great moral questions alone, or vague mythical adventures. Moreover, we might look further on in the agreement between the collaborators in the **Ballads**. The characters and incidents chosen by Wordsworth "were to be such as will be found in every village and its vicinity where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them or to notice them when they show themselves." Surely Wordsworth, the Romanticist is indicated here when he stipulates that his subjects will be chosen by a meditative and feeling mind. Was not feeling the crux of the Romanticist vs Classicist question? And is it not the crux of the Romanticist vs Realist question? The modern Realistic writer



may conduct the minutest study of nature, such as an ardent Romanticist might, but, unlike the Romanticist, it is with a coldly analytical mind that he does so — an **unfeeling** mind.

And, since feeling and imagination are closely related in this question, this brings us to the other and somewhat weaker point which might be indicated to illustrate Wordsworth's Realism. It is known that to imagination, which he emphasized in his preface to the **Lyrical Ballads** as being essential to the Romanticist type of writing, Wordsworth attached a meaning of his own. Hence it may be objected that his use of imagination in writing is no longer a valid note of Romanticism. But careful definition alone of Wordsworth's use of the term will almost suffice to acquit him of this charge. By imagination Wordsworth meant "the careful and accurate observation of nature", or better still "an intuition or insight into reality". This latter is best exemplified in **Michael** where neither detailed or colorful description is much in evidence but rather a type of description intuitive or almost mystical which places us right in the middle of the barren mountainous surroundings amid which the story takes place. More significant still, the description represents nature as being in the same mood as the characters. Far from abandoning Romanticist methods by using description inspired by this type of imagination, Wordsworth goes to the very heart of that style by this means. He makes nature one of the fittest subjects of poetry. But he does not stop at its external covering, he tries to go right to its soul with this intuitive imagination. That would appear to be the ultimate in Romanticism.

It is this imagination, also, with its intuitive character that should be remembered when the use of a Realistic scientific method is attributed to Wordsworth in the ballads, **Goody Blake** and **Simon Lee**. This consists, in these poems, in subjecting poetry to psychology. And, while the narrative and description are evidently minor considerations in the poems in comparison to the analysis of the characters, this may just as well be explained by the use of an intuitive imagination as by the use of an un-poetically excessive interest in psychology. If the former alternative is not a satisfactory explanation by itself of the spirit of these poems it is certainly, to my mind, a contributory factor.

So, in reviewing our brief analysis of the general literary qualities of Wordsworth we must conclude that he was almost entirely Romanticist in style and subject. This will hardly be disputed as regards his style, but some may take exception to it as regards his subject matter. Those who



do this latter will probably be thinking of how, when the excesses of the French Revolution had disillusioned him and deprived him of much of his trust in man, Wordsworth turned to such austere subjects as duty. If at all a departure from Romanticism — as indeed it appears to be — this was one more towards Classicism than towards Realism. Moreover, this initial change in attitude from radicalism culminated in the complete and diametrically opposite conservatism that he adopted at the end of his life. This final step was in opposition to the Realism which extreme liberalism had resulted in — decidedly not the action of a Realist. So with most of his literary characteristics definitely Romanticist, and many of his apparently Realistic characteristics merely the result of extreme Romanticism, we can say that Wordsworth used only the style and subjects of Romanticism — passing off the few exceptions as Realistic methods in the service of Romanticism.

— JAMES KELLY, '46

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### WITHIN THE LAW

About two o'clock on a cold, foggy night in October, 1808, a small boat pulled up, to the customs sheds at the government wharf in Brighton, England. The place was dim and deserted, except for a lone sentry pacing his weary beat farther up the wharf.

"Hi sye, Cap'n, hi thinks yer crizy" whispered one of the two men in the boat.

The other replied with a low chuckle. "Ease her in, mate, so she won't bump and alarm the sentry. Then lend a hand at lifting this bale to the dock . . . Ump . . . there she goes . . . Now cast off, and we're away to land this other bale at the Weymouth customs wharf."

As they silently slipped into the darkness, the mate continued to expostulate. "But Cap'n, takin' hall the risks, smugglin' the silk hall the way from France, hand dumpin' hit right where the tax hofficers will lay 'ands 'n hit. Blimey, Hi think yer barmy . . ."

The Captain only chuckled.

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Two weeks later, the customs officials at Weymouth were holding their quarterly auction of all goods seized from smugglers in their territory. The auctioneer came to a bale of ladies' silk lace gloves, which were open for inspection by prospective purchasers. "Now, gentlemen, how much am I offered for this bale of five thousand ladies' silk lace gloves?"