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John Wordsworth's Death and the End of *The Prelude*¹

By GEORGE SOULE

IN THE JANUARY, 2005, ISSUE OF *THE CHARLES LAMB BULLETIN*, I discussed why Wordsworth in 1804 decided to expand his autobiographical epic, *The Prelude*, to approximately the length we have now. I recalled that, although early in 1804 the poet thought he was wrapping his poem up in five books, in mid-March he changed his mind and launched himself into a poem that would expand to thirteen books. Why? I argued that he changed his mind because he realized he had a problem. Although he had already written his upbeat conclusion, the ascent of Mount Snowdon and the triumph of the poetic imagination, he had not described any really serious low points from which his narrative could ascend. Luckily, he had appropriate material at hand — his experiences in London at various times and in France during the Revolution. Wordsworth realized that including these low points was necessary to the structure of his poem, which would rise above them to a triumphal conclusion. He worked hard during 1804 to push his poem towards its conclusion.

So at the end of 1804 we left Wordsworth in a good state. He had been married for over two years to a woman he loved, Mary. Of their two children, one was a year and a half old lad, the other a baby girl of four and a half-months. His beloved sister Dorothy fit into the family group well, as did his wife's sister Sara when she visited. The poet's house, Dove Cottage (in Grasmere, Cumbria) was small, but a source of pride: he writes to brothers John and Richard that he had recently constructed 'a charming little Temple in the Orchard, a Moss hut . . . with delightful views of the Church, Lake, Valley etc., etc'.² His closest friend, Coleridge, was about to take a trip which could restore his health. Financially, Wordsworth was in good shape, for money from a legal dispute was trickling in. His brother John was about to embark on a profitable voyage to the Far East. Wordsworth knew he had had a good year as a poet. He writes to his brothers that 'I have written some pretty good verses since I saw you'.³

Exactly where was he in writing *The Prelude*? Mark Reed concludes that by the end of December, 1804, Wordsworth had pretty much completed it through Book X, that is, through his treatment of the French Revolution. He had several books to go. Yet much of that work was already done. Reed thinks that by the end of 1804 'Wordsworth had organized his plan for the main order and primary content' of the last three books.⁴ He had saved his 'spots of time' (XI 257) definition and its two wonderful illustrations. And, as I noted, he had the ascent of Snowdon passage and his reflections on it with which he had decided to end his poem.⁵ There still remained much work to do, but in

¹ This article is based on a talk originally given at The Wordsworth Winter School, Grasmere, on February 11, 2005, and then presented in revised form at the Athenaeum of the Gould Library of Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota, on May 26, 2005.

² William Wordsworth to John and Richard Wordsworth, December 27, 1804. *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth (1787-1805)*, ed. and arr. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1935) 430.

³ *Early Letters* 430.

⁴ *Thirteen-Book Prelude* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991) I, 56.

⁵ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850* – a Norton Critical Edition, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill. (New York: Norton, 1979) 520. This volume will

December, 1804, he told his patron Sir George Beaumont that he was resolved to finish it before May so that he could turn to his much delayed philosophical poem, *The Recluse*.⁶

The year 1805 began badly. On (probably) January 2, Wordsworth crossed Kirkstone Pass carrying little Johnny and contracted the inflammation of the eyes which afflicted him off and on for the rest of his life.⁷ He worked on *The Prelude* during January and early February, doing what exactly is hard to say.⁸ Then the terrible blow struck. On February 5, 1805, John Wordsworth's merchant ship *The Earl of Abergavenny* struck the Shambles, a sandbank off Portland Bill in the English Channel — and sank. On February 11, 1805, the news arrived at Dove Cottage: John had gone down with his ship.

I

What effect did John's death have on the ending of *The Prelude*? One thing is sure: it had a profound effect on the Wordsworths. One effect was financial. John had been part of a family organization. William was to write poetry; John was to make money to support them all. (Captains of merchant ships to China could make a lot of money; they had their own private cargoes and could trade in opium as well). But the main effects were emotional. After they heard the news, Wordsworth reports that both Mary and Dorothy 'are extremely ill, Dorothy especially'.⁹ The poet grieved as well. A few days later he reports that 'we have done all that could be done to console each other by weeping together'.¹⁰ It is easy to see why. Though he was a seaman, John had been particularly close to his brother and sister. William described him as having the sensibility of a poet — a 'silent poet'.¹¹ When John spent about eight months with William and Dorothy in 1800, he fitted wonderfully into Dove Cottage life. He had participated in the family pastime of naming places after each other. John discovered a way into a small clearing in the trees just southeast of Dove Cottage, and William named it 'John's Woods'. His closeness had later been given eternal expression when his initials were chiseled (along with those of William, Dorothy, Mary, Coleridge, and Sara) into The Rock of Names, once located along the road to Keswick and now to be seen behind the Wordsworth Museum beside Dove Cottage. John's plan was, after becoming rich as a sea captain, to return to Grasmere and to 'settle near us'.¹² John's death so shattered their web of affection that soon afterwards the Wordsworths began to consider leaving the building that had been the group's center, Dove Cottage. They did so a year and a half later.

henceforth be referred to as 'Norton', and all line references in the text will be to this edition. *The Five-Book Prelude*'s climax is (or was to be) the 'spots of time' passage and its illustrations. See William Wordsworth, *The Five-Book Prelude*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 145-50.

⁶ *Early Letters* (Dec. 25, 1804) 424.

⁷ Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989) 321. See also Mark Reed, *Chronology of the Middle Years* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1975) 279, and *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed. Jared Curtis (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993) 42, 49-50.

⁸ Norton 520.

⁹ *Early Letters* (Feb. 11, 1805) 446.

¹⁰ *Early Letters* (Feb. 13, 1805) 449.

¹¹ Norton 450 n6.

¹² *Early Letters* (Mar. 16, 1805) 466.

At first after John's death, the poet could not write about his brother. He told Beaumont that 'I composed much, but it is all lost except a few lines, as it came from me in such a torrent that I was unable to remember it'.¹³ It comes as no surprise that the first effect of John's death on *The Prelude* was that Wordsworth *stopped* working on it — for several months he *was incapable* of working on it.

Yet he did not forget his resolve to finish his poem before May. Indeed, on May 1, 1805, he wrote Beaumont that he needed to complete it to keep up his end of a bargain with his brother.¹⁴ He reported that in late April he had begun to write again and that he had 'added 300 lines to it in the course of the last week. Two books more will conclude it. It will be not much less than 9000 lines . . . an alarming length!' I count 8486 lines in the surviving 1805 poem, so Wordsworth must have been trying to finish his poem in the length we have it now — or possibly a little longer. He wove together the material he had saved for his conclusion and wrote more than 300 new lines to finish his work in mid-May — almost on time.

If it were not for John's death, would *The Prelude* have been longer? (The three books of 1805 are its shortest). Would Wordsworth have told more of his story? Kenneth Johnston in *The Hidden Wordsworth* argues that John's death caused the poet to wind up matters as quickly as he decently could.¹⁵ Johnston argues that even though some mentions of later events are present in the poem's closing books, Wordsworth essentially stopped telling his story with the events of 1792-1793, the point he had reached in Book X.

It is pleasant to speculate about what Wordsworth might have written about if he had kept on with the fluency he showed through 1804! We could have had *accounts* of how Dorothy helped him revive from his depression — accounts, not just thanks. We could have had a *description* of meetings with Coleridge after 1795, not just expressions of friendship and concern. I especially would like to have a poetic description of Coleridge's arrival at Racedown in June of 1797 (in prose, 'He did not keep to the high road, but leaped over a gate and bounded down a pathless field').¹⁶ Wordsworth could have written lines describing the year at Alfoxden. It would be a joy to read about his walking trip with Dorothy and Coleridge that resulted in 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan'. Perhaps Wordsworth could have described the Man from Porlock. If Wordsworth was eloquent on the horrors of London, I wonder what he would have said in verse about Goslar, the mean little German city he and Dorothy inhabited for a period in 1798 and 1799. I could go on. My point is that Wordsworth had much more experience to draw upon, even if he wanted to end his poem on the positive note of his experience on Snowdon. He probably would have had to stop no later than his Goslar months, for a version of 'Home at Grasmere', which began in 1799 with his Dove Cottage years, had already been written to begin *The Recluse*.¹⁷ If he had extended *The Prelude* as far as his Goslar interlude, it would have led neatly and chronologically into *The Recluse*.

¹³ *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, 1787-1805*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Chester L. Shaver, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) 586 (May 1, 1805).

¹⁴ Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth: A Biography — The Later Years 1803-1850* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965) 40.

¹⁵ Kenneth R. Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy* (New York: Norton, 1998) 813.

¹⁶ Gill 120: in a letter, Mary is quoting Wordsworth.

¹⁷ Gill 144.

At any rate, whether or not John's death caused Wordsworth to hurry his poem to a conclusion, when he took up his poem in late April, 1805, he had the general plan of his last three books worked out, and he knew he could wrap it up with only a little extra work. But exactly what lines were written or revised in April and May — lines John's death could be said to have influenced? To answer such questions, I consulted many authorities: the photographs of the manuscripts and their transcripts in the monumental Cornell edition, books by Mark Reed, Duncan Wu, Jonathan Wordsworth, and most importantly the Norton Critical Edition of *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*.¹⁸ To simplify matters, I decided to follow most the conclusions of the Norton editors in their essay 'The Texts'. They say that in April and May of 1805, Wordsworth probably wrote the opening of Book XI, the opening one hundred eleven and the concluding hundred lines of Book XII, and, most importantly, four passages from Book XIII. He also revised some passages that were incorporated into Books XI and XIII.¹⁹

The Prelude never mentions John by name, probably because, although the brothers were close in age and had been at school together, they had not seen much of each other as adults until John lived at Dove Cottage in 1800, a year the poem's story does not reach. But John's death appears to be alluded to twice in lines written in 1805. William must have had his 'silent poet' brother in mind when he asserts the value of humble, inarticulate men (XII 264-74).²⁰ The reference to John is unavoidable when Wordsworth addresses Coleridge as he winds up his last book. He writes that the days during which he 'prepared' these 'last and later portions' of his poem 'have been, my friend, / Times of much sorrow, of a private grief / Keen and enduring' (XIII 411-17).

II

Scholars and critics have made several other suggestions as to how John's death affected this poem. In Book XIII in lines *dating from early in 1804* Wordsworth describes his ascent of Mt. Snowdon and what he saw: clouds usurping on the real sea, the moon shining down in glory, and a gloomy and breathing blue chasm from which issued the roar of waters. He follows the description with an 88-line (XIII 77-165) *meditation* on its meaning.²¹ These wonderful lines are the climax of *The Prelude*. Wordsworth here tries to define an ultimate state of mind towards which he had been moving since childhood. He began his poetic journey in Book I by asking 'Was it for this?' (I 271) — or to rephrase: why was I given such vivid childhood experiences, so many indications I had been singled out to be a poet? Here in Book XIII he gives his answer: It *was* for this — my experiences have led me to understand and experience this ultimate adult state of mind. He wrote a lot of this material in 1804. But what concerns us here is that in 1805, after John's death, Wordsworth added to the meditation a ten-line preface (66-76) and a longer, eighteen-line coda (166-84).

¹⁸ Jonathan Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1982); Wu, ed., *The Five-Book Prelude*; Wu, *Wordsworth: An Inner Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Reed, *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Middle Years*.

¹⁹ To be specific, XI 1-41, XII 1-111, 278-378; XIII 66-74, 77-165 (revised), 166-235, 241-333, 367-427; and 428-452 (revisions). See Norton 520.

²⁰ Norton 450 n6. Duncan Wu assigns these lines to 1805 after John's death in *Wordsworth: An Inner Life* 241.

²¹ *Five-Book Prelude*, 136-140. This book gives the 1804 text.

According to the critic Jonathan Wordsworth, the question of the influence of John's death rises most forcefully in what I have called the coda, where the poet continued to try to explain and define the ultimate state of mind. The poet calls it man's highest 'faculty' and sees it as a trinity: 'love', which is the same as 'imagination', which is the same as the 'clearest insight, amplitude of mind, / And reason in her most exalted mood' (XIII 166-171). The poet then sums it up. *The Prelude* is the story of this faculty working in him from birth, through bad times, to the happy present,

Reflecting in its solemn breast
The works of man, and the face of human life;
And lastly, from its progress have we drawn
The feeling of life endless, and the one thought
By which we live, infinity and God.
(XIII 180-84, italics mine)

In his *Borders of Vision*, Jonathan Wordsworth comments that these lines show that the poet's development 'leads directly, and without hesitation, to a Christian immortality'.²² In a later chapter, Jonathan Wordsworth writes that 'in February, 1805, belief in an afterlife was to become [for the poet] a matter of urgent personal need'.²³ This same idea is found in a note to these lines in the Norton edition (of which Jonathan Wordsworth was an editor): "'Life endless" [is] a reference to the afterlife which emerges very suddenly in the context of the poem as a whole, but which is explained by Wordsworth's urgent need to believe in the survival of his brother John . . .'.²⁴

Another piece of evidence also suggests that at this time Wordsworth may have been moved by John's death to believe in an afterlife. About a month after he got the bad news, he wrote Sir George Beaumont and asked:

Why should our notions of right towards each other, and to all sentient beings within our influence differ so widely from what appears to be his [God's] notion and rule, if everything were to end here? Would it be blasphemy to say that upon the supposition of the thinking principle being destroyed by death, however inferior we may be to the great Cause and ruler of things, we have *more of love* in our Nature than he has? The thought is monstrous; and yet to get rid of it except upon the supposition of *another* and a *better world* I do not see.²⁵

Yet although here Wordsworth *seems* to argue for the afterlife, I am not sure that it is accurate to say he is embracing the idea.²⁶ An isolated argument that theoretically asserts that we *must suppose* the existence of 'another and better world' is not at all the same as saying we believe in it.

The case for Wordsworth's belief becomes even less strong when we look more closely at the coda we looked at earlier. The passage says that from the progress of his

²² *Borders* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) 34.

²³ *Borders* 96. See also 332.

²⁴ Norton 468 n6.

²⁵ *Letters . . . 1789-1805*, 556.

²⁶ See also Gill 41 and Moorman 41.

'moving soul' he has 'drawn / The feeling of life endless'. Getting a feeling, however important, is not the same as belief, as is implied by the poet's revision of the line ten or so years later to make it more orthodox: 'Faith in life endless' (1850 version, XIV 205). If you regard the coda as a statement of belief, I think you would have to call it ambiguous. What appositives are in parallel with what? The phrase 'The feeling of life endless' is somehow equated with 'the one thought / By which we live'— which is or seems to be the state of mind, the 'faculty' whose progress is being traced. Then 'The feeling of life endless' is equated with what I read as *feelings* of 'infinity and God'.

To understand this coda, we must look at the other passage Wordsworth wrote in 1805 to add to the 1804 mediation — the preface. After the account of Snowdon, Wordsworth inserts this memorable and striking image: the complex scene on Snowdon is

The perfect image of a mighty mind,
Of one that feeds upon infinity,
That is exalted by an under-presence,
The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim
Or vast in its own being . . .

(XIII 69-73)

By this time in *The Prelude*, the poet is moving toward a conclusion. As I said before, he is answering his earlier question by saying *It was for this*. In both 1805 additions, the preface and the coda, Wordsworth is trying once again to add to his definition the nature and development of the state of mind that is at the heart of the poem. As is often the case, his strategy of definition is to present the reader with many words and phrases, no one of which is sufficient in itself, but all of which together (he hopes) evoke what he is talking about. In the preface we find 'infinity', 'the sense of God', and 'whatsoe'er is dim or vast in its own being' (XIII 69-73). In the coda we find the 'feeling of life endless' and 'infinity'. I submit that these words are not used theologically, but *expressively*. They define Wordsworth's ultimate mental state as being, for a wonderful moment, set apart from ordinary life, experienced as outside of ordinary time.²⁷ Perhaps this experience is what people refer to when they say 'time stood still'. His is not a scientific method of definition, but it is probably the only way to define what he has spent his poem trying to define. This sort of moment is not an impenetrable mystery: Wordsworth describes it most famously in 'Tintern Abbey' as when 'we are laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul' (45-6) or elsewhere when we feel 'intimations of immortality'.

III

Another theory of how Wordsworth's spiritual life is related to John's death has recently been offered by Duncan Wu in *Wordsworth: An Inner Life*. Wu thinks that John's death profoundly affected the way Wordsworth saw his poetic mission — that he began to doubt his poetic mission. When Wordsworth in April and May of 1805 confronted his task of finishing his poem,

²⁷ See Northrop Frye's discussion of this phenomenon in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981) 73-7.

he found himself increasingly out of sympathy with the self that had written it. Much of it has been composed in a mood of proud hope, spurred on by the irrevocable knowledge that he was the poet-prophet of 'The Recluse'. In the wake of John's death that hope seemed empty²⁸

Wu goes on to define what Wordsworth's ideas were at this time. In several elegiac poems he wrote in June, 1805, on John's death, Wordsworth felt

subject to the chastening hand of a stern master. . . . The elegies for John establish the chastening rod of the Almighty as a reality, brought to bear on a sensibility that had forgotten the value of humility. . . . [He attempts] to express genuine meekness towards a divine power whose acts he cannot understand.²⁹

I don't think 'meekness' is quite the right word. In a passage that is often overlooked even though it is placed near the very end of *The Prelude*, perhaps even as a climax, Wordsworth tells Coleridge that 'this song, which like a lark / I have protracted, in the unwearied heavens / Singing, and often with more plaintive voice / Attempered to the sorrows of the earth — / Yet centring all in love, and in the end / *All gratulant if rightly understood*' (XIII 380-85, italics mine). The *OED* defines 'gratulant' as 'Expressing pleasure, joy, or satisfaction'. Here I think we must gloss this passage as saying that 'All'— that is, all of my poem, which included viewing the sorrows of the earth, by centering on love is all 'gratulant', all expressive of pleasure, joy and satisfaction. Even though Wordsworth has come a long way from the joys he once had and the hopes he once held, he now does more than submit to God's chastising rod (as Wu would have it). He has accepted the world's woes, including John's death, as 'All gratulant, if rightly understood'. This idea strikes me as a justification of God's ways to man, a theodicy, which M. H. Abrams defines as 'a system of thought which sets out to reconcile the assumption that God is perfectly good with the fact that evil exists'.³⁰ Not a powerfully argued theodicy as are Milton's and Pope's, but a psychologically believable account of arriving at a similar conclusion. A theodicy nonetheless.

It is important that all these passages from 1805 hang together. Wordsworth can accept that 'the sorrows of the earth', including John's death, are 'all gratulant' *because he sees them from the perspective provided by those ultimate moments outside of time*, as defined by words like 'the feeling of life endless', 'infinity', 'the sense of God', and 'whatsoever is dim or vast in its own being'.

In short, Wordsworth started out to write a poem that would end with the triumph of the imaginative mind. After John's death, he came to celebrate, albeit in a muted way and without the emphasis of Milton, the capacity of that mind to accept man's fate.

²⁸ *Inner Life* 241. Wu does think John's death affected what he wrote in 1805, especially in lines XI 48-56.

²⁹ *Inner Life* 245-6.

³⁰ M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993) 80.

IV

So John's death affected the ending of *The Prelude* in some significant but positive ways. I think it also affected the poem in other ways as well. The haste with which Wordsworth rushed his poem to a conclusion, as well as his state of mind, may well have caused some portions of what he wrote in 1805 to be not so good as they might have been. (The preface and the coda are exceptions). The poet himself was dissatisfied when he wrote in MS Z above the page on which he had started what would be Book XI of the 1805 poem: 'This whole book wants retouching [;] the subject is not sufficiently brought out'.³¹ After he had finished the whole poem, he wrote Beaumont that he thought the poem was 'so far below what I seem'd capable of executing, [that it] depressed me much'.³²

Perhaps Wordsworth saw what I see. The last three books of *The Prelude*, even though they are short, are often repetitious. Wordsworth goes over several times what I will call his Bad Years (those between returning to England and his stay at Racedown, roughly late 1792 into 1796). Dorothy and Coleridge are thanked repeatedly. And he obfuscates. Now what Wordsworth is talking about is difficult, but many times ideas and details could have been made more clearly without losing the elevation of style he needed. Unravelling the poet's syntax can be maddening; even his editors occasionally are defeated.³³

If Wordsworth's sentences are difficult, so is his chronology. Few readers object to his placing the climactic passage about spots of time (referring to events of 1775 and 1783) after his account of the French Revolution (1790-1792). He orders ideas, not events. But many readers find the story of Wordsworth's life confusing. We are not sure when the story ends. The last time the story seemed progressing in an orderly way is when Wordsworth hears of Robespierre's death in August, 1794. As the poem draws to a close, the poet admits he is conscious that after that, 'where I lived, and how, / Hath no longer been scrupulously marked' (XIII 336-7). Until he was reunited with Dorothy, he spent three years leading 'an undomestic wanderer's life. / London chiefly was my home' (343-4), though he travelled elsewhere. Finally, toward the end of Book XIII, Wordsworth refers to 'The Period which our story now has reached' (223), which the Norton editors gloss two different ways.³⁴ Perhaps if he had had the time, Wordsworth would have made the chronology of his poem more clear.

V

Earlier on, I speculated on what Wordsworth might have included in *The Prelude* if he were not hurrying to a close. Now we can raise some similar speculations about 'what if?' They may be fanciful, but they raise serious questions about the nature of the ending of this poem.

Perhaps if John had not died, Wordsworth might have retold and improved upon the story of his Bad Years. We know that from late in 1792 until well into 1796-7,

³¹ *Inner Life* 241-3. *Thirteen Book Prelude*, I 601, II 438.

³² *Inner Life* 244.

³³ Norton 456 n8.

³⁴ Norton 470, 472.

Wordsworth suffered from a mental state that made him discontented and unhappy. Those are the times he refers to in the coda as years when he was 'bewildered and engulfed' (XIII 178). In writing *The Prelude*, he was celebrating his escape from his Bad Years and the restoration of his former self.

The seeds of these Bad Years were planted in Book X, which treats Wordsworth's time in France. As with most people, his troubles began when he entered the adult world, the world of adult love with Annette Vallon and real politics with Michael Beaupuy. Annette will not concern us here; Beaupuy introduced him to the ideals of the French Revolution (Equality, Liberty, Fraternity). Although Wordsworth suffered because ideal social conditions did not yet exist, he was convinced the ideals would become real very soon. After he returned to England late in 1792, his pain increased. His hopes for his own country were dashed when England declared war (X 233-5). His hopes for France were similarly dashed when after Robespierre's death the ideals of the Revolution were not realized (X 535).

Now the Bad Years begin, and the poet becomes evasive. His chronology becomes murky, and his narrative becomes confusing. In Books X and XI, the poet goes over similar materials several times in different words that do not necessarily communicate distinctly different ideas. I will try to summarize what Wordsworth tells us about his Bad Years, mainly in his own words:

I was not totally responsible for the way I began to think. Times were bad; Britain's opposition to the French and the cause of Liberty 'soured and corrupted upwards to the source / My sentiments' (X 761-2). I was 'goaded' (X 863) by the 'over-pressure of the times / And their disastrous issues' (XI 46-7). Moreover, I was also not responsible in that I did not originate the ideas that took over my mind. Wild theories' were about (X 774), and for want of any better ones, I took them up (X 790). I welcomed (X 809) the chief of these, Godwinism [though it is never named]. It 'promised to abstract the hopes of man / Out of his feelings' and base them on reason. This was not every-day reason (XI 124), but a different reason, a reason based on 'the freedom of the individual mind' (X 825); my 'independent intellect' (X 828) was empowered to question everything, to lay bare man's frailties (X 820), and to doubt the achievements of heroes and sages (XI 60-6) and even poets (XI 67-73). I demanded mathematical proof and evidence for all assertions (X 903-4). 'I took the knife in hand, / And, stopping not at parts less sensitive, / Endeavored with my best of skill to probe / The living body of society / Even to the heart. I pushed without remorse / My speculations forward, yea, set foot / On Nature's holiest places' (X 872-8). I dragged 'all passions, notions, shapes of faith, / Like culprits to the bar' (X 889-90). I 'cut off my heart / from all the sources of her former strength [and] so did I unsoul / As readily by syllogistic words / (Some charm of logic ever within reach) / Those mysteries of passion which have made, / . . . One brotherhood of all the human race' (XI 77-88).

The results of such probings were not happy. I was 'endlessly perplexed' (X 893); 'I lost / All feeling of conviction, and, in fine, / Sick, wearied out with contraries, / Yielded up moral questions in despair' (X 897-900). I experienced 'unhappiness and guilt / . . . sorrow, disappointment, vexing thoughts, / Confusion

of the judgment, zeal decayed— / And lastly, utter loss of hope itself / And things to hope for' (XI 1-7). I indulged in enjoying superficial, picturesque visual effects, and even may have let myself be free sexually (XI 155-94).

These passages make clear from what Wordsworth suffered: He had been led to disregard his former feelings and beliefs and to question everything and everyone, including the 'mysteries of passion' and 'holy places' of life — I'd gloss those phrases roughly and inadequately as the mysteries of human love, human sexual love, and human brotherhood. And when I looked down this last page in my typescript and marked the references to passages I had quoted, I saw that they went back and forth from Book X to Book XI back to Book X and then back to Book XI again, etc. In short, Wordsworth told the story of his Bad Years once in 1804 in Book X and then once again in Book XI in 1805. If Wordsworth had had the time and the will in April and May of 1805, perhaps he could have conflated his two versions.

More importantly, he might have rendered these experiences in more memorable poetry. Wordsworth was aware that he had not dramatized the events of his later life. He tells Coleridge that

Time may come
When some dramatic story may afford
Shapes livelier to convey to thee, my friend,
What then I learned . . .
(X 878-81)

Wordsworth knew that he had not told his later story with the same force as his earlier one. Readers of *The Prelude* will remember the immediacy of the earlier passage in which Wordsworth and Beaupuy meet 'a hunger-bitten girl / Who crept along fitting her languid self / Unto a heifer's motion' (IX 512-14). They will remember too the entire spot of time when Wordsworth, walking on the Leven sands, is told '*Robespierre was dead*' (X 535), and then is energized both by his hopes and by his memories of another experience on that very spot about ten years before. These are moments which are in the same league with the earlier spots of time which describe stealing a boat on Ullswater, skating on Esthwaite, walking home early in the morning after a dance, or crossing the Alps — the unforgettable moments that produced the great poetry Wordsworth is known for. He might have done the same with his Bad Years, but he did not.

An eminent critic once complained that what kept Wordsworth from equalling Shakespeare's place among English poets was that Wordsworth did not deal with sex. Perhaps no poet could have incorporated sexual ecstasy into the kind of ultimate state of mind Wordsworth most valued. But I wish Wordsworth could have dramatized his Bad Years, and sex played a part in them. When he had a hero going through a crisis somewhat like Wordsworth's, Shakespeare dramatized the experience (and pardon my conflation) by having his hero say:

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
. . . That it should come to this!
But two months dead, nay, not so much, not two.

So excellent a king, . . . so loving to my mother
 That he might not betwixt the winds of heaven
 Visit her face too roughly. . . . Why, she would hang on him
 As if increase of appetite had grown
 By what it fed on. . . . [But now] to post
 With such dexterity to incestuous sheets (*Hamlet* 1.2.124-57)³⁵

Here is a character setting foot in 'Nature's holiest places' — his mother's bed — with a vengeance, not in the abstract, but with jarring particulars.

To sum up, Wordsworth's practice in *The Prelude*, well into Book X, was to render his important youthful experiences in precise evocative, local detail. The result is great poetry. But after writing about the death of Robespierre in Book X in 1804, the poet changes his way of writing — that is, *he changes once the Bad Years begin in the narrative and after the death of his brother in real life*. The Wordsworth of 1805 presents in a somewhat garbled fashion what the young Wordsworth thought in general, but the lines do not associate the younger man's experiences with any particular place, in the manner of his earlier 'spots of time', or in the manner of all his family when they named places for each other. The lines of 1805 do not render dramatically what the younger Wordsworth was experiencing. What exactly was going through the younger Wordsworth's mind when he was setting foot 'on Nature's Holiest places'? When he cut his heart off from the mysteries of passion? If the Wordsworth of 1805 in full possession of his power had written about *these* experiences, what poetry would we have!

I wish that the Wordsworth of 1805 had rendered the younger Wordsworth's Bad Years with the immediacy of the best passages of Books I through X. Or to put it still another way, I wish that the understandable and wholly human grief and depression that Wordsworth suffered after John's death had not kept him from developing the closing books his poem to the fullest.

So Wordsworth is not Shakespeare. Yet Wordsworth shows that even after John's death he can write great poetry — a kind as wonderful as the Bard's, but one which shows a more modern sensibility. Five months after finishing *The Prelude*, he wrote 'The Solitary Reaper', which evokes a distant real place with real sounds: the voice of the Reaper singing and the voice of a cuckoo-bird 'Breaking the silence of the seas / Among the farthest Hebrides' — a poem which shows a modern sense of the drama of real Scottish history and the attitudes you meet in Scotland to this day, when the girl's 'plaintive numbers [may] flow / For old unhappy, far-off things, / And battles long-ago'.³⁶ In its depth of sympathy, this poem reflects the deepening of Wordsworth's own heart after John's death. In its profound calm, 'The Solitary Reaper' suggests that by November two hundred years ago the poet had learned to live with his loss.

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³⁵ *Hamlet* I ii 133-157 in William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974).

³⁶ William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981) I 659. Hayden thinks the poem was probably written on November 5, 1805.

Wordsworth's *The Prelude* as Autobiographical Epic

By KATHERINE CALLOWAY

*A man's [. . .] real life — and this is true stuff that stories are made of —
first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death.*

Walter Benjamin¹

WORDSWORTH'S *THE PRELUDE* IS FAMOUS FOR ITS DEFIANCE of conventional categorization. Readers have long recognized that the epic-length poem is not a traditional epic, and it seems likely that the key to its classification is found in the first forty-six lines,² or the lyric 'glad preamble' to the narrative that follows. At the end of the preamble is a famous tense shift, which marks the transition into the past-tense narrative. How exactly these first few lines render the poem an innovation, rather than a continuation of epic tradition, is still the object of debate.³ Some argue that Wordsworth's claim to have composed his proem spontaneously breaks with epic convention; others argue that the shift between lyric and narrative voice is his real innovation. The current study aligns most closely with David P. Haney's conclusion that 'what begins as a lyric utterance, which seems to be a preparation for an epic narrative, suddenly resolves itself into an autobiography'.⁴ In contrast with Haney, however, I argue that *The Prelude* does not begin as one sort of poem — whether a lyric or an epic — and then become another, but rather that the poem resolves itself into *both* an epic narrative and an autobiography. Wordsworth's use of his own life as the subject for his narrative, and not the stage that he sets by means of the glad preamble, distinguishes *The Prelude* from previous narrative poetry. After highlighting the similarities between the preamble and several older poems, I will consider how the poem's characterization as 'autobiographical epic' might shed light on Wordsworth's Romanticism.⁵ Breaking with the *Preface*'s admonition that poetry ought to be the product of

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 94.

² Line numbers are from the 1850 edition, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850* – a Norton Critical Edition, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979). Translations are mine.

³ Don H. Bialostosky, who recently argued that *The Prelude* 1.46 marked the beginning of the second part of a classical rhetorical argument, points out that previous criticism has dealt with the shift in a number of ways. See Bialostosky, 'The Invention/Disposition of *The Prelude*, Book I', *Rhetorical Traditions and the British Romantic Literature*, eds. Don H. Bialostosky and Lawrence D. Needham (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1995) 141. Two of these will be addressed in the current study.

⁴ David P. Haney, 'The Emergence of the Autobiographical Figure in *The Prelude*, Book I', *Studies in Romanticism* 20.1 (1981): 35. There is validity to the argument that Haney's classification of *The Prelude* as autobiography is reductionistic due to its poetic resemblances to the traditional epic; however, taken simply to mean that the majority of the poem recounts the story of an 'I', the label is useful. In this vein, I shall refer to the speaker in *The Prelude* as 'Wordsworth' for purposes of clarity.

⁵ I shall have more to say on the difficult question of the nature of 'Romanticism' later. Regarding the epic, which can be equally difficult to define, this study confines itself to those characteristics of classical and Miltonic epic that may be easily observed and catalogued, such as the invocation, journey motif, simile, digression, and the like. Those far more interesting discussions of epic that attempt to identify its more essential qualities, such as Mikhail Bakhtin's 'Epic and Novel' and Walter Benjamin's 'The Storyteller', are, unfortunately, outside of the scope of this study. The primary reason for this is that the conversation regarding the essence and *telos* of epic poetry is still open and cannot provide a fixed point of departure: Bakhtin and Benjamin, for example, differ radically on the distinction between the epic and the novel.

recollection, Wordsworth's poetic voice in *Prelude* 1 says, 'Thus, O Friend! did I, not used to make / A present joy the matter of a song, / Pour forth that day my soul in measured strains' (46-8). Wordsworth might have thought that the technique of claiming spontaneous composition was unusual,⁶ but it was not unprecedented or uncharacteristic of traditional poets. In fact, Milton (whose work Wordsworth knew well) makes the same claim on more than one occasion. In Book 9 of *Paradise Lost*, he famously describes his verse as 'unpremeditated' (9.24). Milton also claims to have composed *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* on Christmas morning. Just as it is highly unlikely that Wordsworth actually composed the proem to *The Prelude* spontaneously, Milton probably did not compose either *Paradise Lost* or the *Nativity Ode* as quickly and easily as he says he did. Besides this required suspension of disbelief, the three poems share a number of other traditional features, including a focus on nature's beauty, a number of classical allusions, and an invocation to a muse.

The invocation found in *The Prelude*, however, differs from those in Milton's poems — and it does so precisely because the narrative speaker is also the narrative subject. The opening lines of *The Prelude* read, 'Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze / That blows from the green fields and from the clouds / and from the sky'. Meyer H. Abrams contends that these lines are identical in function to the invocations of muses, Apollo, or the Holy Spirit found in earlier epics, with Wordsworth's 'muse' being the breeze. Abrams proceeds to cite several more passages in which Wordsworth clarifies the nature of his 'muse'.⁷ This need for further clarification was not equally felt by Homer, Virgil, or Milton, who simply invoked their respective muses and turned to the task at hand. Wordsworth's description of the interplay between himself and the inspiring power whose help he enlists is both unique and telling. Kimberly Rucks notes this discrepancy between the invocations in *Paradise Lost* and *The Prelude*, concluding that Wordsworth's is more passive and therefore, more polite, and faulting Milton with being too 'presumptuous' with his muse.⁸ Although Milton's invocations are certainly more straightforward than that of Wordsworth, the difference may have more to do with the poets' subject matter than with their manners.

Wordsworth invokes his muse to inspire a song of *himself*, as it were, to the exclusion of all other possible topics. He reaffirms his resolution to bring down 'Through later years the story of [his] life' (I.640) after the narrative has begun in earnest, proclaiming, 'A Traveller I am, / Whose tale is only of himself' (III.198-9). By contrast, Milton's *Paradise Lost* famously undertakes to 'assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to men' (1.25-26). In the *Nativity Ode*, too, Milton enlists the help of the muse in order to sing of someone besides himself; his brief, direct invocation makes especially clear that he is commanding the muse by proxy, his aim being to sing of the incarnation:

⁶ Charles Moorman, 'Wordsworth's *Prelude*: I, 1-269'. *MLN* 72.6 (1957): 416-20. Charles Moorman notes this uncharacteristic spontaneity:

[The 'glade preamble'] was composed [...] in a manner unlike Wordsworth's usual method of composition. To a poet 'not used to make / A present joy the matter of a song' (I, 46-47) these 'numbers came / Spontaneously' (I, 1-52). In short the force of Nature's inspiration is here so great that what Wordsworth conceives to be the normal poetic process, involving the 'recollection in tranquility' of some significant 'spot' of time (XII, 208) with its attendant emotions and feelings, is compressed and condensed in the overwhelming and directly inspired joy and power of the moment. (417)

⁷ M. H. Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York: Norton, 1984) 28-9.

⁸ Kimberly S. Rucks, 'Ambiguity in Books 1 and 14 of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*'. Master's Thesis. Baylor University, 2001, 17.

Say Heav'nly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein
 Afford a present to the Infant God?
 Hast thou no vers, no hymn, or solemn strain,
 To welcom him to this his new abode [. . .]? (15-18)

Wordsworth, on the other hand, speaks to the muse on his own authority, a pose that warrants the deference we observe in his dealings with her. Indeed, he does not even presume to know her exact identity: in the three lyric paragraphs that punctuate the second part of Book 1, Wordsworth's idea of his source of inspiration evolves.⁹ Thus, although Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and the two poems by Milton all suppose spontaneity and invoke a muse, Wordsworth's poem is rendered fundamentally different from Milton's by the fact that Wordsworth is the hero of his own epic while Milton's hero is always an other.

Wordsworth's prolonged justification of his inspiration and subject matter account for the absence of another epic convention in the opening of *The Prelude*: immediate presentation of the poem's theme. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* famously begin, respectively, with the words 'Wrath' and '[The] man', signaling to auditors that the poems shall address the rage of Achilles and the journey of Odysseus. In keeping with this practice, Virgil opened the *Aeneid* with 'Arms and the man', effectively subsuming both Homeric epics as he anticipates the story of Aeneas's journey and the subsequent war for Latium.¹⁰ Milton naturally followed suit in *Paradise Lost*, beginning his account of The Fall with 'Of Mans First Disobedience'. Whether Wordsworth dispensed with this tradition because beginning an epic-length poem *Me cano*, 'Myself I sing', seemed an act of hubris is not known, but such an obvious break with tradition does at least make one wonder why Wordsworth would make the change.

Another of Wordsworth's devices that has often been engaged by critics on account of its novelty is the startling shift from lyric to narrative that occurs in 1.46: 'Thus, O Friend! did I [. . .]'. The lyric outpourings that recur through the rest of Book 1 are not foreign to the epic: Homer, Virgil, and Milton all interrupt their epics with sage observations concerning what has happened or is about to happen.¹¹ It is Wordsworth's creating in his readers an expectation of one kind of poem, only to surprise them with quite a different kind that renders the beginning of *The Prelude* different from that of a traditional epic. But the move is certainly not new to narrative poetry: in fact, the Roman poet Horace employs the same device in his *Epodes*. Notably, Wordsworth also echoes Horace with his frequent claims to have been consecrated to the lofty task of a poet, such as in the following passage from *The Prelude*, Book 1:

Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!
 [...] from my first dawn
 Of childhood didst thou intwine for me
 The passions that build up our human soul;
 Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,

⁹ Citing 'three separate paragraphs of reflection' that address, respectively, the mind, the 'Wisdom and Spirit of the universe', and the 'Presences of Nature', John McCarthy suggests that Wordsworth 'is less concerned with being philosophically consistent than with affirming to himself and his audience the positive value of his unique history'. See 'The Conflict in Books I-III of *The Prelude*', *Modern Language Quarterly* 30.3 (1969): 374-5.

¹⁰ The first word of the *Iliad* is μῆνις, wrath; of the *Odyssey*, ἄνδρος, man, and the opening phrase of the *Aeneid*, 'Arma virumque cano' translates 'Arms and the man I sing'.

¹¹ These musings are marked by a tense change in Milton as in Wordsworth; no similar shift tense occurs in Homer or Virgil due to the fact that Greek and Latin epic was already composed in the historical present.

But with high objects, with enduring things. (401, 405-9)

In what has come to be known as his 'immortality ode', Horace claims that he is 'a two-formed poet, borne up through the clear air on a wing not vulgar or weak', who, like Wordsworth in the opening of *The Prelude*, has 'left the city behind'.¹² Unlike Wordsworth, however, Horace specifically wishes to continue the poetic tradition that precedes him, elsewhere asking his auditor (Maecenas) to 'count [him] among the lyric poets' in a passage famously imitated by Ben Johnson and Tennyson.¹³

It is in Horace's *Epode 2* that we find the surprising shift from lyric to narrative. Horace's poetic persona begins in true lyric form:

Happy is the man who is far from business affairs,
as was the ancient race of mortals,
who works the paternal fields with his lowing beasts,
free from all financial transactions [. . .].¹⁴

He spends the next 62 lines lauding the simple, rural lifestyle over that of the urban businessman — only to switch suddenly to narration. The poem continues, 'Haec ubi locutus faenerator Alfius', 'Once Alfius the money-lender said these things',¹⁵ and goes on to recount that Alfius proceeded to carry on with his usual business dealings. Here, the surprising shift from lyric outpouring to narration draws attention to the fact that the speaker is not the poet himself, but someone who lives the very lifestyle the poem decries.¹⁶

Wordsworth's similar shift in tense and genre differs from Horace's because the one who spoke *The Prelude's* opening lines and the one speaking in the 'now' of the text are both

¹² Horace, *Epodes and Odes*, ed. Daniel H. Garrison (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1991). Horace's *Odes* opens with the lines:

Non usitata nec tenui ferar
penna biformis per liquidum aethera
vates, neque in terries morabor
longius invidiaeque maior
urbes relinquam.

I call this poem Horace's 'immortality ode' because it goes on to claim that he will never die, being instead transformed into a swan and flying away. The sentiment resonates with Wordsworth's admission: 'I used to brood over the stories of Enoch and Elijah, and almost to persuade myself that, whatever might become of others, I should be translated, in something of the same way, to heaven'. See *Selected Poems and Prose of William Wordsworth*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) 437.

¹³ The Latin reads 'Quodsi me lyricis vatibus inseres, / sublime feriam sidera vertice' (*Carmina* 1.1.35-6) 'But if you will insert me [or 'my volume'] among the lyric bards, / I will strike the stars with my lofty head'. Ben Johnson paraphrases in *Sejanus* 5.1.8-9: 'And at each step I feel my advanced head / Knock out a star in heaven'. Tennyson refers directly to the same lines in *The Charge of the Heavy Brigade at Balaclava*: 'Old Horace? "I will strike", said he, / "The stars with head sublime," [...] Epilogue 46-7.

¹⁴ *Epodes* 2.1-4 reads:

Beatus ille qui procul negotiis,
ut prisca gens mortalium,
paterna rura bobus exercet suis,
solutus omni faenore [...].

¹⁵ Horace, *Epode 2*, 67.

¹⁶ Interestingly, the tense shift echoes the sense of the poem here as in *The Prelude*. When the open-ended freedom of the present lyric gives way to the unchangeable past narrative, innocent optimism gives way to experienced sobriety.

Wordsworth. The sudden change from lyric to narrative is rendered yet more strange by the fact that it seems altogether unnecessary: Wordsworth would not be 'plagiarizing' simply to incorporate his former words into the present poem the way that Horace would have 'plagiarized' his fictional businessman had he done so. But Wordsworth divides his present self from the self that spoke those lines just as if the two were different people. This is an extreme and peculiar way of dealing with what one critic terms 'the contradiction between "auto" and "graphic"'¹⁷ — that is, the problem of using the inherently third-person narrative genre to write of oneself.

It quickly becomes evident that the two 'Wordsworths' of *The Prelude*, which result from the stark contrast between Wordsworth the present lyric voice and Wordsworth the past narrative object, could easily multiply as chapters are added to the narrative. This is in fact the case: just as the present Wordsworth has a different voice from the past one, so would each of the past 'Wordsworths' depicted in successive chapters of the story speak with a different voice than the others. An 'entire' Wordsworth, then, must be an accumulation of all of these voices, an accumulation that can only be perceived once the last chapter has been written; that is, at his death. The situation is described by an Oxford graduate and writer named Sheldon Vanauken, who recounts an experience he had shortly after the death of his wife, Davy:

One of the greatest occurrences of my own grief was the strange thing that began to happen within a day or two of her death. It was the flooding back to me of all the other Davys I had known. [. . .] They were all with me — for ever. The *wholeness* of Davy. That wholeness can only be gained by death, I believe. In writing to [C.S.] Lewis of my understanding of this astonishing phenomenon, I use the analogy of reading a novel like *David Copperfield* that covers many years. [. . .] While one reads, chapter by chapter, even as one lives one's own life week by week, David is what he is at that particular point in the book's time. But then, when one shuts the book at the end, *all* the Davids—small boy, youth, man—are equally close: and, indeed, are *one*.¹⁸

At the close of the posthumously-published 1850 version of *The Prelude*, then, Vanauken would say that we have a 'whole' Wordsworth, albeit a highly fictionalized one. But until Book 14 has ended, both writer and reader may only interact with a single 'Wordsworth' at a time, whether he should be the 'present' lyric voice or one of his various realizations in the narrative — and critics have had to follow suit.

The presence of both a past and present Wordsworth is often assumed in critical discussion, but rarely directly acknowledged. Bradford K. Mudge, for example, points out that the relationship between the inspiring power of Nature and the Wordsworth in the narrative corresponds to the relationship between the present Wordsworth and his reader.¹⁹ A number of the differences between the present and past Wordsworths that provide fodder for discussion stem from the fact that the present Wordsworth (and particularly that of the 1850 text) has had the advantage of a visit from the owl of Minerva. The recurring inflated hopes that a reader observes in the earlier Wordsworth, before he slowly progresses from an attitude of innocence to one of experience, provide the best example of characteristics that are purged between the

¹⁷ Haney 34.

¹⁸ Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987) 185.

¹⁹ Bradford K. Mudge, 'Song of Himself: Crisis and Selection in *The Prelude*, Books 1 and 7', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 27.1 (1985): 6.

appearance of younger Wordsworths and older ones in the text. Such changes in Wordsworth's character are so integral to the progression of *The Prelude* that they hardly seem to need mentioning, but for this very reason, their implication — that a number of different Wordsworths actually appear on the narrative stage — often escapes observation.

Students of philosophy might conclude that Wordsworth's treatment of his past and present selves as different people anticipates existentialist ideology, which rejects the idea that each human being has an abstract 'essence' that remains constant despite the changes one undergoes throughout one's life. But a word of caution is warranted here. Wordsworth does not realize a thoroughly existentialist view of personhood. On the contrary, he assumes that a human being *does* have an essence, granting that this essence is painfully difficult to pin down. A result of this conviction is his emphasis on recollection of the past in the present, which is, it may be cogently argued, the very impetus behind the composition of *The Prelude*. Interpreting Wordsworth's 'My Heart Leaps Up', his friend Coleridge wrote that individuals ought 'to contemplate the Past in the Present, and so to produce by a virtuous and thoughtful sensibility [. . .] continuity in their self-consciousness', adding that 'men are ungrateful to others only when they have ceased to look back on their former selves with joy and tenderness'.²⁰ Interestingly, even as he celebrates the continuity between personal past, present, and future, Coleridge's diction betrays the presence of multiple 'selves' in one life. Wordsworth likewise both recognizes how very different one's former and present selves can be, as evidenced in the first book of *The Prelude*, and exhorts his listeners to identify and preserve the thoughts and emotions that have persisted throughout their lifetimes as common ground between their current and younger selves.²¹ Describing his own endeavor to do this, he writes, 'My hope has been, that I might fetch / Invigorating thoughts from former years' in order to 'fix the wavering balance of my mind' (1.621-3).

With a surprising shift in tense and genre in *The Prelude* 1.46, then, Wordsworth highlights the difference between his past and present selves. In so doing, he draws attention to the organic nature of his text that results in the various realizations of his self with respect to time. Several decades ago, Morse Peckham drew readers' attention to the Romantic conception of the universe as organic and growing rather than mechanistic and static.²² Although Peckham does not claim to have arrived at a perfect 'theory of Romanticism', his distinction is useful. In a sense, previous narrative poetry catalogued epic undertakings that 'conformed to ideal patterns in the mind of God or in the non-material ground of phenomena':²³ the gods reigned in Homer's world; Fate in Virgil's, and God in Milton's. This is because the lives chronicled in those prior epics were already 'closed books' by the time the poems were written, and their authors thus approached 'whole' men and women as subjects. Wordsworth, by contrast, was faced with recounting a life

²⁰ Stillinger 527.

²¹ Wordsworth writes in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that 'our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and [...] by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other we discover what is really important to men'. See *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1: 126.

²² Morse Peckham, 'Toward a Theory of Romanticism', *PMLA* 66.2 (1951): 5-23. It should be noted that several Romantic critics, including Abrams, Bloom, McGann, Mellor, and Peckham himself have amended this 'theory of Romanticism' since Peckham published his original essay on the subject in 1951. This study does not attempt to revive Peckham's original argument in detail but to draw on its general distinction between static mechanism and organic organism. I submit that this distinction is still useful, as the open-endedness of *The Prelude* itself attests.

²³ Peckham 9.

still in progress, in the first person. His closeness to the events, and to the hero, of his text renders *The Prelude* far more organic and open-ended than the traditional epic, which sometimes even comes complete with a detailed preview of future events.²⁴ Like the tree that Peckham employs as an analogy for the cosmos, the hero of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is involved in a process of becoming rather than a state of being. This epic-length poem thus imitates classical and Miltonic poetry in both its claim to spontaneity and its startling shift from lyric to narrative. Its status of autobiography distinguishes it from those traditional poems in a way that reflects the (admittedly protean) Romantic condition.

C.S. Lewis once observed, 'My form remains one, though the matter in it changes continually. I am, in that respect, like a curve in a waterfall'.²⁵ At least as far as concerns the human body, Wordsworth was right: a man or woman is physically 'a different person' at a given point in time from the one he or she was a few years earlier. So it is, Wordsworth would say, with our conscious 'selves' as well. By differentiating between Wordsworth the past narrative object and Wordsworth the present lyric voice, with his use of himself as the hero of an epic narrative, he suggests that continuity between the past and present self should be valued and preserved through the process of recollection. But he demonstrates too that he cannot really be a *whole* man until the book is closed.

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²⁴ Consider, for example, Anchises's speech to Aeneas in the katabasis (Book 6) of the *Aeneid*, or books XI and XII of *Paradise Lost*, which C.S. Lewis famously terms an 'untransmuted lump of futurity' (Preface 129). Incidentally, these two 'lumps of futurity' are often compared to each other.

²⁵ *Miracles* (New York: Touchstone, 1996) 199.

The Lambs' *Tales From Shakespear* and Shakespeare's Plays

By HILARY NEWMAN

OUT OF A TOTAL OF THIRTY-SEVEN PLAYS BY SHAKESPEARE, Charles and Mary Lamb turned twenty of them into their prose *Tales from Shakespear*. All the English history plays and the Roman history plays are omitted. This essay will consider the twenty plays the Lambs rendered into prose narratives and trace what changes they made from the original plays by Shakespeare. Changes in plotting, characterisation and language will come in for particular consideration.

In the Preface to their *Tales from Shakespear*, contributed to by both Lambs, they explain that their prose versions of the plays are intended as an introduction to Shakespeare for the young reader. They hoped to whet the child reader's appetite for the plays of Shakespeare, which they will be able to read in the original in due course. This particularly applied to girls, who were not allowed uncensored access to books at as early an age as their brothers were.

In E.V. Lucas's 1905 edition of the Lambs' children's literature, each of the tales is given its title followed, in brackets, by the name of which Lamb, Charles or Mary, wrote it. Mary Lamb wrote all of the tales, which were based on Shakespeare's comedies, a total of fourteen. Two comedies are omitted: *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Love's Labour's Lost*. Perhaps the subject matter of the former was considered unsuitable for children and the latter turns on some rather erudite classical jokes, as well as containing some bawdy humour. As E.V. Lucas noted:

The pleasanter and more ordinarily human plays were safe with Mary Lamb, whose avoidance of adult complexities amount to genius.¹

Charles Lamb was responsible for the turning into prose of some of Shakespeare's tragedies, as he told William Wordsworth:

I am answerable for Lear, Macbeth, Timon, Romeo, Hamlet, Othello, for occasionally a tail piece or correction of grammar, for more of the cuts and all of the spelling. The rest is my Sister's.²

From Charles Lamb's list we can see that he turned six of Shakespeare's tragedies into prose tales. This meant that Charles Lamb wrote under a third of *Tales from Shakespear*, while Mary wrote over two thirds. As Mary omitted two comedies, so Charles omitted *Titus Andronicus*, perhaps because there is too much unrelieved violence and lust to be suitable reading for a child. Why did Charles take responsibility for these six tragedies and for none of the comedies? A biographer of Mary Lamb suggests two possibilities:

¹ E. V. Lucas, Ed., *The Life of Charles Lamb* (London: Methuen, 1905) 1:346.

² Charles and Mary Lamb, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, E. V. Lucas, ed., vol. 6, *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb* (London: Methuen, 1903-5) Letter no. 152 (June 26 1806).

Perhaps they [the Lambs] thought the tales of madness and murder in *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello* would be disturbing for her or they may have considered that the comedies with their romantic themes were more suitable for a woman to write.³

The Lambs were well equipped for their dual task, as they were both keen readers of Shakespeare and also enthusiastic theatregoers, where their tastes were catholic. Some of their friends were connected with the theatre and Charles Lamb's only known proposal of marriage was made to the actress Fanny Kelly.

Obviously drama and prose narratives are conveyed by different methods. Drama is both literary art and representational art. In its literary aspect, the play is made out of words, which create the story, characters and dialogue. Unlike literary art, drama is acted out, rather than told by a narrator. Thus in a play nobody stands between the audience and the characters, whereas in the Lambs' retelling of the plays as prose tales, they are narrators who come between the characters and the reader. We lose the sense of spectacle, which includes all the sights and sounds of a performance. The narrative representation can also direct the reader towards moral judgements, something that is a more complex matter in a play.

Charles Lamb further differentiated between Shakespeare's plays being performed on the stage of a theatre and being read in the study. Four years after the *Tales from Shakespear*, Charles Lamb wrote an essay called 'On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation'. He considered that although it might be paradoxical the tragedies (and he concluded, also the comedies) of Shakespeare were less well calculated to be represented on the stage than that of almost any other dramatist.

Lamb argues in this essay that watching a play by Shakespeare, in which the actors must make a spectacle with such things as tricks of the eye, tone of voice or gesture, distracts the audience from reacting to the characters' meditations, the 'ambitious, the aspiring speech, the intellectual activity, which prompts them to overleap those moral fences'.⁴ These comments suggest that Charles Lamb would welcome the opportunity to relate the plays in prose narratives.

The Lambs do not seem to have endeavoured to order the plays according to any particular classification or genre. Comedies and tragedies are intermingled with what later critics would classify as 'dark' comedies or 'problem' plays and the 'late romances'. Neither is the *Tales from Shakespear* arranged according to the dates when the plays were written. In fact, the first tale told by the Lambs is *The Tempest*, which was the last complete play Shakespeare wrote, and is often thought to have a valedictory tone.

Both Charles and Mary Lamb made their tales more accessible to their proposed child reader by simplifying the plots of the plays. This is as true of the tragedies as the comedies. Thus while taking the story from Shakespeare's plays, the Lambs do not follow the playwright's plotting. In Chapter Seven of the *Poetics*, 'The Scope of the Plot', Aristotle defines the plot of a drama as being 'the arrangements of the incidents'.⁵ As two literary theorists, Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson comment:

³ Kathy Watson, *The Devil Kissed Her: The Story of Mary Lamb* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004) 122.

⁴ Charles and Mary Lamb, *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1905) 106.

⁵ Aristotle, *Horace, Longinus, Classical Literary Criticism Series*, translated and introduced by T. S. Dorsch (London: Penguin, 1965).

A 'plot' is clearly distinguished from a story upon which a plot may be based. A plot is the artful disposition of the incidents, which make up the story.⁶

In his plays Shakespeare clearly used 'plot' to interweave the main and subplots, high and low characters, and comedy and tragedy. By contrast, the Lambs tended to rely more on extracting the main story line, favouring a straightforward, chronological retelling of the story, cutting out apparently extraneous matter. This is evident throughout the *Tales from Shakespear*.

The very first tale, Mary Lamb's *The Tempest*, omits the subplot of the low characters' conspiracy with Caliban against Prospero. So, too, in the next tale, *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, the subplot of the mechanicals' play is left out. The effect in both these tales is that there is very little which can be classified as 'comedy'. Also, in *A Winter's Tale* Mary Lamb leaves out the pastoral subplot.

Furthermore, in her tale of *The Merchant of Venice*, Mary Lamb does not address the part of the plot which deals with the choosing of a suitor for Portia according to who picks the right casket. This added a fairy tale element in the play that is lost in the tale. Another of the play's subplots, the marriage of Shylock's daughter, Jessica, to the Christian, Lorenzo, is only touched upon briefly, when Shylock's punishment is being decided.

Again, in the play of *All's Well that Ends Well*, there is a subplot concerned with the humiliation of Parolles. The tale of *The Taming of the Shrew* disregards the framing structure of the complex play-within-a-play. The Induction is not necessary to an understanding of the main plot of the play, so Mary Lamb did not bother herself with it.

In other comedies the low scenes of the plays are omitted when Mary Lamb retells them. This is applicable to the tales of *Measure for Measure*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Pericles*. The effect of these omissions in the tales is to confuse the reader about the genre of the tale. In the end one can only tell that these plays are comedies by their denouements: comedies conventionally end happily and with wedding bells. By contrast, tragedies end in death.

Ultimately Mary Lamb is most concerned with the reciting of the love stories in Shakespeare's comedies. In all the tales in which the subplots are ignored, Mary Lamb's clear aim is to tell straightforward romances between one or more pairs of young lovers. As Jean I. Marsden has pointed out, 'love and the happy resolution of a marriage plot replaced humour'. As a result, as Marsden says, 'love becomes the focus for almost every tale'.⁷ However, even Mary Lamb balked at the far-fetched pairing up of characters at the end of *The Winter's Tale*: the ridiculous marrying off of Paulina to Camillo is wisely left out.

The tales of fraternal usurpation and restoration, *The Tempest* and *As You Like It*, are really only framing devices for the romances between Miranda and Ferdinand in the former and Rosalind and Orlando and Celia and Oliver in the latter. When these themes of usurpation are treated as the major theme, they are told as tragedies, for example, in Charles Lamb's telling of the stories of Hamlet and Macbeth.

It is possible that Charles and Mary Lamb shared a common view of Shakespeare's plays, as they shared so much else. For it is not only Mary who leaves

⁶ Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Wheatsheaf, Hertfordshire: Harvester, 1993) 33.

⁷ Jean I. Marsden, 'Shakespeare for Girls: Mary Lamb and *Tales from Shakespeare*' in *Children's Literature* 17 (1989): 52.

out subplots in her retelling of Shakespeare's comic plays, but Charles also does so in his presentations of the tragedies. To an extent this was an inevitable part of their joint project, for the Godwins allocated only about five thousand words to the telling of each of the tales.

This word limit may have persuaded Charles Lamb to omit the subplot in *King Lear*. In Shakespeare's play, the double plot makes familial conflict seem to be a universal problem. By only telling the main plot in his tale, Charles Lamb weakens this sense of the general applicability of father/child relationships which have become dysfunctional. However, at least Charles Lamb stuck to the original ending of the main plot. This was more innovative than can now be easily understood, for as Wayne McKenna comments on Garrick's stage adaptations of Shakespeare's plays:

He maintained Tate's version of *King Lear*, with some amendments of his own, and so continued a tradition which was to keep the original off stage until almost the middle of the nineteenth century. When Lamb wrote his essay on Shakespeare in 1811, he could never have seen *King Lear* performed in the original version, and he expressed his anger at the way in which Shakespeare's plays had been altered[.]⁸

When it is taken into consideration that the only version Charles Lamb could see in the theatre was that which had a happy ending for Lear and Cordelia, it is unsurprising that he preferred to read the text of the original play rather than seeing it performed.

Macbeth has a less complex plot and no major subplots. Charles Lamb's retelling of the play as a tale has fewer cuts than *King Lear*. The porter's scene is omitted. This may be due to it containing unsuitable material for children. Also it does not advance the story and thus on the grounds of word count would have been left out. This also enabled Charles Lamb to include more of the scenes containing the witches, which evidently grabbed his imagination.

In the other tragedies retold by Charles Lamb, it is more often the comic low characters who are left out, rather than actual plot ingredients. This is probably because, on the whole, the tragedies are more concentrated and make less use of subplots (*King Lear* excepted).

This brings us to a consideration of how Charles and Mary Lamb treated Shakespeare's characters, and how they altered or dispensed with them. As in the previous section, I will first consider characterization in the comic tales retold by Mary Lamb, followed by an examination of how Charles treats the characters in the tragedies.

In many of Mary Lamb's comic tales, the low characters are omitted. We have already noticed this in her retellings of *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*. The main pastoral comic character in *A Winter's Tale*, the rogue Autolycus, does not appear in Mary Lamb's tale of the play. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, too, the comic characters Dogberry and Verges do not have roles in the tale. An unnamed 'magistrate' – for they are instrumental in sorting out the complexities of the main plot – performs their function. It would appear that broad humour of a low kind, often involving adult topics, did not appeal to Mary Lamb. Or perhaps she thought that such characters would be lost on her intended young readers.

⁸ Wayne McKenna, *Charles Lamb and the Theatre* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1978) 106.

In some of the tales, Mary Lamb writes out both high and low characters. In *As You Like It*, the melancholy and satirical courtier Jacques makes no appearance, nor do the rustic lovers William and Audrey. Most missed, however, is the clown, Touchstone, who in the play accompanies Ganymede and Aliena into exile in the Forest of Arden. In *Cymbeline* the highborn character and villain, Cloten, is only mentioned in passing as part of his mother's plan for gaining power by marrying him to Imogen. The final paragraph refers to Cloten having been 'slain in a quarrel which he had provoked'. No more information is given, though in Shakespeare's play he had a much larger role and was killed by one of Imogen's brothers.

The exclusion of low characters is seen in both *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *All's Well that Ends Well*. In the former the absences of Speed, a servant to Valentine and Launce, the like to Protheus, are particularly noticeable. Once more, some of the dialogue between the masters and their respective servants are bawdy and unsuitable for children. In addition, these characters contribute nothing to the simple telling of the tale. Parolles is left out of *All's Well That Ends Well*. We do not know whether Mary Lamb shared her younger brother's view that Parolles is the exception to the general rule that Shakespeare had no unentertaining characters.⁹ Parolles was intended as a comic character in this play which has been called a 'dark' comedy or 'problem' play by twentieth century critics. This category also includes *Measure for Measure*, a tale which Mary Lamb retells, and *Troilus and Cressida*, which she does not. In these plays the moral viewpoint presents major difficulties. Bertram is the main problem in *All's Well That Ends Well*, and we can hardly sympathise with Helena's desire to marry him. Simply put, he is not a 'good catch', despite his wealth and title. Again we do not know whether the Lambs' views coincided on this matter, but it is on record that Charles Lamb thought highly of Helena. As he sees her, she is

A young woman seeking a man in marriage. The ordinary rules of courtship are reversed, the habitual feelings are crossed. Yet with such exquisite address this dangerous subject is handled, that Helena's forwardness loses her no honour; delicacy dispenses with its laws in her favour, and nature, in her single case, seems content to suffer a sweet violation.¹⁰

In the other 'dark' comedy or 'problem' play that Mary Lamb retells, *Measure for Measure*, the comic characters in the subplot are omitted. As in *Pericles*, the brothel scene is dropped, together with the characters who occupied it and talked in a bawdy way. However, Mary Lamb's omission of Lucio is a problem. The duke's scheming can irritate an audience and in slandering the duke, Lucio functions as a safety valve for the spectators' exasperation with the machinations of the disguised ruler. In Mary Lamb's tale the duke must be endured, along with his proposals of marriage to Isabella. In Shakespeare's play Isabella neither accepts nor declines the duke's offer of marriage, but Mary Lamb makes her accept. Her tale concludes: 'And the mercy-loving duke long reigned with his beloved Isabel, the happiest of husbands and princes'. Further, as Jean I. Marsden perceptively comments:

The Lambs' conclusion carefully ties up all loose ends, giving the tale a sense of closure conspicuously absent in

⁹ 'Table Talk by the Late Elia', *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, op. cit., 1:349.

¹⁰ 'Characters of Dramatic Writers, Contemporary with Shakespeare', *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, op. cit., 1:53.

Shakespeare's play. Not only does a joyful Isabel marry the Duke, but this resounding romantic conclusion leads to widespread moral order as Isabel's virtue works the changes neither the Duke nor Angelo could effect.¹¹

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the low comic character, Christopher Sly, and, indeed, the whole 'Induction' is omitted by Mary Lamb. In the play the pranksters find Sly in a drunken sleep and set about hoodwinking him into believing that 'he is a mighty lord'. The play proper which follows is then an entertainment performed for Sly's amusement. This is a complex structure of using a play-within-a-play, which Mary Lamb dispenses with, as it is not an essential preamble to the main story of Petruchio and Katherine.

If *The Taming of the Shrew* is a somewhat bizarre love story, *Twelfth Night* is much more obviously of the same genre. The comic characters, Olivia's uncle, Sir Toby Belch, his stooge Sir Andrew Aguecheek, the clown Feste and maid Maria are all left out. Also omitted is the character of the ambitious steward, Malvolio, whom the comic characters in the play are determined to thwart. The adult conversation of the comic quartet could be considered unsuitable for children, and without these four there was no role for Malvolio. As Mary Lamb transforms the play into a tale, it loses most of its comic elements, apart from the traditional happy ending.

In Mary Lamb's tale of *Pericles* the incestuous characters Antiochus and his daughter do not appear. Mary Lamb effectively conveys the first two scenes of the play in a couple of paragraphs. There are several other evil characters in the play and the tale. In the latter, the final long paragraph deals with the bestowal of rewards and punishments, as appropriate, on the characters. In Shakespeare's play this is spoken by the choric figure, Gower, who appears at intervals throughout the drama to hold the plot together. He is necessary in the play because the action extends over a long period of time. The presence of a narrator in the tale naturally means that Gower is superfluous.

Charles Lamb also changed and omitted characters when he retold Shakespeare's plays. In an essay called 'Shakespeare's Improvers', written twenty years after the *Tales From Shakespear*, Charles Lamb complained about alterations made to Shakespeare's plays and particularly to the characters. In this essay, Charles Lamb discusses the one good character in *Timon of Athens*: the faithful steward Flavius. Charles Lamb relates how Shadwell 'improved' on this character by changing his sex,

Thus making the moral of the piece to consist in showing – not the hollowness of friendship conciliated by a man's undistinguishing prodigality, but – the superiority of woman's love to the friendship of men.¹²

In the tale of *King Lear*, as we have already noticed, the subplot is omitted. This naturally leads to the disappearance of several of the play's characters thus creating some difficulty in dealing with the main plot. Edgar is reduced to a nameless 'poor Bedlam beggar'. However, as Winifred Yin has noticed, Charles Lamb diverges from the main plot of Lear and his three daughters to reveal the life and experience of a Bedlam beggar. In this way, Yin points out '... Charles daringly raises the social issue

¹¹ Marsden op. cit., 59.

¹² Charles Lamb, 'Shakespeare's Improvers', *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, op. cit., 1:322.

of poverty'.¹³ Edgar is particularly missed at the end of the tale when he should appear as a future ruler of Britain after the deaths of Lear and his three daughters. Charles Lamb tries to give a brief résumé of Shakespeare's vision at the end of the play, by giving a few details of the subplot. Ultimately, however, he is dismissive, concluding that these stories are 'needless here to narrate; Lear and his Three Daughters being dead, whose adventures alone concern our story'. This is not a satisfactory conclusion to what is, arguably, Shakespeare's most complex tragedy.

Like his sister's retellings in the comic tales, Charles Lamb also sometimes omitted low comic characters in the tragedies he retold. In the early tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*, the most noticeable absence is Juliet's nurse. She is not essential to the development of the story, but in Shakespeare's play she did provide a welcome bit of comic relief. Similarly in *Hamlet*, the gravedigger is left out. If not important in himself in terms of the unfolding of the plot, he provided some necessary light relief, as well as revealing more about the character of the eponymous hero.

Finally in the tragedy of *Othello*, the number of characters is again curtailed. Charles Lamb, as narrator, makes what would now be considered racist remarks about the hero's skin colour: 'Bating that Othello was black, the noble Moor wanted nothing which might recommend him to the affections of the greatest lady'. This prejudice cannot be attributed to Shakespeare in his play. Iago's other victim, a Venetian man called Roderigo, is left out of the tale. This is a loss, as Iago's villainy shown operating against two men, stresses his evil propensity for plotting and deception. Alone, Othello may appear to be simply gullible – as indeed Charles Lamb seemed to think, for he wrote: 'It would settle the dispute, as to whether Shakespeare intended Othello for a jealous character, to consider how differently we are affected towards him, and for Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*. Leontes is that character'.¹⁴ Thus Charles Lamb sums up the cause of the tragedy by repeating Othello's perception of the matter, that he loved 'not wisely but too well'.

Let us briefly consider the respective use of language by the Lambs and Shakespeare. Obviously Shakespeare used blank verse as well as rhyming couplets and prose, and his diction is rich in imagery. The Lambs were well aware of the difficulties which confronted them in the retelling of the plays, as their Preface to the tales makes clear:

. . . the beauty of his language is too frequently destroyed by changing many of his excellent words for words less expressive of his true sense, to make it read something like prose; and even in some places to trick the young reader into the belief that they are reading plain prose, yet still his language is being transplanted from its own natural soil and poetic garden, it must want much of its natural beauty.¹⁵

Mary Lamb's retelling of the tales confronts the further difficulty of rendering comic dialogue into narrative. As the comic characters are often omitted, however, there is a loss of witty repartee anyway. The most obvious one this applies to – albeit it is in the main plot – is the exchanges between Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

¹³ Winifred Yin, 'We Plot Together, Old Bachelor and Maid, in a Sort of Double Singleness', *Charles Lamb Bulletin* 117.1 (Jan. 2002): 16.

¹⁴ 'Table Talk by the Late Elia', *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, op. cit., 1:349.

¹⁵ *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 3:1-2.

However, on rare occasions the plays can benefit by being rewritten in the language of prose. For example, near the beginning of *The Tempest*, Prospero explains his past experience and present conduct to Miranda. In Shakespeare's play this long stretch of dialogue is undramatic and threatens to lose the audience's attention. The same is true of Egeus's long passage of exposition in *The Comedy of Errors*. Both these occur near the opening of their respective plays and may alienate the audience before it has had time to become caught up in the action of the play.

Some of Mary Lamb's retellings of the comedies do try and stick fairly closely to the original language in parts. This is apparent particularly in such plays as *The Winter's Tale*, where some dramatic encounters are related in dialogue by Mary Lamb; for example, the colloquy between the disguised Polixenes and his son Florizel at the feast of the sheep-shearing.

Again, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Mary Lamb gives an almost verbatim rendering of Antonio's letter to Bassanio, telling him his ships are lost and his life forfeit to Shylock. She also quotes, almost word for word, the speeches of Bassanio and Gratiano about what they would sacrifice to save Antonio. The disguised Portia and Nerissa's replies are also taken directly from the play. These exchanges provide some light relief in the otherwise sombre courtroom scene. In both Shakespeare's play and Mary Lamb's tale Gratiano says: 'I have a wife, whom, I protest, I love: I would she were in heaven, so she could entreat some power to change this currish Jew', to which the disguised Nerissa replies: "'Tis well you offer it behind her back. Thy would else make an unquiet house'. Mary Lamb's closing couplet is also taken directly from Shakespeare: '- while he lived, he'd fear no other thing / So sore, as keeping safe Nerissa's ring'. This could be taken as a sexually suggestive remark, but perhaps Mary Lamb assumed that the child reader would understand the ring simply to refer to the one Gratiano had apparently given away.

In *Measure For Measure*, Isabella's chaste and puritanical character is revealed by the way in which Mary Lamb recounts her conversation with another nun. In a passage taken directly from the play, Isabella desires to obey even stricter rules than the ones that are laid down by the convent in which she is a novice. Such well-chosen adoption of dialogue to realize character is frequently used by Mary Lamb.

So, too, the creation of characters and their relationships in *Twelfth Night* are conveyed by the judicious use of Shakespeare's language. There is a close dependence on Shakespearian phrases; for example: Viola's statement that her love-sick sister 'sat like Patience on a monument, smiling at grief'. The beautiful lyric 'Come away, come away, Death' is directly imported into the tale from the play.

When it comes to Charles Lamb's conversion of Shakespeare's tragedies into prose narratives, there is an even closer relationship between the two. The wickedness of Goneril and Regan in *King Lear* is conveyed in their hyperbolic language, protestations which Charles Lamb abridges, but which otherwise remains close to the original. Cordelia's words are almost exactly given: 'she loved her majesty according to her duty, neither more nor less'. Charles Lamb has simply substituted the word 'duty' for 'bond', to make it clearer to the juvenile reader.

In the tale of 'Romeo and Juliet', the initial conversation between the eponymous protagonists is a paraphrased version of Shakespeare's play. Charles Lamb even imports wholesale into his narrative an extended conceit of the two lovers, which is both witty and revealing of the character of Romeo and Juliet.

In the tale of 'Hamlet', the scenes and conversations which Charles Lamb considers to be most significant are paraphrased versions of Shakespeare's plays. This is particularly noticeable in the play-within-the-play, which confirms Hamlet's

suspicion that his uncle murdered his father.

In his tale of 'Othello', the actions of the eponymous hero when he is about to murder Desdemona are recounted by Charles Lamb. Although the ordering of these phrases may diverge from Shakespeare, they are nevertheless taken directly from the play. Thus Desdemona sees her husband 'gnaw his underlip, and roll his eyes, and she knew he was always fatal when he looked so'. These physical details are helpful to the reader of the tale as here, unlike in the play, the reader has to visualise these details for him or herself.

In conclusion, the enduring popularity of Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales From Shakespear* owes much to their sensitive rendering of Shakespeare's plays. Although owing to a word limit of five thousand words, the Lambs had necessarily to abridge the plays, the tales remain true to the spirit of the originals. Subplots tend to be omitted, both for reasons of length and because brothel scenes and bawdy dialogue would have been considered unsuitable for the audience the tales were aimed at. Characters are also omitted, often the ones who would have supplied some comic relief or reinforced the themes of the plays. This sometimes leads to a slightly confused feeling about the mood of the tale – is it ironic, comic, romantic or tragic? – but then this problem also existed in the 'dark' comedies or 'problem plays' of Shakespeare himself. The Lambs showed great sensibility to the language of Shakespeare's plays and this makes their prose tales a pleasure to read. All in all, one would expect their popularity to endure.

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Reviews

The Collected Letters of Erasmus Darwin, Edited by Desmond King-Hele, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; xxxiii + 630 pp; black and white illustrations. ISBN 0521821568. £90 in cloth.

‘In everything that relates to *science*’, Lamb confessed in the ‘Old and the New Schoolmaster’, ‘I am a whole Encyclopaedia behind the rest of the world’, and there is no reason to doubt it. There is no suggestion either in the writings or the letters that he ever gave science or scientists much more than a momentary thought. His decision to remove Mary out of a temporary asylum into his own care could suggest that he mistrusted members of the medical profession and viewed scientists with the same jaundiced eye. That he did have a little time for one doctor at least could be something in his favour — particularly as that doctor was Erasmus Darwin, then better known as the author of *The Botanic Garden* and the *Loves of the Plants*. When in 1796 he heard that his friend Lloyd, beset with ‘seizures’, had placed himself under Darwin’s care at Lichfield, Lamb comforted himself with this news. Nevertheless, he seems to have had a less favourable view of the doctor’s literary merits. In the same year he wrote to Coleridge praising the ‘happy’ satirical swipe Thomas Mathias had made at Darwin’s poetry, in his *Pursuits of Literature*. Coleridge may not have entirely agreed with his friend, for in 1797 he called Darwin ‘the first *literary* character of Europe’; and though the two authors of *Lyrical Ballads* attacked Darwin’s ‘gaudy’ literary style a year later, both were later to acknowledge his influence as a scientific thinker and Coleridge praised him as possessing ‘a greater range of knowledge than any other man of Europe’.

Darwin’s most radical theory, hinted at in *Zoonomia*, and expounded more fully in *The Temple of Nature*, was evolution, which according to King-Hele was propounded ‘in a more thoroughgoing’ way than his grandson Charles was to do in his world-shattering work of 1859. Unfortunately, the promotion of such heretical views at a time when Britain was at war with an atheistic France, effectively destroyed the reputation Darwin had sedulously built up over thirty years, and by his death in 1802 he was a *persona non grata* in polite circles. Luckily, he had done enough by this time to impress a younger audience with iconoclastic tendencies. By the 1790s Blake had already found him an inspirational figure and Byron and Shelley sat up one night discussing his theories — an event which led to Mary Shelley concocting what would become *Frankenstein*.

King Hele, Darwin’s greatest champion, makes great claims for his hero’s mental athleticism and ground-breaking scientific inventiveness. As a proto-Darwinist his position is unassailable, but he was also a plant biologist, and in *Phytologia*, according to King-Hele, ‘gave the first description of the full process of photosynthesis in plants’, while also offering insights into plant nutrition. As a chemist he was one of the first to abandon the role of phlogiston in favour of Lavoisier’s oxygen theory. As an astrophysicist, he proposed the idea of the Big Bang and supported his friend John Michell’s inchoate theory of the black hole. As a geologist he ‘correctly specified the roles of both volcanic and sedimentary rocks in Earth history’. He even wrote on crude oil and advocated drilling for it. He was also the first Briton to fly a large hydrogen balloon and he sketched out ideas that in the hands of others became technological innovations — such as the basic steering mechanism in cars, a copying machine, a speaking machine and a hydrogen-oxygen rocket motor. Indeed, if all these claims are justified, King-Hele would certainly be justified in classing him as ‘the most all-rounder of all time’.

Lamb and Darwin did have some mutual sympathies. Writing to Coleridge in January 1797 Lamb confessed to ‘almost adoring’ Joseph Priestley, whose *Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit* he found both stimulating and comforting. Both Priestley and Darwin were, of course, active members of the celebrated Lunar Society in Birmingham. Coleridge and Darwin had a mutual friend in Thomas Wedgwood, ‘the first photographer’, who seems to have been a sickly child and a hypochondriacal youth. Darwin treated him for various afflictions—mainly eye and nasal problems — in his early twenties — and advised this privileged, but highly talented figure to fill his time by reading his own *Zoonomia* or finding a ‘a wife or a law suit, or some such thing’. Wedgwood was particularly interested in optics, and the two men corresponded on medical and scientific ideas. Indeed, Darwin’s suggestions for the cure of eye problems seem to anticipate the operation established in the 1950s for counteracting the effects of cataracts. Darwin also speculated on whether blind men had tangible ideas, which impressed Wordsworth so much that he introduced them into ‘Tintern Abbey’. Unfortunately, Darwin, like so many of his medical contemporaries, prescribed opium without considering its dangerously addictive properties, with the result that Wedgwood became a junkie and in 1805 died at the tragically early age of 34.

In making Darwin’s fascinating and indeed important correspondence available to historians of science Desmond King-Hele has performed a valuable and scholarly task. My only regret is that Coleridge and Wordsworth were perhaps too young to have had the opportunity of corresponding with the scientist in any meaningful way. Their letters to him can only be imagined.

R. M. Healey

Society Notes and News from Members

CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

The Society's President, Professor J.R.('Dick')Watson, featured on BBC Radio 4's *Sunday Worship* on 30 December in a celebration of carols old and new in Britain.

Our representative at the Alliance of Literary Societies, Robin Healey, is now joint editor of *ALSo*, the journal of the Alliance, which was relaunched last year as a successor to *Chapter One*. The 2007 number of *ALSo* contained nine articles on the topic of censorship and copyright, as well as an extract from a debate on copyright which took place in the Alliance's email forum. Robin's own contribution was an essay on *John Betjeman, the Shell Guides and Corporate Censorship*. The journal is available to Charles Lamb Society members in electronic format, by following these instructions: go to the website at www.allitsoc.org.uk (notice the triple 'L'); click on 'Member Societies' on the toolbar; on the next page click on 'Details of the Society'; on the next page click on 'Click here for members' page'; click to allow temporary access in the scripted window bar that appears; type in the password 'als2als' at the prompt. The theme for the 2008 number of *ALSo* is to be literary tourism.

The annual ALS weekend is to take place in Swindon on 17/18 May 2008, when the host Society will be The Richard Jefferies Society. After the morning's business meeting, Saturday will be given over to a lecture by Hugoe Matthews, President of that Society and a film about places associated with the writer; while on Sunday delegates will explore (in the form of a literary treasure trail with clues) the North Wiltshire countryside and places immortalised by Jefferies in his works.

In anticipation of taking up his new post at Georgetown University, Washington D.C., our Vice-chairman, Professor Duncan Wu, has relinquished possession of Charles Lamb's chair, which for some 15 years has graced his room at St. Catherine's College, Oxford, and been sat upon by many a pupil. The chair is currently housed by your chairman, pending the Council's decision on a suitable home for it. It is a solid piece of early nineteenth century furniture which was presented to the Society in 1956. It is hoped to reproduce a photograph of it, together with some notes on its history, in a future number of the *Bulletin*.

Late last year I was delighted to receive an unusual gift for the Society. Council member Sandra Knott has very kindly donated a patchwork quilt she worked in 2006, which celebrates the life of Charles and Mary Lamb and is entitled 'A Double Life' (a portion of which is displayed below). I am sure members will admire and enjoy this when it is displayed at future meetings.



ALLIANCE OF LITERARY SOCIETIES AGM AND WEEKEND EVENT

On May 19-20, 2007, delegates representing member societies of the ALS met at St Hilda's College, Oxford, for their Annual General Meeting and weekend event, which this year was hosted by the Tolkien Society.

The Charles Lamb Society was represented as always by yours truly, but Mr Leigh-Hunt from the Keats-Shelley Memorial Trust and Linda Curry from the John Clare Society also flew the flag for Romanticism. This meeting was special in at least one respect as it saw the launch of a new literary venture. *ALSo* is to be a yearbook edited by myself and Linda Curry consisting of essays and articles by individual members of the ALS on a given theme or themes. Censorship and Copyright were chosen as the themes for 2007 and the resulting production of nine essays was well received by those present. Two copies of *ALSo* have been deposited with Nick and Cecilia Powell, but the yearbook can be accessed online using a password, details of which may be obtained from the Powells.

The novelty of a new yearbook deflected attention a little from the AGM, which proceeded uneventfully. It was announced that the ALS continues to grow, albeit slowly, most interest coming via the Alliance's very sophisticated website. Even taking into account the expenses incurred by the publication of *ALSo*, the ALS's finances remain healthy. Despite this, it was resolved to slightly increase the subscription for the smallest member societies. The committee was re-elected *nem. con.*, but there were changes to the executive. After many years of excellent service Rosemary Culley stepped down as Secretary but agreed to stay on as Webmaster General. Nicholas Reed also resigned as Chairman, his duties being taken over by Linda Curry.

While the two talks by members of the Tolkien Society that followed the AGM failed to persuade your delegate to read *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings* with any degree of relish, he did warm slightly to their author, whom he had hitherto believed to be too literary hide-bound and fogeyish even for his taste, but who seems to have displayed wider human sympathies. The post-lunch tour of Tolkien's Oxford by another member of the society confirmed this favourable impression. However, it also came across that Tolkien's progress through the academic ranks was due less to great industry on his part and rather more to the fact that in his chosen field of Anglo-Saxon there were few genuine rivals.

Although one or two delegates returned home late in the afternoon, quite a number remained to attend the dinner held at the Department of Continuing Education, where there were further opportunities to exchange ideas and anecdotes.

As our Chairman indicates above, the next AGM and weekend event will be held on Saturday and Sunday, 17/18 May in Swindon, where the host will be the Richard Jefferies Society.

Robin Healey

FROM D.E. WICKHAM

Dream Children

For the record, Charles Lamb's original autograph manuscript of his essay, 'Dream Children', was offered for sale towards the end of 2006 by the American bookseller, Bromer of Boston, in their magnificent Catalogue 127, *An Extraordinary Gathering*, priced at \$US 85,000 (now about £43,000).