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Wordsworth as Environmental "Nature" Writer

Ashton Nichols

William Wordsworth is perhaps the romantic poet most often described as a "nature" writer. From his earliest poems describing places in the 1780s to his final poems (written when he was almost eighty years old), Wordsworth paid careful attention to the details of the nonhuman world in almost all of his poems and prose writings. What the word "nature" meant to Wordsworth, however, is not a simple matter. Wordsworth was a careful naturalist, always paying close attention to the physical environment that surrounded him: animals, plants, landscape, and weather. At the same time, he was a thoughtful literary artist, who described the "mind of Man" as "My haunt, and the main region of my song" ("Home at Grasmere," lines 989–90; later, "Prospectus" to *The Excursion*, lines 40–41).[1] So, does the poet objectively describe the details of his natural environment, or does he subjectively shape those sensory experiences into a unity in his mind? He does both, since the human mind, in Wordsworth's view, is "creator and receiver both" (*Prelude* [1850] Book 2, line 258), taking in the details of the world around him, but then shaping those details into his own mental creations. This helps to explain how he has played such an important role in recent years in the development of "environmental literature." In Wordsworth's masterful language, a simple poem about daffodils can become a significant lesson about the operations of memory and the powers of the human mind. His long poems *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* trace the growth of the mind amid the powerful influences of the natural world—mountains, lakes, forests, and sky—and suggest how the operations of the mind in nature produce many of the most valuable aspects of each person: memory, imagination, and sympathy. His career as a poet also came to embody the nature writer as a wider cultural influence, much like Henry David Thoreau would do later in America.

In his autobiographical poem *The Prelude*, Wordsworth records those moments—he calls them "spots of time"—when the interaction between his growing awareness and a natural scene had a particularly powerful impact on his own development. In "Tintern Abbey," he warns his younger sister Dorothy that she should retain her close connection to the natural world, a connection that will be threatened as she grows into adult consciousness. Many times in his work, nature speaks to the poet—the boy of Winander literally has a conversation with owls—but the poet then ends up speaking for the natural world, praising its value, revealing its beauty, and cautioning humans about their ability to harm its wonders. Wordsworth lived at a time before the Industrial Revolution had a widespread negative effect on the landscapes of England, a time before serious pollution and significant environmental preservation. At the same time, however, he saw what was coming. In the 1830s, Wordsworth spoke out forcefully against the idea of bringing the railroad line deeper into his beloved Lake District. Wordsworth's "environmental" poems helped to establish the value of a naturalistic form of writing that reaches from the poets James Thomson and William Cowper in the eighteenth century to Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney in the twenty-first century. Although it would not technically be correct to call Wordsworth an "environmentalist"—the term did not even exist when he was writing—his poetic flowers, birds, and emotionally affecting landscapes prepared the way for the powerful sense of an essential connection between human beings and the natural world.

William Wordsworth was the second child of John Wordsworth and Ann Cookson, born in Cockermouth, Cumbria, on April 7, 1770. His sister Dorothy was born a year later, and the two remained extremely close throughout their lives, with Dorothy's *Journals* eventually providing naturalistic imagery and precise details (daffodils, storm clouds, and their Grasmere neighbors) for some of her brother's most famous poems. Although his childhood was marred by the early deaths of both parents—his mother when he was eight, his father when he

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was twelve—Wordsworth's memories of growing up, as recounted in his poetry, included powerful moments of fear and excitement, anticipation and enthusiasm, almost always connected with the "sublime" landscapes and countless smaller natural phenomena around him. His childhood included constant attention to the plants, animals, and countryside of the Lake District; he was often a natural historian in poetry, writing lyrics to yew trees, thorn bushes, rivers, sparrows, butterflies, a daisy, a cuckoo, a lesser celandine, and, of course, daffodils. At Hawkshead Grammar School, he received a thorough classical education, fostered by three Cambridge-educated headmasters, one of whom was the brother of Fletcher Christian, famous for the mutiny on the HMS *Bounty* (Wu 162–63).

His poem "The Boy of Winander" records a clearly autobiographical moment when the young naturalist tried to communicate with Lake District owls with surprising results:

> There was a Boy: ye knew him well, ye cliffs
> And islands of Winander!—many a time,
> At evening, when the earliest stars began
> To move along the edges of the hills,
> Rising or setting, would he stand alone
> Beneath the trees or by the glimmering lake,
> And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands
> Pressed closely palm to palm, and to his mouth
> Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,
> Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls,
> That they might answer him; and they would shout
> Across the watery vale, and shout again,
> Responsive to his call, with quivering peals,
> And long halloos and screams, and echoes loud,
> Redoubled and redoubled, concourse wild
> Of jocund din; and, when a lengthened pause
> Of silence came and baffled his best skill,

> Then sometimes, in that silence while he hung
> Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
> Has carried far into his heart the voice
> Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
> Would enter unawares into his mind,
> With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
> Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received
> Into the bosom of the steady lake. (*Prelude* [1850] Book 5, lines 364–88)

The boy's attempt to communicate with wild creatures is immediately successful. Once the owls answer his calls, he has made a direct and immediate connection across the species boundary that prepares the way for the poem's most important moment. In the silence that follows the owls' response, the young nature-lover learns the way memories are made; the sound of waterfalls, the rocks and forests, and the sky reflected in "the steady lake" all make their way into the poet's mind with a force that causes their images to last for decades in the mind.

Wordsworth's earliest major poems, begun while he was still a student at St. John's College, Cambridge, indicate the influence of an earlier neoclassical poetic tradition, but they also reveal a unique emerging voice that would come to identify him as a founder of the romantic movement in English literature. As early as "An Evening Walk" (1787–89) and "Descriptive Sketches" (1791–92) he is already paying close attention to the details of the nonhuman world around him: plants and animals, streams and sky, geography and weather. At the same time, he is also deeply interested in the operations of the human mind. He complicates issues for all readers and critics who want to see him primarily as a nature poet when he says, "the mind of Man— / My haunt, and the main region of my song." If the human mind is the main region of his song, however, he still needs the natural world as the source of the countless objects and creatures on which the mind operates, a world that gives him his subject matter as a poet: "On Man, on Nature,

and on human Life, / Thinking in solitude, from time to time" ("Home at Grasmere," lines 959–60; *The Excursion*, lines 1–3). Poetic images rise up in his mind but never without corresponding emotions: "I feel sweet passions traversing my Soul / Like music" (lines 961–62); and they rise not only from grand, majestic, or sublime circumstances, but also typically from the simple details of daily life and ordinary events.

The poem "Tintern Abbey" (actually titled "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798") is the poem that, more than any other, defines a new way of conceiving poetry, the poet, and the relationship between the mind of the author and the world of nature. In this poem, Wordsworth describes his sister Dorothy, just one year younger, beside him, and he sees her developing mind as the key to the lesson he wants to teach. He tells her to make sure and remember the powerful natural scene they see before them in the Wye Valley. Memory is the capacity that helps to create a vision of the self, a psychological capacity that preserves the past but, more importantly, enshrines that same past "for future renovation":

> . . . And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean, and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
> A lover of the meadows and the woods,
> And mountains; and of all that we behold
> From this green earth . . . (lines 94–106)

"Tintern Abbey" is notable for the way it presents particular places as especially valuable in terms of their ability to trigger remembrance, enhance the present, and provide "life and food / For future years" (lines 65–66). The two metaphors, "life" and "food," are not insignificant. Each person's experience of nature provides "life" because each human is an organic being, connected by a powerful *élan vital* (a life-force) to all other living things. No longer trapped in a mechanistic model of the physical universe first proposed by Enlightenment science, Wordsworth draws on his friend Coleridge's view that both life and art derive from organic principles; romantic human beings are more like plants and animals than machines. The metaphor of "food" is equally important; the nonhuman world provides spiritual nourishment for the emotions ("the passions") just as organic food provides sustenance for the body.

Here is a forerunner of the green movement in modern ecological criticism, emerging by way of Wordsworth's belief in a force that pervades all living things, an organic unity that links the world of human beings to the wider living world around them. The discrete and isolated objects of eighteenth-century rationalist thinking are replaced by a force ("And I have felt / A presence," lines 94–95) that is spiritual without being religious, influential without being deterministic, always able to connect the fragmentary elements of human experience together into a unified identity, a personal self. In the rural world of nature, not the urban world of cities (Blake's "Satanic mills"?), Wordsworth finds just those affecting scenes that are most likely to achieve this result in his mind: waterfalls ("The sounding cataract / Haunted me like a passion," lines 77–78), hillsides ("the tall rock, / The mountain," lines 78–79), and forests ("The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood, / Their colours and their forms, were then to me / An appetite: a feeling and a love," lines 79–81). This world of birds, flowers, and trees is not important simply for its beauty, but because it links the developing mind to the same wider world from which these natural objects come, the material world on which they depend. Wordsworth's ideas here lay

a part of the groundwork for the environmental movement of the twentieth century. Percy Shelley may have been the first to call Wordsworth the "Poet of Nature" ("To Wordsworth," 1816), but modern criticism has asserted Wordsworth's role as a forerunner of environmentalism, as well as the recent movement in literary scholarship known as ecocriticism. In *Romantic Ecology*, Jonathan Bate writes, "Of course, Wordsworth's poem about the boy of Winander addresses itself to the workings of the mind and the power of imagination"—the typical subjects of romantic poetry—"but let us not forget that it is also about a boy alone by a lake at dusk blowing mimic hootings to unseen owls," and these owls, Bate concludes, "are there to answer him" (115). The potential value of the natural world to human beings is, in our modern sense, at once the subject and the object of such a poem.

Wordsworth began his great autobiographical poem, later known as *The Prelude*, in 1798. He had no idea that the childhood memories he began to recount in letters to his friend Coleridge during the freezing winter of 1798–99, when he was shut up in damp, icy rooms in the small Saxon town of Goslar, would become the origins of the greatest autobiographical long poem in English, and perhaps the last epic—an epic of the self—ever written in English literature. (The lyrical lines began: "Was it for this / That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved / To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song" [*Prelude* [1850] Book 1, lines 269–71].) This great poem began as small snippets of recollection—snare robbing, bird's egg- and boat-stealing, ice-skating, and waiting for horses to take him home for vacation—that formed the basis of the young poet's earliest memories of life in the Lake District. These memorable "spots of time," as he would call them, chronicle moments when the nonhuman elements of the growing child's world combine with powerful human influences in the mind—fear of the boat's owner, a woman struggling against the wind, youthful anticipation of a family holiday—to produce lasting lines of poetry. Whether he is robbing snares set by other hunters, waiting for the horses that would take him home not long before his father died, or ice-skating to the point of diz-

zying "transport," the young mind feels itself thinking and feeling, not alone but always amid powerful presences in the natural world.

The year 1798 also saw the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, the volume of poetry that more than any other defined the new movement in poetry announced by Wordsworth and Coleridge. This volume would also become the occasion for the 1802 "Preface," in which Wordsworth would first describe poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" that "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity" (preface to *Lyrical Ballads* 611). He also notes that it should be written in a "language really used by men" and should take its subject from "low and rustic life" since "in that condition, the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature" (Preface 597). This emphasis on rural life gets Wordsworth's contemporary readers, and many subsequent readers, closer to the natural world by emphasizing lives lived close to the land, to agriculture, and even to a wilder world devoid of human beings.

Many of Wordsworth's most powerful poetic insights were fully shaped by this time. "The Tables Turned" offers perhaps the first statement of Wordsworth's central naturalistic philosophy: "Come forth into the light of things, / Let Nature be your teacher" (lines 15–16). This view emerges from his belief that rational thinking needs to be balanced by an emotional response to one's surroundings. The mental capacity that had given its name to the entire age of reason is now described by Wordsworth as "our meddling intellect." This same capacity for rational thought "misshapes the beauteous forms of things" so that humans "murder to dissect" (lines 26–28). In the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, the poem "Nutting" chronicles the sort of human destructiveness that would later come to be associated with assaults on the physical environment. A young boy, who heads off through the woods with the innocent goal of gathering hazelnuts, ends up virtually ravaging the peaceful, natural scene: "Then up I rose, / And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash / And merciless ravage" (lines 43–45). But this boy soon learns the lesson wrought by his own

destructiveness: "I felt a sense of pain when I beheld / The silent trees, and saw the intruding sky" (lines 52–53), and so to his companion he says: "Then, Dearest Maiden, move along these shades / In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand / Touch—for there is a spirit in the woods" (lines 54–56). In such short and simple lyrics, Wordsworth develops a complex theory of the way human beings seek to control a natural world in which power is sensed or intuited; but this is always a power that cannot be fully understood by the rational intellect.

Such an expansive but vague natural power is sometimes associated with God, leading to claims that the early Wordsworth was a pantheist—or one who sees God *in* nature as the ancients did: "I'd rather be / A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn" ("The World Is Too Much with Us," lines 9–10). For fundamentalist Christian theology based on a literal reading of the Bible, God can never be found *in* the natural world, since all aspects of physical nature—birds, flowers, trees, sky, you and I—are only parts of a fallen world that was left to humans after Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden. God is somewhere else, since divinity cannot inhabit a fallen world that was solely the result of human weakness. According to this strict, theological interpretation of Christian "nature," humans were given paradise, but they ended up in a fallen world of death, decay, and corruption. The issue of whether the power that created and controls the universe is to be found in (immanent, within, inherent) or beyond (supernatural, above, outside of) physical nature propels much of the debate that has occupied theologians since the time of Martin Luther. Indeed, the Protestant Reformation is a series of debates about precisely what form or forms of mediation—scripture, Eucharist, priest, prayer, bishops, the heart of the believer—may be required to bridge the gap that separates humans from a God that has left the natural world for the realm of "supernature": heaven. For the young Wordsworth, however, the issue is not so simple. For him, "Heaven lies about us in our infancy!" ("Immortality Ode," line 67), and the place we live in, the sublunary world we inhabit on a daily basis, is "the very world, which is the world / Of all of

us,—the place where, in the end, / We find our happiness, or not at all!" (*Prelude* [1850] Book 10, lines 725–27; also in *The Friend*, 26 October 1809). The young Wordsworth posits a secular version of salvation that saves human beings in the material world they inhabit—rocks, lakes, trees, waterfalls, and mountains—not beyond this world in another.

By the time of the publication of *Poems in Two Volumes* in 1807, Wordsworth had completed most of the lyrics for which he is best known today, especially those associated with the powers of the natural world and the role of the human mind in creating a connection between human beings and their surroundings: "Resolution and Independence" (also known as "The Leech-Gatherer"), "My Heart Leaps Up," "The Solitary Reaper," "The World Is Too Much with Us," and "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." The latter poem contains a number of the most often-quoted Wordsworthian lines and phrases: "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" (lines 57–58); "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting" (line 59); "nothing can bring back the hour / Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower" (lines 182–83); "To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears" (lines 207–8).

This is also the volume of poetry that includes a short lyric that is probably Wordsworth's best known to the general public over two hundred years later. Called "the daffodil poem" and formally titled by its first line, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" begins:

> I wandered lonely as a Cloud
> That floats on high o'er Vales and Hills,
> When all at once I saw a crowd
> A host of dancing Daffodils;
> Along the Lake, beneath the trees,
> Ten thousand dancing in the breeze.

The waves beside them danced, but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee:—
A poet could not but be gay
In such a laughing company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude,
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the Daffodils. (lines 1–18)

This poem is more complex than it seems at first. While it appears to be a simple record of a field of bright yellow flowers on a spring day, it actually shows its readers how memories are made and preserved; it offers a profound meditation on the psychological powers of the human mind. The "wealth" of the memory of these daffodils is "little" known until long after the initial experience, and only then the mind acts to save these flowers for future "renovation" of the self.

By 1814, Wordsworth was a famous public figure as well as the representative of a new voice in poetry, a voice that would come to be called romantic. Wordsworth's version of this movement leaned toward a form of nature-worship and away from Coleridge's interest in the German focus on the mind, especially the heightened imagination and extreme psychological states. Wordsworth was interested in the imagination, but his version of this power was anchored firmly in ideas about memory and the power of youthful experience. Coleridge, by contrast, concentrated on the heightened mental states produced by the opium (laudanum) that he ingested daily for much of his adult life, and by other intense mental states such as melancholy, dejection, and nightmare. The poem Wordsworth published that year, *The Excursion*, became one

of his best-selling poems, and although it is now often seen as limited in its power, the poem offered a view of the relationship between the mind and nature that has had a powerful impact for the past two centuries. In this poem, Wordsworth is very clear about his growing disdain for the rise of industry: "Here a huge town . . . Hiding the face of earth for leagues . . . wilderness erased" (lines 119–29). "I grieve," the poet concludes, "when on the darker side / Of this great change I look; and there behold / Such outrage done to nature" (lines 151–53). This poem was supposed to be the second part of his great three-part epic, a long poem about a poet much like the young Wordsworth: "a philosophical Poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society, and to be entitled the *Recluse*; as having for its principal subject the sensations and opinions of a poet living in retirement," as he would say in his 1850 introduction to *The Prelude*, which had originally been intended as an appendix to the planned but never written epic.

By middle age, Wordsworth settled into the life of the "smiling public man," as W. B. Yeats would describe his own role as a famous poet a century later ("Among School Children," line 8). In 1813, the financially strapped poet accepted a salary that was to be derived from his work as a distributor of stamps in Westmoreland. He had earlier received a small bequest as a result of caring for his dying friend Raisley Calvert. Wordsworth continued to write poetry, much of which now fell into traditional categories: poems on places, celebrations of public events, sonnets on people and memorable dates in English history. The standard view is that Wordsworth's poetic powers failed as he aged, and that the earlier revolutionary, pantheistic liberal became an aging, hidebound, Anglican (Episcopalian) conservative. This view seems overly harsh if we consider poems like the River Duddon sonnets "Scorn Not the Sonnet," "Yarrow Revisited," "On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway," and "Extempore Effusion upon the Death of James Hogg," among other important examples of Wordsworth's later poems. Wordsworth retained elements of his poetic powers until he gave up writing for good upon the death of his daughter Dora in

1847. What faded with age were his philosophical curiosity, radical politics, and willingness to challenge received wisdom for the sake of intellectual consistency. Like many aging authors—Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Yeats are notable exceptions—the future poet laureate became more predictable and a good deal more complacent as he aged.

Many of the second generation of romantic poets died early deaths: Lord Byron succumbed to "a fever" at age thirty-six while fighting with the Greeks in their war for independence; Shelley drowned off the coast of Italy at age twenty-nine; and John Keats died of tuberculosis in Rome when he was only twenty-five. Such early deaths came to be associated with the other-worldly literary styles of these authors, and even the excessively romantic styles of their lives; as Wordsworth had written: "the good die first, / And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust / Burn to the socket" *(The Excursion*, lines 500–2). Wordsworth, however, went on to live a long life surrounded by friends and family, suffering the early loss of one brother at sea and the deaths of three of his children. His life as a public figure was enhanced with the publication of the fifth edition of his *Guide to the Lakes* in 1835. The guide first appeared in 1810 as a money-making effort by a struggling young family man. Wordsworth's expanded descriptions of the beauties of these landscapes in a later version of the book led readers to argue for the need to preserve such places for the benefit of future generations. The poet also objected forcefully, in letters to the newspaper and in poetry, to the proposal to bring the Lakeland railroad line as far as Ambleside: "Is then no nook of English ground secure / From rash assault?" ("On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway," lines 1–2). In this poem, Wordsworth laments the "false utilitarian lure" of such a scheme, the coming "blight" of industrialization that needs the very natural "winds" and "torrents" of water themselves to "protest against this wrong." By this point Wordsworth has become the voice of an early environmental preservationist; the railway, however, came to the Lake District despite the poet's vociferous protests.

Queen Victoria named Wordsworth poet laureate in 1843, just seven years before his death. This honor, the most prestigious public recognition available to a British poet at this point in history, came to an author who had not written his long-promised epic, *The Recluse*, nor had he published *The Prelude*, the poem "on his own life," which was not even named until after Wordsworth's death. He and the family had always known *The Prelude* as the "poem to Coleridge," since it had been dedicated to his best friend in its earliest drafts. In retrospect, it is clearly this poem that gives the most complete version of Wordsworth's developing consciousness, as well as the most thorough analysis of his own life in nature: "Ye Presences of Nature in the sky / And on the earth! Ye Visions of the hills! / And Souls of lonely places!" (lines 464–66). It is not just places that matter, however, since these natural presences "impressed upon all forms the characters [images] / Of danger or desire; and thus did make / The surface of the universal earth . . . Work like a sea" (Book 1, lines 471–75). The earth works like a sea in the mind of the young poet, sending out waves of imagery, stirring rising and falling tides of poetry, stimulating the imagination, and providing the raw materials for art. This is also the poem that will reveal how "[n]ature by extrinsic passion first / Peopled the mind with forms sublime or fair / And made me love them" (Book 1, lines 545–47).

In the century and a half since the publication of *The Prelude*, scholars have come to see this autobiographical epic as Wordsworth's masterwork, a major poem that sets forth his most complete and coherent philosophy of the interaction between nature and culture, while also providing a prototype for modern writing about the self. Recent critical work reveals just how influential Wordsworth has been as a prophet of natural preservation and a protoenvironmental author. As early as 1964, the historian of science Philip C. Ritterbush noted, "Wordsworth's notion of natural harmony anticipated the conclusions of modern science" (203). Jonathan Bate cites Karl Kroeber as the first critic to offer an "ecological reading of Wordsworth," in Kroeber's 1974 essay on "Home at Grasmere," Wordsworth's earliest poetic attempt to describe

and understand the power of this place in his own imagination (*Ecology* 125). Kroeber is also important for *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* (1994), a book that relies on Wordsworth as a central example of a literary artist whose works, in poetry and prose, were crucial texts for the development of early ecological awareness. Bate's own *Romantic Ecology* likewise sees Wordsworth as the originator of a new role for "nature" (and the link between nature and mind) in English literature. He compares Wordsworth to Thoreau, noting that while Thoreau produced the "romantic ecology" (*Ecology* 39) by which the vast geographic expanses of America might be considered worthy of preservation, it was Wordsworth who became the voice for saving smaller spaces: domestic settings and gentler landscapes like those found in his own beloved Lake District.

Not until Bate's own *Song of the Earth* (2000) did Wordsworth come in for a full treatment as the practitioner of a new ecopoetics, a form of environmental writing as revolutionary, in its own way, as all of the critical descriptions of Wordsworth's early version of romanticism. In this view, the specific geographic places and spaces of Wordsworth's poems are as important as these poems' language, politics, and role as autobiographical documents. Of course, Wordsworth praises not only those gentler landscapes around his village home of Grasmere but also the sublime High Peaks of Westmoreland (Helvellyn and Snowdon), as well as the European Alps (Mont Blanc and Gondo Gorge). In recent years, an expanding body of critical opinion has placed Wordsworth among those English authors now being discussed in terms of the critical approach known as ecocriticism. Recent literary critics who have argued persuasively for the central role of the British romantic tradition in the development of ecological awareness, and an increased sensitivity to the natural world, include Kevin Hutchings, James McKusick, Kurt Fosso, and Timothy Morton, among others. Indeed, this line of research has become a major aspect of ecocritical ways of reading, emphasizing the key importance of literature that links humans and the

nonhuman world. Wordsworth, as much as any earlier author, gives modern readers and writers good reasons to praise natural places and work toward preserving those landscapes increasingly threatened by the actions of modern technology and industry.

A rarely quoted fragment of Wordsworth's early philosophical verse (1798)—later incorporated into *The Excursion*—includes lines that embody the central principle of almost all of Wordsworth's writing about the natural world:

> There is an active principle alive in all things;
> In all things, in all natures, in the flowers
> And in the trees, in every pebbly stone
> That paves the brooks, the stationary rocks,
> The moving waters and the invisible air.
> All beings share their properties which spread
> Beyond themselves, a power by which they make
> Some other being conscious of their life,
> Spirit that knows no insulated spot,
> No chasm, no solitude, from link to link
> It circulates the soul of all the worlds.
> This is the freedom of the universe . . . (lines 1–12)

This passage, as much as any in Wordsworth's body of work, reveals the central premise of his protoecological poetry. The natural world is pervaded by a "principle." It might be made of matter, and it might be spiritual, but whatever composes this nonhuman world, a force—as in "may the Force be with you"—pervades every living, and even non-living, thing; the very rocks, stones, and falling waters share in the power that links all things together. All living beings also share in this power; there is one world that unifies creation into a single ecological home. The prefix "eco-" literally means "house" or "home." So there is no solitude, chasm, or separation among the countless parts of the natural world. We are all here together in nature—in Wordsworth's

beautiful phrasing, circulating with "the soul of all the worlds"—and our freedom is granted not by Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence or the "creator" mentioned there; our freedom combines the full freedom of the human mind with the natural freedom of the nonhuman universe. A powerful vision of our life in nature lies at the heart of Wordsworth's writing.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Wordsworth can be found in *William Wordsworth: The Oxford Authors*, edited by Stephen Gill (1984).

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