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A REVALUATION OF WORDSWORTH'S SONNETS

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PREFACE

It was Longinus who wrote to his friend, Terentianus, "The judgment of literature is the final aftergrowth of much endeavor." Any literary anniversary presents for literary criticism, the challenge to ascertain new judgments arrived at through careful research and persistent endeavor. Such an anniversary was celebrated in the year 1950, which marked the centenary of William Wordsworth's death. Literary criticism has already in this decade presented justifications for the poet and revaluations of his poetry.

In 1950 was published Helen Darbishire's The Poet Wordsworth. The author's concern is with the poet and his poetry. In 1951, Gilbert T. Dunklin edited Wordsworth, Centenary Studies Presented at Cornell and Princeton. The volume contains six lectures which present to the modern world recollections and appraisals of the poet, Wordsworth. All studies are presented by men of literary distinction, and include Douglas Bush, Frederick A. Pottle, Earl Leslie Griggs, John Crowe Ransom, B. Ifor Evans, Lionel Trilling, and Willard L. Sperry. In this present year, 1953, there has come from the press, Wordsworth and the Literature of Travel, by Charles Norton Coe. There is little said about the growing popularity of Wordsworth, yet it is hoped for.

The old assumption that Wordsworth's best poetry was written before he was thirty years old, has been too generally accepted and has therefore been the cause of much pure poetry resting unexplored. To delve into all the forms of poetry used by Wordsworth would be too profound a task and would, no doubt, result in confusion. Yet, to pass over that one form wherein he did achieve a high standard of poetic worth in the two decades that followed his so-called decline, would be to neglect to pass favorable judgment where it is due. Wordsworth achieved the perfection of his early years in several of the sonnets written in later life.

In view of the fact that these sonnets until recent years have been seldom analyzed or rarely explicated, it seemed justifiable and worth-while to attempt to present to the reader, recent criticisms which have proved to be the "final aftergrowth of much endeavor." Among the critics who have within the last decade made intensive study of the sonnets of Wordsworth are Cleanth Brooks, Neal Frank Doubleday, Florence Marsh, W. Macneile Dixon, Charles W. Cooper, Lascelles Abercrombie, and David Daiches. The criticisms of these men will be considered in Chapter IV of this thesis.

To present a well-rounded portrayal of this subject, the first chapter is a consideration of the life of William Wordsworth and the influence pertinent to the writing of the sonnets. These influences, it will be noted, are not only those which have reference to external factors--persons and

events--but also, those internal experiences and inspirations which were so much a part of the "growth of the poet's mind."

The second chapter presents the history of the sonnet and stresses in particular the gradual changes from the original Italian to the innovations adopted by Wordsworth, innovations which have proved to be of historical importance to the sonnet.

In the third chapter is given the early criticisms of Wordsworth's sonnets, thus making it clear that during his lifetime Wordsworth received little recognition for his contributions in the sonnet form. These early criticisms, the reader will observe, are, for the most part, controversial issues which appeared in the periodicals of Wordsworth's day.

The fourth chapter includes modern criticism of the poet's sonnets and attempts to prove that there is today a tendency, particularly in the universities, to uncover the hidden treasures contained in these sonnets, and thus give to the modern world a true picture of Wordsworth, the sonneteer.

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CHAPTER I

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: SONNETEER

The centenary of Wordsworth's death has focused the searchlights of criticism upon the mind of a poet who has already, in our own century, been placed in a "new light." Since this "new light" has been too readily blamed for the decline of the poet's influence, it seems fitting that to form a truer estimate of Wordsworth's poetry and to arrive at a revaluation, it is necessary that we understand the man in the light of this mid-century. To understand the man is to follow the poet and his poetry, and to note the rise and fall of his fame.

On the Derwent River, in the county of Cumberland, lies the small manufacturing town of Cockermouth. Here William Wordsworth was born on the seventh of April, in the year 1770. His parents were descendants of ancient Yorkshire and Westmoreland families. William, who was the second of five children, delighted in his birthplace, which today gives scanty recognition to the poet. (Here, on a river whose banks reach to his very door, Wordsworth was able to enjoy a natural beauty, which to the very end was to be his companion and inspiration in poetry, and which, even in his early years, was a chief factor in bringing him close to nature.)

When Wordsworth was eight years old, his mother died, and he, with his brother Richard, was sent to the Hawkshead Grammar School. During his schooling here, which was to last until 1787, he enjoyed a liberty uncommon in the schools of England of that day. He was satisfied with the lack of discipline and appreciated the leniency allowed him in the choice of reading. To him, life at Hawkshead was a continuation of happy hours lived in the midst of scenes of beauty. Here he received the inspirations which were to become the subject of his sonnet, "Written in Very Early Youth."

One can picture the sixteen-year-old youth, perhaps on his way home from school, with no home study to encroach upon those quiet hours of evening, composing the lines,

Calm is all nature as a resting wheel.
The kine are couched upon the dewey grass;
The horse alone, seen dimly as I pass,
Is cropping audibly his later meal:¹

One can sense with him that

a harmony
Home-felt, and home-created, comes to heal
That grief for which the senses still supply
Fresh food;

and hear him plead,

Oh! leave me to myself, nor let me feel
The officious touch that makes me droop again.

In the same year, 1787, Wordsworth composed the "Sonnet Written By Mr.-----Immediately After the Death of His Wife." That one so young could have written so understandingly of

1. William Wordsworth, The Poetical Works, edited by E. De Selincourt, I, 3.

life and death, is clear when we realize how much more he learned, during his youth, from nature than from books. "No book," he himself says, "could have so early taught me to think of the changes to which human life is subject."²

The first of Wordsworth's poems to be printed was a sonnet published in March, 1787. This sonnet, "On Seeing Miss Helen Maria Weep at a Tale of Distress," betrays no resemblance to the other early sonnets. It does reveal, however, a certain tone of melancholy; a feeling which was common not only with Wordsworth, but with many poets of that day.

Bard Mc Nulty, in an article found in the Publications of the Modern Language Association, says of Wordsworth's pioneering in the sonnet form:

→ All are different, both in their octaves and in their sestet, a fact which shows that when he wrote them Wordsworth had not settled upon any model of this form to emulate.³

When Wordsworth entered St. John's College, Cambridge as a young man of seventeen, he had no parents to direct him--his father having died when he was seventeen--yet he missed the guidance and affection he had been shown at Hawkshead, and although he disliked many things about life at Cambridge, remained there until he was twenty-one, when he was graduated.

2. Emile Legouis, The Early Life of William Wordsworth, 1770-1798, p. 35.

3. Bard Mc Nulty, "Milton's Influence on Wordsworth's Early Sonnets," Publications of the Modern Language Association, LXII (September, 1947), 746.

During the years between 1791 and 1795 Wordsworth experienced " a life of disorganized and unstable personality, full of contradictions and problems."⁴ We will not dwell upon these environmental factors and problems, but briefly state that they were concerned with financial embarrassment, occupational doubts, an unfortunate love affair, political attachments, and disbelief in free will. That Wordsworth's depressive mood, resulting from his "disorganized and unstable personality," found its way into at least one of his sonnets we know. There is a sonnet, inserted in a letter to Dorothy Wordsworth, May 6, 1792, which begins,

Sweet was the walk along the narrow lane
 At noon, the bank and hedgerows all the way
 Shagged with wild pale green tufts and Fragrant Hay
 Caught by the hawthornes from the loaded Wain
 Which Age, with many a slow stoop, strove to gain:

In this sonnet we hear the note of melancholy so audible in the following lines:

Now too, on Melancholy's idle dreams
 Musing, the long spot with my soul agrees
 Quiet and dark;⁵

However, this melancholy was not to last too long. The year 1795 brought with it a peace and delight which the poet had not known in four years. His decision to make his home with his sister, Dorothy, reawakened a joy in nature which for the past four years had been slumbering.

4. Ernest Bernbaum, Guide Through the Romantic Movement, p. 82.

5. Legouis, op. cit., p. 156.

It was on May 21, 1802, at Grasmere, that Dorothy read to Wordsworth a number of Miltonic sonnets. To Wordsworth, the most admirable qualities of these sonnets were their manliness and dignity. He admired them for their simplicity and lack of ornamentation, and on the same afternoon composed three sonnets. In his notes to Isabella Fenwick in 1843, he says,

In the cottage of Town End, one afternoon in 1801, my Sister read to me the sonnets of Milton. I had long been well acquainted with them, but I was particularly struck on that occasion with the dignified simplicity and majestic harmony that runs through most of them,-- in character so totally different from the Italian, and still more so from Shakespeare's fine sonnets! I took fire, if I may be allowed to say so, and produced three sonnets that same afternoon, the first I ever wrote except an irregular one at school. Of these three, the only one I distinctly remember is "I Grieved for Buonaparte."⁶

The sonnet which Wordsworth mentions contains the combined effect of rhyme and blank verse. This effect he was able to maintain by the frequent use of pauses, by questions, and exclamations. Note:

I grieved for Bounaparte, with a vain
And an unthinkable grief! The tenderest mood
Of that Man's mind--what can it be?⁷

Wordsworth noted that Milton had achieved success in this manner. Yet, from the sonnet, "Westminster Bridge," which he composed ten weeks later, we glean only slight Miltonic

6. The date, 1802, in Dorothy's Journal does not agree with that of Wordsworth in his note to I.F. It has been accepted that Wordsworth's date is inaccurate.

7. Wordsworth, The Poetical Works, III, 110.

to this period of Wordsworth's life, having been composed in August, 1811.

Praised by the Art whose subtle power could stay
 Yon cloud, and fix it in that glorious shape;
 Nor would permit the thin smoke to escape,
 Nor those bright sunbeams to forsake the day;
 Which stopped that band of travelers on their way,
 Ere they were lost within the shady wood;
 And showed the Bank upon the glassy flood
 For ever anchored in her sheltered bay.
 Soul-soothing Art! whom Morning, Noontide, Even,
 Do serve with all their changeful pageantry;
 Thou, with ambition modest yet sublime,
 Here, for the sight of mortal man, hast given
 To one brief moment caught from fleeting time
 The appropriate calm of blest eternity.¹⁰

As a warning to the readers of "Admonition," another "local sonnet," he says: "Intended more particularly for the perusal of those who may have happened to be enamoured of some beautiful place of Retreat, in the Country of the Lakes."¹¹ The sonnet, composed before the year 1806, begins:

Well may'st thou halt--and gaze with brightening eye!
 The lovely Cottage of the guardian nook
 Hath stirred thee deeply; with its own dear brook,
 Its own small pasture, almost its own sky!¹²

Such sonnets as these give ample proof that Wordsworth was a lover of nature, and more, a poet of nature. They give evidence also, that the Lake Country, in producing the co-author of the Lyrical Ballads, also produced a great sonneteer.

10. Wordsworth, op. cit., III, 1.

11. Ibid., p. 2.

12. Ibid.

There is a common assumption that Wordsworth's seclusion from the stress of life was due to the fact that he lost interest in public affairs and cared little for the movements of his day. Dawson says of this,

Than this assumption nothing can be falser. To say nothing of the prose writing of Wordsworth, few poets have given us a larger body of patriotic poetry, and poetry impregnated with politics, than Wordsworth.¹³

.....
The urgency of the political passion in Wordsworth can be felt through all the days of the great war, and perhaps the noblest record of that period is in the long series of sonnets which Wordsworth wrote between the years 1803 and 1816.¹⁴

During these years, when Wordsworth was being purged in the fire of the Revolution, England was experiencing the common calamity of all Europe, and while being more closely united to the suffering countries of the continent, she was feeling more keenly the troubles existing at home. Wordsworth, like England, participated in the efforts to establish universal righteousness. His contribution took the form of political sonnets, which he grouped under the heading, Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty. Sonnet VIII of this group, "To Toussaint L'Ouverture," expresses Wordsworth's universal patriotism.

By a decree of the French Convention, 1794, the African slaves were enfranchised. Francois Dominique Toussaint, governor of St. Domingo, resisted Napoleon's edict to re-establish

13. W. J. Dawson, The Makers of English Poetry, p. 136.

14. Dawson, op. cit., p. 139.

When Wordsworth wrote the immortal sonnet, "London, 1802," he was thinking not only of Milton, the poet; but especially of Milton, the patriot. Wordsworth had just returned from France; the contrast between the vanity and show of his own London, with the quiet and loneliness of France stunned him. Recalling Milton's proclamation for human freedom, he calls to his spirit thus:

Milton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour:
 England hath need of thee: She is a fen
 Of stagnant waters:

Wordsworth recalled that the Puritanic Milton, good and happy, did not forsake the common work at hand. The sestet of the sonnet clinches the thought:

Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart;
 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
 So didst thou travel on life's common way,
 In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
 The lowliest duties on herself did lay.¹⁸

In these patriotic sonnets we see the sentiments of a poet whose heart was close to universal righteousness, close to his country, and close to man. Can it be said that he lost interest in public affairs and cared little for the movements of his day!

In August, 1803, Dorothy, Wordsworth, and Coleridge toured Scotland. Of this tour only two sonnets are extant; one, "Composed at-----Castle," expresses Wordsworth's love of nature; the other, "In the Pass of Killiecranky," betrays a patriotic mood.

18. Wordsworth, op. cit., p. 116.

During the year 1820, Wordsworth published The River Duddon Series of Sonnets. This series was a first attempt at a sonnet-sequence, and the thirty-four sonnets progress as smoothly as the river itself. The exact source of the river is not known, but Wordsworth fixed its rise near the "noted Shire-Stone placed at the meeting-point of the counties, Westmoreland, Cumberland, and Lancashire."¹⁹ In Wordsworth's day, children in touching at the same time, with hands and feet, the meeting point of the three counties boasted of being in three counties at the same time.

In Sonnet I of the series, Wordsworth justifies his selection of humble theme, Duddon. In its own degree it is inspirational for him who looks for a deeper meaning.

Not envying Latian shades--if yet they throw
 A grateful coolness round that crystal Spring,
 Blandusia, prattling as when long ago
 The Sabine Bard was moved her praise to sing;
 Careless of flowers that in perennial blow
 Round the moist marge of Persian fountains cling;
 Heedless of Alpine torrents thundering
 Through ice-built arches radiant as heaven's bow;
 I seek the birthplace of a native Stream.--
 All hail, ye mountains! hail, thou morning light!
 Better to breathe at large on this clear height
 Than toil in needless sleep from dream to dream:
 Pure flow the verse, pure, vigorous, free, and bright,
 For Duddon, long-loved Duddon, is my theme!²⁰

It is clear that Wordsworth spent many long hours enjoying the flora and fauna of the Lake Region. His knowledge of this country, not only along the banks of the Duddon, but

19. Wordsworth, op. cit.; p. 504.

20. Ibid., p. 246.

also, among the mountains and hidden coves and groves is evident in Sonnet XVII. Note the delicate observation that make the descriptions so accurate. This accuracy is due to the constant training of eye and ear.

A dark plume fetched me from yon blasted yew,
Perched on whose top the Danish Raven croaks;
Aloft, the imperial Bird of Rome invokes
Departed ages, shedding where he flew
Loose fragments of wild wailing, that bestrew
The clouds and thrill the chambers of the rocks;
And into silence hush the timorous flocks,
That calmly couching while the nightly dew
Moistened each fleece, beneath the twinkling stars
Slept amid that lone Camp on Hardknot's height,
Whose Guardians bent the knee to Jove and Mars:²¹

The "Camp on Hardknot's height" which Wordsworth refers to is an old Roman fort and is impressively situated at a point half-way up the hill from Hardknot and Eskdale. His associating the eagle with the Roman Camp is excellent. In his notes about the "imperial bird" he tells us that he has "heard anglers speak of the grandeur of their appearance as they hovered over Red Tarn in one of the coves of this Mountain."²²

In the Hutchinson edition of Wordsworth's Poetical Works we learn that the imagination expressed in Sonnet XXX was realized in 1840, when Wordsworth, with a group of friends, made a tour up stream. Mrs. Wordsworth took an opposite direction and the party did not reach her until they reached an inn seven miles away.²³ The sonnet reads:

21. Wordsworth, op. cit., p. 253.

22. Ibid., p. 508.

23. Ibid., p. 505.

Who swerves from innocense, who makes divorce
 Of that serene companion--a good name.
 Recovers not his loss; but walks with shame,
 With doubt, with fear, and haply with remorse:
 And oft-times he--who, yielding to the force
 Of chance-temptation, ere his journey end,
 From chosen comrade turns, or faithful friend--
 In vain shall rue the broken intercourse.
 Not so with such as loosely wear the chain
 That binds them, pleasant River! to thy side:--
 Through the rough copse wheel thou with hasty stride;
 I choose to saunter o'er the grassy plain,
 Sure, when the separation has been tried,
 That we, who part in love, shall meet again.²⁴

Wordsworth's tour on the continent in 1820, did not result in any outstanding writing of poetry. His companions on this trip were his wife, Mary, and his sister, Dorothy, and several friends of the family. Although they toured Belgium, Switzerland, and northern Italy, Wordsworth's verse is barren and was never to reach the fruitfulness it had once known. The most characteristic of the sonnets written at this period of Wordsworth's life, was the one composed as the party reached the end of their tour and were once again in England. It is called "After Landing--The Valley of Dover," and was written in November, 1820. The poet says of this landing:

This is a most grateful sight for an Englishman returning to his native land. Everywhere one misses in the cultivated grounds abroad, the animated and soothing accompaniment of animals ranging and selecting their own food at will.²⁵

24. Wordsworth, op. cit., p. 259.

25. Wordsworth, The Poetical Works, p. 487.

The second quatrain in the sonnet contains the same thought:

Peace greets us;--rambling on without an aim
 We mark majestic herds of cattle, free
 To ruminate, couched on the grassy lea;
 And hear far-off the mellow horn proclaim
 The season's harmless pastime.

One enjoys with the party, the quietness of it all:

Ruder sound
 Stirs not; enrapt I gaze with strange delight,
 While consciousness, not to be disowned,
 Here only serve a feeling to invite
 That lifts the spirit to a calmer height,
 And makes this rural stillness more profound.²⁶

It occurred to Wordsworth about the year 1820, that it might be wise to present to the people of England some views and points of the ecclesiastical history of his own country. The Catholic Question, which was at that time being discussed in Parliament, kept his thoughts on the subject. Until this time he had given little thought to the fact that he had begun life as a High Churchman,²⁷ and had attended a grammar school that was a foundation of the Church of England. However, these views, which Wordsworth published as Ecclesiastical Sonnets, express an ideal of the Church of England, which forms one of the links between the old High Church tradition and the revived Catholicism of the Oxford Movement.²⁸ Wordsworth states that his purpose in writing these sonnets was to confine his "view to the introduction, progress,

26. Wordsworth, op. cit., p. 197.

27. Hoxie Neale Fairchild. Religious Trends in English Poetry, III, 128.

28. Ibid., p. 151.

and operation of the Church of England, both previous and subsequent to the Reformation."²⁹

Abbie Potts maintains that Sonnet XXX, "The Point at Issue," presents Wordsworth's best interpretation upon the Ecclesiastical Sonnets,"

For what contend the wise?--for nothing less
Than that the Soul, Freed from the bonds of Sense,
And to her God restored by evidence
Of things not seen, drawn forth from their recess,
Root there, and not in forms, her holiness;--
For Faith, which to the Patriarchs did dispense
Sure guidance, ere a ceremonial fence
Was needful round men thirsting to transgress;--
For Faith, more perfect still, with which the Lord
Of all, himself a Spirit, in the youth
Of Christian aspiration, deigned to fill
The temples of their hearts who, with his word
Informed, were resolute to do his will,³⁰
And worship him in spirit and in truth.

If we are to agree with Abbie Potts, then we must assume with her, that "outward acts . . . never obscure for him, the beauty of the inner mind." So that faith would elevate the just, ecclesiastical architecture was to be more than the subject of purely descriptive poetry; it was to be the framework on which to present the spiritual history of the Church.

Wordsworth was fifty-one years old when he conceived the idea to produce these sonnets. Like the great works of Bede, Dante, and Saint Augustine, his spiritual history of man was to be the work of a mature mind, which would bespeak skilled judgment and long experience.

29. William Wordsworth, Ecclesiastical Sonnets, edited by Abbie Findlay Potts. p. 151.

30. Ibid., p. 375.

Another sonnet taken from "Memorials of a Tour in Italy," reveals the reverence which Wordsworth had for Dante. The sonnet is named "At Florence." So great is this reverence that it becomes somewhat paradoxical.

Under the shadows of a stately Pile,
 The dome of Florence, pensive and alone,
 Nor giving to aught that passed the while,
 I stood and gazed upon a marble stone,
 The laurelled Dante's favourite seat. A throne,
 In just esteem, it rivals, though no style
 Be there of decoration to beguile
 The mind, depressed by thought of greatness flown.
 As a true man who long had served the lyre,
 I gazed with earnestness, and dared no more.
 But in his breast the mighty Poet bore
 A Patriot's heart, warm with undying fire.
 Bold with the thought, in reverence I sate down,
 And, for a moment, filled that empty Throne.³¹

In this chapter we have observed the life and the growth of the poet through his sonnets. Would it not be fitting, then, to bring the chapter to a close by citing the sonnet which he composed in 1838. It is true that Wordsworth lived twelve years after this composition, yet the message it contains and the fact that it was the final sonnet in the volume of sonnets published in the year it was composed makes it imperative that it be recognized here.

Serving no haught Muse, my hands have here
 Disposed some cultured Flowerets (drawn from spots
 Where they bloomed singly, or in scattered knots,)
 Each kind in several beds of one parterre;
 Both to allure the casual Loiterer,
 And that, so placed, my Nurslings may requite
 Studious regard with opportune delight,
 Nor be unthanked, unless I fondly err.
 But metaphor dismissed, and thanks apart,

31. Wordsworth, Poetical Works, III, 225.

Reader, Farewell! My last words let them be--
If in this book Fancy and Truth agree;
If simple Nature trained by careful Art
Through It have won a passage to thy heart;
Grant me thy love, I crave no other fee!³²

Wordsworth called this his Valedictory Sonnet.

32. Wordsworth, The Poetical Works, III, 58.

CHAPTER II
THE HISTORY OF THE SONNET

In the preceding chapter, I have attempted to present the life of William Wordsworth in so far as it betrays his interest in the writing of the sonnet. I have shown this interest, which began in early youth and grew as the poet grew, presenting varied themes to his mind. The sonnets selected, although they are not the ones which made Wordsworth a great sonneteer, have shown the interests and trends which he followed.

The present chapter is an attempt to trace the history of the sonnet from its Petrarchan form, which found its way into England through the efforts of Wyatt and Surrey, through its popularity during the Elizabethan era; then through its two hundred years of slumbering, to the time when it was revived by Wordsworth. I shall point out the interests and factors of the sonnet-sequence from its introduction by Petrarch as well as its imitation by Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, and the minor Elizabethan poets, and then show how Wordsworth widened the scope of the subject matter and the theme of the sequence.

In doing this I shall try to make clear the fact that Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth are great sonneteers. Spenser may be called so, because he is responsible for the transitional form between the Italian or Petrarch-

chan sonnet and the English or Elizabethan sonnet. This transitional form Spenser used in his perfect sonnet-sequence, the Amoretti. Shakespeare, likewise, can be called a great writer of the sonnet because by his disregarding of the interlinking rhymes of Spenser, he gave to his sonnets a wider variety and greater popularity of form. His form became the final type of the English sonnet. Milton's contribution to the sonnet was one of substance as well as form. Most of his sonnets are occasional sonnets, and the pause between the octave and the sestet vanishes. (Wordsworth, the fourth of our great sonnet writers, is responsible for its revival, and his artistic sonnets are never overlooked in preference to those of others.

Among the many cultural arts which had their glory during the thirteenth century, we find that form of poetry known as the sonnet. The sonnet gets its name from the Italian "sonare" which means to play upon an instrument.¹ The "sonnetto" was a little poem with instrumental accompaniment. There were several Italian sonneteers who can be traced to the thirteenth century, but the most preferred of these was Fra Guittone d'Arezzo,² because he used the more accepted of the two sonnet forms then in use. His form imitated and perfected by the Italian Petrarch whose artistic sonnets

1. A. T. Quiller-Couch, editor. English Sonnets, p. v.

2. Ibid., p. vi.

have made the Italian sonnet and the Petrarchan sonnet synonymous.

The sonnet, which Zillman says "is one of the truly notable lyric media for poetic expression,"³ is a fourteen line poem in iambic pentameter. The Petrarchan sonnet is divided into two general parts, the octave and the sestet. This division is not entirely artificial, but corresponds to the treatment of the thought involved. The octave, the theme, the question, the reflection, or the problem is presented, and in the sestet, the problem is solved, or conclusion drawn. The substance of the sonnet is always some mood of love. In the octave the rhyme is abba, abba; the sestet rhyme is cde, cde; but never ends in a couplet. Throughout there is unity of expression.

When Francesco Petrarch was born in the year 1304 at Arezzo, art and literature were making great progress in his country. There was keen interest in the writers of the Golden Age and like many other canon law students of his day, Petrarch was drawn away from his training by his desire for reading the great Latin writers, especially Cicero and Virgil. While making his home at Avignon, and having obtained a preferment as a cathedral canon, he came upon that influence which was to direct the course of his life.

3. Laurence John Zillman, Writing Your Poem, p. 42.

William Everett, in The Italian Poets Since Dante, gives us this information:

In April, 1327, he (Petrarch) saw for the first time at early morning services on Good Friday, Laura de Noves, the wife of Hugh de Sade, and immediately conceived a passion for her which henceforth dominated his whole existence.⁴

Laura never responded to Petrarch's appeals, and after trying in vain, first to satisfy and then to subdue his love, he traveled over many parts of France before he retreated to Vaucluse, a short distance from Avignon. At Vaucluse he gave expression to his feelings by writing love songs or sonnets which were immediately received and made their way everywhere. Thus Petrarch became celebrated and his sonnets suppressed the belief that the only true medium for poetry was the language of Virgil and Horace. The Roman Senate, to show its recognition, invited him to Rome to receive the laurel crown.⁵

Petrarch had sung the praises of Laura for more than twenty years when death took her from him. But death did not take the thoughts of her from his heart: it only chastened his love and gave the sonnets written after her death an elevated tone. Petrarch died at Argua, near Padua, in 1374. In praise of Petrarch's sonnets Everett says:

4. William Everett, The Italian Poets Since Dante, p. 9.

5. Ibid., p. 13.

Every sonnet has its own single theme; yet into the fourteen lines are worked abundant illustrations, for which an inferior poet would need three times as many. Every word seems to fall into its right place of itself, and it needs a very close examination to detect the infinite art of the construction.⁶

With such praise is it any wonder that the first English poets to experiment with the sonnet should turn to those of Petrarch!

Tottel's Miscellany published in 1557, contained the sonnets of Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, who were the first English poets to experiment in sonneting. Wyatt, having traveled in Italy and France on various diplomatic missions, knew the poetry of Petrarch, Ronsard, and Desportes, and modeled his sonnets on those of the great Italian and French poets. Although many of the sonnets which appear in Miscellany were translations and imitations, he nevertheless restored to English poetry a life and naturalness which had disappeared. Surrey, a pupil of Richard Croke, a Catholic humanist, did not follow the Petrarchan models, but divided his sonnets into three quatrains followed by a couplet. The rhyme scheme in these sonnets, which were permeated with the learning and culture of the humanist, was abab, cdcd, in the octave, and efef, gg, in the sestet.

The entire gamut of sonneteers which appeared in England during the following fifty years, chose as their models either

6. Everett, op. cit., p. 19-20

the strict Petrarchan form, the innovation of Surrey, or the French models of Ronsard and Desportes. These minor poets, including Drayton, Constable, and Daniel, were surpassed by Sir Philip Sidney, who held to the form adopted by Surrey. It was this form which became the English or Shakespearean sonnet.

The sonnets of Sir Philip Sidney reveal the author's true self, since they express aspects, changes, and episodes in the life of a human passion. It was Sidney's cycle, the Astrophel and Stella, which led to many other sonnet cycles in English, but more directly to the Amoretti of Edmund Spenser.

Spenser is the first of the great English sonnet writers to be considered here. He was born in London, in the year 1552, and when Sidney's Astrophel and Stella appeared in 1591, he began to have a strong desire to write sonnets. Until that year he had little of the Renaissance spirit of writing, but was frequently turning to the past, as is evident in the earlier works, The Shepherd's Calendar and The Faerie Queene. The Spenserian sonnet, which is the transitional sonnet standing between the Italian and the freer English sonnets, introduces the rhyme scheme abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee, thus presenting a unity by the overlapping or interlocking of the quatrains. This offers variety in rhyme sounds, but presents the difficulty of controlling the interlocking rhymes--a difficulty which is completely mastered in sonnet LXXV of the Amoretti, and is worth observing.

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
 But came the waves and washed it away:
 Agayne I wrote it with a second hand,
 But came the tyde, and made my paynes his pray.
 Vayne man, sayd he, that doest in vaine assay
 A mortal thing so to immortalize!
 For I my selve shall like to this decay,
 And eek my name bee wyped out lykewize.
 Not so (quod I) let baser things devize
 To dy in dust, but you shall live by fame:
 My verse your vertues rare shall eternize,
 And in the hevens wryte your glorious name;
 Where, when as death shall all the world subdew,
 Our love shall live, and later life renew.⁷

In the sonnet quoted, of which Elizabeth Boyle is the subject, Spenser was as much concerned with poetic art and the creation of beauty in the abstract, as he was with the portrayal of significant situation.

In another aspect Spenser's sonnets differed from the typical sonnet-sequence of that day. Spenser wrote, in his Amoretti, about a woman who responded to her lover's suit. Indeed, she is typically Petrarchan in the beginning, being both haughty and disdainful, but finally yields to love and marriage. The Amoretti tells a clear story and betrays imagery and technical excellence, although the gradual yielding of the beloved is not Petrarchan.

Just as Spenser and the other Elizabethan poets had recourse to the sonnet when they wished to express their intimate feelings, so too, did Shakespeare. But Spenser and Shakespeare alone, among those who followed the fashion,

7. Edmund Spenser, The Complete Poetical Works of Spenser, p. 732.

reached the lofty height in sonneting as they already had in earlier lyricism. It is Shakespeare's collection of sonnets, however, that Legouis calls

the casket which encloses the most precious pearls of Elizabethan lyricism, some of them unsurpassed by any lyricism.⁸

These unique lyrics in sonnet form were published as a body in 1609. They are each broken into three phases of the same thought, each phase within the limits of a quatrain. Shakespeare followed the pattern of Surrey just as Spenser had done. He disregarded the interlinking rhyme, however, thus making possible a great variety of themes and presenting a variation in quality. In sonnet XVIII which reads:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And oft is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometimes declines,
By chance of nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.⁹

the thought is made to conform to the three independently rhymed quatrains, plus the couplet.¹⁰ According to Zillman, a variation is seen in sonnet LXXIII,¹¹ which follows:

8. Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, A History of English Literature, p. 321.

9. William Shakespeare, The Complete Dramatic and Poetic Works, p. 1272.

10. Hardin Craig, Shakespeare, p. 118.

11. Zillman, Writing Your Poem, p. 45.

That time of year thou may'st in me behold
 When yellow leaves, or none, do hang
 Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
 Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
 In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
 As after sunset fadeth in the west;
 Which by and by black night doth take away,
 Death's second self, that seals up all unrest.
 In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
 As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
 Consum'd with that which it was nourished by.
 This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
 To love that well which thou must leave ere long.¹²

Zillman notes that the sonnet employs the couplet for a shift in point of view.

It is Hardin Craig who raises two questions in regard to Shakespeare's sonnets. Are the sonnets a true cycle, or only a series of sonnet groups and undivided poems? Are the sonnets pure fiction, or in part fiction, or devoted to Shakespeare's reactions to situations in his own life arising from affection for a man and a woman?¹³ Apropos of this problem, nevertheless, Legouis reminds us that

The finest, most poignant and most passionate sonnets are those in which he gives himself, with all his love and his genius, to the young man who dazzles him even after he has been betrayed by him. The profound pathos is thrown into relief by the rare beauty of the images and the style, and by the perfection of the versification, which has a subtle melody never to be surpassed. Music is not inherent in the pattern of the sonnet, or rather in the fourteen-lined poem, three quatrains with distinct rhymes

12. Shakespeare, op. cit., p. 1280.

13. Craig, op. cit., p. 119.

followed by a distich, a form which is less expert than the Petrarchan. But its looseness is redeemed by the infinite care with which the poet caresses words and sounds. Only the best sonnets of Milton attain to the supreme beauty of the best written by Shakespeare, and their themes and effects are entirely other.¹⁴

It is to these themes and effects of John Milton that we now turn. His sonnets, scattered over some thirty years of his life, that is, from 1630 to 1658, reflect more truly the Italian sonnet composed of two quatrains and two tercets, than do those of earlier Elizabethans, for the Italian bards had been his inspiration, and he their direct successor.¹⁵ That which gives importance to Milton's sonnets, however, is the fact that to the inspirations which he received from the Italian sonneteers, he added his own. First, he extended the theme of the sonnet which had always been that of a lover seeking his beloved, to include the whole gamut of human interests. Many of Milton's sonnets are occasional, and the very events which they commemorate necessarily broaden the theme. Secondly, the fourteen lines in half of his sonnets sweep through the octave into the sestet without the traditional pause, and have given to all poets since his time the right to ignore the two-part structure. These changes are evident in the following sonnet, which is considered his greatest.

14. Legouis, op. cit., pp. 321-322.

15. Ibid., p. 602.

Avenge O Lord thy slaughtered Saints, whose bones
 Lie scatter'd on the Alpine mountains cold,
 Ev'n them who kept thy truth so pure of old
 When all our Fathers worshipp'd Stocks and Stones,
 Forget not: in thy book record their groanes
 Who were the Sheep and in their ancient Fold
 Slayn by the bloody Piemontese that rolled
 Mother with Infant down the Rocks. Their moans
 The Vales redoubled to the Hills, and they
 To Heav'n. Their martyr'd blood and ashes sow
 O'er all the Italian fields where still doth sway
 The triple Tyrant: that from these may grow
 A hundr'd-fold, who having learnt thy way
 Early may fly the Babylonian woe.¹⁶

Here, in a sonnet dedicated to the Waldensians, we note that Milton has followed the Italian form very carefully, and yet, in observing the two rhymes of the quatrains and the tercets he has maintained a sustained thought throughout.

It might be well at this point, to mention the French poets who are indirectly accredited with influencing the poet Wordsworth. Early in the chapter there is reference to the master of the French School of Poetry, Pierre De Ronsard, and his follower, Philippe Desportes. These poets, who were the inspiration of the Elizabethan sonneteers, Daniel and Constable, cannot be overlooked in the history of the sonnet. To the names of Ronsard and Desportes it will be necessary to add the name of Du Bellay. Two of these, Ronsard and Du Bellay, fixed the literary Renaissance of France at its highest point, and were among those seven who were called by their contemporaries, "The Pleiade." Among the Pleiade,

16. John Milton, The Student's Milton, p. 35.

Ronsard was called the prince of poets. Hilaire Belloc, in Avril, tells us that we may open Ronsard at any page and find beauty. His sonnets may be translated into fine English because he is saying plainly, great things.¹⁷

Ronsard's first collection of sonnets, Les Amours de Cassandre, published in 1552, deepened the impression that he had already made in the development of Renaissance poetry.¹⁸ This collection consists of two hundred and twenty-two sonnets, only one of which is in the Alexandrine, a meter which he found most useful for the adequate expression of the passions, and which he used with variety in his poems of the later period. The poet's second series of sonnets, Les Amours de Marie, was published in 1552, and was followed in 1578 by Les Amours d'Helene.

Warren Forrest Patterson, in Three Centuries of French Poetic Theory, admits that the sonnets of the second series are more graceful and gracious, and move with an unforced naturalness due to the fact that there is more common use of the Alexandrine. Patterson says that "the artistic structure of these sonnets is as remarkable as is their animating sentiment expressed in a fashion so evocative of

17. Hilaire Belloc, Avril, pp. 118-19.

18. Warren Forrest Patterson, Three Centuries of French Poetic Theory, Parts I-II, p. 490.

vision."¹⁹ Ronsard's attitude on the Alexandrine is summed up in contrast with the decasyllable in the Art Poétique of 1565. Patterson says that it is regrettable, that one who did so much for the progress of the sonnet, "should have left no theory of the form to accompany his admirable examples."²⁰

Ronsard first met Du Bellay at Poitiers in 1547, when the latter was studying law. After this meeting the dominant interest of the two was poetry. Du Bellay was one of the first of the French School to produce a sonnet-sequence. The first sequence appeared in 1549, under the title, L'Olive. Du Bellay's philosophic doctrine of imitation appears in his first sequence and is still evident in the final one, which was published posthumously in 1568.²¹ With minor innovations his sonnets follow the Italian pattern. His Alexandrines have sweep and majesty, " a tonal magnificence not heard before in the French variant genre."²²

Philippe Desportes, the favorite of King Henri III, was a poet of merit and the rival of Francois de Malherbe. He had a lyrical gift, however, superior to that of Malherbe, and his Alexandrines have a soft fluidity. Desportes's sonnets, which number about four hundred, are frequently imitations of the Italian. Henry Francis Cary, in The Early

19. Patterson, op. cit., p. 537.

20. Ibid., pp. 587-88.

21. Ibid., p. 318.

22. Ibid., p. 292.

French Poets, quotes from several of Desportes's sonnets and points out their elegance, ease, and sweetness; yet, Cary notes that there is a certain vigor about them.²³

It is Legouis who reminds us that only within the last half-century has research discovered the real influence of Ronsard, Du Bellay, and Desportes on the Elizabethan sonnet writers.²⁴ These poets of the English Renaissance were closely followed by Milton, who was the inspiration of Wordsworth.

James Holly Hanford, in A Milton Handbook, tells us that it was Milton who determined the style of the English sonnet after its years of dormancy.²⁵ Hanford also said:

The importance of Milton's sonnets as the chief inspiring force and model of those of Wordsworth is well known.²⁶

Wordsworth is the last of the great sonneteers to be considered in this chapter. As already stated, Wordsworth's sonnets are the re-awakening of that form of poetry toward the end of the eighteenth century, and are the cause of its popularity and revived appreciation today. It was he who broadened the theme of the sonnet-sequence as Milton had broadened the theme of the sonnet itself; for by his River Duddon Series and the Ecclesiastical Sonnets Wordsworth

23. Henry Francis Cary, The Early French Poets, pp. 116-17.

24. Legouis, op. cit., p. 318.

25. James Holly Hanford, A Milton Handbook, p. 173.

26. Ibid.

showed those who followed him that the sonnet lends itself well to the expression of connected thoughts. Among those who followed his inspiration were Rossetti, in his House of Life, and E. B. Browning in Sonnets from the Portuguese.

In ending this chapter on the history of the sonnet I have decided to quote a sonnet which belongs to the series of Ecclesiastical Sonnets and is itself an expression of connected thoughts. Wordsworth calls it Sonnet XII.

Down a swift stream, thus far, a bold design
 Have we pursued, with livelier stir of heart
 Than his who sees, borne forward by the Rhine,
 The living landscapes greet him, and depart;
 Sees spires sinking fast--up again to start!
 And strives the towers to number, that recline
 O'er the dark steeps, or on the horizon line
 Striding with shattered crests his eye athwart.
 So have hurried on with troubled pleasure:
 Henceforth, as on the bosom of the stream
 That slackens, and spreads wide a watery gleam,
 We, nothing loth a lingering course to measure,
 How widely spread the interests of our theme.²⁷

How widely spread the interest of Worthworth's sonnet-
 sequence!

27. Wordsworth, Poetical Works, III, 390.

CHAPTER III
CRITICISM PRIOR TO 1850

Thus far in this thesis I have written the story of William Wordsworth's life, presenting in the first chapter those aspects which concern the poet's interest in sonnet writing. In Chapter II, I have given a history of the sonnet from its recognition in Italy, until its revival in England by Wordsworth. To Spenser, Milton, and Shakespeare I have allowed much space and have shown how their sonneting had influenced Wordsworth and had contributed to the gradual changes and growing popularity of the sonnet form.

In the present chapter I shall attempt to give to the reader a knowledge of the early criticisms of Wordsworth's sonnets. In doing this, I shall refer to the early periodical criticisms which began noticeably about the year 1802 and continued until the time of the poet's death in 1850. I shall likewise include the criticisms of Wordsworth's colleagues, Samuel Coleridge and William Hazlitt, and end with reference to the essay of David Masson, written in the year of Wordsworth's death.

There was toward the end of the eighteenth century a tendency to abandon the trite, mechanical poetry of the Classical Age, for a poetry both natural and new. Just as the French Revolution had introduced new principles and politics, so too, was the new poetry to stir up the imagination

and give to the literary world a poetry as natural in content as it was in form. The leaders in the new poetry were known as the "Lake School" and included Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge.

William Hazlitt, in his Lectures on the Living Poets,¹ remarks:

Mr. Wordsworth is at the head of that which has been denominated the Lake School of poetry: a school which with all my respects for it, I do not think sacred from criticism or exempt from faults, of some of which faults I shall speak with becoming frankness; for I do not see that the liberty of the press ought to be shackled, or freedom of speech curtailed, to screen either its revolutionary or renegade extravagances.

It is evident that other critics thought as Hazlitt did, more than a decade earlier, for William Wordsworth's most severe critic, Francis Jeffrey, had already voiced his opinion as early as 1802. In the first volume of the Edinburgh Review² Jeffrey makes this caustic remark:

The peculiar doctrines of this sect, it would not be very easy to explain; but that they are dissenters from the established system in poetry and criticism is admitted and proved indeed, by the whole tenor of their composition.

Jeffrey, like Hazlitt, recognized Wordsworth as the pilot of the "Lake Poets" and showed fear of his growing prestige.

In 1807 Wordsworth published Poems in Two Volumes, and included among the poems were several sonnets. W. S. Ward³

1. William Hazlitt, "On the Living Poets," Lectures on the English Poets, p. 318.

2. Francis Jeffrey, The Edinburgh Review, I, 63.

3. William S. Ward, "Wordsworth, the Lake Poets and their Contemporary Magazine Critics," Studies in Philology, XLII, 98.

tells us that this publication "stirred up the ant-heap and immediately the most famous literary controversy of the period was on," since reviewers in the majority of periodicals took up the challenge.

That which made the controversial issue so paramount does, to a certain extent, concern itself with the sonnets. Joseph M. Beatty tells us that Lord Jeffrey's review in the Edinburgh Review for June, 1807, is the least "discriminating" of his criticisms of Wordsworth, but that it does give the motives for the attack on the Lake Poets.⁴ In the eleventh volume of the Edinburgh Review we find Jeffrey saying:

It was precisely because the perverseness and bad taste of this new school was combined with a great deal of genius and of laudable feeling that we were afraid of their spreading and gaining ground among us, and that we entered into the discussion with a degree of zeal and animosity which some might think unreasonable toward authors, to whom so much merit has been conceded.⁵

Robert Daniel states that it was Jeffrey's desire to display his wit and power of satire and to popularize the Edinburgh Review. Jeffrey had to increase the circulation of the magazine, and "lively persecution made lively reading."⁶

In the publication, "Wordsworth and Jeffrey in Controversy," Russell Noyes remarks that the opposition resulted in a split between poet and critic. Noyes asserts:

4. Joseph M. Beatty, "Lord Jeffrey and Wordsworth," Publications of the Modern Language Association, XXXVIII, 226.

5. Francis Jeffrey, Edinburgh Review, XI, 215.

6. Robert Daniel, "Jeffrey and Wordsworth: The Shape of Persecution," The Sewanee Review, L, 212.

Jeffrey relied on a static and dogmatic authority; Wordsworth upon an individual and prophetic intuition. This led to a quarrel over poetic diction.⁷

Noyes adds that "Jeffrey's morality was based on a fixed social decorum, and the poet's upon a spiritual insight and humility."⁸

Whatever may have been the underlying motive for the criticism, it did not turn the pilot from his course; his deep rooted suspicion of all criticism held him steady even when a youthful worshipper, John Wilson, (Christopher North) made evident in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine his changing attitude toward Wordsworth.⁹ Wilson's criticism of the bard was surpassed only by that of Jeffrey; yet, he had been an early admirer of Wordsworth when living at Ellersay, and later he became a close friend and companion of the Wordsworth family.¹⁰ "North" had defended Wordsworth when to "admire him was to be kicked at."¹¹ Now, in the year 1817, when the admiration was on the wane, Strout tells us that "both praise and abuse are from the eccentric pen of John Wilson."¹²

7. Russell Noyes, "Wordsworth and Jeffrey in Controversy," Indiana University Publications. Humanities Series, No. 5, p. 47.

8. Ibid.

9. Allan Lang Strout, "William Wordsworth and John Wilson," Publications of the Modern Language Association, XLIX, 183.

10. James Venable Logan, Wordsworthian Criticism, p. 14.

11. Ibid.

12. Strout, "John Wilson, 'Champion' of Wordsworth," Modern Philology, XXXI, 394.

Both praise and abuse come from the pen of Francis Jeffrey in his review of Poems in Two Volumes. He faintly extols the sonnets contained therein. After quoting the sonnets "On the Expinction of the Venetian Republic," "London," and "I Griev'd for Bounaparte," he exclaims:

When we look at these and many still finer passages in the writings of this author, it is impossible not to feel a mixture of indignation and compassion, at the strange infatuation which has bound him up from the fair exercise of his talents, and withheld from the public the many excellent productions that would otherwise have taken the place of the trash now before us. Even in the worst of these productions there are, no doubt, occasional little traits of delicate feeling and original fancy; but these are quite lost and obscured in the mass of childishness and insipidity with which they are incorporated;¹³

It is evident from the above criticisms of Jeffrey, that he, having read the various critics' opinions of the Lake Poet in the first twenty years of the nineteenth century, and realizing their constantly growing acceptance of the poet, was baffled when River Duddon, A Series of Sonnets, was published in the year 1820.

This sonnet-sequence, we are told by William S. Ward, was reviewed in eleven periodicals; only one review was noticeably unfavorable, eight were clearly favorable, and the remaining two slightly more commendatory than censorious.¹⁴

13. Francis Jeffrey, Edinburgh Review, XI, 231.

14. William S. Ward, Wordsworth, the 'Lake' Poets, and their Contemporary Magazine Critics," Studies in Philology, XLII, 95.

Among the periodicals presenting constructive criticism were Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, Gentlemen's Magazine, Monthly Review, and the European Magazine. The following quotation from Blackwood's is worth quoting:

Nothing is more common than to talk about the unpopularity of Wordsworth;--but, after all, we are inclined to doubt very much, whether at any moment for many years past he can, with any propriety, be said to have lain under the reproach of unpopularity.

Thus we see that even John Wilson was giving recognition to Wordsworth. In the same review greater praise follows:

The truth is, that among all the English poets who have written since Milton, there is none, except Grey, who has ever caught the true inspiration of the Grecian Lyre with the same perfect dignity as the great poet of the Lakes.¹⁶

After selecting passages from the sonnets, Wilson continues:

Indeed the effect of the whole of the extracts we have made, will, we nothing doubt, be quite sufficient to convince every one who has made the character of English poetry his study, that so far from deserving to be held up to derision as a fanciful and conceited innovator, Mr. Wordsworth (judged by the genuine spirit of his writing) is entitled to be classed with the very highest names among his predecessors, as a pure and reverent worshipper of the true majesty of the English Muse.¹⁷

Katherine Mary Peek remarks that "only the Edinburgh Review could still complacently write in 1822, 'The Lake School of Poetry, we think, is now pretty nearly extinct'."¹⁸

15. John Wilson, Blackwood's Edinburgh Review, VII, 206.

16. Ibid., p. 208.

17. Ibid., p. 211.

18. Katherine Mary Peek, Wordsworth in England, p. 100.

The quotation to which Katherine Peek has reference, was the introductory sentence of the review of Memorials of a Tour on the Continent, which appeared in 1822. The Review continues in the same derogatory spirit that it evidenced in the previous years. Concerning the two sonnets called "Bruges," the critic Jeffrey says:

It is very hard to get at the subject of either; we mean the prevailing idea which the author is desirous of embodying and showing forth to the reader in his fourteen lines. As near as we can reach it, there seems to be something floating in his mind about the antiquity of the place, and its quiet; a dull old town, with ruins and nuns.¹⁹

In the review, sonnet after sonnet is degraded; than in disparagement:

A sonnet, "in a carriage on the banks of the Rhine," is written in a way calculated to give one the idea of the author's senses having been affected by the beverage of the country.²⁰

The sonnet follows:

Amid the dance of objects sadness steals
O'er the defrauded heart--while sweeping by,
As in a fit of Thespian jollity,
Beneath her vine-leaf crown the green Earth reels:
Backward, in rapid evanescence, wheel
The venerable pageantry of Time,
Each beetling rampart, and each tower sublime,
And what the Dell unwilling reveals
Of lurking cloistral arch, through trees espied
Near the bright river's edge. Yet why repine?
To muse, to creep, to halt at will, to gaze--
Such sweet way-faring--of life's spring the pride,
Her summer's faithful joy--that still is mine,
And in fit measure cheers autumnal days.²¹

19. Jeffrey, Edinburgh Review, XXXVII, 451.

20. Ibid., p. 456.

21. Wordsworth, Poetical Works, III, 169.

It is rather interesting to know that De Selincourt includes in his notes to this sonnet an extract from the Journal of William Wordsworth, for the year 1838. The note, in part, reads:

. . . nothing could exceed the delightful variety; but the postilions, who were intoxicated, whisked us far too fast through those beautiful scenes.²²

Through this early crisis in the acceptance of Wordsworth's sonnets then, we have seen that he had received small praise in the periodical criticism of his contemporaries. Let us look now, at the criticism of his associates, and observe first, how the poet's friend, Coleridge, in that excellent literary criticism contained in the Biographia Literaria, regards the sonnets of Wordsworth.

At the outset, it might be wise to remind the reader that when Coleridge wrote the Biographia, he was no longer the admirer of Wordsworth that he had been seventeen years earlier when the two poets published the Lyrical Ballads. Not only the fact that Wordsworth had aroused the indignation of Coleridge with his second Preface, but also, that Coleridge's ideas of poetry had somewhat changed, accounts for the slim praise that Wordsworth received. This slim praise, however, is directed noticeably toward the sonnets.

In chapter twenty-two of the Biographia Literaria, the author exposes five defects of Wordsworth's poetry. He then,

22. Wordsworth, op. cit., p. 471.

in opposition to the defects, presents the six excellences contained therein. It is in the consideration of the excellences that Coleridge calls attention to the sonnets. Having discussed the first excellence, he says:

The second characteristic excellence of Mr. W's work is: a correspondent weight and sanity of the Thoughts and Sentiments, won--not from books, but--from the poet's own meditative observation. They are fresh and have the dew upon them. His muse, at least when in her strength of wing and when she hovers aloft in her proper element.

"Make audible a linked lay of truth,
Of truth profound a sweet continuous lay,
Not learnt, but native, her own natural notes!"
S.T.C.

Even throughout his smaller poems there is scarcely one, which is not rendered valuable by some just and original reflection.²³

Coleridge calls attention to certain poems, among them the sonnet of Bounaparte, in which the critic sees a striking resemblance to Samuel Daniel, whom he calls "one of the golden writers of our Elizabethan age."²⁴ Then, after praising Daniel in no small way, he says:

If Mr. Wordsworth is not equally with Daniel alike intelligible to all readers of average understanding in all passages of his work, the comparative difficulty does not arise from the greater impurity of the ore, but from the nature and uses of the metal.²⁵

In the third excellence mentioned, Coleridge admits that

23. Earl Leslie Griggs, The Best of Coleridge, p. 265.

24. Ibid., pp. 266-67

25. Ibid., p. 267.

Wordsworth "soars far above Daniel." In the sixth and last excellence, Coleridge says:

I challenge for this poet the gift of imagination in the highest and strictest sense of the word.²⁶

Among the examples manifesting the imagination, Coleridge mentions sonnets 8, 9, 19, 26, and 33 in the collection of Miscellaneous Sonnets, and the sonnet on the subjugation of Switzerland.²⁷ We do not agree with Coleridge when he claims that his criticism of Wordsworth will be of no avail in overcoming the prejudice of those who have ridiculed Wordsworth's compositions; at least, not so far as the sonnets are concerned.

At Nether Stowey, in 1798, where Coleridge was visited by William Hazlitt, Wordsworth met the author of "My First Acquaintance with Poets."²⁸ Hazlitt proved to be one of the best critics of Wordsworth of that day. But Hazlitt, like the other contemporary critics, neither knowing nor feeling confident of the status of the Lake Poets, praises and belittles in the same paragraph the poet Wordsworth. In his lecture "On the Living Poets" he remarks:

Mr. Wordsworth is the most original poet now living. . . . His poetry is not external, but internal; it does not depend upon tradition, or story, or old song; he furnishes it from his own mind, and is his own subject. He is the poet of mere sentiment.

26. Griggs, op. cit., p. 271.

27. Ibid., pp. 272-73.

28. Logan, op. cit., p. 22.

There is no praise here, but in the same paragraph we read:

Of many . . . it is not possible to speak in terms of too high praise, such as . . . several of the sonnets, and a hundred others of inconceivable beauty, of perfect originality and pathos.²⁹

In 1825 Hazlitt's The Spirit of the Age was published. This book, which proved to be one of his best, presents fair-minded criticism of his contemporaries who had lured him from the desire of painting to the field of literature. In The Spirit of the Age, concerning Wordsworth he relates:

His standard of poetry is high and severe, almost to exclusiveness. He admits of nothing below, scarcely of anything above himself . . . Milton is his real idol, and he sometimes dares to compare himself with him. His sonnets, indeed, have something of the high-raised tone and prophetic spirit.³⁰

According to Chew, Hazlitt, in the above mentioned book, seldom went astray, and the estimates of his contemporaries often indicate the direction which the judgment of posterity was to take.³¹

Since in the present chapter we are considering the criticism of Wordsworth to the year of his death, I have selected David Masson as the last contemporary critic. Masson gives us an evaluation of the bard at the time of his death. In the essay on Wordsworth Masson expatiates on the origin of

29. Hazlitt, op. cit., p. 309.

30. Logan, op. cit., pp. 25-26.

31. Baugh, A Literary History of England, pp. 1187-1188.

the new poetry, and relates Wordsworth's part in it. The author, in pointing out the characteristics of the poet, shows how Wordsworth's interest in the "traditional, the legendary, and the historical," is evident in his "fine series of Ecclesiastical Sonnets, wherein he traces, as in a series of bold retrospective glimpses, the history of Christianity in the British Islands."³² Masson quotes from the sonnet, "The World is Too Much With Us," and gives the entire sonnet, "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room," when he speaks of the poet's exquisite propriety and delicacy of his style, together with his easy and perfect mastery over the elements of language.

32. David Masson, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, pp. 57, 59, 61, 62.

CHAPTER IV
CRITICISM SINCE 1850

The research done in chapter three presents the findings on Wordsworth's sonnets during his lifetime. It is proof of the fact that the early criticism of the sonnets was not at all free from prejudice, and that the sonnets were received rather skeptically and never highly appreciated or praised. It was Coleridge who said, "His [Wordsworth's] fame belongs to another age, and can neither be accelerated nor retarded."¹

In his essay, "Wordsworth," written in the year 1889, Matthew Arnold explains the reasons for Wordsworth's unpopularity among the general public of that day. He expresses his hope that soon the world will come to realize that although there are among Wordsworth's volumes many poems which are not worthy of praise, nevertheless, scattered throughout are a large number of excellent shorter pieces.² These shorter pieces, this "other age" has learned to recognize as great sonnets, and therefore has given to Wordsworth the fame that Coleridge realized would come. In this chapter, I shall attempt to prove that Wordsworth's sonnets are today being given a place in the new criticism and rank high in the test of revaluation.

1. Griggs, op. cit., p. 278.

2. Matthew Arnold, Essays in Criticism, p. 349.

A student of literature will notice that in any study of poetry or any critical analysis of poetic form, there will be included for explication, a sonnet or two written by W. Wordsworth. This is proof enough that the poet has now come to that desired distinction of being a great sonneteer. Let us now look at a number of sonnets and consider the criticisms. First let us consider the sonnet, "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge,"

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
 Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
 A sight so touching in its majesty:
 This City now doth, like a garment, wear
 The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
 Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
 Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
 All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
 Never did sun more beautifully steep
 In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
 Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
 The river glideth at his own sweet will:
 Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
 And all that mighty heart is lying still!³

The date of composition of this sonnet has long been disputed. In his definitive edition of Wordsworth, De Selincourt says: "It is possible that the sonnet was inspired and drafted on July 31, 1802, and rewritten on Sept. 3, when W. was again in London."⁴ At any rate, the sonnet was composed upon a coach-top, when Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy, were leaving for France by way of Dover. The view was from Charing Cross.

3. Wordsworth, The Poetical Works, op. cit., p. 38.

4. Ibid., p. 431.

In Understanding Poetry, Brooks and Warren first call attention to the fact that in the sonnet we are considering, the description of London is general rather than particular. --that a panorama of beauty is presented rather than detailed description, and that the poem has power and excitement. The authors hint at the fact that Wordsworth evidences surprise at the sight.⁵ This is clear in the opening lines and in the following.

Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!

Wordsworth's using of the word "open" in regard to the city means that there are, as yet, no clouds of smoke, no smog to veil the city's beauty from the fields and sky. It is spectacular to observe that

The river glideth at his own sweet will:

Usually, when beheld, it is filled with barges, schooners, and other seagoing vessels, all in motion; the water is being driven by artificial forces and has little motion of its own.

Brooks and Warren suggest to the reader that comparisons of natural beauty are appropriate in this sonnet, because things of natural beauty are least touched by the hand of man.⁶ Here, London is untouched. At this hour man has not

5. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Understanding Poetry, p. 101.

6. Ibid.

yet disturbed the peace and quiet of the city. If the city were less quiet it would seem less "alive," because to Wordsworth, its being "alive" is in its "mighty heart . . . lying still."⁷

The same sonnet receives critical analysis by Doubleday. The critic points out that a poet can make us benefit by his keener vision. He does not see for us but makes us see; we learn to love what we behold through his poetic vision. Our attention is first called to the realization that the sonnet form serves as a frame for the vision of the morning sun. "The beauty of the morning sun enfolds the city like a cloak; the peace of the city now in the morning is like the peace in nature."⁸ In reading lines two and three,

Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:

we are asked to recall Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi" and hear what the monk says to the captain who has seen the world. It is true that Fra Lippo Lippi is a painter, and could see the beauty for himself, but he wanted to be certain that others saw it too.⁹ Wordsworth's mentioning of, and the way in which he mentions

Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples
help us to see the various shapes of things. We see the

7. Brooks and Warren, op. cit.

8. Neal Frank Doubleday, Studies in Poetry, p. 13.

9. Ibid., pp. 13-14.

green and blue, bright in the clear air, because he says
these things lie

Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

All of this, all the silence that is evident, the course of the river as it glides, the city asleep, make for keener vision of color, sound, change, and surprise.¹⁰

With this analysis we see that the sonnet, "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge," can be, according to Doubleday, a way of seeing.

There is in Poems in English, a superlatively written, and rather lengthy note on the sonnet we are now considering. In itself, it is proof of the esteem placed upon the poem composed while Wordsworth was still a young man. The note reads:

This justly famous sonnet succeeds brilliantly in conveying the sense of early morning hush before the city has awakened. Wordsworth begins with an emphatic line, couched in purely general terms and end-stopped; and he follows this up with two rhyming lines (though the rhyme is imperfect and muted) which still keeps us in suspense about the real subject of the poem. After a pause (which cuts across the structure of the sonnet, coming between the third and fourth lines of the first quatrain) he comes down to particulars, with a gesture of pointing conveyed by "This city....." The sentence which begins thus is one of those grave and beautiful utterances, conveying at once a description of what is observed and the quality of the observer's mood, which Wordsworth at his best could achieve so memorably: the mood of the poet and the early morning appearance of the silent city are now linked permanently, so that the remainder of the poem, building on this unification, can develop naturally into a statement that

10. Doubleday, op. cit.

is at once descriptive and confessional. The contrast between the hushed stillness of the city and the bustling activity which is generally associated with urban imagery is implied but never overtly asserted. After the expressive sentence of lines 4-5, the objects reveal themselves to the observer one by one, but not before they have been described as "silent, bare." (Notice the importance of having these adjectives before the list of "ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples.") Having been revealed, they are linked at once to Nature: they lie "open unto the fields and to the sky" and the fact that the city at this moment of dawn is so transfigured as to be removed completely from normal urban associations into the world of Nature is emphasized by the adjectives "bright," "glittering," and "smokeless." The sense of shimmering beauty is communicated in line 8, and developed further in the next two lines, which constitute another of those grand descriptive sentences that sum up so magnificently the impact of the scene on the poet. In lines 10-11, also, the link between the city and Nature is confirmed. We then move to the poet, who for the first time introduces explicitly his own emotions--which are at once clinched with those two words, calm and deep.

With this projection of the idea of calmness and stillness, all the previous images fall into place and the silence of the city becomes part of the poet's mood. The river is now described by the verb glideth, which again develops the notion of calm silence, and the poem ends on a note of controlled emotion, with the poet exclaiming at the sense of utter peace which arises from the city. That this a state of unstable equilibrium, a rare note of repose for the mighty organism, is suggested in the last line where the real cause for wonder is now fully evident--the fact that a great city can be at once identified with natural beauty (cf. lines 9-10) and with human behavior ("the very houses seem asleep"). Thus Nature, the poet, and the city finally come together, and their doing so symbolizes the poet's mood.¹¹

The above criticism by David Daiches, published in 1950, is a pertinent example of the recognition given to Wordsworth in

11. David Daiches and William Charvat, Poems in English 1530-1940, pp. 697-98.

the year which marked the centenary of his death.

In their critical study, Thomas and Brown present to the reader a certain awareness of the emotion of surprise. This emotion is evoked in the sonnet by visions of morning contrasted with those of night.¹²

Frederick A. Pottle, in presenting isolated qualities of Wordsworth's poetry, and in quoting from the famous Preface, the following text, "Poetry takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquillity" and "I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject,"¹³ points out how the sonnet, "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge," was recollected in tranquillity and called for armed vision.

Pottle says:

Everyone knows of Wordsworth's love of solitude, his conviction that the highest experiences came to him when he was alone . . . The trouble was that, though he had the best of intentions, he could never handle close-packed, present, human crowds in the mode of imagination. If he were to grasp the life of a great city imaginatively, it had to be at night or early in the morning, while the streets were deserted; . . .¹⁴

Willard L. Sperry in considering Wordsworth's religion, says that the latter was not a social mystic. That he was

. . . wholly without the sense of identity with all sorts and conditions of men which we find, for instance, in Walt Whitman or in Tolstoy. He could make nothing of London . . . The only time he felt

12. Wright Thomas and Stuart Brown, Reading Poems, p. 669.

13. Frederick A. Pottle, "The Eye and the Object in the Poetry of Wordsworth," Wordsworth, p. 23.

14. Ibid., p. 30.

able to grasp the city of London was when he saw it from Westminster Bridge in early dawn, its houses asleep, and its mighty heart lying still.¹⁵

The same sonnet was used as an example by Florence Marsh, who in making a study of poetic vision, manifests that it is characteristic of Wordsworth to hide his imagery. This sonnet, however, is pointed out as one that does have a sustained metaphor, since the personification of London becomes obvious only in the last line.¹⁶

Let us now look at another sonnet, "It is a beauteous evening," which follows:

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the sea:
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder--everlastingly.
Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not less divine:
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.¹⁷

Let us first note how this sonnet is much more admired now, than it was at the beginning of this twentieth century. Thomas Bayne, writing in 1907 about the unpopularity of this sonnet, says that because it presents metaphysical difficulties like other of Wordsworth's sonnets it has ceased to be widely

15. Willard L. Sperry, "Wordsworth's Religion," Wordsworth, p. 154.

16. Florence Marsh, Wordsworth's Imagery, pp. 21-22.

17. Wordsworth, op. cit., p. 17.

read. He says, "the quick transition from the contemplation of the peaceful scene to the thought of the omnipresent Deity, while almost startling in its apparent abruptness, is really a legitimate sequence of thought," but one that is seldom seen in poetry.¹⁸

Such was the criticism of nearly fifty years ago. However, the many recent criticisms which we are now considering include this sonnet along with the others. In his critical reading of this poem, Doubleday affirms that our comprehension and reception of the central statement of the poem are much affected by the feeling of religious awe, which Wordsworth has taken eight lines to establish. The literary allusion,

Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year
must be understood if one is to grasp the meaning of the sonnet, otherwise, the thought contained in the octave, God dwells in nature, will not be carried over to the sestet, that God, likewise, lives in the child.¹⁹ The understanding of the biblical allusion, we realize, does away with any metaphysical difficulty.

In The Mind of the Poet, Havens, speaking of the imagination, makes it clear that Wordsworth believed that a child can be imaginative in the full sense of the word. The author says,

It was one who saw childhood as possessed of imagination

18. Thomas Bayne, "Wordsworth and Browning," Notes and Queries, VIII, 466.

19. Doubleday, op. cit., pp. 73-74.

in all the might of its endowment who wrote,

Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
 If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
 Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
 Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
 And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
 God being with thee when we know it not.

To be sure, since he does not have the experience or the needs of the adult and since reason and the other faculties are but imperfectly developed in him, the child cannot make the use of what the imagination offers, cannot learn from it, as the "higher minds" do. Yet the faculty itself, Wordsworth appears to have thought, is as strong and as complete in the early as in the late years.²⁰

It is obvious from this that Havens recognized the qualities which Wordsworth's sonnets contained.

There is another commentary on this sonnet by Thomas and Brown, which enables the reader to see that the central experience contained therein is Wordsworth's idea about the child's spiritual nature. The feeling of Wordsworth and the idea of the spiritual nature fuse into a unified experience.²¹

Sperry, in "Wordsworth's Religion," seems to be of the opinion that the poet in this sonnet is chiefly concerned with the sunset over Calais. The author is trying to infer in his essay that Wordsworth's lack of religion did not crystallize because of a feeling of guilt over the affair with Annette.²² Sperry maintains that a man with qualms of conscience would not have written "It is a beauteous evening,"

20. Raymond Dexter Havens, The Mind of a Poet, I, 237-38.

21. Thomas and Brown, op. cit., p. 669.

22. Sperry, op. cit., p. 155.

nor would he have addressed his natural daughter as "Dear Child! dear Girl!"²³

In his explication and critical perception of this sonnet, Daiches calls attention to the effective handling of religious imagery. He points out the relationship between "holy," "Nun," "adoration" in the first part of the sonnet with "solemn," "divine," and "worshipp'g" in the second part.²⁴ After reminding us that it is not necessary to know the recent criticism of "Dear Child!" in order to appreciate the poem, Daiches continues:

(It is worth noting that God is referred to only indirectly in the first part, by such terms as "heaven" and "mighty Being"--which is the sea reflecting the grandeur of God--while in the second part the religious imagery is more conventional and specific, culminating in the actual mention of God: the idea around which the poem is built is, of course, that an adult sees God directly and less self-consciously.) Notice again how Wordsworth links his own mood to the point he is making, so that the point is of poetic interest in so far as it reflects and illuminates a state of mind.²⁵

Daiches calls our attention to the fact that, as in the sonnet we have just considered, there is a relation between the point communicated and the mode evoked as a result of the method of the communication, so too, there is in the sonnet, "The world is too much with us."²⁶ Let us quote that sonnet and discuss it.

23. Sperry, op. cit.

24. Daiches and Charvat, op. cit., p. 698.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
 Little we see in Nature that is ours;
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
 This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
 The wind that will be howling at all hours,
 And are all up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
 For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
 It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
 A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.²⁷

Concerning this sonnet, the editors of Explicator say:

The construction of Wordsworth's sonnet has too often been explained as a mere catalogue of pleasant images. On the contrary, nearly every image in the sestet fulfills an image in the last half of the octave: "this pleasant lea" corresponds with "this sea;" "suckled in a creed" with "sea that bares her bosom;" "Triton" with "the winds;" the "wreathed horn" with both "sleeping flowers" and "out of tune." To comment upon these correspondences would be superfluous; that they contribute to the greatness of the sonnet, even though seldom consciously noticed, is indisputable."²⁸

The fact that this explication was made in the very first issue of Explicator, is ample proof that this sonnet is frequently analyzed in college classes.

Havens, in his chapter on animism, asserts that Wordsworth believed in spiritual beings and their consciousness. This belief, the critic attributes to Wordsworth's vividness of imagination and to his early life in a wild, mountainous

27. Wordsworth, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

28. The Editors, The Explicator, I, 1. No. 4.

country.²⁹ Wordsworth, he maintains, believed that

. . . man is justified in thinking of nature as sympathizing with his griefs although such sympathy has no existence apart from man's own creative powers. It is not surprising, therefore, that Wordsworth was tolerant of animism even when it rested on what he regarded as falsehood.³⁰

The quotation which Havens uses is,

Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.³¹

Doubleday would have us realize that Wordsworth wished to see Proteus and Triton, because the former, a sea deity, had the power to prophesy, and was supposed to know all the secrets of nature; the latter, who was the son of Neptune, had the task of transmitting orders from his father, to all the distant parts of the sea.³² Wordsworth, grieving that

Little do we see in Nature that is ours;
would enjoy hearing Proteus, on rising from the sea to pasture his calves, tell the secrets of nature. He would like to hear Triton "blow his wreathed horn," so that he might see from "this pleasant lea," all the far away seas respond to the orders of Neptune.

29. Havens, op. cit., p. 76.

30. Ibid., p. 80.

31. Ibid.

32. Doubleday, op. cit., p. 76.

There is a popular sonnet of Wordsworth's which is among those "Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty." Wordsworth, in 1802, had just returned from France and was grieving over the conditions of London, which seemed to have lost its true religious happiness. The thought that if Milton were alive, he might raise the city from its lowly spirit, inspired the poet to write, "London, 1802."

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
 England hath need of thee: she is a fen
 Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
 Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
 Have forfeited their ancient English dower
 Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
 Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
 And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
 Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart;
 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
 So didst thou travel on life's common way,
 In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
 The lowliest duties on herself did lay.³³

Charles W. Cooper has selected this sonnet to show that the understanding of a poet's emotion depends upon the emotional experiences and nature of the reader.³⁴ Cooper gives a paraphrase of the sonnet, and in his own understanding of Wordsworth's feeling says:

He seems to me to be discouraged about his homeland, its spirit and tone. Life about him seems corrupt and lethargic. People are selfish, complacent, indifferent. He thinks of other times when Englishmen

33. Wordsworth, op. cit., p. 116.

34. Charles W. Cooper, Preface to Poetry, p. 206.

were strong and true, noble and courageous; and he thinks of John Milton, poet and patriot, who spoke out fearlessly and clearly for human freedom, who acted wisely and cheerfully, who turned his hand to common work dutifully and unselfishly. If only, he feels, Milton were now alive to rally them, to raise them up from the morass of their stagnation, to restore the virtues that Englishmen should rightly inherit from their stalwart forebears!³⁵

After giving the interpretation of the feeling phase of Wordsworth's meaning, Cooper relates the causes of his own emotional response.

My interpretation of the meaning, of course, is the primary cause, and sense led the way together with my understanding of the poet's feeling. His feeling of discouragement at the surrounding complacency struck a responsive chord; or, to vary the metaphor, the strings of my own heart, attuned by comparable experiences, were set in sympathetic vibrations by the sounding of his emotion. But there were other immediate stimuli of my feelings: the striking metaphor implicit in the assertion that England is a fen, the strong olfactory imagery stimulated by stagnant, the rich connotation of hall and bower, the tone-color of the voice whose sound was like the sea, even the stately Miltonic "music" of the poetic rhythm, suggesting the power of the great poets of the past.³⁶

This emotional response, Cooper reminds us, is, according to many, the most important part of the poem-experience.

Doubleday calls attention to the fact that Wordsworth, in writing of his great predecessor, Milton, is very careful to use the Miltonic sonnet.³⁷

35. Cooper, op. cit., pp. 206-207.

36. Ibid., p. 208.

37. Doubleday, op. cit., p. 222.

Walter Gierasch tells us that the general tone of this sonnet is a "good old days' nostalgia." Milton, a literary and political leader of former days, is now needed to "raise us up." Although, Gierasch admits, Brooks and Warren say the sonnet is poorly organized, yet, there is much in it to be defended.³⁸ In expatiating on the lack of manners in England, which Wordsworth mentions, Gierasch remarks:

The lack of manners is suggested by "selfish"; the lack of virtue by "altar" and "heroic" in the two senses of spiritual and physical strength or virtue; but in the opening six lines the lack of freedom and power are left unspecified, except by the remote implication that men in 1802 are bogged down.³⁹

Continuing the explication, the critic says:

Milton's possession of manners is suggested by "travel . . . In cheerful godliness" and by "duties"; his possession of virtue by "soul . . . like a Star," by "pure," by "godliness", and by "duties"; his possession of freedom by "apart" and by "free"; his possession of power by the sea image and earlier by the belief in the power of his example "to raise us up."⁴⁰

Gierasch mentions several other contrasts which make for organization, but he does point out where there is "criss-crossing, which brings about weakness in the sonnet."⁴¹ May we remind the reader that this criticism comes from Explicator, whose "province is the literature that everyone knows."⁴²

38. Walter Gierasch, "Wordsworth's London, 1802," Explicator, II, No. 6, 42.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid., I, No. 1.

The River Duddon, a Series of Sonnets, published in 1820, receives considerable analysis in Marsh's Wordsworth's Imagery. In the chapter, Sounds, Waters, and Structures, the author says that "the two most fully realized water symbols appear in "The Prelude," and "The River Duddon."⁴³ After dismissing the former, the critic discusses the first sonnet in the series, which follows:

Not envying Latian shades--if yet they throw
 A grateful coolness around that crystal Spring,
 Blandusia, prattling as when long ago
 The Sabind Bard was moved her praise to sing;
 Careless of flowers that in perennial blow
 Round the moist marge of Persian fountains cling;
 Heedless of Alpine torrents thundering
 Through ice-built arches radiant as heaven's bow;
 I seek the birthplace of a native stream.--
 All hail, ye mountains! hail! thou morning light!
 Better to breathe at large on this clear height
 Than toil in needless sleep from dream to dream:
 Pure flows the verse, pure, vigorous, free, and bright,
 For Duddon, long-loved Duddon is my theme!⁴⁴

Florence Marsh observes that the "River Duddon" sonnets are directly about the river and indirectly about the poet. Wordsworth seems to turn to the Duddon to seek relief from more difficult themes.⁴⁵ In the last four lines of the sonnet, we are reminded, the river provides that relief:

Better to breathe at large on this clear height
 Than toil in needless sleep from dream to dream:
 Pure flow the verse, pure, vigorous, free, and bright,
 For Duddon, long-loved Duddon is my theme.

43. Marsh, op. cit., p. 93.

44. Wordsworth, op. cit., p. 246.

45. Marsh, op. cit.

Besides providing relief for the poet, it also provides the image for the flow of the poetry itself.⁴⁶ The critic notes that the function of Duddon, "to heal and to restore, to soothe and to cleanse, not madden and pollute!"⁴⁷ sounds like the poet's own ideal for himself; but more than this--there rests behind the image of the river's birth and growth, the parallel birth and growth of human life. From the sonnet-sequence Marsh points out those lines wherein Wordsworth speaks of the river as a "Child of the clouds," the earth being its foster mother; a "cradled Nursling" which grows into " a Brook of loud and stately march."⁴⁸ The critic remarks that

. . . the union of the river and its tributary stream is described in terms suitable for human marriage; the river's advance to the sea suggests the mingling of the soul with eternity. . .

But while the river Duddon like man is born and grows, unlike man it does not pass away . . . It is also an immutability symbol . . . Human life seen against the permanence of nature is transitory:⁴⁹

Florence Marsh concludes her treatment of this sonnet-sequence by quoting the following five lines from the final sonnet, XXXIV, in The River Duddon Series.

Still glides the Stream, and shall forever glide;
The form remains, the Function never dies;
While we, the brave, the mighty, and the wise,
We men, who in our morn of youth defied
The elements, must vanish;--be it so!⁵⁰

46. Marsh, op. cit., p. 93.

47. Ibid., p. 94.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

The author, whose criticism we are now considering, shows how The Ecclesiastical Sonnets, likewise, use water imagery. In regard to the series, Wordsworth says:

My purpose in writing this Series was, as much as possible, to confine my views to the introduction, progress, and operation of the Church in England, both previous and subsequent to the Reformation.⁵¹

The sonnets were written in 1821, and published in 1822. They are proof that Wordsworth was still writing some of his best sonnets. Let us now look at the imagery which Florence Marsh observes. To her, the frequency of this symbolism in the series makes the water sound as an undercurrent even when there is no mention of it.⁵² The sonnet which follows is the first in the sequence and serves as a stepping-stone from the River Duddon to this series. To Marsh, the image here seems arbitrary.⁵³

I, who accompanied with faithful pace
 Cerulean Duddon from its cloud-fed spring,
 And loved with spirit ruled by his to sing
 Of mountain-quiet and boon nature's grace;
 I, who essayed the nobler Stream to trace
 Of liberty, and smote the plausible string
 Till the checked torrent, proudly triumphing,
 Won for herself a lasting resting-place;
 Now seek upon the heights of Time the source
 Of a Holy River, on whose banks are found
 Sweet pastoral flowers, and laurels that have crowned
 Full oft the unworthy brow of lawless force;
 And, for delight of him who tracks its course,
 Immortal amaranth and palms abound.⁵⁴

51. Wordsworth, op. cit., p. 557.

52. Marsh, op. cit., p. 96.

53. Ibid.

54. Wordsworth, op. cit., p. 342.

Water is one of the most frequently employed vehicles in Wordsworth's poetry, according to Marsh. "It is . . . focal in the River Duddon," and provides a "frame of reverence for the Ecclesiastical Sonnets."⁵⁵

As a final Wordsworthian sonnet for our consideration, I have chosen another from the "Ecclesiastical Series." This sonnet, "Mutability," is called by Abbie Potts, "one of the finest sonnets he ever wrote."⁵⁶ The author, Lascelles Abercrombie, mentions "Mutability" when he admits that "several of his finest sonnets belong to the later years."⁵⁷ Here is the poem.

From low to high doth dissolution climb,
 And sink from high to low, along a scale
 Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail;
 A musical but melancholy chime,
 Which they can hear who meddle not with crime,
 Nor avarice, nor over-anxious care.
 Truth fails not; but her outward forms that bear
 The longest date do melt like frosty rime,
 That in the morning whitened hill and plain
 And is no more; drop like the tower sublime
 Of yesterday, which royally did wear
 His crown of weeds, but could not even sustain
 Some casual shout that broke the silent air,
 Or the unimaginable touch of Time.⁵⁸

W. Macneile Dixon, in a chapter on Wordsworth, speaks of the poet's persistence in finding and using the exact word-- words, not ornamental, but common.⁵⁹ The author says that

55. Marsh, op. cit.

56. Wordsworth, Ecclesiastical Sonnets, edited by Abbie Findley Potts, p. 151.

57. Lascelles Abercrombie, The Art of Wordsworth, pp. 26-27.

58. Wordsworth, Poetical Works, p. 401.

59. W. Macneile Dixon, An Apology for the Arts, p. 144.

Wordsworth has this in common with Shakespeare--"that he is without mannerisms."⁶⁰ Then after quoting the last eight lines of the sonnet he extols both poet and poem thus:

Here, as in a hundred other passages, the absence of effort, the limpid clearness and exactness of phrase, the reserve, almost austerity of the diction challenge comparison with anything in the language. 'The expression,' as Arnold said, 'may often be called bald, but it is bald as the bare mountain-tops are bald, with a baldness which is full of grandeur.' . . . Wordsworth's poetry is a pillar which marks the true highway of Art, to which highway, from all its recoils and excursions, after all its temporary revolts and worship of new creeds in high places, it must ever return, content to find its guidance in principles tried and age-long. To their austerity, their splendid economy of phrase, his sonnets particularly owe their far-shining pre-eminence.⁶¹

Only within the last two decades have critics begun to study the beautiful poetry found in the Ecclesiastical Sonnets, and not only in that series, but in many of the more than five hundred extant sonnets written by Wordsworth. Douglas Bush, states that the poet's finest poetry is mainly of two kinds; one group comprises some short poems,

The other group embraces a good many of the sonnets, those of Milton, on British ideals of the past and sins of the present, on Toussaint L'Ouverture, and kindred subjects, and some on various themes, from the sight of London at sunrise to mutability. In the public sonnets Wordsworth speaks, not with the voice of a bird-watcher, but in the ringing tones of a man among men, a man whose magnanimous idealism

60. W. Macneile Dixon, op. cit.

61. Ibid., pp. 144-145.

and profound anxiety entitle him to deal with nations and great events. Whatever the poet's debt to Milton, this poetry springs from real conflict and has massive strength. In these heroic sonnets, and in others of quieter nobility, Wordsworth is in line with the great poets back through Milton to the ancients. Because he has here a sober consciousness of the facts of human nature and life, he earns the right to celebrate man's unconquerable mind; he does make us feel that we are greater than we know. And perhaps our small anthology holds enough to carry Wordsworth through another hundred years.⁶²

The above quotation is indeed just praise for the poet whose sonnets we have been studying.

It seems fitting that I should close this chapter with one of Wordsworth's sonnets, one line of which is more frequently quoted by our Catholic clergymen than any other of his lines. Because Our Lady has been my guide in this task, I shall pay her, through the poetic vision of Wordsworth, this final tribute.

The Virgin

Mother! whose virgin bosom was uncrost
 With the least shade of thought to sin allied;
 Woman! above all women glorified,
 Our tainted nature's solitary boast;
 Purer than foam on central ocean tost;
 Brighter than eastern skies at daybreak strewn
 With fancied roses, than the unblemished moon
 Before her wane begins on heaven's blue coast;
 Thy Image falls to earth. Yet some, I ween,
 Not unforgiven the suppliant knee might bend,
 As to a visible power, in which did blend
 All that was mixed and reconciled in Thee
 Of mother's love with maiden purity,
 Of high and low, celestial with terrene!

62. Douglas Bush, Wordsworth: A Minority Report," Wordsworth, pp. 21-22.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In this study of Wordsworth's sonnets we have presented sufficient evidence to draw pertinent conclusions. Foremost Wordsworth deserves and is gradually receiving the fitting appraisal of his sonnets.

The early criticisms pelted at him were due to certain antagonism and misunderstanding, to unfair and surreptitious motives. The die-hards of the neo-classic spirit were now skeptical of the Lake School poet whose mind recognized, whose heart felt, and whose hand was forced to write the reactions to the relationship of man with nature, and of man with society. The antagonism and misunderstanding of the poet's mind served as a channel whereby those who felt the common need of controversial issue, could plunge into open attack where they were confident they would receive compensation.

The Lyrical Ballads had songs too sweet, lines too variant, symbols too realistic for adherents to the classic tone, the strict form, and the prosaic thoughts that were by now timely worn.

The misunderstanding for twenty years had obscured the mind of Wordsworth, who watched for every gleam, no matter how dim, that would give him the faintest hope of success.

The first gleam of hope appeared in 1807 with the publication of Poems in Two Volumes. There were critics who were bold enough to admit the presence of poetic beauty which to them was evident in the sonnets contained therein. However, the controversy continued sporadically until 1820. In that year The River Duddon, A Series of Sonnets was published, but the critics were no longer so harsh. By this time Wordsworth cared little about the criticism of others. He alone understood and was able to interpret his thoughts.

The restlessness that was for some time Wordsworth's, has since become the property of the literary scholars who, today, perceiving the poetic vision reflected in a number of the poet's sonnets, have determined to expose the remaining facets by studying the mind of the one whose thoughts were little understood.

Florence Marsh tells us in Wordsworth's Imagery that it is her "purpose here to examine Wordsworth's position in detail in the hope of reaching a rather more accurate statement of Wordsworth's theory of imagery."¹ This statement she makes after her study of symbol in the River Duddon sequence and of metaphor in the Ecclesiastical series. Indeed, the revaluations that were ascertained by critics before the centenary, revaluations that pointed out the poetic diction of "London, 1802," of "The World is Too Much With Us,"

1. Florence Marsh, Wordsworth's Imagery, p. 115.

and "Scorn Not the Sonnet," have already given place to very recent critics who have since become aware of Wordsworth's theory of imagery, as found in "The Stepping-Stones," in "At Rome," and in "Mutability."

The final conclusion to be drawn from this study is that there is still room for higher evaluations of Wordsworth's sonnets. In the most recent issue (June, 1953) of the Publications of the Modern Language Association, there is an article by the Wordsworthian scholar, James R. Baird, in which he admits that his purpose is to investigate the method of Wordsworth's thought.² The study reveals that "Wordsworth's poetry of sense perception is characterized chiefly by movement, or emergence from an original complex of sensations toward an ultimate laying hold upon a pure universal. . . . Sense perception, then, is integral to the emergence of pure universals. The materials upon which it works are preserved by emotion."³ Sense perception of sound, sight, and feeling are pointed out by Baird as being present in many poems. He states that "Gleaming waters appear again in three sonnets ranging from 1810 to 1820, in 'Hail, Twilight, Sovereign of one peaceful hour,' 'To the River Derwent,' and lines 'Composed on the Banks of a Rocky Stream.' "⁴

2. James R. Baird, Wordsworth's 'Inscrutable Workmanship' and the Emblems of Reality," Publications of the Modern Language Association, June, 1953, p. 444.

3. Ibid., pp. 444-49, *passim*.

4. Ibid., p. 456.

James R. Baird further says . . . "most of his poetry is contained in the workmanship exerted upon the collection of past sensations emotionally impressed."⁵ This makes it possible for the poet to arrive at reality; for in Wordsworth's theory of thought there can be no meaning without past. Here, then, is the key which may unlock for further research and reevaluation the sonnets of Wordsworth.

5. Baird, op. cit., p. 450.

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