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Wordsworth and the Victorians

Stephen Gill

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**Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998)
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Wordsworth belongs to a generation that re-invented posterity as the true judge of artistic worth, a truth beyond fashion and faction, the eternal justification of a misunderstood life. His exact contemporary Hölderlin asked 'Wozu Dichter in dürtiger Zeit?', meaning, among other things, why be a poet in an age that does not know how to value poetry? Romantic poets invested very heavily in the future, and for that reason, leaving aside others, their reception makes a fascinating study, full of veneration, misprision, irony, bathos, creative imitation and unconscious symbiosis.

Stephen Gill's book is about both the Victorianization of Wordsworth and the Wordsworthianization of the Victorians. So 'reception' is too passive and simple a term. This is not exclusively a narrative of responses from writers and reviewers, professional comparers in the business of literary criticism; it is about remakings, some of which are generally familiar. Matthew Arnold's reinvention of Wordsworth — the Wordsworth whose 'philosophy' and by implication most of *The Prelude* is of no lasting value — is still well known through his *Essays in Criticism* and his selected edition, *Poems of Wordsworth* (1879), which was still in print very recently. Perhaps J. S. Mill's account of his recovery from emotional breakdown, his discovery of Wordsworth's saving power, is as well known: certainly it is accepted by many critics as a narrative — in fact *the* narrative — of Wordsworth's absorption into mainstream Victorian liberal individualism: another ambiguous canonization (I'm thinking of, for example, Anne Janowitz's *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition*). But these landmarks in the history of 'Wordsworth' take on a fresh appearance in Gill's indispensable book, which fills in a great many details and looks at the subject from a number of angles. The cast in this story is huge: not just poets but novelists, reviewers, publishers, publicists, editors, biographers, political and religious opportunists (especially the latter), self-appointed heritage-definers, and simple souvenir-hunters who removed plants from Rydal Mount right under Wordsworth's nose — among them one Isaac Evans, who in 1841 collected rose leaves to send to his sister Mary Ann.

The cover of the book reproduces J. W. Inchbold's very Pre-Raphaelite painting of a scene in *The White Doe of Rylstone*. It is there because Gill starts with an account of a Wordsworthian who made a pilgrimage to Bolton Abbey in 1882 and was told that the Duke of Devonshire had tried repeatedly but unsuccessfully to breed white does at the Abbey. This may have been a leg-pull, but, as Gill says, the important thing is that Wordsworth's poem had eternally 'identified Bolton Abbey as the place where one ought to see a white doe'. But the image has another function, to remind us that Wordsworth cared very much about *selling* his poetry, not just for the sake of the income but because the nation needed him. These convictions were shared by his heirs, whose careful control of texts and image is the subject of many pages in this book. In the case of the *Doe*, published in 1815, commercial failure was crucial to the people who depended on Wordsworth's income. Dorothy lamented that

I now perceive clearly that till my dear Brother is laid in his grave his writings

will not produce any profit. This I now care no more about and *shall never more* trouble my head concerning the sale of them.

Clearly she *did* care and adopted the doctrine of posterity *faute de mieux*. But these were the dark days when *The Excursion* (1814), the first collected edition (*Poems*, 1815) and the *Doe* successively failed, with memorable help from Francis Jeffrey, and in the long term her prediction was wrong. Quite soon the new problem for Wordsworth, his publishers and heirs was how best to manage the market. He worked hard to get the copyright laws extended and staged the posthumous publication of *The Prelude* to maximize his financial legacy. His heirs inherited this frugal spirit, nurturing new editions — new Wordsworths — over the next half century, fighting off a few pirates and many anthologists, and making difficulties even for dedicated and sympathetic editors like William Knight, whose ground-breaking edition of 1882-9 Gill properly celebrates.

Knight is one of the book's dedicatees (the other is his devoted and contemptuous competitor Edward Dowden), and the story of Knight's negotiations with the Wordsworth family is judiciously told. It is clear that the family were deeply afraid of what the unpublished papers would reveal, and Knight did in fact find enough evidence about a certain 'Annette' and 'Caroline' to have understood the liaison with Annette Vallon. He suppressed it, and the story was first told forty years later by Emile Legouis. Although it is easy to deride Knight as overtactful or timid or squeamish, Gill argues persuasively that he 'oversaw . . . the transference of and care for Wordsworth's text, and for the reputation of the family, into academic control', and that this was a decisive moment in the after-life of the poet. This must be right: the temporary suppression of a sexual scandal is in the end less important than a fundamental change of ethos in the treatment of literary texts: family property or cultural resource? Knight's other service was to found the short-lived Wordsworth Society, a gathering of the great and the good, whose membership Gill usefully lists in an appendix.

This easing of the texts away from family control closely followed a deepening of debate about Wordsworth's status. During the late eighteen-sixties and throughout the seventies and early eighties the major critics weighed in, R. H. Hutton, A. H. Clough, Lesley Stephen, Stopford Brooke, Pater, Arnold and Swinburne among them. None disputed Wordsworth's greatness, but while most argued that Wordsworth had, in Gill's words, 'truths to utter about the greatest mysteries of life', Arnold and Pater spoke of feelings rather than philosophy. Gill sees this, rightly I am sure, as part of a broader debate about the relation of art and morality, though Arnold, surely, had a foot in both camps. There is a curiously persistent notion that Wordsworth must be justified by what he can *do* for 'us', now, and this has a faint but distinct xenophobic tinge to it. One thing he could do was preserve us from *them*, from foreign degeneracy. While Pater celebrated Wordsworth's 'art of impassioned contemplation' as distinct from any moral teaching, Stephen detected in Pater signs of what Gill calls 'a suspiciously French contagion': the fallacy that, as Stephen put it, 'art and morality are two separate things'. Perhaps this is unsurprising, because Wordsworth's reputation was almost exclusively anglophone: he didn't translate. So far as I know there was no German edition before 1893, nor a French until Legouis's selection in 1896, nor an Italian before 1915. It was Wordsworth's fate to become more exclusively identified with Englishness than any of his contemporaries.

It is significant that Arnold defined the character of English poetry in an essay on Wordsworth; perhaps equally significant that he did it in the words of a Frenchman.

The debate of the seventies and eighties is a major focus of *Wordsworth and the Victorians*, but earlier and later periods are also important. In the decade following his death the general issue of his status had its lighter moments. So universally was he admired as a spiritual leader, the Sage of Rydal Mount, that rhapsodic tributes poured from the press and inevitably there was a dissident voice or two. 'The greatest literary impostor of his time', wrote a certain John Wright in the teasingly titled *The Genius of Wordsworth Harmonized With the Wisdom and Integrity of His Reviewers*, in which he imagines a large-scale conspiracy to keep Wordsworth's reputation alive. The idea would be merely absurd, as Gill points out, if there had not been an overwhelming chorus of praise. In the same years publishers issued illustrated editions with sentimentalized and sanitized engravings of healthy, decently dressed children, which Gill discusses with appropriate amusement. Much later in the century Wordsworthian thinking impinged heavily on, for example, the plan to turn Thirlmere into a dam to provide water for the growing population of Manchester, and of course the formation of the National Trust in 1895. Gill gives detailed and judicious accounts of these events.

As to Wordsworth's influence on individual Victorian writers, Gill discussed Arnold, Tennyson, Gaskell, and Eliot, the novelists getting a chapter each. What emerges from the Eliot chapter, 'Wordsworth at Full Length', is first, her huge appetite for *all* his poetry, even the gristly bits. She read the six volumes of the 1836-7 *Poetical Works* at the age of twenty-one, and found positive things to say about even the 'Ode: 1815', which Gill describes here as 'stupefyingly dull'; and in 1880 she was still resisting selected editions:

I prefer Moxon's one-volumed edition of Wordsworth to any selection. No selection gives you the perfect gems to be found in single lines, or in half a dozen lines, which are to be found in the 'dull' poems.

So much for Arnold. The more substantial theme in this chapter is parallels in the art, thought, and general temper of the two. Gill shows how the critical taste of the 1850s and 60s was deeply imbued with Wordsworthian ideas and tones. When *Adam Bede* appeared in 1859, it was widely praised for its 'truth', for Eliot's power to see 'realities' where others merely reflected appearances (John Chapman in the *Westminster Review*). Gill also quotes E. S. Dallas in *The Times*, who found in the novel the 'truism which very few of us comprehend until it has been knocked into us by years of experience — that we are all alike — that the human heart is one.' As Gill points out, Dallas is half-remembering a line from 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' — 'we have all of us one human heart' — a characteristic expression of Wordsworth's conviction of the primacy and universality of human feeling.

In a sense, then, Eliot's novels immediately found a sympathetic critical milieu because she and her more heavyweight reviewers shared such ideas as well as a taste for Wordsworthian seriousness. Critics of *Adam Bede* generally — surprisingly, Gill remarks — ignored the fact that the novel is set back 60 years, in the years of Wordsworth's prime in fact, preferring to harp on its permanent truth, its timelessness. But at the same time Eliot's *gravitas*, like Wordsworth's, helped create the taste for her writings: 'as a direct result of their unremitting

high seriousness, both artists became objects of veneration in their own lifetimes'. Gill writes tellingly about the sheer ambition of both writers, even claiming that they shared a particular kind of professional immodesty. Comparing chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* with Wordsworth's 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, texts published well before their respective writers had an established reputation, he notes that

Each writer makes declarations about truth and falsehood in art as if writing *ab initio*, as if previous debate had not existed. Wordsworth, widely read as he was in recent poetry, sweeps the ground clear. What he did in poetry, George Eliot seeks to do sixty years later for the novel. Favourable references in 'The Natural History of German Life' to Scott (a favourite author) and to Kingsley are token gestures. True writing about rural life, her utterances suggest — and for her creative confidence need to suggest — begins here, with her first novel.

In the same vein Gill compares Wordsworth's dismissal of 'frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies' with Eliot's less strident phrase 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists'. It is a just comparison, though a partial one. Wordsworth was certainly revered in his lifetime, but he was also ridiculed, even despised, in a way that Eliot was not: nobody took that kind of liberty with her. Even so, the comparison points to the ambition of both writers and their willingness to take risks where their artistic programmes demanded it. Noting the Wordsworthian tone of *Adam Bede*'s ideas about religion ('It isn't notions sets people doing the right thing — it's feelings'), Gill comments that 'perhaps the strongest link between their art [is] that they were ready to deal in truisms, knowing them to be the truths that always need resaying': truisms like those of *Lyrical Ballads*, which Arthur Donnithorne dismisses as 'twaddling stuff'.

We move on to *The Mill on the Floss*, in which Gill notes the Wordsworthian themes of memory, affection and personal identity, and outlines recent critical disagreement as to whether Wordsworth's influence is a 'blight' on Maggie's imagination or (more positively) a means by which she could rethink her own past. Thereafter, with the obvious exception of *Silas Marner*, Wordsworth's influence on the later fiction is less, but Eliot remains one of the nineteenth century's great (and conscious) Wordsworthians.

Wordsworth and the Victorians is a book about Wordsworthianism in the nineteenth century, and George Eliot is a distinctive part of that phenomenon. A different history could have been written about opposition to Wordsworth, as Daniel Karlin argued in his review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, but it would have to take into account the powerful shapings of 'Wordsworth' in his later life and after-life, and it would have to acknowledge, as Karlin seems not to since he is mostly concerned to justify Browning's accusation in 1843 that Wordsworth was a political turncoat, a 'lost leader', that the reformist ideas of 1816-1819 that divided Shelley and Wordsworth cannot be assumed to be alive in the same form in the 1840s. Versions of this history have in fact been written: a recent example is Anne Janowitz's book mentioned above, and it is fascinating to read it alongside Gill's. And, for the record, Gill does discuss the rallies of the Socialist League and the Social Democratic Federation in the eighteen-eighties, seeing these bodies as direct counterparts of the more or less geriatric Wordsworth Society: what linked them, he argues, was the by now canonical doctrine of 'sympathy'. But there is something reductive in the assumption that Wordsworth's later support for the Tories makes

him simply a member of the Establishment in all its forms. Gill supplies ample evidence that Wordsworth remained controversial in religious as well as critical circles, and this was no side-issue in what the age demanded of its poets.

Michael Baron
Birkbeck College