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KENNETH R. JOHNSTON

I Wandered Lonely as a Spy:

Advanced Study and Elementary Research

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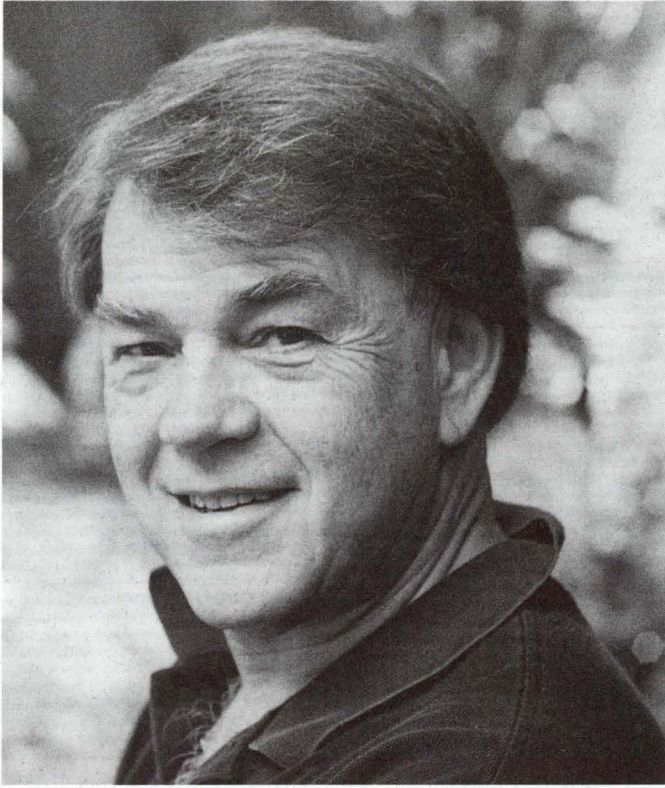


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Kenneth R. Johnston was born in Michigan, raised there and in Minnesota and Wisconsin. He attended Augustana College (Ill.), majoring in political science (B.A. 1959). After an M.A. (1961) at the University of Chicago Divinity School, he began literary studies at Yale University, with a dissertation on Wordsworth's "veiled vision" (Ph.D. 1966). His first—and only—job has been at IU. He received a Distinguished Teaching Award in 1971; spent a year (1974-75) as Fulbright lecturer at the University of Bucharest, Romania, where he met his wife, Ilinca Zarifopol (now an Associate Professor in IU's Comparative Literature Department). In 1984, he published *Wordsworth and 'The Recluse'* (Yale University Press), which eventually led to *The Hidden Wordsworth* (Norton, 1998). Johnston served as an organizer of the exhibition, "William Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism," which toured three cities in the U.S. in 1988: New York, Chicago, and Bloomington. Since 1994, he has been chair of the IU English Department.

Johnston says that his interest in Wordsworth and literature started relatively late. "I never read a Wordsworth poem (that I remember) until I was at least twenty-five years old. So I never had the bad school experience—common in England, if not America—of having to memorize 'Daffodils' as a piece of pretty 'nature poetry.' A further delay was my initial intention to write a dissertation on Emily Dickinson, a project that gradually led me backwards to her roots in English Romanticism. Maybe this meant I came to Wordsworth with more maturity. At any rate, it means that I approached him by a different route than the one he claimed for himself: 'The Child is Father of the Man.'"

I Wandered Lonely as a Spy: Advanced Study and Elementary Research

In Memoriam—Stuart Major Sperry, 1929-1998

As I hope at least some readers will recognize, my title derives from a poem by William Wordsworth, the great English Romantic writer, that is usually called "Daffodils." Wordsworth gave it no title in his published works, and so, following the usual conventions, its "title" is just its first line: "I wandered lonely as a Cloud." It's primarily a poem about wandering and loneliness—human conditions to which the daffodils appear as a massive, non-human, natural antidote:

I wandered lonely as a Cloud
That floats on high o'er Vales and Hills
When all at once I saw a crowd
A host of dancing Daffodils (1-4)

Lonely human wandering is thus balanced by crowded natural "dancing," but neither condition ever disappears:

For oft when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude (13-16)

As is often the case with Wordsworth's poems, especially his "easy pieces" (of which this is surely one) the answer to his often desperate human situations tends to get established as The Meaning of the Poem, with the result that "Daffodils" is the best known, most taught poem in English, at least in England.

But I don't wish to speak of daffodils; instead, I mean to talk about spies. Or rather, I will speak about wandering and loneliness—Wordsworth's, mine, ours—and the solutions other than daffodils he (or we) find for those all-too-human conditions, and the prices he was willing to pay to remove them, or the costs we have to bear if we can't.

But, since I am first and foremost an English teacher, I must start with the first lesson we teach in elementary composition: who is my audience? Who am I addressing, and for what reasons? I could just launch right into Wordsworth and poetry, but an address to a body as august-sounding as the Society for Advanced Study of the Institute for Advanced Study at Indiana University seems to call for something more, something higher, than "just poetry." Or something more comprehensive, since many intellectual disciplines are represented in those "advanced" study.

"Advanced study" sounds like something more, to me, than "just poetry." Now, some may protest—at least I hope some would protest: 'No, no; not at all. Poetry and literature and art are just as important as science and mathematics and economics.' Of course it is

true that, especially in academic settings, the “Humanities”—to use the most general term for all these activities—are honored and preserved and appreciated. But at times they are appreciated like museums are appreciated, or art galleries, or concert halls: nice places to go for occasional uplift and good, “higher” feelings, but effectively a sort of cultural add-on, perhaps even a form of conspicuous consumption. As a professor and, alas, an administrator of the arts and humanities, I often have to resist this apparently benign but ultimately condescending attitude toward the Humanities. This is difficult to do, because this benign attitude often produces benefits—like funding—that more radical, root notions of the Humanities do not.

Wordsworth was one of the first poets to highlight the tension between benign, polite notions of poetry and more challenging, or even threatening, notions of what poetry could be and do. In the late 18th century, the common image of poetry, that he set himself against, was that of a polite drawing-room accomplishment, something like needlepoint or piano playing. He captured the difference between the two in a subtle imagining of just such a drawing-room scene, into which his poems (the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798) have dared to enter:

They who have been accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will, no doubt, frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to inquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title.
(Preface of 1800)

The “scene” lightly imagined here is of an upper class salon, with the invited guests turning round to stare at some rude, common intruders, and asking, in the archly polite diction of high society: “I say! Who are they? Who invited them?”

I sometimes counter peoples’ benign, well-meaning assumptions about the Humanities with the view that they are not only about “the best that has been thought and said in the world,” in Matthew Arnold’s famous phrase, but that they are about what we are as human beings, our humanness. Or, to quote Wordsworth, “The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, that of the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected of him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer or a natural philosopher, but as a Man.” (1800 Preface) He conceived of poetry as something that addresses us in our human condition: what we read (or view, or listen to) when we are free to do whatever we want—presuming we have such freedom, as many people in many places and many times do not.

From this definition, then, it follows that other aspects of our “humanities” would also include things like our vacations, the interior decoration of our homes, the clothes we wear, the “style” in which we express ourselves, not only verbally but through what has come to be called our “life-style,” such as those for which designers like Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein have developed what might be called “whole-life” advertising campaigns, featuring cars, houses, and buff young male and female “friends and families,” right down to their uniformly sulky good looks. Now, these might not seem like the “humanities,” but they are, in my and Wordsworth’s definition. Nor am I suggesting they are necessarily bad, though they might be better. And by that I don’t

mean we should read poetry instead. Wordsworth, of course, did mean that, and particularly his poetry, but that is to jump ahead to my main point, about the costs and prices he paid or was willing to pay to create or authorize himself as, famously, "the poet as a man speaking to men . . . in a selection of language really used by men . . . bringing everywhere with him relationship and love."

Wordsworth was very well aware, at the first dawning of the modern age of capitalistic consumption, of the competition poetry and art and the humanities would face from the new consumer goods, goods that of course have utterly swamped us, 200 years later, so as to have become almost more pervasive in many peoples' lives than "nature."

(I'm reminded here of a recent *New Yorker* cartoon showing a father out in the rain on the highway trying to change a flat tire. He shouts to his complaining children inside the car: "But I can't change the channel! This is really happening!" Actually, of course, the distinction between what is "really happening" and what's "just on television" is not so clear cut, anymore.)

Or, as Wordsworth described his similar situation: ". . . a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the human mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place [the war against France and the rise of Napoleon], and the encreasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. [Compare 24-hour TV news and weather channels.] To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves. [Compare "docu-dramas," or movies like *Primary Colors*—or whatever horror might even now be on the story boards for a "treatment" of Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky.] The invaluable works of our elder writers, . . . the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies [a reference to the contemporary fad for the "Gothic," reviving in our own time in the works of Stephen King and a hundred others], and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse."

That is an amazingly prescient analysis, to have been written two hundred years ago.

Wordsworth went on to say that when he thought of "this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation," he was "almost ashamed to [speak] of the feeble effort with which [he] endeavored to counteract it." And to those who—as he anticipated—would object to his new plain-language, "interventionist" view of poetry, as opposed to conventional views of poetry, he answered, in a tone of annoying authority, that they are people "who speak of what they do not understand; who talk of Poetry as a matter of amusement and idle pleasure; who will converse with us gravely about a *taste* for Poetry, . . . as if it were a thing as indifferent as a taste for Rope-dancing, or Frontinac or Sherry." Now, drinking sherry and rope-dancing are also humanistic amusements, but a highly developed taste in them is not, perhaps, as enabling or expanding of our sense of human being as it is in literature and the arts.

I am almost back to Wordsworth, wandering and spying. But I want to return briefly to those people I referred to a minute ago, who do not have the leisure or freedom to just

be human, whether for poetry, or sherry, or rope-dancing, or vacations or interior decorating. Or virtually none. These of course are most people, most of time, almost anywhere around the globe and throughout history. And here the "arts and humanities" run up against a formidable challenge, related to my initial feeling that "advanced study" must imply something more important than poetry. These are the challenges of both Nature and History, or let us say, for shorthand, disease and politics. With all the never-ending, insoluble problems that we will always face on these fronts, why fool with poetry? People are dying, or being murdered, and what has poetry to do with that?

Two great 20th century Modernist poets had something to say about this challenge, on opposite sides of the question. T.S. Eliot, trying to protect poetry from merely becoming enlisted in this or that propaganda war, said, "Poetry is poetry and not an other thing." And he was right. W.H. Auden, speaking about the death of yet another 20th century poet, W.B. Yeats, in the context of the Spanish Civil War—where high-minded, benign liberal ideas took a terrific beating, as they have almost everywhere, in the 20th century—said "Poetry makes nothing happen." And he was right too.

Are poetry and the humanities just escape valves, then? And can we even claim that it's an escape back into or toward our "basic humanity"?—whatever that is. In this argument, the image of Nazi death camp guards listening to recordings of Beethoven's great Ninth Symphony, which sets Schiller's "Ode to Joy" to music, has been repeated ad nauseum. The image, and the challenge, are particularly appropriate, since Beethoven was Wordsworth's exact contemporary—both born in 1770—and all of them, including Schiller, were what we now call "Romantics."

But at another extreme, we have the experience of John Stuart Mill, the great Victorian utilitarian reformer, the very opposite of a Romantic aesthete—whose whole life was devoted to producing the greatest good for the greatest possible number of people. Few people can be said to have been more dedicated to the improvement of the lot of humanity than John Stuart Mill, who was literally raised a Utilitarian by his father, James Mill. He said he first came to his great object in life when he was 15 years old, when he first read Jeremy Bentham, the father of Utilitarianism. From that moment, he says, "I had what might truly be called an object in life; to be a reformer of the world." (*Autobiography*, Chapter 5: "A Crisis in My Mental History") But he came to the great crisis of his life, something on the order of a nervous or mental breakdown, when he realized—at the ripe old age of 21—that if "all [his] objects in life were realized . . . all the changes in institutions and opinions which [he was] looking forward to could be completely affected [in an instant]" . . . would he then be happy? "And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, 'No!' At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down." That is, it was not the impossible difficulty of achieving all the ends of human betterment that depressed Mill, but the realization that even the achievement of all of them would not be enough to make him happy.

Mill was rescued from this mental crisis by reading Wordsworth, whose work he had, before this moment, not thought very much of. But it was not Wordsworth's nature poetry that saved Mill, though he liked mountains and scenes of rural beauty. As he says, "Scott does this better than Wordsworth, and a very second-rate landscape does it more effectually than any poet." No: "What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my

state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought colored by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of. . . I seemed to draw from [them] a source . . . of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared by all human beings; which had no connection with struggle or imperfection, but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind. From them I seemed to learn what would be the perennial source of happiness, when all the greater evils of life shall have been removed."

Now, having set up this "high argument" in defense of poetry, why would I write a critical biography, *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy*, (Norton, 1998) that shows Wordsworth, far from being a "nature" poet, commenting wisely on the ills of modern life from the hills of the North of England, to have been thoroughly implicated in and compromised by his life and times, with an illegitimate child by a French lover; an "active partisan" associated with radical, revolutionary writers in both England and France; and perhaps worst of all, a *turncoat*, who worked as a paid secret agent of the repressive government of William Pitt? That is, given Wordsworth's great role as one of the first modern writers to articulate the function of the arts and the humanities in creating what might be called a healthy national imagination, in an emerging modern world of consumer capitalism where profits drive "leisure products" to ever lower levels of human value, why seem to attack him?

The short form of my answer—which I didn't know when I started out—is: to show that he knew whereof he spoke. His eventual positioning of himself among the daffodils in the English Lake District—a position which has become a virtual identity by now—was in strictly biographical terms something in the nature of an admission of failure—i.e., he couldn't "make it" in the big time, the big city. But it gave him a perspective on a violent world of politics and revolution and war and spying and journalism in which he had been thoroughly involved for the crucial years of his 20s: from 1790 to 1800. He spoke about his perspective in these terms, at the end of "the poem on the growth of my own mind," *The Prelude*, which covered just his first 30 years (though he lived to 80), and was published posthumously in 1850, long after the fear of the French revolution had subsided in England:

I rose
As if on wings, and saw beneath me stretched
Vast prospect of the world which I had been
And was; and hence this Song . . .
 . . . often with more plaintive voice
To earth attempered and her deep-drawn sighs,
Yet centering all in love, and in the end
All gratulant if rightly understood.

(Prelude, XIII. 381-88)

That is, he could see himself as a "world." The verbs "been" and "was" in the second and third lines might seem like misprints for, "seen" and "known," but Wordsworth says he was his world. This is Romantic egotism, certainly, but it is not merely, or personally, "egotistical." It recognizes honestly, daringly, the extent to which we are all our own

worlds; and, as Mill came to recognize, if we don't honestly admit that, then we are in some sense sick or alienated from ourselves, no matter how altruistic or socially responsible we are, or feel ourselves to be.

Such a view of one's self reminds us that, besides being the poet of healthy imagination in a sick society, Wordsworth is also the poet par excellence in English of self-development: "the Mind of Man," he said, was "the haunt and main region of my song." An American parallel is very close here: Walt Whitman, the poet of democracy, whose greatest single poem is "Song of Myself." There's no contradiction here, between democracy as applying to society, and self referring to interior individual consciousness, because the two are dialectically related, as our other great Romantics, Emerson and Thoreau, articulate best for us. In Emerson's strange and powerful essay called "Self-Reliance," he defines genius as daring to speak your own thoughts in the full confidence that others will assent to them. The trouble is that this could define a mad man as well as a genius. But it is democracy above all that depends on integrated individual souls with healthy imaginations. Feudalism or slavery or totalitarianism don't depend on them: in fact, fear them and repress them. But, on the other hand, a democracy full of sick souls is not truly democratic but an anarchy of spirit regulated by empty legal forms.

Did I want to show that Wordsworth's self-development was not as "[con]gratulant, if rightly understood" as he presented it in *The Prelude*? Yes, I did, though the amount of discrepancy I discovered surprised me, even though I well knew that *The Prelude* was a poem, not an autobiography as such, and that its hero is an idealized type of the young man of talents finding his way in a modern world emerging out of the smoke of the Age of Revolutions. (Julien Sorel in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* is another, similarly ambiguous example).

In looking for "the hidden Wordsworth," I wanted to see, by keeping true to the evidence (old and new) that I encountered, how his poetry of feeling builds out from, and then back into, the larger social structures of the world it sought to change. Because, at its largest, Wordsworth's artistic aim was nothing less than world-redemption, in an epic poem called *The Recluse*. (Here's another version of the same paradox, that a redeemer should be a recluse.) He announced its themes as being "On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life"—which pretty well covers everything. The only subject left out of such an epic ambition is God, or religion, and that was deliberate. Wordsworth's friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, author of "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," told him he could be the new Milton of English literature, and urged *The Recluse* on him as "the first great philosophic poem" in the language—by which he meant it would supplant the Last Great Religious Poem in the language, which was Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Now, Wordsworth never wrote *The Recluse*, except for a few disconnected parts. Instead, he wrote *The Prelude*, completing it in 1805, when he was 35, and then spent the remaining 45 years of his life revising it. But rather than a failure, his concentration on the personal *The Prelude* instead of getting on with the more general *Recluse* is another version of that tension between personality and society that I've been mentioning, which for efficiency, we can cut through simply by saying that all true revolutions begin in individual human hearts and minds. That is Wordsworth's story for us, and the one I set out to test.

(Here I make an intermission, called "A Tale of Two Titles." Originally, the working title of my book was *Young Wordsworth: Creation of the Poet*. Which pretty well says it, for the kind of study I've just been outlining. How "young man Wordsworth" (paraphrasing Erik Erikson's developmental biography, *Young Man Luther*) made himself into the Poet of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, the source of all the quotations I've been using. But my publisher hated it, because it seemed to imply another volume—*Old Man Wordsworth?*—which I certainly was not going to write: the second half of Wordsworth's life is boringly normal (perhaps like most of ours), and anyway, self-creation or self-fashioning was my interest, and once he had created himself as the hero of *The Prelude*, that self-fashioning project was essentially completed.

So the first title had to go. And then I found a sentence in my already-written Epilogue which said, "the young Wordsworth is the hidden Wordsworth," and I simply switched the subject and the predicate (somewhat as George Orwell hit upon his famous title, *1984*, by reversing the digits of the year in which it was written, 1948). So my emphasis on self-creation now highlighted all the parts that Wordsworth left out or disguised: it's still about self-fashioning, but with an emphasis on the process, of "hiding," or selectively editing himself.

Then, since the need remained for some explanation of exactly what was "hidden," my wife suggested the title of John Le Carre's thriller, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. And that did it: it was only a matter of word-substitution, since we already had the "spy" business for the emphatic final beat: DA-dum, DA-dum, DA-dum, BOOM—three regular trochees and a final spondaic foot.

Finally, for an "internal" confirmation of my change, I found a little-known passage in *The Prelude*, where Wordsworth records part of the crisis that his allegiance to the French Revolution generated in him, even before it degenerated into the Reign of Terror:

I avow that I had hope to see,
I mean that future times would surely see,
The man to come parted as by a gulph
From him who had been, that I could no more
Trust the elevation which had made me one
With the great family that . . .
Is scattered through the abyss of ages past.
Sage, Patriot, Lover, Hero; for it seemed
That their best virtues were not free from taint
Of something false and weak, which could not stand
The open eye of Reason.

(*Prelude*, XI.57-67)

That is, full of republican virtue and enthusiasm, he no longer felt himself part of the great company of "sages, patriots, lovers, and heroes" from the classical humanist past, a somewhat nobler company, all in all, than the ones in which I found him, of poets, lovers, rebels, and spies. "Lover" is common to both descriptions, and "patriot" might be considered a corollary of "rebel," or another form of it. "Sage" is certainly a synonym for

"poet," as Wordsworth used the terms in his own self-imagining. But "spy" is the term that does just not compute, and is hard to equate with "hero."

This little textual coincidence, and the difficulties it raises, provides my transition out of my intermission and back to our hero, from whose adventures I'll recount a couple of stories from my "elementary research" in espionage, to complement—and complicate—my higher justification of "advanced study" for "wandering lonely as a cloud," or a spy.)

"Spy" is certainly the word that captured attention in Britain when *The Hidden Wordsworth* first appeared. There the entire title was read by some reviewers as an "American" provocation. I winced a little bit, but by now I actually enjoy the controversy, because it forces people to think about comfortable received notions of Wordsworth in particular and of poetry, arts, and the humanities more generally. Over there, it sounds like a sensational title: "hidden!" "lover!" "rebel!" "spy!" What next? Just what Brits might expect from the Land of Bill Clinton—and again raising that question of healthy or unhealthy national imaginations. Nevertheless, the terms are not sensational, but all true and documentable: "lover" and "rebel" are well known in Wordsworth biography, though perhaps more forgotten than remembered until recently. Until the last 15 years most critics have been all too willing to follow Wordsworth's suggestion that *The Prelude* records his "juvenile errors," and that he thus casts them out by appearing to confess them.

But what about "spy"? I confess the British public reaction surprised me. It doesn't change my opinion of Wordsworth much. In fact, I don't think it amounted to much: he was only a "spy" in the sense that any of us might be called "spies" if we were paid by the CIA for doing something (delivering a message, making a contact, etc.) on our next trip abroad. I don't know if the CIA works that way, but that's the moral rub about espionage: how would you know I don't know? I might not be telling the truth. And even if we were just a one-time contract worker, if our friends knew we were being "funded by the CIA"—for anything—it wouldn't be long before they were calling us a "spy": all in jest, of course, but an uncomfortable joke just the same. I had ignored, or forgotten about, the almost erotically intense emotions that swirl around the idea of espionage in Britain, home of the fictional John Le Carré (whose real is David Cornwell—another double identity), and of the very real Kim Philby, Anthony Blunt, and Guy Burgess, Cold War spies who were all undergraduates at Cambridge University in the 1930s, Wordsworth's alma mater in 1791. They were attracted to Communism just as he was to revolutionary Jacobinism. And the covering up of one's youthful Communism or Fascism from the 1930s and '40s has been just as serious a business in the late 20th century as covering up one's youthful Jacobinism was in the early 19th century. In addition, Christopher Marlowe, Daniel Defoe, Graham Greene, among other British authors, all acted as spies or informants for the government in their day. Hence artistic "hiding" in the service of a higher (government) intelligence has a good pedigree.

The discovery of this evidence was in fact more interesting, to me, for confirming the pattern of hiding than for what it meant about Wordsworth's politics, to say nothing of his moral integrity. But for some readers, reviewers, and audiences it has been a very disillusioning revelation. It made some of them angry at me ("kill the messenger"), but

more of them angry at Wordsworth. One man said he would never be able to read Wordsworth in the same way again; that is, he had "lost his faith" in Wordsworth. This would be very troubling to me, and my thoughts here are an attempt to work through this difficulty.

But was Wordsworth a spy? And if so, so what? At long last I come to the spy stories. There are two episodes and two kinds of evidence. One has been well known for years; the other was published for the first time in my book.

The first one is the hilarious "Spy Nozy" story. Wordsworth's friend Coleridge wrote, in his *Biographia Literaria*, published in 1817, how when they were all living near each other in Somerset near the Bristol Channel in 1797, their strange doings (nighttime walks, abtruse conversations, doing their wash on Sundays, etc.) caused their simple neighbors to suspect they were "French folk" who might be scouting the neighborhood for a possible French invasion. (We tend to forget that there were French invasions of England and Ireland at this time, four in fact, between 1796 and 1798, but since they all ended in failure and fiasco, they don't seem very serious. But they were very serious and terrifying when they occurred.) According to Coleridge, the government sent down an agent who spied on them, and reported back that they were talking about someone named "Spy Nozy." And this, Coleridge exclaims, delivering his punch-line, was none other than the Dutch idealist philosopher Spinoza! Spinoza = Spy Nozy. That was Coleridge's joke, and posterity has swallowed it, hook, line, and sinker. For one thing, it very cleverly confirms two prejudices we have about poetry and politics. One, that poets are harmless folk presenting no danger to anyone; two, that governments are stupid and bureaucratic. And the implied third correlative is that poetry and politics don't—or shouldn't—have anything to do with each other.

But Coleridge's story is a very artful recasting—or hiding—of the truth, which was finally set forth clearly in 1908, ninety years ago; but the joke goes on, sweeping mere facts before it. The government had indeed sent an agent, named James Walsh, down to Somerset to check out the rumors. But Walsh said nothing about "Spy Nozy" or Spinoza, and very little about Coleridge, whom he was only seeing for the first time. What he reported instead was that he had learned the name of the person who had rented Alfoxden House, the big manor house in the neighborhood: "the name Wordsworth I think known to Mr. Ford." He also recognized the poets' visitor, John Thelwall, who had until very recently been Public Enemy No. 1, as the leading radical orator in London, stirring up the people to such treasonous thoughts as calling for a national constitutional convention, such as the one held in Philadelphia less than 10 years earlier, in 1787, or the one that had abolished the monarchy and established a republic in France in 1792. Having John Thelwall as your house guest in 1798 would be approximately like having H. Rap Brown or Stokeley Carmichael as guests in America in 1968. The only greater threat than Thelwall at the time was one of the few names that have survived from this period when British republicanism was successfully stamped out: Tom Paine, author of *The Rights of Man* and *Common-Sense*, another "crossover" revolutionary of stirring power:

These are the times that try men souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like

hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. ("The Crisis")

Such revolutionary rhetoric is very stirring, and Thelwall's was almost as good as Paine's.

But back to Somerset. Instead of a silly—but good—joke about Spy Nozy, what the government agent reported was that he recognized the parties, and that, furthermore, the government need not worry or do anything as result. Why not? Thelwall was no longer a danger: the draconian Gagging Acts of 1795 had driven him and every other radical orator out of business into other lines of work—Thelwall ended his days as a teacher of elementary composition and elocution.

But what about Wordsworth? Who was this Mr. Ford he was known to? James Walsh was reporting to his superior, John King, who was, along with Ford, one of the two men through whom William Cavendish, the 3rd Duke of Portland and Home Secretary at the time, in charge of domestic surveillance, created the British Secret Service in its modern form. They were the under-secretaries who linked the Home Office to the Foreign Office, thus putting all espionage, domestic and foreign, under one central control: "the Fountainhead," as one of Portland's admiring operatives called it.

I haven't space to say more about John King and Richard Ford, but there are several pages in *The Hidden Wordsworth* that show the connections between them and people they knew, and people that Wordsworth and Coleridge knew, that might lead this under-agent, James Walsh, to suppose that Mr. Ford would recognize "the name Wordsworth."

It's a faint trail, even though Wordsworth's and Coleridge's "rebel" connections with the republican reform movements of the 1790s have come more and more to light in recent years. The ultimately interesting question here is how their Romanticism emerged out of their republicanism, keeping in mind that republicanism was treason in the 1790s in England.

Fast-forward to 1993: I'm standing in the Wordsworth Library in Grasmere, England, next to Dove Cottage, the shrine to which lovers of Wordsworth's poetry come in their millions year after year, and where he wrote, between 1799 and 1808, the largest proportion of the poems for which he is famous. Robert Woof, director of the library, hands me a very old account book, saying, "You might be interested in this." The book is the Duke of Portland's secret paybook for his top spy-masters. Robert knows where the interesting entry is and points it out to me: "To paid Mr. Wordsworth's Draft, 92 pounds, 12 shillings, June 13, 1799." Bingo! Or, maybe not: Robert Woof cautions, "It could be any Wordsworth: Joe Wordsworth, Al Wordsworth, Sam Wordsworth."

But I know something that Robert doesn't. Just above Wordsworth's name is a payment to Richard Ford. And just above that, and again on the two lines below Wordsworth's name is the name "Crawfurd." We already know who Richard Ford is. But Crawfurd is Sir James Crawfurd, the British chargé d'affaires in Hamburg, Germany, the very city to which Wordsworth and Coleridge had decamped from Somerset in September of 1798, ostensibly to spend two years learning German language, philosophy and poetry, though Wordsworth and his sister returned to England in April of 1799. So, about six weeks after our Wordsworth's return from Germany, there is a payment of nearly 100 pounds—a very substantial sum in those days—to a Mr. Wordsworth, made in conjunction with payments to the same Richard Ford with whom James Walsh associated

him two years earlier, and to the man in charge of all British espionage operations in Hamburg. Hamburg was then a veritable stewpot of international intrigue, as just about the only free city remaining in Europe, and the center of British efforts to draw the German princes into their war against Napoleon—and of French efforts to keep them out of it.

Again, I have to say “trust me”: the better part of two chapters in *The Hidden Wordsworth* examines in detail likely points of connection between Wordsworth and Crawford and Ford. Enough for me to say here that I am convinced that Portland’s “Mr. Wordsworth” is our William Wordsworth, the Poet of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, the hero of *The Prelude*, and the Bard of *The Recluse*. Is this a scandal, or not?

I don’t think so. Not in the sense of, “Shock! Horror! Wordsworth a spy!” My biography is far from a sensational exposé, in the manner of some contemporary biography, which Joyce Carol Oates has accurately labelled “pathography,” the point of which seems to be to reveal all the dirty, even pointless, secrets about famous peoples’ sex lives, diseases, etc. They beat their wives (Robert Frost?); they had incestuous relationships (William and Dorothy Wordsworth?); they cheated, lied, had medical problems, broke the law, whatever.

This is not the way I see it. I take the “spy” information to be another confirmation of my hypothesis about Wordsworth’s “hidden” self-creation. A particularly loaded instance, to be sure, but not more so than the discovery in the 1920s that he had had an affair in 1792-93 with a Frenchwoman named Annette Vallon, that produced a daughter, named Caroline, who is the focus of the famous sonnet, “It is a beautiful evening, calm and free, / The holy time is quiet as a Nun.” Caroline, and not his legitimate daughter Catherine (born 1808, died 1812), as most readers always think, is the human subject on which this sonnet closes:

Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
The nature is not therefore less divine:
Thou liest in Abraham’s bosom all the year

(“Here” is the beach at Calais, where Wordsworth and Dorothy had returned in July of 1802, during a brief truce in the war, to settle his relations with Annette, since he was going to marry his childhood sweetheart, Mary Hutchinson, that fall.)

People got over that shock to their image of Wordsworth—though many visitors to Dove Cottage are still shocked when the guides make reference to Annette or Caroline—and they’ll have to get over the “Spy Wordsy” shock too.

The lesson that I draw from all these hidden identities is that the “creation of the poet” was harder than we thought. It may be “all gratulant if rightly understood,” but the effort of understanding may be harder than we thought, on the basis of *The Prelude* alone. And that makes Wordsworth more interesting, to me: far more interesting than the Victorian sage of Rydal Mount, the grand country manor house to which he moved in 1813, after he had publicly joined (rejoined?) government service, as Stamp Distributor for Westmorland—i.e., a functionary in the office of the internal revenue. It may be difficult to conceive our Romantic nature poet as a spy, but that may be preferable to thinking of him as a tax collector.

Professor Stephen Gill of Oxford University may have created new “governmental” problems for me on this point, in his conclusion to his review of *The Hidden Wordsworth* in the *Times Literary Supplement* for September 18, 1998:

Issues of national security demand a final question. In a footnote, Johnston relates how in an attempt to retrace Wordsworth’s wanderings on Salisbury Plain, he entered an army practice area. He dodged the watchman on a “military observation tower” only to be confronted by three tanks. As the gun of one of them turned towards him, it seemed for “one heart-stopping moment” that they had rumbled him, but they wheeled away. It’s an amusing tale, the adventures of a harmless English Professor from Indiana, but what Johnston is doing here is exactly what Coleridge did with *Spy Nosy*. The account passes off in comedy the fact that he had actually penetrated the British Army’s exclusion zone. Will a CIA pay-book surface some day? Is “Johnston” a name know to Mr. Ford? Is he, in short, a spy? (p. 4)

But this kind of knowledge, of the costs Wordsworth was willing to pay—or unwilling, but had to pay anyway—gives more authority, not less, to our response to those famous phrases from the *Lyrical Ballads*’ preface, not only the fine democratic one, that “a poet is a man speaking to men,” but also the quasi-religious one, that “The Poet is the rock and defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love.”

In this respect, Wordsworth’s “mission” is as important, if not more so, than that of the Man of Science, as Mill recognized, and as Wordsworth had already anticipated:

Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge . . . If the labours of Men of Science should ever create any material revolution . . . in our condition . . . the Poet will sleep no more than at present, but he will be ready to follow the Man of Science . . . he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of Science itself. The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the Poet’s art as any . . . if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us . . . as enjoying and suffering beings. If the time should ever come when what is now called Science . . . shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man. (1800 Preface)

Studying such a poet, and assessing the costs of his creating himself such a poet, even if they include both revolutionary activities and reactionary ones like “taking the King’s shilling” as a spy, deserve the support—and how much less expensive it is than science!—of organizations, institutes of advanced study, and their societies of friends, wherever they may be.



I Wander'd Lonely As a Cloud

I wander'd lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.
Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the Milky Way,
They stretch'd in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.
The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed— and gazed— but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:
For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

