

Wordsworth's Death and the Figure of the Poet in 1850

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Abstract

This article will consider the extent and nature of the celebrity of the Poet Laureate William Wordsworth, who died in 1850. Ostensibly the most famous English poet alive in that year, on his death on 23 April 1850, Wordsworth had been Poet Laureate for just over seven years and had been actively producing verse since 1793. Shortly after his death, his longest poem, now considered a masterpiece of autobiographical epic, *The Prelude*, was published; one could easily assume that the death of such a major poet coupled with the publication of one of his most significant works would dominate the literary world in that year; yet notices of his death, while widespread, were fleeting in focus, and *The Prelude* met with a lukewarm reception. This challenges the concept of even a Poet Laureate as literary celebrity.

Nonetheless, as I will show, his name endured as a byword for 'poet' in periodicals of the time, and the Wordsworthian pastoral lyric remained an enduring form in periodicals of the year of his death; meaning that Wordsworth as a figure of 'true poet' endured even as his personal celebrity had waned.

Keywords: William Wordsworth, celebrity, Prelude, death, Matthew Arnold, elegy

William Wordsworth was in an odd situation in 1850. His own impressive longevity meant that he had outlived Samuel Taylor Coleridge, his fellow author of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), who died in 1834, and he had seen at least two canonically defined generations of poets follow him: those who are now often considered later Romantics, such as Shelley, Keats, and most famously (at the time) Byron; and the generation which followed them, including Tennyson and the Brownings. While recent literary criticism has challenged the

compartmentalisation of Romantic and post-Romantic poetry into such groups, by 1850 this narrative of literary history, even if the word ‘Romantic’ was seldom used, had established itself and definitely informed the reactions to Wordsworth on his death; for instance, the *Illustrated London News* claimed on his death that Wordsworth was ‘one of the last and most illustrious of a race of poets now all but extinct’ (Anon., ‘Death of the Poet Wordsworth’ 296). This essay will begin by demonstrating that light-hearted filler about Wordsworth was still in circulation in the year of his death, before giving an account of his passing and its mediation in nineteenth-century periodicals, considering in particular Matthew Arnold’s elegy, first published in *Fraser’s Magazine*. I will go on to discuss the lukewarm reception of Wordsworth’s now-seminal autobiographical epic, *The Prelude*, before considering the presence of the name ‘Wordsworth’, and Wordsworthian poetry, in mass market periodicals of the year 1850. The article will show that, while Wordsworth in the year of his death could be seen as something of a marginal figure whose celebrity had declined, nonetheless his model provided an epitome of the idea of the ‘poet’, whose subject matter and poetics can be seen in both elite poetry and mass market journalism. Before his death, Wordsworth seems to have been enough of a ‘household name’ to have an unusual fact about him included as filler in a March 1850 issue of the *London Journal*, published just a month before his death, where we are told:

Wordsworth is said to have no sense of smell. Once, and only once in his life, the dormant power awakened. It was by a bed of stocks in full bloom, at a house which he inhabited in Devonshire, some five-and-twenty years ago; and he says it was like a vision of paradise to him; but it lasted only a few minutes, and the faculty has continued torpid from that time. (Anon., Untitled 26)

This essay will go on to show that despite being relatively obscure in terms of appreciation in the year of his death, nonetheless Wordsworth figured as a ‘definition of a poet’ in 1850, in

both the elite and mass market press, in terms of his image and also the rural and seemingly ‘insignificant’ subject matter of his poetry.

Wordsworth’s Death, 23 April 1850

By the early Spring of 1850, Wordsworth was ageing – he was seventy-nine years old, and while the winter weather was bitter and wet, we know that he insisted on walks, for instance on 10 March attending a church service then walking in the evening as well (Barker 801).

This led to a severe cold from which he did not really improve: ‘He was growing progressively weaker and more lethargic: he would not eat, move nor speak’, and remained very unwell as he turned eighty years old on 7 April (Barker 803). His son, Willy, was staying with him and wrote on 23 April, the day of his death, to his wife and baby daughter: ‘I wish you were both here this lovely day & could hear the glorious thrush that has been singing on the mount ever since day break’ (qtd in Barker 804). Willy did not have time to sign this letter of 23 April before he was summoned to his father’s room to witness his death.

The pastoral idylls associated with Wordsworth extended, as we can see here, to his own family’s private communications, and correspondents with the poet himself from the same month were also curious about funeral plans. As Juliet Barker notes, in April 1850 Wordsworth was sent a letter by Basil Montagu celebrating his eightieth birthday and observing, unaware of how close the poet was to death, the likelihood of a clamour to place him amid the ‘stony archwork’ of Westminster Abbey, asking Wordsworth’s opinion of such a resting place (qtd in Barker 804).

Wordsworth’s grave at St Oswald’s church in Grasmere very quickly became a symbol of what Samantha Matthews has termed ‘nineteenth-century anti-monumental pastoralism, which valued affective monuments rather than didactic ideal sculpture or epitaphs’ (159). Matthews locates this in, for instance, a ‘Sonnet on the Death of

Wordsworth' by 'H. M. R.' printed in *The Spectator* on 25 May, but the praise for the grave's appropriateness can also be located elsewhere in periodicals of that year. For instance, in the *Working Man's Friend*, a new periodical of 1850 designed specifically for the working classes who wished to educate themselves, we find an article entitled 'Wordsworth's Grave; or, what one has, and what one does with it' in the issue for 2 November 1850. Therein we read:

Imagine, reader, a rustic church of the humblest kind, with no pretensions whatsoever to architectural beauty; behind that church rests William Wordsworth. Call up in your mind a very simple, rude churchyard, no beauty of art, and the one or two attempts at artistic beauty mere disfigurements; no flowery sward, but a mere common green grass; no flowers growing on or near the tombs; no cares from loving hands; but all left to Nature in her undress. In a secluded corner of such a burial-place is the grave of William Wordsworth. (Anon., 'Wordsworth's Grave' 129)

The author goes on to quote lines describing the area from Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (1814), thus specifically linking the poet's resting place to his work and suggesting a union of the corpse and corpus in death. The idea of the grave becoming a place of pilgrimage for admirers appealed to the author: 'Tell us merely where his honoured ashes lie; we know the rest; the world knows the rest; and to that corner the great ones of the earth will come to acknowledge a greatness far surpassing theirs' (Anon., 'Wordsworth's Grave' 129). The opening here is followed by an account of one such pilgrimage, where the narrator meets a previously unknown 'companion' at the graveside, a local man also paying his respects, who claims that Wordsworth consistently advised against moving to the city, and demonstrates the wisdom of this advice via an account of a relative, Margaret, dying quite soon after moving to Manchester having begun frequenting the 'very low kind' of public houses in the city (Anon., 'Wordsworth's Grave' 131). The pilgrimage to Wordsworth's grave, and its juxtaposition

with urban life, is echoed by a real-life visit undertaken in 1852 by a group of Manchester workers, who journeyed to the poet's resting place on foot having taken a train to Windermere, and there offered a prayer: 'We shall bear your spirit with us – that, and the influence you have imparted, shall continue beneficently to hover around us, mighty for good, and your memory shall be held by us as a precious legacy, triumphant over time and change' (qtd in Bate 465). The quasi-religious tone here, and the journey from urban to rural, reflects the frequent nostalgic enthusiasm for the rural in mass market periodicals of 1850, despite their likely being read by a predominantly urban-dwelling audience. Additionally, the distaste for the idea of placing Wordsworth's body in Westminster Abbey is echoed by an anonymous female author in the *Ladies' Companion* of the same year, noting that 'London, to Wordsworth, was a foreign, a distasteful abode. He dwelt among his own people. There, among those glorious mountains, should it not be our *first* object to place our monumental tribute?' (Anon., 'A Woman's Thoughts' 184; original emphasis).

The coverage of Wordsworth's death, then, tended to view his burial and memorial as fitting, perhaps testament to how thoroughly in his work he had associated himself with the rural and specifically with the Lake District (neither the article on 'Wordsworth's Grave' in the *Working Mans' Friend* nor the *Illustrated London News* piece on his death bears his image; the former bears an image, not entirely accurate, of Wordsworth's gravestone; the latter a picture of Rydal Mount [Anon., 'Death of the Poet Wordsworth' 296]). However, his name resonated in periodicals of the year of his death, and not only in elegies and obituaries.

The Death of Wordsworth in the Press

Despite the Wordsworthian rural lyric seeming to pervade the way that poetry was presented in mass market periodicals, the death of the poet was perhaps less of a media event than one

might have thought; indeed, Samantha Matthews has suggested that ‘some newspapers and periodicals’ comparative indifference [to the poet’s passing] suggested that the “immortal” Wordsworth was long dead’ (155).

In each six-month volume of the *Illustrated London News* in 1850 a ‘Chronology of Remarkable Events’ was provided to readers, in addition to an index. In the December 1849–June 1850 chronology, on 23 April the death of Wordsworth was listed as the most important event. It did, however, have to share that date with a Great Agricultural meeting on Barham Downs, south of Canterbury. One can see a scattergun nature of the choices for each day from, for instance, our being told that on 19 April the most notable event was the ‘chase of a jackal in the New Forest’, and on 21 May, ‘Her Majesty churched, at Buckingham Palace’ (Anon., ‘Chronology’ n.pag.). Despite this potential lack of impact, immediately after its event, news of Wordsworth’s death spread throughout the country via reproductions of the initial report in *The Times* (among other publications, with the *Morning Chronicle*’s perhaps the other most-frequently reproduced notice). However, there were surprisingly few updates or other notices following the initial reports and obituaries, either in the main national/London papers or their regional counterparts.

This seeming lack of interest might be a result of the action, as it were, taking place not in a metropolitan centre but in the Lake District, although it might also be a reflection of Wordsworth’s literary-historical situation. Obituarists were understandably quick to link Wordsworth and Coleridge (as indeed were reviewers of *The Prelude*), but the other poet who was frequently mentioned was Byron. The *Morning Chronicle*’s widely republished obituary said Wordsworth’s poems ‘followed’ those of Byron, albeit claiming that the poems of Wordsworth ‘exercised, slowly, perhaps, but permanently, a deep and renovating moral influence on the growing mind of the nation’ (Anon., ‘Death of William Wordsworth’ 5). Even if this was an attempt to distance the two, this link – to a poet of perhaps similar fame

and influence, if a clearer celebrity, who was clearly not an unequivocal admirer of Wordsworth – endured in more elite responses. For instance, in the elegy to Wordsworth by Matthew Arnold, a family friend, Wordsworth is situated as the last ‘poetic voice’ of three – the earlier two being Goethe and Byron. This poem was commissioned by Edward Quillinan, Wordsworth’s son-in-law, whose response, according to Arnold’s biographer Nicholas Murray, was slightly underwhelmed: ‘It is *very* classical’, he wrote to Crabb Robinson, ‘or it would not be M. A.’s’ (qtd in Murray 105; original emphasis).

Arnold’s poem, published in *Fraser’s Magazine*, begins:

Goethe in Weimar sleeps, and Greece,

Long since, saw Byron's struggle cease.

But one such death remain'd to come.

The last poetic voice is dumb.

We stand to-day by Wordsworth's tomb. (‘A.’ 630)

Claiming that the subject of one’s elegy is ‘the last’ of all poets is common – it was a fairly frequent claim in elegies of Wordsworth’s successor as Laureate, Tennyson, after his death in 1892.¹ However, readers of *Fraser’s* who were interested in poetry would surely have been aware that Wordsworth had produced very little verse since being appointed as Laureate (*Fraser’s* was by this point a ‘thoroughly miscellaneous’ and broadly liberal magazine [Turner 230]). Arnold would no doubt also have been aware of this, and that the glaringly awkward rhyme of ‘dumb’ and ‘tomb’ would be noted by readers; the atonal clanging generated was possibly designed to make them understand the disharmony engendered by the loss even clearer. This is accentuated by the very clear rhyme between ‘Greece’ and ‘cease’,

and the focus on nations implicitly notes that Wordsworth, as Laureate, is a national poet; Byron is handed over to Greece. This befits the equivocal stance of the poem on Byron:

He taught us little; but our soul

Had *felt* him like the thunder's roll.

With shivering heart the strife we saw

Of Passion with eternal Law [...]. ('A.' 630; original emphasis)

Byron was still a subject of some controversy much later than 1850; indeed, late in the century, one of Alfred Austin's main occupations as literary journalist was to defend him against the still-prevalent moral objections to detail of Byron's life (in fact in 1888 Austin specifically defended him against accusations from Arnold of 'brutal selfishness' in his personal life [777]). As such, one can understand the Arnoldian desire to dismiss Byron's 'teaching' in favour of the feeling his verse generated; yet the fact that Arnold's poem begins, after its introduction, with this qualified praise for Byron suggests that Arnold struggled a little with how to handle his chosen subject, Wordsworth, who was known to him personally but whose verse was not all that akin to Arnold's either in subject matter or form.

After discussing Byron and Goethe, Arnold arrives at Wordsworth. The dead poet is praised for offering in his verse a return to childhood:

Our youth came back; for there was shed

On spirits that had long been dead,

Spirits deep-crush'd, and closely furl'd,

The freshness of the early world. ('A.' 630)

This sense of Wordsworth's appeal primarily stemming from a readerly reinvigoration via a reunion with a childhood engagement with nature fits much of the reception of *The Prelude* in the same year. And yet there is something of a contradiction as we approach the end of the poem:

Others will teach us how to dare,
And against fear our breast to steel;
Others will strengthen us to bear—
But who, ah who, will make us feel?
The cloud of mortal destiny,
Others will front it fearlessly—
But who, like him, will put it by? ('A.' 630)

One remembers that the introduction to this elegy specifically praised Byron's ability to provoke feeling in the reader; one also remembers that the hostile responses to Wordsworth written by Shelley and Browning took direct issue with the poet's seeming retreat from his early work's direct engagement with concerns of the political present. Arnold's elegy can thus be read as an attempt to establish Wordsworth as a depoliticised figure providing respite from the worries of the here and now, and this somewhat stilted poem betrays some of the contortions of interpretation and presentation necessary to stabilise such an image of the once-radical Laureate.

Wordsworth's longevity left elegists such as Arnold and also obituarists in an odd position; along with the awkward comparison of the still-popular but morally problematic Byron, the poems of younger poets such as Shelley and Keats had only recently been widely-distributed, and the rueful nature of the former's sonnet 'To Wordsworth', combined with the

continuing hostility of the young Shelleyan Robert Browning who castigated Wordsworth in his 1845 'The Lost Leader', suggests that the longevity and increasingly reactionary politics of the elder poet, as well as his acceptance of the Laureateship, left him with few genuine enthusiasts in the year of his death. In the end it seems that, maybe lacking Arnold's insight and personal sense of Wordsworth's later years, obituarists were led to promote the departed poet's merits in an almost apologetic manner, as in, for instance, the *Morning Chronicle*:

The proofs of his genius as a poet require to be sought for, not in the forms which he adopted, but in isolated passages scattered through poems not in themselves attractive or beautiful, and in small effusions of a fugitive character. (Anon., 'Death of William Wordsworth' 5)

Despite this passage seeming to present Wordsworth's readability and appeal as rather limited, a selective approach to reading and enjoying his work fits with the approach to poetry advocated for working-class readers of 1850 in *The Literature of Working Men*.

The Publication and Reception of *The Prelude*

The longest passages by Wordsworth which readers would have been able to access in the press of 1850, without buying an actual book, were from *The Prelude*, published three months after Wordsworth's death. Samantha Matthews claims that reviewers in literary periodicals, as perhaps is common when faced with a work published quickly following an author's death, 'were under pressure to read the final work as an authoritative crowning achievement; a critical myth reflected in the editorial orthodoxy of taking the last edition revised during the author's lifetime as an authoritative text' (171). However, despite this apparent pressure, as Stephen Gill notes, 'not even the most conscientious reviewers can be expected to have made the effort' of reading the entire poem (30). He highlights how often

the praise was generalised and bland in magazines such as *Fraser's* to the *British Quarterly*; this was matched in periodicals with wider circulations, for instance the *Illustrated London News*, which told its readers: 'It is, in some parts, highly picturesque; in others powerfully eloquent: – every where, it bears evidence to its being the work of a master mind' (Anon., 'Literature' 150). Advertisements for the poem had claimed that it was started in 1798 and finished in 1805 – the later extensive revisions were not mentioned (see Matthews 172) – yet the *Morning Post* reviewer noted, somewhat presciently, how mature it sounded:

The poem was begun in 1799 and completed in 1805; but there is little in it to remind the reader that it was composed in the season of early manhood' (Anon., 'The New Poem' 6). *The Prelude* was reviewed in standard nineteenth-century fashion in many periodicals, with extended quotations allowing readers a fairly full sampling of the text. As happened with Tennyson's *In Memoriam* of the same year, snatches of it were also excerpted, with the *Nottinghamshire Guardian* of Thursday 29 August 1850 on page 7 including a poem it entitled 'Infancy', attributed to "'The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind.'" An Autobiographical Poem. By W. Wordsworth'. It begins:

Blest be the Babe,

Nursed in his mother's arms, who sinks to sleep

Rocked on his mother's breast; who with his soul

Drinks in the feelings of his mother's eye! (Wordsworth, 'Infancy' 7)

These lines come from the second book of *The Prelude*, lines 234–7 – or rather, they almost do, because an extra word, 'be', has been inserted in the first line. This does not fundamentally change the overall meaning, yet it does give the lines a potentially more Biblical tone, and also demonstrates that Wordsworth's text was being altered and changed in meaning (presented here out of its wider context, an interlude about the development of a

smaller child, in a section of the poem concerning the poet's schooldays) fairly quickly after publication – these same lines were some of those excerpted in the *Illustrated London News*' review of the poem, where they were transcribed accurately (Anon., 'Literature' 1850). This approach to decontextualised short quotations fits the view of Wordsworth posited in the *Morning Chronicle*: that he was best read in small excerpts.

The full poem, which appeared in July, met with a decidedly muted response, when reviewers were not predictably and possibly insincerely presenting it as the pinnacle of a life's work, as Gill has noted. The *Morning Post*'s review ends fairly positively, but nonetheless dwells on the poem's drawbacks, noting that '[t]he fault of the new poem lies in this, that the same gravity of manner and somewhat stately march of narration are found in treating of comparatively trivial things, or what will certainly appear so to ninety-nine out of every hundred readers' (Anon., 'New Poem' 6). This reviewer might have been reading at speed, seemingly ignorant of the opening sections of *The Prelude* which specifically discuss the importance of wandering, and not focusing necessarily on what was previously considered 'important' – this is an autobiographical epic poem after all, which by its nature is asking questions about significance and scale. They also appear to be ignorant of earlier, famous lines, from 'Tintern Abbey' (1798), wherein Wordsworth identified 'that best portion of a good man's life; / His little, nameless, unremembered acts/ Of kindness and of love' ('Lines' ll. 34–6, p. 88). Yet the feeling of a lack of significance in many sections was not limited to this single reviewer. The *Morning Chronicle* noted of the early sections about the poet's childhood: 'If poetry mean the best possible idea, couched in the best possible words, poetry these embalmings of the trivialities of life assuredly are not' (Anon., 'Wordsworth's *Prelude*' 6). This was tempered by an acknowledgment that a poet's life can also be said to be considered to constitute 'the links in the history of the humanity the poet would deal with', but the former, rather more critical phrase, would surely linger in a reader's mind. Near the

conclusion the poem is presented as of chiefly biographical value, perhaps reflecting the reference to ‘embalmings’ in the previous quotation – that the seemingly insignificant details recorded by Wordsworth herein will be of interest to those trying to write his life:

The one man to whom ‘The Prelude’ will be of inestimable value is the man – whoever he may be – who is mediating the poet’s biography, and to whom the ‘Prelude’ will supply a mass of material, in return for which he must tell the world, in readable form, what the ‘Prelude’ tells discursively and unimpressively. (Anon., ‘Wordsworth’s *Prelude*’ 6)

The tacit but unmistakable claim herein is that Wordsworth’s poem is not readable. From the above evidence from newspaper reviews, a slightly different picture emerges of the immediate reception of *The Prelude*, running counter to the discussions of Gill and Matthews. It is clear that the literary world appreciated *The Prelude* – Dickens had a copy by August (Litvak 94), and indeed seemed to allude to it in a late section of *David Copperfield* (Litvack 95); Tennyson also had a copy (Tennyson 334), and the Brownings in Florence had read it by December (Barrett Browning 235) – but the much wider readerships of newspapers and mass market periodicals would have noted ambivalence, at best, in many of their chosen journals.

Those who did not notice the ambivalence might have noticed the poem in the news for reasons other than poetical; chiefly its being suggested as a critique of the University system as it existed then. Some newspaper reviews, including that in the *Illustrated London News*, noted the critical presentation of Wordsworth’s time at Cambridge (possibly because they come relatively near the beginning of the poem), but it was the *Examiner* which focused on this in a way that led to the poem being seen as openly ‘political’ on the subject of higher education, as it quoted passages which seemed critical of University life at length,

commenting: ‘we can imagine the stupefied surprise with which not a few of the dull defenders of old routine will read such writing from one whom they have been taught to regard as wholly theirs’ (Anon., ‘The Literary Examiner’ 5). This review was reproduced elsewhere, for instance on 31 July 1850 in the *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, so the reach of this slightly questionable interpretation was quite wide. Perhaps because John Forster was both editor of the *Examiner* and also leader writer at *Household Narrative* at the time, the latter periodical also took up the theme, and its literary sections for two consecutive months focused on the ‘University debate’ via Wordsworth.

‘Wordsworth’ as a Pen Name: ‘bad poetry’ in the *London Journal*

In the correspondence pages of the *London Journal* of 13 July 1850, a short passage of poetry is included:

For many a year the old milestone has been a fixture by the roadside,
Enveloped in a mossy mantle of green, which has grown by his side;
By the widespreading elm ’tis shaded o’er and sheltered from the rains;
He who placed it there is long since no more, whilst the stone it still remains;

Standing by the roadside alone,

A fixture for years is the old milestone. (Anon., ‘Notices to Correspondents’

304)

These lines were not reproduced as examples of high-quality writing, but were instead included as a supposed favour to a correspondent. Before the lines are reproduced, we read the following:

WORDSWORTH – You presumed a good deal when you adopted such a distinguished ‘nom du guerre.’ Your poetry is only very poor prose; but to gratify you, and as a lesson to our youthful friends, we publish a verse of your song on the ‘Milestone.’ (Anon., ‘Notices to Correspondents’ 304)

Various critics have noted that contributions to correspondence columns in mid-nineteenth century periodicals were likely often invented, and while this is probably not the case with the *London Journal*, these sections of periodicals were certainly heavily curated by their editors – witness, in *Reynolds’s Miscellany*, G. W. M. Reynolds’s frequent extended grandstanding in the responses to questions (which he supposedly received) about matters such as emigration and Catholicism in 1850 or the extended and fairly heated discussion of the latter in the correspondence section of the *Family Herald* in the same year. Despite this, it is interesting that editors also acknowledged, while not always printing, a good deal of poetical contributions,² and this is reflected in *Reynolds’s Miscellany*, where the editor frequently headed his correspondence columns in 1850 with a note that ‘Several pieces of poetry are declined, with thanks’ (Reynolds 47). The *London Journal*, as Andrew King notes, went further than mere acknowledgment – according to King, under the editorship of George Stiff, a great deal of the poetry included, ‘if not indeed the overall majority, had been written by readers’, whether this was made clear by its inclusion in ‘Notices to Correspondents’ or in the main part of the journal where it was ‘used to fill column space’ (116).

Other editors were a little less kind than Reynolds when declining the poetical contributions of readers – witness the editor of the *Ladies’ Companion*, Jane Loudon, who in her ‘letter-bag’ observed of the poetical contributions she received:

With regard to poetry, something more is required than the mere facility of making rhymes. The true poet’s eye sees everything in a brighter light than it wears naturally,

and casts an ideal charm over the dull realities of life. Poetry is essentially an art of the imagination; and without imagination no one can ever hope to become a poet. (71)

It is notable here that Loudon seems to be inspired by Wordsworthian poetics – the last sentence shares a lot with the ‘Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*’, where Wordsworth writes of the poet as a man who ‘has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind [...] [With] a greater power in expressing what he thinks and feels’ (Wordsworth, ‘Preface’ 103–4). To return to correspondence, Kirstie Blair notes that it was frequently the case that editors tried to dissuade their readers from contributing poetry, or to ‘learn from example’ of other readers whose work was presented as faulty in some way (191–2). This might well have been the ultimate intention of the ‘Wordsworth’ contribution in the *London Journal*: the inclusion, and ridicule, of the lines on the ‘milestone’ an attempt to dissuade readers from sending in quite such tortured attempts at poetry, or at least to encourage them to work more on their verse – though the precise faults of the ‘Milestone’ poem are not made clear by the editor of the *London Journal*.³ That might also explain another response to a correspondent from the same year:

Peter E. Ford – poetry is the result of delicate perceptions and extreme sensibility. No doubt it is a natural gift; but, like the wild flower, it must be cultivated to bring it to perfection. We agree with Horace,

‘Poets are born, not made’. (Anon., ‘Notices to Correspondents’ 160)

The reference to a ‘wild flower’ suggests implicitly a connection between poetry and nature which might hint at a Wordsworthian influence in the conception of poetry on the part of the editor. This might also be discerned by some of the poetry in the periodical of this year. For

instance, the issue of 24 August includes a poem, ‘The Maiden’s Grave’, by John Bolton Rogerson, wherein we read of the titular grave:

Flowers bloom around, the flowers in life she loved,

The truest emblems of a simple maid,

Whose breast was ne’er by thoughts unholy moved,

Whose tongue was ne’er to evil words betray’d [...]. (Bolton Rogerson 398)

The poem dates from 1842, and a footnote tells us that the grave in question belongs to Ann Bamford, daughter of Samuel Bamford, the poet, who Bolton Rogerson claims as an acquaintance; the poem was apparently inspired by the experience of visiting the grave in person with Bamford. Despite this biographical specificity, the focus on a rural-seeming grave of an innocent child is typical of the Wordsworthian subject matter frequently found in the journal’s poetical contributions. This is clear from the editor’s praise, in another correspondence column, of ‘the first verse of the lines to a “Dew Drop”’, where we read:

The eye of early morn hath waked

A tear, where nought hath ever ached –

A tear of pearly dew;

A drop as pure, distilled, and clear

As ever nymph from fountain near

In fairy pitcher new. (Ward 128)

This contribution, seemingly contributed via the author’s real name rather than a pseudonym, demonstrates that Wordsworthian subject matter (nature) and style (clear rhymes like those in *Lyrical Ballads*) were not unwelcome. However, to return to ‘The Milestone’, this meant the

choice of the pseudonym 'Wordsworth' was doubly unfortunate, yet it does hint at the presiding poetical influence on the contributor which does not seem out of step with the periodical.

The poem focuses on a road marking, which seems to be surrounded only by plant life, and thus must be rural; it considers the longevity of the stone and the plants around it, while the person who installed it is no longer alive. This is hardly original subject matter, yet the focus on a rural road and the longevity of nature suggests that the reader of the *London Journal* – itself undoubtedly predominantly read in urban areas – might well have considered this fitting subject matter for a poem. The rhythm and rhyme of the poem too, are undoubtedly handled in an inexpert manner, yet the clear rhyme scheme which is attempted suggests a familiarity with the style of *Lyrical Ballads*, at least, if not the 'Preface' and its theories; the inspiration here must have been, in part, the nature and subject matter of the poems included in mass market periodicals at the time as discussed above.

In 2007, Linda K. Hughes's article 'What the *Wellesley Index* Left Out' made an important intervention in the study of periodicals. Therein she noted that poetry was actively excluded from the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, one of the 'founding documents of periodical studies' (91). This was undoubtedly motivated, as Hughes notes, by a belief that magazine verse was 'trite or sentimental "filler" worth no one's time' – yet part of the reason for studying periodicals is precisely to interrogate and reconsider what is considered historically and literarily significant (91). Hughes correctly notes that poetry in periodicals is far more important and interesting than the *Wellesley Index* and its early editors would have had us believe, and this is echoed by the strong reverence for poetry in the output of contributors to, for instance, *The Literature of Working Men*, a companion periodical to the *Working Man's Friend*, also founded in 1850, which was comprised entirely of contributions by working-class writers. According to Robert Whelan Boyle, a printer from Camden Town

writing therein: The Poets of all nations are the representatives – the mirrors of their respective countries. They reflect the joys and sorrows – the hopes, the fears, the wrongs, the sufferings, and the valour of their countrymen; as well as the virtue, the beauty, and the devotedness of their countrywomen’ (9). Strong praise indeed, and another indication that poetry was perhaps quite highly valued by readers of mass market periodicals. However, Whelan Boyle viewed poetry as important, but not to the exclusion of all other reading:

To the Working Man we would say, cultivate a taste for poetry, and read and study our best poets; not to the exclusion of works of a more utilitarian caste – such as history, travels, and science; but read them occasionally, and the change will be a very pleasing one. When the toils of the day are over – when the bodily functions are almost prostrated – when that *excessive* lassitude which none but working men feel enwraps the frame – when, in fine, the mind and body crave repose, – THEN, we say, you’ll find a comforter in the poets: they will sympathize with you in your griefs – ‘give sigh for sigh, or tear for tear’ – soothe your sorrows, and infuse into your soul the balm of consolation and hope. (9–10; original emphasis)

It should be noted here that this periodical was consistently less keen on prose fiction, of which no contributions were printed therein. This sense of poetry as a soothing tonic at the end of an exhausting working day does not stop Whelan Boyle from recommending Milton to his readers, to be enjoyed ‘slowly, having a good English and Classic dictionary by his side’ (11); this is possibly difficult when poetry is recommended for times when ‘the mind and body crave repose’. However, the idea of poetry as a tonic might explain why the majority of contributions of poetry to the periodical Whelan Boyle was publishing in – but also more generally in mass market periodicals – were relatively short. There are only a few poems over a page in length in the *Literature of the Working Man*, and it is rare to find poems even close to a page in length in larger-form, wider-circulation periodicals such as *Reynolds’ Miscellany*,

the *Family Herald*, or the *London Journal* in 1850; the most sustained passages of poetry in a lot of issues of periodicals of 1850, be they mass market or otherwise, are excerpts incorporated in reviews. This inevitably meant that lyric was the dominant form of poetry, and, in keeping with a tendency in the fiction in mass market periodicals to idealise rural life at the expense of urban, the subject matter touched, when not on love, often on the natural world. Thus even if Wordsworth's celebrity was so muted that his death saw relatively little press coverage in 1850, nonetheless the idea of a poet as focused primarily on producing lyrics on rural subject matter endured.

Conclusion

As my consideration of Wordsworth in the periodicals and poetry of 1850 has shown, it does seem that a good number of readers might have been surprised to learn of his death in 1850, with the poet assumed to already have passed; the second Victorian Poet Laureate might have been expected, even given his old age, to have been something more of a celebrity, with rather more media coverage of his passing and funeral. However, as I have shown, Wordsworth's influence and image endured, in his embodying a cultural touchstone and figure of poet, as well as the inspiration for aspiring poets in terms of both form and subject matter. 'Wordsworth' was still code for 'poet' in the year of his death for a wide range of readers, even if his actual works, including the posthumously published *The Prelude*, were met more with shrugs than fervour in the year of his death.

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Notes

¹ For more on this see Samantha Matthews, ‘After Tennyson: the Presence of the Poet, 1892–1918’.

² Kirstie Blair noted in *Victorian Periodicals Review* in 2014 that working-class poets by and large read poetry in penny weeklies, often in fact in the correspondence columns where they could also submit their work for publication.

³ Andrew King also notes that the *London Journal* at this point tended to be fairly encouraging in its responses to readers’ poetical contributions (116).