

Wordsworth and Friendship

John Powell Ward

Coleridge Bulletin, New Series, No 15, Spring 2000, pp. 27-40

In 1803 Thomas De Quincey, then only seventeen, wrote sycophantically to Wordsworth ‘Soliciting your friendship’. For, he said, ‘without (it) what good can my life do me?’ Wordsworth answered that because of De Quincey’s letter itself ‘I am already kindly disposed towards you. [But] my friendship it is not in my power to give...a sound and healthy friendship is the growth of time and circumstance, it will spring up and thrive like wildflower when these favour, and when they do not, it is vain to look for it’ [1]. In such resonating sentences we seem to see Wordsworth’s sense of tactics balancing his feeling for friendship itself.

Classic statements on friendship from earlier centuries include the essays of Bacon and Montaigne. There is no record of Wordsworth reading them, though of course he may have done. Bacon, though somewhat utilitarian, has a twentieth-century sense of role theory: ‘A man cannot speak to his son but as a father; to his wife but as a husband; to his enemy but upon terms; whereas a friend may speak as the case requires, and not as it sorteth with the person’. For Montaigne, both more ideal and more human, friendship arises in the personalities of the two parties. It does not depend on a social structure; it evolves its own. ‘If I were pressed to say why I love (my closest friend), I feel that my only reply could be: *Parce-que c’est lui, parce-que c’est moi*’; because it was he, because it was I [2].

Twentieth-century social psychology has researched friendship for a long time. Two main themes emerge: degree of friendship, and friendship compared to other relationships. Degrees of friendship seem to run from no relationship to casual acquaintance, cordial acquaintance, friendship, and close friendship. This “closeness” is interesting. Why “close” friend, not deep or strong friend, and why goes “good friend” somehow not reach all the way in? Michael Argyle concluded that while liking and interaction increase together, there is a stopping-point, for total suitability would be unthinkable. Equally one might like one’s “cordial acquaintance” without confiding much, or placing much reliance. Relationships outside friendship include collaborator, enemy, avoider and lover (this list omits ones like leader, victim, clown and scapegoat, which can pertain between friends) and those which build a

[28]

community; neighbour, relative and colleague [3]. Lovers and enemies must meet, but friends can be apart for long periods. Like collaborators but not lovers, enemies or avoiders, friendships need not resent third parties. With collaborators the problem of the degree of intimacy can be deferred. Married or partner couples can unite in strong friendship foursomes. Your social network is the more tight-knit the more your friends know each other as well as yourself.

Wordsworth had early friendships at Hawkshead and Cambridge which didn’t develop and on which I must say little; for example John Spedding, William Mathews, and Michel Beaupuy in France. There were collaborations, mutual supports and hero-worshippings, and Wordsworth no doubt learnt to distinguish them. But we should say something of Robert Jones, the Cambridge friend who went with Wordsworth on the continent in 1790. Of their three-thousand-mile journey at nearly thirty miles a day, two-thirds was on foot, much of it

on difficult or mountainous terrain. Enough to try any relationship; but it must have worked, for there were long treks in Wales later, and sporadic contact for life. Wordsworth dominated intellectually but respect for Jones was total: ‘a most affectionate Man, and, I verily believe, the best-tempered Creature imaginable; to me, who am apt to be irritable in travelling, an inestimable qualification’. Wordsworth did use others at times, maybe too easily, but he did usually put it on record [4].

Another sort of friendship came later. Here Wordsworth kept in lifetime contact but mainly by letter. Meetings could often be years apart. But there were mutual interests, service and personal affection; and while distance may prevent such friendships being “close”, equally it could make them closer. The potentially sensitive nuances of daily interchange are avoided, and two already integrated personalities may find a lasting equilibrium.

Take for example Sir Walter Scott. Wordsworth and Scott first met in Edinburgh in October 1803, more than a decade into Wordsworth’s friendship with Jones. Of that first occasion Scott’s son-in-law and biographer John Gibson Lockhart wrote that they met ‘as if they had not been strangers’ [5]. On their way home William and Dorothy called in at Scott’s Border home, and in later years this became the pattern, with the Scotts in turn staying at Grasmere (or Coleorton in Leicestershire when the Wordsworths occupied it) on their way to London. Plans kept changing. In 1805 and 1806 visits had to be cancelled, and there was a total gap from 1808 to 1815. In 1830, two years

[29]

before Scott’s death, Wordsworth wrote ‘I love that Man, though I can scarcely be said to have lived with him at all’ [6].

But the friendship prospered, because the plain kinship of spirit survived the frequent disagreements over literature and Wordsworth’s somewhat frank habit of remark. He comments on Scott’s house at Branxholme: ‘It looks better in your poem...the situation however is delightful, and makes amends for an ordinary mansion’. Learning that Scott is to edit Dryden Wordsworth rubbishes Dryden then instructs Scott how to go about the job, although it is not clear whether Scott had requested this. William and Dorothy loved Scott’s capacity to befriend everyone he ran into; yet Scott wrote of Wordsworth: ‘differing from him in many points of taste, [yet] I do not know a man more to be venerated for uprightness of heart and loftiness of genius. Why he will sometimes choose to crawl on all fours when God has given him so noble a countenance to lift to heaven I am...little able to account for’. There is a poignant detail here too in that, only shortly before the death of John Wordsworth in the sinking of the *Abergavenny*, Scott’s young cousin John Rutherford was also drowned in the sinking of the *Lady Jane Dundas*. Scott wrote to Wordsworth, ‘I often thought of the similar effects which the same disastrous event must necessarily have produced in your little family of Love’ [7].

Francis Wrangham was a clergyman Wordsworth first met probably just after Cambridge. Their collaboration, a translation of Juvenal, fell through, but their correspondence continued for decades. There was an affinity in that both missed early preferment through their sympathy with the French Revolution. Wrangham was bookish, much published, and often held left-of-centre views. Wordsworth enquires politely about Wrangham’s latest collection of sermons, airs strong opinions on all subjects, apologizes as always for delay in replying, and in 1819, twenty years on, asks, ‘Dear Wrangham, are you and I ever likely to meet in this world again?’ Wordsworth did however confide in Wrangham about their mutual friend Basil Montagu. Montagu was a clear “avoider” in our socio-psychological terms. Wordsworth showed great tolerance of Montagu’s ineptitude, unreliability, and failure—over many years—to repay large financial debts. Early on William

and Dorothy had seen him as ‘so amiable, and so good that everybody who knows him must love him’; but in 1808 Wordsworth writes to Wrangham about Montagu with considerable exasperation. Wordsworth had approached Montagu over the George and Sarah Green affair, a Grasmere couple who died in a blizzard on the mountains and for whose children a fund was raised. The details aren’t essential here but Montagu, with the best of intentions, had in various ways

[30]

played havoc with the whole publicity campaign. ‘Montagu is a most provoking fellow; very kind, very humane, very generous, very ready to serve with a thousand other good qualities; but in the practical business of life the arrantest Mar-plan that ever lived’. And all this is four years *before* the dreadful quarrel with Coleridge, for which Montagu was so responsible. Yet there is credit to Wordsworth here, it seems. Henry Crabb Robinson greatly admired him for refusing to break off relations with Montagu after the Coleridge debacle. Only a year later Wordsworth signs off a letter to Montagu, ‘God bless you both—affectionate love from all here’ [8].

Charles and Mary Lamb corresponded with the whole Wordsworth family. But this was still a “distance-friendship” I would say, mainly because of Lamb’s declared dislike of going out of London. This friendship shows how subtle differences between personalities can be accommodated. If Lamb was indeed a touch unnerved by Wordsworth personally, then it is the more remarkable that he found a way of writing to him that Wordsworth could respond to. That Wordsworth disliked criticism is a matter of record, but equally so, reading between the lines, is his occasional recognition that he needed it. So Lamb voiced objections to Wordsworth’s poetry frankly, but always along with praise which never sounded like mere balancing flattery because Lamb’s plain sincerity and goodness of heart were palpable. The wider cheerfulness about not just literature but life in general also let in vulnerability of his own without seeming mawkish, and it seems he gradually won Wordsworth’s confidence. By 1816, after much interchange on *The Excursion* and the 1815 Poems, Lamb could say this: ‘Tell Mrs. W[ordsworth] her Postscripts are always agreeable. They are so legible too. Your manual graphy is terrible... I should not wonder if the constant making out of such Paragraphs is the cause of that weakness in Mrs W.’s Eyes as she is tenderly pleased to express it. Dorothy I hear has mounted spectacles; so you have deoculated two of your dearest relations in life. Well, God bless you and continue to give you power to write with a finger of power on our hearts what you fail to impress in corresponding lucidness upon our outward eyesight’ [9]. Lamb could only have touched on so sensitive a subject as Wordsworth’s use of his womenfolk via a relationship of deep trust.

Finally one cannot omit Sir George and Lady Beaumont, perhaps the fondest of them all. Wordsworth wrote more poems to, for or about George Beaumont than anyone else outside his own family. The plain fact is that Beaumont gave Wordsworth sizeable amounts of money over the years, as

[31]

well as lending them the country seat at Coleorton for six months in the winter/spring of 1806-1807 and numerous other kindnesses. Wordsworth usually accepted, at times with what could seem rationalization. ‘It would be strange if I should think that money poured out from so pure a cistern as the heart of a Friend could taint me, or if I should be afraid of it’. Yet Beaumont states his own gain clearly. ‘Were I to express to you how much our interest and if

possible our regard is encreased [*sic*] by our personal knowledge of your family of Love’—the same phrase as Scott’s—‘it might appear like affectation... I never see you or read you but I am the better for it’. Twenty years later Beaumont offers Wordsworth a hundred pounds. ‘I hope you will not be offended at the offer... Your friendship has been one of the chief blessings of my life and I shall remain deeply in arrears’. Wordsworth was not offended (he took the money), but Beaumont’s financial metaphor seems knowing. This was also one of those married-pair foursome friendships—the correspondence of Margaret Beaumont with both William and Dorothy is a major resource—and this underlines what we shall come to, namely how closely for Wordsworth friendship is tied to kinship. Beaumont illustrates some of the other key identifiers of friendship rather exactly. He wanted Coleridge and Wordsworth to be friends of each other (friendship doesn’t resent intrusion); but his own personality perhaps also craved support. Late in life he told Wordsworth why he first became a painter. ‘I was left early to my own inclinations, and never pushed forward in public. My natural turn was for retirement... I always persuaded myself there would be enough who loved the bustle of the world and who would do the business far better from inclination; than I should after torturing my mind, and destroying all my comforts, and what could suit such a temper better than this silent art?’ [10]

So much for the “distance-friendships”. With the professional literary disciples like Henry Crabb Robinson and Thomas De Quincey it was different. Robinson’s greater ability to stay the course probably stemmed from his deep modesty and his judicious sense of the range of Wordsworth’s qualities good and less so. Crabb Robinson and Wordsworth grew closer in 1820 when they shared a tour of the continent. In letters thereafter ‘My Dear Sir’ becomes ‘My Dear Friend’, and rapport increases. Wordsworth writes: ‘My dear Friend: You were very good in writing me so long a Letter, and kind after your own Robinsonian way in going to inquire after our long and banished Little one’ (the Wordsworth’s third son Willy) [11]. That small affectionate touch is new; yet already for a decade Robinson had accompanied Wordsworth to literary events in London, met him for long solo discussions of literature and politics in his own lodgings, and been welcomed at Rydal by at least 1816.

Edith

[32]

Morley wrote that Robinson ‘worshipped [Wordsworth] this side idolatry’, but also that he was no sycophant [12], and his Diary reveals this.

For of course we get a lot on Wordsworth from Crabb Robinson. Robinson recorded things exactly as they happened, and no animus ever entered. And his regard for Wordsworth, never in question, tends to come in passing; for instance on one visit to Rydal: ‘it was a serious gratification to behold so great and so good a man as Wordsworth in the bosom of his family’. His praise for the poetry has reservations. *The Excursion* is ‘exquisite’, but with *Peter Bell* Wordsworth has ‘set himself back ten years’. On the quarrel with Coleridge Robinson sides with Wordsworth. ‘(Coleridge) thinks Wordsworth cold. It may be so; [but] healthful coolness is preferable to the heat of disease...’ Robinson’s witness is reliable, for he was chief intermediary between the estranged parties. Yet on the strained meeting when the *Biographia Literaria* was published in 1817 the allegiance alters. ‘I was for the first time in my life not pleased with Wordsworth, and Coleridge appeared to advantage in his presence’. Robinson notes elsewhere Wordsworth’s refusals to take criticism and his contempt for the work of others. I believe he could see that Wordsworth’s honesty and bluntness were the same thing, as though Wordsworth could only be factual, as he saw it, whatever the area. This was a friendship of a special kind, with very distinct needs being met for nearly separate personalities. Crabb Robinson said of himself, ‘I am nothing, and never

was anything, not even a lawyer’—which of course is just what he was. One can’t imagine such from Wordsworth. But Robinson was totally trustworthy—and *that* is what was acknowledged in 1820. For on that continental trip he was introduced to Caroline Vallon, and so became a rare party to the closet secret of all [13].

As for Thomas De Quincey, people disagree as to why he and the Wordsworths fell out. Stephen Gill shares Robinson’s view that it was De Quincey’s habits, his slovenliness and opium; in short, says Gill, De Quincey was getting like Coleridge. But Robinson also says it was De Quincey’s marriage that disgusted the Wordsworths; and again, that De Quincey was boring. ‘De Quincey has a fine and very superior mind’ but he is ‘a proser... He wearies by the uniformity of his homilies, and he has no measure in his talk’. Thomas McFarland thinks it was De Quincey cutting down the trees in the Wordsworths’ much loved orchard when he moved into Dove Cottage in 1809 [14]. But we want to ask all the more then, surely, what drew Wordsworth to De Quincey in the first place.

[33]

Wordsworth perhaps saw De Quincey’s precocious admiration for the *Lyrical Ballads* as born of his great flair with children. De Quincey had a rare privilege; before taking over Dove Cottage in February 1809 he lived with the Wordsworths, at Allan Bank, for three months. He was popular with the Wordsworth children, and certainly helped the possibly dyslexic eldest son John. Wordsworth in turn made good use of De Quincey’s expertise in printing, getting him to see *The White Doe of Rylstone* through the press. One sees here yet again the balance of friendship, the unequal needs equally met, much as the Wordsworths later felt betrayed by De Quincey’s public revelations on their family life. But Wordsworth still inspired loyalty, for which De Quincey too deserves some of the credit. It was he, *after* the breakdown of relations, who stoutly and publically denied all the rumours of a William/Dorothy incestuous relationship rampant in Grasmere at the time [15]. And De Quincey’s comment on Wordsworth as a lover, though inaccurate strictly, was astute in wider application. ‘There never lived the woman whom (Wordsworth) would not have lectured and admonished under circumstances that should have seemed to require it; nor would he have conversed with her in any mood whatever without wearing an air of mild condescension to her understanding... A lover therefore, in any passionate sense of the word, Wordsworth could not have been’ [16]. Well, Annette Vallon and the William-Mary love-letters of 1810 and 1812 discount that notion, and Wordsworth also came to have great regard for such as Felicia Hemans and Maria Jewsbury in later life. But the question does arise, of the curious Dove Cottage menage and Wordsworth’s one-by-one friendships with male peers; and so we now bring sexual love, and kinship, along with friendship, into the equation; again in our socio-psychological terms, comparing “friend” not now with collaborator, enemy, avoider etc, but with blood-relative, neighbour and spouse.

For that socio-psychological material we began with has often seen a deep similarity between friendship and marriage. The German sociologist Georg Simmel saw both as uniquely depending on ‘the person in its totality’, an ‘entering of the whole undivided ego into the relationship’ [17]—Montaigne again: ‘because it was he, because it was I’. Simmel thought this was ‘[even] more plausible in friendship than in love, for the reason that friendship lacks the specific concentration upon one element which love derives from its sensuousness’. Feminism has modified Simmel’s view [18], yet it clearly addresses our earlier question; namely, how close is “close” when there is no sexual

[34]

union. But it also raises a new question altogether. For what if friendship, love and kinship too, all three, subsist within the same relationship? Such intensity might modify the need for more orthodox friendships outside—enabling Wordsworth, we might feel, to prefer the ennobling “distance” friendships and the gratifying “disciple” friendships just considered.

The issue turns on the Dove Cottage/Rydal triangle of Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Hutchinson and Wordsworth himself. Poignant as it was, I believe that Dorothy’s emotion at her brother’s wedding was temporary. As her letters show, she had the profoundest regard for Mary Hutchinson, built up since childhood; she had expected the tension and was ready for it [19]. What matters is what that extraordinary triangle really consisted of. Of course one takes the jibe of Coleridge’s remark to Thomas Poole, that Wordsworth had ‘every the minutest Thing, almost his very Eating & Drinking, done for him by his Sister, or Wife’ [20]. But the ‘little family of Love’ had more, a kind of (metaphorically) incestuous saturation, via the doubling or even tripling intensity of the three role-pairings that held between them. William and Mary were married couple *and* childhood friends; Dorothy and Mary were in-law siblings *and* childhood friends too; and William and Dorothy were close siblings *and* quasi-lovers in a relationship still obscure today. Compounding all this is the third element that the Wordsworths and Hutchinsons had been friends and neighbours for generations, already linked by a marriage between earlier cousins. So all the elements—lover, neighbour, relative, friend—in one way or another suffuse all three pairings: William and Mary, William and Dorothy, Dorothy and Mary. Evidence for the strength of all three pairings would need another article altogether; much of it is familiar.

So all this glosses, at least, the “staunch friend” model of male-peer orthodoxy. The intense love-and-kin triangle probably also needed another man half in it, half outside it, to draw Wordsworth out of his self-imposed “solitude” into the male ethos of the day—desirably or otherwise in our own terms. But the two men who, with Sara Hutchinson, made up the “set” (as they called it) of six—Samuel Taylor Coleridge and brother John Wordsworth—were both emotionally entailed and both departed the scene sooner or later. John’s loss from the whole set-up is a major factor in the entire story; we can only surmise how things would have been if he had lived [21].

[35]

But if this lack was even partly made up for by the community substitute of male “neighbour”, then the candidate would have to be Robert Southey.

The Southey lived up at Greta Hall only twelve miles away. Not a lot in common with Wordsworth; similar politically, but Southey’s slightly laid-back character and cosy house full of books were too far from Wordsworth’s lifestyle for affection or even much mutual respect to seem likely. Wordsworth and Coleridge said Southey wrote ‘too much at his ease’; his poetry lacked compulsion; and Southey thought Wordsworth overvalued himself and at times was plain selfish [22]. But over the years this changed. And it was as neighbours that it did so; affection grew between the two families; there were mutual visits, and picnics at Thirlmere, the lake on the Ambleside-Keswick road between them. The growing mutual need was for consolation. Wordsworth had already turned to Southey in moments of sorrow. When John Wordsworth died in 1805 Wordsworth wrote to Southey, ‘If you could bear to come to this house of mourning to-morrow, I should be forever thankful’, followed by some unburdening of feeling. In 1812 the death of the six-year-old Thomas brought a most sad outpouring from Wordsworth to Southey, and later Southey would turn to the Wordsworths in his own grief. More cheerfully, an amusing letter from Dora Wordsworth to her future husband Edward Quillinan shows the easy informality which had grown up. Wordsworth and Southey are just leaving for a local political rally in pouring rain. ‘All the old cloaks and

coats in the house were raked up, *hat covers* etc—Father exactly like a Scotch drover—Mr Southey with blue cloak & scarlet lining describing to us in broken English the dangers and privations he had gone through in his retreat from Moscow & laughing at our fears for the wetting they would get...’. As late as 1835 Wordsworth could be quoted, albeit inaccurately, as saying that he wouldn’t give five shillings for all Southey’s writings, but nearly twenty years earlier had stoutly defended him against a charge of political obsequiousness: ‘A most false and foul accusation, for a more disinterested and honourable Man than Robert Southey does not breathe’ [23].

Before coming finally to Coleridge, we have to ask about the place of friendship in Wordsworth’s poetry. The answer is that it is seldom clear-cut. The poems are not on friendship but arise from it. It is often elegiac, written after the friend’s death, as with the Matthew poems or the sonnet to Raisley Calvert. It can be symbolic, for example in a poem seldom read today, “For the Spot Where the Hermitage Stood”, about the seventh-century bishops St Herbert and St Cuthbert. These lifelong friends, now miles and years apart,

[36]

died at exactly the same hour. Or friendship can be rather public, as in the sonnets to Thomas Clarkson on the passing of the Slave Trade Bill, and to Benjamin Haydon—‘High is our calling, Friend!—Creative Art...’, where some mutual back-slapping can be detected. Sometimes the poetry itself is the point, as when Michel Beaupuy inspired Wordsworth to almost Shakespearian language: ‘A meeker man /Than this lived never, nor a more benign ... Injuries/ Made him more gracious, and his nature then/Did breathe its sweetness out most sensibly,/As aromatic flowers on Alpine turf/When foot hath crushed them’ (*Prelude* 1805 ix 298-9, 301-5). Or a single couplet says it all in four softly-telling words: ‘Lamb, the frolic and the gentle,/Has vanished from his lonely hearth’. And it is often best indirect, as when the rather ponderous “On the Departure of Sir Walter Scott for Naples” (unaccountably described by Crabb Robinson as ‘the most perfect sonnet in the language’) is upstaged by the more expansive “Yarrow Revisited”.

Again though most notably friendship mingles with kinship. In the early Grasmere poems it is so often kinship that draws Wordsworth in; the poems to Dorothy, “The Sailor’s Mother” and “The Emigrant Mother”, the Poems on the Naming of Places, “Michael” but most significantly “The Brothers”, where their relationship eschews brotherhood’s common rivalries and depicts something nearer the friendship ideal. Later too, friendship is never distinct from the complete community; what in an 1820 poem “A Parsonage in Oxford”—Robert Jones’s, actually—Wordsworth called ‘that Domain where kindred, friends,/And neighbours rest together’. Our three socio-psychological categories reassert themselves. In the “Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle”, thoughts of his brother’s death at last reveal why solitude as a value is limited. But that sense enables the indirection, within the same statement, of the tribute to Wordsworth’s true friend George Beaumont, the Peele Castle artist:

Then, Beaumont, Friend! Who would have been the Friend,
If he had lived, of Him whom I deplore;
This work of thine I blame not, but commend;
This sea in anger, and that dismal shore.

O ‘tis a passionate Work!—yet wise and well,
Well chosen is the spirit that is here;
That hulk which labours in the deadly swell,

This rueful sky, this pageantry of fear!

And this huge Castle, standing here sublime,
I love to see the look with which it braves,
Cased in the unfeeling armour of old time,
The lightning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves.

[37]

Farewell, farewell, the heart that lives alone,
Housed in a dream, at distance from the Kind!
Such happiness, wherever it be known,
Is to be pitied; for 'tis surely blind.

But welcome fortitude, and patient cheer,
And frequent sights of what is to be borne!
Such sights, or worse, as are before me here. –
Not without hope we suffer and we mourn.

In the setting of kinship or 'Kind', friendship feels the more natural for being included indirectly.

As to Coleridge, I think I need first a quick "for and against" checklist on Wordsworth himself. He had the solid Protestant virtues in abundance; courage, integrity, reliability, physical strength, fierce support for the weak, and great affection. He was a leader in good causes; and privately, contrary to some popular opinion, he could be approachable, vulnerable, and quite modest. At the end of a long epistle of instruction to Catherine Clarkson he wrote, 'I have just read over this Letter; it is a sad jumble of stuff and as ill expressed'. And he could respond to rebuff with sidelong imagination. When told by Crabb Robinson that De Quincey had declared 'Mrs Wordsworth is a better wife than Wordsworth deserves' he exclaimed, 'Did he say that? Did he say that? That is so true I can forgive him almost anything else he says' [\[24\]](#).

The difficulties came from how he saw himself. As Hazlitt put it, 'it is as if there were nothing but himself and the universe. He lives in the busy solitude of his own heart'. This surfaced in objection to criticism of his poetry, contempt for that of others, and ruthless self-promotion which disconcerted those who were most fond of him. For some the breakdown with Coleridge lies in this, though I personally do not believe, as Paul Magnuson seems to, that Wordsworth in some sense stole Coleridge's poetry. Coleridge certainly didn't think so. Coleridge simply believed that Wordsworth was the greater poet; on that he was rueful but not resentful. But Wordsworth denounced the poetry of Campbell, Southey as we have said, Samuel Rogers who admired Wordsworth and was kind to him, and Walter Scott too. Even Charles Lamb sometimes found that a small adverse comment was unwelcome in a cornucopia of praise. Lady Morgan, who enquired at a dinner party 'Has not Mr Wordsworth written some poems?', knew just how to be provocative [\[25\]](#). How could the evasive and self-abasing Coleridge ever get a look in?

I think it's clear. Wordsworth simply revered Coleridge, as much as Coleridge revered Wordsworth. Actually Wordsworth could give praise to

[38]

others too, more than he sometimes gets credit for [26], but this reverence was unique. When Coleridge died Wordsworth called him ‘the most *wonderful man* he had ever known’ [27]. And one sees, looking through the letters, the relationships extraordinary flavour, quite unlike anything else in Wordsworth’s life. To write ‘My dearest Coleridge’ and ‘My beloved Friend’ was, for Wordsworth, unique in address to a male; and when in 1808 Coleridge evidently wrote (in a letter now lost) with a sense of profound hurt and grievance, Wordsworth’s four-thousand-word answer, quite uncharacteristically, bursts with the incoherence of a wounded adoration. ‘Let me sweep away some of the rubbish of which I hoped to have never heard more. You tell me that Stoddart conceives from my Letter that I approved his conduct and you add...how could he do otherwise?... It is not in my nature to feel indignation in such cases, you stood in my esteem at such an immeasurable distance from Stoddart, that I could no more think of anything he could say or do as reflection on your reputation than I should dream that the sun would be darkened to the Island of Great Britain by a braken [*sic*] fire on one of our mountains’[28]. It recalls, for this reader, the Brutus/Cassius quarrel in *Julius Caesar* (act iv scene v): ‘You wrong me every way; you wrong me, Brutus. I said, an elder soldier, not a better. Did I say better?’ ‘If you did, I care not’... ‘I denied you not.’ ‘You did’. ‘I did not; he was but a fool that brought my answer back’; and so on and on, with the eventual reconciliation revealing all the more how deep was the love that, when seemingly withheld, could engender such bitter emotion.

Even when Coleridge became a total “avoider” Wordsworth still simply revered him. At the time of the 1812 quarrel, no less, Wordsworth expanded on Coleridge’s qualities to Crabb Robinson, the intermediary between them. ‘Wordsworth, with no faint praise, then spoke of Coleridge’s mind, the powers of which he declared to be greater than those of any man he ever knew. From such a man, under favourable influences, everything might be looked for. His genius he thought to be great, but his talents still greater, and it is in the union of so much genius with so much talent that Coleridge surpasses all the men Wordsworth ever knew’. When Coleridge died in 1834 Wordsworth wrote to Henry Nelson Coleridge, ‘though...I have seen little of him for the last 20 years, his mind has been habitually present with me, with an accompanying feeling that he was still in the flesh’ [29].

And what evoked all this near-worship, in one so proud as Wordsworth, who in 1809 had written to Thomas Poole that Coleridge ‘neither will nor can

[39]

execute any thing of important benefit either to himself his family or mankind?’ [30] Oversimplifying of course, the Coleridgean mind: the endless torrent of charming articulation; the ideas, the nuances, the images, the continuous meditations, and the seemingly uncontrived rhythm in which it was all couched. It left Wordsworth rapt, apparently for ever. ‘The heart should have *fed* upon the *truth*, as Insects on a leaf—till it be tinged with the colour, and show its food in every the minutest fibre’; ‘Wickedness is assigned by selfish men, as their excuse for doing nothing to make it better’; ‘an author’s pen, like children’s legs, improves with exercise’; ‘The Monthly has *cataracted* panegyric on me, the Critical *cascaded* it, & the Analytical *dribbled* it with civility’; ‘I love Plato, his dear, *gorgeous* nonsense’; ‘Consciousness...[connects] the *present link* of our Being with the one *immediately* preceding it’; ‘Wordsworth’s words always *mean* the whole of their possible meaning’ [31]. With such stuff pouring out all day long, on their walks at Alfoxden or in Grasmere too, backed by longer doses of startling commentary on Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Hume and Kant (the sort of reading Wordsworth found indigestible) it is hardly surprising that Wordsworth was overwhelmed by this fountain of material from which he might write *The Recluse*, the great philosophical poem which Coleridge rather deeply longed to see

appearing. And because Coleridge too was aware of the ‘whirlbrain’ or ‘aye-babbling spring’ lesser mortals might seem from such formless chatter, and recognized the slower gravitas in Wordsworth he lacked himself, as well as Wordsworth’s increasingly greater poetry, one sees again the mutual-need element on which deep friendship often subsists, this time between personalities so powerful, and so oddly complementary.

All of which suggests a personal bonding so close that maybe neither of them ever fully coped with it. And Wordsworth’s need for Coleridge as spirit-genius of *The Recluse* gave rise to what seems the unique case of friendship-poetry from Wordsworth which comes direct and unstinted. This is the familiar ‘very affecting lines’, as Dorothy called them, written for *The Prelude* Book vi just when Coleridge was leaving for Malta in 1802. Of the near one hundred lines here are just a few:

O friend, we had not seen thee at that time,
And yet a power is on me and a strong
Confusion, and I seem to plant thee there.
Far art thou wandered now in search of health,
And milder breezes—melancholy lot –
But thou art with us, with us in the past,

[40]

The present, with us in the times to come.
There is no grief, no sorrow, no despair,
No languor, no dejection, no dismay,
No absence scarcely can there be, for those
Who love as we do. Speed thee well!...
(*Prelude* 1805 vi 246-256)

Quite wrongly, Wordsworth never thought he had found words to express what he felt about Coleridge [32].

© Contributor 2000-2005

NOTES:

- [1] Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth, A Biography: The Early Years 1770-1803* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1957, 1969) page 580; *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years 1787-1805*, arranged and edited by Chester L. Shaver, from the first edition by Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1967) 29 July 1803, page 400.
- [2] Francis Bacon, *Essays* (London: J.M.Dent & Sons Ltd 1972) page 86; Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, translated with an Introduction by J.M.Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1958), page 97.
- [3] Michael Argyle, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1967) pages 59-67; Theodore M.Mills, *The Sociology of Small Groups* New Jersey: Prentice-Hall 1967) esp. pages 126-130; Elizabeth Bott, *Family and Social Network* (London: Tavistock 1957) esp. chapter III.

- [4] Kenneth Johnson, *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy* (New York: W.W.Norton & Co) page 92; *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years Part 1 1821-1828*, arranged and edited by Alan G.Hill, from the first edition by Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1978) 4 Jan 1825, page 297. Wordsworth's debt to Robert Jones is also acknowledged in the dedicatory letter to Jones at the start of the 700-line 'Descriptive Sketches' of 1792, about their journey.
- [5] J.G.Lockhart, *The Life of Sir Walter Scott* (London: J.M.Dent & Sons Ltd 1906) page 116.
- [6] *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years Part 2 1829-1834*, revised, arranged and edited by Alan G.Hill, from the first edition by Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1979), 30 July 1830, page 310.
- [7] *Letters Early Years* 16 Oct 1803 page 412; *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years Part 3 1835-1839*, revised, arranged and edited by Alan G.Hill, from the first edition by Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1982), page 561n; Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth: A Biography: The Later Years 1803-1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1965) p. 39
- [8] *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years Part 2 1812-1820*, revised by Mary Moorman and Alan G.Hill, from the first edition by Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1970) 19 Feb 1819, page 524; *Letters Early Years* 19 Mar 1797, page 181; *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years Part 1 1806-1811*, revised by Mary Moorman, from the first edition by Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1969) 5 June 1808, page 246; *Letters Middle Years* 2, 18 Jan 1813, page 75.
- [9] *The Letters of Charles Lamb* in 2 vols, edited by E.V.Lucas, revised by Guy Pocock (London: J.M.Dent & Sons Lts 1947) 9 April 1816, vol I page 378.
- [10] Moorman *Later Years* pages 36-37; *ibid* page 88 6 Nov 1805 (Dove Cottage MS); *Letters Later Years I* May 1825 page 350n; *ibid* Jan 1821 page 6n.
- [11] *Letters Later Years 1* 12 Mar 1821, page 43.
- [12] Edith J.Morley, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lamb &c.: being Selections from the Remains of Henry Crabb Robinson (Manchester University Press 1932) page xvii.
- [13] *The Diary of Henry Crabb Robinson: An Abridgement*, edited with an Introduction by Derek Hudson, page 46; 36, 60; 18; 56; Morley page xvi; Robinson Diary 66.
- [14] Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1989) page 300; Robinson Diary 51 and 33; Thomas McFarland, *Romantic Cruxes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) pages 106-7.
- [15] Robert Gittings and Jo Manton, *Dorothy Wordsworth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1985) pages 105-6
- [16] Thomas De Quincey, *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*, edited with an Introduction by David Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1970), page 185.
- [17] *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, translated, edited and with an introduction by Kurt H.Woolf (Free Press, Glencoe 1950) pages 324-325.