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THE POET AS TEACHER: WORDSWORTH’S PRACTICAL AND POETIC ENGAGEMENT WITH EDUCATION

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The University of Edinburgh
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Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis is my own work, and that it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. All materials obtained from other sources have been duly acknowledged.

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Abstract

This thesis revisits William Wordsworth’s practical and poetic engagement with education as epitomised in his claim that “Every Great poet is a Teacher: I wish either to be considered as a Teacher, or as nothing.” By situating this claim in the larger contexts of Wordsworth’s writings and Britain’s educational development from the late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, it argues that Wordsworth advocated a poetic education of receptive and creative imagination as a corrective to the practical education of passive learning and reading, and that his authority as a poet-teacher was confirmed rather than challenged by the wide divergence of his reception in Nineteenth Century Britain.

The introduction defines the research topic, argues for Wordsworth’s relevance as a poet-teacher against his dubious reception in contemporary educational institutions, and examines some mistaken notions of him as a poet of nature and childhood. Chapter One investigates Wordsworth’s lifelong critique of contemporary pedagogical theories and practices for their confusion of education with instruction and their neglect of religion. Chapter Two studies Wordsworth’s proposal for an alternative mode of poetic education that relies on nature, books, and religion to foster the individual’s religious imagination, which informed Wordsworth’s vocation as a poet, and underlay the revisions of the educational backgrounds of his major poetic speakers. Chapter Three explores Wordsworth’s endeavours to cultivate readers’ receptive and creative imagination against the prevalent literary taste through differentiating strategies of communication in his poetic theories and short poems written between 1794 and 1815. Chapter Four discusses the educational uses made of Wordsworth’s poetry through studying the representative selections of his poems edited by Victorian educators, so as to reveal the slow, winding, but steady process of his being recognised as a teacher in both practical and poetic senses. The thesis concludes with a reaffirmation of Wordsworth’s authority and relevance as a teacher, both then and now.
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Epigraphs

“I am condemned for the very thing for which I ought to have been praised; viz., that I have not written down to the level of superficial observers and unthinking minds.— — Every Great poet is a Teacher: I wish either to be considered as a Teacher, or as nothing.”

Wordsworth to Sir George Beaumont, 1808.

“Not that he [Wordsworth] did wrong to think himself a great teacher: he was a teacher no less beneficent than great: but he was wrong in thinking himself a poet because he was a teacher, whereas in fact he was a teacher because he was a poet.”

Introduction

William Wordsworth maintained a lifelong interest in education, an interest that finds expression in his poetry and prose, major and minor works, private letters and public statements. Amongst his juvenilia is a poem in praise of “The Power of EDUCATION,” composed in 1784-85 when he was a student at Hawkshead Grammar School. When he heard the literary coterie’s disparaging remarks about his Poems, in Two Volumes (1807), Wordsworth declared in a letter to his friend and patron, Sir George Beaumont, that “Every Great poet is a Teacher: I wish either to be considered as a Teacher, or as nothing” (MY I: 195). The poet’s only known public speech, occasioned by the building of a new village school in Windermere in 1836, is an earnest appeal for a renewed understanding of the term “education” (Prose III: 295). Towards the end of his life, Wordsworth continued to revise earlier writings and compose new poems about various aspects of education.

Wordsworth’s engagement with education is both practical and poetic. He shows a pragmatic interest in education in that many of his poems deal with practical matters in pedagogy, such as how a child ought to be taught and which teaching methods should be employed or avoided. He also demonstrates a highly poetic educational concern because he endeavours to improve the general public’s intellectual and moral faculties through the reciprocal actions of poetry writing and poetry reading. The two aspects are united when his poetic treatment of children’s education serves to teach the adult readers a lesson of effective teaching and learning, and when his poems become teaching materials in educational institutions. In most cases, however, Wordsworth deals with education in the abstract and poetic sense, and the adult readers are not always aware of their being the target subject of education.

2 In 1845, Wordsworth published a two-part poem “The Westmoreland Girl: To My Grand Children,” with the first part relating the story of a cottage girl’s brave rescue of a lamb from the torrent to a young audience, and the second part addressing “a maturer Audience” about the task of bringing her up as Britain’s “Maid of Arc.” See PW I: 255-58.
The poetic and practical aspects of Wordsworth as a teacher, though united in his poetry writing, are divided in nineteenth century readers’ reading experiences. It is in the poetic sense that Wordsworth uttered the wish to be regarded as a teacher, as he wanted to “create the taste by which he is to be relished” and “teach the art by which he is to be seen” (MY I: 150). However, the public’s reception of him as a teacher tends to verge on the practical side. In his middle and later years, Wordsworth was frequently consulted on practical matters of education, first by friends and admirers, and then by important members of the Anglican Church and the state. Meanwhile, his poems infused with subtle messages of poetic education were not well received by the reading public he intended to teach. From the 1830s to the 1890s, selections of his poems were edited for pedagogical uses inside and outside of classrooms by Victorian educators of various levels; however, only a few editors recognised the poet’s educational value in the way Wordsworth desired.

The discrepancy between the poet’s conception and the public’s perception of him as a teacher during the nineteenth century is illustrated by the two epigraphs preceding this Introduction. Whilst Wordsworth felt himself wronged by contemporary readers who failed to appreciate his educative value, the Victorian critic Swinburne, in an elaborate effort to correct what he believed was wrong in Wordsworth’s claim, ironically proved the poet right. They agree in essence that a poet can be a teacher whereas a teacher is not necessarily a poet, and that the educative authority of a poet arises from his poetic achievement rather than his moral tone. Wordsworth anticipated the difficulty of being recognised as a great poet, and therefore a teacher; Swinburne’s distinction between the logical premises of the two identities explained what lay behind the difficulty for many nineteenth-century readers. Although Wordsworth has become a household name in Britain over the past two hundred years, his wish to be regarded as a teacher remains to be justified and fulfilled among new generations of readers. It is time for renewed efforts to be made to study Wordsworth’s wish and affirm his relevance.
This thesis seeks to revisit Wordsworth’s practical and poetic engagement with education as epitomised in the claim that becomes the first epigraph. By situating this claim in the larger context of the Wordsworthian canon, and Britain’s educational reforms and reading practices from the late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, I argue that Wordsworth advocated a poetic education of receptive and creative imagination as a corrective to the practical education and passive reading, and that his authority as a teacher was confirmed rather than challenged by the wide divergence of his reception.

Although this thesis focuses on Wordsworth and nineteenth-century Britain, the investigation itself is motivated by what I consider the indifference, scepticism, or reductionism that characterise Wordsworth’s reception in modern educational institutions across the Atlantic. Wordsworth’s name has been firmly inscribed in the pantheon of English literature, but many literature teachers in American and British universities find it hard to preach a “Wordsworthian education” to undergraduate students in our modern world. Outside of the English Department, Wordsworth’s name is discursively invoked for empirical education, usually in the elementary level, to be challenged or upheld for its association with nature and childhood. Sometimes the two trends converge in that scholars with dual interests in literature and education tend to regard Wordsworth as a teacher when it comes to a child’s relationship with nature.

In his repeated demands that readers should bestow much time on poetry and comprehend it “as a study,” Wordsworth can be said to have anticipated the establishment of English literature as an academic discipline before the formation of the Oxford English School in 1904. Ian Reid in his 2004 book Wordsworth and the Formation of English Studies offers a discursive and reflexive account of how Wordsworthian thinking has been acknowledged or absorbed in the academic

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discipline of English in three institutional sites in London, Melbourne, and Cornell. However, Reid’s optimism about Wordsworthian influence has not been widely shared by English teachers who are engaged in the teaching of Wordsworth to undergraduate students. In 1986, Peter J. Manning contributed an article to *Approaches to Teaching Wordsworth’s Poetry*, titled “On Failing to Teach Wordsworth.” Manning admitted that both he and a distinguished Romanticist at the University of Southern California felt the difficulty in disrupting the “bored silence” of students which betokened “a collective ‘so what,’” and that to the sophomores, “the importance of Wordsworth’s place in literary history can be explained but not felt” (39). Furthermore, this worry about students’ inability to feel related to Wordsworth in meaningful ways is also witnessed by David Simpson. In his 2009 book *Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern*, Simpson describes some typical classroom responses to Wordsworth among UC Davis undergraduates:

One or two identify with the nature poet, while others feel a kinship with the author of a major autobiographical poem who never quite seems to know what to do with his life. A few can appreciate the “dodgerel poems” as intriguingly postmodern before their time, but many more agree with the student who wittily described Wordsworth’s poetry as the “brussels sprouts” of literary history—you have to read it but you don’t like it and you would never order it yourself. (15-16)

If the average American college students’ attitude towards Wordsworth is indifferent at worst, the British teenagers’ impression of the poet, as portrayed by the popular sitcom *Outnumbered*, can be alarming to English teachers. In Series 4 Episode 2 (aired on BBC Channel One in September 2011), Jake, the fifteen-year-old boy, has an essay to write on the Romantic poets. His opening sentence, written in front of the TV, is “The Romantic poets were a bunch of Emos.” When challenged by his father, a history teacher, Jake retorts in a nonchalant manner: “Well, you know,

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5 J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace* (1999) depicts a classroom scene at Cape Technical University where Professor David Lurie’s efforts to engage the students’ attention to nature’s usurpation of the imagination in Book 6 of *The Prelude* meets with awkward silence. In order to wake them up from the state of torpor, the professor resorts to drawing an analogy with falling in love to expost Wordsworth’s writing about the limits of sense-perception. However, when his affair is exposed, Lurie is referred to as the author of a book on the “English nature-poet William Wordsworth” in the daily broadsheet *Cape Argus*. See *Disgrace* (London: Harvill Secker, 2010) 21-23, 46.
I like daffodils and I appreciate them, but it doesn’t mean I have to go on about them the whole time. I can think, that’s a nice daffodil, and then move on with my life.”

After the first sentence, he decides on the conclusion: “Wordsworth had a very bland life; the most interesting thing he did was sleep with his sister.” One may shrug it off as a harmless joke in popular culture which does not deserve rebuttal, but Jake’s response to Wordsworth does prompt me to think about the divide between what Nicholas Roe calls the “high” and “low” traditions of Wordsworth’s reception, with the latter being “the basis of Wordsworth’s reputation” (226). If a voyeuristic interest in the poet’s private life is all that excites a teenager, it may be time for scholars and schoolteachers to reflect what might have gone awry in our education.

What Peter J. Manning said about the American college students in the 1980s still holds true about British secondary school students in 2010s: “[T]he bewilderment of current students repeats the situation Wordsworth described in 1800. Electronic marvels more seductive—and more violent—than the gross stimulants he inveighed against in the preface now compete for attention” (39). One may add that what Wordsworth feared about “the degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation” is now instantly gratified with a swipe of the news or social networking applications on smart phones. In recent years, many literary scholars have recognised Wordsworth’s relevance to our modern life. Brian McGrath, among others, points out that some key passages from the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* have “come to a renewed legibility” (566). He continues to contend that “[t]he numbness that consumers of realistic, real-time media experience today when confronted with massive amounts of information may be a version of the blunted modern mind Wordsworth diagnoses in the preface” (567).

Wordsworth’s disdain for his contemporary readers coexisted with his hope for an appreciative posterity. In his 1808 letter to Sir George Beaumont, preceding his declaration of the wish to be regarded as a teacher, Wordsworth claimed, “my Poems must be more nearly looked at before they can give rise to any remarks of much
value, even from the strongest minds . . . let the Poet first consult his own heart as I have done and leave the rest to posterity, to, I hope, an improving posterity” (MY I: 195). One doubts whether he would have found an improving posterity among the youth of American and British schools two centuries later. I share a prominent Wordsworthian scholar’s dismay: “To discover Wordsworth’s perceived remoteness from so many of the few natural hearts I had hoped to find in the modern university was a shock of not so mild surprise” (Simpson 16).

In the poetic sense, Wordsworth has been abandoned for being an irrelevant teacher by English majors or secondary school students for the past few decades, despite their own teachers’ painstaking efforts of engagement. In the practical sense, however, the poet is still regarded as a teacher, albeit degraded in the educational hierarchy to be associated chiefly with elementary school children, and, for that matter, challenged by professional educationists for being a poet of nature. E. D. Hirsch Jr., the distinguished literary-critic-turned educator, published an article in 2001 about the root problems underlying the practical failures in reading and mathematics education in America’s progressive schools. Arguing from an intellectual historian’s viewpoint, he attributes the failure of progressivism to its allegiance with Romanticism and questions American society’s uncritical acceptance of “Romantic educational ideas” (13). A large portion of the public has, in Hirsch’s view, placed a quasi-religious faith in nature and natural development, and showed an unreasonable distrust of social custom and human intervention. The principal “culprit” is Wordsworth, as Hirsch cleverly alludes to lyrical ballads like “The Tables Turned” and “The Idiot Boy” to expose the problems in progressive schools: “This naturalism explains the no-fault complacency with which a progressivist teacher reassures the concerned parent not to worry if Johnny or Jane is not reading at grade level. . . . One must not interfere with the child’s natural course of development” (18). Hirsch believes that a misplaced faith in the Romantic notion of natural development can lead to serious social consequences, as visible in “the perpetuation of the
test-score gap” between pupils trained in the Romantic and Classical traditions, and therefore he appeals to the public’s sense of “economic and political justice” for a greater scepticism towards the Romantic ideology of education (24).

Hirsch’s critique of the Romantic notion of education has a strong resonance in Britain, where the influence of Romanticism on education is more deeply felt and directly associated with Wordsworth. Andrew Stables, a British professor of education, observes in his 2003 book Education for Diversity that Wordsworth’s description of his own childhood in The Prelude was consciously evoked as a powerful influence on educational practice in Britain in the latter half of the twentieth century. For Stables, Wordsworth held a “Romantic conception of the child” and “echoed many beliefs of Rousseau’s in his championing of an essentially apolitical, anti-urban, nature-worshipping, solitary educational ethic” (26-28). In a more recent article of 2009, “The Unnatural Nature of Nature and Nurture: Questioning the Romantic Heritage,” Stables remarks that “Romantic, sometimes specifically Wordsworthian conceptions of the child still feature strongly in the international debate about childhood and schooling, and underpin current ideas about progressive and child-centred pedagogy.” He concludes that “[t]he Romantics critiqued and problematised nurture while worshiping and mystifying nature,” and “such worship and mystification was never truly politically innocent” (8).

We may pause to reflect on the multi-faceted reception of Wordsworth as a teacher in the educational context over the past five decades. How much of the literature students’ indifference to Wordsworth is a reflection of their own imaginative deficiencies? How much of the educationists’ scepticism of Wordsworthian influence is a projection of their doubts and fears? And how remote

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6 Hirsch’s worry about the social consequences of a blind trust in the Romantic notion of education is not novel. In 1988, Margaret Mathieson and Gerald Bernbaum published an article “The British Disease: A British Tradition?” The article appeared at a time when the British public criticised the country’s educational system for its disappointing economic performance vis-à-vis the United States. The authors traced the root problem to an arts-based literary curriculum in the nineteenth century which they believed was influenced by Romantic poets and was hostile to the teaching of science, technology and commerce. They identified Coleridge as the most influential writer, but their criticism of Coleridge was equally applicable to Wordsworth. See the article in British Journal of Educational Studies 36.2 (1988) 126-74.
is our contemporary perception of Wordsworth’s educational value from his original conceptions? To reestablish his relevance according to his own terms, it is necessary to trace the construction and deconstruction of the image of Wordsworth as a teacher. As the body of my thesis focuses on Wordsworth’s engagement with education in the nineteenth century, in the Introduction I shall offer a brief survey of the literary critics’ perception of the poet’s relation to education since the twentieth century. Hence, I illustrate the need to look further back into history before moving on to present times.

Book-sized publications about Wordsworth’s involvement in education are few and far between. Apart from writings on the biographical aspect of Wordsworth’s own education in Hawkshead or Cambridge and on the classroom teaching of Wordsworth’s poetry by English teachers, I have not found many influential books devoted to systematic discussions of Wordsworth’s educational engagement. Ian Reid’s 2004 book *Wordsworth and the Formation of English Studies* is a significant contribution to the study of Wordsworth’s influence from the end of the nineteenth century, but the poet’s general engagement with education in the whole nineteenth century remains to be explored.

The scarcity of scholarly books on this particular subject makes two unpublished doctoral theses noteworthy, for they remain the only PhD theses devoted to Wordsworth’s educational ideas in British and American universities of the past sixty years. Gilbert T. Dunklin’s thesis “Wordsworth’s Theory of Education,” completed in 1948 at Princeton University, presents a comprehensive study of

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9 There is a book named *Wordsworth and Education* self-published by Barry Pointon in 1998, but it comprises a massive amount of primary materials on the biographical aspects of Wordsworth’s and his children’s education, poorly organised and insufficiently analysed, with little influence in academia.
Wordsworth’s involvement in the reform movement of education as reflected in his lifetime writings, and examines how his educational ideas informed his social, political, and religious thinking. However, for all its breadth and depth, the thesis is outdated in light of the new scholarly editions of Wordsworth’s writings that mushroomed in the second half of the twentieth century. Another thesis, “William Wordsworth and Education, 1791-1802,” submitted by Ayumi Mishiro to the University of Bristol in 2001, adopts a primarily biographical approach and focuses on Wordsworth’s educational engagement within one decade, leaving the most creative and influential years of the poet’s life unaccounted for.

Wordsworth’s educational thoughts and engagements have also been discussed in individual articles and book sections, but these shorter pieces tend to tackle one aspect of his educational concerns, or give a cursory inspection of it amid general discussions of Wordsworth or Romanticism. My survey of these miscellaneous criticisms reveals that two themes stand out in critical discourses of Wordsworth’s educational thinking: the first is the role of nature, which has been viewed by many as the most important force in a Wordsworthian education; and the second is childhood, for many critics have considered children as the primary subjects of Wordsworth’s educational concern.

When critics touch upon Wordsworth’s educational importance, the usual verdict they give relates to the role that the poet accorded to nature, although they differ greatly when it comes to the exact meaning of “nature” in the poet’s educational scheme. Scholars in the early twentieth century interpreted nature in both material and spiritual senses, and stressed the intellectual and moral lessons to be derived from communion with nature. John Churton Collins in his 1901 lecture on “Wordsworth as a Teacher” identified Wordsworth as “the poet of Nature” (100), and he understood “nature” as “the material universe,” a vast living entity “endowed with sentient and intelligent life, having soul and reason” (117). When he summarised “the leading teachings of Wordsworth’s philosophy,” the most important
lesson was that “as man possesses the power of responding to Nature, possesses a soul which can be brought into harmony with the soul of Nature, he can be educated and moulded by Nature” (117-18). C. Clarke developed this line of interpretation in his 1948 article “Nature’s Education of Man: Some Remarks on the Philosophy of Wordsworth.” He differentiated two senses of “Nature,” one as “the world of natural objects” which can be known “through association of ideas,” and the other as “the sense of an ultimate, non-visible Reality” which can be approached through “intuitive insight” (310). As an educational force, Nature “can not only supply man with knowledge, but also contribute to his moral education” (312).

In the 1960s and 70s, American scholars like Harold Bloom, M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Hartman turned to explore the relation between mind, nature and imagination in Wordsworth’s poetry. Bloom in *The Visionary Company* eulogises Wordsworth’s grand proposal of a marriage between mind and nature that produces an earthly paradise (125-26). Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism* endorses Bloom’s understanding, and contends that the “high argument” of Wordsworth’s major poetry is that “a new world” created by “an apocalyptic action of imaginative vision” is “man’s only available paradise” (408). Hartman has a more nuanced exposition of the relation between the three. In *Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1787-1814*, he accords a more prominent role to nature in the growth of the poet’s imagination. Book V of *The Prelude*, in Hartman’s view, illustrates Wordsworth’s idea of “how resourcefully nature educates a boy entrusted to her rather than to a human agency” (19). In “Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness,” Hartman argues that Wordsworth “had subdued poetry to the theme of nature’s role in the growth of the individual mind.” Nature plays a crucial role in “converting the solipsistic into the sympathetic imagination,” and it “entices the brooding soul out of itself, toward nature first, then toward humanity” (308). The emphasis of these scholars on the Romantic imagination was radical and influential, as it challenged the received wisdom that Wordsworth was a poet advocating the role of nature for moral refinement.
James Chandler gives the idea of nature’s education a different twist in his 1984 monograph *Wordsworth’s Second Nature*, which locates Wordsworth’s philosophy and power in reference to his involvement in the “intellectual history of the French Revolution” (xvii). Chandler distinguishes between “nature” and “second nature” in the philosophical writings of Rousseau and Burke, arguing that “Wordsworthian ‘nature’ typically operates according to Burke’s dialectic of second nature and not according to the Rousseauist model of nature to which, either implicitly or explicitly, it is most often likened” (74). By the Burkean sense of second nature Chandler refers chiefly to habit, custom, and tradition—as opposed to the natural state of man in Rousseau’s sense. Wordsworth’s adherence to second nature has educational implications, for Chandler aims to demonstrate how the poet’s literary experiments in *Lyrical Ballads* and the five-book *Prelude* “translate Burkean politics into . . . attacks on Roussseauistic systems of (political) education,” and how Wordsworth “answers these ‘natural’ methods of education with a kind of traditionalism” (xxii).

In the 1990s, Wordsworth’s education of nature takes another unexpected turn with the rise of ecocriticism in Britain initiated by Jonathan Bate’s seminal book *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991). It is a book “dedicated to the proposition that the way in which William Wordsworth sought to enable his readers better to enjoy or to endure life was by teaching them to look at and dwell in the natural world”(4). At first sight, Bate seems to return to the earlier interpretations, but his approach is a radical reaction to the critical climate of the 1980s. Bate intends to recast Wordsworth as a nature poet and sets his new readings against two critical traditions: “Hartman threw out nature to bring us the transcendent imagination; McGann throws out the transcendent imagination to bring us history and society” (8). He contends that the New Historicists’ attempt to overthrow a hegemonic regime of imagination “has itself become hegemonic” (6). A primary aim of Bate’s book is “to recapture something of what Wordsworth did for the nineteenth
century,” because it seems to the author that “what he did then is relevant to what we need now” (8). I share Bate’s sense of relevance and agree that now is the time to “allow Wordsworth to become once more what he imagined himself to be.” However, I have doubts over his equation of what the poet imagined himself to be with “what Shelley called him, and what he was to the Victorians: ‘Poet of Nature’” (9). As I have argued in the beginning of this Introduction, Wordsworth imagined himself to be a teacher and the Victorians did not easily agree with that.

The ecocritical approach to Romanticism has exerted enormous influence in the past few decades with the gradual awakening of a global awareness of the environmental crisis, arguably initiated by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*—the title itself inspired by Keats’s poetic line “And no birds sing.”

Ironically, by bowing to nature, members of the ecocritical school have stimulated opposing views. In 2007, Timothy Morton published a book with a provocative title *Ecology without Nature*. He argues that “the very idea of ‘nature’ which so many hold dear will have to wither away in an ‘ecological’ state of human society” (1). In his 2010 book *The Ecological Thought*, Morton reiterates the argument that the idea of “nature” fails to serve ecology well: “Ecology can do without a concept of a something, a thing of some kind, ‘over yonder,’ called Nature. Yet thinking, including ecological thinking, has set up ‘Nature’ as a reified thing in the distance . . . preferably in the mountains, in the wild” (3). Morton’s reflection on ecocriticism is a timely counterbalance to the simplistic use of Wordsworth as an iconic figure for environmental education and ecocritical pedagogy.

These critics attach different shades of meaning to Wordsworth’s use of nature,

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10 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963). The last two lines from Keats’s ballad “La Belle Dame sans Merci”—“[Though] the sedge is wither’d from the lake, / And no birds sing”—serve as an epigraph to the book.

and understand its relation to education in different senses—moral, phenomenological, philosophical, political, and ecocritical. Despite their divergent interpretations of nature and education, their choices of texts are rather uniform in the preference of poems written before 1807. Hence Wordsworth’s musings on nature and education in his later poems, prose, and letters remain to be explored. A major task of my thesis is to demystify the role of nature in Wordsworth’s thinking on education, by addressing the complementary role of culture—in the forms of books and religious faith. Wordsworth persistently emphasised the cooperation between nature and culture, and his advocacy of a religious education gained increasing momentum in later writings, which has been relatively understudied.

Further, it is necessary to understand the cause of such overemphasis on nature. Critics who perceive Wordsworth’s educational thinking as constructed on the role of nature tend to focus on the first few books of *The Prelude* and the familiar poems from *Lyrical Ballads*, where Wordsworth’s descriptions of childhood in a natural environment and natural state of mind evoke powerful responses. Nature and childhood have long been regarded as the two most important subjects in Wordsworth’s best poetry, and they form the basis of many critics’ understanding of Wordsworthian education.

While nature is associated with Wordsworth’s educational views in general, children are supposed to be the chief subject of his educational concern. With the rise of studies of the Romantic childhood from the 1970s,^{12} Wordsworth’s representation of children and childhood has been under closer scrutiny, for his enigmatic line “the child is father of the man” still captures the popular imagination. Critics writing about the Romantic childhood inevitably turn to Wordsworth, and their discussions of Wordsworth’s portrayal of childhood always touch on its implications for education. Childhood and education are thus closely related in studies on

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Romanticism in general and Wordsworth in particular. In a complicated turn of
events, Wordsworth’s educational views seem to have become only relevant as far as
children and early education are concerned.

A. S. Byatt is among the pioneering critics who considered attentively
Wordsworth’s ideas of education and childhood. In her 1970 book *Wordsworth and
Coleridge in Their Time*, Byatt devotes a chapter to “Education and Childhood,”
observing that “[s]ome of Wordsworth’s greatest poetry deals with the relationship
between the experience of the child and the experience of the adult—development of
consciousness, modes of learning.” In the light of this developmental psychology,
she judges that the poet “attached great importance to the education and upbringing
of children.” Byatt concludes that although interest in the child developed generally
in the Romantic period, “some of Wordsworth’s insights—and Coleridge’s—are
much deeper than was usual amongst poets or educational theorists” (162-63).

Byatt’s reading highlights the connection between childhood and adulthood in
Wordsworth’s poetry and the profound value of Wordsworth’s views concerning the
education of children. To some extent, later readings of the Wordsworthian childhood
and education can be viewed as various echoes of or rebellions against such
sympathetic and appreciative interpretations. I believe that Byatt’s succinct
observations contain more truth than the politicised readings as offered by Judith
Plotz and Alan Richardson, to date, the two most influential scholars on
Wordsworthian childhood and Romantic ideas of education.

As an early champion of the Romantic childhood, Judith Plotz has based her
studies on the conviction that there exists an archetypal “Romantic child,”
characterised by one dominant trait with varied manifestations in a group of
Romantic writers headed by Wordsworth. The problem of adhering to a unifying
image is manifest in the two contradictory characteristics of that Romantic childhood
she has proposed in two critical pieces written about twenty years apart. In the 1979

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13 This book was reprinted in 1989 under a new title *Unruly Times: Wordsworth and Coleridge in Their Time* by
The Hogarth Press, without substantial changes in the content.
article “The Perpetual Messiah: Romanticism, Childhood, and the Paradoxes of Human Development,” Plotz interprets the child as a symbol for the Romantic consciousness of development and perceives “continuity and development” as the dominant themes of Wordsworth’s poetry (81). However, in her 2001 monograph *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood*, Plotz presents the Romantic child as “an emblem of fixity rather than of growth and development” (24). Wordsworthian children are defined by their “alienation from adult [sic]” (74), and their “resistance to progress and development” as a result of their “self-sufficiency” (77).

What remains unchanged in Plotz’s arguments is the “anti-educational strain” associated with the child image, which is perhaps derived from her peculiar understanding of the line “the child is father of the man.” If the child is indeed the “father of the man,” Plotz questions, “how can the process of growing up be anything other than ‘a descent into a lesser form of being?’” To maintain the sanctity of an almost idealised childhood, the educational process “must seem ironic, a forced exchange of a lower for a higher form of vision” (“Perpetual Messiah” 68). This “anti-educational strain” is further stretched in 2001, when Plotz remarks that education “is increasingly conceived the enemy of childhood,” in so far as it “is conceived as a matter of cultural transmission rather than the development of mental faculties.” She neatly summarises this antagonism: “Romanticism uncouples the link between schooling and childhood; the more schooling, the less childhood” (31). Plotz finds that the child, for its self-sufficiency and alienation from adults, becomes the father of himself. Her conclusion is alarming with political implications: “The emphatic sequestration produces childhood as a space of freedom, emphatically for adults, but very questionable for children. It is a ticket of release for parents, granting them *freedom from* parental responsibility” (85).

A careful reader could easily detect a logical flaw in Plotz’s arguments—that she has employed a simple syllogism in both pieces of criticism. Since the Romantic child must be a symbol of development or fixation, and Wordsworth is the most
celebrated Romantic poet on childhood, it follows that he represented the
development or fixation more effectively than others, and consistently so. Plotz
assumes the existence of a single entity constructed out of the collective efforts of a
group of canonical writers called “the Romantic child,” which is a major concern of
Wordsworth who, as “the master child-spotter” (Romanticism 44), has a
“fixed”—though contradictory—opinion on this matter. The fixation on what one
may call “the Wordsworthian childhood” also leads Plotz to a narrow and perhaps
mistaken view of Wordsworth’s thinking about education, particularly in regard to
schooling and parental duties, which I will address in my first chapter.

Alan Richardson’s wide-ranging book Literature, Education, and Romanticism
(1994) investigates “how changes in the definition and status of literature were
implicated in and informed by changes in educational methods, institutions, and
ideologies” during the Romantic period (xiv). Richardson suggests that “[i]n its
wider sense of mental growth, education might be taken as defining the Romantic
ethos” (6). Childhood and education are related in that “educational practices and
institutions presuppose a child to educate,” and “the manner in which childhood is
conceived and represented helps shape the theory and practice of education no less
than these in turn affect conceptions of the child” (8). In this light, Richardson’s
investigation into Wordsworth’s educational engagement is unnecessarily confined
by his assuming the child as the subject of education and excluding the adult reader
who is the real target of the poet’s concern. I will argue, throughout this thesis, that
Wordsworth intended to educate adult readers, some of whom were responsible for
the education of children.

Even within the scope of childhood education, Richardson’s discussion is
flawed by its heavy reliance on the contemporary social theories of ideology and
hegemony as expounded by Louis Althusser, Pierre Bourdieu, Raymond Williams,
and Frederic Jameson. He seems to endorse Althusser’s belief that “schooling plays
an ideological as well as directly economic function in reproducing the social order”
For Richardson, the most captivating line from Wordsworth is “knowledge not purchas’d with the loss of power” (1805 Prelude V: 449), as the word power “would ordinarily evoke social relations of domination” (38). Behind Wordsworth’s linking of childhood and power, Richardson claims, “lie the pervasive social transformations which Jameson characterizes as the ‘bourgeois cultural revolution’ and Foucault as the ‘disciplining’ of society” (39). One has the uneasy feeling that Wordsworth’s poetry has been selectively employed to illustrate these modern theories of social discipline.

Alan Richardson’s interpretation of Wordsworth’s individual poems is also influenced by the social theories of power and discipline and the New Historicist perspective. In a close reading of the “anti-didactic lyrics” of “We Are Seven” and “Anecdote for Fathers,” Richardson interprets the children’s mentalities as “rooted in a transcendentalized nature rather than being culturally produced” (71-72). He believes that “Wordsworth protests against the ideological construction of childhood by envisioning an ideology-proof, organic sensibility; a move which tends to leave the child unsocialized and frozen in a state of eternal innocence” (72). In a general evaluation of Wordsworth’s poetry about children in nature, Richardson summarises that “the appeal to nature tends to slide into a sort of primitivism, which closes off the prospect for intellectual development” (106). However, according to the book’s reviewer Alan Bewell, this is “a fundamental misreading of the poet who said that ‘the child is father of the man’” (264).

In his book, Richardson cites Plotz’s 1979 article, and in return his reading is absorbed in Plotz’s revisionist book of 2001. Plotz’s telescopic focus on the Romantic childhood and Richardson’s politicised reading of education and childhood tend to reinforce the image of Wordsworth as the poet of childhood. The extent of their influence is visible from the fact that both Plotz and Richardson feature prominently in Ann Wierda Rowland’s new book Romanticism and Childhood: The Infantilization of British Literary Culture (2012), which begins and ends with a study
of Wordsworth’s poetry of childhood and has “The child is father of the man” as the title of its first chapter. Although these three critics have provided nuanced readings of Wordsworth’s treatment of childhood and education, their interpretations have consciously or unconsciously promoted the idea of Wordsworth as a poet of childhood, with doubtful political implications of education for children as well as adults.

A. S. Byatt’s brief observations of Wordsworth’s views on education and childhood in 1970, I believe, are still more pertinent to the poet and to his modern readers. I also share Stephen Gill’s view in his 1989 biography *William Wordsworth: A Life* that “to see Wordsworth as essentially the poet of childhood . . . is to misunderstand him completely,” because throughout his greatest period of creativity Wordsworth was interested in “the development of the adult mind” and “the adult moral sense” (10). When the focus is adjusted slightly from childhood to education, in the broader sense of the term as defined by Wordsworth in his 1836 speech, and the view expanded to include the whole corpus of Wordsworth’s writings, one may have a very different understanding of Wordsworth’s representation of childhood. It forms only a part—important but not essential—of the poet’s overall educational concern.

My conclusion from the brief survey of existing studies on Wordsworth and education is that the poet’s educational message is thought to be primarily about the role of nature and relevant for the upbringing of children. As Louise Chawla points out in a 2002 article: in contemporary social science,

> Romantic connections between childhood and nature are usually dismissed as “romantic” in the most pejorative sense—an idealised, unrealistic picture of unbroken innocence and happiness that represses the reality of social discord and pain. What this cursory dismissal actually expresses is ignorance of Romantic thought. (202)

When E. D. Hirsch Jr. and Andrew Stables expose the pernicious influence of Romantic or Wordsworthian education in modern schools, they target a stereotyped image of Wordsworth as a poet of nature and childhood.
The extent to which such a stereotyped understanding of Wordsworth has infiltrated the twenty-first century’s educational system and suffered undeserved criticism is what motivated my reassessment of Wordsworth’s educational engagement, both practically and poetically. My own approach has benefited from the scholarly debate over the past several decades. What M. H. Abrams considers the “high argument” of Wordsworth’s poetry about the redemptive power of imagination still holds true, but needs to be grounded more solidly in social history, especially the educational history as explored by Alan Richardson. With Jonathan Bate, I believe Wordsworth is still profoundly relevant to us today—not as a nature poet but as a teacher-poet. I also agree with Timothy Morton that nature has to be demystified, so that the value of culture can be restored in Wordsworth’s educational thinking.

In extending the scope of examination to include Wordsworth’s later writings and his posthumous influence on education, I have been influenced by Stephen Gill’s conviction that the later Wordsworth has been underestimated. Gill first expresses this conviction in his biography of the poet in 1989: “Wordsworth’s later years cannot be dismissed as of ‘merely biographical interest’” (vii), because “as Wordsworth grew older he became a stronger, not a weaker, power in national culture” (viii). He backs up the conviction with a richly documented book Wordsworth and the Victorians in 1998, and another book Wordsworth’s Revisitings in 2011. In the most recent book, Gill argues that revisiting, both literally in the sense of revisiting a place and creatively in the sense of textual revision, is “central to Wordsworth’s imaginative life” (9). The scholar reiterates his “conviction that imaginatively he remained impressively vigorous into old age and that the artistic stature of the poet in his later years, as opposed to his historical-cultural significance, tends to be underestimated” (12). Therefore, I regard this thesis a modest contribution to what Gill calls “the ongoing reassessment of the later Wordsworth” (WR 12), from an educational perspective.

Since the term “education” evokes associations of pedagogy, didacticism, and
even authoritarianism, I am aware of this word’s potential unpopularity in what M. H. Abrams wryly refers to as “our present critical climate” when he evokes Matthew Arnold’s tribute to “Wordsworth’s healing power” in his Cornell lecture of 2010. But I find myself not alone in reaffirming the humanistic value of Wordsworth. In 2012, Adam Potkay published a book unabashedly titled *Wordsworth’s Ethics*. By borrowing his title from Leslie Stephen’s 1876 essay “Wordsworth’s Ethics,” Potkay hopes to offer “a useful corrective or counterweight to the antihumanist excesses that have come to characterize many literary studies and that have made them largely irrelevant to any but the most rarefied academic audiences” (203-04). My thesis titled “The Poet as Teacher” will contribute to what Potkay sees as “positive yet still fragile trends within twenty-first-century literary criticism: its so-called ethical turn; a more general interest in thinking about the sort of thought that literature facilitates or makes possible” (7).

To restore Wordsworth’s importance and relevance as a teacher, this thesis delves into the poet’s own time and tries to answer the following questions: What is implied in his claim that every great poet is a teacher? In what sense does he wish to be regarded as a teacher, and by whom? Where does he gain the authority to “usurp” the educational influence of a traditional teacher on the one hand, and assert superiority over readers on the other hand? How did the nineteenth century reading public respond to his poet-as-teacher claim? And above all, is Wordsworth still relevant to us?

A thesis thus conceived has to be selective in order to highlight Wordsworth’s identity as a poet-teacher. It seeks to approach Wordsworth’s practical and poetic engagement with education from four perspectives, namely, his lifelong critique of contemporary educational theories and practices; his proposal for an alternative mode of poetic education as exemplified by his poetic speakers; his continuous efforts to educate readers; and his reception by Victorian educators. From the four

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perspectives grow four chapters. They proceed thematically, as each treats a particular kind of audience of Wordsworth’s educational concerns. Each chapter progresses more or less chronologically, so as to reveal the development of Wordsworth’s thoughts, his changes as well as consistency. I believe a more accurate understanding of the comprehensiveness and complexity of Wordsworth’s educational concerns can be achieved by locating the poet in the political, economic, literary and cultural context of the late eighteenth to late nineteenth centuries. By making the poet relevant to his own time, this thesis explores the history of competing views on practical education and competing interpretations of Wordsworth’s educational value, so as to reaffirm his enduring power and relevance as teacher.
Chapter One Wordsworth as a Critic of Practical Education

In “The Roots of the Education Wars,” E. D. Hirsch Jr. claims that “[t]he Romantic conceives education as a natural growth” (18). Then he denigrates the Romantic poets’ appropriation of the word’s Latin origin:

Romantics began translating the Latin word *ee-duck’co* as meaning “leading out” or “unfolding,” confusing it with *e-dook’co*, meaning “to lead out.” It was a convenient mistake that fits in nicely with the theme of natural development, since the word development itself means “unfolding.” But the actual Latin root word for education is *ee-duck’co*, which means “to bring up” and “instruct.” It implies deliberate training according to social and cultural norms, in contrast to words like *growth* and *development*, which imply that education is the unfolding of human nature, analogous with a seed growing into a plant. (18-19)

The “Romantics” mentioned in Hirsch’s article include Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, but Wordsworth seems to be the prime culprit, given Hirsch’s more frequent reference to his name and poems. However, if we examine Wordsworth’s use and understanding of the word, the Romantic poet may well be acquitted.

Wordsworth first defined the word, though in a loose manner, in a letter to his friend Hugh James Rose in January 1829: “Education, I need not remark to you, is everything that *draws out* the human being, of which *tuition*, the teaching of schools especially, however important, is comparatively an insignificant part” (*LY* II: 19).

Wordsworth’s “[to] draw out” and “tuition” mean similar things as Hirsch’s “to lead out” and “instruct[ion].” Wordsworth understood the two linguistic units in a relation of inclusion, where tuition accounts for only a part of education; Hirsch, by contrast, places the two in stark opposition, and in doing so accuses the Romantics of confusing two Latin words.

It is highly unlikely that Wordsworth, who received sound classical education in Hawkshead Grammar School and Cambridge University, had forgotten the Latin root of “to educate” or intentionally bent the meaning to confound his learned correspondent. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, the verb “educate” meaning “[to] bring up, provide schooling or tuition” derives from the
Latin word “ēducāre,” which has a close relation to “ēdūcere,” the root of “educe” (301). If we are to be more exact, there are actually three Latin words associated with education in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. The first is “ēdoceō,” which means to “instruct or inform thoroughly” or “impart a complete knowledge of” some art and science (587). Then there is “ēdūcō” with up to ten connotations, ranging from leading forth troops to bringing up children. In the latter sense it equates to “ēducō”—“to tend and support the growth of (offspring), bring up, nurture, rear” (587-88), the third word and direct ancestor of “to educate.”¹⁵ Strictly speaking, the instructive feature of education as upheld by Hirsch should be attributed to “ēdoceō” instead of “ēducō,” therefore Romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge should be spared Hirsch’s charge if they prefer “ēducō” for its inclusiveness.

The Romantics, and Wordsworth in particular, did not oppose formal schooling or instruction. What they objected to was the equation of mechanical instruction with real education, a word with larger implications and more ennobling properties, applicable to human beings of all ages. Ian Britain, the contributor of the entry “Education” to *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age*, notices that “the words ‘education’ and ‘culture’ had similar connotations and could be used interchangeably,” and education “was a term that could include the operation and application of much wider environmental influences, within nature as well as society, from childhood onwards” (161). By allowing education such an expansive range of references, Britain seems to have in mind Wordsworth’s comprehensive definition of education in his 1836 speech.

This chapter seeks to examine Wordsworth’s practical engagement with contemporary educational theories and experiments against the intellectual and historical backgrounds of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. I argue that, throughout his life, the poet acted as a severe critic and unofficial advisor of England’s educational affairs, and his dissatisfaction resulted from what he perceived

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¹⁵ I am indebted to Professor Gao Fengfeng of Peking University for the Latin origin of the word “education,” and the caution that it does not have a fixed, exclusive meaning due to the evolving nature of language.
to be two grave mistakes in the education of all levels of students regardless of class, gender and age: the confusion of education with instruction or knowledge acquisition, and the neglect of Christian faith. Whilst in popular understanding, Wordsworth’s educational thinking is characterised in terms of antagonism between nature and nurture, I shall reveal the poet’s more inclusive definition of education and his constant emphasis on cooperation between different sources of influence. Much of the stereotyped perception that I have surveyed in my Introduction is due to a selective reading of his early poems about nature. This ignores the later Wordsworth who advocated the need of religious instruction, as if there were two Wordsworths and only the early one mattered. I will show that there is one Wordsworth with a steadfast principle in education, and that without sufficient attention to the later Wordsworth, one is likely to err on the early Wordsworth. Therefore this chapter starts from a close reading of Wordsworth’s only public speech on education in 1836, then compares it with his juvenile poem on education in 1784-85, and then analyses his poetic engagement with practical education in Book V of *The Prelude* (1805) and the last two books of *The Excursion* (1814).  

**The Late and Early Wordsworth on Education**

Wordsworth’s speech on education was delivered on 13 April 1836 to mark the laying of the foundation stone of the new school in the village of Bowness, a free elementary school for both boys and girls built at the sole expense of John Bolton, a wealthy Liverpool merchant and a friend of the poet. Bolton, the expected speaker, fell ill, so he requested the poet to perform the ceremony on his behalf. After some initial reluctance, Wordsworth consented and made his first public speech. His carefully prepared speech was curtailed by the pouring rain, but the address was so

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17 Wordsworth’s initial response was diffident recoil, as Dorothy wrote to request their nephew Christopher to “make a speech” for the poet which he could “pronounce verbatim.” Christopher replied that he could not help, so the poet drafted the speech himself. See *LY* III: 188-89, letter 989 and note 2.
welcome that Wordsworth obliged the audience by having the whole text printed in a local newspaper *The Westmorland Gazette and Kendal Advertiser* on 16 April.\(^{18}\) W. J. B. Owen believes it “reflects [Wordsworth’s] years of thinking about the education of children” (*Prose* III: 288), and Alan G. Hill claims that the poet’s “speech on the purpose and aims of education” serves as “a notable summary of the convictions of a lifetime” (*LY* III: 198). But Owen and Hill are short on details about Wordsworth’s convictions. I share their observations and intend to expand on those convictions so they can shed some light on the poet’s critique of contemporary education.

The Bowness speech reiterates and comments on the wishes and intentions of Bolton and the original contributors of the first village school fund. Those wishes include the instruction of practical subjects like writing and reading that should be “meet and convenient” for the youth, the honouring of God, the improvement in their social and economic circumstances, and thankful remembrance of the benefactors of this school (*Prose* III: 292).\(^{19}\) Wordsworth made judicious comments on each of these intentions, and conducted it in a reverted order to leave more space for what he considered the most important issue. He began by reminding the gathering to be grateful to the benefactors because he regarded “gratitude” as “the most perfect shape of justice” (292). He then acknowledged it was “honourable” and “natural” to teach the youth for material gains, but pointed out that “worldly advancement and preferment neither are, nor ought to be the main end of instruction, either in schools or elsewhere” (292-93). Finally, he turned to the subject to be taught and the place of religion, and it is here that Wordsworth launched his full scale attack on contemporary educational practices.

Wordsworth was addressing a local assembly, and he was aware that the new school was designed for the children of the rural poor who otherwise could not afford any regular education. Nevertheless, he made it an occasion to express publicly some

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\(^{18}\) See Wordsworth’s letters to various friends in *LY* III: 198, 209, and Owen’s introduction to the speech in *Prose* III: 287-89.

\(^{19}\) All quotations from this speech are from *Prose Works*, vol. III, so only page numbers are provided in the following analysis.
of his long-held opinions on education, especially his disapproval of formal education as carried out in many of the country’s schools for children from almost all social backgrounds. Observing the rapid expansion of elementary education for the young in recent years, Wordsworth questioned its practical effect in front of the advocates of education. “I speak in the hearing of persons who may be active in the management of schools elsewhere,” he declared, and many schools “are conducted at present so as to afford melancholy proof that instruction is neither meet nor convenient for the pupils there taught, nor, indeed, for the human mind in any rank or condition of society” (294).

In the poet’s opinion, the failure of school instruction in general was manifest in two aspects. The first concerned religious education, “the most important of all,” in his hierarchy of valuable knowledge. Where it was not neglected, it “is too often given with reference, less to the affections, to the imagination, and to the practical duties” than to the subtle distinctions of doctrine and factual history of scripture which can be taught by a catechetical process (294). This error arose from teachers’ undue emphasis on the exercising of understanding and memory, so the pupil’s learning can be easily displayed to the instructors and inspectors of schools.

However, it was a less grave error compared with the second one regarding the secular education of practical subjects, which resulted from the same desire for display and led to what Wordsworth called “an overstrained application to mental processes of arithmetic and mathematics; and a too minute attention to departments of natural and civil history.” Wordsworth found the display of precocious intellectual power in these branches of knowledge “astonishing,” “useless” and “injurious.” Because they had no practical use in future life, the extraordinary powers of mind would decay, and the knowledge gained through such a training process “with[ers and] drops off” (294-95). Moreover, such education also meant “a loss of opportunities for culture of intellect and acquiring information” for future life (295).

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20 The original printing in the newspaper spells “knowledge within drops off,” and Wordsworth pointed out the “gross blunder,” as “within” should be “withers and.” See Wordsworth’s letters in LY III: 198 and 209. This error has not been corrected or noted in the Prose Works edited by Owen and Smyser.
Wordsworth attributed the cause of such errors to a decay of the feeling that “the business of education should be conducted for the honour of God.” Then he directed the audience’s attention to “a fundamental mistake” that characterised his era: that the word “education” was “habitually confounded with tuition or school instruction.” The latter did constitute “a very important part of education,” Wordsworth admitted, but “when it is taken for the whole, we are deceived and betrayed” (295). Deception and betrayal are extraordinarily strong terms in such a context. Wordsworth suggested that tuition had usurped the place of education, and it was time for the term “education” to be rightly understood and properly conducted:

Education, according to the derivation of the word, and in the only use of which it is strictly justifiable, comprehends all those processes and influences, come from whence they may, that conduce to the best development of the bodily powers, and of the moral, intellectual, and spiritual faculties which the position of the individual admits of. In this just and high sense of the word, the education of a sincere Christian, and a good member of society upon Christian principles, does not terminate with his youth, but goes on to the last moment of his conscious earthly existence—an education not for time but for eternity. (295)

Comprehensiveness and Christianity are the prominent features of Wordsworth’s definition of education. Wordsworth resorted to the word’s Latin origin but did not confine himself to a pedantic distinction between drawing out potentials and imposing knowledge. He did not censor the means to be employed or the sources of influence, as long as they would contribute to the all-round development of an individual. The “study period” is expanded from childhood and youth to cover a lifetime, therefore not only children but also adults are subjects of education. Readers familiar with the popular understanding of the early Wordsworth will be surprised to find no direct reference to nature or attack on book learning in this definition, and amazed to hear the poet’s strident advocacy of Christian faith. The ultimate goal of education, for Wordsworth, is to bring up a genuine Christian who is prepared for not only an earthly life in a Christian society but also an immortal life in a Christian heaven.
Cooperation between educators is key in carrying out such an education. Since education can take place outside of school, schoolmasters are not the sole educators. Wordsworth called for the cooperation between “schoolmasters and ministers of the gospel,” and “the never-ceasing vigilance of parents.” He asked that parents should become the most important tutors of their children in supplementing and enforcing the teachings of school and church. More importantly, parents should exercise their educative influence “through the silent operation of example in their own well-regulated behaviour, and by accustoming their children early to the discipline of daily and hourly life, in such offices and employment as the situation of the family requires, and as are suitable to tender years” (295). What Wordsworth desired to see is children growing up to be “happy and worthy people,” and such children are chiefly educated “[b]y the influence of hereditary good example at home, and by their parochial schoolmasters opening the way for the admonitions and exhortations of their clergy” (296). There is enough evidence in this speech to refute Alan Richardson’s conclusion in 1994 that Wordsworth wished for the children “a ‘natural’ education” (72); and Judith Plotz’s charge in 2001 that Wordsworth alienated children from the adults, and that such separation was meant to free adults from “parental responsibility” (Romanticism 85). As Basil Willey pointed out earlier in 1970, “though our modern ‘permissiveness’ to children might seem, at first sight, derivable from [Wordsworth’s] view of the child as heavenly visitant,” the poet “would certainly have been horrified at ‘what man has made of child’ today; horrified at the passion, ill temper, and misery caused by the abdication of parental authority, and the absence of health-giving restraint, happy discipline, and regular rhythms in daily living” (270).21

Admittedly, Wordsworth’s definition of education and proposal of particular methods betray a conservative undertone in terms of class and gender for a modern reader. Even his proposition for more comprehensive education is conditioned by

“the position of the individual” and “the situation of the family.” Wordsworth defended his opinion by referring to the divine intention: “It is in the order of Providence, as we are all aware, that most men must end their temporal course pretty much as they began it” (293). Happiness and contentment with one’s situation thus become worthy of cultivation. This is particularly important in female education, as Wordsworth believed youthful females were more likely to be exposed to temptations. Therefore he recommended the education of peasants’ daughters “be confined to reading, writing, and arithmetic, and plain needlework, or any other art favourable to economy and home-comforts.” Their intellectual development should be subdued to moral discipline, as Wordsworth prescribed, “hands full of employment, and a head not above it, afford the best protection against restlessness and discontent” (295-96).

It is easy to associate such a conservative tone with Wordsworth’s conservative turn in politics during his later years, and to judge the later poet a betrayer of his former democratic beliefs. However, a comparison of Wordsworth’s understanding of education with those of his Romantic contemporaries will allow us a more just evaluation of Wordsworth’s political stance against the intellectual climate of his time. One may read Wordsworth’s Bowness speech together with Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s lecture on education. Coleridge delivered a lecture on 18 November 1813 in Bristol about the new monitorial systems of education introduced by Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster. The original lecture notes were lost, but The Bristol Gazette kept a detailed report of his definition of education:

It was to educe, to call forth; as the blossom is educed from the bud, the vital excellencies are within; the acorn is but educed or brought forth from the bud. In proportion to the situation in which the individual is likely to be placed, all that is good and proper should be educed; for it was not merely a degradation of the word Education, but an affront of human nature, to include within its meaning, the bare attainment of reading and writing, or of Latin and Greek; as in former Lectures he had placed moral above intellectual acquirements, so in education its object and its end would only be pernicious, if it did not make men worthy and estimable beings. (Lectures I: 585)
Many parallels can be drawn between the two poets’ definitions of education, such as the reference to the word’s Latin origin with special emphasis on drawing out, the objection to equating education with mere instruction of tangible knowledge, the preference of moral integrity over intellectual achievement, and the similar awareness of the individual’s social position. Against such inclusive definitions that refuse to equate education with instruction, E. D. Hirsch Jr.’s attack seems to have been misplaced. It is not that Wordsworth and Coleridge would replace mechanical instruction with natural development, but that they believed mere instruction was not sufficient for the genuine education of an individual or a worthy member of society.

The “situation” of the individual in Coleridge’s definition involves class and gender as well. *The Bristol Gazette* recorded Coleridge’s opinions regarding “the difference of education between the higher and middle classes.” Both classes should aspire to “moral and religious truths,” but the higher class needed “a different degree of acquirement, a gradation of acquisition of language and knowledge; proportionate to the sphere in which they were to move” (*Lectures* I: 589). Coleridge also concerned himself with female education. A newspaper advertisement in 1814 announced his intention, upon the demand of “several highly respectable ladies,” to give one or two lectures on the subject of female education. He was to explain “the whole machinery of a School organised on rational Principles, from the earliest Age to the completion of female education, with a list of the books recommended, &c. so as to evolve gradually into utility and domestic happiness the powers and qualities of womanhood” (*Lectures* II: 6). Coleridge even mentioned the plan to write a book “on the duties of women, more especially to their husbands” (*Table Talk* 368). Although neither project materialised, Coleridge, like Wordsworth in 1836, stressed the aim of female education as to enhance domestic utility and happiness. However, in this thesis I do not attempt a feminist critique of Wordsworth’s educational ideas, because his concerns were based more on class than on gender, and in many cases the fundamental principle applied to males and females alike.
We may wonder to what extent Wordsworth’s educational thoughts in 1836 were influenced by Coleridge, one of the two persons (the other being Dorothy) to whom Wordsworth’s intellect was most indebted.\(^{22}\) He could feel Coleridge’s intellectual influence after long years of their estrangement.\(^{23}\) Wordsworth in his 1836 speech possibly drew upon Coleridge’s earlier thinking, but the question of priority and influence can be quite complicated and controversial,\(^{24}\) and it is safer to say that the two poets shared similar thoughts and sentiments concerning various aspects of education. If the later Wordsworth sounds conservative in his stress on constant discipline and Christian principles, it does not suggest a sudden turn from the liberal ideas of his youth, but rather a continuation of and development from his earlier beliefs, some of which he shared with Coleridge. As Alan G. Hill remarks on another occasion, Wordsworth’s Bowness speech was “a summing-up of convictions which had their origin far back in the Racedown and Alfoxden days” (“Wordsworth” 301). Hill seems to suggest Coleridge’s influence during the years of their celebrated friendship, but Wordsworth’s convictions could be traced further back to a poem composed in his early youth, known as “Written as a School Exercise at Hawkshead, Anno Aetatis 14.”\(^{25}\)

It may not be mere coincidence that Wordsworth’s first known poem of juvenilia in 1784-85 was occasioned by a similar circumstance as his only public speech in 1836—the poem was dedicated to the two hundredth anniversary of Hawkshead Grammar School, founded in 1585 by Edwin Sandys (1519-1588), Archbishop of York. In this poem, Wordsworth imitated Pope’s versification and style to praise the goddess of education and Sandys the founder of Hawkshead.\(^{26}\) Many resemblances in ideas can be discovered in the two pieces written at different

\(^{22}\) See Wordsworth’s letter to William Rowan Hamilton in 1832, \textit{LY} II: 536.

\(^{23}\) Upon hearing the news of Coleridge’s death, Wordsworth wrote to Henry Nelson Coleridge in July 1834, “though . . . I have seen little of him for the last twenty years, his mind has been habitually present with me.” See \textit{LY} II: 728.


\(^{25}\) \textit{PW} I: 259-61

\(^{26}\) Wordsworth later recalled that the verses “were much admired, far more than they deserved, for they were but a tame imitation of Pope’s versification, and a little in his style.” See \textit{PW} I: 366.
stages of the poet’s life. Apart from gratitude to the benefactor and praise of the particular school, Wordsworth in the school exercise expanded the scope to celebrate the general advance of education in Britain, where intellectual prowess began to receive higher honour than martial strength. It is noticeable how some of his thoughts regarding the purpose of education in the 1836 speech have their seeds in 1785:

While thus I mused, methought, before mine eyes,
The Power of EDUCATION seemed to rise;
Not she whose rigid precepts trained the boy
Dead to the sense of every finer joy;
Nor that vile wretch who bade the tender age
Spurn Reason’s law and humour Passion’s rage;
But she who trains the generous British youth
In the bright paths of fair majestic Truth:

Stern was her forehead, but a smile serene
‘Softened the terrors of her awful mien.’
Close at her side were all the powers, designed
To curb, exalt, reform the tender mind. (5-12, 15-18)

Clearly, the poet at a very young age understood the purpose of education as to encourage children’s rational pursuit of truth, cultivate and discipline their tender minds without hurting their natural sensibility. Although the means employed—emulation, shame, and industry—were reviewed or repudiated in his later writings, they suggested Wordsworth’s early awareness of the need for cooperation between different sources of influence. A similar hierarchy of knowledge can be discerned in Wordsworth’s praise of Hawkshead education, in that the intellectual attainment of classics and science should “guide the fluctuating youth / Firm in the sacred paths of moral truth” (77-78). Hawkshead’s precepts not only subdued the youth’s unruly passions and offered them material advantages in life (“quelled the passion’s strife” and “smoothed the rugged walks of life”), but also “pointed forth the blissful way / That guides the spirit to eternal day” (103-06). Wordsworth invoked religious sentiment more than twice in this poem: “Pure Religion” was credited with the power of “rear[ing] the peaceful breast” and “lull[ing] the warring passions into rest” (30-31), and then “Science with joy saw Superstition
fly / Before the lustre of Religion’s eye” (43-44). Wordsworth in his youth believed that intellectual achievement and moral perfection would be of little avail without the guidance of religion.

My comparison of Wordsworth’s 1836 speech with Coleridge’s 1813 lecture and his own poem in 1785 intends to demonstrate the originality, comprehensiveness and consistency in Wordsworth’s educational thinking. When we celebrate or criticise Wordsworth as a poet advocating a natural education for children, we may have dealt with only one aspect of his educational ideas while neglecting other aspects such as his emphasis on religion and the adults’ need of education. Since many of his verse comments on education are social critique of contemporary educational practices, it will be fruitful to study those poetic texts in the social-historical context, so as to bring into dialogue Wordsworth the poet and other intellectuals engaged in education. In the Bowness speech, Wordsworth mentioned in passing that “[t]his education of circumstances has happily, in this district, not yet been much infringed upon by experimental novelties” (295). The experimental novelties he encountered in 1836 were markedly different from those he famously ridiculed in Book V of The Prelude of 1805, as they were encouraged by different educational philosophies or ideologies and conceived to address materially different social realities. Wordsworth closely watched the changing tides of his time and held onto steadfast principles of his own during his interaction with those educational theorists and practitioners.

The rest of this chapter will study Wordsworth’s involvement in Britain’s educational reforms at the turn of the nineteenth century, as mainly reflected in the poetic speaker’s critique of the educational experiment in Book V of The Prelude and the Wanderer’s proposal for a national system of education in the last two books of The Excursion. The thirteen-book Prelude (1805) is my chosen text because its portrait of the child prodigy reflects the early Wordsworth’s views on the private

27 “The education of circumstances” as a term also appears in Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s article “What is Education,” The Monthly Magazine V. XXIX (1798) 168.
education of children from a middle class background, under the influence of philosophers like Rousseau and Godwin. By comparison the national system of education proposed in the 1814 *Excursion* represents Wordsworth’s deliberation on mass education for children from the working class background, and involves his complex attitudes towards the popular monitorial system initiated by Andrew Bell. Despite the different intellectual and socio-political backgrounds, Wordsworth remained consistent in his early and late critiquing of these educational experiments, which was based on his distrust of equating education with instruction, and his increasing concern over the secularisation of education.

**Book V of The Prelude: Wordsworth’s Responses to Rousseau and Godwin**

It could be argued that *The Prelude* is a study in education. Book V, a book dedicated to the influence of books in his early childhood, contains Wordsworth’s most explicit attack on the contemporary educational system in about a hundred lines. After expressing gratitude to his mother for her simple creed and traditional method of parenting, the poet turns to compare his own upbringing with “the monster birth /Engendered by these too industrious times” (292-93). He paints a model of a child produced in accordance with the latest educational experiments: “‘tis a child, no child, / But a dwarf man” (295-96). The child is characterised by his perfect moral sense—free from quarrelsomeness, selfishness, gluttony, pride or gullibility. Moreover, he is a prodigy “in learning and books” (320-21), skilled in all branches of human knowledge:

> Ships he can guide across the pathless sea,  
> And tell you all their cunning; he can read

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The inside of the earth, and spell the stars;
He knows the policies of foreign Lands;
Can string you names of districts, cities, towns,
The whole world over, tight as beads of dew
Upon a gossamer thread; . . . (331-37)

This seemingly flawless prodigy with perfect moral sense and intellectual
capacity invokes in Wordsworth mere revulsion, as he sees the boy lives a life of
perpetual lies, and his very soul is shrouded by vanity and conceit. Acute is
Wordsworth’s critique of the child prodigy; he holds the tutors to blame for such
unnatural growth, and gathers his critical force to denounce the officious educators of
his time. It is worth quoting in full:

    These mighty workmen of our later age
    . . . . . . . . . . . . . . the Tutors of our Youth,
The Guides, the Wardens of our faculties,
And Stewards of our labour, watchful men
And skilful in the usury of time,
Sages, who in their prescience would controul
All accidents, and to the very road
Which they have fashion’d, would confine us down
Like engines, when will they be taught
That in the unreasoning progress of the world
A wiser Spirit is at work for us,
A better eye than theirs, most prodigal
Of blessings, and most studious of our good,
Even in what seem our most unfruitful hours? (370, 376-88)

For a long time, scholars have been preoccupied with the task of finding out
the exact target of Wordsworth’s critique in this passage, and they have suggested
several possible candidates. The dominant opinion is that Wordsworth has in mind
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, author of Emile, or some of his British followers. Émile
Legouis contended that Rousseau’s influence on Wordsworth permeated the whole of
the poet’s work and life, but “it is in his opposition to what Wordsworth perceived to
be the errors of Rousseau, that this very influence is manifested” (57). Ernest de de
Selincourt, in his extensive annotation of the Oxford edition of The Prelude,
observed that Wordsworth “seems to refer to Rousseau when he differs from him,”
and the praise accorded to the poet’s mother “is an explicit criticism of Rousseau’s
'tutor,' with his artificial manipulation of Nature’s lessons” (542). James Chandler argues that “the monster child does bear a striking and straightforward resemblance to Emile” (110), and, given the historical context, “the portrait of the monster child does appear to be a reasonably coherent satire of the revolution’s Rousseauist dream of an ideal pupil” (113). William A. Ulmer declares that “Rousseau was the paramount influence on the educational polemics of The Prelude, book 5” (“Rousseau’s Emile” 18).

Some scholars are more cautious and avoid singling out Rousseau as the sole target. De Selincourt added in his note that Wordsworth’s chief protests in this passage “are not against Rousseau, but against those who, stimulated by the enthusiasm for education kindled by Rousseau, but without his genius, devoted their lives to ‘child study’” (542); he named the Edgeworths, authors of Practical Education (1798), as more probable targets (543). David Erdman in “Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Wedgwood Fund” made a strong case that the passage in its manuscript form was provoked by Tom Wedgwood’s proposal to build a “nursery of genius” following Godwin’s philosophy. Geoffrey Hartman suggests that the episode of the Boy of Winander supported Wordsworth’s argument that nature’s “infinite resources mock the presumptuous followers of Rousseau, educators who treat children like engines, confining them by a timetable scheme of development and seeking to eliminate idleness and fruitful accidents” (Wordsworth’s Poetry 19). Joel Morkan tries to bypass the controversy by arguing that “Wordsworth confronted a phenomenon of his age that transcended any single individual” (249), and that the poet opposed the contemporary educational theory because he believed the direction “was anti-imaginative and totalitarian” (251). Alan Richardson has named Locke, Rousseau, and the Edgeworths as probable subjects of Wordsworth’s critique.30

Despite the general agreement on the range of educational philosophers and theorists as possible targets of Wordsworth’s polemic, there has been little consensus

30 See Richardson, Literature, Education, and Romanticism, 48-52.
on the grounds of his attack. Earlier interpretations about Rousseau’s influence such as those proposed by De Selincourt and Hartman stress the opposition between nature and nurture. But James Chandler reminds readers that whereas Wordsworth opposed Rousseauist education in the name of natural education, Rousseau “specifically represented his project as a casting out of artificial education in favor of natural” (117), therefore it is not about nature versus nurture, but nature versus what he calls second nature. Joel Morkan suggests that Rousseau’s “authoritarianism clashed with Wordsworth’s creative individualism” (251). But Alan Richardson discovers a more complex side of the first generation Romantics’ critique of the pervasive “authoritarianism” of Locke and Rousseau (51). He contends, while these writers “deplore the methods of the new approach to education—particularly the dual emphasis on relentless edification and constant, often hidden, surveillance—their own writings on childhood are complicit with some of its more subtly disciplinary aspects” (51-52). Richardson notices that Wordsworth “retains Locke’s disciplinary ‘eye,’ only shifting from a tutorial to a transcendental gaze” (63).

The lack of consensus means that there is still room for exploration. Given the enormous popularity of Rousseau’s *Emile* in Britain after its publication in 1762, it is hard to disregard its possible influence on Wordsworth. However, the difficulty later critics have in determining and agreeing on Wordsworth’s grounds of attack of Rousseau suggests the poet’s opposition to the philosopher may have been exaggerated, just as Rousseau in *Emile* has exaggerated his difference from Locke who proposes to treat the child as a reasoning being. In revisiting this passage, I will challenge some modern assumptions about Wordsworth’s polemic against Rousseau in terms of nature versus discipline by drawing attention to Rousseau’s

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31 According to Legouis, the book was translated into English four times within four years between 1763 and 1765, and in his formative years Wordsworth was surrounded by disciples and admirers of Rousseau on almost every side. See *The Early Life of William Wordsworth*, trans. J. W. Matthews (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1921) 55-57.

32 Geraint Parry points out that in this regard “Rousseau both exaggerated his difference from Locke and underestimated the extent that Locke had cautioned against treating the young child as capable of adult understanding.” See his article “Émile: Learning to Be Men, Women, and Citizens,” *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 253.
reception in Britain during Wordsworth’s early years, and then shift the focus of comparison from Rousseau to Godwin—an underestimated source of influence on Wordsworth’s educational thinking.

Rousseau as a target of Wordsworth’s educational polemic seems to be the result of some literary critics’ interpretations, which is not necessarily shared by intellectuals from other disciplines. While literary critics suggest Wordsworth opposes Rousseauist authoritarianism in Book V, educational scholars like E. D. Hirsch Jr. and Andrew Stables have grouped the two writers in the same camp of Romantics and interpreted their educational message as preference of natural development over artificial instruction. In fact, there have been long-standing disputes with regard to Rousseau’s educational ideas and legacies in general. A. S. Byatt laments that “Rousseau’s views on education, like his views on politics, were simplified by being popularized.” She reminds readers that “Rousseau had a vision, an honourable vision, of what human being should aim at—a kind of integrity of personality” (173). When too much attention is paid to the authoritarian and disciplinary nature in the upbringing of Emile, it is easy to overlook the fact that Rousseau defended himself against the imagined charge of impracticality in his Preface to Emile. Moreover, Geraint Parry, scholar of political theories, argues that the “combination of liberty and discipline was central to Rousseau’s educational ideas, as they were to his moral and political thinking” (247), for Rousseau “does not offer just one account of education but several” in a number of writings (249). General readers of Emile tend to emphasise one side of his concerns, regarding him as either champion of liberty or proponent of discipline.

Contrary to today’s critics who suspect Rousseau’s over-reliance on discipline, many readers in the late eighteenth century associated him with excessive liberty. Richard Lovell Edgeworth, in his memoirs of 1821, revealed that he formed a strong

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33 Sophia Woodley also contends that “[w]hile Emile ostensibly dealt with educational issues, it was in fact a work of political philosophy, best understood in conjunction with Rousseau’s Social Contract (also published in 1762).” See Woodley, “’Oh Miserable and Most Ruinous Measure:’ The Debate between Private and Public Education in Britain, 1760-1800,” Educating the Child in Enlightenment Britain. Eds. Mary Hilton and Jill Shefrin (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009) 24.
desire to educate his son (born in 1764) “according to the system of Rousseau” (172). His understanding of the system was such that “the body and mind of my son were to be left as much as possible to the education of nature and of accident” (173). After several years’ steady pursuit, he found the boy between the age of seven and eight to be almost an ideal Emile, except that “he had too little deference for others, and he shewed an invincible dislike to control” (174). By the time the boy was nine, Edgeworth found himself “entangled in difficulties with regard to [his] child’s mind and temper” (268). He began to regret “the error of a theory, which [he] had adopted at a very early age, when older and wiser persons than [himself] had been dazzled by the eloquence of Rousseau” (268-69). Edgeworth’s initial enthusiasm and later complaint seem to suggest that many of his contemporaries considered Rousseau as a preacher of absolute liberty in early education, and they followed him or abandoned him for the same reason. Coleridge used to repeat an anecdote about his ridicule of Rousseau’s principle upheld by his friends. When John Thelwall defended the “negative education” of Rousseau, Coleridge led him into his neglected garden full of weeds and explained it was a garden “educated according to Rousseau’s principles” (*Lectures* I: 106).

It is obvious from these two accounts that Rousseau’s name had been chiefly associated with natural or non-interfering education for many decades at the turn of the nineteenth century, by his followers and critics alike. Edgeworth in his early days, his “older and wiser” contemporaries, and John Thelwall all understood Rousseau’s message as “education of nature” or free from discipline. Edgeworth’s later rejection of Rousseau and Coleridge’s sarcastic remark were based on the same assumption that Rousseau’s natural education needed to be replaced with authoritarian discipline. Given the intellectual atmosphere of Rousseau’s reception in Britain during that period, one may question how Wordsworth could have interpreted the message in *Emile*. Was he enthusiastic or apathetic? Did he see Emile as a child raised in nature or a child monitored by a manipulative tutor?
Although *Emile* and *The Confessions* were found amongst the possessions of Wordsworth’s library, the poet’s major biographers, apart from the French scholar Legouis, give only passing references to Rousseau in their books.\textsuperscript{34} Any suggestion of his being influenced by Rousseauist ideas during his formative years is hypothetical and contested.\textsuperscript{35} The closest we can get to associate Wordsworth with *Emile* with any biographical certainty is to follow Duncan Wu’s suggestion that Wordsworth might have read the book in 1796, when “[p]erhaps he and Dorothy were reading books on education as an aid to bringing up Basil Caroline Montagu” (1770-1799 119-20). Basil Caroline Montagu, born in December 1792,\textsuperscript{36} came to the tutelage of William and Dorothy Wordsworth between 1795 and 1798, after the death of his mother Caroline in 1793 and the subsequent crisis of his father Basil Montagu. Dorothy’s letters to her friend Mrs Marshall during this period sound as if they were following the principles in *Emile*. She noted with delight that the boy “is quite metamorphosed from a shivering half starved plant, to a lusty, blooming fearless boy. He dreads neither cold nor rain. He has played frequently an hour or two without appearing sensible that the rain was poring down upon him or the wind blowing about him” (*EY* 166). The description resembles the early upbringing of Emile, whom Rousseau’s tutor must teach to take much exercise outdoors and “get used to the changes in the air and to every degree of temperature without suffering inconvenience” (92).

There are also similarities in their approaches to the mental exercise of the

\textsuperscript{34} The phrase “Rousseau’s ‘child of nature’” was used by Mary Moorman to refer to Annette Vallon. See Moorman, *Early Years*, 180. Stephen Gill mentions Rousseau’s *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité parmi les hommes* being echoed in *Salisbury Plain*. See Gill, *Life*, 75.

\textsuperscript{35} Melvin Rader surmised that “during the revolutionary period in France the poet must have discussed Rousseau with his philosophically minded friend, Michel Beaupuy. Moreover, Godwin was a great admirer of Rousseau, and Wordsworth fell under the spell of Godwin.” See Rader, *Wordsworth: A Philosophical Approach* (London: Oxford UP, 1967) 56. But the first half of the sentence is speculative and the latter half is not entirely true. Duncan Wu records a scholar’s suggestion, without comment, that “W’s teacher at Hawkshead, William Taylor, was probably influenced by *Emile*.” See Wu, *Wordsworth’s Reading, 1770-1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 120. However, Kenneth R. Johnston rejected Legouis’s speculation that Hawkshead Grammar School’s educational philosophy was influenced by the theories of Rousseau, claiming that the academic discipline there was “hard old-fashioned classicism, combined with hard new-fashioned mathematics, and the value of the boys’ freedom out of class was more accidental than philosophically inspired.” See Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth* (New York: Norton, 2001) 50.

\textsuperscript{36} According to Johnston, Basil’s birthday was 27 December 1792, two weeks after that of Caroline, Wordsworth’s natural daughter by Annette Vallon. See Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth*, 327.
child. In response to her friend’s enquiring about their “system respecting Basil” in 1797, Dorothy gave a more detailed account of their educational ideas:

It is a very simple one, so simple that in this age of systems you will hardly be likely to follow it. We teach him nothing at present but what he learns from the evidence of his senses. He has an insatiable curiosity which we are always careful to satisfy to the best of our ability. It is directed to everything he sees, the sky, the fields, trees, shrubs, corn, the making of tools, carts, &c&c&c. He knows his letters, but we have not attempted any further step in the path of book learning. Our grand study has been to make him happy in which we have not been altogether disappointed; he is certainly the most contented child I ever saw; the least disposed to cry. (EY 180)

William and Dorothy regarded themselves as challenging their “age of systems” by adopting a simple method with Basil. One may wonder what those systems were, and whether Rousseau’s method was one of them, or one against them. But the Wordsworths seemed to have shared Rousseau’s belief in the primacy of sense impressions which can be traced back to John Locke’s theory of “Tabula Rasa.” Rousseau maintained that “since everything that comes into the human mind enters through the gates of sense . . . our first teachers in natural philosophy are our feet, hands, and eyes” (90). Rousseau also insisted that “nature, not man, is his schoolmaster” (84), to which the Wordsworths would have no objection. In their measured pace with Basil’s book learning, they seem to have followed Rousseau’s advice against training a child prodigy or “exhausting his strength by over-much exercise” (70). Their ultimate concern was Basil’s happiness and contentment, which would not have been an ignoble aim in Rousseau’s eyes, for happiness also distinguishes Émile when he “has reached the perfection of childhood,” because “he has lived the life of a child; his progress has not been bought at the price of his happiness . . . he has been as free and happy as his health permits” (126).

Back to the context of Book V of The Prelude, even those critics who identify Rousseau as a possible target of Wordsworth’s attack have agreed that the two could have shared many premises concerning the nature of childhood, the importance of phenomenal nature, and the distrust of precocious intellectual training. Émile
Legouis contended that “[i]f Wordsworth is inevitably agreed with [Rousseau] as to first principles, he differs from nearly all his conclusions.” Legouis continued that Wordsworth had no sympathy with Rousseau’s fears and suspicions of societal influence which prompted him to conceive the idea “of transporting [Emile] to a utopia where beings and objects exist for no other purpose than that of his instruction” (57-58). James Chandler suggests that for Rousseau, “there is nature and derivative rational method on the one side and the antinature of human institution on the other. For Wordsworth, there is nature and derivative second nature on the one side and rational method on the other” (119).

Given the complex circumstances of Rousseau’s reception in Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century, the valid question regarding Wordsworth’s position is not whether Wordsworth was a Rousseauist or an anti-Rousseauist, but rather in what terms he agreed or disagreed with Rousseau. To better understand the complexity of intellectual influence, I propose to shift the attention from the controlling educators to the prodigy pupil in Book V, and investigate Wordsworth’s intellectual relationship with William Godwin—who was once influenced by Rousseau and in turn influenced Wordsworth. Wordsworth’s stance will be clearer if we compare and contrast his notions about the purposes and methods of education with those of Godwin and Rousseau.

In “Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Wedgwood Fund,” David Erdman recovered a letter Tom Wedgwood (son of Josiah Wedgwood, the famous potter, and brother of Josiah Wedgwood II) wrote to William Godwin in 1797 about the proposal for a nursery of genius. Wedgwood intended to invite Godwin to sit among the committee of philosophers, and Wordsworth and Coleridge to be its superintendents. No reply from Godwin was found, but Wedgwood did pay a visit to Wordsworth later that year, probably to disclose his plan. Erdman suggested that the encounter with Wedgwood was the stimulant behind Wordsworth’s satire of artificial tutelage in Book V of The Prelude. Erdman’s conclusion is hard to dispute, but his
evidence may be interpreted differently, to suggest the influence of not Wedgwood but Godwin, especially Godwin’s relatively understudied treatise *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature.*\(^{37}\) Godwin’s intellectual relation to Rousseau also affords new comparisons between the three writers on education.

The fact that Wedgwood should suggest the proposal to Godwin and include Wordsworth in his plan is worth consideration. Wedgwood had been acquainted with Godwin since 1793 and corresponded with him. He wrote this letter on 31 July, 1797, shortly after Godwin’s publication of *The Enquirer* the previous February. *The Enquirer* contains two essays “Of the Sources of Genius,” so there is a strong possibility of Wedgwood’s reading these essays and finding them appealing, which prompted his proposal of the nursery of genius to Godwin. Godwin’s intellectual position in the 1790s, his responses to Rousseau, and his influences on Wordsworth, make him an interesting figure to study both in the historical context and in respect to Wordsworth’s literary text.

To understand Godwin’s importance in the contemporary educational debate, it is necessary to have a brief survey of the British forerunners of educational reform in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, with whom Godwin shared many beliefs. In *The Two Nations and the Educational Structure 1780-1870*, Brian Simon offers a group portrait of the rationalistic industrialists and philosophers who took an almost scientific interest in education, including Joseph Priestley, Erasmus Darwin, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Thomas Day and Josiah Wedgwood. They came from dissenting backgrounds and attempted to devise an improved education for children of the middle class. Their educational ideas were drawn on one hand from “the writings of the great French *philosophes* of the Enlightenment,” and on the other from “the psychology of associationism advanced by David Hartley” (24). While the former helped them define “the kind of people education should produce,” the latter provided “a rational explanation of the learning process” (38). “The rationalist

\(^{37}\) For a recent survey of Godwin’s contribution to the educational debate of his time and his educational philosophy, see Janet Bottoms, “‘Awakening the Mind:’ The Educational Philosophy of William Godwin,” *History of Education* 33.3 (2004) 267-82.
viewpoint,” according to Simon, was “given its most complete expression” and “its widest circulation” by William Godwin in his 1793 treatise An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness (49).

Godwin acknowledged his indebtedness to Rousseau in the Preface to Political Justice, regarding him one of the French writers from whose works he “derived great additional instruction” (I: viii). The radical philosopher believed that the human mind can be advanced towards a state of perfection by three principal causes—literature, education, and political justice. By literature he meant “the diffusion of knowledge through the medium of discussion, whether written or oral,” and education, “a scheme for the early impression of right principles upon the hitherto unprejudiced mind” (I: 19). But for human improvement, literature alone is insufficient, neither is education “in the sense in which it has commonly been understood” (I: 26). Godwin proposed a different kind of education that sounds quite Rousseauistic in its apprehension of the errors surrounding the pupil, the considerable efforts involved to counteract the general contagion, and the rationale for experimental education for a selected few:

It employs an immense combination of powers, and an endless chain of causes for the production of a single specimen. No task, which is not in its own nature impracticable, can easily be supposed more difficult, than that of counteracting universal error, and arming the youthful mind against the contagion of general example. The strongest mind that proposed this as its object, would scarcely undertake the forming more than one, or at most a very small number, of pupils. (I: 26)

While the topic of education is sparingly discussed in Political Justice (1793), it receives more systematic treatment in The Enquirer, and the latter treatise has more direct links with Wordsworth. Godwin began the composition on 1 August, 1796 and finished it on 28 January, 1797. It is worth noticing the frequent communication between Godwin and Wordsworth prior to the composition of The Enquirer. Mary Moorman observed that in the spring and summer of 1795, “Wordsworth was indeed under Godwin’s influence in a far more direct manner than simply by reading Political Justice,” for Godwin recorded nine meetings with
Wordsworth between February and August 1795 (Early Years 262), and he also called twice on Wordsworth in July. In the summer of 1796, they met four times in London (Early Years 297), during which they could have discussed extensively their educational ideas—topics that concerned Godwin for philosophical reasons and Wordsworth for more practical reasons, given his tutelage of Basil Caroline Montagu and their mutual friendship with Montagu the father. In August 1796, Godwin began the composition of several essays on education which form the first part of his essay collection entitled The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature. There is little evidence to suggest Wordsworth’s reading of The Enquirer, but Godwin in the Preface remarked that the essays “are principally the result of conversation,” and admitted his “passion for colloquial discussion” (vii). It is reasonable to suppose Wordsworth’s possible contribution to these discussions and his inspiration from them.

The first nine essays in The Enquirer constitute a systematic discussion on the purpose, importance, and methods of early education. In the first essay “Of Awakening the Mind,” Godwin defines the three leading objects of what he calls “a just education” as “happiness, virtue, wisdom, including under the term wisdom both extent of information and energy of pursuit” (2-3). Happiness is the ultimate goal, but wisdom is the path. In Godwin’s vocabulary, wisdom, knowledge, and information have similar positive connotations. He argues in the second essay “The Utility of Talents” that a man’s happiness would increase in proportion to his acquisition of knowledge, and that talents in general hold a higher estimation among mankind than virtues, and therefore it is desirable to produce talents through education. Essays III and IV examine the sources of genius. “Genius is wisdom,” Godwin offers his definition, “the possessing a great store of ideas, together with a facility in calling them up and a peculiar discernment in their selection or rejection” (24). In this sense genius is not inherent at birth but rather generated subsequently. Essay V contends that a promising indication of genius manifests in an early taste for
reading, because books are “the depositary of every thing that is most honourable to
man” (31). Essay VI argues for the advantages of learning the classics, especially
Latin, as an intellectual discipline from an early age. Essay VII compares private
education with public education in favour of the latter. Essay VIII rejects the
common view about the happiness of youth for the lack of freedom and respect from
the “dictatorial interruption” of preceptors, so he proposes that “animadversions”
should be directed “against the instructor, not his pupil” (74). Essay IX discusses the
importance of motives in encouraging the pupil’s acquisition of knowledge.

Wedgwood was probably influenced by the two essays on genius, for his
understanding of genius in the letter to Godwin bears many resemblances with
Godwin’s. In Essay III “Of the Sources of Genius,” Godwin defines this term as
signifying “a spirit of prying observation and incessant curiosity” and suggests “these
qualities are capable of being generated” (13). He believes although genius can be
generated by external forces, the fostering of genius could be a delicate issue: “if
nothing occur to excite the mind, it will become torpid; if it be frequently and
strongly excited, unless in a manner that, while it excites, engenders aversion to
effort; it will become active, mobile and turbulent” (14). It follows that “an adequate
cause for the phenomenon of genius may be found, in the incidents that occur to us
subsequent to birth.” If genius could be produced after this method, it will be of great
importance “in the science of education” (14). Godwin finds the first indications of
genius usually disclose themselves at about the age of five, and, “as far therefore as
genius is susceptible of being produced by education, the production of it requires a
very early care” (15). These observations, together with his repeated stress that
“genius requires great care in the training, and the most favourable circumstances to
bring it to perfection” (17), are positively echoed in Wedgwood’s letter.38

Wedgwood outlined a rough plan of an educational scheme to accelerate the
progress of humanity by engineering superior characters of genius. He defined

38 For the full copy of Wedgwood’s letter to Godwin, see David V. Erdman, “Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the
genius as the possession of “distinct, vivid primary and consequently distinct vivid secondary ideas with high degrees of pleasure associated,” and the habit of “rapid survey and prompt, incessant combination and separation of the above primary and secondary ideas” (qtd. in Erdman 431-32). To prevent any loss of time in the fostering of this quality, Wedgwood proposed a radical experiment of having children’s exposure to sense impressions systematically administered by the superintendent in his nursery of genius. If Wedgwood was indeed influenced by Godwin’s essays, he may have overlooked the philosopher’s caution against misapprehension in his final paragraph:

Genius, it seems to appear from the preceding speculations, is not born with us, but generated subsequent to birth. It by no means follows from hence, that it is the produce of education, or even was the work of the preceptor. Thousands of impressions are made upon us, for one that is designedly produced. The child receives twenty ideas *per diem* perhaps from the preceptor; it is not impossible that he may have a million of perceptions in that period, with which the preceptor has no concern. We learn, it may be, a routine of barren lessons from our masters; a circumstance occurs perhaps, in the intercourse of our companions, or in our commerce with nature, that makes its way directly to the heart, and becomes the fruitful parent of a thousand projects and contemplations. (17-18)

If it were so that Godwin did not approve of Wedgwood’s plan, it might be explained by this important addition. Godwin’s recognition of the importance of chance encounter and serendipity also distances himself from Rousseau. In a later essay of the same collection, Godwin acknowledges Rousseau’s magnitude and originality, but points out that “[h]is whole system of education is a series of tricks, a puppet-show exhibition, of which the master holds the wires, and the scholar is never to suspect in what manner they are moved” (106). Compared with Richard Lovell Edgeworth and others who were once fascinated by Rousseau’s “excessive liberty,” Godwin may be among the earliest readers to notice Rousseau’s systematic control. If Wordsworth is anti-Rousseauist in the sense of anti-disciplinary, he is possibly indebted to Godwin for the insight. Godwin realised the limit of education in
producing genius, and conversely the value of un-sought-of circumstances, which could have rendered him quite appealing to Wordsworth. It is thus necessary to compare and contrast the three writers on specific points regarding early education.

Unlike Godwin, both Rousseau and Wordsworth are opposed to the overstraining of intellectual capacities at a young age. However, one thought seems to be agreed by these three authors concerning the motivation for acquiring knowledge. Rousseau asserts that his object is to teach Emile to value knowledge “at its true worth, and to love truth above all things” (170). Such a disinterested love of truth translated into Godwin’s terms would be an intrinsic motive for learning. In his ninth essay “Of the Communication of Knowledge,” Godwin distinguishes between two kinds of motives—the intrinsic and the extrinsic. Intrinsic motives are those “which arise from the inherent nature of the thing recommended,” while extrinsic motives are those “which have no constant and unalterable connection with the thing recommended, but are combined with it by accident or at the pleasure of some individual” (76-77). Undoubtedly, the best motive to learn is “a perception of the value of the thing learned,” and the worst motive “may well be affirmed to be constraint and fear.” Godwin also includes a motive in-between, “less pure than the first, but not so displeasing as the last, which is desire, not springing from the intrinsic excellence of the object, but from the accidental attractions which the teacher may have annexed to it” (78-79).

The same clear distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motives for learning also appears in Wordsworth’s 1806 letter to an unknown friend who sought his advice on educating his little girl. In his reply, Wordsworth classifies knowledge into three kinds, according to its relation to the learner’s intrinsic or extrinsic motive. The first class is “interesting for its own sake,” including “things known because they are interesting, not interesting because they are known.” The second class comprises “such knowledge as, while it is chiefly interesting for its own sake, admits the fellowship of another sort of pleasure, that of complacence from the conscious
exertion of the faculties and love of praise.” And the last class is to be particularly cautioned against, which are “interesting almost solely because they are known, and the knowledge may be displayed” (MY I: 287).

One may see a striking similarity between Godwin’s classification of motives and Wordsworth’s classification of knowledge in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic values. But a closer reading can reveal a crucial difference in their understandings of the relation between knowledge, virtue, and happiness. Godwin regards knowledge as the cause of virtue and happiness: “Is it to be feared that a man should know too much for his happiness? Knowledge for the most part consists in added means of pleasure or enjoyment, and added discernment to select those means” (7-8). He elevates talents above virtue in the belief that knowledge is power: “Talents are the instruments of usefulness. He that has them, is capable of producing uncommon benefit; he that has them not, is destitute even of the power” (8-9).

In contrast to Godwin, Wordsworth has a very different understanding of the relation between the three: happiness is associated with virtue, which can be augmented or undermined by one’s acquisition of knowledge, depending on the kind of knowledge and the motivation of learning. In the context of his 1806 letter, Wordsworth was primarily concerned with the potential moral defects like vanity and selfishness in his correspondent’s daughter as a result of her receiving too much attention from her privileged private tuition. He recommended a method to cure her weaknesses and refine her character “by putting her in the way of acquiring without measure or limit such knowledge as will lead her out of herself” (MY I: 287).

A more important distinction between Godwin and Wordsworth is their respective understandings of what should constitute knowledge. In “Of the Studies of the Classics,” Godwin distinguishes between “knowledge of words” and knowledge “of things” (51), but he means by the former languages and the latter science, both of which can be maintained through books. Books for Godwin are “the depositary of every thing that is most honourable to man,” and “he that loves reading, has
everything within his reach” (31). It is precisely this equation of education with knowledge acquisition, and knowledge with book learning, that provoked Wordsworth’s attacks on practical education throughout the years.

In his 1806 letter, Wordsworth lamented that the third class of knowledge, the least worthy of pursuit,

comprehends three fourths of what, according to the plan of modern education, children’s heads are stuffed with; that is, minute, remote, or trifling facts in geography, topography, natural history, chronology, &c., or acquisitions in art, or accomplishments which the child makes by rote, and which are quite beyond its age; things of no value in themselves, but as they show cleverness. (MY I: 287)

To have a better grasp of the vogue of education criticised by Wordsworth, we may refer to Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* written between 1811 and 1813. In Austen’s novel, the upper class sisters Maria and Julia Bertram think their poor cousin Fanny Price “prodigiously stupid,” because she cannot “put the map of Europe together” or “tell the principal rivers in Russia.” By contrast, they “used to repeat the chronological order of the kings of England, with the dates of their accession, and most of the principal events of their reigns,” plus those “of the Roman emperors as low as Severus; besides a great deal of the Heathen Mythology, and all the Metals, Semi–Metals, Planets, and distinguished philosophers” (20-21). Rich in irony, this passage invites comparison with Wordsworth’s satirical portrait of the child prodigy. The Bertram sisters’ vanity and selfishness fed by such a false education may illustrate the moral dangers predicted by Wordsworth regarding the daughter of his unknown correspondent. For similar reasons, the child prodigy in Book V of *The Prelude* is satirised, not only because his learning is not motivated by intrinsic love, but also because his knowledge thus gained is useless, impossible to be assimilated into the moral and spiritual growth of his whole person.

The textual comparison between Wordsworth’s critique of contemporary education and the educational philosophies of Rousseau and Godwin yields a more complex pattern of influence than is commonly assumed in terms of natural
development versus artificial intervention. Indeed, Rousseau’s reception in Britain at the turn of the eighteenth century was ambiguous and ironic. Whilst Coleridge regarded Rousseau as an advocate of natural education, the radical philosopher Godwin exposed his system as essentially manipulative. It is difficult to surmise which of the conflicting aspects was absorbed or attacked in Wordsworth’s poetry, if he aimed at Rousseau at all. When the focus shifts from the educator to the educated, we see resemblances as well as differences between Wordsworth and Godwin in their notions of motivations for learning, their definitions of knowledge, and their understandings of the relation between knowledge, morality and happiness.

In my view, what ultimately distinguishes Wordsworth from both Rousseau and Godwin is the poet’s emphasis on the Christian faith in education. Religion was part of the institutional tyranny that Godwin attempted to challenge. In The Enquirer Godwin held “the doctrines of the Christian religion” accountable for “the introduction and perpetuating of bigotry in the world” (322). The child prodigy that “sifts” and “weighs” and “Takes nothing upon trust” (Prelude V: 337-38) could have been an ideal student of Godwin, who advocated the inquisitive spirit in Political Justice in the name of science: “When we are once persuaded that nothing is too sacred to be brought to the touchstone of examination, science will advance with rapid strides” (1: 21). Although Rousseau acknowledged God as a benign creator in the beginning of Emile, and his tutor would teach religion to Emile at a later stage, the tutor too often takes matters into his own hand and leaves little room for God’s working. Rousseau claimed that “we are each taught by three masters,” by which he meant inborn nature, men, and the surrounding environment (6). Wordsworth, however, in praise of his mother’s simple creed, regarded God as the supreme master. Rousseau’s professed goal is to reconcile the conflicting demands made of a person as a natural being and as a member of society. But clearly Wordsworth intended to add a third dimension—the spiritual or religious aspect of a person, which does not confine him to the here and now but connects him with eternity. In his scheme of
education, the components of education consist of nature, books, human life, and above all, the Christian faith. Faith is not only manifested in the educator’s trust in God’s will, but also in the religious teaching of the child from an early age.

Such emphasis on religious instruction becomes more prominent in Wordsworth’s later writings on educating the children (and adults) from working class backgrounds. In his early writings about the education of children from middle class families, it is associated with his valuing of a child’s moral improvement above his intellectual capacity, and his attack on manipulative tutors’ lack of faith in God and their usurping of His power. Whether believing in God or not, educators following the philosophies of Rousseau or Godwin understood education in the narrow sense of knowledge acquisition or training for a secular, rational life. In Wordsworth’s view, this encourages vanity in the pupil and exposes the hubris of the educators themselves. Wordsworth adhered to the same principle in his critique of private education of middle class boys and girls and mass education of sons and daughters of the labouring poor. To trace the consistency and change in his educational concerns, I shall turn to his involvement in the debate about a national system of education as illustrated in the last two books of *The Excursion*.

*The Excursion, the Debate on National Education and the Madras System*

*The Excursion* deserves closer study because of its cultural influence on Wordsworth’s contemporaries, as it was his longest poem known to the public before the appearance of his posthumously published *Prelude*. The problem of providing national education for the children of Britain’s working class had drawn the attention of intellectuals from various political and religious backgrounds for almost a century, from the 1780s till the passing of the Elementary Education Act in 1870; it preoccupied Wordsworth’s mind from 1808 till the end of his life. Wordsworth never doubted that the poor and their children should be educated, but he harboured scepticism about the popular methods proposed by well-intentioned people to
promote education among the working class. In this section, I will start with the poetic characters’ discussion about the lack of education for children in factories and fields in the final two books of *The Excursion*, which leads to the vision of state-sponsored education in Britain. I then move on to explore the historical debate over the provision of national education for Britain’s working class, and examine Wordsworth’s engagement with Andrew Bell’s Madras system of monitorial education, one of the most popular and influential methods of mass education. The poet’s initial support of and eventual opposition to the Madras system, I shall argue, arise from the same beliefs that underline his critique of the rationalistic educators of the child prodigy: education is more than instruction, and no education is commendable that does not enhance the moral and religious growth of a person.

The issue of national education is brought out as a result of heated discussion between major characters of *The Excursion*, especially between the Solitary and the Wanderer, about the social impact of industrialisation on Britain and on poor children in particular. The Wanderer utters a relatively balanced view regarding the losses and gains generated by recent scientific discoveries and technological inventions. Upon hearing his praise of man’s “Intellectual mastery” over “the blind Elements” (VIII: 203-04), the poetic narrator questions the damage done to traditional country life, the dissolution of “old domestic morals of the land” that “dignified and cheered a low estate” (VIII: 238, 240). This line of thought is picked up by the Wanderer who laments for rural parents that lost their sons to the newly erected factories. The topic naturally leads to education, as he envisions the sight of a factory boy coming out of a cotton mill, without any schooling, whose “liberty of mind” was “gone for ever” (VIII. 323-24). Consequently, the boy becomes insensitive to the joy and beauty of the natural world and he could expect no hope in manhood. The poetic narrator and the Wanderer show deep concerns about the damaging effects of industrialisation on agricultural communities and children working in factories.

However, the Recluse joins in and points out the equally grievous situation of a
plough-boy who has not been affected by factories but has suffered from the same hard labour and ignorance of mind. The boy had eyes

Wide, sluggish, bland, and ignorant, and strange;
Proclaiming boldly that they never drew
A look or motion of intelligence
From infantconning of the Christ-cross-row,
Or puzzling through a Primer, line by line,
Till perfect mastery crown the pains at last. (VIII: 414-19)

The Recluse rejects the idyllic notion of pastoral bliss in a pre-industrial society. Although this plough-boy is the natural product of the field, he is as ignorant and uninformed as tens of thousands of other boys in fields or factories. For such an unfortunate being, the Recluse questions what the country’s churches and schools have done for him and adds a final, rhetorical question, “what liberty of mind is here?” (VIII: 436)

The Recluse’s stinging observation of the ignorant country boy sets readers to question the validity of some critics’ charge that Wordsworth preferred children to be naturally educated, based on selective readings of the first few books of The Prelude and poems about children in nature from Lyrical Ballads. Alan Richardson, for example, asserts that “Wordsworth’s idealized representations of childhood tend to close in upon themselves, rather than opening into a critique of the child’s dilemma at a time when a ‘natural’ education such as the one Wordsworth himself claimed to have enjoyed was less and less available” (72). It is a hurried charge without reference to Wordsworth’s later writings, or the later books of The Prelude or The Excursion, where the poet emphatically did not paint an idealised childhood of “natural” education.39 Through the voice of the Recluse, Wordsworth demonstrated his acute awareness of the dilemma facing children of both the rural and urban poor in the age of Industrialisation. Moreover, he also attempted to offer three solutions through the sage Wanderer in the final book of The Excursion, and the proposal for a national system of education came not as the first but as the third.

39 Although Alan Richardson discusses the last two books of The Excursion in the context of national education, his focus is on the hegemonic and colonialist nature implied in this proposal, which I find hard to agree. See Richardson, 98-101.
The three speakers’ impassioned discussion is interposed by the Vicar and renewed in the next book. The Wanderer expresses his compassion for both the factory boy “subjected to the Arts / Of modern ingenuity, and made / The senseless member of a vast machine” (IX: 159-61), and the rustic boy who, “untaught,” became the “Slave of ignorance, and oft of want, / And miserable hunger” (IX: 164-66). However, having sensed discontent and despair in the Recluse’s question, the Wanderer does not immediately address the issue as purely educational and thus resolvable by political measures. Instead he tries to revive Christian gratitude and hope in those suffering beings, including the dejected Recluse.

A fallacy in the argument of the Recluse lies in his tendency to view liberty as freedom from toil and ignorance, and to equate knowledge with the ability to read. He argues in light of the rational philosophy of Godwin, and even his reference to the plough-boy has Godwinian resonances. In his essay on the source of genius, Godwin examines the children of peasants and discovers that they possessed the same promise of genius (as those born into more affluent families) in terms of understanding and observation at the age of seven. But the traces “are obliterated at the age of fourteen” (16), Godwin notes, because of the crushing weight of the world: “They are brutified by immoderate and unintermitted labour. Their hearts are hardened, and their spirits broken, by all that they see, all that they feel, and all that they look forward to” (17).

The Wanderer, however, views the matter differently. Liberty of mind in his perception corresponds more to immortality of spirit, which has little to do with one’s status, wealth or book knowledge. In this regard, he denies the fundamental inequality between different persons, especially between the rich and the poor; and he appeals to enlightened understanding of the individual and the judicious will of God. Through the association of the senses and experiences, he argues, each and every human being is endowed with the same capacity to receive influences from nature and acquire reason, imagination, freedom of will, and moral conscience,
which would ensure their “immortality” (IX: 216-27). “True equality” resides in the fact that “The smoke ascends / To heaven as lightly from the Cottage-hearth / As from the haughty palace” (IX: 244-46), and a person with such an insight “may walk / The fields of earth with gratitude and hope” (IX: 247-48). It is the false worshipping of “Gain, the master-idol of the realm” (VIII: 186) that has led people away from the true temple of God, and caused them to grieve over injustice, resulting in “So wide a difference between man and man” (IX: 253).

In this sense, the Wanderer expresses a cherished belief that Wordsworth had held since the 1790s. In “Lines Written in Early Spring” from the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth’s speaker endeavours to feel the abundance of pleasure in every motion of nature, and believes that “To her fair works did Nature link / The human soul that through me ran” (5-6). He upholds the creed that nature has plenty to offer for man’s pleasure, but he is left to “lament / What man has made of man” (22-24). What grieves the poetic speaker is the thought of man’s insensitivity to nature—and thus injustice to himself. A similar lament is registered with renewed energy in a sonnet published in 1807, “The World Is too much with Us; Late and Soon,” in which the poet mourns his fellow beings’ indifference to the bounty of nature in their fervent “Getting and spending.” He utters an almost impious plea to the “Great God” that he would rather be a Pagan who could make tales out of nature than a corrupted Christian who offers up his natural gifts and power to the god of “Gain.”

An appeal to true faith in God and trust in the reason and imagination of the individual can be regarded as the Wanderer’s first answer to the Recluse’s dismay at social inequality and children’s plight. Apart from religious consolation, the Wanderer also finds solace in the vivacity and companionship of two boys from different backgrounds of the community. In a second attempt to answer the Recluse, the Wanderer draws the group’s attention to a brighter scene of the Pastor’s son and

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41 See *P2V*, 150.
his playmate from a poorer family enjoying the same degree of happiness in childhood, despite their different prospects in future life. Their happiness results from a healthy balance of physical and mental development thanks to their early education, which is more comprehensive than the instruction the Recluse has in mind and equally accessible to both boys:

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . How blest that pair
Of blooming Boys (whom we beheld even now)
Blest in their several and their common lot!
A few short hours of each returning day
The thriving Prisoners of their Village-school;
And thence let loose, to seek their pleasant homes
Or range the grassy lawn in vacancy;
To breathe and to be happy, run and shout
Idle,—but no decay, no harm, no loss;
For every genial Power of heaven and earth,
Through all the seasons of the changeful year,
Obsequiously doth take upon herself
To labour for them; bringing each in turn
The tribute of enjoyment, knowledge, health,
Beauty, or strength! Such privilege is theirs,
Granted alike in the outset of their course
To both; . . . (IX: 255-71)

The “blooming boys” form a sharp contrast with the ignorant and miserable children under toil in factories and fields. It is worth noticing that the Wanderer regards them as equally blessed in their “several and common lot.” Wordsworth was conscious of their different social backgrounds and described the cottager’s son as dressed in “plainer garb” (VIII: 560). Their futures would differ greatly, because the Pastor’s son has brighter prospects in a broader world than his “cottage-comrade,” who has no higher destiny than the “old hereditary wish” to live and die in contentment in “his native vale” (IX: 275-79). Yet despite their separate fates in adulthood, the two boys are “fond companions” in childhood (VIII: 556), and receive virtually the same kind of education, which promises an equal start in life and hopefully points towards the same kind of immortality obtainable by all. When looking back in old age, they “will allow that justice has in them / Been shown, alike
to body and to mind” (IX: 288-89).

Education for the two boys consists of a few hours in the village school, light domestic duties at home, and total freedom in nature. It is a levelling force: the boys go to the same village school, listen to sermons from the same Pastor, play in the same pasture, and receive from the same God enjoyment, knowledge, health, beauty and strength—more than anything that can be gained from an ordinary school. Perhaps that is why the Wanderer would restrict their school time to only a few hours each day in favour of their more comprehensive education under the care of nature and providence. The Wanderer’s praise to the “genial Power of heaven and earth” is essentially consistent with Wordsworth’s thanksgiving to the “Wisdom and Spirit of the universe” which purified the “elements of feeling and of thought” in the 1805 Prelude (I: 428, 438). On the whole, this cited passage from The Excursion suggests that the Wanderer regards schooling as important to combat ignorance, but not as the best means to ensure liberty of mind. Formal education in schools should be supplemented by home influence and freedom in nature, with nature being the more important teacher because of its manifestation of the divine will.

The Pastor’s son and his rustic companion also represent a reconciliation of two models of childhood education in Book V of The Prelude. Michael Baron notices that the “dwarf man” and the Boy of Winander are both “companionless” in life, although the former is surrounded by teachers and other admiring adults, and the latter blows mimic hootings to the listening owls. They are meant to contrast each other, yet Baron perceives “ironies in both cases” (116-18). They represent boys from two classes, with access to different kinds of educational resources, but in each of their isolated states, factual knowledge and imaginative power remain separated. Neither boy can be said to have enjoyed an education proper for his childhood or beneficial for his future. But the scene of the two companionable boys in The Excursion offers a healthy alternative. It does not root out social injustice or inequality; yet it attempts to ameliorate the situation by bridging the gap from
childhood and preparing both boys to face their future with knowledge and power.

Hopeful at the sight of these two “blooming boys,” the Wanderer has a vision of their fortunate circumstances shared by the multitudes of the nation, and this is his third and direct answer to the Recluse’s challenge regarding the role of the state:

Oh for the coming of that glorious time
When, prizing knowledge as her noblest wealth
And best protection, this Imperial Realm,
While she exacts allegiance, shall admit
An obligation, on her part, to teach
Them who are born to serve her and obey;
Binding herself by Statute to secure
For all the Children whom her soil maintains
The rudiments of Letters, and inform
The mind with moral and religious truth,
Both understood and practiced, — so that none,
However destitute, be left to droop
By timely culture unsustained, or run
Into a wild disorder; or to be forced
To drudge through a weary life without the aid
Of intellectual implements and tools;
A savage Horde among the civilised,
A servile Band among the lordly free! (IX: 292-309)

The Wanderer regards knowledge as the true wealth of a nation. However, knowledge in his understanding included not only basic literacy, but also moral and religious truth integrated with practical life. His proposal may strike a modern reader as conservative, for its immediate goal seems to argue for the maintenance of an orderly society where some are born to serve and obey. But it was progressive enough at a time when the critical debate was not about how the poor should be educated, but whether they should be educated at all. Wordsworth believed that even those born and living in the most unfortunate circumstances should have access to civilisation and means for intellectual sustenance, and not be reduced to abject servility.

Alan Richardson perceives that “the Wanderer adopts a distinctly reactionary and hegemonic language,” and regards his vision as “at once reformist and
reactionary” (100). But I believe the Wanderer is more prudent than reactionary, given that he cautions his audience about “A Bondage lurking under shape of good” and “mischief which the wise diffuse / With gladness” (IX. 190, 197-98). The Wanderer is fully aware of social evils, but also sees further than socio-political reformers. While they place much hope in political measures to address these problems, he foresees problems arising from good-intentioned intervention, and proposes the religious perspective as a higher guidance, less tangible but more liberating and empowering than the political.

In a footnote to “Binding herself by statute,” Wordsworth recommended a practical method to realise such a large scale education—Andrew Bell’s Madras system of mutual instruction. He praised that “the discovery of Dr. Bell affords marvellous facilities for carrying this into effect, and it is impossible to over-rate the benefit which might accrue to humanity from the universal application of this simple engine under an enlightened and conscientious government” (314). But this was only the first part of the story concerning Wordsworth’s engagement with Bell’s system in particular and a system of national education in general. Wordsworth changed his stance twice in the prolonged national debate on the issue of mass education for the poor which divided the country along political and religious lines since the 1790s.

Before the passing of the Education Act in 1870, elementary education in England was characterised by a “general lack of standardization,” according to Alan Richardson, as “schooling was carried out through a patchwork of dissimilar institutions, endowed (or ‘public’) and private-venture” (77), not to mention the fact that “much education went on outside of schools altogether” (78). Education or literacy for the lower classes had been a controversial issue in Britain since the beginning of industrialisation and the outbreak of the French Revolution. Adam Smith in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) was concerned about the dehumanising impact of divisions of labour which would render the ordinary worker “stupid and ignorant,” incapable of “any rational conversation,”
“judging,” or “defending his country” (782). For the benefit of the individual as well as civilised society, he called for public attention to be given to educate the common people “to read, write, and account” at an early age: “For a very small expense the publick can facilitate, can encourage, and can even impose upon almost the whole body of the people, the necessity of acquiring those most essential parts of education” (785). Smith observed that in Scotland this had been conducted through the universal establishment of parish schools, and in England through charity schools on a smaller scale.

From the 1780s, the Sunday school movement popularised by Robert Raikes began to flourish in England. Frank Smith regarded it as one of the two solutions (the other being factory employment) to address the neglected state of poor children following the growth of population and migration to towns and cities (47). In many of the early Sunday schools children were taught to read and learn the Catechism, while writing was withheld or not introduced till a later period. Pupils included both children and adults, and the teaching usually had religious and political implications. For instance, when the evangelical writer Hannah More and her sisters founded a series of Sunday schools in the Mendips in the 1790s, their aim “was to teach literacy to both children and adults so that the pupils would read the Bible, be converted to Evangelical Christianity and be insulated from subversive politics” (Stott 41).

The Sunday school movement provoked mixed responses from political radicals and conservatives alike. In the wake of the French Revolution, many conservatives of the ruling class saw the ability to read among the working class as a serious threat to the current social order, when Britain began to be flooded with radical pamphlets. Thomas Paine’s The Rights of Man was the most widely read and most influential, causing a political crisis among the ruling class. According to E. P. Thompson, the sales of The Rights of Man totaled two hundred thousand in a

Raikes started his work in Gloucester in 1782, but there had been Sunday schools scattered in England and Wales before 1780s. Raikes’s main contribution is popularisation and systematisation of Sunday school instruction. For more information on Sunday schools, people and institutions involved, see M. G. Jones, The Charity School Movement (London: Frank Cass, 1964) 142-54.
population of ten millions in England, Wales and Scotland between 1791 and 1793; they were found “in Cornish tin-mines, in Mendip villages, in the Scottish Highlands, and, a little later, in most parts of Ireland” (English Working Class 106-08). Although The Rights of Man was banned and Paine outlawed in 1792, the subversive effect of reading was still feared by many—the then Prime Minister, William Pitt, even contemplated passing legislation against Sunday schools in 1799 and 1800.43

Even those who supported education in principle were opposed to Sunday schools in practice. William Godwin in his Political Justice was strongly opposed to a system of national education mainly out of his instinctive distrust of the establishment’s despotism and his concern that the alliance with government would perpetuate prejudice and impinge on the freedom of enquiry. “Even in the petty institution of Sunday schools,” Godwin remarked, “the chief lessons that are taught, are a superstitious veneration for the Church of England, and to bow to every man in a handsome coat. All this is directly contrary to the true interest of mind” (2: 210). Godwin’s critic T. R. Malthus, however, urged for more government support and regulation of the movement to prevent possible bias. Malthus considered it a “national disgrace” that “the education of the lower classes of people in England should be left merely to a few Sunday schools, supported by a subscription from individuals, who of course can give to the course of instruction in them any kind of bias which they please” (153).

Despite much opposition, Sunday schools continued to grow and played an important role in the secular and religious education for children of the labouring poor. The influence of the Sunday school movement can be assessed by the number of students it taught. According to Frank Smith, “as early as 1787 Raikes claimed that it comprised a quarter of a million children,” and the number reached “half a million in 1818” (59-60).44 “It was through the Sunday School that the idea of

44 Raikes’s claim may be an exaggeration. According to the reports of Sunday School Society, there were 201
universal education was first conceived possible,” Smith observed, “[w]hile
discussion was still raging whether the labouring poor should be taught to write, a
knowledge of reading was spreading throughout the country” (60).

Whilst Sunday schools solved the problem of neglected children on Sundays,
the monitorial system developed by Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster began to
change the educational practice for poor children in day schools in a profound way
from the late 1790s. Bell and Lancaster seemed to have arrived at a similar system of
monitorial instruction. The basic mechanism is to employ student monitors for
instruction and supervision through a mechanically designed curriculum and a
sophisticated system of discipline including detailed methods of promotion, reward
and punishment. Lessons which mainly consisted of reading and catechism were
divided into definite tasks with increasing difficulty levels, and students who were
older and faster were upgraded to be instructors of inferior groups and supervisors of
their behaviour. Reliant on the division of labour and the principle of competition,
the system boasted its chief merits of economy, efficiency, and orderliness, which
offered an invaluable solution to the social and economic problems of mass
education. Both Frank Smith and Alan Richardson have noticed the analogy between
the new schools and the new factories in terms of organising method.45

Many schools were established in England after one or the other system, and
the two founders remained on good terms for several years. The conflict between the
two systems started in 1805 when Sarah Trimmer published a book in which
Lancaster was wrongly accused of stealing ideas from Bell.46 According to R. A.
Foakes, the two systems had much in common, and the controversy focused on three
issues: priority, the relation of education to religion, and the methods of rewards and
punishments.47 The Bell-Lancaster controversy grew to divide advocates of national

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45 Smith, 75; Richardson, 93.
46 See Smith, 78.
47 See Foakes, “‘Thriving Prisoners:’ Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Child at School,” Studies in Romanticism
education along political and religious lines. Lancaster the Quaker gained the support of Whig reformers like Samuel Whitbread and Henry Brougham, and Bell the Anglican churchman secured the backing of the Church of England and poets like Coleridge and Wordsworth.\(^{48}\)

Despite the growing awareness of and support for education of the poor, suspicion of its social, moral and religious effects remained strong among the governing class. When the Parochial Schools Bill was proposed by Whitbread in 1807 to extend education for all pauper children, it won the debate in the House of Commons but met overwhelming rejection in the House of Lords. The familiar Conservative objection in the Commons was voiced by David Giddy, who believed the scheme would be “prejudicial to the morals and happiness of the labouring classes,” because it would “teach them to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good servants in agriculture, and other laborious employments to which their rank in society had destined them,” and “enable them to read seditious pamphlets, vicious books, and publications against Christianity.”\(^{49}\) Although the Lords recognised the utility of education, they were concerned about its possible challenge to the religious establishment. The Archbishop of Canterbury opposed the Bill because he wished to maintain the “controul and auspices of the establishment” over English education and hoped measures could be taken to “guard against innovations that might shake the foundations of our religion.”\(^{50}\)

These debates are significant as they formed the larger context of Wordsworth’s educational engagement from his middle years. Many of the sentiments from both the Liberal and Conservative sides can be found in Wordsworth’s writings. Correspondence shows that he had been expressly concerned with the question of national education since 1808, when he laid out the obstacles in

\(^{48}\) The religious division is in general and not absolute terms. According to Chester W. New, most of the money that backed the central organisation of the Lancasterian schools came from Anglicans, and there were also Anglicans among the Lancasterian leaders. See New, \textit{The Life of Henry Brougham to 1830} (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961) 200.

\(^{49}\) \textit{The Parliamentary Debates from the Year 1803 to the Present Time}, Vol. 9, 798.

\(^{50}\) \textit{The Parliamentary Debates from the Year 1803 to the Present Time}, Vol. 9, 1178.
a letter to Francis Wrangham: “I deem any plan of national education in a country like ours most difficult to apply to practice.” Owing to different developing levels between areas and different demands among various walks of life, it was simply impossible to envisage a unified system that would answer the needs of all. Wordsworth raised a practical question: “What form of discipline, what Books or doctrine, I will not say would equally suite all these, but which, if happily fitted for one, would not perhaps be an absolute nuisance in another?” He then gave a piece of advice: “My dear Wrangham, begin your Education at the top of society, let the head go in the right course and the tail will follow” (MY I: 249-51). Wordsworth did not object to national education in principle but had concerns about imposing a unified system in practice.

However, this concern was soon to be dismissed in his newly gained knowledge of Andrew Bell’s method, as he told Wrangham in another letter of 1808: “Since I wrote to you I have read Dr Bell’s Book upon education which no doubt you must have seen” (MY I: 269). Mark L. Reed suggests that Wordsworth came to be acquainted with Bell through Coleridge in May 1808 (Wordsworth 387), and Duncan Wu infers that Wordsworth would have obtained Bell’s most readily available publication, The Madras School (1808), at Coleridge’s recommendation, as a copy of it was retained at his library at Rydal Mount (1800-1815 21). Bell’s Madras system originated in the Military Male Orphan Asylum founded at Madras in India in 1789, and was transplanted into England in 1797 with apparent success in charity schools, parochial schools and other military asylums.

Bell paid a brief visit to Keswick in 1811, during which he went with Wordsworth into the village school at Grasmere and proceeded to teach the boys as well as the master and the poet himself, according to Moorman (Later Years 178). Wordsworth showed such great interest in the new method that he not only sent his sons John and Willy to a school where the Madras system was practised, but also participated in teaching in the village school himself for some time. Moorman
believed it was around this time that Wordsworth completed the final book of *The Excursion* (*Later Years* 179), in which his call to the State to educate its citizens echoes many of Bell’s proposals in *The Madras School*. Their friendship deepened. In September 1812, Bell visited Grasmere again and stayed with the Wordsworths for a fortnight, and there he prepared a new edition of his “Madras System” with the assistance of Dorothy.\(^{51}\) In an 1815 letter to Thomas Poole, Wordsworth wrote: “If you have read my Poem, the ‘Excursion,’ you will there see what importance I attach to the Madras System. Next to the art of Printing it is the noblest invention for the improvement of the human species” (*MY* II: 210).

Wordsworth found the Madras system attractive mainly because of Bell’s practical solution to his previous concerns, apart from their shared Anglican faith. In his Advertisement of *The Madras School*, Bell boasted that his invention guaranteed the health of body and sanity of mind for the poor children in not only Britain but all over the world. It provided an unsurpassable remedy “for the disorders of filth, idleness, ignorance, and vice,” which he believed were “more fatal to children than the ravages of the Small-Pox,” and its glory resided in its “moral, religious and political tendency” (vii). Above all, Bell claimed to have discovered a pragmatic solution to practical problems which previous philosophers like Godwin failed to address: “Let modern philosophers dispute about the perfectibility of the human race, the Author recommends only what is practicable, what has been practiced, and what is in daily practice” (viii).

Economy, efficiency, and emphasis on morality and religion are among the chief features that drew Wordsworth to the Madras system in the first place. This system provides an economical method of educating a large number of children because it “rests on the simple principle of tuition by the scholars themselves,” therefore, the school, however large it may be, can be “taught solely by the pupils of the institution under a single master” (2). Another distinguishing feature of the

\(^{51}\) Moorman, *Later Years*, 178.
Madras system is efficiency, achieved through “the division of labour,” “the perpetual presence and never-ceasing vigilance of its numerous overseers,” and the students’ “love of imitation.” Bell declared with much pride: “It is a laudable emulation, a sweet contention, a competition of places, which renders the school a scene of constant amusement and exercise to the scholar” (3-4).

Bell was confident that his system, with striking features of economy and efficiency, “is well adapted for the instruction of the people, and for the purpose of national education” (4). Wordsworth must have agreed with Bell’s understanding of the tasks of elementary education as “to rend simple, easy, pleasant, expeditious, and economical, the acquisition of the rudiments of letters, and of morality and religion” (6), as the Wanderer’s proposal for national education including “rudiments of Letters” and “moral and religious truth” reaffirms Bell’s plan almost verbatim. In defining the ultimate object of the Madras system as to produce “good scholars, good men, good subjects, and good Christians” (7), Bell was anticipating Wordsworth’s view in the 1836 speech that education should comprise of intellectual, moral and spiritual development, and that it should aim at teaching a person as an individual, social, and Christian being.

However, Wordsworth’s support of Bell’s system had an ambiguous undertone from the very beginning which in due time would develop into criticism and objection. In his 1808 letter to Francis Wrangham about Bell’s book, he commented: “it is a most interesting work and entitles him to the fervent gratitude of all good men: but I cannot say [? it has made] any material change in my view of […] [I] would however strenuously recommend [? the system] wherever it can be adopted” (MY I: 269-70). He may have appreciated the practicality of the system in addressing social evils, and approve of its putting religious and moral education before book learning, but as a poet he held reservations about the specific measures employed by Bell, especially concerning emulation. Wordsworth seldom mentioned Lancaster in his writings, but his attitude towards Bell’s system can be taken as indicative of his
views on the monitorial system in general.

What elicited Wordsworth’s increasing doubt and criticism of the Madras system is its reliance on emulation. Wordsworth’s attitude towards emulation is rather ambiguous. Sometimes he believed it could stimulate pupils to learn more quickly, as he considered “Emulation” and “shame” as useful tools of education in his 1785 school exercise. But he began to doubt the moral validity of competition in learning during his Cambridge years. In Book III of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth “grieved” to see his fellow students who “in the field of contest stood / As combatants,” showing passions that seem to him “low and mean” (511-14). However, when he wrote to Daniel Stuart in 1818 about the education of the latter’s brother-in-law, Wordsworth offered practical advice for the young man so that he could be better “prepared to outstrip his Rivals,” and he counted one of the advantages of studying in a bigger college in Cambridge being that “he may *chuse* his Company, and is more likely to be roused by emulation” (*MY* II: 457-58). The poet seemed to distinguish between honourable and dishonourable emulation, but associated the less noble aspect with Bell’s Madras system.

It is worth noticing that Bell in *The Madras School* defended his system against the charge regarding emulation, and justified its role as a perpetual and powerful agent. Concerning the violation of Christianity, Bell quoted the words of St Paul and distinguished between two kinds of emulation, the “works of flesh” and the “fruit of the spirit,” arguing that the former was condemned but the latter was encouraged by the apostle (252). Bell proceeded to argue that whether emulation was virtuous or not depended on “the source whence it originates, and the object to which it is applied” (254), so emulation could be a virtuous tool for the intellectual, moral and religious welfare in the Madras School:

> The desire of superiority, the endeavour at excellence, which is styled *emulation*, using that word in its true sense, when directed to laudable pursuits, is a principle implanted by the hands of the Creator for the wisest and noblest purposes in the human breast. It is this principle that is elicited by the classification of a school; by which its pupils are
excited to excellence, and to rise to distinction and eminence in learning, in morals, and in religion. (254)

Bell did not rule out the possibility that emulation might “sometimes degenerate into envy.” But he quickly dismissed such degeneration in his school, claiming that nothing like it had occurred in his observation, and that he should not be faulted for “the misapplication or perversion of this principle, or any other, which may lead to a different result” (255).

Despite Bell’s defence and optimism, Wordsworth’s suspicion of the often vicious effects of emulation lasted for decades. In 1846, he warned his nephew Charles Wordsworth about dangers of emulation in education for similarly moral and religious reasons: “I cannot help being afraid of encouraging emulation—it proves too often closely akin to envy, in spite of the christian spirit you recommend.” He spoke from his own experience: “I can sincerely affirm, that I am not indebted to emulation for my attainments whatever they be.” Wordsworth’s ideal of learning, confirmed by his own habit and achievement, remained that knowledge should be valued “for its own sake and for the good that may and ought to come out of it, the unmixed pure good.” This substitution of intrinsic motivation for external stimulus is the fundamental cause for Wordsworth’s objection to Bell’s Madras system, as he told Charles: “I used often to press this view of the subject upon the late Dr Bell, in whose system of Tuition this was a master-spring” (LY IV: 765).

Modern critics find Wordsworth’s support of the Madras system confusing. R. A. Foakes points out that Wordsworth seemed to have been unaware of “the ideological significance of the new system of education,” in that Lancaster’s plan for a rectangular schoolroom with a raised platform for the teacher has ironic similarities with Jeremy Bentham’s scheme of prison—the Panopticon (204). He discovers many prison images associated with Wordsworth’s depiction of children at school, and concludes with such observation, “it is striking that in his enthusiasm for the benefits of Bell’s system he took no direct notice of the possibilities built into it for the abuse of power and the exercise of tyranny” (206). Alan Richardson argues from a slightly
different perspective using the image of a machine, and finds contradiction in Wordsworth’s support of Bell’s system: “‘Wordsworth seems blinded by fears of ‘disorder’ to the contradiction involved in criticizing the factory system for rendering children (and adults) parts of a ‘machine’ and then recommending an educational system which he himself characterizes . . . as a ‘simple machine’’” (100).52

My study shows that Wordsworth’s attitudes towards the Madras system were ambiguous from the beginning and increasingly critical in his later years. His initial support was not ideologically blind, nor was his later repudiation self-contradictory. As I have argued in the beginning of this section, the Wanderer’s proposal for national education comes not as the first but as the third answer to address the Recluse’s challenge; it is a direct reply to the perceived duty of the state and the church. However, true liberty of mind cannot be achieved solely through external help from institutions, but rather requires enlightening the individual mind and making it aware of its innate power of feeling, reasoning and imagination. As the Wanderer’s first two answers indicate, early communion with nature, some basic schooling, and faith in God are the best means to combat misery and safeguard happiness. In this sense Wordsworth in 1814 did not differ much from the poet of The Prelude in 1805, because he upheld the same broad understanding of knowledge, the same emphasis on the intrinsic motivation of learning, and the same advocacy for the cultivation of Christian virtues. In spite of Wordsworth’s class consciousness, the same principles applied alike to the private tuition of middle class children and the mass education of children of the working class.

The Later Wordsworth on the Place of Religion in National Education

Wordsworth’s most vocal objections to the Madras system and its extended application were expressed in two successive letters he wrote to Hugh James Rose, an Anglican clergyman, in late 1828 and early 1829. It is generally believed that they

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52 David Simpson also notices that Bell’s scheme sounds “Romantic” at first but becomes increasingly more “Benthamite.” He regards Bell’s and Wordsworth’s “confusion” as “not uncommon” among contemporary climate of educational ideology. See Simpson, Wordsworth’s Historical Imagination, 198-99.
anticipated Wordsworth’s 1836 speech. The first letter was dated December 1828, in which Wordsworth pointed out the errors committed by two groups on the subject of education. One group, represented by the Whig politician Henry Brougham (also a supporter of Joseph Lancaster), mistakenly believed that “sharpening of intellect and attainment of knowledge are things good in themselves, without reference to the circumstances under which the intellect is sharpened, or to the quality of the knowledge acquired.” In other words, they dissociated the instruction of knowledge from the cultivation of moral sense. The other group, despite their advocacy of religion and morality in education, were engaged in a wrong course “from not understanding the constitution of our nature and the composition of society.” Wordsworth targeted his criticism at Andrew Bell and the supporters of Bell’s Madras system: “They talk about moral discipline; but wherein does it encourage the imaginative feelings, without which the practical understanding is of little avail, and too apt to become the cunning slave of the bad passions” (*LY* I: 685-86). The two groups erred on different grounds, but their common mistake resulted from the separation of knowledge, morality, and imaginative feelings.

Andrew Bell’s Madras system was Wordsworth’s major concern, as two thirds of the letter registered his disapproval of the setting up of a Madras school for girls at Ambleside. He objected to the system’s reliance on emulation which would breed envy, and feared their prematurely acquired knowledge, given their humble backgrounds, would have little practical use in society and render them unfit for hard labour or drudgery. Frustration and discontent can be morally corrosive, so Wordsworth’s recommendation was that “[a] hand full of employment, and a head not above it, with such principles and habits as may be acquired without the Madras machinery, are the best security for the chastity of wives of the lower rank” (*LY* I: 686). Exactly the same sentiment was repeated almost verbatim in the 1836 speech regarding the education of peasants’ daughters.

Wordsworth ran out of paper but was compelled to continue the discussion at
greater length in a second letter, in response to Rose’s reply in January 1829. Rose expressed his deference to Wordsworth and voiced his opinions on education as a Christian preacher: “We educate children . . . as social, not as immortal beings, and consider their progress in the world as the first thing needful, to say the least.” From this viewpoint, Rose commented on the failure of religious education in the monitory system: it “is a blank” in the “Lancastrian System” and only “an adjunct” in Bell’s system (qtd. in LY II: 18-19). In his reply Wordsworth examined how the Madras system, which operated in infant schools and national schools in alliance with gratuitous instruction, violated human nature and certain Christian principles of gratitude.

Infant schools were established by well-intentioned people to help relieve working class mothers of childcare burdens and meanwhile offer their children “a good education.” An advocate of benevolent maternal influence, Wordsworth was strongly against such separation of children from their mothers, but nevertheless recognised it as a necessary evil in some extreme circumstances where a mother could not afford to care for her child. What he abhorred was the increasingly general belief among some people that these schools became “good in themselves” and should be popularised. “These people,” Wordsworth pointed out to Rose, “confound education with tuition:”

Education, I need not remark to you, is everything that draws out the human being, of which tuition, the teaching of schools especially, however important, is comparatively an insignificant part. Yet the present bent of the public mind is to sacrifice the greater power to the less—all that life and nature teach, to the little that can be learned from books and a master. In the eyes of an enlightened statesman this is absurd; in the eyes of a pure lowly-minded Christian it is monstrous. (LY II: 19-20)

Wordsworth’s diagnosis of current misunderstandings about education in 1829 echoed Coleridge’s definition of education in the 1813 lecture and anticipated his own more comprehensive exposition in 1836. The same earnestness characterised his distinction between education and schooling, his advocacy for education in a broader
environment of nature and human life, and his wish to direct it towards a higher spiritual purpose.

Moreover, Wordsworth even opposed infant schools and the Madras system as a course of tuition for intellectual, moral, and religious reasons. He distrusted the overstraining of a child’s intellectual faculties in an artificial environment: “Natural history is taught in infant-schools by pictures stuck up against walls, and such mummery. A moment’s notice of a red-breast pecking by a winter’s hearth is worth it all” (LY II: 20). This statement reaffirmed Wordsworth’s early trust in nature as a superior teacher. “One moment now” in the March sun “may give us more / Than fifty years of reason,” the poetic speaker declares in a 1798 poem.53 However, the later Wordsworth objected to the Madras system because of its dangerous moral consequences from the use of emulation as stimulus: “What conceit, and presumption, and vanity, and envy, and mortification, and hypocrisy, etc.etc., are the unavoidable result of schemes where there is so much display and contention!” All these feelings thus generated are “at enmity with Christianity” and Wordsworth passed a resolute judgement: “Human learning, as far as it tends to breed pride and self-estimation . . . is against the spirit of the Gospel.” Wordsworth was also concerned that domestic affections were sacrificed by the premature acquisition of knowledge in Infant schools. He opposed any scheme which “whets the intellect by blunting the affections,” as he believed the child more knowledgeable than his parents would “arrogate a superiority unfavourable to love and obedience” (LY II: 21). From a practical perspective, he found the lack of a “harmonious co-operation between these schools and home influences,” so the child receiving eight hours of schooling every day can hardly escape bad influences from home if parents were not virtuous, or benefit from good parental examples and domestic cares (LY II: 22).

If we compare Wordsworth’s charges of anti-Christian emulation in 1829 against Andrew Bell’s defence of virtuous, Christian emulation in 1808, we may find

53 See “Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House, and Sent by My Little Boy to the Person to Whom They Are Addressed,” in the Cornell edition Lyrical Ballads, 63-64.
the poet’s criticism somewhat unjustified or disproportionate. Why did Wordsworth bring up the subject again almost two decades later? The answer may be that he used the Madras system as a catalyst for criticising the new trends in education taking place at almost every level. In a densely informative passage, he sketched out the general picture:

The link of eleemosynary tuition connects the infant school with the national schools upon the Madras system. Now I cannot but think that there is too much indiscriminate gratuitous instruction in this country; arising out of the misconception above adverted to, of the real power of school teaching, relatively to the discipline of life; and out of an over-value of talent, however exerted, and of knowledge prized for its own sake, and acquired in the shape of knowledge. The latter clauses of the last sentence glance rather at the London University and the Mechanics’ Institutes than at the Madras schools, yet they have some bearing upon these also. (*LY II: 22*)

Neither the Madras system nor Wordsworth’s attack on the contemporary understanding of knowledge and schooling was new, and even the Infant school had been around for over a decade since its establishment by Robert Owen in 1816. What was alarmingly new for Wordsworth was to see the spreading of knowledge dissociated from morality and religion in adult educational institutions like the newly founded London University and the expansion of Mechanics’ Institutes all over the country. Interestingly, all these projects were championed by one person, Henry Brougham, the Scottish-born lawyer statesman, with whom Wordsworth often disagreed on many issues.

Henry Brougham had been engaged in many activities to induce Wordsworth’s displeasure. He was one of the founders of the *Edinburgh Review* which for years attacked Wordsworth’s literary experiments. During the Bell-Lancaster controversy, Brougham was a “Lancasterian” and supported the nonconformists. His political campaigns to dislodge the Lowther family in Westmorland in 1818, 1820 and 1826 were defeated partly due to Wordsworth’s active defence of the Lowther interest. 54 Mary Moorman observes that the period following the end of the war against France

54 See Mary Moorman’s account in *Later Years*, 344-55.
“were years of social distress, uprisings, and political ferment among the ‘lower orders,’ countered by the government with severe measures of repression” (Later Years 344). In Wordsworth’s assessment, “Brougham stood for Dissent against Church, for urban and industrial against landed interest, for opposition against establishment” (Gill, Life 329).

Wordsworth defended the landed interest against the challenge of the Whig reformer Brougham not so much because he was a confirmed Tory as because he feared more the consequence of a revolution. F. M. Todd offers a subtle explanation of the poet’s turn of political conservatism and his spiritual affinity with the Tories: “Whatever the limitations of the Tories, they were inevitably the party of ‘repose,’ inspired by principles of permanence and stability on which they based their opposition to Whigs and Frenchmen alike. The Whigs were necessarily the party of discontent” (148). Discontent for Wordsworth is the greatest enemy of personal happiness and social stability, and Whiggism in education should not be cultivated. In one letter to Lord Lonsdale in 1821, Wordsworth specifically voiced his concerns on the selection of school masters: “All trustees of Schools ought to be especially careful as to the principles of those whom they elect as Masters. In my own neighbourhood are two School Masters, both Ultra-whigs, and Ultra-whiggism in a Master produces Radicalism in his Pupils” (LYI: 11-12).

Given Wordsworth’s political stance during the 1820s, there is little to wonder at his opposition to Brougham’s bringing political liberalism into education, especially in the dissemination of Mechanics’ Institutes and the founding of London University. Neither was initially proposed by Brougham, but both gradually came under his leadership. The Mechanics’ Institute was designed to teach reading and other practical knowledge to adult working class men, and Brougham’s 1825 pamphlet Practical Observations on the Education of the People became “the Bible of the Mechanics’ Institute movement and of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful knowledge” (New 336-37). More influential of Brougham’s educational engagement
is his role in the founding of London University in 1826—the first English university open to religious dissenters with an extended range of subjects. It did not obtain a charter until 1836, but Wordsworth repeatedly voiced his objections to what he perceived to be the neglect of religious education.55

The Mechanics’ Institutes and London University, as far as they were championed by Brougham, represented for Wordsworth a dangerous trend of secularisation in education, or a threat to the status of the Church of England. In an 1837 letter to Dora, Wordsworth wrote, “You know how deeply I am interested in the education, above all the religious education of the People.” Immediately he turned to attack Brougham’s scheme for setting up a board of commissioners to supervise the grant for the extension of national education. The committee had the power to determine “where and how Schools are to be erected, and the people taught,” but Wordsworth regretted the mistake of “[t]he Clergy not being alluded to in his pranks” (LY III: 489). When he heard that Thomas Arnold was to teach in the University College (the new name for London University) in 1838, Wordsworth wrote to Henry Crabb Robinson questioning the status of religion in the new university: “Do not the words of the Charter say that the object of the Institution is to provide a regular and liberal course of education? How is this to be done, if Christianity as promulgated in the Greek testament, is as a matter of fact to be excluded? Plague upon such liberality [. . .]” (LY III: 523). Two years later he told Robinson that he wanted to support a plan “of Education in connection with and under the superintendence of the Church of England” (LY III: 709), and he reiterated the point that the Church of England should be “at the head of the general religious education of the country” (LY III: 714). He did not hesitate to criticise Brougham as head of “philosophists” who ran the risk of preparing the people for slavery with the practice of central organisation (LY III: 714-15).

Wordsworth’s conservative position in the two letters to Hugh James Rose

55 For Wordsworth’s involvement in the establishments of University College London and Kings College London, see Ian Reid, Wordsworth and the Formation of English Studies, chapter 2.
could be easily misunderstood as anti-education for the poor, so he chose to explain
in 1829 to his brother Christopher (then Master of Trinity College, Cambridge) that
he was not averse to the people being educated. On the contrary, his wish was “to
guard against too high expectations” (LY II: 55). A month later, he complained to
Basil Montagu about the excessive zeal to educate the poor, which made people
overlook the more urgent need of “an improved education of the middle and upper
class.” This improvement would be better to start from elementary education “in our
great public schools, thence ascend to Universities . . . and descend to the very
nursery” (LY II: 99). These qualified remarks can also partially explain his objections
to Henry Brougham’s schemes of infant schools and London University. If the
education of the middle and upper classes was seriously flawed, they would serve as
negative examples for the working class that strived to move upward. As E. P.
Thompson observed, the enlarged educational opportunities of the people worried
Wordsworth because “education has come to be seen, very widely, and by many
working people themselves, simply as an instrument of selective social mobility.”
Worse still, the entire system “works such a way as to confuse certain kinds of
intellectual ability (or facility) with human achievement,” so various educational
developments only “entail a fundamental betrayal of the kind of equality of worth
which Wordsworth imagined” (Romantics 28-29).

To better understand Thompson’s view and Wordsworth’s position on national
education, we need to return to the Wanderer’s argument in Book IX of The
Excursion. From a religious perspective, liberty of mind is within the reach of each
individual, and there can be no essential difference between man and man, if only
one does not equate liberty with knowledge acquisition and material comfort. This,
for F. M. Todd, “was the core of Wordsworth’s new egalitarianism,” which
“inevitably drove him from a concern with legal or political reform.” But it does not
suggest Wordsworth’s retreat from fundamental concerns about human happiness.
“Political and social reform was thus replaced by a faith in the more real reform, the
leading man back to the natural sources of never-failing joy and consolation, which he hoped his own poetry would effect,” Todd argues (149). At this stage, Wordsworth’s stance has well transcended the party politics of Whigs or Tories.\footnote{For a sympathetic interpretation of Wordsworth’s politics, especially during his later years, see Edith C. Batho, *The later Wordsworth* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1933) 119-233. E. P. Thompson pointed out that “Wordsworth rejects equally the revolutionary and the conservative philosopher. This is no movement from ‘Left’ to ‘Right’: if anything, it is a movement away from both, to an anti-politics or an anti-philosophy.” See Thompson, *The Romantics*, 92.}

In 1845, the Inspector of Schools (Hugh Seymour Tremenheere) presented his “Minutes of the Committee of the Privy Council on Education” and his “Report on the Mining Population” to Wordsworth, and urged the poet to write an essay about his “present impression on the subject of elementary education for the lower classes” (qtd. in *LY IV*: 732). Wordsworth in his reply criticised the narrow understanding of knowledge, and challenged Tremenheere to conceive more broadly the sources, agents, and purpose of education. His questions are long but worthy quoting in full:

> let me ask you, dear Sir, whether throughout the Minutes too little value is not set upon the occupations of Children out of doors, under the direction, or by permission, of their Parents, comparatively with what they do or acquire in school? Is not the Knowledge inculcated by the Teacher, or derived under his management, from books, too exclusively dwelt upon, so as almost to put out of sight that which comes, without being sought for, from intercourse with nature and from experience in the actual employments and duties which a child’s situation in the Country, however unfavorable, will lead him to or impose upon him? How much of what is precious comes into our minds, in all ranks of society, not as Knowledge entering formally in the shape of Knowledge, but as infused thro’ the constitution of things and by the grace of God. There is no condition of life, however unpromising, that does not daily exhibit something of this truth. (*LY IV*: 773)

Comparing this passage with Wordsworth’s satirical portrait of the child prodigy in Book V of *The Prelude* (1805), the Wanderer’s address in the last two books of *The Excursion* (1814), and the poet’s 1836 speech at Bowness, we see the consistent principle underlying Wordsworth’s criticism of contemporary educational experiments and practices. Whether the subject concerned is a little girl from a middle class family, or the illiterate sons of the working class, Wordsworth upholds
the same principle that education is more than schooling or book learning, that moral
and spiritual cultivation should never be sacrificed for intellectual attainment, and
that the ultimate purpose of education is to achieve liberty of mind in the Christian
sense. State intervention, though necessary, could not bring out the desired result,
unless it involves the cooperation between home, school and church, between nature,
books, and circumstances. His criticism is based on his deep and broad engagement
with the prevailing modes of education for over half a century, but his ideal
transcends the natural development or disciplinary training of Rousseau and Godwin,
the liberal or conservative politics of those in power. It is so radical in spirit that it
sounds reactionary to some of his contemporaries and later critics.

Coleridge’s judgement can be relied upon for a just assessment of
Wordsworth’s value. When he heard James Mackintosh and Tom Wedgwood
express an indifferent opinion of Wordsworth, he remarked to them: “He
[Wordsworth] strides on so far before you, that he dwindles in the distance!” The
anecdote was recorded by William Hazlitt without clear indication of context.57 Yet
given Wordsworth’s rejection of Tom Wedgwood’s proposal for a nursery of genius,
we may read it as illustrative of Wordsworth’s views on education. Coleridge
reminded Wordsworth’s critics that Wordsworth was liable to be misunderstood, not
because his views were wrong but because they were too far-sighted for his
contemporaries.

Chapter Two The Poetic Education of Religious Imagination

Wordsworth’s dissatisfaction with contemporary modes of education, as is discussed in Chapter One, results from what he perceived to be the confusion of education with instruction, and the neglect of Christian faith in every level of education. His engagement with education is not a diversion from poetic creation, but rather an integral part of it. Parallel to his criticism of the flawed practical education is his conception of an alternative of what can be called poetic education, aiming at cultivating the poetic spirit inherent in everyone. However, Wordsworth’s conception of a poetic education is also an evolving process, subject to constant revision with his deepening understandings of his own vocation and the social conditions of his time.

This chapter seeks to approach Wordsworth’s educational engagement by examining the educational background he designed for his major poetic speakers during their formative years. They include the speaker “I” in The Prelude, the Female Vagrant in the Salisbury Plain poems, and the Pedlar in The Ruined Cottage. Their educational experiences are a mixture of Wordsworth’s autobiographical account and his poetic creation, and were revised over several decades. Nature, books, and religion are the most important components of a poetic education, but their relative importance changes during the revision process in that nature’s precedence gradually gives way to religion.

Such a gradual elevation of Christian faith in Wordsworth’s poetic representation of early education is closely related to his increasing stress on religious instruction in practical spheres of education, and Wordsworth’s growing alignment with the Anglican Church has often been regarded as a cause for his imaginative decline. It can be argued that Wordsworth’s Christian faith and his poetic imagination are not only reconcilable, but also essential to his sense of vocation as a poet and teacher. This chapter starts with a survey of the poet’s perception of his

vocation and his imaginative duty, which leads to an examination of his own poetic education in *The Prelude*, and the bearing of that experience on Wordsworth’s revision of the educational background of the Female Vagrant and the Pedlar. It contends that the infusion of religion and imagination—persistent throughout Wordsworth’s creative life but more prominent in his later years—has enriched and strengthened his views on education, both practically and poetically.

**Religious Imagination and Wordsworth’s Poetic Project**

The importance of religion for Wordsworth as a poet is evident from the religious metaphor he used to describe his entire poetic project. In his Preface to *The Excursion* of 1814, Wordsworth for the first time publicly announced his plan to write a long philosophical poem “that might live,” to be entitled *The Recluse*, and containing “views of Man, Nature, and Society.” He regarded it a reasonable thing to “take a review of his own mind, and examine how far Nature and Education had qualified him for such employment,” and part of that effort resulted in the finished draft of *The Prelude*. In his poetic design, *The Prelude* has a relation to *The Recluse* “as the Anti-chapel has to the body of a gothic Church.” Moreover, this metaphor can be extended for understanding the structural and thematic relationship between *The Recluse* and his published shorter poems: “[H]is minor Pieces, . . . when they shall be properly arranged, will be found by the attentive Reader to have such connection with the main Work as may give them claim to be likened to the little Cells, Oratories, and sepulchral Recesses, ordinarily included in those Edifices.” Even the author’s unfinished and unpublished poems are conceived with the evangelical endeavours “to please” and “to benefit his countrymen” (38-39).

Wordsworth also used images and expressions laden with religious meaning in the ensuing passage of what he called the “Prospectus of the design and scope” of *The Recluse* (39). He declared that “the Mind of Man” will be his “haunt” and the main region of his song, so that “Paradise” and “Elysian groves” may cease to be a
mere fiction as in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*:

For the discerning intellect of Man,
When wedded to this goodly universe
In love and holy passion, shall find these
A simple produce of the common day.
—I, long before the blissful hour arrives,
Would chaunt, in lonely peace, the spousal verse
Of this great consummation. (52-58)

M. H. Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism* hails that Wordsworth’s song “will be an evangel to effect a spiritual resurrection among mankind . . . merely by showing what lies within any man’s power to accomplish, as he is here and now” (27). Wordsworth proclaims

> How exquisitely the individual Mind  
> (And the progressive powers perhaps no less  
> Of the whole species) to the external World  
> Is fitted: —and how exquisitely, too  
> Theme this but little heard of among Men,  
> The external World is fitted to the Mind;  
> And the creation (by no lower name  
> Can it be called) which they with blended might  
> Accomplish:—this is our high argument. (63-71)

Wordsworth uttered a majestic claim of what he would do with his poetry. He would demonstrate how the human mind, through a holy marriage with the external world, is capable of “creat[ing] out of the world of all of us, in a quotidian and recurrent miracle, a new world which is the equivalent of paradise” (Abrams 28). Abrams sees in this Prospectus Wordsworth’s prophetic tone and vision, and associates it with the “poet-prophet” claim at the conclusion of *The Prelude*. He regards the narrative line of *The Prelude* to be “the birth, growth, disappearance, and resurrection of imagination” (118), and argues that “in Wordsworth’s sustained myth of mind in its interchange with nature, the imagination plays a role equivalent to that of the Redeemer in Milton’s providential plot [in *Paradise Lost*]” (119). For this reason Abrams calls Wordsworth’s imagination “redemptive,” but, with some qualification, strips it of the religious connotation, as he proposes a “functional parallel between
Milton’s *sacred* story of mankind and Wordsworth’s *secular* account of the growth of an individual mind” (120, emphasis added).

Abrams evades the question of Wordsworth’s faith and casts him as a “secular” poet in an idiosyncratic sense. In his earlier discussion of *The Prelude* in the tradition of “crisis-autobiography,” Abrams contends that his concern is “not with the valid autobiographical question: ‘What was Wordsworth’s creed—pantheist, panentheist, Christian?’” The more relevant question is, “What role does God play within the poem itself?” And the more essential question is: “What does God do in the poem?” To this last question, his answer is “patently, ‘Nothing of consequence.’” The critic’s reason is that, “if all allusions to deity were struck out of *The Prelude*, there would be no substantive change in its subject matter or development” (90). In avoiding probing into Wordsworth’s religious belief and underplaying the role of God in *The Prelude*, Abrams presents the poem as participating in “the large movement of Romantic philosophy,” the tendency of which “is greatly to diminish, and at the extreme to eliminate, the role of God” (91).

However, Abrams’s dismissive discussion of Wordsworth’s faith can be hardly justified by the biographical story of Wordsworth’s life or the increasingly religious sentiments in his later poetry. He suggests in a preemptive manner: “It seems likely that Wordsworth did not greatly trouble himself about the question of orthodoxy until incited to do so by Coleridge’s alarm and the remonstrances of friends and reviewers” (90). But Wordsworth’s religious faith is too important and complex to be dealt with so lightly and generally. I agree with most of Abrams’s eminent readings on the Prospectus and *The Prelude*, but want to argue differently on the matter of the poet’s faith and the religious dimension of his “redemptive” imagination. Whereas Abrams perceives Wordsworth as “a poet-prophet” with “a public role” to serve his contemporaries (116), I propose to shift the focus slightly and see him as principally a poet-teacher with a clear, religious message to teach.
By Wordsworth’s own words in the Preface to *The Excursion*, *The Prelude* is an account of how far “Nature and Education” have prepared him to write a greater poem. Education is a key word in juxtaposition with nature, which is worth particular consideration, given that his poetry is popularly understood as advocating a “natural education” or “education by nature.” Moreover, *The Prelude*’s concluding lines stress the educational role assumed by Wordsworth and Coleridge and the religious nature of their teaching:

Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak  
A lasting inspiration, sanctified  
By reason and by truth: what we have loved,  
Others will love: and we may teach them how,  
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes  
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth  
On which he dwells, above this Frame of things  
(Which ’mid all revolutions in the hopes  
And fears of men doth still remain unchanged)  
In beauty exalted, as it is itself  
Of substance and of fabric more divine. (1805 *Prelude* XIII: 442-52)

The whole poem emphatically ends with the adjective “divine,” and the subject modified is the “mind of man,” which is believed by the poet, who used to be a devoted lover of nature, as “a thousand times more beautiful” than his earthly dwelling place. By 1805, Wordsworth had made “the mind of man” the theme of his poetry, and this passage was completed around the same time the “high argument” of the Prospectus was conceived.\(^5^9\) Wordsworth did not see his exaltation of the “more divine” human mind in conflict with his religious faith, although in the 1850 edition, “and by truth” became “blest by faith,” and “we may teach them” became “we will teach them” to strengthen his sense of conviction and determination (emphasis added).\(^6^0\) He was not troubled by the use of “divine” to describe the human mind,

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\(^5^9\) In the Cornell edition of *Home at Grasmere*, the editor Beth Darlington points out that “while it is not possible to pinpoint the exact date of composition of the Prospectus, the period between spring, 1800, and early spring, 1802 appears the likeliest. Lines 1002 to 1014 [from ‘I, long before the blessed hour arrives’ to ‘this is my great argument’] were probably added in 1806, but could conceivably be an 1805 revision” (22).

also because in an earlier section of *The Prelude*, he had uttered a similar wish to teach others about the “heart of man” who was brought up with religious faith:

. . . thus haply shall I teach,
Inspire, through unadulterated ears
Pour rapture, tenderness, and hope, my theme
No other than the very heart of man
As found among the best of those who live,
Not unexalted by religious faith,
Nor uninformed by books (good books, though few),
In Nature’s presence. (XII: 237-44)

The most worthy subject of his future song is not educated by nature alone, but is first and foremost exalted by religious faith, with the aid of a few judiciously selected books. The precedence given to faith is another sign that by 1805, Wordsworth had already come to the realisation that religious faith was as indispensable as nature for the education of a worthy being. On an earlier still occasion, Wordsworth paid tribute to Nature, and the power of human minds,

To men as they are men within themselves.

How often high service is performed within,
When all the external man is rude in show,—

Not like a temple rich with pomp and gold,
But a mere mountain chapel, that protects

Its simple worshippers from sun and shower.

“Of these,” said I, “shall be my song.” (XII: 223-31)

The power, beauty, simplicity and sanctity of the human mind, with its natural and divine qualities, are captured in a charged metaphor of “mountain chapel,” which brings together man, nature, and religious faith into an aesthetically and spiritually harmonious coexistence. Interestingly, Wordsworth deployed a similarly loaded metaphor in the Prospectus—the “metropolitan temple in the hearts / Of mighty Poets” (85-86). The difference between a mountain chapel and a metropolitan temple, like the difference between a meditative recluse and a public poet, is a matter of degree and not of kind. As a sanctuary of human spirit, what matters is not the external decoration but the internal service, regardless of its size and location. The two metaphors also suggest that no essential distinction exists to distinguish a mighty poet and an estimable individual, except that the poet possesses the capacity to
enlighten and console more souls with the magnitude of his heart and the affective power of his art.

Wordsworth’s greatest work and his entire poetic project are conceived to be governed by one high argument that a holy marriage between the mind of man and the external world would produce an earthly paradise, which is potentially available to everyone as quotidian experiences. It is not an arrogant appropriation of Christian faith, but rather a fervent affirmation of the power of the Almighty Author and a tribute to man who is created in His image. The power and sanctity of the human mind and the divine quality of its creation in alliance with nature thus represent what Wordsworth attempts to reveal throughout his poetry, and what he intends to teach others as a poet. The lesson itself concerns cultivating the poetic spirit of imagination, but the import of the lesson has a profoundly religious dimension.

The religious dimension of Wordsworth’s imagination manifests not only in the result of its creation which, in Gene W. Ruoff’s words, “minister[s] to man’s appetite for the eternal” (691), but also in the creative process itself which makes the human mind an agent of the supreme mind of God. C. M. Bowra in his discussion of the Romantic imagination regards this faculty as “the most vital activity of the mind” and the “very source of spiritual energy” for the major Romantic poets, and when they exercise it, they in some way “partake of the activity of God” (3). Bowra argues that for Coleridge, “the imagination is of first importance because it partakes of the creative activity of God” (4), and Wordsworth “agreed with Coleridge that this activity resembles that of God” (18).

More valuable in Wordsworth’s conception of the creative imagination is that he believes it is not the gift bestowed to a few genius poets, but is the inherent capacity of everyone. However, he is aware of the tremendous difficulty of convincing others to realise this truth and teaching them to cultivate this capacity. How can he persuade the public to accept what is initially his private conviction? One way is to treat his personal experience as bearing testimony to the general truth.
In his proclamation about the individual mind’s fitting to the external mind in the Prospectus, Wordsworth notes in the parenthetical addition that what is true of the individual may be true of “the whole species” (65). Another way is to probe into the collective origin of the creative imagination, which he carries out in the much celebrated passage in *The Prelude* about the blessed infant babe.

The passage first appeared in the two-part *Prelude*,\(^{61}\) which suggests that in around 1799, Wordsworth already considered the relation of his individual imagination to the collective creativity of mankind, and the religious force of the creative imagination.

Bless’d the infant Babe
(For with my best conjectures I would trace
The progress of our being) . . . .
Emphatically such a being lives.
An inmate of this *active* universe;
From nature largely he receives, nor so
Is satisfied but largely gives again, . . .
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . his mind,
Even as an agent of the one great mind,
Creates, creator and receiver both,
Working but in alliance with the works
Which it beholds.—Such verily is the first
Poetic spirit of our human life, . . . (II: 267-69, 295-98, 301-06)

Wordsworth composed the passage around the same period as he started the project which was later to be titled *The Recluse*. On 6 March, 1798, Wordsworth wrote to James Webbe Tobin to reveal his poetic plan: “I have written 1300 lines of a poem in which I contrive to convey most of the knowledge of which I am possessed. My project is to give pictures of Nature, Man, and Society. Indeed I know not any thing which will not come within the scope of my plan” (*EY* 212). Nursed in his mother’s arms, the infant already exercises his mind that receives impressions from nature and creates in alliance with his perceptions, by which he is “No outcast . . . bewildered and depressed” but “An inmate” of the active universe. It is the first example Wordsworth presents to support his high argument of what can be

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accomplished through a holy communion of the mind and the world, and thus an important illustration of his view on Nature, Man, and Society. The phrase “the first poetic spirit,” together with the immediately preceding lines, appears almost verbatim in subsequent editions despite Wordsworth’s extensive revisions between 1805 and 1850, testifying to the strength of Wordsworth’s conviction.

“The first poetic spirit” displayed by the infant mind comprises the perceptive and creative activity, or what James Engell calls the perceptive and creative imagination. “The perceptive power is crucial and forms the basis of the poetic imagination,” Engell observes, but adds that “this perception is also an act of creation” (267). By creating a world of his own, the infant participates in the active universe, and the infant mind is, as the Norton editors point out, “not merely an agent, but in its creativity a reflection, of the mind of God” (21 n5). Therefore, the creative imagination has strong religious implications from an early stage of Wordsworth’s poetic career.

In this passage Wordsworth also endeavours to show that the poetic spirit is not the sole possession of poets. The plural pronoun “our” indicates his belief in the shared property of this attribute among humanity. A few lines later he calls it “this infant sensibility” and regards it as the “Great birthright of our being” (II: 315-16, emphasis added). “Our” also suggests that all infants are potential poets. However, Wordsworth is aware that this poetic spirit is “By uniform control of after years / In most abated and suppressed,” and only in some “Preeminent till death” (II: 307-10). Poets are among those fortunate some that manage to retain this poetic spirit, as Wordsworth claims that *The Prelude* marks his efforts to display the means by which this infant sensibility “was in [him] / Augmented and sustained” (II: 316-17). It is in this sense that the poet repeatedly referred to *The Prelude* as a poem about his own poetic education.62

Because of the divine quality of the first poetic spirit and its vital connection

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62 See *LY IV*: 415-16.
with our being, the poetic education that aims to nourish its growth is, in Wordsworth’s view, superior to the practical education that merely teaches worldly knowledge. In his definition of a poet in the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth compared poetic knowledge with scientific knowledge and elevated the former above the latter. While the knowledge of the poet “cleaves to us as a necessary part of our existence, our natural and unalienable inheritance,” the knowledge of the Man of science “is a personal and individual acquisition, slow to come to us, and by no habitual and direct sympathy connecting us with our fellow-beings,” and consequently, poetry “is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge” (*Prose I*: 141). The poet’s claim of possessing a superior kind of knowledge is the ground of his criticising the contemporary education that neglected the imaginative development of children, and also the premise of his advocating an alternative of poetic education.

However, problems remain with regard to convincing others of the exemplary value of a poet’s knowledge and education, and communicating the value to others. Wordsworth was apprehensive of the difficulties even as he was composing the poem on the growth of his own mind, and the evidences of his struggle are the expansion and revision of his own poetic education in *The Prelude*, and the alterations of the educational background of his poetic speakers in the *Salisbury Plain* poems and *The Ruined Cottage*. In the next section I shall discuss the relation between the three poetic speakers and demonstrate the evolving process of Wordsworth’s conception of their poetic education, especially regarding the roles of nature, books, and religion.

**The Poetic Education of Wordsworth’s Speakers**

The poetic speakers whose education will be examined include the “I” in Wordsworth’s autobiographical verse *The Prelude*, the Female Vagrant in the *Salisbury Plain* poems, and the Pedlar in *The Ruined Cottage* who later becomes the Wanderer in *The Excursion*. All of their educational backgrounds were under
constant revision over a period of around forty years, which offers an opportunity to study the changes and development of Wordsworth’s views on poetic education. Each version and revision bears the mark of Wordsworth’s concerns of poetic education at the time of composition, which has a certain correspondence with his general views on practical education as laid out in the previous chapter. Through a comparative reading of the revision history of the three poetic speakers’ education, this section will reveal a general pattern that nature, books, and religion constitute the most important factors in a poetic education, but their relative importance changes as nature’s role declines and religion’s role ascends with each revision.

To treat the narrative “I” of *The Prelude* as one of the speakers instead of the poet himself requires some clarification. Stephen Gill in his biography of Wordsworth reminds readers that the poet’s “strong self-representation must be assessed, not simply followed” (vii). “As a poem [*The Prelude*] is a wonderful achievement,” Gill acknowledges, but as an autobiography, “it is open to question,” partly because it is “selective,” and more importantly because “it was written not only to present a self-image to posterity but to assist the writer to understand his own life, so that the rest of it might be lived more purposefully and in accordance with truths perceived in the act of writing the poem” (2). He calls readers to “resist the proffered key” of the author, in light of the discrepancies between the facts and Wordsworth’s “interpretative glosses” on them, especially when “the gloss itself . . . is subject to revision” (9).

If *The Prelude* is “an imaginative treatment of” the growth of a poet’s imagination (Engell 267), then who is the “I” of the narrative? According to Michael Benton, *The Prelude*’s narrator is “not the well-documented figure from literary history,” nor “the implied author,” but rather somewhere between the two, “a projection of the Poet-self which Wordsworth self-consciously creates as he explores his own life narrative” (134). Benton calls the “I” Wordsworth’s “persona” who takes up a tricky autobiographical stance: “his Poet-self appears knowledgeable, intimate,
privy to profound personal feelings and high-flown thoughts, yet we know that the voice that is addressing us is both editing and aestheticising the experiences it describes” (134). Moreover, *The Prelude* covers only a fraction of his actual life, and despite over forty years’ retrospective revision, Wordsworth’s persona “remains perpetually young” (135).

However, the narrative “I” of *The Prelude* is much closer to Wordsworth the poet than the narrative voices of the Female Vagrant and the Pedlar. But the educational backgrounds of the latter two also bear traces of Wordsworth’s own experiences as presented in *The Prelude* and other lyrics. After comparing the structural and thematic similarities between *Salisbury Plain* and *The Ruined Cottage*, James Chandler argues strongly for regarding the latter as a “transformation” of the former (131-32). The Female Vagrant’s early education, though recollected in fewer details, resembles that of the Pedlar in essence if not in content, even in their respective processes of revision. The similarities between the Pedlar’s educational background (especially as represented in the Wanderer’s story in Book I of *The Excursion*) and Wordsworth’s account of his own in *The Prelude* are too obvious to escape any student’s notice. Since the essential facts about Wordsworth’s own education are not fabricated in *The Prelude*, to clarify the matter and illustrate the connections between the three speakers, I will use Wordsworth the poet in discussing *The Prelude*, but Wordsworth’s persona in reference to the poetic speakers collectively.

The composition and revision of the three poetic speakers’ educational backgrounds are motivated by a similar concern about authority and authenticity. *The Prelude*, as an autobiographical poem, comes out of Wordsworth’s ambition to write the long philosophical poem *The Recluse*, and a lack of confidence and certitude leads to his review of his poetic education. Although the Female Vagrant’s story is framed within a larger narrative, Wordsworth still feels the need to offer some background of her upbringing so as to lend more authenticity to her story. As the
narrative focus of *The Ruined Cottage* shifts from Margaret’s suffering to the teaching of the Pedlar, Wordsworth adds an extensive account of the Pedlar’s educational background to enhance his authority.

Chronologically, the earliest manuscripts of all three poems are dated a few years before 1800, their extensive expansion and revision occurred between 1800 and 1806, and their final revision and publication took place in the last two decades of Wordsworth’s life. During the span of over fifty years, the most significant change in Wordsworth’s views of practical education is his increasing advocacy of a genuine religious education which aims to bring up England’s children as Christians. The same gradual emphasis on religion is manifest in the educational backgrounds of his poetic speakers. Comparing the revision processes of the three poems, one can see clearly that Wordsworth is gradually limiting the space of nature and elevating the role of religion, whereas books occupy a suspiciously necessary and middling place. Read as three poems in the process of making, they reveal Wordsworth’s evolving ideas of what a poetic education comprises and how to strengthen its exemplary value.

The educational background of the Female Vagrant in the *Salisbury Plain* poems is to be examined first, as it is the earliest in the order of Wordsworth’s composition. Wordsworth’s original manuscript, titled *Salisbury Plain*, is dated 1793-94. He revised and expanded it into a new poem titled *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* in 1795, published her story separately as “The Female Vagrant” in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, and revised the whole narrative again for the final publication in 1842 under the new title of *Guilt and Sorrow; or Incidents upon Salisbury Plain*. The Female Vagrant’s childhood experience is related in various lengths from one to four stanzas—a comparatively insignificant portion of the overall tale of her suffering, which itself is framed by a larger narrative scheme. But Wordsworth put much effort into the composition and revision of her childhood experience, especially the opening stanzas about her education. Compared with the overall expansion and
revision, the alterations of these stanzas are small and local, but they were revised in
the light of Wordsworth’s changing conception of his poetic mission, his increased
understanding of changes in practical education, and his views about the poetic
representation of practical education. The growth of the Female Vagrant’s mind,
therefore, illustrates the growth of the poet’s mind.

In the original manuscript of 1793-94, the Female Vagrant’s narrative starts
with three stanzas that offer a detailed description of her childhood bliss:

26
“By Derwent’s side my father’s cottage stood,"
The mourner thus her artless story told.
“A little flock and what the finny flood
Supplied, to him were more than mines of gold.
Light was my sleep; my days in transport rolled:
With thoughtless joy I stretched along the shore
My parent’s nets, or watched, when from the fold
High o’er the cliffs I led his fleecy store,
A dizzy depth below! His boat and twinkling oar.

27
“Can I forget my seat beneath the thorn,
My garden stored with peas and mint and thyme,
And rose and lilly for the Sabbath morn;
The church-inviting bell’s delightful chime,
The merriment and song at shearing time,
My hen’s rich nest with long grass overgrown,
The cowslip gathering at the morning prime,
The hazel copse with teeming clusters brown,
[                                     ]

28
“Can I forget the casement where I fed
The red-breast when the fields were whitened o’er,
My snowy kerchiefs on the hawthorn spread
My humming wheel and glittering table store,
The well-known knocking at the evening door,
The hunted slipper and the blinded game,
The dance that loudly beat the merry floor,
The ballad chaunted round the brightening flame
While down the ravaged hills the storm unheeded came? (226-52)

One does not need to look hard in these stanzas for traces of the little girl’s
“natural” education as is commonly understood. She may be said to have enjoyed a completely “natural” upbringing in the beautiful and fertile Lake District, where everything happens to the rhythm of nature in both physical and cultural senses. Rural occupations and recreations take place in seasonal and cyclic orders. The farmers sow in spring, shear in summer, harvest in autumn and sing and dance around the fire in winter. They rise up in the morning to work in the field and come back home in the evening for rest and entertainment. The father (the mother died in childbirth) carries on heavy tasks outdoors, while the girl watches aside or learns her domestic duties like tending the garden and weaving. No strictly religious instruction is mentioned, but she recalls with fondness the delightful tunes of church bells and associates the Sabbath morning with lovely flowers. Schools and books are out of the picture, and even the singing of ballads, signs of the village’s cultural heritage, is carried out with an awareness of the presence of nature—a storm ravaging down the hills. Every form of necessary education is thus naturalised in the Female Vagrant’s recollection.

Such a predominant featuring of nature in her childhood experience suggests Wordsworth’s indebtedness to the eighteenth-century poets he admired, as many descriptions are comparable with Thomson’s *The Seasons*, Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village*, and Cowper’s *The Task*. In the early 1790s, Wordsworth was still finding his poetic voice and theme. The first draft of *Salisbury Plain* is a social protest poem, and the anonymous Female Vagrant’s childhood story forms part of the narrative that aims to expose the evils of socio-political realities at home and abroad, which severed her natural upbringing and uprooted her village’s traditional way of life.

Wordsworth returned to it in 1795 with substantial revisions and expansions, and gave it a new title *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*. He kept the original stanza 26, replaced the cultural activities of singing and dancing in stanza 28 with the commercial event of market days, which the aging father attended in neat attire.

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63 James Chandler, commenting on the opening of *The Ruined Cottage*, points out that it “is an invitation to settle into the familiar mode of eighteenth-century nature poetry: the mode of Thomson, Goldsmith, and Cowper.” See *Wordsworth’s Second Nature*, 142.
decorated by the daughter. The girl’s childhood was less idyllic and carefree, and her bond with her father became strengthened, as she quickly grew into a pious, dutiful young woman, the staff and support of her aged father. Such a shift of emphasis from innocent freedom to filial duty is signaled by the changed content of her home education, which Wordsworth inserted between the original stanzas 26 and 27:

My father was a good and pious man,  
An honest man by honest parents bred,  
And I believe that, soon as I began  
To lisps, he made me kneel beside my bed,  
And in his hearing there my prayers I said:  
And afterwards, by my good father taught,  
I read, and loved the books in which I read;  
For books in every neighbouring house I sought,  
And nothing to my mind a sweeter pleasure brought. (271-79)

The new stanza about the girl’s religious instruction and book reading suggests Wordsworth’s moving away from an overreliance on natural education. But the space allotted to them and their orders of appearance indicate that nature remains a principal influence. The girl’s religious and literary education took place at home, with her father being the teacher of both. Moral virtue and religious faith were valued above other forms of knowledge by the father, so the daughter’s religious instruction preceded her book learning. The little girl was described as an avid reader who would seek books throughout the rural community of literate villagers, and even preferred reading books to playing in nature. Such additions of her childhood education are necessary for the new theme of the overall narrative, as Stephen Gill remarks: “The Female Vagrant’s tale survived as a major element in the poem’s attempt to awaken humane sympathies through representative human stories” (WR 194). Her sympathy was cultivated through the religious teaching she received from a pious father, and the humanising influence of books she read in her closely knit community. Wordsworth placed the girl’s education at a time when rural England had not been generally influenced by the charitable educational movements; therefore home remained the principal site for basic religious and literary education.
The woman’s tale was published separately as “The Female Vagrant” in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* with no substantial changes from the 1795 draft. But Wordsworth was not satisfied with it; he wrote to a friend in 1801 that “the diction of that Poem [of the Female Vagrant] is often vicious and the descriptions are often false, giving proofs of mind inattentive to the true nature of the subject on which it was employed” (*EY* 328). He instructed his correspondent Anne Taylor on how to read this poem, especially with regard to the beginning: “Omit the first stanza entirely and begin the poem with the 2\textsuperscript{nd}, omit and 3\textsuperscript{rd} and 4\textsuperscript{th} Stanzas” (*EY* 328). The first four stanzas of “The Female Vagrant” are stanzas 26 to 28 from the original draft of *Salisbury Plain*, including the one inserted in 1795 which becomes the second in order. By 1801, Wordsworth was pleased with none of them except the 1795 addition about the Female Vagrant’s religious and literary education, and thought it good enough to start the whole poem and represent her whole childhood experience before she reached the age of twenty.

The opening four stanzas of “The Female Vagrant” remained unchanged in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, but the 1802 edition of the poem was printed according to Wordsworth’s wishes in the 1801 letter—the Female Vagrant’s childhood experience was reduced to one stanza about her father’s character and teaching.\(^{64}\) Yet the earlier stanzas were not out of Wordsworth’s mind. In the Appendix to the 1802 Preface, “By what is usually called Poetic Diction,” he cited a phrase “the church-going bell” from Cowper’s verses supposed to be written by Alexander Selkirk, observing that “[t]he epithet ‘church-going’ applied to a bell, and that by so chaste a writer as Cowper, is an instance of the strange abuses which Poets have introduced into their language” (*Prose* I: 164). In criticising Cowper’s use of language, Wordsworth may have recalled his own description of “church-inviting bell” that appeared in the Female Vagrant’s childhood recollection in the successive drafts from 1793-94 till 1800.

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When the Female Vagrant’s story was published in 1842 as an integral part of
the *Salisbury Plain* narrative under the new title of *Guilt and Sorrow; or Incidents
upon Salisbury Plain*, her tale started with the following lines:

> “By Derwen’t side my father dwelt—a man
> Of virtuous life, by pious parents bred;
> And I believe that, soon as I began
> To lisp, he made me kneel beside my bed,
> And in his hearing there my prayers I said...”(199-203)

Wordsworth recycled and revised the two stanzas about her gardening and
market-going with her father before moving on to her suffering adulthood. The
representation of the Female Vagrant’s childhood experiences seems to be restored to
the state Wordsworth described in 1795, but the import of her early education
changed in that religious instruction and book learning received more emphasis than
playing or working in nature. Stephen Gill notices the changes in the sailor’s
response to the Female Vagrant’s tale: “In earlier-stage revision to *Salisbury Plain*
the sailor tries to cheer the woman by talk of ‘social Order’s care’... In *Guilt and
Sorrow*, a quite different sense is conveyed—there is reason to trust in an ultimately
benevolent order” (*WR* 205-06). The sailor adopts an attitude later to be voiced by
the Pedlar with regard to Margaret’s suffering in *The Ruined Cottage*, but the Female
Vagrant’s early education, especially her prayers and reading, helps her survive life’s
tragedies and be receptive to the sailor’s words of consolation.

The revision history of the Female Vagrant’s tale from its inception in 1793-94
to its final publication in 1842 reveals the importance Wordsworth attached to her
childhood education, the consistency of his advocating the roles of nature, books, and
religion, and the changing emphasis on the content of her education from nature to
religion and books. As individual poems, neither *The Female Vagrant* nor *Guilt and
Sorrow* has a prominent position in the Wordsworthian canon. When viewed as a
work-in-progress project, however, the whole *Salisbury Plain* narrative, and with it,
the Female Vagrant’s childhood education, can illustrate the development of
Wordsworth’s sense of identity as a poet and the growth of his poetic art. What
Stephen Gill says on *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* of 1795 is true of the continuous project: the poem was important to Wordsworth because “it offered him further evidence of the depth of his own poetic resources and . . . because with it Wordsworth reached the point of knowing that he wanted to be something more than a closet intellectual radical who wrote verses. He wanted an actual, not a notional audience” (*WR* 197-98).

A similar pattern about the changing roles of nature, books, and religion occurs more pointedly in the revision history of the Pedlar’s education in *The Ruined Cottage*, which was written and revised between 1797 and 1804, and incorporated in the first book of the 1814 *Excursion*.65 As a character the nameless Female Vagrant resembles Margaret in her suffering, and as a storyteller her childhood education bears more resemblance with that of the Pedlar. But structurally and thematically, the Pedlar plays a more important role in his narrative. He is not only a teller of Margaret’s story, but also a guide who admonishes the poetic speaker “I” to respond to her suffering. The poetic speaker “I” is an audience of the Pedlar’s tale, and thus “a representative of the reader” (Chandler 141).

In a multiple-frame structure of the narrative, the story of Margaret’s suffering is told by Margaret herself to the Pedlar in the core, and then by Pedlar to the poetic narrator “I,” and in the very outer layer by the poet Wordsworth to an actual audience. It is no coincidence that the narrators share some essential traits in their educational backgrounds as represented in the poems. To apply the frame structure to the whole body of Wordsworth’s works, we see how the Female Vagrant’s story is, in its revised form, subsumed into the story of Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage*, which is incorporated into the first book of *The Excursion*—itself being the only component of *The Recluse* published in Wordsworth’s lifetime. The relevant questions are, according to Stephen Gill, “what is the proper response to a fate such as Margaret’s? . . . Can Margaret’s death be made to work for our good? Can

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65 I have followed James Butler’s Cornell edition in discussing the evolving textual history of *The Ruined Cottage*. Stephen Gill has summarised its complex history in his study *Wordsworth’s Revisitings*, 49-55.
understanding how best to respond to her story help us lead a better life?” *(WR 56-57)*

So much of the moral purpose of narrating a woman’s suffering depends on the Pedlar’s (and later the Wanderer’s) interpretation that Wordsworth did not spare any effort to account for his childhood education, and revised it again and again to enhance his authority.

Wordsworth finished the initial poem about Margaret and read it to Coleridge in June 1797, but little is known about the exact content and structure. By March 1798 he had already expanded the poem, and Dorothy copied a substantial portion in her letter to Mary Hutchinson, which contained a few crucial lines about the Pedlar’s childhood experience:

. . . . He was born of lowly race
On Cumbrian hills, . . . . . . . .
I loved to hear him talk of former days
And tell how when a child ere yet of age
To be a shepherd he had learned to read
His bible in a school that stood alone,
Sole building on a mountain’s dreary edge
Far from the sight of city spire, or sound
Of Minster clock—*(EY 200-01)*

As in the story of the Female Vagrant, Wordsworth located the Pedlar’s childhood in his native Lake District, allowing the boy to be thoroughly exposed to the influence of nature in its beauty and sublimity. However, the composition of this first draft took place after Wordsworth’s 1795 substantial revision of the Female Vagrant’s story, so there are similarities as well as differences between the two characters’ early education. Conscious of the need to insert the religious and literary education into the Female Vagrant’s upbringing, Wordsworth mentioned the two aspects right in the beginning of the Pedlar’s account of his early experiences. But the boy’s education differs from the girl’s chiefly in that the site of education shifts from home to school, where the Bible seems to serve as the primary textbook and reading material. His educational experience has a more realistic colour because of its congruity with the history of elementary education in England during the late
eighteenth century, when charity schools and Sunday schools began to flourish in the countryside to teach the children of the labouring poor to read the Bible.

However, as a wise storyteller, the Pedlar is closer than the Female Vagrant to Wordsworth’s ideal of poet-prophet-teacher, therefore popular forms of education alone would not suffice to guarantee the source of his wisdom and authority. If he possesses a higher truth which is communicable to the poet figure and general readers, his education must be somewhat different from and superior to that which is ordinarily available. Moreover, Wordsworth felt an urge to mould it according to his ideal of poetic education as he understood it in The Prelude, so in many aspects the Pedlar’s education shares some features Wordsworth claimed to have enjoyed himself in childhood and early youth. In the 1798 manuscript (MS.B), Wordsworth wrote defiantly about the Pedlar’s early education in nature in contrast to the commonplace education in schools:

. . . Though he was untaught,
    In the dead lore of schools undisciplined,
    Why should he grieve? He was a chosen son:
    To him was given an ear which deeply felt
    The voice of Nature in the obscure wind,
    The sounding mountain and the running stream. (74-79)

The common book knowledge taught at schools was dismissed as “dead lore,” from which the boy was spared. He lost possession of certain kinds of knowledge, but retained his imaginative power, a higher kind of knowledge in Wordsworth’s esteem. By calling him “a chosen son,” Wordsworth attributed to the boy characteristics later to be found in his self-representation in The Prelude. The same epithet is applied to Wordsworth’s persona in the 1805 Prelude, but the description of the Pedlar-as-boy’s deep communion with nature is equivalent to Wordsworth’s proclamation about genuine poets in the two-part Prelude of 1799, when he praised his fellow poet Coleridge as “no slave / of that false secondary power by which / In weakness we create distinctions” (II: 250-52). These lines precede the passage about

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66 See Book III, line 82. The Norton editors notice that the claim was allowed to stand until the revisions of 1838/39, but it was dropped in the more pious edition of 1850. See the Norton edition of Prelude, 96 n9.
the blessed infant babe where the first poetic spirit is powerfully evoked, and thus there is a strong link to suggest that Wordsworth presented the working and nurturing of the poetic spirit in the Pedlar. The poetic spirit works in his imaginative response to the sound of nature. He has ears that can not only hear but also feel various sounds with the least need of external stimulus, for he can tune in to the voice of the elements and make music out of it. In this sense he resembles the Boy of Winander who blew mimic hootings to the owls. The education the Pedlar received as a child must be conducive to the growth of his poetic sensibility, and Wordsworth had already formed some opinions about commonplace education’s deadening of the poetic spirit, so he allowed more importance to the influence of nature to counteract the negative impact of books.

Wordsworth’s emphasis on the influence of nature during the Pedlar’s formative years is also in accordance with the lesson the Pedlar tried to impart in the 1798 manuscript. At the end of the first part of the poem which closes at Margaret’s husband’s gradual change of temper, the Pedlar observed the cheerfulness of his surrounding environment and asked:

Why should we thus with an untoward mind
And in the weakness of humanity
From natural wisdom turn our hearts away,
To natural comfort shut our eyes and ears,
And feeding on disquiet thus disturb
[      ] of Nature with our restless thoughts? (251-56)

The second part of the narrative ends abruptly with the announcement of Margaret’s death, without any comment from either character. Stephen Gill points out that Wordsworth may have recognised the Pedlar’s invocation of “natural wisdom” as “neither self-explanatory nor adequate” (WR 57). The poet’s lack of assurance is also evident from the blank space left in the transcription quoted above, in which he inserted “The calm” in the 1799 manuscript.67 The Pedlar’s early education in the presence of nature has a direct bearing on his musing of a “natural wisdom,” despite

its unsuccessful attempt to convince the poetic speaker, and for that matter, the poet Wordsworth and potential readers.

As with the Salisbury Plain narrative, Wordsworth revised The Ruined Cottage extensively from 1799 and 1802 and produced a complex manuscript. In the third draft, MS.D, he took out the long passage of the Pedlar’s history and had the whole story transcribed as an addendum. Wordsworth introduced some major and significant alterations to the Pedlar’s early experiences, including the change of his birthplace from England to Scotland, the adding of a new family member—his stepfather—and the boy’s religious and literary education. The expansion of the Pedlar’s history amounts to what Jonathan Barron and Kenneth R. Johnston call “a complete poetical biography” (76), and they stress the similarities between the Pedlar and the poetic narrator, suggesting that “we might almost think that the Pedlar’s biography is his own” (77). But such a reading glosses over the Pedlar’s Scottish identity, which I think serves to distance him from an overt identification with Wordsworth’s self-representation in The Prelude, given that many lines and expressions about the two speakers were identical in the 1798-99 drafts.

Stephen Gill notices the Pedlar’s new identity as a Scot, and explains the change in terms of Wordsworth’s literary sources for such a creation, including his first touring of Scotland in 1801, his schooldays acquaintance with the Scottish pedlars, and his reading of travel literature about Scotland.68 It can be argued that Wordsworth’s change of the Pedlar’s identity may also be motivated from an educational perspective, which is aimed to bring the characterisation in line with educational reality. In MS. D, the Pedlar’s early education is described as follows:

Among the hills of Perthshire he was born
Ere he was four years old
His Father died [and left behind] three sons
And Patrick was the youngest of the three.
His Mother married for a second Mate
A School-master who taught the Boys to read
And bred them up & gave them as he could

68 See WR 64-65.
Needful instruction teaching them the ways
Of honesty & holiness severe
Patrick a Herd boy was the summer through
But in the winter-months he duly went
To his Step-Fathers[sic] School that [st]ood alone
Sole building on a mountain’s dreary edge. (65-80)

Details from this passage indicate Wordsworth’s awareness of what was going on in the practical sphere of elementary education in Britain, and his consequential revision of the poetic education to keep up with historical reality. He changed the Pedlar’s birthplace from Cumbria in England to Perthshire in Scotland, probably because in the later half of the eighteenth century, a child of the labouring poor was more likely to be better educated north of the border. Adam Smith in Wealth of Nations praised the universal education enjoyed by the Scottish people at a time when the Sunday school movement was not yet begun in England. “In Scotland, the establishment of such parish schools has taught almost the whole common people to read, and a very great proportion of them to write and account,” Smith pointed out, whereas in England, “the establishment of charity schools has had an effect of the same kind, though not so universally, because the establishment is not so universal” (785). Wordsworth acknowledged the more advanced educational experience in Scotland, as he added an inquiring postscript to the 1829 letter to Hugh James Rose: “Is the education in the parish schools of Scotland gratuitous, or if not, in what degree is it so?” (LY II: 25) Moreover, for Wordsworth, Scotland also represented better preserved religious piety. The Pedlar was brought up in a household virtuous and religious though extremely poor: “the very children taught / Stern self respect, a reverence for God’s word / And piety, scare known in English land” (MS. D. 112-14).

The shift of birthplace paved the way for the introduction of a stepfather. A comparison of MS. B and MS. D reveals Wordsworth’s possible misgivings about the separation of home and school influences regarding the child’s education, when parish schools began to replace home as the major site of instruction. The trend
became increasingly worrying for Wordsworth during the early decades of the
nineteenth century. When he criticised the proposal for infant schools under Andrew
Bell’s Madras system in 1829, his objection was less about the system’s mistaken
notion of knowledge than its violating the “the sacred law of nature . . . that the
mother should educate her child” (*LY* II: 18). His insistence on a harmonious
co-operation between home and school influences was reaffirmed in the 1836 speech
where he stressed that “parents become infinitely the most important tutors of their
children” (*Prose* III: 295). Comparing this version of the Pedlar’s early education
with that of the Female Vagrant at home by her father who was pious, conscientious,
and literate, we may find Wordsworth cherished an ideal of education where there
should be no drastic separation between home and school influences, or between
intellectual, moral, and religious aspects of instruction. But he also realised the
difficulty of maintaining that ideal in a fast-changing world, so he had to make
concessions by smoothing the transition from home to school. The creation of a
stepfather who happened to be a schoolmaster is a clever way to solve the problem;
he served as a bridge between the familial and the institutional sites of education,
ensuring the consistency of Patrick’s moral, religious, and intellectual instruction at
home and in school.

When Wordsworth combined the story of Margaret and the history of the
Pedlar into one poem with a new title *The Pedlar* in 1804 (MS. E), he made the
Pedlar the central figure and took extra care to describe his educational background,
especially his aptitude for reading. Wordsworth’s attitude to his poetic speakers’
book reading is ambiguous. He portrayed the Female Vagrant as a keen reader in her
childhood, but did not specify the kind of books she read. When it comes to the
description of the Pedlar’s relation to books, Wordsworth’s revisions betray his
struggle to balance the influence of nature and the influence of books. The Scottish
boy still went to his stepfather’s school on the mountain’s edge, but it was on his
solitary way back home through the wood that the “foundations of his mind were
laid” (128). His experience was an extension of the first poetic spirit described in the blessed babe passage of *The Prelude*, for he “had perceiv’d the presence and the power / Of greatness, and deep feelings had impress’d / Great objects on his mind” (131-33). The intense communion with nature enhanced his poetic sensibility, as he gradually attained

An active power to fasten images
Upon his brain; and on their pictur’d lines
Intensely brooded, even till they acquir’d
The liveliness of dreams. (142-46)

In such a frame of mind the boy “had small need of books” (157). Apart from natural influence, the traditional tales and legends associated with the mountains and woods nourished his imagination and wakened his moral sense. However, a few lines later Wordsworth added a long passage describing the boy’s strong appetite for books:

But greedily he read, and read again of books
Whate’er the Minister’s old Shelf supplied,
The life and death of Martyrs who sustain’d
Intolerable pangs, and here and there
A straggling volume torn and incomplete
that left half-told the preternatural tale,
Romance of Giants, Chronicle of Fiends,
Profuse in garniture of wooden cuts,
Strange and uncouth, dire faces, figures dire,
Sharp-knee’d, sharp-elbow’d, & lean-ankled too,
With long and ghostly shanks, forms which once seen
Co[uld never be forgotten.] (164-75)

This passage was composed around the same time that Wordsworth was working on the expansion of the two-part *Prelude* to a five-part project. Jonathan Wordsworth’s reconstruction of the five-book *Prelude* shows that parts of what was later organised into Book V were drafted in the early spring of 1804.69 We may suppose Wordsworth drafted the Pedlar’s reading and his poetic speaker’s indebtedness to books in the same period and with the same views in mind. As

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James Chandler contends, even without knowledge of the argument about the value of books in Book V of *The Prelude*, readers can still recognise that “the Pedlar grew up literate and is described as having been an avid reader of books from the shelves of his vicar and schoolmaster.” Chandler also points out “the inescapable fact that Wordsworth himself is a poet who both hopes his words will teach as nature teaches and intends that they will be read in books” (141). There is no doubt about the necessity of books for a genuine, poetic education.

However, there are peculiarities about the content and source of the Pedlar’s childhood reading, which suggests Wordsworth’s active participation in the contemporary debate about education. William St Clair notices that the explosion of reading in the Romantic period “included an explosion of warnings against its dangers” (131), and reading ought to be undertaken “in moderation and under supervision” because it “was too exciting, too distracting, and it inflamed the imagination” (281). It is especially so in the highly politicised discussion about children’s reading. Alan Richardson observes that in the later half of the eighteenth century, “fairy tales and fantasy in general came under attack from two sides: the rationalist school of education . . . and the Christian moralist critique” (113). While the former school put emphasis on “useful knowledge” over “fantastic visions,” the latter group tried to revise “fanciful productions” for “juvenile edification” (113-14). Wordsworth and Coleridge are among the most outspoken defenders of fairy tales and fantasy literature against moralising tales tailored for children.\(^70\) In Book V of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s critique of the manipulative educators of the infant prodigy is followed by an earnest plea for fantasy literature:

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Oh! give us once again the Wishing-Cap
Of Fortunatus, and the invisible Coat
Of Jack the Giant-Killer, Robin Hood,
And Sabra in the Forest with Saint George!
The Child whose love is here, at least doth reap
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\(^70\) Coleridge’s daughter Sara recalled that fairy tales were believed to be “wholesome food, by way of variety, for the childish mind,” and it was a point on which “Sir Walter Scott and Charles Lamb, my father, My Uncle Southey, and Mr. Wordsworth were all agreed.” See *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge*. Ed. Edith Coleridge. Vol. 1. (London: H. S. King, 1873) 181-82.
One precious gain, that he forgets himself. (364-69)

While in *The Prelude* Wordsworth prescribed fantasy literature as an antidote to teachings of rationalistic educators, in *The Pedlar* his evocation for the same literature has a subversive implication for the Christian moralists. It is from a church minister’s bookshelf that the boy found a treasure trove of literature. Religious tales are mentioned sparingly first in less than two lines, and the rest of the lines relate the lasting impressions that fantasy and supernatural tales made on him. The used condition of the volumes —“straggling,” “torn,” and “incomplete” may suggest their popularity with generations of children before him, and the minister’s unusually liberal approach on this issue.

Growing up under such influences of nature and books, the Pedlar understandably acquired an unorthodox religious faith: “He neither pray’d, nor offer’d thanks or praise; / His mind was a thanksgiving to the Power / That made him” (206-08). It was through his deep communion with nature as he herded on the mountain tops that he witnessed the written promise:

. . . . He had early learn’d
To reverence the Volume which displays
The mystery, the life which cannot die:
But in the mountains did he *feel* his faith:
There did he see the writing. All things there
Breath’d immortality, revolving life,
And greatness still revolving; infinite.
. . . nor did he *believe*, he saw. (213-19, 222)

Stephen Gill remarks that Wordsworth “decided to enhance the account of the pedlar’s development by exploring the relation between his experience of Nature’s ministry and his formal education within the Christian faith” (*WR* 64). But the Pedlar’s education, in both its literary and religious dimensions, can hardly be called “formal.” As the boy grew older, his appetite for books increased in range and sophistication. He went to buy books of his own choice with hard-earned pocket money in the neighbouring town. During the break from labouring in the hills, he “gaz’d upon that mighty Orb of Song” by the “divine Milton” (240-41), supplied by
his stepfather. Later in MS. E, the poetic narrator remarks on the shaping effect of “The Scottish Church” on the Pedlar (344-49), but observes that “sometimes his religion seem’d to me / Self taught, as of a dreamer in the woods” (356-57). The Pedlar’s religious experience and outlook are imbued with profoundly imaginative feelings, which is attributable less to the minister’s preaching or religious tales than to his solitary walking or working in nature and his voracious reading of imaginative literature.

The 1804 poem *The Pedlar* consists of three parts, respectively about the Pedlar’s history, the declining of Margaret’s family fortune, and her tragic end. Although the Pedlar’s evocation of “natural wisdom” and “natural comfort” remains in the second part, his story-telling in the third part ends with a lesson of wisdom to the sorrowful poetic narrator:

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My Friend, enough to sorrow have you given,
The purposes of wisdom ask no more;
Be wise and chearful [sic], and no longer read
The forms of things with an unworthy eye.

That what we feel of sorrow and despair
From ruin and from change, and all the grief
The passing shews of being leave behind,
Appear’d an idle dream that could not live
Where meditation was: I turn’d away
And walk’d along my road in happiness. (853-56, 865-70)
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However baffling this message may become for actual readers, it leaves the poetic speaker feeling “Admonish’d thus, the sweet hour coming on” (875). It remains a question whether his personal conviction can be shared by a larger audience.

When *The Pedlar* was incorporated into the first book of *The Excursion* in 1814, the story of Margaret’s suffering, then told by the Wanderer, and his admonishment of the poetic speaker remained largely unchanged, except that some details were added for a more Christian nature of the Wanderer’s upbringing. In the outer frame of the poetic speaker’s narrative that precedes the Wanderer’s history, however, a passage is inserted to bring the Wanderer’s semi-poet identity into
sharper relief, which at once heightens his poetic qualities and distances him from the real poet figure.

Oh! many are the Poets that are sown
By Nature; Men endowed with highest gifts,
The vision and the faculty divine,
Yet wanting the accomplishment of Verse,
. . . . . . . these favoured Beings,
All but a scattered few, live out their time,
Husbanding that which they possess within,
And go to the grave, unthought of. Strongest minds
Are often those of whom the noisy world
Hears least; else surely this Man had not left
His graces unrevealed and unproclaimed. (81-84, 92-98)

The Wanderer was one of the natural poets who managed to maintain their first poetic spirit till old age, yet without any lines written down to carry their names or thoughts for posterity. The poetic speaker, or Wordsworth’s persona who identified with the poet’s interest in the mind of man, deemed it his duty to “record in verse” what the Wanderer’s mind had dealt with. Wordsworth’s persona paid a high tribute to the unremarked but remarkable poets whose quality of mind he admired, without diminishing the importance of a real poet, the definition of which Wordsworth himself offered over a decade before in his 1802 Preface to Lyrical Ballads. The poetic speaker’s celebration of nature’s poets is a modified exaltation of the first poetic spirit of our being in the two-part Prelude, and his proffered verse about their minds is in accordance with Wordsworth’s Prospectus to The Recluse.

For the next three decades the Wanderer’s narrative remained the same in successive printings of The Excursion, yet in 1845 Wordsworth revised Book I again to add a few lines about Margaret’s Christian piety to the Wanderer’s lesson after

“The purposes of wisdom ask no more [sorrow]:”

Nor more would she have craved as due to One
Who, in her worst distress, had ofttimes felt
The unbounded might of prayer; and learned, with soul
Fixed on the Cross, that consolation springs,
From source deeper far than deepest pain,
For the meek Sufferer. (935-40)
Before his turning away in happiness, the Wanderer also demanded a Christian understanding of Margaret’s suffering: all the grief appeared an idle dream that could maintain “No where, dominion o’er the enlightened spirit / Whose meditative sympathies repose/ Upon the breast of Faith” (953-55). Accordingly, Wordsworth made some alterations to the history of the Pedlar’s early education. His Scottish family, where he first learned Christian piety from his exemplary parents, remained intact, and thus he had no familial relation to the teacher of the village school.

Stephen Gill explains the increasing presence of Christian expressions and sentiments in the light of the historical contexts. “By 1845 he knew that the Christian elements which had been increasingly important in the development of The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar 1802-4, and which had seemed clear enough then, needed to be made clearer still,” Gill remarks, for “in the thirty years since the first publication of The Excursion, the intellectual context—and specifically the religious context—into which the poem was received had changed very greatly.” But Gill also recognises that Wordsworth’s change was not due to the pressure imposed by critics, because the poet had “an imperious view of his own poetic authority” and revised his poetry out of his own dissatisfaction with the text (WR 78).

A detail from the 1814 Excursion can account for the Wanderer’s augmentation of the Christian import of Margaret’s suffering as well as his understanding of it. In the 1814 version, the boy still went to the minister’s shelves for books of fantasy literature, but the tales of Christian martyrs’ suffering left a deeper impression in his mind: they sustained fearful pangs “Triumphantly displayed in records left / Of Persecution, and the Covenant—Times / Whose echo rings through Scotland to this hour!” (I: 192-94) These lines, added to the 1804 manuscript, are echoed by the 1845 description of Margaret’s consolation from the pain of “the meek Sufferer.” Furthermore, if we recognise that Margaret’s story is derived from that of the Female Vagrant, and remember that the Female Vagrant, as a lisping little girl, used to kneel beside her bed and say her prayers in her father’s hearing in the 1795 manuscript, we
may see the link between the Female Vagrant’s prayers in her early days and Margaret’s consolation from the “unbounded might of prayer” in her adult distress. Wordsworth’s Christian evocations in 1845, therefore, are influenced by his religious sentiment as well as his sense of aesthetic consistency.

Moreover, the educational experiences of the Wanderer as represented in the 1845 version of *The Excursion* can be viewed in connection with Wordsworth’s views on the practical education of children from poor families during the final two decades of his life, especially those articulated in his 1836 speech and his 1845 letter to the Inspector of Schools, Hugh Seymour Tremenheere. In both the speech and the letter, Wordsworth uttered his critique of contemporary education for its lack of Christian faith, its neglect of cooperation between home, school, and the church, and its overlooking knowledge obtained from sources other than books and within classrooms. The Wanderer’s Scottish education—including the pious lesson he learned from his virtuous parents, the religious and literary tales he read from the minister’s shelf, other kinds of books he borrowed from his schoolmaster, and his early communion with nature during his shepherding—is presented in poetry as a healthy and noble alternative that was denied to many of England’s children in reality.

A high level of resemblance can be found between the Pedlar’s experiences and Wordsworth’s representation of his own in *The Prelude*. In the history of the Pedlar’s early education, his poetic spirit is nurtured through the combined influence of nature, books, and religion, exercised on him by the cooperative effort of home, school, and the church. In the poem on his own poetic education, Wordsworth also emphasised the educative influences of nature, books, and religion. The revision history of the two poetic speakers’ biographical sketches reveal the same pattern that nature’s dominant influence is gradually supplemented by the humanising influence of books, and later superseded by that of religious instruction. While in the two-part *Prelude* of 1799 Wordsworth acknowledged his indebtedness chiefly to nature for
the awakening and augmenting of his poetic spirit, in the thirteen-book *Prelude* of 1805 he added other major contributors, notably his formal education in Cambridge in Book III and his indebtedness to books in general in Book V. From the finished 1805 text to the published poem of 1850, a distinguishing feature has been the intensified religious feeling expressed in an unmistakably Christian language.\(^{71}\)

Their initial conception, major expansions and revisions occurred during the same period; therefore they ran parallel and shared many qualities expressed in the same language. In the evenings on his solitary walk back home, the Pedlar as a boy saw “the hills / Grow larger in the darkness” and felt a “communion” with nature “not from terror free” (MS.E 123-24, 129), which sounds similar to the boat-stealing episode in *The Prelude* and Wordsworth’s speaker’s claim that “Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up / Foster’d alike by beauty and by fear” (*1805* I: 306-07). Their tastes for books also grew in parallel directions. The Pedlar boy’s enjoyment of fantasy literature from the minister’s shelf is mirrored by Wordsworth’s persona’s excitement over the discovery of “[a] slender abstract of the *Arabian Tales*” (V: 484), and the former’s saving money to buy more books of his choice is reflected in the latter’s ambition to save up enough to buy the whole volume of *The Arabian Nights*. Both boys read ferociously from the store of their fathers’ (or later schoolmasters’) books, and both held Milton as their favourite poet when their literary taste became more mature. The Pedlar’s religious education was initiated at home with his parents serving as the model of piety. Although there were few references to the poetic speaker’s formal religious training in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s speaker thanked his mother for her steadfast faith in God as the supreme force in his early education in Book V. In the poem “Catechising” from the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* of the 1820s,\(^{72}\) Wordsworth’s lyrical speaker once again recollected his mother for the

\(^{71}\) A debate was held at the Wordsworth Conference in 1984 on the relative merits of the 1805 and 1850 *Prelude* texts. Herbert Lindemenger argued that his preference of the 1805 text “was at least partly due to a strong antipathy to the statement of Christian doctrine” in the later text. J. Robert Barth counter argued that *The Prelude* “may become somewhat more explicitly or assertively [religious] in the 1850 version, but this is only possible because it was deeply religious from the beginning.” See “Waiting for the Palfreys: The Great *Prelude* Debate,” *The Wordsworth Circle* 17. 1 (1986) 2, 19.

\(^{72}\) See *PW* III: 395.
religious ceremony: “Beloved Mother! Thou whose happy hand / Had bound the flowers I wore, with faithful tie” (9-10).

The fact that the characterisation of the the Pedlar bears traces of Wordsworth’s self-representation has been confirmed by the poet himself and noticed by many scholars. In his note to Isabella Fenwick, Wordsworth confessed that “wandering” had been his own passion, as books were the passion of his friend Southey. As for the character of the Wanderer, Wordsworth remarked, “had I been born in a class which would have deprived me of what is called a liberal education, it is not unlikely that, being strong in body, I should have taken to a way of life such as that in which my Pedlar passed the greater part of his days.” The poet recognised his own more privileged education, but also confessed the private wish he invested on the Pedlar: “I am here called upon freely to acknowledge that the character I have represented in his person is chiefly an idea of what I fancied my own character might have become in his circumstances.”73 The two figures become so closely intertwined that James Butler, the Cornell editor of the Pedlar’s story, claims in his introduction that “Wordsworth’s growing fascination with his own past experience and the way in which it affected his apprehension of reality produced a Pedlar sequence which is, in fact, the poet’s first autobiographical work” (17).

Wordsworth’s own remarks and critical observations reveal the extent of identification as well as distance between the poet himself and the poetic speakers he created to embody an educational idea. The three speakers—the Female Vagrant as both subject and narrator of her own story; the Pedlar as witness, listener, and narrator of Margaret’s story; and the poetic speaker as both listener and recorder of the Pedlar’s narrative and response—have all demonstrated the poetic spirit that is celebrated in the blessed infant babe passage of The Prelude. Regardless of their birthplace, gender, and social position, the Female Vagrant and the Pedlar are given an education that is believed to be conducive to their moral outlook. Their

educational backgrounds, especially the Pedlar’s, correspond with Wordsworth’s self-representation in his autobiographical verses on the one hand, and reflect the poet’s critique of contemporary education on the other hand. The poetic education they received is thus a projection of Wordsworth’s ideal onto the social reality of his day, indicating the poet’s ongoing concern of how a child should be better educated in order to be better prepared for the adult moral life, and how that education can be accessible to all.

The evolving textual history reveals that Wordsworth accorded considerable importance to the roles of nature, books, and religion in the education of his poetic speakers, and the cooperation between home, school, and church influences. We see the gradual shift of emphasis from nature’s education to the aid of books, and Wordsworth’s evocations of Christian education become increasingly more vocal in the later manuscripts, in accordance with his practical concerns expressed in his prose and letters. However, the Christian elements are present even in the drafts composed before 1805, and Wordsworth’s religious faith is not incompatible with his poetic creativity. How nature, books, and religion have, individually and collectively, contributed to the growth of the poetic imagination is the topic of the next section.

**Nature, Books, Religion and the Education of Poetic Imagination**

*The Prelude* that was finished in 1805, according to Wordsworth’s own account, is a record of how “Nature and Education” prepared him for the vocation of a poet. But the definition of the two terms and their juxtaposition call for special attention. Nature is a rather protean term in Wordsworth’s poetry, and no less so is education. In Book XII of the 1805 Prelude about the impairment and restoration of the imagination, Wordsworth regarded the lonely public roads as his schools in which he daily read the “passions of mankind” and the “depth of human souls” (165-66), through conversation with wanderers and vagrants he encountered there. He was convinced at heart “How little that to which alone we give / The name of
education hath to do / With real feeling and just sense” (169-71). Here by education Wordsworth probably referred to the formal education of book learning in schools and universities, which he deemed indispensable but insufficient for the education of a poet. If nature is represented by the public roads and the wider world at large, and education is another name for schooling and instruction, the conjunction “and” suggests the necessary cooperation between the two forces. What needs to be clarified is the concept of nature, its role in fostering the poetic imagination, and the problem of sole reliance on it.

Nature is “perhaps the most complex word” in the English language, according to Raymond Williams who identifies three areas of meanings. When Jonathan Bate addresses the issue in The Song of the Earth (2000), he follows the threefold distinction of a modern British philosopher, Kate Soper, and uses nature primarily in the first sense, “the concept of the non-human,” although he acknowledges that “it is impossible to hold the three senses fully apart” (33-34). Onno Oerlemans in Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature (2002) remarks that within Romantic writing and criticism, the term “nature” may be taken “as a referent for a materialistic fate . . . a transcendent power which may or may not be God, a conservative notion of the proper telos of culture, or the material world itself, often reduced or idealised to mere scenery or landscape” (31). When it comes to Wordsworth’s poetry, the issue is especially intriguing because his verses embody all these aspects. H. W. Garrod in 1923 cautioned readers about the need to distinguish various senses in which Wordsworth used the word nature. “Even where he uses ‘nature’ as the equivalent of the external world, or our experience of it, it is his habit to colour that meaning with meanings derived from many of the other very vague uses of the word,” Garrod observed, and that in Wordsworth’s poetry the term nature “stands often as an

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74 The three areas of meaning distinguished by Raymond Williams are “(i) the essential quality or character of something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings.” See Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (London: Fontana/Croom Helm, 1976) 184.

equivalent of the elementary principle of the unintellectualised goodness in the world of both men and things: the antithesis of custom and formal reason” (54-55).

Many attempts have been made to clarify Wordsworth’s use of the term. In his discussion of Wordsworth’s “doctrine of Nature;” Arthur Beatty contends that Wordsworth inherited two uses of the term from the eighteenth century. One use, which is derived from Bacon and Hobbes through Locke and the “sensational school” of philosophy, holds nature “as the source of truth and reason” (132). The second use, opposite to the first and with Rousseau as its apostle, regards nature as “opposed to man, in that it is always good, while man as he is in society is evil” (133-34). Beatty believes Wordsworth’s attitude to nature “adhered to the rationalistic, intellectual, and anti-sentimental party” (135), but when he considers nature’s role in the three stages of man’s development, he interprets the word as mainly referring to the external world. In the article about nature’s education of man, C. Clarke identifies Wordsworth’s use of nature in the sense of both “the world of natural objects” and “an ultimate, non-visible Reality,” but in terms of education, nature still refers to “the world of natural objects” (310). “What did Wordsworth mean by ‘Nature’” is the title of Laurence Lerner’s article. He recognises that “there is a profound—and unresolved—ambiguity in Wordsworth’s idea of Nature” (296), but after enumerating the various passages where the word appears, Lerner decides on the meaning of nature as “all-embracing” and “a word for everything that is” (298). James Chandler makes the distinction between the Rousseauian idea of nature and Burkean sense of “second nature” which comprises “use, custom, and habit” (xviii). He calls the environment in which Wordsworth matured “nature” in the usual, material sense, but cautions readers not to “lose sight of the role it plays as a human culture, a second nature, furnishing the poet with the moral power that sustains and sanctions his writing” (xix).

Three aspects can be summarised from previous studies on Wordsworth’s use of nature: the external world of natural objects, the transcendent power of God, and
the culture of human custom. It is almost impossible to separate the three aspects clearly, but many confusions and misunderstandings have resulted from either a lack of distinction in the various senses or a failure to see their cooperation and unification. When I argue that nature, books, and religion account for the three most important agents of education in Wordsworth’s poetry, by nature I mean primarily the external world of natural objects, but not exclusive of the cultural and spiritual dimension. My emphasis on the material sense aims to challenge the usual understanding of Wordsworth’s educational message regarding the role of nature.

The influence of natural objects on the growth of human imagination has been explored by many scholars from various approaches. In William Wordsworth: His Doctrine and Art in Their Historical Relations, Arthur Beatty offers a systematic argument for Wordsworth’s indebtedness to the philosophy of associationism initiated by British empiricist philosophers like Hobbes and Locke and developed by David Hartley. According to the principle of association, all mental activities are derived from sensation which results from direct contact with external realities. The simple ideas of sensation become the basis of complex or intellectual ideas through certain laws of transmutation. Beatty discovers three stages of the mind’s growth in Wordsworth’s poetry in accordance with associationist philosophy: Childhood is the “age of sensation,” youth is the age of “simple ideas” or “feeling,” and maturity is the age of “complex ideas” or “thought” (74, 127). The first two periods of life are closely related to external nature and “both marked by a lack of self-consciousness and by absorption in sensation” (136).

Beatty finds his theory of three stages of man attested by Wordsworth’s most celebrated verses. In the thirteen-book Prelude, Wordsworth’s speaker realises in retrospect that in his boyhood, nature was only the playground, “secondary” to his physical activities, and it took a long time for nature to be enjoyed for “her own sake” (VIII: 476-81). For Beatty, Wordsworth in his youth further developed the

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76 For more discussion about the imagination and associationism, see James Engell’s The Creative Imagination, Chapter 6.
power “to see and to note,” and “learned to observe with accuracy” (137); yet still his observation was marred by the lack of unity, because he was “under the domination of senses” (138). In the poet’s own words, he entered a state in which the eye—“the most despotic of our senses gain’d / Such strength in me as often held my mind / In absolute dominion” (Prelude XI: 174-76). But in the passage from youth to maturity, it is “Nature” that thwarts this “tyranny” of the eye by summoning all the senses to counteract each other and transcend themselves, until they are all made conversant and subservient to “the great ends of liberty and power” (Prelude XI: 178-83).

Beatty’s theory works best to explain nature’s drawing out the perceptive imagination in childhood, but it does not accord sufficient importance to nature in the development of a mature, creative imagination. Nature’s influence on the creative imagination of Wordsworth as a mature poet is explained in greater detail by James A. W. Heffernan. In Wordsworth’s Theory of Poetry: The Transforming Imagination, Heffernan believes that nature provided a model for Wordsworth to formulate the concept of imagination as a creative power (95). The Prelude records a sublime moment at the ascent of Snowdon, when Wordsworth witnessed the transforming effect of mist on distant hills and waters, which struck him as “The perfect image of a mighty Mind, / Of one that feeds upon infinity” (XIII: 69-70). The experience showed the domination which nature “Exerts upon the outward face of things, / So molds them, and endues, abstracts, combines” (XIII: 77-79). Such transforming power of nature is the exact resemblance and “a genuine counterpart / . . . of the glorious faculty / Which higher minds bear with them as their own” (XIII: 87-90). Higher minds are those with imaginative power that can “build up greatest things / From least suggestions” (XIII: 98-99). The Snowdon experience granted Wordsworth “the living proof of the analogy between natural power and poetic creation,” Heffernan observes, and it had a profound influence on Wordsworth’s understanding of his role as a poet: “For the rest of his life, he firmly believed that when a poet transforms the visible universe by the power of his imagination, he imitates the
creative action of nature herself” (105).

From physical pleasure in childhood to philosophical contemplation in adult life, nature’s significance for Wordsworth in the growth of the poetic spirit cannot be overstressed. However, nature also needs to be transcended and supplemented so that the imagination can be humanised. Arthur Beatty’s theory about nature’s absorption and domination of the mind in childhood and early youth already suggests the need for a timely transcendence, and Geoffrey Hartman approaches the issue from another perspective. In Wordsworth’s Poetry, Hartman introduces the dimension of self-consciousness, and distinguishes between the young Wordsworth’s unconscious imaginative power, which is “inseparable from overwhelming sense-impressions,” and the retrospective poet’s consciousness of his imagination, which enables him to “dissociate nature’s strength from his own” (215). The child’s self-consciousness, together with his imaginative capacity, must be naturalised first and then humanised. Hartman notes in “Unremarkable Wordsworth” that the question of growth is “how to humanize one’s soul without losing it, how to bind the child’s imagination without binding it down.” Nature plays a critical role in this complex process: “If nature fails, the child’s development is either arrested, and he becomes an idiot whose ‘life is with God,’ or a premature adult, doomed to cynicism or alienation. If Nature succeeds, the child is organically ready to be humanized” (16).

Both the importance and limitations of nature in fostering the self-conscious imagination are built into the textual history of the Boy of Winander. Excluded from the two-part Prelude is a fragment about a boy who would stand alone

Beneath the trees or by the glimmering lakes
And through his fingers woven in one close knot
Blow mimic hootings to the silent owls
And bid them answer him. 77 (177-80)

This is in essence the portrait of the poet as a boy. For Michael O’Neill, the boy’s mimic hootings “are responsive to a circumambient world of forces and energies that he wishes to imitate and compel into relationship.” When the boy “hung / Listening,”

77 See the MS. JJ in Parrish ed, The Prelude, 1798-1799, 128.
he “occupies a creatively provisional position between inner and outer, projection and reception” (137-38). O’Neill’s interpretation breaks away from Beatty’s and Hartman’s chronological demarcation about the growth of Wordsworth’s poetic spirit, in that the boy already consciously exercises a perceptive and creative imagination. In this sense, the boy continued to exercise the perceptive and creative sensibility that first manifests in the blessed infant and unites him with the active universe. However, devoid of his own voice, the boy is far from being an articulate poet—not even close to the poetic speakers like the Female Vagrant and the Pedlar.

Wordsworth’s sudden shift from third person perspective to the first person “I” and “my” in the 1799 manuscript blurs the distinction between the poetic speaker and another boy of his childhood. However, when the passage appears in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*, all references to “I” and “my” are replaced by “he” and “his,” and Wordsworth wiped off all traces of personal identification with the boy. A short tailpiece is added about the boy’s premature death at the age of ten, and the mature poet’s silent mourning at his grave. When incorporated into the 1805 *Prelude*, “There was a Boy” in the expanded form appears right after the episode about the prodigy boy who is “no child, / But a dwarf man” (V: 294-95). Wordsworth’s inclusion of this third-person narrative into Book V of his autobiographical poem leads many critics to probe the true identity of the boy of Winander and his relation to the poet. His real identity remains a mystery, and the shift of perspective, according to Geoffrey Hartman, suggests Wordsworth’s desperate attempt to conjoin “the making of a man and the making of a poet” (*WP* 233).

“There was a Boy” also has another identity as a separate poem, first published in 1800 and then in successive collections among “Poems of the Imagination” from 1815 onwards. In the 1815 collection where Wordsworth devised an innovative way of organising his previous poems, “There was a boy” is not one of the “Poems Referring to the Period of Childhood,” but the first poem in the category of “Poems

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of the Imagination.” Such an arrangement leads one to ponder over Wordsworth’s conception of the imagination: he either indicates the whole experience as the result of his imagination, or he draws readers’ attention to the imaginative power exerted by the boy.

It is in the immediate context of Book V of The Prelude that most critics read this passage. In Stephen Gill’s view, it “serves to contrast the innocent and appropriate childishness of a ‘favoured son’ with the monstrous man-child produced by modern theories of education.” But Gill also advocates preserving its independent status for its educational message: “Wordsworth was prepared then to advance his claims about the educative powers of Nature into the citadel of educational theory itself, going beyond statements of personal experience to make propositions of general truth” (“Wordsworth’s Poems” 184-85). I agree with the educational use Wordsworth intended to convey through this passage as both an independent poem and an integral part of The Prelude, but have reservations about the notion of Nature’s educative power, because such a reading overlooks the tailpiece about the boy’s death and the poet’s mourning. If nature is a superior teacher, how shall we account for the death of the boy, and along with it, the deaths of other supposedly Wordsworthian children of nature like Lucy Gray?

Critical opinions on this question are divided. A romanticised reading, as suggested by J. Robert Barth, sees the deaths of the Winander boy and Lucy Gray as poetically inevitable for their too deep communion with nature: “His intimacy with nature, like hers, is so deep that it can be fulfilled only by death” (35). Barth tries to dismiss the cause for sadness over such deaths and argues for the sense of beauty and harmony, but such an interpretation cannot satisfactorily explain the life of the Female Vagrant and the Pedlar who survived their immersion in nature during childhood. Adam Potkay argues along similar lines but interprets it in educational terms: “While Wordsworth expunges the Prodigy, he benignly allows the Winander Boy to die, sparing him from the knowledge that is all too often purchased by the
loss of power” (“A Satire on Myself” 163). But this benign killing for the sake of
nature or power does not solve the problem as posed by Alan Richardson: “the
appeal to nature tends to slide into a sort of primitivism . . . many of his represented
children are left stranded in an eternal childhood, like Lucy Gray, the Danish Boy . . .
and, most famously, the Boy of Winander” (106).

Even the critics who expounded nature’s role have noticed the darker side of a
“natural education.” Arthur Beatty mentions the total absorption and domination by
nature of the child’s mind. Geoffrey Hartman compares the timing and narrative tone
of the Boy’s death with those of the Lucy poems, finding that both Lucy and the Boy
of Winander “die before consciousness of self can emerge wholly from
consciousness of nature” (WP 21). Richard Adelman reiterates and develops the
doubt about nature’s pernicious role in education based on a close reading of “Three
Years She Grew.” The actual details of Lucy’s promised education at the hands of
nature is narrated from the perspective of a personified Nature, which makes up
eighty percent of the poem. “What seemed to be a description of the natural
education Lucy would receive in reality becomes an account of her total union with
nature . . . and a destruction of her physical form,” Adelman observes (142). Besides,
Nature appears as a tyrannical figure, as it will “prescribe every activity that occupies
her and every capacity she develops.” Therefore, the education to be received by
Lucy is “one of control above all else.” She will be enslaved to nature and be “barely
human” (Adelman 144).

The child figure’s premature death in nature is strangely tied to the growth and
immortality of the poet, as implied in the revision history of “There was a Boy.”
Hartman notices that in the early manuscripts, the Boy of Winander was identified as
Wordsworth’s speaker, so “the death of the Boy may have been an afterthought,
strangely self-referring” (WP 20). “There was a Boy” in the 1805 Prelude differs
from the version in the 1800 Lyrical Ballads in its end piece, where the final
emphasis is laid not on the death of the boy, but on the poet speaker’s response to the
death. It is this response that attracts Hartman’s attention: the poet who stands a full half-hour at the boy’s grave “looks not only at something external, a grave, but also at something within, his former heart.” In other words, “the poet is mourning the loss of a prior mode of being but meditates on the necessity of a loss which leads into matured awareness” (WP 21). In his 2005 article “Reading: the Wordsworthian Enlightenment,” Hartman revisits this passage and remarks, “There is a sense in which the Boy of Winander episode shows that mute, inglorious Miltons do exist.” As another “elegy in a country churchyard,” it may suggest that “all human beings are potentially poets.” Then “what prevents their poetic gift from developing?” Hartman does not quite believe Wordsworth’s explanation about “uniform control of after years,”” but attributes it to the boy’s intense experience in nature. His early experiences were “so charged and powerful” that they blocked the passage from nature to self-consciousness, from childhood to maturity (33).

If nature is also held responsible for the thwarting of the poetic mind, then what would have delivered it from the total absorption of nature? One answer may be found in the broader context of “There was a Boy” in Book V of The Prelude, a book devoted to what Wordsworth calls “a scanty record . . . / Of what [he] owed to Books in early life” (630-31). We can still read the Boy of Winander who was born, educated, and buried in nature as in sharp contrast with the prodigy boy whose life is imprisoned in book learning. Although Wordsworth’s speaker sounds sympathetic to the natural boy and satirical to the bookworm, neither boy can be said to serve as an example for the growth of a poetic mind, which shall have both “books and Nature” to feed on, and possess “Knowledge not purchased with the loss of power” (447-49). However, in their contrasted state each boy represents an essential quality that is indispensable for the mature poet. “The Infant Prodigy is,” Adam Potkay argues, “Wordsworth’s representation of his own scholastic enthralment, exaggerated and objectified,” and the Prodigy “encapsulates one aspect of Wordsworth’s school years” (“A Satire on Myself” 162).
In Book V of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth presented himself during his school years as an avid reader of books. When he returned to his father’s house during the summer holidays, he was overjoyed at the prospect of resuming reading the “golden store of books,” and recollected how he read devouringly by the side of Derwent, “Till, with a sudden bound of smart reproach” he took to the sport again (513-15).

Comparing this scene with the first spot of time presented in the 1799 *Prelude*—that he, as a four-year-old child, “Made one long bathing of a summer’s day [,] / Basked in the sun, or plunged into thy streams, / Alternate, all a summer’s day” (I: 19-21), one sees how nature’s influence began to be supplemented by that of books in the growth of a poet’s mind. Adam Potkay thus concludes his article, “in the course of Wordsworth’s career, the child prodigy proved to be father of the public poet” (166).

Stephen Gill in his biography of Wordsworth also cautions readers to guard against the poet’s self-representation of education. “A superficial reading of *The Prelude* could suggest that Wordsworth thought Nature alone had made him a poet, he himself as a naked savage,” Gill points out, but Wordsworth “wrote as he did then because of study, instruction, example, and in finding these at the right time and in the right place Wordsworth was as fortunate as possibly any other English poet has been” (27). Gill then lays out the benefits offered by Hawkshead Grammar School where Wordsworth spent his formative years: the first was that “it made books available” (28), and the second was the two headmasters, William Taylor and his successor Thomas Bowman, who “valued English literature, especially poetry, unusually highly as a part of a liberal education and attempted to ensure that the vigour of recent work was felt in their remote domain.” It was under their system that Wordsworth “was encouraged not just to read but to write” (29). That is how the school exercise dedicated to Hawkshead came into existence when Wordsworth was only fourteen, followed by more prolific output in his mature years.

Wordsworth’s attitude to books may appear ambiguous and baffling to many readers. His lyrical speakers frequently ask their interlocutors to discard books and
embrace the teachings of nature, but seldom vice versa. In the companion poems “Expostulation and Reply” and “The Tables Turned,” William urges his friend Matthew to quit his books which is “a dull and endless strife,” and to “close up these the barren leaves” of science and art. The Pedlar, thanks to his communion with nature and immersion in the traditional tales, has “small need of books.” Even Book V of The Prelude, a book supposed to be on the value of books, leaves critics more doubtful than convinced. R. D. Havens, for example, finds the treatment insufficient, since “a third of the 605 lines treat of education and are in the main an attack on book learning.” As for the poet’s own reading, apart from children’s books, “all the works singled out for especial mention in Wordsworth’s prose account of his early reading are omitted” (375). Thomas McFarland compares Wordsworth with his more learned friend Coleridge, and contends that the entire Book V “exists as a testimony not to Wordsworth’s but to Coleridge’s reverence for books.” He claims that “the subject of books is ultimately alien to Wordsworth; he talks about almost anything rather than books” (288-89). Mary Jacobus also notices that book learning “gets short shrift from an educational point of view, and the whole drift of Book V is towards subsuming literature under the heading of nature” (127).

Wordsworth’s reserved praise of books and impassioned attack upon book learning render him a dangerously troublesome anti-intellectual figure to modern educators. Even for literary scholars, many would sympathise with Havens’s complaint that The Prelude, as a study of the imagination, “contains no direct comment on the relation of books and education to the development of this faculty” (380-81). How should we evaluate his claim of obligation to books for the growth of his mind? I think a distinction shall be made between the books Wordsworth recommended and those he disparaged, and then reconciliation can be achieved between nature andimaginative literature for the growth of a poet’s mind.

In Book XII of The Prelude, Wordsworth’s speaker twice displays suspicion towards books in general: books can “mislead us” and “good books” are “few” (207,
So there exist at least two kinds of books for Wordsworth according to the effects they produce on readers’ minds. He did not specify his criteria, but evidence can be gathered from the account of his own reading in childhood and Cambridge, his epistolary advice on the readings of a little girl in 1806, and the books he assigned to the Pedlar as a boy. Beneficial readings comprise chiefly of the Bible, romance and fantasy in childhood, and imaginative literature for the growing youth and adults. Wordsworth and his fellow poets recommended fantasy and fairy tales for children against the flood of moral tales edited by anxious educators.

The importance of fantasy and imaginative literature for awakening children’s imagination has been powerfully put forward by Coleridge. Given the two poets’ shared interests in the issue of education, Coleridge’s argument may shed light on Wordsworth’s proposal. When society was debating on whether children should be permitted to read “Romances, & Relations of Giants & Magicians, & Genii,” Coleridge’s answer was decisively affirmative: “I know no other way of giving the mind a love of ‘the Great,’ & ‘the Whole.’”79 In his 1818 lecture about the best literature for children, Coleridge argued strongly for the Arabian Nights, because they inspired interest “through the working of imagination, the idea of power in the will.” These tales are more suitable for children than the popular moral tales exactly because they “cause no deep feeling of a moral kind—whether of religion or love; but an impulse of motion is communicated to the mind without excitement, and this is the reason of their being so generally read and admired” (Lectures II: 191).

Coleridge then generalised about the effect of imaginative literature and repeated some of his key points which confirmed Wordsworth’s opinion: “they carry the mind out of self, and show the possibility of the good and the great in the human character” (Lectures II: 192).

If fairy tales are wholesome food for children’s minds, poetry and imaginative literature provide more nourishment for the growing youth. The Pedlar, after passing

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79 Coleridge to Thomas Poole, 16 October 1797, in Griggs ed, CL, 354.
his childhood, became fascinated by the poems of Milton. Wordsworth in Book V of *The Prelude* acknowledged his being charmed by poetry around the age of thirteen, and finding them “sweet / For *their own* sake(s)—a passion and a power.” He could remember the early morning hours he spent by the lake “repeating favorite verses” or “conning more” (581-92). But his introduction to the poets may have occurred much earlier. It is recorded in Christopher Wordsworth’s *Memoirs* that “the Poet’s father set him very early to learn portions of the works of the best English poets by heart, so that at an early age he could repeat large portions of Shakespeare, Milton, and Spenser” (34). The great English poets—Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton—were said to be his favourite authors during the Cambridge years (*Prelude* III: 276-93).

Wordsworth’s sound classical training in Hawkshead and Cambridge also enabled him to enjoy Greek and Latin poems. Among Roman poets he was strongly attached to Ovid and Virgil, and as to Homer, he thus confessed: “I was never weary of traveling over the scenes through which he led me” (*PW* IV: 422). All of these writers are renowned for their imaginative power and are therefore conducive to the growth of his imagination. In his later years, Wordsworth acknowledged their influence to his American friend Henry Reed: “In the Mss Poem upon my own Poetic education there is a whole Book of about 600 lines upon my obligations to writers of imagination, and chiefly the Poets” (*LY* IV: 415-16).

Wordsworth’s advocacy of fairy tales and imaginative literature would look more progressive if examined against two dominant schools of thoughts, evangelicalism and utilitarianism. “The two movements, the one religious, the other not only secular but in its pure state anti-Christian, were jointly responsible for the early nineteenth century’s veneration of the printing press,” according to Richard D. Altick (129). While the evangelicals emphasised “the spiritual necessity of reading” (99), the utilitarians stressed the need to diffuse “useful knowledge” through publications (131). Both movements, however, denounced imaginative literature as useless and corrupting, and recommended religious or scientific literature instead.
Religious literature predominated in nineteenth-century England thanks to the campaign of The Religious Tract Society, The British Foreign Bible Society and The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. Although Wordsworth presented the Bible and religious tales in the Pedlar’s educational background, he promoted the reading of fantasy and imaginative literature for a person’s moral and spiritual growth. When Francis Wrangham attempted to recommend religious books to enlighten the poor, Wordsworth was sceptical of the project and argued for the beneficial influence of imaginative literature. “My meaning is, that piety and religion will be best understood by him who takes the most comprehensive view of the human mind,” Wordsworth explained, and such a mind “is best promoted by a due mixture of direct and indirect nourishment and discipline. For example, Paradise Lost and Robinson Crusoe might be as serviceable as Law’s Serious Call, or Melmoth’s Great Importance of a Religious Life” (MY I: 249).

Fairy tales and imaginative literature are preferred over moral tales and religious literature for their use of educing the self from selfish absorption and encouraging the growth of imagination. In Book V of The Prelude, Wordsworth claimed that his verse “is dedicated to Nature’s self / And things that teach as Nature teaches” (230-31). How can books teach as nature teaches? Geoffrey Hartman proposes that the books praised and recommended by Wordsworth “have an effect on the child deeply analogous to nature: they provide a nature for imagination, to which the child can go out, to which it can forget itself.” He calls it the “second nature,” or in Wordsworth’s own words, “the great Nature that exists in works / Of mighty Poets” (V: 622-23), which “keeps up the generous relations of mind and external world” (WP 226).

The move away from nature to books is treated not as a separation but rather as reconciliation in Wordsworth’s poetry. One strategy is to read books in nature’s presence. If Wordsworth the boy felt a sense of guilt for losing himself in books by Derwent’s side, as a youth, he felt elated when reading poetry in nature. The famous
dream of the Arab episode is occasioned by the poetic speaker’s (Wordsworth shifted to the first person narrative in the 1850 version of *The Prelude*) reading *Don Quixote*, “seated in a rocky cave / By the sea-side” (*1850 58-59*). Another strategy is to read nature, including both the primary nature of material objects and the second nature of human culture, as a book. The metaphorical reading of nature is more profuse in the 1850 *Prelude*. “Nature’s book of rudiments,” Wordsworth declared in Book III, was illustrated by the lives and manners of ordinary rural labourers (583). In Book IV, “The face of every neighbour” he met during his holiday “[w]as as a volume” to him (58-59). The poetic imagination, nurtured by nature and books alike, finds no dichotomy between nature and books.

Nature, books, and religion have never been completely separated in Wordsworth’s conception of the ideal growth of a poet’s mind, and their interaction in one life’s progress can be illustrated by a poem he composed in 1802:

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My heart leaps up when I behold
    A Rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a Man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
    Or let me die!
The Child is Father of the Man;
    And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.
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Short as it is, the poem has a unique position in Wordsworth’s collected works. It is the first poem under the category of “Poems Referring to the Period of Childhood” in Wordsworth’s 1815 collection of *Poems*, and its last three lines serve as an epigraph to the “Intimations Ode” which concludes the whole collection. H. W. Garrod contends that “the conception of human days bound together by natural piety is the clue to the interpretation of the *Ode* in its entirety” (113), and further suggests that “We may profitably conceive the *Prelude*, accordingly, as a self-examination

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80 See *P2V*, 206.
directed towards binding together the poet’s own days, his different periods, and moments, of inspired consciousness” (124).

The poem sketches the precarious growth of the first poetic spirit. The child whose heart leaps up at the sight of a rainbow is exercising a strong poetic sensibility of perceptive and creative imagination in his spontaneous response to the external world. His mind, like that of the blessed infant babe, is an agent of the great mind of God. The experience is profoundly religious; the rainbow is not only a natural phenomenon but also a biblical symbol as the token of God’s covenant with Noah. Being able to respond to the rainbow thus becomes testimony to his connection with the heavenly home, and failure to respond implies a spiritual death worse than mortality. Ideally, the fully lived life of a poet takes the form of a book through the metaphor of binding days together, and the book acquires a religious significance through the binding principle of “natural piety.” As the poet’s creative mind reflects the creative mind of God, his life as a book mimics the Bible in its religious resonance. The message conveyed within nine lines about the fitting between the mind and the external world and the paradisiacal bliss thus obtained is in essential accordance with Wordsworth’s high argument in his Prospectus to The Recluse.

With the phrase “natural piety” we naturally turn to the question of Wordsworth’s religion and its relation to his poetic imagination. If his imagination is profoundly religious, his understanding of religion is intensely imaginative, liable to be misunderstood by his contemporary readers as well as later critics. Coleridge called him “at least a semi-atheist” in 1796 (CL 216). In his later years, critical opinions were divided over the issue of Wordsworth’s faith. Stephen Gill’s survey shows that among the poet’s contemporaries, John Wilson insisted in 1842 that Wordsworth “certainly cannot be called a Christian poet,” William Howitt attempted to prove Wordsworth as essentially a Quaker, and others found his later poems

“sympathetic to Romantic Catholic tradition” despite his vigorous opposition to Catholic Emancipation (WV 66-69).

Literary critics generally agree on the religious spirit of Wordsworth’s poetry, but could hardly arrive at a consensual name for his exact religion. The most ambitious effort to study Wordsworth’s religion was first attempted by Hoxie Neale Fairchild. In Religious Trends in English Poetry, Fairchild devotes a substantial chapter to a religious biography of Wordsworth. He traces the development of the poet’s faith from his pre-school years when he “had received the elementary religious training of an eighteenth-century Anglican child” from his pious mother (138), through the period of “Tintern Abbey,” when his “nature-worshipping type of deism . . . is hardly distinguishable from pantheism” (170-71). After the “more specifically Christian flavor” in The Excursion (208), Fairchild moves to the Ecclesiastical Sonnets of the 1820s, when it was “possible for him to combine his Catholic sympathies with his Anglican High Churchmanship” (247), and his survey ends with “the outwardly rigid Anglicanism of his old age” (259). Fairchild reveals more aspects of Wordsworth’s religious life than later critics could agree with, but the distinction between the poet’s early pantheism and later Anglicanism has been hugely influential.

After Fairchild, more books have emerged to expose Wordsworth’s contrariety or defend his consistency in the matter of faith. Nancy Easterlin, in Wordsworth and the Question of “Romantic Religion,” offers a new account of Wordsworth’s problematic religiousness by identifying two aspects of religion: religion defined on the one hand as “affective experience—states of heightened consciousness or intuition of the divine,” and on the other hand, “as organized belief systems.” She summarised them as “religious form and feeling,” and found a “discrepancy”

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82 An early but still very useful study on the development of Wordsworth’s religious is offered by Edith C. Batho in The Later Wordsworth, 234-311.
83 In response to his being regarded as a “worshiper of Nature,” Wordsworth dismissed it as a mistaken notion gathered from his “passionate expression” which was “uttered incautiously in the poem upon the Wye.” He criticised the reader for “reading in cold-heartedness and substituting the letter for the spirit.” See his letter to Mrs Clarkson in January 1815, MYII: 188.
between the two in Wordsworth’s poetry (29). Robert Ryan in *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789-1824* argues that Wordsworth did not have to abandon his “pantheism” when resuming his place in the Anglican Church: “To accommodate orthodox Christians, all Wordsworth needed to do was adjust his claim to rely solely on nature for revelation and grace by assigning to nature an auxiliary function as conduit of a higher power” (95). Since most critics conceded the later Wordsworth’s Christianity, William A. Ulmer, in *The Christian Wordsworth: 1798-1805*, endeavours “to see his earlier religious attitudes referred, simply for the sake of consistency, to the same evaluative criteria which moved critics to grant his later Christianity.” He contends that “there exists considerable continuity in Wordsworth’s religious outlook” (19). Ulmer names Wordsworth’s religion as a form of “Romantic Anglicanism,” because the poet’s “‘Romantic’ sensibility explains his emphasis on the epiphanic, self-exploratory, and emotional in religious experience,” whereas “Anglicanism provided that spiritual individualism a welcome foundation in tradition” (23).

Even when most critics agree on Wordsworth the man being a Christian in later years, there is the subtle distinction between the man and the poet. J. Robert Barth maintains his doubt that “Wordsworth the poet was ever fully Christian,” because his poetry “can at no point—even late in his life—be said to reflect a fully Christian view of the world” (27). Barth distinguishes between two concepts, “sacramental and incarnational,” and argues that “throughout his life Wordsworth was—imaginatively—a deeply religious but pre-Christian poet,” since “he never really integrated Christ into his sacramental view of the world.” He suggests Wordsworth’s imagination was “Hebraic rather than Christian,” for the Old Testament was more formative for the growth of his imagination (28).

While Barth denies the Christianity of Wordsworth’s poetry, more critics dismiss his later poetry for been excessively Christian. D. J. James believes Wordsworth’s poetry declined with his acceptance of Christianity, as his embracing
of Christian dogmas “released him from the necessity of attempting to convey in his own language what he saw to be adequately expressed in Christianity” (209). C. M. Bowra also associates the poet’s loss of “creative imagination” with his embracing of “a more orthodox faith” (102). John Jones contends that “Wordsworth’s Christianity often made matters worse” (168). At the 1984 “Great Prelude Debate,” Herbert Lindenberger compares the poetic expressions of one idea in three Prelude texts and finds “a steady improvement” when he “moves backward in time from 1850 to 1805 and thence to 1799.” He considers the 1850 lines “too stiff,” “abstract,” “formal” and “too obtrusively Christian” (3).

These accusations constitute a false dichotomy between religion and imagination, one which the poet had to reject repeatedly. One of the reasons for Wordsworth’s critique of contemporary education was his dissatisfaction with the way religious education was conducted without reference to imagination.84 His inability to identify or sympathise with certain forms of religion also arose from his strong emphasis on imagination. As he told Henry Crabb Robinson, he was unable to “feel with the Unitarians in any way,” because their religion “allows no room for imagination, and satisfies none of the cravings of the soul” (HCR 87).

In terms of the relation between religion and poetry, Wordsworth claimed an analogous relation in his letter to Lady Beaumont shortly after the publication of Poems, in Two Volumes in 1807, “to be incapable of a feeling of Poetry in my sense of the word is to be without love of human nature and reverence for God” (MY I: 146). In the 1815 “Essay,” he expanded the analogy to illustrate the poet’s and the religionist’s shared reliance on symbolic representation to access and convey the higher truth: “The commerce between Man and his Maker cannot be carried on but by a process where much is represented in little, and the Infinite Being accommodates himself to a finite capacity. In all this may be perceived the affinity between religion and poetry” (Prose III: 412). Wordsworth even came to the defence of religious

84 See Wordsworth’s 1808 letter to Francis Wrangham, MY I: 249, and his 1836 speech, Prose III: 294.
literature when Walter Savage Landor remarked that he was disgusted with all books that treated of religion and offended by the phrase “second birth” in Laodamia. He made an impassioned reply stating the fact that the most imaginative poetry contained the highest form of religion:

I have little relish for any other [books than those treating of religion]—even in poetry, it is the imaginative only, viz. that which is conversant [with], or turns upon infinity, that powerfully affects me—perhaps I ought to explain—I mean to say, that unless in those passages where things are lost in each other, and limits vanish, and aspirations are raised, I read with something too much like indifference. (_LY_ II: 245)

Poetic imagination and religious imagination became indistinguishable, so were poets and religionists, as Wordsworth continued to declare: “All great Poets are in this view powerful Religionists” (_LY_ II: 245). But religionists are to be distinguished from theologians who “puzzle their heads about dogmas” (_LY_ I: 351). Wordsworth was particularly pleased with a friend’s “distinction between religion in Poetry and versified Religion,” and he explained his aversion to “frequent mention of the mysteries of Christian faith” on the ground that he “felt it far too deeply to venture on handling the subject as familiarly as many scruple not to do” (_LY_ IV: 23).

Wordsworth’s greatest poems are those that treat religion imaginatively, and there are as many of them in his later years as in his early years. In an 1837 tour in Italy, he visited a Franciscan friary at La Verna, which occasioned a poem “The Cuckoo at Laverna.”

The friary is described as “a Christian Fortress, garrisoned / In faith and hope” (32-33), inhabited by the monks who partake of St Francis’s loving spirit and,

> with those gentle hearts
> Consorted, Others, in the power, the faith,
> Of a baptized imagination, prompt
> To catch from Nature’s humblest monitors
> Whate’er they bring of impulses sublime. (69-73)

The poet is one who possesses the “baptized imagination” which “allows him access to the sublime in the present moment of experience,” and, at the height of the

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85 See _PW_ III: 218-22.
communion, “the distinctions between Catholic and Protestant, priest and poet, Italy and England are dissolved in the pool of imaginative life” (Rudy 275). His “baptized imagination” does not exclude nature, as Adam Potkay observes, “his spiritual link to both Francis and La Verna’s present-day friars is found rather in nature than in dogma—in the voice of the spring-time cuckoo that Wordsworth hears, the voice that they had heard” (Wordsworth’s Ethics 200). The “vagrant Voice” (27) of the cuckoo at La Verna evokes association with the “wandering voice” of the cuckoo Wordsworth heard in his school-boy days in the 1807 poem “To the Cuckoo.”86 But the later poem is greater and richer, not in spite of but because of its Christian sentiment heightened by the creative imagination.

The “baptized imagination” thus represents a higher stage of the growth of a poet’s mind, and the continuation into old age of the “natural piety” Wordsworth felt as a boy. Imaginatively he remained vigorous in his seventies, as his creative mind can still be stimulated by not only nature but also artistic or literary representation of nature. Wordsworth’s note to the 1842 sonnet “Suggested by a Picture of the Bird of Paradise”87 reveals how the poet, combining the roles of a teacher and a religionist, endeavoured to cultivate the imagination of the whole nation where images were abundant. He was concerned about the injurious effect produced by the ready availability of “pictures of animals and other productions of nature, as seen in conservatories, menageries and museums,” if “the imagination were excluded by the presence of the object” (PW II: 524). When the material nature he enjoyed in immediate intimacy was increasingly out of reach for a nation in the process of industrialisation, the cultivation of imagination became more reliant on Holy Scripture and other “consecrated works of Bard and Sage” (Prelude V: 41).

Wordsworth continued to explain in epistemological terms how we came to know material nature and improve our human nature through the imaginative representation of natural objects in great literature:

87 For the poem, see PW II: 320.
If it were not that we learn to talk and think of the lion and the eagle, the palm-tree, and even the cedar, from the impassioned introduction of them so frequently in Holy Scripture, and by great poets, and divines who write as poets, the spiritual part of our nature, and therefore the higher part of it, would derive no benefit from such intercourse with such subjects. (PW II: 524-25)

Nature, books, and religion are the most important factors in the early education of Wordsworth’s poetic speakers, and all three factors are present in his most imaginative poems regardless of genre and the date of composition. The poet’s embracing of Christianity did not come at the expense of his love of nature or his imaginative power. What he believed was true of his own experience he wanted to impart to others, convinced that a poetic education was infinitely superior to a practical education. Although his conception of what constituted an ideally poetic education changed in that nature was gradually supplemented by imaginative books and Holy Scripture, he never believed they should be mechanically separated, in the way that practical education was designated to home, school, and church.

Wordsworth’s advocacy of the cooperation between nature, books and religion in a poetic education, together with his insistence on being a poet-teacher-religionist, is beautifully crystallised in a poem addressed to his daughter Dora in 1816, when she was twelve (around the age when the Boy of Winander died, according to the 1850 Prelude). The opening two lines—“A LITTLE onward lend thy guiding hand / To these dark steps, a little further on!”—are taken directly from Milton’s Samson Agonistes. Wordsworth was suffering from eye problems, and began to think about the day when he would have to lean upon Dora as a guide. But before that time he asserted his role as her “natural leader,” eager to conduct her to a mountain top for a Snowdon epiphany of a profoundly imaginative experience in nature:

Let me, thy happy guide, now point thy way,
And now precede thee, winding to and fro,
Till we by perseverance gain the top
Of some smooth ridge, whose brink precipitous
Kindles intense desire for powers withheld

88 See PW IV, 92-94.
From this corporeal frame. (23-28)
But “more gladly” would Wordsworth conduct her, “through woods and spacious forests,” to behold the human art that erects Nature’s “temples” (34-36). Here temples evoke “shrines,” or books that contain the immortal human spirit, and naturally he led Dora to the realm of books. It is noticeable that the poem starts with a quotation from Milton which itself alludes to Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, and ends with, in Hartman’s words, “a peroration that shows unmistakably how intensely Wordsworth felt about both Classical wisdom and Scripture” (*Unremarkable Wordsworth* 93).

Now also shall the page of classic lore,
To these glad eyes from bondage freed, again
Lie open; and the book of Holy Writ,
Again unfolded, passage clear shall yield
To heights more glorious still, and into shades
More awful, where, advancing hand in hand,
We may be taught, O Darling of my care!
To calm the affections, elevate the soul,
And consecrate our lives to truth and love. (49-57)

Hartman notices that the peroration “combines two inherited notions: that of the Book of Nature which lies open to all eyes, and that of the Reformers ‘opening’ the Book of God for all to read” (*Unremarkable Wordsworth* 93). More relevant to his claim of being a poet-teacher-religionist is the fact that, Wordsworth, facing the book of Holy Scripture, was humbled to resign his role as a father and guide and become a fellow student of Dora. Eventually, the child is not the father of the man, nor is the poet a teacher of his readers. All boundaries collapse and all distinctions dissolve in a baptized and unifying imagination, which consecrates our lives to religious truth and love, and thus makes paradise “a simple produce of the common day” (“Prospectus” 55).
Chapter Three The Poet as Teacher of the Reader

In his major narrative poems, Wordsworth created poetic speakers like the Female Vagrant and the Pedlar whose early educational experiences shared traces of the poet’s self-representation in *The Prelude*. These speakers are potential poets whose first poetic spirit are developed but not fully realised like Wordsworth himself. Nevertheless, their poetic education grants a certain weight of authority to their narratives of suffering and the moral lesson intended for the poet figure, and through the poet to the reader. Jonathan Wordsworth in *The Music of Humanity* observes the relation between Wordsworth, the Pedlar, the poet figure, and the reader in *The Ruined Cottage*: “Nominally he [the poet figure] may be Wordsworth himself, but in practice he is a dramatization of the reader” (91-92). By emphasising the initially very different responses of the poet figure and the Pedlar to Margaret’s story and “bringing them finally to something like agreement,” Wordsworth “is able to persuade the reader to accept the standards he imposes” (92).

Jonathan Wordsworth’s observation reveals the extent to which the poet intended to implement his educational ideal and the delicacy of the practice. “No writer can tell his own audience how it ought to react to his work,” the critic remarks, “but if he creates one for his story-teller he can make it exemplify whatever response he wishes to evoke” (95).89 The poet figure has an important function in *The Ruined Cottage*, linking the actual author Wordsworth and his unknown reader to achieve an educational agenda. As a first-person narrator he has some degree of identification with Wordsworth himself. As an audience of the Pedlar’s narrative and thus a representative of the reader, he is admonished by the Pedlar who was educated according to Wordsworth’s conception of what constituted a genuine poetic education. The education of the poet, the poetic speaker, and the reader, therefore, is

89 William G. Rowland Jr. makes a similar observation that Wordsworth created “a surrogate reader” to guarantee “at least one sympathetic reader for the poem, one person who will be affected the way the poet wants him to be... In Wordsworth’s imagination the poem is addressed to an ideal audience of one, who is taught how to respond to the poem as he listens to the story.” See Rowland, *Literature and Marketplace: Romantic Writers and Their Audiences in Great Britain and the United States* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1996) 55.
directed towards the same goal of developing the first poetic spirit—of cultivating the responsive and creative imagination—that will enable our being to regain the paradise lost.

However, the poet figure’s ready acceptance of the Pedlar’s interpretation of Margaret’s story is somewhat problematic for actual readers. Jonathan Wordsworth points out that the poet figure “has almost no active characteristics” in the poem, because “[h]is views are never asked, never offered. Like the reader, he simply listens and responds” (95). Wordsworth’s revision history shows the difficulty he found in rendering the Pedlar’s comfort about “natural wisdom” more convincing to the poet figure. But more difficult would be the task to convince the actual reader to sympathise with the poet figure’s response, for the poet cannot control the adult reader’s response the same way as he moulded the Pedlar’s childhood education. Jonathan Wordsworth suggests the foreseeable difficulty: the reader is offered at one moment “intolerable suffering” and the next “dispassionate wisdom,” and despite the poet figure’s response, there is “certainly the element of doubt” concerning whether “Wordsworth can persuade his readers to believe in it” (98).

To persuade his readers to believe in what he believed is the very goal of Wordsworth’s writing. At the end of the 1805 *Prelude*, Wordsworth claimed that he and Coleridge would “teach” and “instruct” others to love what they had loved. The things they loved include imaginative literature, and the educational project Wordsworth conceived involves teaching others to love readings he preferred and produced. For Jon Klancher, Wordsworth and Coleridge came to believe that “reading redeems us” (135). Scott Hess, in commenting on a “quasi-religious formulation” of Wordsworth’s relation with his readers, suggests that the poet “offers himself as a poetic John the Baptist, breaking down the structures of authority in the old poetic culture in order to incorporate readers into a newly leveled and purified public, leading to their eventual redemption through reading” (211).

This chapter seeks to revisit Wordsworth’s troubled relationship with his
readers when he tried to instruct them instead of merely entertaining them. Wordsworth wrote with the ambition to educate the actual readers to become ideal readers. His ideal reader is, not unlike his poetic speakers, a poet figure like himself. While Wordsworth could create a poetic speaker with an idealised childhood education conducive to the growth of the first poetic spirit, he could not expect the adult readers to have similar educational experiences with regard to nature, books and religious faith. His own means of educating readers is through his works of poetry, which he believes contain profound truths about nature, society, and religion. The greatest difficulty confronting Wordsworth is how he could foster the poetic spirit of receptive and creative imagination in the adult reader without creating an interpretive impasse. In other words, he is faced with the delicate task of effecting a balanced response of passiveness and activeness, submission and resistance from the reader, so as to create the taste by which he is to be enjoyed. To begin with, I will briefly survey the poet’s teacher claim and its reception among readers and critics.

The Poet-as-Teacher Claim: Its Past and Present Reception

Wordsworth’s relationship with his readers has always been quarrelsome. He initially conceived of the poet-reader relationship like the teacher-pupil relationship, where the teacher endeavours to edify the mind and feeling of the pupil and elevate him to a higher level. Success in such a relationship depends on both of the pair performing their respective duty of giving and receiving, and the most achieving pupil receives more knowledge because he develops the mental power for knowledge acquisition and best combines passiveness with activeness in relation to the teacher. But unlike in the teacher-pupil relationship where the teacher’s authority is conventionally guaranteed, the poet has a more difficult time first establishing his authority, and then enlisting the cooperation of his readers without their undue resistance or submission. Wordsworth’s task is further complicated by literary critics’ greater claim of authority, and the emerging force of the literary marketplace which
turned reading into a form of consumption and separated an author’s desired readers from actual readers.

The complex constituencies of readers—the ideal, desired, actual, and professional—caused Wordsworth uncertainty in his attitude towards them. Hope of being appreciated and fear of being misunderstood coexisted in many poems published between 1798 and 1807, and in the prose and letters composed between 1794 and 1815. This chapter examines the background that initiated Wordsworth’s intention to teach the reading public, the initial strategies he employed to address the discrepancy of readers, and the adjustment he adopted in the face of critical response. It points out that Wordsworth differentiated his audience in his prose and poetry to criticise the corrupted taste of some readers and cultivate the accurate taste of others, or used the same strategy to address the unknown individual reader. He shifted from tight control of authorial description or interpretation to open invitation of readerly participation in poetry-making, usually within the space of a single poem. But the differentiating strategy can cause interpretive difficulties when actual readers do not identify themselves with the poetic speaker or invoked reader, showing either too strong resistance to the poet’s dominion or too weak assertion in cooperation.

Wordsworth had anticipated the readers’ resistance even before his publication of the first edition of Lyrical Ballads, but the readers’ reaction of indifference or miscomprehension only increased his sense of urgency to teach. Shortly after the publication of his Poems, in Two Volumes in 1807, Wordsworth wrote to Lady Beaumont to stave off her worries about its negative critical reception, “never forget what I believe was observed to you by Coleridge, that every great and original writer,

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90 I borrowed the term “reading constituencies” from William St Clair, who uses it to describe different social groupings of book buyers and readers. See St Clair, The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period, 195-96, and chapter 13 “Reading Constituencies.”

91 Tilottama Rajan in The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theory and Practice (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990) points out that the discrepancy between Wordsworth’s desired and real audiences caused the poet’s “uncertainty even as to his desired audiences” (148). William G. Rowland Jr. in Literature and Marketplac also argues that “the actual relationship to diverse groups of readers caused [Wordsworth] creative uncertainty” (40). Scott Hess’s book Authoring the Self (New York: Routledge, 2005) also deals with Wordsworth’s response to his own sense of uncertainty in the last two chapters. My discussion of Wordsworth’s uncertainty will centre upon the relative activeness and passiveness in both the poet and the reader.
in proportion as he is great or original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished; he must teach the art by which he is to be seen” (*MY* I: 150). Frustrated by the almost unanimous contempt for the 1807 *Poems* and Francis Jeffrey’s damaging comment on the 1814 *Excursion*, Wordsworth reiterated his conviction in the 1815 “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface,” in a more assertive tone, that “every author, as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed: so has it been, so will it continue to be” (*Prose III*: 80).

By such a grand claim as creator of original taste and teacher of mankind, Wordsworth placed himself above many other writers, critics, and readers, which undoubtedly caused friction and controversy. John Keats famously declared that “We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us—and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great & unobtrusive.”92 Keats had in mind Wordsworth, whose poetic character he identified as “egotistical sublime” and wished to differ from.93 William Hazlitt was more sympathetic in his portrait of Wordsworth in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825). He recognised the revolutionary nature of Wordsworth’s poetical experiments, which led to “the unaccountable mixture of seeming simplicity and real abstruseness in the *Lyrical Ballads*.“ Undoubtedly it was a challenging style. “Fools have laughed at, wise men scarcely understand them,” Hazlitt wryly observed (233).

The poet’s self-aggrandizement and distrust of critical readers place modern readers in a difficult position of having to choose alignment between a suspiciously didactic poet and a consciously resistant readership. In one of his early articles, Stephen Gill takes up the challenge of Keats in defence of Wordsworth. Keats’s words are so memorable that “for many students they have become the once-and-for-all answer to Wordsworth’s less sympathetic remarks and provide an

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authoritative critical reason for ignoring a great deal of challenging poetry” (385). Gill is also concerned that Keats’s remark encourages a tendency to view didactic poetry as an inferior genre whose message is to be rejected simply because “the reader feels the palpable design,” and such a response “robs us” of the potential benefits from reading Wordsworth (386).

I share Gill’s concern that this resistant attitude could prevent us from a more just and beneficial appreciation of Wordsworth, and agree with his definition of the critical task, which is “to ask what is the poet’s didactic method, by what criteria can we judge the legitimacy of his design on us, what kind of judgement can we make between one didactic poem and another” (387). But Gill’s corrective method introduces new problems. He chooses to compare “two notoriously uneven didactic poems” (387), and distinguished between the success of “The Old Cumberland Beggar” and the failure of “A Night on Salisbury Plain.” But such a distinction, regardless of its standard, seems to have ignored Wordsworth’s caution in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*:

> If an Author by any single composition has impressed us with respect for his talents, it is useful to consider this as affording a presumption, that, on other occasions where we have been displeased, he nevertheless may not have written ill or absurdly; and, further, to give him so much credit for this one composition as may induce us to review what has displeased us with more care than we should otherwise have bestowed upon it. (*Prose* I:154, 156)

Wordsworth’s reading instruction has found a more sympathetic follower in Don H. Bialostosky. The primary purpose of Bialostosky’s 1984 book *Making Tales* is “to guide our understanding of Wordsworth’s experimental narratives in *Lyrical Ballads* toward a position from which they will give us a greater and better pleasure than most of his readers have previously received” (1). The previous readers could have included Stephen Gill, although Bialostosky takes Geoffrey Hartman to task. He “was surprised and irritated” to discover that the poems that pleased him “were

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94 Stephen Gill, “Wordsworth’s Breeches Pocket: Attitudes to the Didactic Poet” *Essays in Criticism* 19. 4 (1969) 385-401. Quotations in this paragraph are all from this article and hence only page numbers are given.
considered failures by respected critics” like Hartman (2). Bialostosky proposes an alternative approach by applying Bakhtin’s theory of discourse to “account for what we already enjoy and extend our appreciation to Wordsworth’s still neglected narrative experiments” (8).

The poet’s claim to authority over readers and his wish to be considered as a teacher continued to divide modern scholars in recent decades. There have been critics who identify with the poet and endeavour to justify his authorial intention. Kurt Heinzelman in *The Economics of the Imagination* (1980) adapted the Marxist economic theory of labour exchange to account for Wordsworth’s conception of the writer-reader relationship. “In assessing poetry’s power to affect moral choices,” Heinzelman argues, “Wordsworth required a poetic economics that would leave the reader ‘versed’ in the use of both the economic and the aesthetic imagination and that, by showing the connection between them, would educate the reader in the reciprocal labor demanded of him” (200). Inspired by the reader-response theory of Wolfgang Iser, Susan Meisenhelder in *Wordsworth’s Informed Reader* (1988) attempts to explore the interaction between text and reader in Wordsworth’s poetry, especially the structural means the poet employed to affect his reader. She believes that “fundamental to Wordsworth’s poetic theory is a concern that his poetry educate and morally improve his readers. His desire to affect and ultimately to change his readers, to elevate their conceptions and to rectify their judgments, appears repeatedly in his comments on his work” (8).

In recent years, however, more critics have risen to challenge Wordsworth’s claim to authority and sought to assert a more active role on behalf of critics for the greater interpretive freedom of readers. Among its most eloquent advocates is Lucy Newlyn. In her much acclaimed monograph *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (2000), Newlyn raises some significant questions: “[W]hat happens when literary criticism declares its status equal or even superior to that of creation, as it has done in some branches of twentieth-century literary theory? Is
there evidence of an anxiety of reception . . . that ‘the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author?’” (xii) Tempted to give a cautiously affirmative answer to the second question, Newlyn proceeds to expose a circularity of logic in Wordsworth’s almost unreasonable demand on his readers: “The purpose of his poetry was to extend the range of his audience’s feelings; yet, to do this, he depended absolutely on his readers’ willingness to enter his own emotional world” (104). “Operating within a circular hermeneutics of identification,” Newlyn continues, “Wordsworth betrayed a confusion about the extent to which readers must be active or passive, if they were truly to understand” (108). In certain cases, the poet’s continuing life must be “at the cost of the death of the reader” (127). However, in an article published a year later, “How Wordsworth Keeps His Audience Fit,” Newlyn modifies her claim about the life-death contest between the poet and his reader: “It is in the construction of a ‘model reader’ closely akin to his own persona that Wordsworth . . . attempt[s] to allay the fear that the reader is born only at the cost of the author’s death” (70).

Lucy Newlyn’s challenge and modification about Wordsworth’s relationship with readers and critics are shared and developed by other critics. In his Authoring the Self: Self-Representation, Authorship, and the Print Market in British Poetry from Pope through Wordsworth (2005), Scott Hess also reveals Wordsworth’s attempt to “contest the authority of both readers and reviewers” in his critical essays, which “make the author entirely self-authorizing in relation to a future or imagined public cast in his own image” (217). Not only the reader is expected to become a poet figure, but also the critic is required to demonstrate vocational qualifications “which turn out to be identical to those of the poet” (217). Andrew Franta, in Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public (2007), argues along similar lines but arrives at a slightly different conclusion from Wordsworth’s calling for the communication of power. Franta recognises that the communication of power between the writer and the reader can be a “risky business” (73), but the risk is tilted
towards the writer, because the reader’s claim on the writer might outweigh the
writer’s claim on the reader. In other words, it can become “a zero-sum game in
which the power communicated to readers is granted at the poet’s expense” (61).

My own approach has been influenced by all the abovementioned critics. While critics like Bialostosky and Meisenhelder have unshakable faith in
Wordsworth’s authorial purpose, Newlyn and Franta are somewhat sceptical of the
authoritarian figure of the poet. We see in modern critics’ varied responses the
persistent tension between submission and resistance which can be traced all the way
back to the time when Lyrical Ballads first appeared. Wordsworth had expected the
pleasure of recognition by some but also anticipated thoughtful resistance by others.
Though conscious of the perpetual tension in the writer-reader relationship, I am
more inclined to identify with the former group of critics; the latter group, inspired
by modern literary theory about the death of the author, may have “taken
Wordsworth’s ‘People’ to mean themselves” and thus “us[ed] an ideal academic
readership to displace the recalcitrant historical publics early-nineteenth century
writers faced” (Klancher 5).

The period I choose to focus on—1798 to 1807—is also a deliberate reflection
on the complexity of the writer-reader-critic relationship. The so-called “great
period” of Wordsworth’s creative life was initiated by Matthew Arnold in 1879 when
he attempted to re-create the taste in which Wordsworth was to be appreciated by the
Victorians. One of the most prominent literary critics of his time and a professed
disciple of Wordsworth, Arnold preferred the short lyrics written in this single
decade to the longer poems published afterwards, believing they could best represent
Wordsworth’s genius. His verdict, though profoundly influential on the poet’s
subsequent reception, reflects the critical climate of the 1870s instead of the period
when those poems were first introduced to the public. The fact that Arnold’s
elevation of the single-decade lyrics is an unwitting correction of earlier reviewers’
biases, and that his disapproval of the longer poems was disputed by twentieth
century critics, also testifies to the difficulty Wordsworth encountered in creating the new taste and his slow but steady success. It is necessary, therefore, to situate Wordsworth’s claim of teaching readers to acquire the correct taste in his own historical context.

To understand Wordsworth’s claim of authority on literary taste and his endeavours to educate the readers between 1798 and 1807, we need to look a few years back and examine the taste he rebelled against and his ground of rebellion. The following sections will start with a brief overview of Wordsworth’s opinions on the prevalent taste and his conception of the writer-reader relationship before 1798. Then it studies how Wordsworth challenged the literary convention by monitoring the responses of both experienced and inexperienced readers in the “Advertisement,” “Simon Lee” and “The Idiot Boy” from *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). The next section investigates how a mixed critical reception of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* prompted Wordsworth to define his role as a poet and differentiate the fit and unfit readers in “A Poet’s Epitaph.” Finally, it turns to the critical reception of the 1807 *Poems, in Two Volumes* to assess the effect of Wordsworth’s educative endeavour, and to see how he anticipated the difficulty by being an exemplary reader in “The Solitary Reaper.” Throughout the period, Wordsworth attempted to educate readers by giving reading directions in the prefatory statements and dramatising scenes of learning and teaching in the poems. His hope for the teachability of readers coexists with his fear for the strength of their existing prejudices, and the degree of his authorial control is in proportion to the degree he expects of readerly cooperation. It is the uncertainty of readerly response that leads to his simultaneous rebuking of the unfit reader and evoking of an ideal reader in the lyrics.

**Wordsworth on Taste and the Writer-Reader Relationship before 1798**

When I argue that Wordsworth intended to awaken and develop the poetic spirit of the reader, I use “the reader” as an umbrella term and do not maintain a strict
distinction between the idealised, individual, textual "reader" and the historical, collective, empirical "audience" in the convention of modern criticism. My interest is mainly in those that Wordsworth tried to address and educate in and through his poems, and thus my use of "the reader" covers a wide range of referents, from the textual addressee (like "O reader!" in "Simon Lee"), the imagined reader (one that must "Behold her" in "The Solitary Reaper"), to the empirical reader who listened to his poem (like Coleridge to whom Wordsworth read out the manuscript version of what was to become The Prelude), or engaged in silent and private reading. The fictional or factual readers can sometimes converge in Wordsworth’s conception, but are not always identical. They are not confined to Wordsworth’s contemporaries, as he increasingly felt himself addressing posterity. Among the actual readers are a group of professional readers—critics or reviewers who were champions of public opinions with considerable sway over the choices of the reading public, or academics in the highly disciplined study of literature in modern times.

The questions that naturally follow such a preliminary distinction are: who were the readers that Wordsworth intended to reach and teach? Why did he think they were in need of education and what qualified him as a teacher? What were the lessons that he wanted to teach and how did he teach? And how shall we evaluate its effect? These questions are difficult and interrelated, pertaining to bigger issues like the nature and purpose of Wordsworth’s poetry, his definition of the poet and his relationship to fellow beings including other writers, general readers, and professional reviewers, the value of his poetry and his appropriate place in literary history. It is necessary, therefore, to narrow down the enquiry by focusing on his relation to contemporary readers, who were originally the immediate audience of Wordsworth’s writing.

Even the initial question of Wordsworth’s target reader turns out to be a complex issue. Before he started to publish, Wordsworth entertained hopes of

95 Jon Klancher has offered an excellent account of the historical relationship between the two terms. See his monograph The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832 (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1987) 8-14.
improving the minds of the multitude of his countrymen. But the economic conditions of both the writer and the readers determined that he had to aim at the educated and affluent readers from the middle and upper classes who could afford the price of a book and the leisure to read.\textsuperscript{96} However, he also sincerely hoped his poetry could benefit the labouring poor. Writing to Francis Wrangham in 1808, Wordsworth observed that he cannot find “much disposition to read among the labouring Classes, or much occasion for it,” that the “half-penny Ballads, and penny and two-penny histories” available to them were of mixed quality, and that he wished he could supplant bad weeds with “flowers and useful herbs” of his own publications (\textit{MY} I: 248). It remained an unrealised wish, as even in his native Lake District, the cottagers in the neighbourhood preferred Hartley Coleridge’s poems, believing that “Wudsworth’s was not for sec as us” (Rawnsley 16). While the labouring poor cannot afford his poetry or appreciate it, the more privileged class of readers were slow to recognise his genius, causing the despairing poet to make an aggressive distinction between the unthinking “Public” and an idealised “People” in 1815 (\textit{Prose} III: 84).

To understand Wordsworth’s sense of urgency and authority to teach readers and create the taste for his poems between 1798 and 1815, it is necessary to have a glimpse at the reading culture during the decades commonly known as the Romantic period. Taste became an issue for Wordsworth at a particular historic moment when Britain witnessed the gradual formation of a reading public from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, driven by the dissemination of education and the lowering cost of books. James Lackington, a bookseller, predicted the effect of Sunday school movement in the 1790s: “The Sunday-Schools are spreading very fast in most parts of England, which will accelerate the diffusion of knowledge among the lower class of the community, and in a very few years exceedingly increase the

sale of books” (427). He further noticed that “the introducing histories, romances, stories, poems, &c. into schools, has been a very great means of diffusing a general taste for reading among all ranks of people” (429). William St Clair points out that the abolition of perpetual copyright in 1774 significantly brought down the price of books, and consequently, “a huge, previously suppressed, demand for reading was met by a huge surge in the supply of books, and was soon caught up in a virtuous circle of growth” (115). Technological improvements in the 1820s and 1830s also brought about a “significant mechanisation of book production” which made more books affordable (St Clair 87).

The explosion of reading is reflected in the sheer amount of books published during that period. According to St Clair, between the 1780s and the 1830s, about five thousand new books of poetry were written by about two thousand living poets, and about three thousand new works of prose fiction were published, not to mention the reprinting of old titles out of copyright protection (172-73). It was undoubtedly a buyer’s market, a fact not to be overlooked by anyone who wanted to make a living or fortune out of writing. Lee Erickson’s study of nineteenth-century English publishing history reveals that “the expansion of the publishing market precipitates a crisis for literature, because the most profitable work is no longer that which appeals to the most sophisticated and literary taste” (15).

There was also dispute over the notion of sophisticated taste. After all, who is in the rightful position to judge on matters of literary taste, the writer or the reader? The choice was complicated by the participation of a third force in the Romantic period—a group of professional readers or critics who wrote reviews for the periodical magazines, some of whom influenced the opinions of readers and sales of books. Lucy Newlyn points out the challenges confronting original yet fledgling writers like Wordsworth and Coleridge: “The financial necessity of engineering their

97 One needs to be judicious with the bookseller’s account. Richard D. Altick is more sceptical about the quality of teaching in primary and secondary schools during the early half of the nineteenth century, and he doubts that school education fostered a taste for reading among pupils. See Altick, The English Common Reader, chapters 7 and 8. Altick’s reservation is supported by Matthew Arnold’s reports on elementary schools, which will be discussed in my next chapter.
own success went hand in hand with a desire to mould public taste in a direction they
themselves found palatable.” She recognises that this double objective, of becoming
canonical while distancing themselves from the popularity enjoyed by other writers,
made it the task of a lifetime to “create the taste by which they are to be enjoyed.”
But the project was also hindered by “the periodical press, which aimed to reflect
rather than transform the preferences of the reading-public” (9). Over time the
reviewing-bodies were “steadily acquiring an authority which legislated arbitrarily
over the tastes of the reading-public” (10).

Newlyn’s recognition of a “competitive-collaborative relationship between
creativity and criticism in the Romantic period” (xii) seems to value an egalitarian
writer-reader relationship, and allow more authority to critics than some writers were
happy to grant. Indeed, Wordsworth never quite trusted critics as just arbiters of
public taste and competent judges of his poetry. He regarded them as misled and
misleading beings that, like the readers they professed to guide, stood in need of
education from greater writers. Wordsworth’s distrust of critics and readers should
not be dismissed as an unpopular writer’s jealousy and discontent, but needs to be
understood as an intellectual, moral, and aesthetic response to the literary conditions
of his time.

Wordsworth was an unacknowledged critic of literary taste before he became a
recognised poet. Taste for him is not a purely aesthetic issue but pregnant with
intellectual and moral significance. “Bad taste, whatever shape it may put on, is
injurious to the heart and the understanding,” declared Wordsworth in a manuscript
of an essay upon epitaphs (Prose II: 97). A person’s literary taste is indicative of his
whole moral and intellectual being, because “his ability to enter into the spirit of
works in literature depends upon his feeling, his imagination, and his
understanding—that is, upon his recipient, upon his creative or active and upon his
judging powers” (Prose II: 97-98). In this sense, taste is by no means a personal and
private matter, but has rather wider ramifications, for “what is true of individuals is
equally true of nations” (Prose II: 98).

The remarks made during Wordsworth’s mature years offered a cognitive explanation behind his campaign for correcting what he perceived to be bad taste in the public sphere. It is a stance developed from his early conviction of his own superior literary taste and his sense of responsibility towards the nation, long before he was known to the public he set out to educate. Wordsworth’s lofty ideal of reforming the nation through writing despite financial pressure, and his critique of existing political writers, literary critics, and periodical publications are evident in his two letters to William Mathews in 1794 about a joint plan for a monthly miscellany.

As an impoverished and little known writer at the age of twenty four, Wordsworth was interested in Mathew's proposal for a joint publication of “a monthly miscellany from which some emolument might be drawn” (EY 118). But the pressing financial need did not drive Wordsworth to please his target audience for money. His audience awareness and his intention to teach were obvious from the questions he raised: “What class of readers ought we to aim at procuring; in what do we, each of us, suppose ourselves the most able, either to entertain or instruct?” (EY 119, emphasis added) Wordsworth had in mind the middle and upper class readers with both purchasing power and governing influence, when he suggested that in their planned project “it will be impossible . . . not to inculcate principles of government and forms of social order of one kind or another” (EY 119).

Wordsworth proceeded to suggest possible topics and set the moral tone of the publication: “Besides essays on morals and politics, I think I could communicate critical remarks upon poetry, &c. &c, upon life and manners, and to make our publication a vehicle of sound and exalted Morality.” He assumed the role of a critic on political philosophy, poetry, and current affairs, and even on periodical publications and their contributors. “All the periodical miscellanies that I am acquainted with, except one or two of the reviews, appear to be written to maintain the existence of prejudice and to disseminate error,” Wordsworth thus diagnosed the
magazine culture, and expressed his determination not to conform: “To such purposes I have already said I will not prostitute my pen” (EY 119).

In the same letter, Wordsworth mentioned briefly the reception of his two poems, which is suggestive of his early response to critical opinions, and his critique of the critics. An Evening Walk and Descriptive Sketches were published in 1793. Wordsworth was conscious of their “imperfect” state as well as their merits, but disappointed with their critical reception: “They have been treated with unmerited contempt by some of the periodical publications, and others have spoken in higher terms of them than they deserve” (EY 120). With an air of nonchalance, Wordsworth suggested that the critics either failed to appreciate his poems, or failed to appreciate them in the right light and proportion. It is not that Wordsworth wanted to have his works unanimously admired, but rather that he wanted to have them criticised or admired according to sound criteria. Unwarranted criticism and unqualified admiration for Wordsworth expose the critic’s inability to approach an original author with due proportions of submission and resistance.

Wordsworth laid out his thoughts on what to write in the first letter, the scope of which is comparable to his ambitious project The Recluse, and he indicated the preferred manners of writing in a second letter to Mathews a few weeks later. In retrospective view of his own experience during the French Revolution, Wordsworth regarded his duty as an “enlightened friend of mankind” to enlighten his countrymen. He told Mathews that “people should be enlightened upon the subject of politics,” but he disapproved of most political publications, not for the message conveyed but for the style deployed: “I severely condemn all inflammatory addresses to the passions of men, even when it is intended to direct those passions to a good purpose” (EY 125).

By “inflammatory addresses” Wordsworth probably meant revolutionary pamphlets that flooded Britain after the outbreak of the French Revolution. In The Prelude, Wordsworth recalled that he, like others, “had read, and eagerly / Sometimes, the master pamphlets of the day” (IX: 96-97). Scholars suggest this refers to
Wordsworth’s reading of Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*, the most widespread radical pamphlet that responded to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Looking back on his residence in revolutionary France, Wordsworth reflected on the transient and destructive power of inflammatory authors:

The Land all swarm’d with passion, like a Plain
Devour’d by locusts, Carra, Gorsas, add
A hundred other names, forgotten now,
Nor to be heard of more, yet were they Powers,
Like earthquakes, shocks repeated day by day,
And felt through every nook of town and field. (IX: 178-83)

The negative similes reveal Wordsworth’s deep uneasiness with writings that came from unthinking authors to unthinking readers. Such writings stimulate and feed the public’s appetite for passion without helping them to reason, which he feared would betray the revolutionary ideals and leave the suffering poor in a worse situation of anarchy and chaos. As he confessed to Mathews, although he disapproved of “monarchical and aristocratic governments,” he “recoil[s] from the bare idea of a revolution” and “deploir[s] the miserable situation of the French” (*EY* 123-24). A violent revolution in Britain can only be averted, in his view, “by the undaunted efforts of good men in propagating with unremitting activity those doctrines which long and severe meditation has taught them are essential to the welfare of mankind” (*EY* 124-25).

Wordsworth undoubtedly envisioned himself as one of such “good men” destined to advance the improvement of humanity by spreading the gospel of “long and severe meditation.” His desired audience includes all mankind, and his method of teaching is set to differ from the revolutionary pamphlets, as he declared in metaphoric terms: “I know that the multitude walk in darkness. I would put into each man’s hand a lantern to guide him, and not have him to set out upon his journey depending for illumination on abortive flashes of lightening, or the coruscations of transitory meteors” (*EY* 125).

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The metaphors Wordsworth chose—a guiding lantern versus the abortive flashes of lightening or meteors—illustrate his ideal mode of writing and anticipate his fighting with other writers to better enlighten humanity. Instead of giving readers false hope with a transitory though glaring light which would lead the mass nowhere, Wordsworth wished his writings could serve as lanterns to individual travellers that would guide them on the independent journey of discovery. The lantern metaphor also suggests Wordsworth’s ideal relationship with the reading audience: he wanted to cultivate a direct and intimate relationship of mutual trust and respect, where the writer from his privileged position offers necessary guidance but refrains from demanding subjugation, and the reader, acknowledging his need for instruction, is not a merely passive receiver but an active explorer on his own. It is a polite and constructive relationship that recognises both the privilege of the author and the dignity of the reader. Its success depends on the precarious balance of exertion and restraint on the part of the writer, as well as the passiveness and activeness on the part of the reader.

In his early twenties, Wordsworth already assumed the role of a guide and teacher, on matters of literature, morality, and politics. Although for practical reasons he had to target the more affluent class of readers, his desired audience included the vast multitude of humanity. He hoped to enlighten the reading public with an improved manner of writing that would suppress their gross appetite for passion or action, and cultivate their more refined sensibility and feeling. The planned periodical foundered, and soon Wordsworth’s conception of an ideal relationship with the reading public was put to severe test, when he had to compete with popular writers for a reading audience and authority over literary taste.

In 1795 Wordsworth started to write *The Borderers*, a tragedy on crime and human suffering. It was revised in 1797 and, upon Coleridge’s encouragement, sent to a theatre in London. But the play was rejected by the theatre’s manager in December, despite Wordsworth’s traveling to London for the revision and
production. Wordsworth’s failure forms a sharp contrast with the enormous success of another play staged at the same time, Matthew Gregory Lewis’s drama *The Castle Spectre*. But he seemed unaffected by the setback and reacted coolly to Lewis’s popularity in a letter to James Tobin in March 1798: “I am perfectly easy about the theatre, if I had no other method of employing myself Mr. Lewis’s success would have thrown me into despair. The *Castle Spectre* is a spectre indeed” (EY 210). Two months later he went to see the play in Bristol, by which time it had been produced twenty-eight times. William Hazlitt recalled Wordsworth’s comment— “it fitted the taste of the audience like a glove.” Hazlitt noted that this “*ad captandum* merit was however by no means a recommendation of it, according to the severe principles of the new school, which reject rather than court popular effect” (118).

Wordsworth’s disparaging comment on Lewis’s drama reveals his dissociation between taste and popularity, and his dissatisfaction with this stimulating kind of writing. He was perfectly aware of what would sell with the public, but he refused to conform to their aesthetic standard, and showed a consistent distaste for what is later called “Gothic” writings. He had, “by some strange accident,” read Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian*, but “read only to laugh at it,” according to Thomas de Quincey (258). While Hazlitt was neutral in his comment on Wordsworth’s relation with popular taste, de Quincey related the anecdote as an instance of “defective sympathy in Wordsworth with the universal feelings of his age” (258). But Wordsworth was consistent in condemning what he saw as bad taste in Gothic writings, whoever the author may be. He evoked Radcliffe again in 1815, criticising Walter Scott’s anonymously published novel *Guy Mannering* for “want of taste, which is universal among modern novels of the Radcliffe school” (MII 232).

Apart from inflammatory political pamphlets and Gothic novels in Britain,
Wordsworth fought with the popular taste in contemporary German poetry during his stay in Germany after the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. Admittedly the collection was initiated by Coleridge as a fund-raising project for their foreign trip, but the pecuniary need did not undermine Wordsworth’s high moral ground when it came to taste. Wordsworth paid several visits to the aged German poet Friedrich Klopstock (1724-1803), and on one occasion they discussed another German writer Christoph Wieland’s epic poem *Oberon*. Wordsworth frowned upon its sensual subject: “I thought the passion of love as well suited to the purpose [?]s of poetry as any other passion, but that it was a cheap way of pleasing to fix the attention of the reader through a long poem on the mere sexual enjoyment.” Klopstock seemed to think differently, reminding him that “such poems please every body.” Wordsworth, however, answered adversely that “it was the province of a great poet to raise people up to his own level, not to descend to theirs” (*Prose* I: 94).

This anecdote discloses much about Wordsworth’s early contemplation of popularity and taste, his poetic aspiration and his relation to the public. As an unknown young poet, he challenged the aesthetic standard of established German poets and rejected to bow to popular taste that was too easily satisfied by sensational appeal. Popularity is not the mark of greatness; a great writer necessarily has to distinguish himself from the vast majority of people, not merely to entertain them but also to instruct them. Wordsworth’s understanding of a great writer’s mission anticipates his definition of an original author of genius in 1815: “Of genius, in the fine arts, the only infallible sign is the widening the sphere of human sensibility, for the delight, honour, and benefit of human nature” (*Prose* III: 82).

At the age of twenty eight, with only three published works behind him and two bearing his name, Wordsworth was in no position to assert his own greatness. But he had a clear vision of what a great poet should be, and was prepared to measure the achievements of some popular contemporary writers in order to find a great one and learn from him. Wordsworth did not specify his standard, but it could
be gathered from his evaluation of another German poet Gottfried August Bürger (1747-1794). Bürger was well known in Britain for his supernatural ballad “Lenore,” which relates the horrifying incident of a maiden’s midnight ride with a spectre lover to the grave. Finished in 1773, it was translated into English by William Taylor and published in 1796 in the *Monthly Magazine* and caused an immediate sensation. Five translations of the poem appeared in the course of the year, including one rendered by Walter Scott. Bürger himself was heard saying that “the popularity of a poetic work is the mark of its perfection” (qtd. in Primeau 89).

Wordsworth, however, was not as impressed with the poem as most of his contemporaries. In a letter written during their German sojourn, Wordsworth told Coleridge that he and Dorothy had read “Leonora” and a few other poems of Bürger in the German original, but they were upon the whole “disappointed, particularly in ‘Leonora,’” and even thought some passages were inferior to the English translation by Taylor. Wordsworth was less enthusiastic about Bürger than even Coleridge, but he acceded to Coleridge’s opinion of Bürger as a poet, who “is never the mobbist, one of those dim drivellers with which our island has teemed for so many years”—by “dim drivellers” he possibly alluded to writers like Lewis. The disappointment set Wordsworth apart from others who were thrilled by Bürger, and disclosed his order of hierarchy for works of literature.

Acknowledging Bürger as one of the few authors whose books can arouse his interest, Wordsworth was not yet satisfied: “when I have laid the book down I do not think of him. I remember a hurry of pleasure, but I have few distinct forms that people my mind, nor any recollection of delicate or minute feelings which he has either communicated to me, or taught me to recognise.” The images are vague and ghostly, the pleasures sensual and transient, and the feelings gross and crude: Bürger failed to “communicate” or teach something valuable to an aesthetically more

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103 See Wordsworth’s letter in late November to early December 1798, in *EY* 233-34. The following quotations are from the same letter and thus without page numbers. The name Lenore was sometimes translated as Leonora, Leonore or Ellenore.
perceptive and intellectually more demanding reader like Wordsworth. Wordsworth also disliked the lack of character in Bürger’s poems: “I see everywhere the character of Bürger himself. . . . But yet I wish him sometimes at least to make me forget himself in his creations.” In this respect, Wordsworth was as opposed to the egotistical author as Keats after him. Character “is absolutely necessary” in poems descriptive of human nature, while “incidents are among the lowest allurements of poetry.” Nevertheless, Wordsworth granted the merits of Bürger’s poems the Incidents and recognised in them “a manner of relating which is almost always spirited and lively, and stamped and peculiarized with genius.” But his final assessment is reserved: “still I do not find those higher beauties which can entitle him to the name of a great poet.”

In Wordsworth’s order of preference, Bürger is a good poet with some genius, superior to many of his contemporary British writers, but not measuring up to the standard of the first-class genius. Poetry can attract by incidents, character, or feeling, and a poet’s greatness can be measured by the extent he can dispose of gross incidents and communicate more delicate feelings. Wordsworth’s judgement on the strengths and weaknesses of Bürger’s poetry, and his disappointment with and expectation from Bürger, anticipate his arguments in the 1800 Preface to Lyrical Ballads that “the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants,” that “one being is elevated above another, in proportion as he possesses this capability,” and that “to endeavour to produce or enlarge this capability is one of the best services in which, at any period, a Writer can be engaged” (Prose I: 128). His evaluation of Bürger’s genius also anticipates the gradations of genius in the 1815 “Essay:” the highest grade of genius “is the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe,” and on a lower level, it is “the application of powers to objects on which they had not before been exercised,” and lower still is “the employment of them in such a manner as to produce effects hitherto unknown” (Prose III: 82).
Wordsworth’s reserved appreciation of Bürger’s supernatural ballad, his contempt for Lewis’s Gothic play, and to some extent, his aversion to the political pamphlets, all originated from the same aesthetic standard which he formed in the 1790s, articulated in his mature years and adhered to till old age. Emerging from these letters and comments is Wordsworth the demanding reader and discerning critic before he became a distinguished poet. As a reader Wordsworth was never passive but always expected to be “taught” by a greater writer. Compared with the reviewers of his 1793 poems, Wordsworth in his comment on Bürger’s poems demonstrated superior critical sensitivity, with a steadfast notion of what to like and dislike in a given author. As a fledging poet, he conscientiously modeled himself on great writers, and wished to pass his own knowledge and discriminating power on to his readers. Doubtless he expected the same high standard of attentiveness and discernment in his readers, not because he wanted to draw them to himself, but because he wanted to teach them to identify, appreciate, and learn from original and great authors—whenever they appear and wherever they are—for their own enlightenment. If his wish becomes true, readers will acquire a more refined taste, be elevated to a higher level of moral, intellectual, and aesthetical consciousness; the nation they collectively form will become a “humanised society” and “a grateful tribute to all-ruling Heaven” (*The Excursion*, IX: 389, 391).

The “Pre-established Codes of Decision:” “Simon Lee” and “The Idiot Boy”

That Wordsworth wrote with an obvious intention of instructing readers to receive his new kind of poetry is manifest from the “Advertisement” for *Lyrical Ballads*.\(^{104}\) The difficulty, as he must have felt then, is the uncertain constituency of readers. Although he targeted the volume at the privileged class with wealth and education—judging from his apologetic reference to the use of language from “the middle and lower classes of society” and his quoting of Sir Joshua Reynolds on

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\(^{104}\) Quotations from the “Advertisement” are taken from *Prose I*: 116-17, so page numbers are omitted.
taste—he was conscious of the divisions within this affluent class, made up of critics of diverse preferences, writers with different levels of genius, and readers with various degrees of sophistication. To teach such a variety of readers how to respond to his poems is thus an impossible mission, and the anonymous author must first establish his authority.

Wordsworth’s strategy is to differentiate the readers and then negotiate with each group on the terms of his reception. Perfectly aware of the poetic tradition and public taste, he was concerned that readers would turn away from his choice of subject matter, under the influence of critics and reviewers. His first move was to dismiss the interference of critics categorically and put the reader into direct contact with the author’s writings. Then he appealed to three kinds of readers. The first kind of readers, the vast number of the mass audience, were described as victims of “the gaudiness and insane phraseology of many modern writers,” who sought “gratification” from possibly supernatural or extraordinary incidents. To such corrupted appetites, Wordsworth provided, “for their own sakes,” the key to understanding his book, that they must judge whether it “contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents” (emphasis added). The emphasis on naturalness and the order of preference from feeling through character down to incidents are in accordance with Wordsworth’s critique of the poems by the popular German poet Bürger.

The second kind of readers, those “of superior judgment,” may have objections not to his subject matter but to his style and language. Wordsworth defended himself by referring them to great writers of past and original authors of modern times. He quoted an established authority on fine arts, Sir Joshua Reynolds, that an accurate taste in poetry “is an acquired taste, which can only be produced by severe thought, and a long continued intercourse with the best models of composition.” His stress on “severe thought” and “long” communication with great works of art is a reaffirmation of what he told Mathews in 1794 that only “long and severe
meditation” could result in doctrines truly beneficial to mankind. To sophisticated readers, Wordsworth suggests that he has learned from the best of ancient and contemporary writers “in painting manners and passions,” which amounts to a bold assertion that he would like to be ranked among the greatest.

Wordsworth finally turns to the third kind of readers, “the most inexperienced” that had no particular liking or disliking, not mistaught like the first kind, but rather untaught in the art of reading. They are more susceptible to the influence of positive or negative kinds, and the advice they receive from the poet is to form an independent judgement and avoid “the rashness of decision” by long hours of reading and serious thinking. Wordsworth said remarkably little on the last kind of readers, as if reluctant to mould them into any shape. The truth is that, if these readers follow closely his succinct advice, they would eventually acquire the accurate taste and need no more instructions from others.

Short as it is, the “Advertisement” is full of tension, arising from Wordsworth’s mixed hope and fear, and his consciousness of being a challenger who has to battle on many sides to establish his authority, yet without being overtly authoritarian. By anticipating and disarming potential objections, Wordsworth literally issues a disclaimer that affirms his fulfillment of the authorial obligation, and invites readers to fulfill their part of interpretative duty. It represents Wordsworth’s first pronounced attempt to create the taste by which he is to be enjoyed, and its strategy of “dividing and conquering” is matched in the poems that follow the “Advertisement.”

Several scholars have pointed out Wordsworth’s uncertainty in relation to his audience, which leads to the juxtaposition of different modes of addressing readers. Tilottama Rajan, for example, argues that “Lyrical Ballads juxtaposes different types of poems so as to sensitize us to the issue of sociolects, of how discourses are formed and cultural texts constructed. The collection thus becomes the scene of its own

105 Wordsworth claimed in the 1815 “Essay” that “to be mistaught is worse than to be untaught.” Prose III: 66.
reading” (137). In a subtle reading of “Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew Tree,” she
discloses that Wordsworth’s creed about love of nature leading to love of man is
rather insecure; the insecurity is evident in the fact that ‘he addresses the poem as
much to himself as to the traveler, dividing himself into instructor and pupil and
speaking as resolved soul to another self that is still traveling” (147). As readers
move between the poems, Rajan suggests, “Wordsworth himself moves between
centre and periphery, between authority and its displacement” (153). Influenced by
Rajan’s approach, Thomas Pfau also argues that “[v]irtually all of Wordsworth’s
ballads dramatize or recall a scene of interpretation and instruction” (189). Ballads
like “Expostulation and Reply,” “The Tables Turned,” and “Anecdote for Fathers,” in
Pfau’s view, show “how the scene of instruction dramatized in these poems
reproduces itself as a hermeneutic crisis of reading for the reader” (192). Echoing
Rajan’s observation, Pfau contends that the collection “shifts back and forth”
between “palpably inadequate scenes of instruction” on the one hand, and “models of
a maturer, quasi-stoic wisdom” on the other hand (193).

Pfau’s interpretation of Lyrical Ballads explores how the Wordsworthian
ballad relies on “a deep-structural logic of self-surveillance” as formulated in the
“monitorial” systems of Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster. He maintains that
“Romantic pedagogy seeks to convert the individual’s self-consciousness into its
own disciplinary authority” (11). Given Wordsworth’s belated acquaintance with Bell
and his inherent distrust of the monitorial system, I think the dramatised scenes of
reading and instruction may be more accurately understood in their historic context
of literary taste. Wordsworth employed the same strategy of differentiating various
constituencies of readers in the poems in order to monitor their responses. However,
the poet was by no means a monitor in the sense of Bell’s monitors. Instead of
indoctrination, Wordsworth intended to challenge readers’ “pre-established codes of
decision” and cultivate their independent thinking and refined feeling. To illustrate
these points, I will choose to analyse two well-known poems, “Simon Lee” and “The
“Idiot Boy,” which are targeted at the first two kinds of readers mentioned in the “Advertisement,” and examine how Wordsworth attempted to educate readers’ responsive and creative imagination by engaging their activeness and passiveness.

“Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman, with an incident in which he was concerned” is in many ways an intriguing poem. It comprises three parts with three distinct styles. The first part starts in the conventional ballad style to describe Simon Lee’s old age, poverty, and infirmity in contrast to his former youth and vigour. Then the poet pauses and turns to address the expectant reader in the middle of the ninth stanza:

My gentle reader, I perceive
How patiently you’ve waited,
And I’m afraid that you expect
Some tale will be related.

O reader! had you in your mind
Such stores as silent thought can bring,
O gentle reader! you would find
A tale in every thing.
What more I have to say is short,
I hope you’ll kindly take it;
It is no tale; but should you think,
Perhaps a tale you’ll make it. (69-80)

After this prolonged admonishment, the speaker moves to the third, lyric part, telling the incident involving his voluntary help of severing a root of an old tree for Simon Lee, the old man’s profuse tears of thanks, and his enigmatic response: “Alas! the gratitude of men / Has oftener left me mourning” (103-04).

Many critics have pointed out Wordsworth’s endeavour to educate the imagined reader in this twelve-line apostrophe, and some of them have identified the reader invoked as from a particular social background.106 John F. Danby, for instance, paid attention to the adjective “gentle” as “interestingly weighted.” “There is first the sense of ‘submissive, amenable,’ and the condescension implied. There is also the

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106 As David Simpson summarises, “much of the commentary on this poem has concentrated on the way in which it is a ‘test’ of the reader’s ability to sympathize with a poetry devoid of gaudy and inane phraseology and loudly declared messages.” See Wordsworth’s Historical Imagination, 149.
opposite meaning . . . ‘well-born, polished and sophisticated, high in station’” (44). By deriving “two opposites and alternatives” from the word, Danby perceived the “reversibility of the superior-inferior relation” between the speaker and the reader. But such a reading assumes that the poetic speaker wishes the “gentle” reader from the privileged class to be submissive to him, whereas Wordsworth feared such a reader’s habitual submission to writers (especially those good at tale-telling) may be the very cause for his need of education.

The poetic speaker’s apostrophising stands deliberately in the way of the imagined reader’s expectation of immediate gratification. The imagined reader is gentle, not so much in the sense of being a gentleman or lady as in the sense of being passive and expecting to be entertained with a tale. Undoubtedly Wordsworth’s speaker addresses a middle or upper class reader, but the reader is also a particular kind among those who could afford the volume. He is not “inexperienced” nor one “of superior judgment,” but representative of the vast majority with deep-rooted bad habits of reading, as Wordsworth classified them in the “Advertisement.” That the poetic speaker has in mind such a passive reader is also testified by his use of subjective mood—”had you in your mind” and “you would find” in the following lines—which, according to Charles J. Rzepka, implies “you have not” or “you do not” (55). David Simpson also points out that, “in his assertion of the ordinary event as of great poetic importance, Wordsworth is mounting the sort of attack upon decorum that offended so many of the readers of his early work, and still offends others today” (Wordsworth’s 149).

However, I do not agree with Rzepka’s views that the gentle reader “submits to be enlightened,” that “Wordsworth creates in his own mind a fictive audience of converts to his brand of benevolence,” and that “the poet shows very little of what we might call performance anxiety” (55). If submission is the most desirable characteristic in a reader, or if Wordsworth only wants the reader to shift the object of submission from other writers to himself, he could hardly justify the “worthy
purpose” of his poetic experiments, and he would claim little difference from the writers or modes of writing he critiqued. The very subjunctive mood, together with expressions like “I hope you’ll kindly take it,” “should you think” and “perhaps,” indicates the speaker’s “anxiety of reception,” to borrow Lucy Newlyn’s phrase. Wordsworth does not quite trust the reader’s capacity to think, but yet earnestly hopes the reader can think. The poet is aware of the tricky situation he puts himself and the reader into: he reprimands the reader for being too passive to other writers, but if his lesson is partially received, the reader could become too active and rise to resist being taught at all.

In this regard, Andrew Griffin’s interpretation remains the most subtle and sophisticated. He perceived that the poem “originates in Wordsworth’s profound uneasiness about the expectations that poet and reader come together to satisfy,” and he related it to the serious speculations underlying Wordsworth’s endeavour of challenging the poetic convention: “To make a true poem, what powers of response in the reader, matched by what sort of action on the poet’s part, must be fitted to what sort of subject?” (393). Griffin situated the poem in Wordsworth’s attitude towards the public taste: “Both the ‘Advertisement’ of 1798 and the Preface of 1800 reveal a mixture of contempt for and fear of his gentle readers and their ‘pre-established codes of decision’” (395).

Wordsworth in the 1800 Preface felt a desperate urgency to restore the original sensitivity of human mind, which he regarded as a writer’s duty, especially so at the turn of the nineteenth-century: “For a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor.” He blamed “the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country” for having conformed themselves to the public’s “craving for extraordinary incidents,” and regretted that 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, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” (*Prose* I: 128).

Wordsworth’s condemnation of the literary marketplace is a pointed attack at such writings as “Monk” Lewis’s *The Castle Spectre* and imitations of Bürger’s “Lenore.” Michael Gamer reads the “Preface” and the poetry it seeks to justify “both within the context of Gothic’s reception in the last years of the eighteenth century and as a response to it” (92). “Simon Lee,” in Wordsworth’s own words, embodies his counteractive efforts of “placing my Reader in the way of receiving from ordinary moral sensations another and more salutary impression than we are accustomed to receive from them” (*Prose* I: 126, 128). According to Andrew Griffin, the poetic speaker is like a “grudging guide” who means only to lead the reader “to a spot he has in mind” and leaves the reader “mentally alert, intellectually and morally alone” (397). One may be reminded of the lantern metaphor Wordsworth employed in his letter to Mathews in 1794. He did not intend to lead a group of travelers with a single lantern in his own hand, but deemed it a noble service to “put into each man’s hand a lantern to guide him” (*EY* 125), in due respect to the individual’s “voluntary exertion.” Therefore, although the speaker tightly controls the narrative up to the point of line 80, he leaves the reader independent for the rest of the poem, with the advice that the reader should kindly “take” the non-tale he would offer, “think” over it, and “make a tale out of it.” As Brian McGrath suggests, the poem “focuses on an unremarkable incident to aid the reader to invest in a passion or feeling that is not reducible to sentimentalism or sensationalism,” and its stress is “not placed on the incident but on the reader’s ability (or inability) to ‘take it’” (571).

The address to an imagined reader shows Wordsworth’s awareness of the conventional contract entered between writer and reader that set them apart as giver and receiver. However, Wordsworth overturned the convention in “Simon Lee” by challenging the reader to receive what his own mind can give. The effect of such a deliberate breaking up of the contract is, according to James Averill, “to cause the
reader to examine his expectations, and, indeed, the entire enterprise of reading” (164). Averill notices that Wordsworth’s speaker challenged the reader “to invest serious thought in the casual act of reading,” and it is an experiment “to explore the boundary area between reader and writer, and to invite the reader to partake in the poetic making” (165). In asking the reader to “take” and “make”—to be receiver and creator at the same time—Wordsworth’s speaker is effectively demanding him to exercise “the first poetic spirit” which the poet believed was inherent in every human being. It is a worthwhile practice; if the reader can be more observant and thoughtful, he may eventually regain the poetic habit of mind that enables him to “find / A tale in every thing.” In this sense, the poem as a whole is “a schooling of the imagination” (Griffin 404).

Wordsworth resorted to a different strategy of addressing readers in “The Idiot Boy” for a similarly educative purpose. But this time, the targeted readership included those “of superior judgment” who the poet feared would accuse him of having “descended too low” and used expressions “too familiar, and not of sufficient dignity” (Prose I: 116). The longest poem by Wordsworth in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, it tells the story of Johnny the idiot boy’s night adventure when he was set on a pony by his mother Betty Foy to send for a doctor in town for their sick neighbour Susan Gale. Many scholars have pointed out its “mock-epic” features,107 such as its dealing with “a life-and-death issue” and “the last chance of success depending on the last person likely to succeed” (Danby 52), elements that would be familiar to the eighteenth-century reader well versed in the literary tradition.

Unlike the poetic speaker in “Simon Lee” who addresses the “gentle reader” in the middle of the ballad, Wordsworth’s speaker in “The Idiot Boy” addresses a variety of characters and readers. He chides Betty in the second stanza “What means this bustle, Betty Foy?” (8) In the middle of the ballad, he shifts from third person

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narrative about Betty’s anxiety to address an unspecified audience: “She listens, but she cannot hear . . . / The grass you almost hear it growing, / You hear it now if e’er you can” (292, 295-96). Then there is the direct appeal to the reader: “Oh reader! now that I might tell / What Johnny and his horse are doing / What they’ve been doing all this time” (322-24). He invokes the muses for help: “Oh gentle muses! Let me tell / But half of what to him befel” (349-50), and even blames the muses for their indifference: “Oh gentle muses! is this kind? / Why will ye thus my suit repel?” (352-53) As Richard Gravil observes, the speaker’s “mockery (if it is mockery) is generously bestowed upon all and sundry,” and the chiding is applied to Betty’s “foolishly misplaced pride” first, and later “to our pre-established codes of how a narrative poem should proceed” (107).

After over three hundred lines, the speaker stops to address the “reader” who, like the “gentle reader” invoked in “Simon Lee,” has been patiently waiting for the progress of the tale. Instead of frustrating the reader’s expectations, the speaker unsparingly gratifies the passive appetite for tale, with four successive stanzas that begin with “perhaps.” He lists some of the possibilities that could have happened to Johnny and his horse: Johnny may be roaming the cliffs “[t]o lay his hands upon a star,” or “like a silent horseman-ghost, / He travels on along the vale,” or “he’s hunting sheep, / A fierce and dreadful hunter he!” Or “[h]e’s galloping away, away, / And so he’ll gallop on for aye, / The bane of all that dread the devil” (327-46).

Clearly the speaker is teasing the tale-craving reader with such wild fancies. As John F. Danby perceived, “[t]hey are terribly stale literary stock—the sublimely whimsical, the Monk Lewis, the Quixotic; mad Ajaxes and romantic wild-men,” and Wordsworth “conjures up the fancies in order to indulge so many reading-public weaknesses, and, again, detach himself from them” (51-52). Mary Jacobus makes a special case for the influence of Bürger’s “Lenore” on the composition of “The Idiot Boy,” for Wordsworth may have in mind the British reading public’s fascination with the German ballad, and the opening stanza of “The Idiot Boy” echoes that of
Taylor’s magazine translation. However, Wordsworth’s poem “burlesques the ballad of supernatural adventure in order to establish new priorities—the feelings and experiences which irradiate the everyday” (233). The chief contrasts between these two ballads are of natural versus supernatural as the subject matter, and of feeling versus action as the source of poetry. “Instead of the sound and fury of Lenora’s midnight gallop,” Jacobus notices, “we have the successive moods of Johnny’s mother (pride, anxiety, despair, relief),” and “the headlong speed of Bürger’s narrative is transferred to her frantic pursuit of her missing son” (251). This interpretation is supported by Wordsworth’s own explanation in the 1800 Preface that he “trac[ed] the maternal passion through many of its more subtle windings” in “The Idiot Boy,” and that his poetry distinguishes from the “popular Poetry of the day” in the fact that “the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling” (Prose I: 128).

The climax of this poem comes at the end when Betty insists that Johnny should give an account of his nocturnal adventure, a request perhaps made on behalf of the ballad readers. Here the speaker withdraws his role as a narrator and interpreter, trusting the responsibility of story-telling to Johnny. Johnny’s reply is carefully framed by the speaker’s reassuring introduction and concluding emphasis:

And this to Betty’s question, he
Made answer, like a traveller bold,
(His very words I give to you,)
“The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,
“And the sun did shine so cold.”
—Thus answered Johnny in his glory,
And that was all his travel’s story. (457-63)

In his notes to Isabella Fenwick, Wordsworth recollected that the last stanza—“The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo, And the sun did shine so cold”—was “the foundation of the whole.” The poet remembered the words were reported to him by Thomas Poole, but he “heard the same repeated of other Idiots,” and added

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that “this long poem was composed in the groves of Alfoxden, almost extempore; not a single word, I believe, being corrected, though one stanza was omitted” (Curtis, *Notes* 10). The source of Wordsworth’s inspiration, the circumstance of his writing, and the relatively little revision it goes through, encourage readers to reconsider the importance of Johnny’s account of his travel’s story. Johnny’s words are introduced with the speaker’s almost fastidious emphasis on its factual truth and his offering gesture “I give you.” The offer faintly echoes the apostrophe in “Simon Lee:” “What more I have to say is short, / I hope you'll kindly take it” (77-78). After presenting Johnny’s short reply, the speaker adds two concluding lines in resolute confirmation of Johnny’s glory and his story, which may be read as variants of the other speaker’s tentative advice in “Simon Lee:” “It is no tale; but should you think, / Perhaps a tale you'll make it” (79-80).

From the four successive stanzas that enumerate Johnny’s possible adventures to the final stanza which contains only two lines of the travel story, Wordsworth’s speaker shifts from activeness to passiveness in storytelling, and he expects the reader’s corresponding shift from passiveness to activeness in the reading process. Contemporary reviews show little evidence of readers’ cooperation, since the poem was derided by many and enjoyed by a few for different reasons. However, modern critics have demonstrated what can be made out of Johnny’s cryptic reply and how enriching and educative the reading experience is. Johnny’s experience, according to Mary Jacobus, is an “adventure . . . of the imagination” (259-60), for “a mysterious inner life sets him apart, identifying him with the other-worldliness of the moon or the well-being of the curring owlets whose call he echoes with his burring” (260). Johnny responds to what he sees and hears “with a freshness of vision” which is analogous to the poet’s” (261).109

To fully appreciate the poetic quality of Johnny’s reply, Susan Meisenhelder points out, we should “withhold our adult, rational preconceptions about the boy’s

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109 Jonathan Wordsworth also observed that beyond the idiot boy’s “mongol inarticulacy lies a special capacity to relate—a capacity that for most would be destroyed in the process of education, acquiring language, forming ordinary relationships and assumptions.” See *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision*, 70.
mental capabilities and examine the perceptual processes involved in the statement itself” (50). In this light, she continues, the remark clearly indicates the “creative sensibility” which Wordsworth described in *The Prelude* as “observation of affinities / In objects where no brotherhood exists / To common minds” (*1805* II: 403-05).

When Johnny attempts to interpret the owl’s cry and the moon in terms of his daytime experience, “the rearrangement of the elements and the synthetic perception evident in his response reveal imaginative power and aesthetic sensibility beyond the ordinary,” Meisenhelder elucidates, and in this sense, “the boy’s two-line answer is the quintessential miniature poem” (50).

In both “Simon Lee” and “The Idiot Boy,” Wordsworth anticipated the middle and upper class readers’ expectations of extraordinary tales or poetic convention, but deliberately frustrated or mocked the popular or refined tastes. He challenged the “pre-established codes of decision” not by subjugating the passive or prejudiced readers to his own interpretation, but by encouraging them to think on their own, so that they can learn to exercise the perceptive and creative imagination and be raised to a level closer to the original poet. Ambitious as his objectives are, the success of his endeavour relies partly on the reception of the reading public, towards whom he maintained a mixed attitude of hope and fear. Would contemporary readers take kindly Wordsworth’s slightly condescending invitation and learn to read his poems with thinking, feeling, and imagination? To what extent did their responses influence Wordsworth’s communicating strategy in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*? These are the subjects of discussion in my next section.

**Wordsworth’s Fit and Unfit Audiences: “A Poet’s Epitaph”**

The first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* received mixed comments in contemporary literary magazines between 1798 and 1800. Most reviewers reacted cordially to the experiments and recognised the author’s talents of composition. Their major complaint, however, was with the author’s choice of subject matter, despite the
author’s defensive plea in the short “Advertisement.” Robert Southey, the first to review the volume in October 1798 for *The Critical Review*, deemed the experiment a failure, “not because the language of conversation is little adapted to ‘the purpose of poetic pleasure,’ but because it has been tried upon uninteresting subjects” (Reiman I: 310). Dr Charles Burney in *The Monthly Review* wished the “genius and originality” would be bestowed “on more elevated subjects” (Reiman II: 717). An anonymous review from the *British Critic* acknowledged the reforming endeavour of the author (whom he mistakenly identified as Coleridge throughout) “to recall our poetry, from the fantastical excess of refinement, to simplicity and nature” (Reiman I: 128), and praised “its probable effects upon modern readers.” Nevertheless, he raised a minor complaint that the tale about the idiot boy “descends quite to common life” (Reiman I: 129).

While “Simon Lee” made little impression with its overt plea to the gentle reader, “The Idiot Boy” attracted almost unanimous condemnation. Southey lamented in *The Critical Review* that the poet wasted his talents in over five hundred lines on a worthless subject: “No tale less deserved the labour that appears to have been bestowed upon this. It resembles a Flemish picture in the worthlessness of its design and the excellence of its execution” (Reiman I: 308). By deploying the terms of fine arts, Southey answered back Wordsworth’s immodest challenge to critics and readers “of superior judgment,” determined to prove his superior taste in poetry. The contest over authority can be better understood in light of Southey’s own poem “The Idiot” which was published anonymously in June 1798 in *The Morning Post*. It tells in sixty lines the story of an idiot boy Ned who dug up his mother’s grave and tried to warm her corpse by the family hearth, not long before he passed away.110 In its swift, detached and conventional narrative about idiocy and death, Southey “fulfils the reader’s expectations” and “puts him in a position of superiority to Ned” (Duthie 219-20). Although the subject matter is low and sensational, Southey did not breach

the eighteenth-century sense of decorum or challenge the reader to think or feel differently.\footnote{Robert Mayo also cited “The Idiot” but did not identify Southey as its author. Mayo asserted the similarities between the two poems, such as the use of village life as background, the mother-child relationship as subject matter, and the deployment of “the incongruous mixture of the grotesque and the pathetic.” See Mayo, “The Contemporaneity of the Lyrical Ballads,” \textit{PMLA} 69.3 (1954) 499-500. But such a comparison neglected the aesthetic difference that Wordsworth apart from other Gothic writers.}

Wordsworth was much hurt by Southey’s review and feared it would damage the sale of \textit{Lyrical Ballads}. In a letter to his publisher Cottle, Wordsworth complained about Southey’s insensitivity: “He knew that I published those poems for money & money alone. He knew that money was of importance to me. If he could not conscientiously have spoken differently of the volume, in common delicacy he ought to have declined the task of reviewing it.” He was dissatisfied with Southey’s “vague praises” of his talents, and showed triumphant contempt for all critics: “I care little for the praises of Southey or any other professional critic but as it may help me to pudding.”\footnote{See James A. Butler, “Wordsworth, Cottle, and the \textit{Lyrical Ballads}: Five Letters, 1797-1800,” \textit{Journal of English and Germanic Philology} 75 (1976) 145.} This sour remark should not lead to a mistaken notion of the mercenary nature of Wordsworth’s writing. His distrust of and sometimes even hostility to critics originated from his early reading experiences about reviews in general and criticism of his previous publications in particular. Most critics, in his view, can neither praise nor censor poetry according to just criteria.

However, the vague praises and strong condemnation did not affect the sale of \textit{Lyrical Ballads} as Wordsworth feared. According to Dorothy’s report in 1800, “the first volume sold much better than we expected, and was liked by a much greater number of people,” although they “knew that poems so different from what we have in general become popular immediately after their publication were not likely to be admired all at once.” She mentioned William’s plan to “publish a second Edition of the Lyrical Ballads with a second volume” (\textit{EY} 297-98). Wordsworth also confessed that he had pleased a greater number of readers than he expected (\textit{Prose I}: 118).

Wordsworth was also aware that popularity did not translate to correct taste. The readers’ source of pleasure in reading \textit{Lyrical Ballads} may differ from the
author’s original intention, not to mention their disappointment with certain poems that were his personal favourites. As some scholars have argued, “both friendly and unfriendly critical notices invoked prevalent, and already established, critical standards in their assessments of the poems,” and in doing so, “both substantially bypassed or ignored Wordsworth’s appeal” in the “Advertisement” against the “pre-established codes of decision” (336).\textsuperscript{113} In his letter to the publishers in December 1800, Wordsworth pointed out that the \textit{Lyrical Ballads} “are written upon a theory professedly new, and on principles which many persons will be unwilling to admit” (\textit{EY} 310). It is necessary to prefix an explanatory essay “instructing the public in how to read this verse” (Schulz 625).

In the expansive Preface to the 1800 edition of \textit{Lyrical Ballads}, Wordsworth attempted, despite his claim of unwillingness to do so, a systematic defence of the theory upon which his poems were written. Should this theory be recognised and realised, he had faith that “a class of Poetry would be produced, well adapted to interest mankind permanently” (\textit{Prose I}: 120). Underlying such an ambitious project was his perception of the connection between literature, taste and morality. A comprehensive defence would require

\begin{quote}
a full account of the present state of the public taste in this country, and to determine how far this taste is healthy or depraved; which again could not be determined, without pointing out, in what manner language and the human mind act and react on each other, and without retracing the revolutions not of literature alone but likewise of society itself. (\textit{Prose I}: 120)
\end{quote}

Wordsworth curtailed his discussion to present a miniature version of the blueprint. His poetic theory emphasises the mental process involved in the composition (and reading) of a poem, which produces “habits of mind” that enable poets to “describe objects and utter sentiments” in a particular manner, so that “the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful statement of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, his taste

exalted, and his affections ameliorated” (*Prose I*: 126). In desiring to connect the poet’s mental activities with the reader’s understanding, taste and affection, Wordsworth demonstrated his commitment to elevating readers towards the level of great poets. This “concern with the reader’s response, and hence with the artful means by which the poet plays upon it” is, according to Stephen Parrish, “Wordsworth’s central concern through all his critical writing, altering little throughout his career” (8).

The greatest obstacle to the genesis of a new kind of poetry, and consequently, a new kind of reader, is the prevalent public taste for literature. Wordsworth diagnosed the public taste at the end of the eighteenth century as a “degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation” which worked to “blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion” (*Prose I*: 128). His own writing was “the feeble effort” with which he endeavoured to “counteract” this trend (*Prose I*: 130). Poetry in his definition is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” which “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (*Prose I*: 148). Such a definition highlights both the poet’s power of “voluntary exertion” and his habit of long and deep meditation, which prevents powerful feelings from becoming outrageous stimulation. Readers attuned to this kind of poetry would, in Wordsworth’s view, be gradually cured of the depraved taste and develop a healthier constitution of feeling and mind.

An important indicator of public taste is literary criticism, which Wordsworth believes stands between his original poetry and his desired readers. The poet deems some critical opinions were wasted on poetry “neither interesting in itself, nor can lead to anything interesting.” Besides this false mode of criticism is a common mode of criticism, which looks up to the opinions of “such and such classes of people” for a verdict on poetry. Wordsworth advises his reader to “decide by his own feelings genuinely, and not by reflection upon what will probably be the judgment of others” (*Prose I*: 154). If the reader is by chance impressed by any single composition,
Wordsworth further suggests, he should be encouraged to read other works by the same author with almost equal trust and reverence. “This is not only an act of justice,” Wordsworth continues, “but in our decisions upon poetry especially, may conduce in a high degree to the improvement of our own taste” (Prose I: 156). This education of taste must come at a cost. In order to enjoy the poetry recommended here, the poet acknowledges, “it would be necessary to give up much of what is ordinarily enjoyed.” But the sacrifice is worthwhile, for the reader would be rewarded with a more “genuine” kind of poetry that “may give other enjoyments, of a purer, more lasting, and more exquisite nature” (Prose I: 156).

Like the 1798 “Advertisement” where Wordsworth addressed three distinct segments of readers within the privileged class, the 1800 Preface also embodies Wordsworth’s differentiating strategy towards the audience in terms of their reading experiences. Wordsworth seems to address the mass audience in his diagnosis of the public taste, associate experienced and cultivated readers with incompetent or biased literary critics, and appeal to the inexperienced readers to rely on their own judgements. He feared his poetic innovation would be criticised by the public, but paradoxically, he nursed the hope of relying on the eminent leaders of public opinion to promote the new edition.

Wordsworth wrote in December 1800 to his publisher Longman and requested that half a dozen copies or so be sent “to persons of eminence either in Letters or in the state,” and one copy to Charles Lamb (EY 310). The recipients were three women and five men, including Anna Letitia Barbauld the literary critic and author of children’s literature, Matthew Gregory Lewis whose popularity he used to despise, Sir James Bland Burges, writer Knight Marshall of George III’s household, Charles James Fox the prominent Whig statesman, and the Duchess of Devonshire, friend of Fox and the most powerful political woman in Georgian Britain. They represented fairly the eminent literary and political figures from across the spectrum. Coleridge drafted all the other letters, but Wordsworth composed the one to Fox in January.
In this carefully worded letter to Fox, Wordsworth acknowledged that he and the statesman moved in “different circles,” but he observed in Fox’s public character “a constant predominance of sensibility of heart,” which rendered him dear to true poets. He recommended two poems especially, “The Brothers” and “Michael,” which were “written with a view to shew that men who do not wear fine cloaths can feel deeply.” Repeating his views in the Preface about the moral benefits attainable from reading his poems, Wordsworth hoped that “they may excite profitable sympathies in many kind and good hearts, and may in some small degree enlarge our feelings of reverence for our species, and our knowledge of human nature.” Furthermore, Wordsworth suggested the two poems “might co-operate” with Fox’s political efforts “to stem this and other evils” (EY 312-15). In other words, Wordsworth “expresses his love for Fox by co-opting Fox’s politics to his own poetics” (Johnston 544).

Fox’s reply was short, obliging, and surprising. He acknowledged that he enjoyed the poems, and identified his favourites as including “Harry Gill,” “We are Seven,” “The Mad Mother,” and “The Idiot.” However, he confessed his inability to appreciate “The Brothers” and “Michael.” “I read with particular attention the two you pointed out;” said Fox, “but whether it be from early prepossessions, or whatever other cause, I am no great friend to blank verse for subjects which are to be treated of with simplicity.” Fox’s “early prepossessions” are synonymous with the “pre-established codes of decision” which Wordsworth found typical and strong in experienced readers.

Charles Lamb also replied upon receiving the present copy. He admitted that he did not feel any poem in the second volume “so forcibly as the Ancient Marinere, the Mad mother, and the Lines at Tintern Abbey in the first.” With regard to the critical preface, he wished it “had appeared in a separate treatise,” because “its

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114 For the identity of all the recipients and the content of the letters, see Kenneth R. Johnston, The Hidden Wordsworth, 542-45.
dogmas . . . associate a diminishing idea with the Poems which follow, as having been written for Experiments on the public taste” (266). As Lamb perceived, experimenting on the public taste was what Wordsworth did with both the 1798 “Advertisement” and the 1800 Preface. Above all, Lamb objected to Wordsworth’s didactic manner in many a poem: “An intelligent reader finds a sort of insult in being told, I will teach you how to think upon this subject” (265). One wonders whether Fox could have felt insulted by Wordsworth’s letter of instruction, and whether his indifference to the two poems recommended was a willing resistance to be taught. But Lamb was an unusually disciplined reader, much more experienced than most of Wordsworth’s target audience. Wordsworth did not assume all of his readers as well educated as Lamb; what was superfluous for him might be necessary for others.

These eminent persons’ diverse responses to the second edition no doubt amused Wordsworth, and afforded him both hope and fear concerning the creation of a new taste in which he could be enjoyed. He also received an unexpected long letter from an enthusiastic young reader, John Wilson, the seventeen-year-old undergraduate student from Glasgow University who would later become a major critical voice of *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (under the name of Christopher North). In the letter of May 1802, Wilson spilt much ink praising the achievements of *Lyrical Ballads* and the effects produced on his mind. He discovered, among other things, “marks of delicate feeling,” “benevolence of disposition,” and “knowledge of human nature,” and felt his soul “refined by the sentiments contained in them.” As Stephen Gill notices, Wilson “relied heavily on the Preface for the terms in which he praised the philosophy and morality of the *Lyrical Ballads*” (*Life* 197).

The latter half of Wilson’s letter, however, revealed that he had not fully subscribed to the instructions in the Preface. Wilson made a drastic turn to criticise Wordsworth’s choice of subject matter in “The Idiot Boy.” It appeared to him “almost unnatural that a person in a state of complete idiotism should excite the

warmest feelings of attachment in the breast even of his mother.” He added that the
same incapacity to sympathise with either the mother or the idiot boy was shared by
all the people he knew. To strengthen his argument, Wilson invoked the established
codes of decision: “This inability to receive pleasure from descriptions such as that
of ‘The Idiot Boy,’ is, I am convinced, founded upon established feelings of human
nature, and the principle of it constitutes, as I dare say you recollect, the leading
feature of Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments.” He concluded that the poet had
“committed an error” in the choice of this subject, but made some allowance, like
that of Southey, that the fault “lies in the plan, not in the execution.”

This letter prompted a long and passionate reply from Wordsworth. He thought
highly of Wilson’s serious responsiveness in approaching the poems: “It is plain
from your letter that the pleasure which I have given you has not been blind or
unthinking; you have studied the poems, and prove that you have entered into the
spirit of them” (EY 353). The poet’s terms of praise emphasised thinking and
studying, two basic steps for a reader’s poetic education. Wordsworth went beyond
his usual habits of correspondence to give a lengthy reply, “not because Wilson
praised him,” as Gill perceives, “but because in criticizing the conception of The
Idiot Boy he had revealed that he was still far from appreciating the radical character
of the poems and from sharing Wordsworth’s vision of the poet’s role” (Life 198).

In two thirds of his reply, Wordsworth challenged Wilson’s observation that his
subject failed to give pleasure by questioning the audience to be pleased: “Does not
please whom?” Definitely not the middle and upper class readers who “cannot bear
to see delicate and refined feelings ascribed to men in low conditions in society,
because their vanity and self-love tell them that these belong only to themselves, and
men like themselves in dress, station, and way of life.” Wilson failed to see, in
Wordsworth’s words to Fox, that “men who do not wear fine cloaths can feel deeply”
(EY 315), and the reason for his failure is the “established codes of decision” he

117 “Christopher North:” A Memoir of John Wilson, 30-31.
derived from books like Adam Smith’s moral philosophy.

Wordsworth then contemplated the duty of a poet and the distinction between a merely good and a genuinely great poet. It could be praiseworthy to reflect truthfully the feelings of human nature, he observed, but a great poet “ought to a certain degree to rectify men’s feelings, to give them new compositions of feeling, to render their feelings more sane pure and permanent, in short, more consonant to nature, that is, to eternal nature, and the great moving spirit of things” (EY 355). He attached a profoundly redemptive function to the writings of a great poet, and associated the genuine kind of poetry with the permanence of human nature, in accordance with the Christian spirit.

The definition of a great poet’s duty has significant implications for his composition of “The Idiot Boy,” Wordsworth told Wilson, because the “loathing and disgust” many people feel for an idiot was not necessarily attached to human nature “in any vi[rtuous?] degree,” but was “owing in a great measure to a false delicacy” and “a certain want of comprehensiveness of thinking and feeling” (EY 356). He observed that while parents of the privileged class would board an idiot child out to a public or private institution, fathers and mothers “of the lower classes of society” took such children under their own care, and so did their poor neighbours, demonstrating “the great triumph of the human heart” (EY 357). Wordsworth’s own feelings towards idiots are voiced through “the sublime expression of scripture that, ‘their life is hidden with God’” (EY 357). It is perhaps in this sense that he attached unusual importance to readers’ ability or inability to appreciate “The Idiot Boy,” and his poetry in general. As he later told Lady Beaumont, “To be incapable of a feeling of Poetry in my sense of the word is to be without love of human nature and reverence for God” (MY I: 146).

Wordsworth’s reply to Wilson came out shortly before the publication of the third edition of Lyrical Ballads in June 1802. A significant addition to the new Preface is Wordsworth’s definition of the poet and his target audience. By defining the poet as essentially “a man speaking to men” (Prose I: 138), Wordsworth
transcended the varied distinctions that artificially separated one man from another, and stressed our shared humanity. In a defensive passage, Wordsworth claimed that the only restriction a poet should consider was to give “immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer or a natural philosopher, but as a Man” (Prose I: 139). This singular emphasis on the abstract “Man,” and its difference from the possibly miseducated professionals, is a reaffirmation of Wordsworth’s faith in the “certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind,” as he expressed in the 1800 Preface (Prose I: 130).

The definition of a poet and the distinction between an ideal reader of poetry and readers of other knowledge are significant for our understanding of one particular poem from the 1800 Lyrical Ballads—“A Poet’s Epitaph.” Wordsworth uneasily associated publishing with death. Even before the publication of the first edition of Lyrical Ballads, in March 1798, he wrote to James Tobin: “There is little need to advise me against publishing; it is a thing which I dread as much as death itself” (EY 211). According to Stephen M. Parrish, Wordsworth composed “A Poet’s Epitaph” in the frozen German winter of 1798, with which he “seems to have celebrated his own imagined death at Goslar” (176). The epitaphic genre is not new, and Wordsworth’s poem may have been inspired by Robert Burns’s “A Bard’s Epitaph” of 1786. The peculiarities of Wordsworth’s “A Poet’s Epitaph,” according to Joshua Scodel, lies in the fact that it “neglects to describe the deceased in order to concentrate wholly on the reactions of readers, good and bad.” Instead of inviting readers as is the tradition of the genre, Wordsworth devoted nine stanzas to expelling various kinds of inadequate readers, which “suggests by its very length the rarity of ‘proper’ readers” (387). It can be considered as Wordsworth’s defence strategy as well as poetic pedagogy.

“A Poet’s Epitaph” comprises two distinct parts addressing two different kinds of readers, the professional man and the poetic “Man.” In the first part, the poetic speaker banishes specific types of readers in successive stanzas: the “statesman” is asked to “learn to love one living man” before “think[ing] upon the dead;” the

118 Stephen M. Parrish notices the influence of Burns’s “A Bard’s Epitaph” on Wordsworth’s poem but focuses on their similarity in the portrayal of the poet image. See Parrish, The Art of the Lyrical Ballads, 176-77. Michael O’Neill also compares the two poems and points out their difference in terms of wisdom and moral offered to the reader. See O’neill, “Lyrical Ballads and the ‘Pre-Established Codes of Decision,’” 130-31.
“Lawyer” has to keep off with the “hardness” of his “coward eye” and the “falsehood” of his “sallow face;” the lazy and indulgent rich man is forbidden to use the grave as a “cushion;” the ‘soldier’ is welcome only after laying down his “sword aside;” the “Philosopher” that would “peep and botanise / Upon his mother’s grave” is to turn away so that the dead may rest in peace; and the “Moralist” who is a “reasoning, self-sufficing thing” is advised to sleep in his intellectual crust and not to waste a second “Near this unprofitable dust” (1-36). “Despite its obvious satirical exaggerations,” Scodel observes, “the poem suggests the genuine difficulties Wordsworth imagined when contemplating readers,” and the succession of professionals resembles the various readers Wordsworth lists in the 1802 Preface (388).

In the second part of the poem, however, the poetic speaker adopts a more sincere tone to greet his expected reader. The figure is described as everything the professionals are not—an unassuming youth from an ordinary background, possessing ordinary intellect and unsettled in any profession. In terms of formal education he is not as well educated as the professional men, but his deficiency in practical spheres of education turns out to be an advantage conducive to the growth of his poetic spirit. A closer look will reveal him as a poet figure with receptive and creative imagination, who can respond to the call of external nature with voice of his own: “He murmurs near the running brooks / A music sweeter than their own” (39-40). With “impulses of deeper birth” that “[h]ave come to him in solitude” (47-48), the young man is a poet whose poetry “is the spontaneous outflow of powerful feelings,” originating “from emotion recollected in tranquility” (Prose I. 148). He is said to be able to find “in common things” some “random truths”—“The harvest of a quiet eye / That broods and sleeps on his heart” (49-52). In this sense, he is also the ideal reader expected in “Simon Lee,” who has in mind “[s]uch stores as silent thought can bring” (74).

The harvest suggests that the young reader is a poetic labourer, capable of reaping food for spiritual nourishment. To such a youth the poet speaker extends his warmest welcome in the final stanza:

—Come hither in thy hour of strength,  
Come, weak as is a breaking wave!  
Here stretch thy body at full length;
Wordsworth’s juxtaposition of strength and weakness in the young man has puzzled some of the most powerful critical minds. Lucy Newlyn reads it as “characteristic of Wordsworth’s divided wishes with respect to his readers” (126). Deeply suspicious of the author’s palpable design, she is sympathetic to the reader who “is invited to lie down in the grave of the poet—literally to swop places with him—as though the poet’s continuing life must be at the cost of the death of the reader” (127). This is, however, a serious misunderstanding of Wordsworth’s expectation from the reader, which she recognises and modifies later.

Susan Meisenhelder is more accurate to say that Wordsworth “desires not to deliver knowledge to a passive reader” but rather demands “an active reader” (231). The poet expels the professional men one after another in the first part because he thinks their education and training have rendered them passive receivers of information, with too strong prejudices and too weak creative power. The ideal reader, however, can be strong and weak at the same time, and for the right reason. “In his ability and willingness to be affected lies his strength,” Meisenhelder explains (233). But this is only one aspect of an ideal reader, and the other aspect involves creation based on reception. As Meisenhelder perceives, in inviting the reader to build a house upon this grave, the poet “urges the sensitive reader, one who gains power through his willingness to be ‘informed,’ to use the poem as the basis for his own creative act of building” (234). In this sense, the poem performs the pedagogy of responsive and creative reading.

The split voice of the poem—satirical in the first part and lyrical in the second—aroused controversial responses among Wordsworth’s contemporaries. Charles Lamb wrote to Wordsworth that the poem “is disfigured, to my taste, by the vulgar satire upon parsons and lawyers in the beginning . . . all the rest is eminently good, and your own” (265). But his preference of the latter part is opposed to the opinion of John Stoddart, a London lawyer and author, who was reported to have remarked: “The latter part I dont like, it is very ill written.” That the literary

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119 Joshua Scodel also interprets this last but final line as indicating “a deathlike posture.” See *The English Poetic Epitaph*, 390.

120 Wordsworth compiled two columns of opposite opinions on certain poems for the entertainment of Coleridge. Stoddart also showed his distaste for “The Idiot Boy,” saying he was “thrown into a fit almost with disgust, cannot possibly read it.” See *EY* 319-20.
minded Lamb should feel distaste for Wordsworth’s satire upon the lawyer whereas the actual lawyer Stoddart should prefer the first part despite its belittling of his profession is a curious displacement. Their conflicting opinions illustrate the dilemma of Wordsworth’s poetic pedagogy: the genuinely creative reader can appreciate his merits right away and may feel insulted by instructions and clues, yet readers whom Wordsworth intended to educate and win over often prove immune to his coaxing. John Wilson seems to demonstrate an ideal combination of weakness and strength, but his letter of mixed praise and censure caused Wordsworth to reconsider the mission of a poet as well as his method of teaching, which had significant bearing on his future style and his relation to readers.

The Poet, the Reader, and “The Solitary Reaper”

A fourth edition of Lyrical Ballads in 1805 testified to the slow but steady growth of Wordsworth’s popularity, but the taste he wanted to foster was still in a precarious state, as he knew too well with the publication of his next collection of poems in April 1807. Poems, in Two Volumes contains over one hundred new pieces, most of which are grouped under loose headings like “The Orchard Pathway,” “Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty,” “Poems Written During a Tour in Scotland,” and “Moods of My Own Mind.” Priced at 28 shillings for each set, these thousand copies published by Longman were aimed at affluent readers. Unlike previous editions of Lyrical Ballads, Poems did not appear with any prefatory statement, and the planned one paragraph “Advertisement” was cancelled for unknown reasons.

Wordsworth had a very dim vision of its reception by the general public. Manuscripts of some poems had been circulated among friends before the publication of the two volumes, and, from the coterie’s friendly objections on minor points, he fathomed their fate among harsher critics. Before any review appeared in literary magazines, Wordsworth wrote to Lady Beaumont in May to reassure her that he would not be wounded by any negative feedback: “It is impossible that any expectations can be lower than mine concerning the immediate effect of this little work upon what is called the Public” (MY I: 145). By “public” he meant “all worldlings of every rank and situation” (MY I: 146), no longer identifying them with

121 For the price and copies, see St Clair, 661.
122 See P2V, 527 for the whole text of the “Advertisement.”
any particular social class, as his correspondents the Beaumonts were his sympathetic readers among the privileged class.

Moreover, Wordsworth requested Lady Beaumont not to worry about the present reception of these poems, but maintain a steadfast faith in their worthy destiny, which was “to console the afflicted, to add sunshine to daylight by making the happy happier, to teach the young and the gracious of every age, to see, to think and feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous” (MY I: 146). The aims deviate little from his pronounced purpose in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* or his private confession to John Wilson in 1802. As the author of “A Poet’s Epitaph,” Wordsworth believed in the immortality of his poems and the office they would perform “long after we (that is, all that is mortal of us) are mouldered in our graves” (MY I: 146). Having lost his faith in the contemporary “Public,” who “in the senseless hurry of their idle lives do not read books,” the poet placed his hope on an improved posterity: “for this multitude of unhappy, and misguided, and misguiding beings, an entire regeneration must be produced; and if this be possible, it must be a work of time.” He concluded this somber letter by inviting Lady Beaumont to share with him “an invincible confidence that [his] writings (and among them these little Poems) will co-operate with the benign tendencies in human nature and society, wherever found, and that they will, in their degree, be efficacious in making men wiser, better, and happier” (MY I: 150). Wordsworth still maintained the hope he expressed in the 1801 letter to Charles Fox that his poetry would “co-operate” with readers to produce some kind of reform and improvement.

The anticipated attack did not take long to arrive. Byron’s review with mixed opinions appeared first in the *Monthly Literary Recreations* in July, followed by a vicious comment from the *Critical Review* in August, and the devastating blow was delivered by Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review* in October. They followed a similar pattern of noticing the deserved popularity of *Lyrical Ballads*, criticising the new publication as not equal to the poet’s previous work, praising the bulk of sonnets, ridiculing other lyrics, and condemning all the poems from “Moods of My Own
Mind.” They all agreed that Wordsworth wasted his genius on some unworthy subjects, and regretted that he insisted on writing against the established taste.\[^{123}\]

Francis Jeffrey, the lawyer-turned critic, assumed a judicious tone and charged Wordsworth’s “open violation of the established law of poetry” (Reiman II: 438),\[^{124}\] in the name of preserving good taste and performing public duty. Interestingly, he also appealed to the public and posterity in his judgement, and argued the case against Wordsworth with the same set of terms the poet used in self-defence: “[S]o strong is our conviction of their obvious inferiority, and the grounds of it, that we are willing for once to wave our right of appealing to posterity, and to take the judgment of the present generation of readers, and even of Mr Wordsworth’s former admirers, as conclusive on this occasion” (430).

Jeffrey systematically objected to Wordsworth’s poetic diction and subject matter. Apart from “[t]heir peculiarities of diction” which alone would “render them ridiculous,” he criticised Wordsworth’s method of “connecting his most lofty, tender, or impassioned conceptions, with objects and incidents, which the greater part of his readers will probably persist in thinking low, silly, or uninteresting” (431). Then he dismissed the poems almost one by one from beginning to end, except the sonnets. “[T]o the Daisy” was “very flat, feeble, and affected;” “[T]o the Small Celandine” is “a piece of namby-pamby;” the lofty vein in “Ode to Duty” “is very unsuccessfully attempted;” “Alice Fell” is “an insult on the public taste,” and the concluding poem of “Intimations Ode” is “beyond doubt, the most illegible and unintelligible part of the publication” (431-36). As William Christie summarises, Jeffrey’s review aimed at “reducing all the poems to one of three unflattering categories: either they are childish and therefore trivial, mystical and therefore ‘unintelligible,’ or dull and therefore inconsequential” (63).

Having anticipated the worst critical review and placed his hope in a future


\[^{124}\] Jeffrey’s review is taken from Reiman ed. *The Romantics Reviewed*, vol. II, so only page numbers are given in the following quotations.
audience, Wordsworth was less affected by the vicious attacks than his critics wished to see. He was, however, concerned with the financial prospect, knowing that “the immediate sale of books is more under the influence of reviews than is generally supposed,” and the sale of this publication was of considerable consequence to his family (MY I: 155). Wordsworth grudgingly wrote to Sir George Beaumont in early 1808 that no poem of his would ever be popular. He said so not “in modest disparagement of the Poem [Peter Bell], but in sorrow for the sickly taste of the Public in verse” (MY I: 194). His judgement on the public taste for poetry was as pessimistic in 1808 as in 1800. In response to Lady Beaumont’s friend’s fault-finding with his poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” he blamed the careless reader for insufficient attention to nature and to his poem: “I am condemned for the very thing for which I ought to have been praised; viz., that I have not written down to the level of superficial observers and unthinking minds.” The same complaint could have been a reply to John Stoddart’s condemnation of the second half of “A Poet’s Epitaph.” It is in this context that Wordsworth made the famous declaration: “Every Great poet is a Teacher: I wish either to be considered as a Teacher, or as nothing” (MY I: 195).

But Lamb’s caution about intelligent readers’ dislike of being taught may have prevented Wordsworth from overt imposition.

It is clear from this letter that Wordsworth wished to be considered as a teacher in the sense that he could teach the art of close observation and deep thinking through his poetic creation. However, he would detest being regarded as a moral teacher with explicitly didactic messages. The distinction is important because Wordsworth’s declaration is likely to evoke unpleasant feelings of authoritarianism if taken out of context. Nowhere is the distinction more effectively clarified than the poet’s rejection to serve as a moral teacher upon the request of an admiring youth. In December 1809, John Wilson and his friend Alexander Blair wrote a joint letter on education to the editor of The Friend, signed “Mathetes” (which means learner, pupil,
Wilson assumed the role of a representative youth of his age, discussed the moral dangers surrounding a reasonably well educated youth upon his entering into society at a degenerate age, and expressed the need for a more enlightened mind to guide the youth. He identified Wordsworth as one whose name “calls up the recollection of their weakness, and the consciousness of their strength,” and wished to have a “living Teacher” like Wordsworth so that the youth can gather around him, receive his influences and embrace his doctrines, “with the ardent zeal of a disciple” (33).

Wordsworth received this letter from Coleridge and consented to make a reply to be published in The Friend. Instead of being flattered by the young reader’s recognition, he was rather alarmed by the request. In his reply, Wordsworth corrected Wilson’s view regarding the progress of society, and warned him to “guard against unqualified admiration, even in cases where admiration has been rightly fixed” (10). He urged the youth to go back “to Nature and Solitude” to understand himself and regain “precious feelings of disinterested, that is self-disregarding, joy and love.” In such a state of mind the youth can “return to the visible Universe, and to conversation with ancient Books, and to those, if such there be, which in the present day breathe the ancient spirit” (18). The prescription reminds readers of the education Wordsworth designed for his poetic speakers like the Pedlar—immersion in nature and serious study of good books.

The poet further rejected Wilson’s request for a moral teacher upon the same principle he criticised the excessive interference of the rationalistic educators of the prodigy child in Book V of The Prelude. Having the guidance of a more experienced mind could be an advantage, but Wordsworth warned it “might prove an oppression not to be thrown off, and a fatal hindrance” (22). Even a most learned and benevolent teacher “may be betrayed into many unnecessary or pernicious mistakes where he deems his interference warranted by substantial experience,” which may lead the

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125 Prose II: 3. Subsequent quotations from the letter and Wordsworth’s reply are from the same source and only page numbers are given.
inexperienced disciple to have “no real feeling, indecisive judgements . . . and words uttered by rote with the impertinence of a Parrot or a Mocking-bird” (23). The principle is also in agreement with his advice in the prefatory statements attached to *Lyrical Ballads*: to pass a fair judgement on his poems, the individual reader should consult his own feeling, instead of the opinions of critics or persons with higher social status. Besides, there is the delicate balance between weakness and strength to be expected from an ideal student—the same quality the poetic speaker of “A Poet’s Epitaph” looks for in an ideal reader. Wordsworth recognised that in the learning process, “humility and docile dispositions may exist towards the Master . . . but at the same time they will be liable to overstep their due bounds, and to degenerate into passiveness and prostration of mind” (23.)

At the conclusion of this long reply, Wordsworth agreed to accept the title of a “living Teacher” only in the character of a “Philosophical Poet,” who thought of morality “as implying in its essence voluntary obedience, and producing the effect of order” (24). The philosophical poet “transfers, in the transport of imagination, the law of Moral to Physical natures,” and “contemplate[s] . . . all modes of existence as subservient to one spirit.” The “one spirit” refers to the spirit of Christianity, for Wordsworth shared with his correspondent the final stanza from his “Ode to Duty” (published in the 1807 *Poems*), in which he resolved to follow the guidance of duty (24-25). Reading this reply together with his letters to the Beaumonts, we can see that Wordsworth did not shun his moral responsibilities towards the youth, but saw his duty as residing chiefly in the imaginative act of poetic creation, which, if properly understood, would teach the reader to become intellectually more independent, morally more spontaneous, and spiritually more enlightened.

It is easier to assess the aesthetic and educative values of the 1807 *Poems* with the benefit of hindsight, if we compare the overwhelmingly negative contemporary reviews and Wordsworth’s defensive and clarifying responses. Together they

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126 Jacob Risinger argues that Wordsworth saw imagination and duty as essentially connected and compatible. See his article “Wordsworth’s Imaginative Duty,” *Romanticism* 14.3 (2008) 207.
disclose how Wordsworth predicted the objections he would encounter, how he persisted in his effort to please the indestructible qualities of human nature, and how the poet, confronted with miscomprehension and hostility, remained optimistic about the values of his endeavour to himself and his fellow beings. All these sentiments are present in one poem from the 1807 collection, “The Solitary Reaper,” which was undeservedly overlooked by all of the early reviewers but more closely studied in recent decades—another triumph for Wordsworth’s prophesy about his faith in an improved posterity.

“The Solitary Reaper,” though under the category of “Poems Written During a Tour in Scotland,” was in fact inspired by the poet’s reading of a passage from Thomas Wilkinson’s Tours to the British Mountains. The original passage reads like this: “Passed a female who was reaping alone: she sung in Erse as she bended over her sickle; the sweetest human voice I ever heard: her strains were tenderly melancholy, and felt delicious, long after they were heard no more” (qtd. in P2V 415). Wordsworth demonstrated consummate imaginative and educative power in turning this prose description into a poem of profound engagement, symbolic of artistic creation and poetic reading. The speaker responds to the Highland lass on the one hand, and commands the response of his imagined reader on the other hand. Through the speaker’s attentive listening to and imaginative interpretation of the lass’s singing, Wordsworth attempted to “teach the art in which he is to be seen” and “create the taste by which he is to be relished” (MY I: 150).

Like many of his previous poems, “The Solitary Reaper” summons the attention of an imagined reader right at the beginning, though not so explicitly as “Simon Lee” or “A Poet’s Epitaph.”

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts, and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound. (1-8)

The speaker commands the reader three times in the first stanza. The initial “Behold” is rather coercive, with “an archaic biblical ring about it,” which “adds dignity and weigh to the command” (Finch 94). The second summoning, “stop here, or gently pass,” functions more economically and diplomatically in differentiating the readers than the elaborate rejection and invitation in “A Poet’s Epitaph.” Despite its order to stop and allowance of freedom to leave, it conveys the speaker’s expectation of “attention and humility” from the imagined passerby, as Michael Cooke observes, and “[n]o matter what the passerby does, he is obliged to show reverence, to be reverent” (42). The third command “O listen” is directed to the passerby who would pause and become a potentially fit audience of the singing. “Not observation, but an active recognition and a taking part of the moment, must be understood as the core of the poem,” Cooke suggests. On the whole, the speaker is “not just sharing his reaction with an amorphous audience” but also “enforcing a reaction upon an audience whose susceptibility he himself determines.” In this regard, the drama of the poem, like that of “Simon Lee” and “A Poet’s Epitaph,” takes place “between speaker and subject, and reflectively between speaker and audience” (Cooke 42).

In the second stanza, the speaker does not address the reader any more but indulges in his enjoyment of the lass’s tune, which he thinks more haunting than the chanting of nightingales among Arabian sands, and more thrilling than the voice of the cuckoo among the Hebrides. The message is consistent with Wordsworth’s teaching concluding the 1805 Prelude that “the mind of man becomes / A thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells” (XIII: 446-48). As if conscious of his neglecting of the reader, the speaker asks a rhetorical question at the beginning of the third stanza: “Will no one tell me what she sings?” But the negative form implies both a wish for being told and a negation of that wish. It is the speaker’s mild complaint for the lack of assistance or cooperation from the invoked audience, and also a clever excuse for continuing to exhibit his own interpretive
imagination as a superb audience. In Terry Eagleton’s words, the speaker treats the song “as a blank text onto which to project his own poetic fantasies” (151-52). The speaker’s imagination searches through all time to make sense of her melancholy song, from “old, unhappy, far-off things / And battles long ago” to “familiar matter of to-day” and “some natural sorrow” that “has been, and may be again” (19-24).

The final stanza shifts in perspective as well as in tense:

Whate’er the theme, the Maiden sang  
As if her song could have no ending;  
I saw her singing at her work,  
And o’er the sickle bending;  
I listen’d till I had my fill:  
And, as I mounted up the hill,  
The music in my heart I bore,  
Long after it was heard no more. (25-32)

It has attracted lots of critical attention regarding the speaker’s relation to the singer as well as the reader. Bialostosky notices that the speaker has not used the first person “I” at all until the final stanza, and he uses it as the “emphatic subject of the last four actions the poem relates: I saw her, I listened, I mounted up the hill, and I bore the music in my heart.” What strikes him is that the sequence of action makes no demand upon any other being, as “the self-sufficient sequence carries an almost triumphant Caesarean air of coming upon the scene, finding something of value and carrying it off successfully with no help from anyone” (Dialogics 143). In Terry Eagleton’s view, the speaker “has reaped what gratification he wants from her, without even knowing who she is, and now he is ready to travel on,” and in this sense, “it is he who is the solitary reaper” (152).

Eagleton’s interpretation highlights the poetic speaker as the solitary reaper and downplays the speaker’s tribute to the reaping and singing lass, which renders the poet an aesthetically exploitative figure. It has political implications that are favoured by New Historicist and Feminist critics. Such an ideologically charged approach accuses the poet of exploiting the subject on the one hand, and depriving
the reader of interpretive freedom on the other hand. Marjorie Levinson, for example, argues that “the poet effortlessly reaps his mind of a harvest grown from the seeds of random, unlooked-for associations,” whereas “[t]he reader’s intellectual and emotional willfulness is thwarted by the poem’s insistently speculative mode of discourse and its circular structure” (149). Scott Hess holds the similar view: “Though he places the reader in the same position as himself, the narrator takes complete control in interpreting the reaper’s song and dictating the term of the poem’s reception, leaving the actual reader little free imaginative space” (271).

Despite their subtlety, these interpretations are problematic, liable to incur the poet’s prophetic complaint that he was condemned for the very thing for which he ought to have been praised. To Eagleton’s implication of aesthetic exploitation, one may be reminded that the whole encounter may be fictional; and if there is aesthetic exploitation, the victim is not the Highland lass but rather Thomas Wilkinson whose prose description formed the basis of Wordsworth’s poem. But that will lead to enquiries about literary borrowing or plagiarism, which is not the focus of this thesis. Suppose the encounter is factual, one may still argue that the speaker is in fact a preserver of the lass’s artistic labour, for he bore in his heart what would otherwise have vanished in the vale, unheard of and unremembered. He rescues the lass’s song before it dies into eternal silence, in a similar manner as the lass reaps the grain before the setting in of winter. Instead of hoarding it to himself, he intends to share it with others, despite the lurking fear that his offer might be neglected, the same way as the lass’s song was ignored by many passengers.

Levinson’s adverb “effortlessly” has deliberately overlooked the extraordinary effort the speaker has invested to understand and thus preserve her song, which takes up two whole stanzas and half of the poem. Moreover, the speaker does not intend to rob the reader of his or her interpretive opportunity, as Levinson and Scott suggest. He takes up the responsibility of interpretation because he perceives or fears the imagined reader’s indifference or inability to respond to the song; the poet’s
prescience arose from his years of encounter with the reading public. In addition, the
speaker does not claim absolute authority over his interpretations, as his first
projection is qualified by “perhaps” and the second expressed in the question form
“or is it,” which amounts to self-erasure. It is more just to say that he attempts to set
an example of creative reading which is simultaneously creative composing.

If the solitary reaper in the title can refer to both the highland lass and the
poetic speaker, is there any possibility that it may refer to the reader as well? For
Don H. Bialostosky, the answer is no, because the sudden use of “I” in the final
stanza, which seems to conflict with the first three stanzas, marks the poem as “a
failed attempt to share an everyday experience felt to be especially significant”
(\textit{Dialogics} 150). But Bialostosky may have been more pessimistic than the poet
himself in this regard, for Wordsworth in his letter to the Beaumonts expressed an
invincible faith that his poem would be enjoyed by the people and readers of an
improved posterity.

However, it would be unduly optimistic to suggest the reader is definitely the
solitary reaper—it underestimates the labour required of that epithet. Singing and
reaping are connected not only because the lass performs both at the same time, but
also because “the creative act” of singing (and poem-making) is “a basic human
endeavour” (Finch 91-92). A similar observation was made by Andrew Griffin that
the poetic speaker’s “repeated efforts to grasp or realize what he sees and especially
what he hears . . . produce a kind of working side by side with the Reaper, or a duet
with her . . . and thus making a song of his own, in parallel to hers” (403). If the
lass’s harvesting requires no less endeavour than her sowing, and the speaker’s
listening to her song demands no less effort than her creating of the song, it is only
natural that whoever wants to be a solitary reaper of the poet’s song must invest
sufficient labour of imagination comparable to the amount invested by the poet
himself. And the poetic speaker has demonstrated how.

From “Simon Lee” and “The Idiot Boy” through “A Poet’s Epitaph” to “The
Solitary Reaper,” Wordsworth has persistently tried to educate his readers by dramatising scenes of reading, in which an imagined reader is admonished to be aware of his deficiencies and encouraged to think deeper and longer. The poetic speaker strives hard to achieve a delicate balance between fulfilling his conventional duty as a storyteller and experimenting on a new kind of poetry that will treat his readers not as passive consumers but as active co-authors. In other words, Wordsworth attempted to turn the actual reader into an ideal reader who, like the poet, is capable of both responsive and creative imagination. The lyrics published between 1798 and 1807 are his experiments on poetics as well as on readerly taste.

The public reception of these poems, whether being of mixed praise and censure, slow recognition or utter rejection, gave Wordsworth causes more for disappointment than for celebration. In his 1815 “Essay,” Wordsworth reiterated the claim that “every author, as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed” (Prose III: 80). The repetition itself betrays his failure, if not perceived difficulty, of creating such taste. “Where lies the real difficulty of creating that taste by which a truly original poet is to be relished?” Wordsworth asked; he then proposed three answers in question form:

Is it in breaking the bonds of custom, in overcoming the prejudices of false refinement, and displacing the aversions of inexperience? Or, if he labour for an object which here and elsewhere I have proposed to myself, does it consist in divesting the reader of the pride that induces him to dwell upon those points wherein men differ from each other, to the exclusion of those in which all men are alike, or the same; and in making him ashamed of the vanity that renders him insensible of the appropriate excellence which civil arrangements, less unjust than might appear, and Nature illimitable in her bounty, had conferred on men who may stand below him in the scale of society? Finally, does it lie in establishing that dominion over the spirits of readers by which they are to be humbled and humanised, in order that they may be purified and exalted? (Prose III. 80-81)

The passage contains three propositions that amplify the original question about the difficulty of creating the right taste, and many scholars regard them as
clues to Wordsworth’s poetic experiments. Don H. Biolostosky, for instance, believes that the first proposition of “breaking the bonds of custom” is voiced in the 1798 “Advertisement” and the 1800 Preface; the second about our common humanity is stressed in the 1800 Preface and its 1802 addition; and the third “reflects the posture of the Essay Supplementary itself in which the poet sets aside his appeal to the reader on the basis of a common humanity and asserts his own claims to greatness” (Making Tales 3-4). Other scholars, like Dingwaney and Needham, do not agree with such a temporal demarcation and suggest that the three questions “so accurately identify both the spirit and the letter of the earlier Preface that it is tempting to see them as Wordsworth’s retrospective gloss on his earlier Preface” (341).

Unconvinced by their interpretations, I have been reluctant to identify a clear direction of change in Wordsworth’s poems from 1798 to 1807 in terms of tone or style, as all three methods can be detected in the four poems from different periods. The three methods are not answers to his original question. In the first sentence of the next paragraph, Wordsworth called them all “ends” to be attained, and pointed out that the true difficulty did not lie in the “mere communication of knowledge,” but in the fact that “to create taste is to call forth and bestow power, of which knowledge is the effect” (Prose III: 81-82). The poet’s exposition of the relation between knowledge and power in poetic education reaffirms his earlier conviction regarding practical education that knowledge should not be purchased with the loss of imaginative power. Moreover, to “call forth” and to “bestow” are two different approaches to education, virtually in correspondence with “to draw out” and “to impose” as suggested by their Latin roots.127 Creating an accurate literary taste thus becomes an essential part of Wordsworth’s overall educational concern.

While both calling forth and bestowing emphasise the initiative responsibility of the poet (or the educator), Wordsworth also stresses the interpretive obligation of the reader. There cannot be sympathetic understanding of the profound and exquisite

127 See my discussion of these terms in the beginning of chapter one.
feelings or lofty thoughts “without the exertion of a co-operating power in the mind of the Reader” (Prose III: 81). As Wordsworth remarked to Lady Beaumont in 1807, his writings would “co-operate” with certain tendencies of human nature to effect changes for the better. Those tendencies certainly include the “first poetic spirit” of our being, dormant in some but not destroyed in all.

Modern scholars talk about writers’ dependency on readers for economic or symbolic survival. Andrew Franta, for example, contends that “in arguing that the poet’s job entails not only the creation of poems but the creation of taste, Wordsworth at once asserts control over his readers and acknowledges his dependence on them” (57-58). However, it is worth remembering that writers and readers are mutually dependent, and readers’ spiritual need for an original writer may be greater than original writers’ financial need for survival in a consumer-dominated book market. Wordsworth anticipated readers’ resistance but made up his mind in “Resolution and Independence,” a poem published together with “The Solitary Reaper” in 1807. In a subtle interpretation of this poem, Lucy Newlyn suggests a “subliminal connection . . . between readers as parasites (sucking the lifeblood out of poets) and readers as a dwindling source of remuneration.” She further notices that “the increasing scarcity of leeches works as a complex metaphor of his resentful dependence on an audience by whom he was neglected” (Reading 31). Yet I think more can be made of these lines: “But how can He expect that others should / Build for him, sow for him, and at his call / Love him, who for himself will take no heed at all?” (40-42). It is a question directed to the poetic speaker as well as his readers. The verbs “build” and “sow” imply hard labour to be invested, and they resonate with core messages of “A Poet’s Epitaph” and “The Solitary Reaper.” Ultimately, as its title indicates, this is a poem about not dependence but independence. Intellectual independence of the reader is what Wordsworth endeavoured to accomplish through his poetic education.

128 See P2V, 123-29.
Chapter Four Wordsworth Edited for Educational Purposes

Wordsworth’s attempt to establish himself as a teacher of observing, feeling, and thinking did not fare well in the early decades of the nineteenth century. However, from the 1830s, his claim to be regarded as a teacher became gradually acknowledged by British educators, who showed considerable interest in his opinions on education and began to use his poetry in classroom teaching of English. This chapter seeks to examine the pedagogical use made of Wordsworth’s poetry from the 1830s to the 1890s by a comparative study of several educational editions of Wordsworth’s poems edited by educators for students of various levels. My survey of the growth and expansion of Wordsworth’s influence explores how the Victorian educators interpreted his value in education, with particular attention to the tendency to view Wordsworth as a poet of nature and childhood and thus suitable for the young. The tendency to infantalise Wordsworth coexisted with the tendency to philosophise him—which continues to prove his perceived difficulty of creating the taste in which he could be enjoyed.

The association of Wordsworth with the practical education of children may sound odd for scholars versed in the academic study of English Romanticism in higher education. But Wordsworth’s name was frequently evoked in the popular critique of Romantic ideas of education launched by scholars engaged in educational science. Nicholas Roe distinguishes between what he calls the “low” and “high” traditions of Wordsworth’s reception over the past two centuries. Whilst Wordsworth experienced a “Prometheus Rising” in the twentieth century thanks to the efforts of M. H. Abrams, Geoffrey Hartman and other prominent literary scholars, Roe argues, “over the same period the low tradition of Wordsworth’s reception has been lost to sight, and rarely features in modern studies of him” (235).

Nothing is more illustrative of the chasm between the low and high traditions with regard to Wordsworth’s educational influence than the incompatibility of arguments in recent books published by professors in departments of English and
those in the discipline of Education. Ian Reid’s 2004 book *Wordsworth and the Formation of English Studies* offers a detailed account of “the percolation of Wordsworthian images and ideas, whether explicitly acknowledged or unconsciously absorbed, through a range of discursive practices that came to constitute the academic discipline known as English” (ix). In *Our Victorian Education* (2008), Dinah Birch highlights the legacies inherited by the contemporary British educational system from nineteenth century thoughts, which can be traced to Wordsworth as “a seminal presence” (12). But the English professors’ eulogy of Wordsworthian influence is not shared by professors of education. During the same period, two articles were published which exposed the negative impact of Romantic ideas of education, with pointed reference to Wordsworth. 129

Although the educational professors’ attacks on Wordsworth originate from an overtly literal interpretation of his poetry and a simplistic application of his poetry to elementary education, the persistence of such depreciation of Wordsworth undermines the authority of the English professors’ more appreciative words. How shall we make sense of the fact that Wordsworth is upheld as a supreme teacher in the higher education of English literature, yet criticised for being a suspicious figure in the practical education of children, in the same modern era? If the former can be identified as the “high” tradition and the latter as the “lower” tradition in Nicolas Roe’s terms, when did the two start to diverge in the educational field? Or to trace the question a bit further, when did Wordsworth’s roles as a poet and a teacher converge in the first place? How did Wordsworth respond to the initial use of his poetry in practical education? And how did later editors’ interpretation of his educative value differ from the poet’s own? These are the questions I attempt to answer in this chapter. They are important and relevant, because unless properly attended to, they will continue to cast a distortedly negative image of Wordsworth among the new generation of readers in the twentieth-first century, with dire

129 See E. D. Hirsch Jr.’s and Andrew Stables’s attack of the Romantic or Wordsworthian influence in contemporary education in my Introduction.
consequences for both the poet and his readers—perhaps more serious for readers who lack the poet’s “resolution and independence.”

In the previous chapter I argued that Wordsworth wished to be regarded as a teacher in the aesthetic sense instead of the moralising and didactic sense, and that he declined to serve as a living teacher to his young admirer John Wilson despite the latter’s earnest plea. I share Dinah Birch’s view that, although he was commonly identified as a teacher, Wordsworth “was nevertheless hostile to the idea that his writing could in any straightforward sense be an advocation of what can be learned from books” (12-13). But this does not mean a dismissal of books; in poem after poem he tried to teach the art of correct and creative reading. The most important lesson he wanted to impart to readers is not to be found in a concrete proposition in his poetry, but to be reaped through the laborious process of close reading and deep thinking.

For ordinary readers, access to Wordsworth’s poetry is largely conditioned by its dissemination medium. As Alan Richardson notices, the humanising effect of Wordsworth’s verse “depends on its dissemination through texts, anthologies, reading groups, and schools” (263). Wordsworth’s poems were disseminated through three major channels in the nineteenth century. The poet exerted strict control over the publishing of his poetry, so the principal channel was through his negotiated publishers, first Longman and then Moxon from 1836. Authoritative as these standard editions were, they attracted a relatively small readership. W. J. B. Owen’s research of the Longman archives reveals that between 1800 and 1835, around ten thousand copies of over fifteen editions of Wordsworth’s poetry were sold. The number is far from being impressive compared with the sales of the most popular writers of that time. Scott’s *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* alone went through seventeen editions between 1805 and 1825, with a total sale of over thirty thousand copies, and Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, Canto the Third* issued twelve

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130 For a brief account of the major publishers and texts of Wordsworth’s works in the nineteenth century, see Stephen Gill’s *Wordsworth and the Victorians*, chapter three.
thousand copies in 1816.\textsuperscript{131} The prohibitively high pricing of \textit{The Excursion} also discouraged less affluent readers.\textsuperscript{132} Therefore the standard editions did not make Wordsworth accessible to the majority of nineteenth-century readers.

The second channel—the usually unauthorized reprintings of Wordsworth’s individual poems in periodicals—proved more effective in disseminating his poetry amongst readers with less disposable income. N. S. Bauer argues that “it was by means of quotations in magazines and reviews that his poems reached their largest audience” (“Wordsworth’s Poems” 61). Bauer conducted a meticulous survey and counted that a total of 303 different poems were quoted 650 times between 1798 and 1836 in miscellaneous periodicals, and he even listed the major poems by the frequency of their appearances. Extracts from \textit{The Excursion} appeared in 29 different issues, and “Tintern Abbey” was the most popular of his shorter poems. Such a study can be useful in assessing the popular reception of Wordsworth but is too general to indicate the poet’s educational influence, due to the miscellaneous natures of these periodicals. J. P. Ward carried out a more focused study by examining Wordsworth’s representation in five major educational journals from 1835 to 1881, and thus revealed a more complex pattern of his reception among Victorian educators.\textsuperscript{133}

A third channel is to explore Wordsworth’s appearance in school anthologies. Ian Michael’s statistical analysis of school anthologies between 1802 and 1870 suggests that Wordsworth’s popularity is only surpassed by that of Shakespeare. However, the conclusion needs careful qualification because Michael’s final order is derived from the “average weighted rank,” which takes into consideration both the “rough measure of popularity” and the “weighted number of ranking positions,”

\textsuperscript{131} See W. J. B. Owen, “Costs, Sales, and Profits of Longman’s Editions of Wordsworth,” \textit{The Library} S5-12. 2 (1957) 93-107. For the publishing histories, prices, print runs, and sales of major texts in the Romantic period, see William St Clair’s \textit{The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period}, Appendix 9. 585-90 on Byron, 632-44 on Scott, and 660-64 on Wordsworth.

\textsuperscript{132} According to St Clair, \textit{The Excursion} in quarto was priced at “42 shillings” before binding and “45 shillings” bound, being “perhaps the most expensive work of literature [for its length] ever published in England.” To put things into perspective, St Clair adds that “[f]or the price of one copy of \textit{The Excursion} in quarto, a reader in Salisbury could have bought over a hundred fat pigs.” See \textit{The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period}, 201-02.

\textsuperscript{133} See J. P. Ward, “‘Came from Yon Fountain’: Wordsworth’s Influence on Victorian Educators,” \textit{Victorian Studies} 29. 3 (1986) 405-36.
whereas the raw data suggest that William Cowper is more frequently represented than Shakespeare, and Thomas Campbell is as popular as Wordsworth (236).

Even if one accepts the notion that Wordsworth is among the most popular poets in school anthologies, questions remain as to which poems have been chosen for what purposes. N. S. Bauer surveyed a list of over thirty English and Scottish anthologies which reprinted Wordsworth’s poems between 1798 and 1836, and discovered that five out of the seven anthologies published before 1808 reprinted Wordsworth’s poems but did not include his name. From 1808 to 1822, Wordsworth’s poems disappeared from the anthologies altogether, probably as a result of the persistently damaging reviews. The most frequently reprinted poem from 1823 to 1836 was the sonnet “Composed upon Westminster Bridge,” which appeared in six editions, and no other poem came close in popularity. J. P. Ward finds that of the seventeen different poems which appeared in the general school anthologies between 1851 and 1872, only four featured in more than one selection—“To A Cuckoo,” The Excursion IV, 851-887, “Tintern Abbey” in whole or part, and the Westminster Bridge sonnet under the title “London at Sunrise” (407-08). Bauer’s and Ward’s findings suggest a lack of conviction or consensus among anthologists with regard to Wordsworth’s true value in education.

I propose a fourth channel to ascertain Wordsworth’s educational influence by studying selections of Wordsworth’s poems used for educational purposes. Standing between the strict authorial control of the standard editions and randomly chosen individual poems, such selections can best reflect public perception of Wordsworth the poet as teacher: which poems are chosen—by whom and for whom—and under what principles can reveal complex social and economic forces underlying the propagation of Wordsworth’s reputation. Therefore, I choose to study several representative editions of Wordsworth’s poems for educational purposes that appeared between the 1830s and the 1890s, and to assess how they represent the

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negotiations made between the poet, the editor, and the publisher in the educational and economic contexts.

The selections that I will study include: Joseph Hine’s *Selections from the Poems of William Wordsworth, Esq, Chiefly for the Use of Schools and Young Persons* (1831); James Burns’s illustrated edition of *Select Pieces from the Poems of William Wordsworth* (1843); two annotated editions of the first book of *The Excursion* in the early 1860s; Matthew Arnold’s selection of *The Poems of Wordsworth* (1879); and William Knight’s scholarly edition of Wordsworth’s complete poems (1881-86). Each edition is unique in its contribution to shaping Wordsworth’s image as an educational poet among a particular group of readers under different circumstances. The first two, aiming at the young in private schools, were the only selections published during Wordsworth’s lifetime, allegedly with his approval, but the responses they elicited from the poet reveal much of Wordsworth’s cautious concern for the educational use of his poetry. The heavily annotated editions of the first book of *The Excursion*, designed for pupil teachers to prepare examinations, were occasioned by a major reform in Britain’s educational policy, which saw the implementation of a national system of teacher training that grew out of the controversial monitorial system. Matthew Arnold’s selection is the first edition designed to promote Wordsworth’s fame among ordinary adult readers, whereas William Knight’s scholarly edition opened the possibility of the academic study of Wordsworth.

These editions have a common feature in that their editors were all involved in education to a greater or lesser degree. Joseph Hine was a school teacher and admirer of Wordsworth; James Burns was a publisher who specialised in juvenile literature; the two editors of the Wanderer’s story were both principals in teacher training colleges; Matthew Arnold was inspecting the state schools when editing this public-oriented edition of Wordsworth; and William Knight was Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of St. Andrews when he embarked on the editing of a
scholarly and complete edition of Wordsworth’s works. These educator-editors served as a bridge between Wordsworth the poet-teacher and an expanding population of young and adult readers. Their perceptions of Wordsworth’s educational value constitute an evolving history of Wordsworth’s gradual ascent up the ladder of English studies, from elementary and private schools, through secondary and state schools, to academic studies in British higher education. But it is not a straightforward ascent, because there coexisted a trend that would confine Wordsworth to the domain of elementary level students, as if educationally he is more relevant to children than adults.

It is worth pointing out, in the first place, that Wordsworth never intended to write for the sake of children, or with child readers in mind, despite the frequent featuring of childhood themes in his poetry. When the Scottish poet and philanthropist James Montgomery approached Wordsworth in 1824 for his contribution to *The Chimney Sweeper’s Friend and Climbing Boy’s Album* in order to arouse public awareness of the children’s plight, Wordsworth, though full of sympathy for the chimney sweepers, declined to write anything on their behalf, saying that he was unable to write verses “that do not spring up from an inward impulse of some sort or other, so that they neither seem proposed nor imposed” (*LY* I: 248). In 1825, a young American woman Elizabeth Palmer Peabody drafted a letter of homage to Wordsworth which reached the poet two years later. Peabody presented herself as a timid admirer of Wordsworth’s poetry and an instructor of the young for five years. She found poetry to be the best means to develop the noble parts of children’s minds, but Wordsworth’s poems “are with few exceptions addressed to an older class of readers . . . [and] not comprehensible by children,” and thus she made a bold suggestion that Wordsworth “should write a volume for children” (Neussendorfer 184). Wordsworth again rejected this suggestion: “If I am to serve the very young by my writings, it must be by benefiting at the same time, those who
are old enough to be their parents.”

The two requests from Montgomery and Peabody suggest that Wordsworth’s name was associated with children or education or both in the 1820s, and his poetry was sought after for the benefits to the young especially. As indicated above, Wordsworth was reluctant to write particularly for the young, and he believed the best way to serve the young was by turning their parents and teachers into wiser and more sympathetic beings, through the existing poems already available for the adults’ careful perusal. Such requests and replies repeat the pattern set by his exchange with Mathetes with regard to his being a living teacher to the young in *The Friend* a decade earlier. Wordsworth’s attitude towards his duty as a poet-teacher, whether self-imposed or proposed by others, had been consistent and firm—that the teaching should be achieved through the serious and imaginative reading of his poetry, which would in due time effect a refinement of feeling and an improvement of understanding. In this regard his target readers are adults who are mature enough to comprehend the intellectual and moral issues at stake, rather than small children who are in need of primers for basic learning of literacy and grammar. It is important to remember the distinction, because some editors, willingly or unwittingly, produced copies of Wordsworth for the young with a condescending manner to the poet.

**Joseph Hine and Selections from the Poems of William Wordsworth (1831)**

Although Wordsworth refused to write any new poems for the young on order, he did not hold strong objections to having his existing poems used for teaching the young, as can be seen in his active involvement in the first school edition of his poems upon the proposal of Joseph Hine. Hine’s *Selections* of 1831 has the credit of being the first in many respects. It is the first selection of Wordsworth’s poems edited

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136 One may ask if it is possible to teach canonical poets to the young, but it leads to debates about pedagogical issues which are beyond the scope of this chapter, and has to be bypassed here.
not by the poet himself, for Wordsworth had maintained strict control of the dissemination of his works, and for a long time objected to the idea of publishing them in popular gift copies. It is the first selection for an explicitly educational purpose, and in Stephen Gill’s words, it marks the point that “Wordsworth entered the history not only of poetry but of educational theory and practice in nineteenth-century Britain” (Life 350). This is the first and only edition of its kind that obtained the poet’s permission and support, though Wordsworth exerted no small control over its production. Wordsworth’s correspondence with the publisher Edward Moxon and his editing of Hine’s original preface reveal how he expected his poetry to be used for practical education and what should not be encouraged in a school edition.

Joseph Hine’s success in obtaining the poet’s permission for such an edition is largely due to his personal acquaintance with Wordsworth, which convinced the poet of his worthiness as a reader and a teacher. Hine was a schoolmaster at Brixton who loved English poetry and admired Wordsworth. According to the memoir of his student John Hullah who attended the private school at Brixton before 1826, Hine’s school was the only one he heard of where “the curriculum was almost made up of English literature” (4). Hullah remembered Hine’s personal and intimate acquaintance with Wordsworth, and regarded him as one of the earliest admirers of the poet, who “communicated his admiration to his pupils and to all who came under his influence in very early days” (5), when the ordinary readers’ acquaintance with Wordsworth was from Francis Jeffrey’s scathing attack of his poems.

Hine had been teaching Wordsworth’s poetry at Brixton for several years before he approached the poet for a selected edition for his pupils in 1831. His acquaintance with Wordsworth was intimate enough to secure a visit from the poet to his school, prior to the publication of the Selections. Edward Quillinan, who accompanied Wordsworth on the occasion, reported the visit in his letter to Dora with

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considerable detail, and paid particular attention to Wordsworth’s interaction with the teacher and students who were studying his sonnet “Composed upon Westminster Bridge.” The account is worth being quoted in full, because it offers a rare insight into not only how Wordsworth’s poem was actually taught at that time, but also how the poet responded to such teaching:

He [Hine] received us all three with the most earnest cordiality . . . . But to Mr Wordsworth he was crushingly affectionate. [. . .] After wine and cake we were ushered into the schoolroom. [. . .] The boys rose and bowed, sate and gazed; pencils and slates were brought out at word of command; pedagogue gave out, line by line, the Sonnet supposed to be written on Westminster Bridge. All the boys wrote it, one echoing the Master, as the clerk [. . .] does the clergyman. When finished, several boys in turn read it aloud: very well too. They were then called upon to explain the meaning of “the river glideth at its own sweet will.” One boy, the biggest [. . .] made a dissertation on the influence of the moon on the tides etc etc and seemed rather inclined to be critical; another said there was no wind, another that there were no water breaks in the Thames to prevent its gliding as it pleased; another that the arches of the bridge had no locks to shut the water in and out; and so forth. One boy said there were no boats—that was the nearest. Poet explained: was then called upon by Pedagogue to read his Sonnet himself; declined: Ped. Entreated: Poet remonstrated: Ped. Inexorable; Poet submitted. I never heard him read better. The boys evidently felt it; a thunder of applause; Poet asked for a half-Holiday for them—granted—Thunders on Thunders [. . .] Seriously speaking the whole scene was indescribably animated and interesting. (LY II: 395)

Quillinan’s account shows the particular methods employed by Hine in teaching pupils, including writing down the poem, reading it out loud, and explaining possibly difficult parts. No meticulous parsing or paraphrasing was involved. The boys’ answers, rational to the point of being scientific, indicate their relatively advanced level in this secondary school. Wordsworth was prevailed upon to offer his own explanation and to read out the poem, which seemed to have communicated his ideas well to the boys. There was little to hint Wordsworth’s critique of the teaching of this poem, except that he interfered in the schooling itself by releasing the boys from the classroom for a while, as if suggesting that a half-holiday out in nature
would teach them more than hours of poring over his own poem. Quillinan’s letter was written on the 3rd of March, and given the freshness and immediacy of his account, the visit probably took place not long before in early spring. Wordsworth’s suggestion for a holiday was essentially in accordance with the poetic speaker’s invitation to his sister in a poem from the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, that in the first mild day of March, they should leave books at home, and “[c]ome forth and feel the sun:”

One moment now may give us more  
Than fifty years of reason:  
Our minds shall drink at every pore  
The spirit of the season.\(^{138}\)

Hine’s faith in the importance of poetry for the education of the young must have commended himself favourably to the poet, who had been for years advocating the beneficial effects of early exposure to poetry. Since Wordsworth had refused at least two requests that he should write something especially for children, and he had been concerned about the insufficient financial return from his labour, how he came to give approval for Hine’s selections for the young (which might affect the sale of his five-volume standard editions) is worth consideration. Hine was fully aware of the delicate case and appealed to Wordsworth for permission on two grounds, judging from the opening paragraphs of his lengthy preface. In the first place, he eulogised the educational value of Wordsworth’s poetry for the young, claiming that his pupils “were in a glow of delight” upon hearing Wordsworth’s poems and they always wanted to hear more. Then he brought up the issue of availability: the prohibitively expensive standard editions in multiple volumes were neither affordable to most students nor convenient for school use. To enable more students to benefit from the edifying work of the poet, Hine proposed to “have a selection from Mr. Wordsworth’s writings, in the form and at the price of a class-book, so that a copy might be put into the hands of each pupil; and other conductors of schools.” Conscious of the possible diversion from the sale of the standard editions, Hine urged interested and moneyed readers to purchase the complete works from

\(^{138}\) “Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House,” lines 25-28.
Longman. Should his edition prove more popular—Hine was sure of that—it would only do greater justice to Wordsworth and humanity by promoting its admission “into every private family, and every school in this and other countries where the English language; in its simplicity, force, purity, and elegance, is cultivated” (v-vi).

Wordsworth probably found Hine’s appeal and reasoning irresistible and he granted his permission with generous support, allowing the schoolmaster to “select, without limitation, from his entire works” as he saw fit for the purpose (Hine vi). Hine produced a medium-sized volume of over 370 pages, containing over 180 poems. Sold at a reasonably cheap retail price of 5s.6d, this economic school edition boasts a major feature of inclusiveness. Chronologically, it gives a fair representation of Wordsworth’s major poems published between 1798 and 1822. In terms of poetic forms, it contains ballads, odes, long narrative poems (including the whole of Peter Bell, two excerpts from The White Doe of Rylstone, and four excerpts from The Excursion, with the whole of Book I), and nearly a hundred sonnets. The subject matter ranges from familiar incidents involving children through national and political events to philosophical contemplation of life and death. In this regard, Hine was less censorious than later schoolmasters, who wanted a “purified” edition that excludes the poems they believed unsuitable for children.

The comprehensive feature is also manifest in Hine’s inclusion of poems ridiculed by magazine reviewers, especially “The Idiot Boy.” This poem, which Wordsworth took so much delight in composing, proved significantly challenging to his most devoted admirers. Stephen Gill points out that appreciation of this poem seemed to Wordsworth “a touchstone of a reader’s sympathies” (Life 141n). Wordsworth’s letter to the publisher Edward Moxon on 13th June explains how Hine passed the test: “Mr Quillinan talks of omitting the Idiot Boy—it was precisely for his perception of the merit of this Class of Poems that I allowed Mr Hine to make the Selection.” Wordsworth was not unaware of Hine’s occasional blunders and hyperboles in praise of the author, but he believed Hine “has succeeded full as well if
not better than most other Persons could have done” (LY II: 401). Hine’s Selections is the only edition discussed in this chapter that included “The Idiot Boy.”

Hine’s edition is also special because of the support it received from the poet and his family, who assisted the editing in many ways. Dora was enlisted to read through the selected poems “to detect errors,” some of which were discovered “of the most cutting kind for the Author and Lovers of his poems” (LY II: 389). More importantly, Wordsworth applied himself to proofreading Hine’s preface before it went to the publisher. In his study of the proofsheets (in Huntington Library), Paul M. Zall lays out Hine’s original statement and Wordsworth’s revision for comparison.¹³⁹ He suggests Wordsworth “is chiefly concerned with straightening out the accuracy and continuity of his editor’s prose style” (94). But I believe the poet’s revisions are more substantial than merely stylistic, and they are motivated by the educational purpose of the volume.

Zall finds Hine’s original title was “A Selection of Poems from the Works of William Wordsworth, Esq. for the Use of Schools and Young Persons,” and Wordsworth added the modifier “chiefly” before the phrase “for the Use of schools.” Zall believes such an addition “incidentally enlarges the potential audience” (94). It is not incidental but crucial. Wordsworth did not object to seeing his poems read by the young, but feared the title would suggest that they were solely for the young, to the exclusion of adult readers who were his actual target audience and stood in more urgent need of education. In his June 1831 letter to his friends, Wordsworth referred to the Selections as “edited by a Dr. Hine for the benefit chiefly of schools and young persons, . . . and it would be found a good traveling companion for those who like my poetry” (LY II: 399, emphasis added). The cautious modifier “chiefly,” in both the book title and the private letter, suggests that Wordsworth deemed Selections should not be confined to elementary schools, or reduced to the status of children’s literature and thus to be shunned by adult readers.

Apart from enlarging the readership in terms of age, Wordsworth deemed the edition to be suitable for both genders. In the second paragraph of dedication (to admirers of Wordsworth’s poetry), Hine originally wrote that many schoolmasters would be enabled to gratify themselves by putting Wordsworth’s poems into the possession of their pupils. Wordsworth deleted many repetitive expressions in this paragraph, but emphatically inserted “of both sexes” after “pupils,” according to Zall (94), as if Hine’s original choice of “pupils” was not inclusive enough. Again, the insertion is not redundant, because Wordsworth appreciated gender division in both education and the book market; he wished to reach humanity—not children, nor men or women in particular. The Brixton school Wordsworth visited seems to consist of only boy students, so Hine might have unconsciously had only male pupils in mind. On the other hand, Wordsworth had been recently approached by commercially oriented publishers for contributions to the gift book market, which provided beautifully illustrated and expensively bound books for female readers of the leisured class. By stressing its value to pupils “of both sexes,” Wordsworth was rejecting the usual practice of the gendered book market and emphasising the shared humanity to be cultivated through reading his poetry.

Wordsworth made several other revisions to the preface. He crossed out Hine’s censorious remark about Milton being among the poets whose writing cannot be read by the young without proviso. Milton’s poems are amongst those he valued most throughout his reading life. However for Wordsworth, there is no such notion that a poem can be good for adults but bad for children—it is either beneficial or corrupting to all readers. When Hine claimed that readers should demonstrate powers not “much inferior to the author,” Wordsworth toned down the demand by remarking that readers should possess powers “in no small degree resembling those of the author.” Almost thirty years after the appearance of the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth still held the belief that the power differentiating readers from the poet

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was not in kind, but in degree. In other words, he tried to assert the superiority of the author without putting off readers fromimaginative exertion. Another example of Hine’s defensive statement being tempered is concerning critical opinions. Hine aligned himself firmly and somewhat irrationally with Wordsworth against criticism: “Those poems that the small wits have so often denounced, are not only his favourites, but will, under a better poetical taste, please the public the best.” Wordsworth revised it with qualifying additions: “Several poems and passages that witlings have so often denounced, are not only, we believe, his favourites, but will, under a better poetical taste, please the public in rivalry with those whose merit is unquestioned” (Zall 94-95).

Had he not considered Hine’s feelings, Wordsworth could have made more corrections, as he communicated some concerns to his publisher Moxon. In two successive letters on the 9th and 13th of June, Wordsworth told Moxon that he objected to the “notes” or “Editorial Nutcrackers” in this selection, perhaps fearing that the editorial notes would mislead readers. In the margin of the proof sheet beside the title page, Zall finds that Wordsworth noted emphatically: “No life prefixed—This must not be on any account” (94). The rejection of biographical sketches can be understood in light of his “Essay upon Epitaphs,” when Wordsworth insisted that “the mighty benefactors of mankind, as they are not only known by the immediate survivors, but will continue to be known familiarly to latest posterity, do not stand in need of biographical sketches; . . . This is already done by their works, in the memories of men” (Prose II: 61). Hine followed the advice and attached no biographical account in the Selections. Overall, Wordsworth thought the collection judiciously made. He recognised that “Mr Hine is an original person, and therefore allowance must be made for his oddities. He feels the poetry, and that is enough. His preface does him great credit” (LY II: 395).

Wordsworth was even involved in its promotion immediately after the

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141 LY II: 395, 401.
142 School editions of Wordsworth in the 1880s and 1890s usually had a brief account of Wordsworth’s life.
publication. He told friends that “I wish the book to be circulated, if it be found to answer his [Hine’s] purpose; 1500 copies have been struck off. [. . .] The retail price (bound) is only 5s.6d., and the volume contains, I should suppose, at least 1100 verses” (LY II: 399). Wordsworth may have been right about the volume and price, but Hine had selected over 180 poems instead of over a thousand. 143 The poet also ordered gift copies to be sent to his friends with children. On 11th of June 1831, Wordsworth wrote to Benjamin Robert Hayden: “Call at Moxon’s Bond Street, and let him give you from me, for your children, a copy of the Selections he has just published from my poems” (LY II: 397). One month later, Wordsworth wrote to Edward Quillinan: “When you call at Moxon’s pray tell him that I begged Lady Frederick Bentinck wd sent for a copy of the Selections to be considered as a present from me to her son” (LY II: 403-04). Hine’s Selections sold well, and by October 1834 Wordsworth began to negotiate with Moxon for a second edition (LY II: 745).

As the first school edition of Wordsworth’s poems, Joseph Hine’s inclusive but unobtrusive Selections has authenticity unparalleled and unsurpassed in selections of Wordsworth for educational purposes during the nineteenth century. Authenticity results from not only Hine’s personal experience as an English teacher but more importantly, Wordsworth’s active involvement in the editing process. The poet’s enthusiastic participation in Hine’s teaching and editing of his own poems was motivated by his comprehensive understanding of education in principle as well as his realistic fears of the reductive way in which his poetry might be used for practical teaching. Compared with his previous rejection of Elizabeth Peabody’s request for a volume of poetry for children, Wordsworth’s meticulous editing of Hine’s preface set a provisional standard of what he believed should be followed or avoided in editing his poetry for educational use.

143 J. P. Ward made two factual mistakes in his article. On page 407, he mentioned Hine’s selections “contained well over eighty poems.” He must have obtained the number from the table of contents only, and therefore overlooked a hundred poems under the comprehensive titles of “Miscellaneous Sonnets,” “sonnets Dedicated to Liberty,” and “Ecclesiastical Sketches.” Another mistake appears in note 7, where he attributed the 1847 Select Pieces from the Poems of Wordsworth to “the same editor and publisher,” and thus confusing this edition first published by James Burns in 1843 with Hine’s Selections.
However, Wordsworth’s urge to correct Hine on many occasions also reveals a dilemma with regard to his role as a teacher. He saw himself as a teacher of primarily adults’ imagination, and wanted to reach a larger readership for their emotional and spiritual edification. The appearance of the school edition propagated his name and enlarged the circle of his potential influence, but the nature of the school edition, with the very young as its target readers and without an established pedagogy, had the potential of infantilising Wordsworth’s writings. Even the early admirers who were teachers, like Peabody and Hine, acknowledged that the profundity of his wisdom disguised in simple language and familiar subject matter would be beyond the comprehension of small children. Wordsworth grudgingly granted his permission to Hine, with repeated reminders that the poems were worthy of being read by both children and adults of both sexes. Later educational editors, however, without the unreserved admiration of Hine or strict supervision of Wordsworth, turned out to be more or less rashly liberal in their approach to Wordsworth.

James Burns’s Illustrated Edition of Wordsworth for the Young

Joseph Hine’s Selections started the precedent of editing Wordsworth’s poems for the young, and Wordsworth supported the cause on two conditions: firstly, the poems must be judiciously chosen to reflect the educational purpose, and secondly, the price must be reasonably cheap to ensure its circulation among school pupils, as he was willing to make a financial sacrifice for the education of the nation’s young. After Hine, another schoolmaster, the Reverend Henry Gough, approached Wordsworth in 1842 for another school edition for his own students, and Wordsworth readily consented. But when the book, a beautifully illustrated Select Pieces from the Poems of William Wordsworth, came out and reached the poet in December 1843, Wordsworth was shocked to find it contrary to all his expectations.

In a letter to his unsuspicous brother Christopher, who entertained a favourable notion of the Select Pieces, the agitated poet explained the original idea
for the book and the twists and turns of events that resulted in the present edition:

The Revd Mr Gough, then under master of St. Bees School, and now head master of the Grammar School Carlisle, applied to me for permission to publish Selections from my poems, as an ordinary school-book for his own Scholars mainly and for the use of those classes of society which might not have access to so expensive a book as the whole Body of my Poetry. He told me so, that having his own Scholars mainly in view the Selections would principally be of poems the subjects of which were from the North of England, as being most likely to interest them. Of course I had no difficulty in giving my consent to such a publication under his management, nor to his extending the collection, as far as was consistent with a low price, and reasonable attention to Mr Moxon’s interest and my own. In fact I expected that the price of the Book would not exceed half a crown or three shillings at the utmost, and as neither I nor Mr Moxon nor Mr Gough looked to any pecuniary advantage, or wished for any, the work would have had no expenses to bear of Copyright or Editorship, and might have been sold cheap accordingly. (LY IV: 509-10)

However, as Gough was preoccupied with moving from St. Bees to Carlisle, he left the project to the care of a London publisher James Burns who, according to Mark L. Reed, was “a specialist in juvenile, popular, and illustrated literature, but nowise in major modern poetry” (70). Wordsworth complained to his brother that Gough did not inform him of Burns’s dealing with the poems, but Burns committed a greater mistake in disregarding Gough’s judgement and wishes. He “put the work into the hands of another Editor, a Scotch man, who furnished a preface,” part of which was very objectionable to Wordsworth (LY IV: 510). Eventually, Burns produced a beautiful and expensive gift book for the Christmas market. It contains a vignette of Rydal Mount on the title page, a flattering dedication to Queen Victoria, a patronising advertisement, and sixty eight poems—about a third of which are accompanied by pictorial illustrations and all of them bordered with elaborate floral decorations. Reed’s study of the publisher’s accounts shows that 2000 copies were printed, of which 1325 were bound in printed-paper-covered boards and sold for 7s.6d, and 500 were bound in half leather and sold for 8s.6d. Compared with Hine’s

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144 For a detailed bibliographical account of the Select Pieces with its physical features and editorial status, see Mark L. Reed, “Wordsworth’s Surprisingly Pictured Page: Select Pieces,” The Book Collector 46 (1997) 69-90.
plain edition of over 180 poems sold at a modest retailing price of 5s.6d, the *Select Pieces* “was intended not at all for students or for the poor” (Reed 70-72).

Wordsworth had many reasons to be concerned. He felt his charitable permission ill-used at the hands of James Burns, a publisher of children’s literature with a keener interest in business than in education. Apart from the pricing which effectively denied its access to children of the poor, Wordsworth was concerned about the impact Burns’s selection would have on the sales of his standard editions. He had already protested to Moxon about the condescendingly offensive advertisement, which suggested that readers, unless being provided with a selected edition like that of Burns, would “most probably be repelled from his poetry altogether” (ii). To his fear and perhaps even humiliation, the *Select Pieces* proved an immediate market hit, and even his family members and admirers congratulated him on its immense popularity, misled by the advertisement about its gaining consent from the poet and his official publisher Moxon. After some difficult negotiations between the three parties, a second edition was published by Moxon in 1847. The second edition of 3000 copies was sold at a much cheaper price of 6s.6d, and soon exhausted by late 1853. Another printing came out in 1854, bringing the total issue to 7000 copies, much more than the 3000 copies printed for Joseph Hine’s edition.145

The market success of the *Select Pieces* and Wordsworth’s subsequent compromise should not blind us to the fact that the poet maintained an irreconcilable objection to it as an educational edition. Wordsworth was somewhat surprised—and even embarrassed—to discover that, despite his strong support of Hine’s *Selections* and avowed dislike of Burns’s *Select Pieces*, it was the latter that won over the buying public. What were the secrets that contributed to the market success of this edition? And why should Wordsworth be worried about its popularity from an educational perspective? The answers are to be found in the editing principle of this volume, with its peculiar understanding of education and heavy reliance on

145 For sales information regarding *Select Pieces*, see Mark L. Reed, “Wordsworth’s Surprisingly Pictured Page: Select Pieces,” 76-77.
illustrations, which went contrary to Wordsworth’s conception of the educational effects of his poetry.

The editing principle is first stated in the dedication. 1843 was the year when Wordsworth was conferred with the title of Poet Laureate, so this volume was ostentatiously dedicated “To Her Most Sacred Majesty, Victoria, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, etc. etc. etc.,” with the intention of “familiaris[ing] the youth of the realm with such images of purity and beauty, and such lessons of truth and loyalty, as are herein contained.” The dedication makes it clear that this selection aims at, not chiefly but almost exclusively, the “youth” of the empire, and its educational value lies primarily in the sense of purity, beauty, truth and loyalty evoked by the pictures and words.

Praise for beauty and purity continues in this advertisement, where the editor recommended Wordsworth’s writings for use in education, because of its capacity to awaken the “sense of beauty of the world, both material and spiritual”— regarded by many as one of the greatest benefits that one human being could confer on another. But the advantage of Wordsworth’s poems “more directly connected with education” was his use of the English language; this renders him second only to Shakespeare and more suitable than Spenser and Milton for students:

In Wordsworth . . . is the English tongue seen almost in its perfection; its powers of delicate expression, its flexible idioms, its vast compass, the rich variety of its rhythms, being all displayed in the attractive garb of verse, and yet with a most rigorous conformity to the laws of its syntax. Those who know how much education must concern itself with man’s distinctive organ, speech, will know also how to appreciate such a benefit as this. (iii-iv)

Although the anonymous editor also discussed the use of Wordsworth’s poetry for awakening children’s minds and cultivating a taste for poetry, his understanding of education lacked the spiritual affinity which Joseph Hine had felt with the poet. Wordsworth maintained a grand design of edifying humanity, of which the education of children occupied only a small though significant part. Even within the sphere of educating children, the dedication and advertisement lack the comprehensiveness
that characterises Wordsworth’s 1836 speech on elementary education. The intellectual, moral and spiritual scope of Wordsworth’s original conception is lost in the editor’s advocacy for perfection in rhetoric and elocution, under the fashionable term of “beauty” as in the sense of Belles Lettres.  

One can hardly fail to notice the irony—what was criticised by earlier reviewers as infantile use of language and undignified choice of subject matter began to be praised by Victorian editors as examples of beauty and purity, and thus became especially suitable for children. Byron attacked Wordsworth for “‘abandoning’ his mind to the most commonplace ideas, at the same time clothing them in language not simple, but puerile.” He ridiculed one poem from the 1807 Poems (“Lines Written at the Foot of Brother’s Bridge”) as “out of the nursery” and “namby-pamby” (Reiman II: 662). Francis Jeffrey also condemned Wordsworth’s 1807 collection of poems for their “childishness” and “babyish absurdity” (Reiman I: 429, 432). Although Burns’s editor did not necessarily agree with these reviewers, one can not help but suspect that he turned the hostile reviews to his advantage and made the poems appealing to the young for similar reasons.

In James Burns’s edition, beauty seems to have replaced power to define the poet’s contribution to humanity. Whilst Wordsworth regarded the greatest service he could offer mankind was to transmit power to his readers, and he valued his poems according to the imaginative power required to produce and understand them, Burns’s editor praised Wordsworth’s educational value for his correct language and pure thought. The revolutionary power of Wordsworth’s poetry is made to conform to the Victorian aesthetics of beauty. Beauty is not necessarily antithetical to power in

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146 The Scottish editor’s approach to Wordsworth was probably influenced by the study of Belles Lettres as advocated by Hugh Blair in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, which was first published in Dublin in 1783 and remained hugely popular for the next few decades. Blair declared in the introduction that “in the education of youth, no object has in every age appeared more important to wise men, than to tincture them early with a relish for the entertainments of taste” (14).

147 Ann Wierda Rowland in a recent book *Romanticism and Childhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012) also pays close attention to Byron’s and Jeffrey’s criticisms of Wordsworth’s poetry and associates the rhetoric of infancy with the infantilisation of British literary culture during the Romantic period. See 2-3 of the book.

148 Henry Crabb Robinson’s diary entry records an anecdote: while a clergyman esteemed Wordsworth’s poems “for their moral purity,” the poet himself valued them “principally as being a new power in the literary world,” and he “looked to the powers of mind they call forth, and the energies they presuppose and excite as the standard by which they should be tried.” See Edith J. Morley ed. *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers*, 389.
Wordsworth’s educational thinking, as power enables one to perceive beauty in material nature and human life. But the kind of beauty advocated by Burns’s editor, in the format of a beautifully illustrated and expensively bound book, is reduced in its spiritual value and turned into a selling point in the book market.

As the first illustrated selection of Wordsworth, *Select Pieces* exerted massive appeal to early Victorian middle class readers and lovers of Wordsworth’s poems. Wordsworth was in an awkward position to respond to James Burns’s liberty on the one hand and its favourable public reception on the other hand. His letters to Edward Moxon, immediately after the publication, illustrate the embarrassment. Two days after venting out his anger and distress about the business, he had to write to order a copy for his nephew John, who “wants to make a present of the Books which have been admired in a Family to which he is greatly obliged.” However, it is the other two sentences that capture the irony: “I have asked Mr Gough to learn for me how many copies have been struck off and told him that I shan’t give my consent to another edition of the same kind. It is one of Burns Selections that my Nephew wishes for, bound as the Paper directs” (*LY* IV: 507). His resolution to stop further editions cannot change the fact that Burns’s *Select Pieces* was in great demand, and from then on it would replace Hine’s *Selections* as the family’s gift copy. 149

Wordsworth’s pressing concern as expressed in his correspondence with Moxon was that Burns’s edition would hurt the sales of the standard editions. But his deeper concern was the new taste revealed in the public’s growing appetite for pictures in books. According to Colin Clair’s survey of the history of printing in Britain, the use of illustrations in books of every kind increased from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Charles Knight’s *Penny Magazine*, founded in 1832, was one of the first periodicals to use woodcuts on a large scale. 1842 saw the first issue of the weekly *Illustrated London News* with sixteen pages of letterpress and

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149 The National Library of Scotland holds an 1850 copy of *Select Pieces*, which bears a brief note as follows: “To Mary Peddar, With the thanks in handwriting of Mary Wordsworth, for her kind acceptance of this Book, in exchange for One much more valuable, to them Both. Rydal Mount, Sepr 17th, 1850.”
thirty-two woodcuts. By 1850, “there were illustrated magazines, literary annuals marketed on their beautiful pictures, books of landscape views, all affordable by the bourgeoisie and selling by the tens of thousands,” as Tim Fulford notices. In 1855, Alexander Macmillan pointed out the secret of the publishing business to his brother: “You don’t know the influence of prettiness on even sensible people” (Graves 67). There was no better way to sell “prettiness” to the fashionable world than combining verses with pictures.

Wordsworth was not slow to sense the emerging taste for pretty prints in books, but his response to such a trend was primarily negative. He declared in an 1833 letter to Edward Moxon: “It is a disgrace to the age that Poetry wont sell without prints—I am a little too proud to let my Ship sail in the wake of the Engravers and the drawing-mongers” (LY III: 616). Although his attitude softened a little later, and he even considered joint ventures with illustrating artists, he maintained two principles. First, the artist must subordinate to the poet, so that the pictures illustrate the poem, not the other way around. Second, the total cost must be controlled so that the price would not discourage the less affluent but perhaps more responsive readers.

The market success of Burns’s Select Pieces contrasted sharply with the slow sale of his standard editions, and the unpopularity of Hine’s unillustrated selections. Wordsworth’s worry in the 1840s runs parallel with his earlier concern about the popularity of Gothic writings, as such trends revealed for him a similar preference for instant visual stimulation over quiet thoughts. His distaste for the new trend is registered in a sonnet which criticises the public appetite for “Illustrated Books and Newspapers:”

DISCOURSE was deemed Man’s noblest attribute,
And written words the glory of his hand;
Then followed Printing with enlarged command

For thought—dominion vast and absolute
For spreading truth, and making love expand.
Now prose and verse sunk into disrepute
Must lacquey a dumb Art that best can suit
The taste of this once-intellectual Land.
A backward movement surely have we here,
From manhood,—back to childhood; for the age—
Back towards caverned life’s first rude career.
Avaunt this vile abuse of pictured page!
Must eyes be all in all, the tongue and ear
Nothing? Heaven keep us from a lower stage!¹⁵³

Wordsworth deemed there existed a hierarchy in human communication from
discourse through written words down to illustrated printings. The development in
printing technology represented for him a dumbing down of intellectual demand. As
L. J. Kooistra observes, Wordsworth “couched his criticism in evolutionary
discourse,” and illustrated printing “was evidence of regression to a lower, more
material, stage of life” (395). The poet associated pictures with the childhood period
of human intellectual history when primitive beings used drawings in caves before
the invention of writing. Kooistra also sensed Wordsworth’s worry about “a
dangerous femininity undermining a noble masculine culture” (395). Although the
masculine and feminine divide is less visible in Wordsworth’s poem, Kooistra’s
interpretation does shed light on the problems underlying the Select Pieces, for
infantilisation and feminisation are two characteristics of Burns’s edition. As I
indicate above, it reduces Wordsworth’s poems to the level of school children and
appeals to them with the feminine beauty of the illustrations and border designs.

The use of illustrations in Select Pieces becomes more problematic when
viewed in the larger context of Wordsworth’s educational concerns. Fundamental to
Wordsworth’s educational thought is the cultivation of imaginative power, the
ultimate attribute of an improved mind. A chief obstacle to the functioning of
imagination, however, is the human eye. “The increasingly popular illustrated book
engaged the eye rather than the mind and imagination,” observes Gillen D’arcy

¹⁵³ PW IV: 75.
Wood (173). Speaking in the context of the sonnet, Peter Simonsen points out that “Wordsworth did not, in a reactionary manner, condemn and wish to ban illustration *per se* . . . . But primarily he worried that the eye might become more important than the ear and render it superfluous as an organ of sense” (31).

To better understand the relation between the eye and the mind, the physical sense and the spiritual vision in Wordsworth’s view of educating the imagination, we may draw an analogy between the 1846 sonnet (opposing the illustrated book) and Wordsworth’s critique of the picturesque in the 1805 *Prelude*. The poet identified “a strong infection of the age,” which the Norton editors refer to as “the cult of the picturesque” (424). Although Wordsworth did not subscribe to the cult, he confessed that he experienced a state when “the eye was master of the heart,” and the sight, the “most despotic of our senses,” held his mind in absolute dominion (XI: 171-76). Sophie Thomas notices that “Wordsworth’s widely shared antipathy to the picturesque drew . . . from its status as a ‘mimic’ art that left little room for the agency of the imagination.” She traces this dichotomy between the eye and the mind to the 1805 *Prelude*, where “Wordsworth claims that his maturation as a poet involved overcoming a superficial dependence on the senses, particularly sight, and makes explicit his struggles with the picturesque” (13-14).

Wordsworth transferred his earlier fear of an excessively sensual perception of the picturesque to his later worry about the reading public’s insatiable appetite for pictures in books. The eye-catching illustrations can easily divert readers’ attention away from the words and imprison their mind within the visual representations, which do not always match the spirit of the verse. James Burns’s *Select Pieces* demonstrates a certain degree of integration of pictures and poems, as John Buchanan-Brown notices that about “a dozen of the vignette head-pieces appear to have been especially designed for the edition, while other head-and tail-pieces are patently derived from printer’s stock” (131). But even the fairly integrated

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154 One positive example is the headpiece of “The Female Vagrant,” which features a little girl kneeling beside her bed to say her prayers in her father’s presence. An example of the stock ornament repeatedly used on different
illustrations can restrict the reader’s understanding. Stephen Gill’s study of the various engravings of Wordsworth during the mid nineteenth century reveals serious limitations: the illustrations in general are limited to “[l]andscape, animals and birds, [and] some human beings,” especially young maidens and feminised boys. What is more, “[n]o attempt is made to suggest the poetry’s philosophical or religious dimension. The political Wordsworth is ignored, as is whatever is disquieting or threatening” (WV 97-98).

Initially conceived as an educational edition and advertised to be one, James Burns’s Select Pieces turned out to be a popular gift book to be consumed, rather than a school reader to be studied. It certainly introduced Wordsworth to a greater number of readers than previous editions, and won over sectors of the reading public that would otherwise avoid him altogether. However, numbers can be deceptive. Instead of promoting Wordsworth as a teacher for humanity, this edition divided readership between young and adult, female and male, rich and poor—targeting the former of each set. Burns’s Select Pieces helped propagate the idea of Wordsworth as a poet of nature and childhood, and presented his poetry as “an occasional recreation” or “a species of luxurious amusement” for young readers of the privileged class.\footnote{It is difficult to surmise whether Wordsworth’s endeavour to evoke the imaginative power of general readers is compatible with the purchasing power of more affluent readers. Given the poet’s scepticism towards popular taste, the market success of this illustrated edition may indicate fashionable Victorian readers’ appetite for images. This appetite is symptomatic of, paradoxically, both the affluent readers’ need for imaginative education and their rejection of such education.}

Book I of The Excursion as a Textbook for Teacher Training (1863-64)

In Wordsworth and the Formation of English Studies, Ian Reid showed “how occasions is a picture of two boys playing flute in a valley, which appears twice to decorate different poems at the bottom of the page when the narrative is still going on—first in “The Idle Shepherd Boys,” and then in “Michael, a Pastoral Poem” with only one boy left in the picture. See Appendices for these illustrations.\footnote{The phases are from Wordsworth’s 1815 “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface,” Prose III: 62.}
Wordsworthian thinking came to dominate for most of the twentieth century the training of English teachers” by focusing on the contribution of successive Wordsworthians at the University of London’s highly influential Institute of Education from the final decades of the nineteenth century (71). But the link between Wordsworth and teacher training can be traced back to the 1860s, when annotated editions of *The Excursion* (Book I) were compiled for the use of pupil teachers. At least three editions of the Wanderer’s story were published between 1863 and 1864. Edward Moxon’s edition was subtitled “Represented as a class-book for Training Colleges,” with a brief introduction by a D. C. from St. Mark’s College, Chelsea, dated January, 1863. In the same year appeared *The First Book of The Excursion by William Wordsworth: The Wanderer, With Notes to Aid in Grammatical Analysis and in Paraphrasing*. The editor Rev. H. G. Robinson was Canon of York and Principal of the Diocesan Training College. Another edition came out in 1864, *The First Book of Wordsworth’s Excursion. With Full Notes and a Treatise upon the Analysis of Sentences*, edited by the Rev. C. H. Bromby, Principal of the Normal College, Cheltenham.

These three editions shared some common features with regard to the choice of text, professional background of the editors, and the timing of publication. The Moxon edition contained a scanty introduction and no notes; the other two provided extensive notes and laid similar stress on grammatical analysis—for the practical needs of the same target reader, the pupil teachers. Wordsworth’s vision of a national system of education—voiced through a sage teacher, the Wanderer, in the final book of *The Excursion*—began to materialise after 1863. The first book about the Wanderer’s own education was closely studied by Britain’s state-sponsored future teachers.

However, there was also a sense of irony. The Wanderer rejected a career of

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156 D. C. remains unidentified to date. The five-page introduction offers composition background of the first book, Wordsworth’s account of the Wanderer’s character and its genesis, *The Excursion’s relation to The Recluse*, and a brief biographical account of the poet. The verses are neither numbered nor annotated, so it would not be a useful textbook for training colleges compared with the two editions by Robinson and Bromby. Therefore I will omit discussion of this edition in detail and focus on the other two editions instead.
village teacher in his youth, and his comprehensive mode of learning in nature and society was a direct challenge and an idealised alternative to what Wordsworth believed to be the narrow focus of book learning in schools. This section attempts to explore the historical circumstances surrounding the Robinson and Bromby editions, examine how Wordsworth’s poetry was taught and tested during these years, and expose the discrepancy between the poet’s ideal and the pedagogical reality.

Behind the homogeneous editing of Wordsworth’s poem were the rapid expansion of elementary schools and the standardization of English studies from the mid nineteenth century. According to W. F. Connell, Britain’s schools had been supported by voluntary subscription, endowment, or the payment of school fees until 1833. In 1833, the central government voted a grant to assist in the building of new schools. In 1839, a Committee of the Privy Council was appointed by parliament to supervise the disbursement of the grant, and the Committee appointed the first batch of Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMIs) for the supervision. The Minutes of the Committee issued in 1846 marked a new stage of the state’s influence in educational matters: “The State which had hitherto confined its efforts to assistance in the erection of school buildings, had decided to take a hand in supervising, through its inspectorate, what went on inside those school buildings” (5-6).

A significant aspect of the 1846 Minutes concerned the training of a large number of qualified schoolmasters with improved methods of teaching, so as to justify the government’s investment and encourage school attendance from the working class. What the Minutes proposed was a pupil-teacher system, an improved version of the monitorial system invented by Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster. The Committee on Education deemed that the system of monitorial instruction had practically failed in Britain, because the monitors usually employed “are under twelve years of age, some of them being as young as eight or nine, and

157 For details of the minutes, see Minutes of the Committee of Council on Education with Appendices. 2 vols. London, 1846. Pages 1-10 (vol. 1) cover regulations about the education of pupil teachers, stipendiary monitors and training teachers; pages 54-56 (vol. 2) offer description and evaluation of schoolmasters’ training.
they are in general very ignorant, rude, and unskilful” (40). Although Normal schools had been established since 1839, they also failed to educate qualified schoolmasters, as the Principals complained about the candidates’ lack of training “in ordinary elementary knowledge” and the “absence of the proper physical, mental, and moral qualifications” (43).  

To remedy those failures in both elementary and Normal schools, a pupil-teacher system was designed to train a body of skilful and highly instructed schoolmasters. The pupil teacher, usually from a working class family, was selected from “the most deserving and proficient of the scholars,” and he or she was to be apprenticed to a schoolmaster (or a schoolmistress in the case of a female pupil) at the age of thirteen to eighteen. During the apprenticeship the pupil teacher could receive a steadily increasing annual stipend from the government, and he or she should be annually examined by HMIs. Towards the end of such apprenticeships, those who passed the annual examinations would receive a certificate which would enable them to compete for either the Queen’s Scholarship at Normal schools or public service in the government. In the Normal schools, pupil teachers would receive further instruction for three years, and be examined, at the close of each year, by the HMIs. They would be awarded with certificates denoting one of three degrees of merit, which would determine their annual income upon leaving the Normal school and becoming school masters.

One beginning as a Queen’s scholar undertook five years’ apprenticeship before proceeding to specialist education and training. The scholar was also obliged to show his understanding of the Bible, to display basic skills in class management, and master common-sense knowledge of algebra, geography, history, and essay composition and grammar, such as syntax, etymology and prosody.  

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158 This and the previous quotations are from The School in Its Relations to the State, the Church, and the Congregation: Being an Explanation of the Minutes of the Committee of Council on Education, in August and December, 1846. London: John Murray, 1847.

159 See The School in Its Relations to the State, the Church, and the Congregation, 47-48.

160 See Matthew Arnold, Reports on Elementary Schools: 1852-1882 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1910) Appendix C, 286. Arnold’s comments on the pupil teachers are quoted from this book, unless specified otherwise.
editions of Wordsworth’s *The Excursion, Book I* in 1863-64 appeared as a pragmatic response to a practical problem—the lack of proper textbooks and grammatical training for pupil teachers before 1860. Matthew Arnold is a reliable source for studying the learning conditions and professional qualities of pupil teachers during the mid-nineteenth century. He had first-hand experience in inspecting schools and examining scholars. During his thirty-five years’ service as Her Majesty’s Inspector (1851-86), Arnold composed ten general reports on elementary schools from 1852 to 1863. In these reports, he repeatedly raised the alarm for lack of standard textbooks, which resulted in pupil teachers’ failure in grammatical knowledge of parsing and paraphrasing and their deficiency in literary taste and mental cultivation.

The pupil teachers’ lack of good textbooks for grammatical drill and cultural refinement can be seen in two of Arnold’s school reports. In 1860, Arnold complained that the cheap and popular reading books used in elementary schools contained a large proportion of poetical extracts by anonymous compilers themselves and second/third-rate American writers. “To this defectiveness of our reading-books,” Arnold attributed “much of that grave and discouraging deficiency in anything like literary taste and feeling,” which even well-instructed pupil-teachers in elementary schools and the ablest students in training schools exhibited almost invariably (82). In his 1861 report, Arnold uttered concern for “the commonness of the failure in grammar,” evident in the examination papers of the candidates for Queen’s scholarships. He found the ordinary pupil teacher “paraphrases a passage even worse than he analyses it,” and he associated this failure with acquired want of taste. It was “in their almost universal failure to paraphrase ten lines of prose or poetry, without doing some grievous violence to good sense or good taste” that the pupil teachers displayed the want of literary taste and general culture most conspicuously (84, 87). The remedies Arnold prescribed were “a universally-employed text-book” for pupil teachers to study grammar, and a policy demanding for their “learning by heart extracts from good authors” (86, 88).
The demand for standardized textbooks for pupil teachers became more urgent after the report of the Newcastle Commission. The Commission, under the chairmanship of the fifth Duke of Newcastle, was established in 1858 to investigate the state of schools, because the public suspected that many of the Treasury grants, which increased more than fourfold between 1851 and 1858, “were being squandered on paying unqualified teachers to give education of doubtful value” (Simon 347). The final outcome of this report appeared in 1861, with the proposal that grants should only be given to schools if the level of attendance was satisfactory and if, on examination, each child showed adequate proficiency in reading, writing and arithmetic. In addition, the teacher’s income would depend, to a considerable extent, on the pupils’ performances at the examinations. It was a controversial scheme by which the government intended to provide “sound and cheap elementary instruction.” Popularly known as “payment by results,” it was adopted and incorporated in the Revised Code of 1863.161

It is under such complex circumstances—a prolonged lack of suitable textbooks for pupil teachers and a radical reform in the national system of education—that, in 1863, principals in Normal schools compiled new textbooks. These compilations were aimed at preparing trainees for tests in grammar and composition. By that time, Wordsworth’s fame had been established among Victorian educators, though not without censure occasionally. Importantly, Matthew Arnold sanctioned the choice of Wordsworth as a model English author. As early as 1848, he wrote to Arthur Hugh Clough that “[t]hose who cannot read Greek should read nothing but Milton and parts of Wordsworth: the state should see to it” (LMA I: 128). The last clause is “illuminating” in Lionel Trilling’s succinct judgement (33). Trilling probably alludes to Arnold’s passionate campaign for the propagation of Wordsworth, using his advantageous identity as a literary critic and educationist. It is unsurprising that the two educators, H. G. Robinson and C. H. Bromby, turned the

161 For more information about the Newcastle Commission, see Brian Simon, The Two Nations and the Educational Structure, 346-50.
first book of Wordsworth’s *The Excursion* into textbooks for pupil teachers’ grammatical and literary studies.

H. G. Robinson announced in the Preface his editorial purpose regarding the notes to the text: they were “designed to assist Students in Training Schools, and other candidates for a Certificate of Merit, in preparing themselves to answer the questions which will be set in Grammar and composition at the Government Examination in December.” Consequently, they had been adapted to the needs of such students, and “made to harmonize with generally prevailing methods of teaching and studying English Grammar.” To anyone who might object to such notes, Robinson apologetically reminded that “Pupil Teachers and Uncertificated Schoolmasters are, for the most part, very imperfect grammarians, and require to be instructed in the ‘first principles’ of the science” (iii). In “Hints to the Student” that precedes the main text, Robinson provided brief but useful hints to the students regarding parsing and paraphrasing, and even offered illustrations of paraphrasing at the end. A good example is the paraphrasing of the following lines:

. . . . Sound needed none,
Nor any voice of joy; his spirit drank
The spectacle; sensation, soul, and form
All melted into him; they swallowed up
His animal being; . . . (*The Excursion* I: 226-30)

Robinson’s exemplary paraphrasing reads like this: “There was no need of any sound or utterance of delight. He took in the prospect with his whole soul. The impressions which it produced, its features and spirits, penetrated his nature, and extinguished all sense of mere physical existence” (ix).

The eight pages of notes attached at the end of the extract shed much light on the myriad emphases on parsing, paraphrasing, literary tradition, etymology, and rhetoric during the period. For instance, after paraphrasing “*The Landscape*
*indistinctly glared* in line 2 as “shone with an indistinct and dazzling light,” Robinson drew readers’ attention to a comparable line in Dryden “The cavern glares with new-admitted light.” He encouraged students to consult the history of the word “baffled” (in line 23) in “Trench’s *English, Past and Present*, p. 132.” For literary merits he pointed out “the vividness of the image” suggested and “the utter blankness of desolation” implied in the phrase “four naked walls” (in line 30). An example of grammatical analysis is provided for the phrase “As if asleep” (in line 30): “*Asleep* is an adjective attributive to the subject *he*. *As if* may be parsed as a compound conjunction. Both in meaning and form it corresponds exactly to the Latin *quasi.*”164

The notes demonstrate the editor’s erudition, sound knowledge in grammar, and refined literary taste, all of which were worthy objects of imitation for the pupil teachers.

It is not clear how Robinson’s textbook was used in classrooms, but it must have come out in time for pupil teachers to prepare for the General Examination of Normal Schools before Christmas 1863. *Papers for the Schoolmaster*, which contains the examination papers for the first year male student for Normal schools in 1863, reveals that tests of composition relied solely on extracts from the first book of *The Excursion*.165 Pupil teachers and acting teachers were required to “expand the following passage [lines 191-96] in paraphrase,” parse certain words like “no,” “its own” and “lay open” (from lines 358-73), “fill up the blanks” taken from line 434 to 443, “[m]ake notes on any grammatical peculiarities” in lines 475 to 484, and finally, “[w]rite in prose, not exceeding eight lines, the story of Margaret, as told by the Wanderer.”166 Book I of *The Excursion* thus served as a repository for teaching and testing students in parsing, paraphrasing, recitation and composition.

How are we to evaluate such meticulous use of Wordsworth’s *The Excursion* under the new policies of educational reform? A mixed response is found in Matthew

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164 Robinson’s notes run from 39 to 47. The examples I gave are from page 39.
165 Text questions about Wordsworth did not appear in the examination papers for female students in 1863, which may suggest an ongoing gendered reception of Wordsworth in education.
166 For the whole range of examination questions, see *Papers for the Schoolmaster* (London, 1864) 16-18.
Arnold’s school report of 1863, which deals with the effect of the new system of
evaluations prescribed by the Revised Code. On the one hand, Arnold was pleased
to notice the improvement in the quality of school reading books, probably thanks to
publications like Robinson’s annotated edition of The Excursion. He welcomed the
new requirement that pupil teachers should learn by heart some passages from the
standard authors, as shown in the examination questions above. On the other hand,
Arnold was still critical of the cultural attainment “both of the pupil-teacher and of
the elementary school-master,” which seemed to him to “resist the efforts made to
improve it and to remain unprogressive.” These shortcomings in taste and culture
“show themselves more manifestly in the student’s grammar and composition papers
than in any other” (99-100).

If the test takers demonstrated inadequate understanding and taste in
appreciating writers like Wordsworth, the blame lies not in textbooks such as H. G.
Robinson’s edition of The Excursion but rather in new policies which encouraged
mechanical learning. Arnold criticised the lack of cultural and intellectual vision in
the new system of examinations, the object of which “is not to develop the higher
intellectual life of an elementary school, but to spread and fortify, in its middle and
lower portions, the instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic, supposed to be
suffering” (93). Later educators sympathised with Arnold’s stance regarding the
Newcastle Commission and Revised Code: “Instead of trying to put a soul into
elementary education, they branded it as a necessarily soulless thing.”

The 1864 edition of Book I of The Excursion, annotated by Rev. C. H. Bromby,
fully embodied the soulless teaching of English under the pressure of the Revised
Code. The editor remarked that by 1864, the Wanderer’s story from Wordsworth’s
The Excursion “has been selected by the Government Department of Education as a
Textbook on which students in normal schools will be examined.” Moreover,
exercises “in paraphrasing and analysis of sentences” had been required in

167 The Teaching of English in England, 47.
university examinations (iii). To meet such official demands, Bromby’s edition includes a twenty-page long treatise upon the analysis of sentences, offering a detailed and systematic introduction to grammar and syntax (with bullet points, tables and graphs). For instance, under the section of “Analytical Syntax” is a subsection about “Adverb Clauses” which is classified into four groups according to their limiting functions: of manner, time, place, and cause and effect. The last category “of cause and effect” is further divided into six minor categories of cause, inference, effect, condition, purpose, and consequence, each with an illustrating sentence.\footnote{Bromby, 23. In the original footnote, the Arabic numbers are placed above the words. For typographical reason I chose to move the numbers next to the words they indicate.}

Bromby’s footnotes to the verse text are saturated with the same rigorously scientific spirit. Almost every line of the Wanderer’s story is subject to grammatical analysis. For example, seven footnotes are given to the first seven lines on the first page: “high” in line 1 is “[u]sed adverbially;” “indistinctly glared” in line 2 can be paraphrased as “shone with a dazzling light that rendered the landscape indistinct;” and “Downs” in line 3 is derived from “dun, a hill, [which] means an elevated plane, though sometimes applied also to a valley.”\footnote{See G. H. Bromby ed, The First Book of Wordsworth’s Excursion (London: Longman, 1864) iii-v for introduction; 1-20 for “Analytical Syntax,” of which pages 12-14 for “adverb clauses.”}

Incredible for a modern reader is the editor’s analysis of lines 37-39: “Him (1) | had I marked (2) | the day before (3) | alone and stationed (4) in the public way | with face (5) turned | toward (6) the sun | then setting (7).” Bromby noted the grammatical and syntactical functions of the numbered words: “1, obj. to 2; 2, subj. and pred.; 3, adv. to pred. in 2; 4, comp. adj. to 1; 5, adj. to 1; 6, adv. to 5; 7, adj. to obj. in 6.”\footnote{Bromby, 21.}

The same level of thorough analysis is followed throughout the notes. Like the officious tutor of the prodigy child in The Prelude, Bromby supervised the text and made every sentence serve a grammatical purpose.

This heavily annotated textbook of The Excursion could have been a perfect
illustration of Wordsworth’s protest that “we murder to dissect.” The 1864 Christmas examination did not require the same level of grammatical precision as laid out in Bromby’s notes, but nevertheless this edition indicates the pressure felt by teachers and students alike under the threat of the Revised Code. When Arnold wrote another school report after four years’ lapse in 1867, he was shocked to see the marked change in the English elementary schools: “I find in them, in general, if I compare them with their former selves, a deadness, a slackness, and a discouragement which are not the signs and accompaniments of progress” (102-03). He deemed the change attributable to the school legislation of 1862, which, “by making two-thirds of the Government grant depend upon a mechanical examination, inevitably gives a mechanical turn to the school teaching” (113). If one considers that many schoolmasters in the elementary schools were former students of the Normal colleges—and they had probably used Bromby’s edition of *The Excursion* as their textbook for grammatical and syntactical analyses, one can easily understand Arnold’s critique of teaching modes in primary schools, which “has certainly fallen off in intelligence, spirit, and inventiveness” during the past four or five years (112).

The two annotated editions of Book I of *The Excursion* in 1863-64 marked large scale study of Wordsworth’s poetry in many parts of England with full government support, as his verse on a sage teacher’s educational background became compulsory reading for generations of young pupil teachers all over the country. However, they produced doubtful effects either in improving mind and feeling of pupil teachers or in promoting Wordsworth’s reputation as an educational poet. Despite the official recognition of his value as a model writer, the spirit of Wordsworth’s educational thinking—its emphasis on the enlargement of sympathy, cultivation of genuine taste and fostering of imaginative power—was irrevocably lost in the mechanical emphasis in parsing and paraphrasing during examinations.

Selected uses of Wordsworth’s poetry for separate groups of pupil teachers

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171 From “The Tables Turned,” line 28.
during the 1863 examinations indicate that Wordsworth was still a divisive influence. The test of Wordsworth’s *The Excursion* was confined to first year male students in Normal schools, and the first year female pupil teachers were given excerpts from William Cowper’s *The Task* and Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village*. Female candidates were tested on peculiarly feminine knowledge of domestic economy like laundry and cooking.\(^{172}\) It is possible that Wordsworth was deemed too masculine a poet for female students in the 1860s, which marked a drastic turn from the feminised representation of his poetic beauty in the 1840s. Another divisive use of Wordsworth, however, showed a certain continuity of interpretation among Victorian educators. I refer to the fact that Wordsworth’s poem was used for testing the “first year” male candidates, whereas the second year males were examined on Shakespeare and Milton in 1863-64. There was a subtle distinction of hierarchy that Wordsworth was more suitable for the younger minds. It is an impression that early reviewers like Byron and Francis Jeffrey ridiculed, generations of educators (from Joseph Hine through James Burns’s editor to the anonymous examiners) felt, and Wordsworth vainly fought against.

On the whole, the institutionalising of Wordsworth into the national system of teacher training in the 1860s is a mixed blessing for the poet, full of irony and displacement. It employed pedagogical methods to which Wordsworth would have been decidedly opposed. The textbooks propagated the poet’s name in education and promoted students’ familiarity with grammatical aspects of his language, but did not encourage the study of his poetry for intellectual and moral improvements. Although in the first sanctioned school edition compiled by Joseph Hine, the poet carefully added “chiefly” and “both sexes” in the title and preface to reduce misunderstandings and enlarge the potential readership, the 1863-64 examinations of pupil teachers suggest the enormous difficulties in overcoming presumptions and prejudices. Wordsworth’s claim to be regarded as a teacher in a cultural sense by general

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\(^{172}\) See the examination subjects for female candidates in household economy in *Papers for the Schoolmaster*, 207, and also Appendix K in Arnold’s *Reports* for the different requirements set for male and female pupil teachers.
humanity was still to be validated and championed.

Matthew Arnold’s The Poems of Wordsworth (1879): Its Rationale and Effects

If there had to be an educational selection of Wordsworth in the late nineteenth century, no one was more qualified as an editor than Matthew Arnold, the poet, literary critic, and above all, educationist. However, when Arnold did undertake the task of editing Wordsworth, the result was not a school reader but a popular edition simply named The Poems of Wordsworth aimed for the general public. It appeared in 1879 with a carefully drafted critical preface and a new method of classification of his poems, which exerted profound though controversial influence on later readers and critics of Wordsworth. This section seeks to examine its target audience, Arnold’s critical assessment of Wordsworth’s strengths and weaknesses in the famous preface, and the influence it had on the reception of Wordsworth as an educational poet among the Victorians.

It is to be noticed that, although Arnold persistently called for the study of great English authors in the national system of education, and he repeatedly acknowledged the beneficial influence of Wordsworth, he was never directly involved in the editing of school editions of Wordsworth. But he edited A Bible Reading for Schools, based on chapters 40-66 of Isaiah, which was published in 1872 for specific use in elementary schools. The idea of a new selection of Wordsworth’s poems was proposed to Arnold by Alexander Macmillan in January 1877. Arnold’s reply was brief but positive: “I like the notion of the Wordsworth selection, and am inclined to undertake it. I suppose you want a notice of Wordsworth to begin the volume, but it ought not to be a long one.” In a postscript, Arnold added: “I am against having many notes. Let us not aim at a school-book, but rather at a literary book which schools can and will use” (LMA 4: 353-54). Arnold’s

distinction between a schoolbook and a literary book suitable for school use was
probably the result of his disillusionment with schoolbook editions of Wordworth’s
_The Excursion_.

With an accurate grasp of public taste, Macmillan dictated terms of style and
target readership so as to ensure its market success: “It should be done and annotated
only to the extent of common intelligence . . . and not for scholastic purpose.
’Bottles’ touched with emotion is the sort of audience you seek to reach—and create”
(qtd. in Buckler 133). He added that Arnold’s interest in “Bottles” would be helpful
in the editing of such a work. By “Bottles” Macmillan alluded to a figure in Arnold’s
_Friendship’s Garland_, a millionaire bottles manufacturer who “has read nothing of
importance, and thought nothing of importance” (Honan 342). In Stephen Gill’s
words, he is “Arnold’s representative, self-made, wealthy, no-nonsense, upwardly
mobile, middle-class Englishman” (_WV_ 288n5). Arnold understood the target readers
were not too young, too poor, or too learned—the class he famously named
“philistines” and set out to educate through his social and critical endeavours.

Macmillan could not have found a more satisfactory editor. Compared with
previous editors of Wordworth, Arnold enjoyed three advantages not to be shared
by anyone before or after him. Firstly, his personal acquaintance with and knowledge
of Wordworth were gained through his early upbringing, as well as through his own
merits. As Stephen Gill points out, “Arnold is one major Victorian writer of whom it
can be said without metaphor that he was nurtured in the Wordsworthian presence.”
He refers to the fact that the Arnold family purchased the estate of Fox How, with the
help of Wordworth, to be closer to Rydal Mount.174 From a young age, Matthew
Arnold was accustomed to seeing Wordworth as his family friend. He heard the
poet’s unpublished work read aloud; he listened to Wordworth talk about literary
matters. Secondly, Arnold’s creative and critical genius reveals significant
indebtedness to Wordworth. His own poetry is recognised to be “deeply rooted in

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174 Gill, _WV_, 174-75.
his close and extensive reading of Wordsworth” (Birch 23). In his critical writings, Arnold “quoted from him, alluded to him, used him as a touchstone, and repeatedly affirmed his high estimate of Wordsworth’s permanent stature” (Gill, WV 178).

Thirdly, Arnold was one of the most influential educational theorists of his time, with a lifelong commitment to education, a grand vision of cultivating the whole of society, and an enduring interest in promoting the role of literature in education. In Chris Baldick’s words, he was “son of Dr Thomas Arnold, brother-in-law of Gladstone’s Education minister William Forster, slum-school inspector, and Oxford Professor, all at once” (60). As an Inspector of Schools, he had first-hand knowledge of the use, lack of use, or misuse of Wordsworth in state-sponsored elementary schools; this probably triggered his enthusiasm for editing Wordsworth for the general public. But the crushing workload of inspecting schools delayed Arnold’s editing project. He made the selections in April 1879, during the little spare time he had, but was obliged to request more time for the preface because he was “inspecting hither and thither over the face of the Earth, and Saturdays and Sundays are the only days [he] can count on” (qtd in Buckler 139).

These personal, cultural, and professional associations with Wordsworth have rendered Arnold a critical admirer of Wordsworth rather than a committed devotee. In his 1864 essay “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” Arnold challenged the general proposition, encouraged by Wordsworth’s contempt for critical reviews, that “the critical faculty is lower than the inventive.” He believed Wordsworth was better employed making his “celebrated Preface, so full of criticism, and criticism of the works of others” than writing his Ecclesiastical Sonnets.

175 According to Honan, Arnold “had to talk to every pupil-teacher in his district once a year, hear them recite in the winter and spring, and mark large numbers of their scripts in January—and inspect the normal schools at other times.” In quantitative terms, he examined “173 “elementary schools” and 117 “institutions,” 368 pupil-teachers and 97 certified teachers, as well as 20,000 pupils in a typical year (1855) in the early phrase of his inspectorate.” See Matthew Arnold: A Life, 260, 262. Arnold’s letters to family members often complained about exhausting tasks and fatiguing schedules. A week before Christmas 1859, he wrote to his mother: “Tuesday Wednesday Thursday and Friday I had to be at the Westminster Training School at ten o’clock—be there till 1/2 past one—and begin again at 3, going on till half-past 6—this with 80 candidates to look after and gas burning most of the day, either to give light or to help warm the room.” See LMA I: 514.

“Wordsworth was himself a great critic,” Arnold announced, “and it is to be sincerely regretted that he has not left us more criticism” (259). However, Arnold’s reverence for Wordsworth as a critic was reserved; he deemed Wordsworth the poet not necessarily his own best critic, and he would claim greater critical authority on Wordsworth’s poetry and literature in general.

Even when Arnold recommended “Milton and parts of Wordsworth” for those unable to read Greek, his tribute to the latter poet was qualified—Wordsworth should be introduced only after some proper editing. Arnold brought appreciation as well as criticism into his editing of Wordsworth, notably in his preface to the Poems. The importance that Arnold attached to this piece of work is apparent in his drafting and revising of a critical statement which turned out much longer than initially planned. Three versions were published within a short space of about four months. His statement appeared firstly as a separate article for *Macmillan’s Magazine* in July 1879, reappeared in a revised version in September to introduce *The Poems of Wordsworth*, and was revised again in the second printing of the selections in November. Although not many of the revisions are substantial, the sheer attention bestowed on this critical statement reveals Arnold’s eagerness to do justice to Wordsworth.

As a professed admirer of Wordsworth, Arnold was dismayed to notice the discrepancy between Wordsworth’s fame and fortune (selling power): although he was generally acknowledged as a great poet, his poems never achieved the popularity enjoyed by Scott, Byron, and Tennyson. Arnold’s task was to make the public buy the poems, yet not simplify or vulgarise the poet. The declared objective of this carefully contemplated preface was to restore Wordsworth’s true glory and boost his popularity amongst the public in both Britain and Continental Europe. Arnold believed that Wordsworth deserved a place in the history of British and European

177 My chosen text for the Preface is from “Wordsworth” in *English Literature and Irish Politics*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1973) 36-55. It is reprinted from the 1879 *Poems of Wordsworth*. Subsequent quotations will provide page numbers only.

literature “after Shakespeare, Molière, Milton, Goethe, indeed, but before all the rest” (41).

To address the “diminution of popularity” Wordsworth suffered at the hands of the contemporary poetry-reading public, Arnold attempted to clear the obstacles, external as well as internal, that hindered his due recognition. External obstacles consisted of the unqualified critics, including the “tenth-rate critics and compilers” who spoke of Wordsworth’s poetry with “ignorance” and “impertinence,” and devout Wordsworthians who were “apt to praise him for the wrong things” (37, 48). Internal obstacles were what Arnold believed to be Wordsworth’s own making: one example was the uneven qualities of his verses. He preferred Wordsworth’s shorter pieces to his two longest poems, *The Excursion* and *The Prelude*; and he valued the verse composed between 1798 and 1808 above the majority of poems written before or after this golden decade. Another obstacle was Wordsworth’s peculiar classification of his poems in his collected edition since 1815, which Arnold deemed artificial and far-fetched.

After pruning what he believed to be the inferior poems, Arnold assumed the role of a supreme critic and discriminating Wordsworthian: he proposed to reveal the genuine greatness of Wordsworth’s poetry according to his criteria of literary criticism. “Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life;—to the question: How to live” (46). Further, Wordsworth’s superiority lies not only in the great number of good poems, but also in his capacity to deal with “more of life,” and, “as a whole, more powerfully” (48). Whilst other Wordsworthians like Leslie Stephen lauded the poet for his “philosophy,” his “ethical system,” and his “scientific system of thought,” Arnold objected to these features and declared that Wordsworth’s greatness lay in his capacity to feel “the joy offered to us in nature” and human life, and to communicate the joy powerfully to us, rendering it “accessible universally” (48-51).179

Towards the end of his preface, Arnold reiterated the objective of this volume: “To disengage the poems which show his power, and to present them to the English-speaking public and to the world.” He defended his denigration of other Wordsworthians by claiming himself a seasoned Wordsworthian, one who felt affection for the purity and wisdom of the master as strongly as he felt the defects. He proclaimed Wordsworth as “one of the very chief glories of English Poetry,” and concluded his preface with Wordsworth’s own words concerning the purpose of his poetry: “They will co-operate with the benign tendencies in human nature and society, and will, in their degree, be efficacious in making men wiser, better, and happier” (55). This is a fitting reminder of the educational value of Wordsworth’s poetry, which also captures the essence of Arnold’s own campaign of cultivating the Victorians.

As an edition targeting the general adult public, The Poems of Wordsworth is free from fulsome dedications and extravagant illustrations. Its only decorative factors are an engraving of Rydal Mount on the cover and a portrait of Wordsworth preceding the title page. Arnold chose the last three lines from “My Heart Leaps up When I Behold” as the motto of the whole book. The selected 170 poems were classified into six groups according to the Greek tradition: Poems of Ballad Form (nine), Narrative Poems (thirteen), Lyrical Poems (forty), Poems Akin to the Antique, and Odes (nine), Sonnets (sixty), and Reflective and Elegiac Poems (thirty nine), followed by an index of first lines. Arnold kept the notes minimal and unobtrusive, only inserting a few lines occasionally to point out allusions to some local rivers, mountains, and people.

The sales of this edition proved that Arnold succeeded in creating the kind of buyers Macmillan expected, if not the readers Wordsworth wished. The Poems of Wordsworth appeared in two formats in September 1879, one in small octavo for 4s.6d., and the other for 9s. in a limited “Large Paper Edition.” Two months later, the small octavo issue was reprinted with some corrections and additions: this was again
reprinted in 1880 and 1882. Arnold made further improvements in 1884 and 1888. “In its first 110 years the book has been reprinted more than forty times and is still in print with its original publishers,” Jared Curtis observes, and it has “gained considerable influence over readers’ perception of the poet and the poet’s work for many years after” (“Matthew Arnold” 45-46).

A significant aspect of Arnold’s influence is that he broadened the horizon of Wordsworth’s influence as an educational poet, through redefining the scope of education and the constituency of readers. Compared with the previous editions of Wordsworth for explicitly educational purposes, Arnold’s *Poems of Wordsworth* was not an educational edition in the strict sense of the word, for it was not conceived to be reading material for school age children. In his preface, Arnold’s only reference to education was negative—he ridiculed the Wanderer’s advocacy of a national system of education in *The Excursion* as poetically dull, fit to be “quoted at a Social Science Congress” (50). But Arnold had a broader and deeper understanding of Wordsworth’s purpose of education than all the previous schoolmaster editors. Wordsworth had strong misgivings about his poetry being used to teach young children. Almost all school editions tailored his poetry for letter learning and grammatical exercises for the young—this mechanical process of learning and examining deprived students of joy and vivacity. As a school inspector, Arnold recognised the dire consequences of such misuse in his examination of pupil teachers. In a new edition aimed for the general public, and in evoking Wordsworth’s own remark about his poetry’s contribution to the essential welfare of humanity, Arnold saved Wordsworth from being the example of correct English for school children, and elevated him to the status of a spiritual teacher for adults of all backgrounds.

However, the critical influence of Arnold was not entirely favourable to Wordsworth, as his overall high praise was tempered with occasionally harsh criticism. Aware of reservations about Wordsworth’s accessibility for a wide range of adults and children—especially the poor-educated ones—Arnold justified what he
deemed should be the target audience. He cautioned William Knight in 1879 about the unscholarly nature of the preface: “It is not an elaborate Criticism of Wordsworth’s poetry, but the sort of essay which seemed to me best calculated to introduce and help such a volume. You must read it with this view of its character and design” \((LMA\ 5:\ 44)\). When in January 1880 he received Jemima Quillinan’s letter which contained Wordsworth’s grandson Willie’s remarks on the selections, Arnold defended his choice and criticism. “What I had to think of, both in the preface and in the selection, was the great public; it is this great public which I want to make buy Wordsworth’s poems as they buy Milton’s,” he explained, and added that “[m]any poems which Wordsworth’s friends and admirers like, I have therefore excluded.” He feared that some of those “would appear inane” to “the great public” \((LAM\ 5:\ 77)\).

Arnold’s discriminating attitude towards Wordsworth was disconcerting for some readers but encouraging for others. “Here at length is the first thoroughly right thing said about Wordsworth,” claimed Algernon Charles Swinburne, who praised Arnold for breaking away from the spell that charmed previous Wordsworthians \((212-23)\). In his essay (“Wordsworth and Byron”), Swinburne criticised Wordsworth’s earlier disciples who were misled “by their more or less practical consent to accept Wordsworth’s own point of view as the one and only proper or adequate outlook from which to contemplate the genius and the work, the aim and the accomplishment of Wordsworth” \((213)\). Ironically, Wordsworth’s “own point of view,” strictly speaking, is that readers should not consent or reject his viewpoints too rashly. In the 1815 “Essay,” he chastised “critics too petulant to be passive to a genuine poet, and too feeble to grapple with him” \((Prose\ III:\ 66)\). The balance between passive acceptance and active exertion, uncritical resistance and considered submission, is difficult to maintain for professional critics as well as for general readers.

Although Arnold did not explicitly comment on Wordsworth’s role as a
teacher, Swinburne noted in his preface a rebellious streak against Wordsworth’s claim to be regarded as a teacher, and did not hesitate to pass judgement to rejoin: “Not that he [Wordsworth] did wrong to think himself a great teacher: he was a teacher no less beneficent than great: but he was wrong in thinking himself a poet because he was a teacher, whereas in fact he was a teacher because he was a poet” (213). This elaborate comment with multiple negations needs to be untangled. In Swinburne’s understanding, Wordsworth was an educational poet, and his value as a poet depends on his identity as a teacher. Swinburne disagreed with what he believed to be Wordsworth’s self perception, and argued that Wordsworth’s educational value lay in his poet identity. However, as I have pointed out in the previous chapter, Wordsworth’s original declaration to Sir George Beaumont was that “Every great Poet is a Teacher”—not the other way round, that “Every great Teacher is a Poet.” Furthermore, his long reply to “Mathetes” was meant to clarify existing and potential misunderstandings with regard to this claim. In vigorously disagreeing with the supposed mistaken notion of Wordsworth, Swinburne was ironically confirming Wordsworth’s true worth as a poet-teacher, and displaying his ultimately accurate judgement as a critical reader.

Swinburne’s remarks about resisting “Wordsworth’s own point of view” and regarding him as a teacher in the poetic instead of moralistic sense, though voiced to revolt against Wordsworth’s supposedly authorial control and his disciples’ indiscriminating acceptance, actually provided evidence that Wordsworth began to be appreciated by the taste he created. Swinburne unwittingly proved a reader and critic Wordsworth wished to have or help create, who would eventually recognise his genius and acknowledge him as a teacher after a long period of study and independent thinking. The thinking process involves rejecting the “pre-established codes of decision” held by the poet’s disciples, and the eventual recognition of Wordsworth’s true value as a teacher of close observation, deep feeling, and quiet thoughts.
If Swinburne’s alleged critique of Wordsworth essentially lends force to the poet’s original claim, what can we make of his praise of Arnold’s critique? How much of Arnold’s resistance is due to his misunderstanding of Wordsworth, or Leslie Stephen, to a lesser degree? How much of our modern perception of Wordsworth’s great decade and subsequent decline is a passive acceptance of Arnold’s judgement, which the critic himself admitted was necessarily biased for the benign purpose of inducing the Victorian public to buy and read Wordsworth’s poems?

Arnold’s judgement on Wordsworth became controversial among later critics. Lane Cooper, compiler of the Wordsworth concordance, launched a comprehensive response to Arnold’s edition of Wordsworth fifty years later, and censured the critic for his “arbitrary treatment of the text.” Cooper repeated Edward Dowden’s criticism that although Arnold’s choice of poems was excellent, his choice of a text was not judicious, for “[i]n some instances he did what was illegitimate—he silently manufactured a text of his own, such as Wordsworth had never sanctioned or seen, by piecing together readings from more editions than one.” Besides, Arnold took liberty in renaming Wordsworth’s poems, and neglected Wordsworth’s noble style that “is often found in Wordsworth’s later poems” (7-9).

However, Cooper’s criticism is in turn criticised by G. G. Sedgewick, who defends Arnold’s aim of removing three major obstacles in appreciating Wordsworth. As for the unsympathetic remarks in the preface, Sedgewick believes that “Arnold is bound as a critic to sift wheat from sand” (66). He also reminded the readers that “[i]t is indeed possible to disagree with Arnold, but it is usually dangerous” (63). One may parody the caution and ask whether it is dangerous to disagree with Wordsworth, whom Arnold considered as a great critic?

The old debate between poets and critics became intensified in Arnold’s critical appraisal of Wordsworth. Arnold’s intention was to popularise Wordsworth as

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180 For Lane Cooper’s essay, see “Matthew Arnold’s Essay on Wordsworth,” *Evolution and Repentance* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1935) 1-17. It was first delivered as a paper in 1926, and then published in *The Bookman* in 1929. For a more detailed analysis of Arnold’s method in this edition, see Jared Curtis’s article “Matthew Arnold’s Wordsworth,” especially 52-56. Arnold is the first editor to make a group of the “Lucy Poems.”
an educative force in a general sense among the middle class Victorian reading public, but his editing was influenced by his own aesthetic standards which did not always agree with Wordsworth’s. Jared Curtis observes the complex pedagogic and poetic considerations that drove Arnold’s project: he was anxious “to influence Wordsworth’s reputation as the fine lyric and narrative poet he saw him to be,” and he considered Wordsworth “a fellow poet suffering from neglect and misreading,” and thus “he thought the older man’s work looked the better the more it resembled his own” (“Matthew Arnold” 57). However we may evaluate Arnold’s critical assessment in the preface, we have to recognise his contribution in the dissemination of Wordsworth. “It is due to Arnold,” as Rachael Trickett remarks, “that Wordsworth’s first general profound acceptance by English readers took place” (54).

**Scholarly and School Editions of Wordsworth from the 1880s to the 1890s**

Owing to the concerted effort of Wordsworth’s disciples and critics, the last two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed an explosive interest in editing Wordsworth for educational purposes; such interest resulted in broader definitions of education, a larger number of his poems chosen, and a wider range of readers targeted. From graded school readers to complete scholarly editions, there coexisted educational editions of Wordsworth for readers from the widest social and intellectual spectra. The chasm between the “low” and “high” traditions of approaching Wordsworth remained, but there were signs of bridging, with the appearance of a treatise *Wordsworth’s Prelude as a Study of Education* in 1899, by an English teacher James Fotheringham for his fellow teachers and future teachers. This last section uses Arnold’s influence as a starting point to survey the proliferation of Wordsworth in this volatile period, and question some misconceptions about the poet along the way.

A remarkable event in the 1880s was the launching of the first complete scholarly edition of Wordsworth’s works, as a result of the extraordinary labour of a
devout Wordsworthian, Professor William Knight of St Andrews University. Not long before Arnold’s selection of Wordsworth came out, in March 1879, Knight approached the Wordsworths about editing a complete edition of the poet’s works, which would probably extend to eight volumes: including topographical notes, all the variations in the text in successive editions, the Isabella Fenwick notes to the poems, a biography, and a critical or expository essay.181 His enthusiasm, experience, dedication and perseverance won over the permission and support of the poet’s family, and led to the production of eight volumes of The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth between 1882 and 1886, followed by three volumes of The Life of William Wordsworth in the next three years. Knight’s scholarly edition, in Stephen Gill’s opinion, “mark[ed] the beginning of a new phase in Wordsworth’s publishing history as the poetry passed into the control of academics and became a subject for research” (WV 85).

In Gill’s esteem, Knight’s edition is educational, not only because it would greatly facilitate the academic study of Wordsworth, but also because it was “motivated by profound reverence for Wordsworth as a teacher” (WV 226). Knight paid his homage to the poet as a teacher through presenting his poems “in chronological order of composition, not of publication” (I: ix). In such a novel arrangement, Knight abandoned Wordsworth’s own system of classification, as it was first conceived in 1815 and since then followed in the authoritative editions. He also challenged Arnold’s rearrangement as not essentially better than Wordsworth’s own, for “[a]s a descriptive title, “Poems of Sentiment and Reflection” may be as good as “Poems akin to the Antique,” and “Poems of the Fancy” quite as appropriate as “Poems of Ballad Form” (I: xvii). Knight justified his chronological arrangement with a profoundly educational ethos, claiming that the editor’s purpose was to demonstrate “the growth of his [Wordsworth’s] mind, the progressive development of his imaginative power” (I: x). He edited it for the sake of posterity who “may wish

181 For Knight’s letter to William Wordsworth Jr., see Gill, WV, 221.
to trace the gradual development of genius in the imaginative writers of the past” (I: xi).

In his effort to show the growth of the poet’s imaginative power over the course of a long and prolific creative life, Knight tried to reveal how Wordsworth became the poet we know and revere, and he cared more for the publicity of Wordsworth than the projection of his own critical views. Although later scholars and editors produced more authoritative and complete editions of Wordsworth’s works, Knight would be remembered as the “Wordsworthian discoverer, enabler, and publicist” (Gill, WV 224). The style and quality of his work can be illustrated with the notes to “There was a Boy” in volume II. Knight designated the composition date to 1798, and publication date to 1800. He included the following Isabella Fenwick notes:

Written in Germany, 1799. This is an extract from the Poem on my own poetical education. This practice of making an instrument of their own finger is known to most boys, though some are more skilful at it than others. William Raincock of Rayrigg, a fine spirited lad, took the lead of all my school-fellows in this art. (II: 55)

Knight also added his own editorial note: “The passage occurs in the fifth book of The Prelude.—ED.” (II: 55). He traced the textual variations from 1800 through 1805, 1815, 1827 to 1843, and even included an extensive copy of Coleridge’s comment, plus a long paragraph on the identity of William Raincock in the Fenwick note. The comprehensiveness, discrimination and objectivity shown in the notes to this single passage are sufficient to prove the extraordinary quality of Knight’s editing project, and his achievement is especially impressive for being undertaken without the assistance of modern information technologies.

Despite Matthew Arnold’s efforts to advocate Wordsworth as a national treasure for the general public, and William Knight’s scholastic effort to promote the

182 See II: 56-58. In the second edition of this volume Knight added a few lines about the textual history of this passage in the Wordsworth canon: “This ‘extract’ will be found in the fifth book of The Prelude, II. 364-397. It was included among the ‘Poems of the Imagination.’ In the editions of 1800 to 1832 it had no title, except in the table of contents. In 1836, the finally adopted title of the poem was given in the text, as well as in the table of contents.” See Knight, Poems of William Wordsworth, 2nd ed (London: Macmillan, 1896) II: 57.
academic study of Wordsworth, school editions of Wordsworth for the young continued to appear in the educational market in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, without apparent improvement in quality. The editors took greater liberty in renaming Wordsworth’s poems and assumed a more censorious tone in their introduction. Two school readers, though perhaps not hugely influential, can still illustrate the image of Wordsworth perceived or created by elementary schoolmasters, to the possible despair of Arnold. The editor of Selections from the Poetical Works of William Wordsworth (1881) for the English School-Classics, Hawes Turner, renamed Wordsworth’s untitled poems in quite a misleading manner. For example, “The Education of Nature” was the title given to “Three Years She Grew,” and “Life in Death” referred to “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal.” More deliberate was J. C. Wright, editor of Wordsworth for the Young (1893), who replaced Wordsworth’s original titles with his own: “Expostulation and Reply” became “Nature: A True Companion,” and the “Intimations Ode” was simply renamed “Love of Nature in Childhood.” These two editions presented Wordsworth as a poet of nature and childhood in a reductively sentimental manner.

However, one school reader clearly bore the influences of Arnold’s edition in its introductory statement and classification of poems. Among the English Classics for Schools issued in 1891 was Wordsworth’s Shorter Poems, edited by a Mrs. Edmund Helps, late Headmistress of the Norwich High School for Girls. Probably encouraged by Arnold’s critical appreciation, Mrs. Helps in her preface stated that “[t]he study of Wordsworth will certainly help us to be wise and good and happy.” But this appraisal did not escape the spell of infantilisation, for she thought young people would enjoy Wordsworth’s poetry because “he is the poet of outdoor life; he loved and wrote about things dear and familiar to most boys and girls” (x). She echoed Arnold in discriminating tone: “It would be misleading not to say that much of Wordsworth’s poetry is, as poetry, unworthy of himself.” Yet her reasons sound a mixture of criticism from Francis Jeffrey and Arnold: “He was too anxious to avoid
‘the poetic diction’ of his time. His lack of humour sometimes made him tedious; and, as is usually the case, the poetic fire decayed as age crept on” (x-xi). In the choice and classification of Wordsworth’s poems, she apparently adopted Arnold’s method and divided the twenty four poems into five categories, “Lyrics,” “Poems in Ballad Form,” “Narrative Poems,” “Odes,” and “sonnets.”

Mrs Helps’s dismissive introductory statement testifies to the harm done to Wordsworth by satirical critics like Jeffrey, which was exposed by J. G. Lockhart almost seventy years ago:

The object of the critic [Jeffrey] . . . is merely to make the author look foolish; and he prostitutes his own fine talents, to enable the common herd of his readers to suppose themselves looking down from the vantage-ground of superior intellect, upon the poor, blundering, deluded poet or philosopher, who is the subject of review. (258)

One can not charge Arnold with the same terms, but the actual effect of his negative comments had similar effects on less discerning editors, who would disseminate the perception of Wordsworth as a simple and flawed poet among the impressionable minds of children.

The infantilisation of Wordsworth was manifested not only in the prefaces and renamed titles, but also in the position allotted to Wordsworth’s poems in the whole series of school readers. Take the English Classics for Schools for example: it issued a series of reading materials for three grades of students in 1891, and Mrs. Edmund Helps’s *Wordsworth’s Shorter Poems* belonged to the lowest grade, “intended for the use of average boys and girls between ten and thirteen years of age” (viii). Even within the Grade I category which featured twelve books, five were Scott’s multi-volume works, and Wordsworth was only represented by a slender volume of short poems. By the end of the nineteenth century, the taste by which Wordsworth wished himself to be enjoyed was still in a precarious state. Victorian schoolmasters and educational publishers still preferred the simple Wordsworth of nature and childhood to the complex Wordsworth of imaginative power and moral strength, unwittingly justifying the foresight of Wordsworth’s precaution of adding “chiefly”
to Joseph Hine’s first edition for the young.

With the scholarly, school, and popular editions of Wordsworth competing for reading audiences in the 1880s and early 1890s, Wordsworth’s reputation as a teacher was firmly established in Britain; although different groups of readers with different levels of intellectual attainments interpreted his educational value in a variety of ways. It was no exaggeration to say that a sharp chasm opened in the 1880s concerning Wordsworth as a teacher, since there was little evidence of dialogue and mutual influence between these editors from different institutional backgrounds. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the chasm began to be bridged with the appearance of James Fotheringham’s 1899 treatise Wordsworth’s “Prelude” as a Study of Education. It is not another edition of The Prelude, but a small book of about seventy pages: the first study that attended to Wordsworth’s poet-teacher claim literally through a discursive reading of his autobiographical poem. More importantly, it was written by an English teacher for the benefit of his fellow teachers of English. As Fotheringham indicated in a note preceding the text, parts of the essay “were originally read to the Bradford Branch of the Teachers’ Guild,” and the whole was published to fulfill the teachers’ wish of having it.

The stated aim of this treatise was “to show the value and interest of the Prelude as a study of education . . . to set out the principles and truths of this poetry, the ideas and intuitions of this poet, in their bearing on education in its larger sense and scope” (12). For Fotheringham, Wordsworth regarded life itself as education, with childhood and the child’s mind as its starting point (16-17). The Prelude thus illustrated the “futile and injurious” pursuit of a purely intellectual education, revealed the “factors of education—the means and powers by which the growth of the human soul is promoted” (31, 41). Towards the end he interpreted Wordsworth’s supreme teaching as follows:

Open your eyes to the world, your hearts to the life about you. Learn to see things through faith in and love of them, through their “total beauty and meaning,” not through their “partial appearances.” Live simply for high ends. Put yourself in touch with your kind. Learn to care for them if
only because they are tied up in the same bundle of life with yourself. Learn the value and beauty of simple lives and lowly virtues. Set yourself to live kindly with all sorts of men, and you will soon find that the best you can bring to the general good will seem all too little. And therein you will have found that which gives satisfaction through the sense of a growing and an infinite good. (71-72)

As a teacher at the close of the nineteenth century, James Fotheringham redefined Wordsworth’s value as a teacher, not for his pure language or simple subject matter but for the moral lessons the poet offered: faith, love, beauty, common humanity, compassion, and hope—something reassuring to those suffering from pessimism at the fin de siècle. Evoking Wordsworth for the consolation of the present age was nothing original, since Arnold famously commemorated Wordsworth’s “healing power” in his “Memorial Verses” of 1850, and continued to praise Wordsworth’s great power of feeling and communicating joy in his preface to The Poems of Wordsworth in 1879. Leslie Stephen’s 1876 essay “Wordsworth’s Ethics,” unfairly criticised in Arnold’s preface, ended by reiterating Wordsworth’s noble aim, which was “to console the afflicted; to add sunshine to daylight by making the happy happier; to teach the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous” (307). Fotheringham had, like Arnold and Stephen before him, “present[ed] a Wordsworth who matters in contemporary culture, not only because he has a message which can instruct, sustain, and console, but also because his poetry demonstrates, against the aesthetic tendencies of the day, that this is poetry’s true office” (Gill, WV 216).

Modern readers may find such moralistic interpretations of Wordsworth’s genius old-fashioned. Even Stephen Gill regards James Fotheringham’s treatise as having reduced The Prelude “to a portmanteau of maxims,” and thus exemplified an extreme of the ethical approach (WV 306 n29). What is truly remarkable about Fotheringham’s treatise can best be seen when viewed from the Arnoldian perspective—the time it took for the nation’s teachers to not only understand the

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language but also to appreciate the spirit of Wordsworth’s poetry. Nearly fifty years had passed since the first publication of *The Excursion* in 1814, when excerpts from it were edited and circulated among Normal schools for grammatical studies of pupil teachers in the 1860s. It took almost another fifty years for *The Prelude* to affect the teachers of English after its first publication in 1850. By that time, teachers had “outgrown” their predecessors in their admiration of Wordsworth as a spiritual teacher, not a mere grammatician as presented by the school principals of the 1860s. Furthermore, in his choice of *The Prelude* as an object of study, Fotheringham challenged Arnold’s pronounced verdict that Wordsworth’s longer poems were inferior to the early lyrics, although he subscribed to Arnold’s praise regarding Wordsworth’s greatness in general. Therefore, his treatise combines word and spirit of Wordsworth, and bridges the “low” and “high” traditions in regarding Wordsworth as a teacher.

A survey of the reception history of Wordsworth as a teacher through various educational editions of his poetry enables us to revisit the poet’s place in English literature. When Ian Reid in his 2004 book *Wordsworth and the Formation of English Studies* argues for the penetrating influence of Wordsworthian thinking during the institutionalisation of English studies from the late nineteenth century, his focus is on the higher tradition of Wordsworth’s reception as carried on by successive generations of learned Wordsworthians. But even within higher education in English departments, Wordsworth’s place among the Romantics has been debated since the twentieth century. At the Wordsworth centenary celebrations held at Cornell and Princeton Universities in 1950, Douglas Bush raised the brave question, “Is he still, for us, a great poet?” (4). He asked more questions on behalf of general (though small) body of readers: “What does Wordsworth now actually mean to me? Do I find myself going back to him continually because he gives the kind of profound stimulus and satisfaction that I want?” (8). The general sense of doubt is reflected in academic practice; Jack Stillinger remembers that “at Harvard in the middle 1950s,
Wordsworth was very little taught or read” (559).

Twenty years later, to commemorate the bicentenary of Wordsworth’s birth, Basil Willey contributes an article “Wordsworth Today,” in which he reaffirms Wordsworth’s position as “at the head of the English poets of the nineteenth century . . . higher than even Arnold had thought” (266). Despite the decline of some Wordsworthian ideals—notably, “love of nature” or “belief in the holiness of nature” (267), Willey argues that Wordsworth’s high rank amongst English poets remains “unaffected by the fall of romanticism and the abandonment by the present age of most of his ideas and beliefs” (274-75). The poet holds his position “because his poetry celebrates, with unrivaled power and insight, a theme not subject to the vagaries of time or fashion: the wedding of the mind of man with the universe;” and the creation thus produced (275). However, from the 1990s, the names of Wordsworth and the other big five male poets (Blake, Coleridge, Byron, Shelly, and Keats) have been challenged in the canon formation of British Romanticism, most powerfully by feminist critics.184

Wordsworth’s precarious place in higher education in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, as I have discussed above and in the Introduction, is not unrelated to his precarious place in elementary and secondary education in the nineteenth century. For a considerable period of time, Wordsworth was understood and presented by Victorian schoolmasters as a poet of nature for innocent children. His poems were chosen primarily for their simple and correct use of English and familiar subject matters, and occasionally censured by schoolmasters if they deemed the verses unfit for childish eyes and ears. The censorious editors (like James Burns’ anonymous editor and Mrs Helps) were more or less influenced by prominent critics like Francis Jeffrey and Matthew Arnold. But it by no means suggests that the admiring editors have a superior understanding of Wordsworth.

Between Jeffrey’s ridicule and Arnold’s mixture of praise and censure stood Coleridge’s prophetic verdict in 1817, that Wordsworth’s fame “belongs to another age, and can neither be accelerated or retarded” (BL 158). Coleridge’s own evaluation of the defects and beauties of Wordsworth’s poetry was provoked by what he called “the strange mistake so slightly grounded, yet so widely and industriously propagated, of Mr. Wordsworth’s turn for SIMPLICITY!” (BL 158). “I am not half as much irritated by hearing his enemies abuse him for vulgarity of style, subject and conception,” he continued, “as I am disgusted with the gilded side of the same meaning, as displayed by some affected admirers with whom he is, forsooth, a sweet, simple poet! and so natural, that little master Charles and his younger sister are so charmed with them, that they play at ‘Goody Blake,’ or at ‘Johnny and Betty Foy!’” (BL 158-59). He would have been dismayed by the industrious scale of the mistake being propagated in the name of education, with the dual forces of marketplace and government policies.

This survey also reveals the persistent discrepancy between the poet’s own conception and the public’s perception. Wordsworth uttered the wish to be regarded as a teacher when he felt himself misunderstood by contemporary readers; he maintained the cautious optimism that his poetry would be better appreciated by the people of an improved posterity. His genuine care for future generations led him to consent to the publication of his selected poems for the young, yet his consent was unwittingly miscomprehended or misused for the better half of the nineteenth century. Wordsworth reminded his first educational editor Joseph Hine that his selection of poems must be “chiefly” for the use of the young, but that caution was thrown away by later editors who made their selections “solely” for the young. His worry about the eye’s despotic power was confirmed by the reading public’s preference of the illustrated edition produced by Burns over the cheaper and plain edition prepared by Hine. The Wanderer’s educational background was originally conceived as a poetic alternative to traditional education, yet his story was used to serve the practical
education on a national scale that Wordsworth would have objected to. Matthew
Arnold’s efforts to accelerate Wordsworth’s fame proved controversial, when his
rationale of selection encouraged more people to focus on Wordsworth’s shorter
poems within a single decade, and his influence as a critical scholar seems to have
eclipsed Wordsworth’s assertion as a poet-teacher.

Almost a century passed from the time Wordsworth first uttered the wish to
enlighten his fellow countrymen (in his 1794 letter to William Matthews) to the time
Britain’s teachers (William Knight and James Fotheringham in the 1880s and 1890s)
began to acknowledge his educative power in the senses he desired. The
nineteenth-century educator-editors’ battling with passive acceptance or active
resistance attests to the enormous difficulty of Wordsworth’s task of creating the taste
by which he hopes to be appreciated; yet eventually he was recognised, by critics and
educators alike, as a poet and teacher—for children and adults of both genders, inside
and outside of schools.
Conclusion: Why a Wordsworthian Conception of Education Still Matters

This thesis has investigated Wordsworth’s practical and poetic engagement with education in Britain from the late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. The investigation is motivated by the discrepancies I found between the poet’s wish to be considered as a teacher and modern readers’ sense of his irrelevance, between literature teachers’ faith in his value and educational scholars’ doubt of his influence—or put in a grossly simplistic way, between poetic and practical understandings of education. What did Wordsworth mean by this wish? Why did he feel an urgency to teach and where did his authority come from? What were his conception of education and his method of teaching, as a poet-teacher? And more importantly, how was he received as a poet and teacher by his contemporaries and near contemporaries? Prompted by these questions, I have traced, in four chapters, Wordsworth’s critique of contemporary theories and practices of education, his proposal for an alternative of poetic education, his endeavours to educate middle and upper class adult readers, and the uses to which he was put for educational purposes in and out of schools during the Victorian period. My conclusion is that Wordsworth was, and is still, relevant to Britain’s educational debates.

Wordsworth’s wish to be considered as a teacher is inseparable from the educational development in Britain from the late eighteenth century and his own sense of mission as a poet amidst rapid changes in politics, economic conditions, literature and society. In this sense his engagement with education is both practical and poetic. To better understand the interaction between these two aspects, I have sometimes stepped out of the commonly defined Romantic period and the disciplinary boundary of English literature, with the conviction that Wordsworth’s educational significance is not confined to the poetry or prose which he published within six decades and which we study in English departments of modern times.

The four chapters have dealt with the interaction between Wordsworth’s practical and poetic engagement with education from four perspectives. By focusing
on selected passages from Book V of *The Prelude* and the last two books of *The Excursion*, Chapter One discussed Wordsworth’s critique of contemporary educational experiments, and situated his critique in contemporary debates about private education for middle and upper class children and mass education for working-class children and adults. It compared Wordsworth’s views about practical education with those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Godwin, Andrew Bell and Henry Brougham. Wordsworth shared some common ground with these advocates concerning the need of education for children as both individuals and members of society; he also differed from them on two principles: education should not be reduced to school instruction, and religious education should not be neglected for children of all classes.

Wordsworth is not only a critic of practical education but also a visionary of poetic education. In Chapter Two, I explored Wordsworth’s proposal for an alternative of poetic education which relies on the combined influences of nature, books and religion to foster the individual’s religious imagination. To cultivate the poetic spirit of responsive and creative imagination, which Wordsworth believes inherent in every human being, lies at the foundation of his entire poetic project. He also adjusted his poetic vision according to practical development in education; therefore both his vision and revisions are manifest in the textual histories of the educational backgrounds he designed for his major poetic speakers—the Female Vagrant, the Pedlar, and the autobiographical “I” in *The Prelude*.

The first two chapters focused on children as subjects of Wordsworth’s poetic representation and educational concerns. However, they aimed to challenge some popular understandings of Wordsworth’s supposed idealisation of children and advocacy of “natural education.” I have demonstrated how Wordsworth’s vision of poetic education was socially grounded, and how nature’s role was downplayed and supplemented by books and religion in his later writings and revisions. The next two chapters turned to discuss the educational interaction between the poet and his adult
readers—including his reviewers, admirers and editors.

Chapter Three explored Wordsworth’s endeavours to communicate this poetic education to adult readers through his shorter poems and poetic theories published between 1798 and 1815. With these writings Wordsworth experimented on not only his poetic style but also the reading public’s taste and aptitude. The writer-reader relationship in Wordsworth’s conception resembles that of the teacher-pupil relationship, and the poet assumed the responsibility of edifying the reader’s literary taste and moral feelings against what he believed to be the corrupting effects of Gothic writings. His difficulties lay in the different constituencies of readers with varied experiences and expectations; his strategies included differentiating readers and maintaining a delicate balance between exercising authorial control and arousing readerly exertion. Disillusionment with contemporary readers led Wordsworth to put increasing faith in an improved posterity.

The convergence of Wordsworth as a poet and Wordsworth as a teacher occurred in the Victorian period when Wordsworth’s poems were selected and edited by educators for students of various levels; hence the poet’s wish to be considered as a teacher received diverse interpretations and emphases with different educational editors. Chapter Four studied several representative editions of such selections from the 1830s to the 1890s; their editors ranged from private school masters through teacher training college principals to seasoned academics. These decades witnessed the infantilisation of Wordsworth for small children on the one hand and the philosophising of him for the general public on the other hand, which anticipated the tensions and discrepancies we have seen in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Overall, I have argued that Wordsworth’s educational engagement was closely intertwined with his sense of mission as a poet and Britain’s educational development during his lifetime. Although many of his poems feature childhood and nature, his target audience was middle and upper class adults who were guardians and tutors of children; throughout his creative life, Wordsworth had emphasised the
importance of religious education and its compatibility with nature and imagination. Books of poetry are the chief means to disseminate his educational ideas: he intended to educate adult readers through a poetics of engaging readers in responsive, active, and imaginative reading, which would wean them off the constant craving for extraordinary incidents and encourage them to be observant and thoughtful. However, Wordsworth’s educational ideal was misinterpreted for much of the nineteenth century, with Victorian schoolmasters persistently portraying him as a simple poet of nature and childhood. This thesis, to borrow Adam Potkay’s words, “ventures back in order to move ahead, seeking in the past a power that might reinvigorate our contemporary discussion” of Wordsworth and education (Wordsworth’s Ethics 4). In the rest of the conclusion, I will reaffirm Wordsworth’s relevance to current discussions of education both within and beyond the academic disciplines of English and Education.

My survey stopped at the end of the nineteenth century, before the widespread institutionalisation of English as an academic discipline (of which Wordsworth can be credited as an early proponent). Wordsworth’s position has been secured in English departments, but his educational legacy remains debatable, challenged by some and defended by others. After Jerome J. McGann’s famous challenge of the Romantic ideology, another New Historicist critic, Clifford Siskin, questioned Romanticists’ approach to canonical authors. In The Historicity of Romantic Discourse, Siskin reveals the “Romantic nature of criticism written about the Romantics,” as is manifest in the “resemblances between the interpretation and that which is being interpreted” (4). He urges Romanticists to keep a historical distance from their subject matter:

Criticism has helped to perform what I call . . . the work of Literature, establishing itself as an institution by helping to perpetuate the Romantic myth of culture—a myth which assigns to a set of primary “artistic” texts, and their “creators,” the power of psychologically transcending the

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185 McGann contends that “Wordsworth’s poetry elides history. . . . The idea that poetry, or even consciousness, can set one free of the ruins of history and culture is the grand illusion of every Romantic poet.” See The Romantic Ideology (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983) 91.
everyday without unduly interfering with it. The secondary critical texts written to access that power have thus become valuable as the means of standardizing the levels of literacy that ensure the developmental significance of an individual’s “love of literature.” (11)

Siskin’s critique is a development of Swinburne’s protest against enthusiastic yet uncritical Wordsworthians before Arnold and a remote echo of Arnold in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” except that Arnold tried painstakingly to promote the learning of great literature as a means of self cultivation. Putting aside the issue of interference (which I have discussed throughout the thesis), one may admit that Romantic criticism has indeed perpetuated some Romantic ideas. But Siskin’s resistant stance has a danger of another kind: what if those ideas, when correctly understood, are after all worth advocating?

Siskin’s resistant attitude was challenged by Don H. Bialostosky in his article “Wordsworth, New Literary Histories, and the Constitution of Literature.” For Bialostosky, the reader’s exercise of a “co-operating power” in relation to Wordsworth’s creative power has more positive implications than is usually granted by revisionist critics: “the poet’s exercise of literary power need not only be a coercive imposition but may also be a provocation, even a demand, for productive questions and responses.” Such cooperation has the potential to “cultivate the disciplines through which poets and readers . . . may recognize and exercise the powers of literature and secure their blessings not only to themselves and their posterity but ‘in widest commonalty spread’” (420). In his conclusion Bialostosky affirms the position that “in the struggle over the constitution of literature, Romantic discourse and Wordsworth’s contributions to it should not be dismissed as a seductive regime,” because “Wordsworth’s vision of a democracy of active and disciplined sensibilities, inspired by its poets but not overawed by them, still retains the power to inform our practices and underwrite our institutions.” His caution is worth remembering by students and teachers of English literature alike: “It would be premature and unwise to put this regime in the past when we have not yet seen what we might make of it and what it might make of us” (421).
A decade after the publication of Alan Richardson’s monograph *Literature, Education, and Romanticism* (1994), education as a Romantic ethos or Wordsworth’s involvement in education has not been fully explored. According to a survey conducted by Sharon Ruston in conjunction with the English Subject Centre on “Teaching Romanticism” from 2005 to 2006, New Historicism and Feminism were the main theoretical approaches used, and Wordsworth was the most taught of the “big six” authors, yet “education” as a theme was the least attended to among the proposed range of sixteen themes, only more popular than “environment” and “orientalism” (the most popular, apart from “Romanticism” as a concept, are nature and gender). Given the fact that most modules did not extend beyond the period usually defined as Romantic (1770-1830), it is reasonable to surmise that Wordsworth’s engagement with education, especially during his later years, may not be familiar to many students of Romanticism.

Around the same time, however, British educationists began to pay more attention to the positive legacy of the Romantic conception of education, and their critique of current educational policies have strong resonances of Romantic or Wordsworthian ideals. In 2006, David Halpin, Professor of Education from the University of London, published an article entitled “Why a *Romantic* Conception of Education Matters.” He argues that “Romanticism’s valuing of love and the life of the imagination . . . provides a way of addressing differently and fruitfully certain issues to do with pedagogy in schools, making in particular better sense of what it means to be an effective teacher and a productive learner in such contexts” (325). The same argument is developed in his 2007 book *Romanticism and Education: Love, Heroism and Imagination in Pedagogy*. Contrary to E. D. Hirsch Jr. and Andrew Stables, Halpin contends that the decline of Romantic influence on teachers has led to England’s schooling becoming “more utilitarian than imaginative; more managerial than collegial; more individualist than communitarian; and more

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186 Over seventy Romanticists representing more than sixty English Departments across the UK responded to the questionnaire about the way they taught Romanticism in their institutions. For the survey and its findings, see the report on BARS website: http://www.bars.ac.uk/teaching/barsteaching.php.
competitive than cooperative” (2).

However, even Halpin’s appreciative approach is not without its problems. In his 2008 article “Pedagogy and the Romantic Imagination,” Halpin illustrates “why a specifically Romantic conception of the imagination has important implications for teaching and learning” (60). After quoting two passages from *The Prelude*, notably the evocation of imagination in the “Simplon Pass” episode, Halpin immediately discusses the benefits of applying such a Romantic imagination to classroom teaching:

pupils make more imaginative learners if what they are encouraged to learn illuminates for the better and joyously their experience of being schooled; and teaching becomes more imaginative if those that practise it have the opportunity to look for and find creative solutions to the problem of how best to interest and motivate pupils. (65)

Halpin’s interpretation of Wordsworth’s poetry is accurate and his intention to reform pedagogical method noble. Yet the way he acknowledges Wordsworth as a teacher of teaching is liable to encourage using Wordsworth to illustrate modern theories of education. In this regard Halpin differs little from Hirsch or Stables.

“The history of reception repeatedly shows that works of literature are put to use in ways unintended by their authors,” remarks Jeffrey C. Robinson on Hazlitt’s essay “My First Acquaintance with Poets” (178). The same applies to Wordsworth’s poetry in education. Hazlitt reminded readers that “the received history of Wordsworth and Coleridge—either full acceptance or full rejection—needs rethinking in the present, a kind of updating of their nourishing and vitalizing qualities in light of their retrograde politics” (Robinson 183). Similarly, the appropriation of Wordsworth for contemporary educational practice, either to be deplored or to be applauded, needs a serious rethinking, one that includes the relation between literature and education, the teaching of literature, and the place of literature in higher education.187

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187 William Walsh, a professor of education writing in the 1950s, cautioned that “literature is literature and not an illustration of educational ideas,” but he also believed that “there are in the manifold richness of a major literary work —when, and only when, it is enjoyed, intelligently read as literature—elements, values, meanings, feelings, incomparably strengthening to the educational sense.” See his book *The Use of Imagination: Educational*
Outside departments of English and Education, Wordsworth’s name does not feature prominently in public debates on education, although his ideas about a national system of education still have currency. When the British educational philosopher Richard Pring titles his 2009 article “Education Cannot Compensate for Society,” he draws attention to the social and economic context of many young people, “which affect[s] not just the capacity to meet targets but more profoundly what those targets should be” (200). The term education is more closely associated with schooling in modern times; Pring’s awareness of individual students’ social positions which conditions his or her educational attainment is prone to be criticised as politically conservative, economically segregating, and ethically questionable. But Wordsworth would have approved of it. The poet objected to the fast growth of infant schools established upon monitorial principles. In an 1829 letter to Hugh James Rose, Wordsworth observed that he intended to “qualify” and “check unreasonable expectations” of what might be done through education (LY II. 19, 24). He added in another letter to his brother Christopher that he was not “averse to the people being educated” but wished “to guard against too high expectations’ (LY II. 55). If the Romantic poet and the modern philosopher sound more cautious and less optimistic than popular views, it is because they both understand the larger socio-economic context in which education takes place, and the need for cooperation between different forces to bring about the desired effect.

In a society where most people regard education chiefly as a means for upward social mobility, the power of education is rather limited. But that is not how Wordsworth defined the purpose of education. As the poet emphasised in his 1836 speech, education was for the intellectual, moral, and spiritual development of the

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*Thought and the Literary Mind* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959) 9-10. A debate about the teaching of English literature in American universities broke out recently. On 12 July, 2013, *The Wall Street Journal* published an article entitled “Who Ruined the Humanities?” by cultural critic Lee Siegel. By the humanities the author primarily means Western literature. He reflects on the “slow extinction of English majors,” and attributes the phenomenon to “the academicization of literary art,” which has dissociated literature from real life. See the article and the comments generated on [http://online.wsj.com/article/SB100014241278873282382300457858503296798048.html?mod=WSJ_article_comments#articleTabs%3Darticle](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB100014241278873282382300457858503296798048.html?mod=WSJ_article_comments#articleTabs%3Darticle)
whole person during the entire course of an individual’s life, and it was not merely
for worldly advancement but for the immortality of the soul, in a Christian society
and for a Christian heaven. In an increasingly secular age, the religious dimension of
education may have lost its appeal, yet the transcendent value Wordsworth attached
to education still sends a positive message with liberating power.

More and more interested people in recent years have begun to question the
narrow aim of education as understood by government and society. In a 2010 article
“The need for a Wider Vision of Learning,” Pring argues that “the need to measure
and standardise performance has resulted in a marginalization of the broader vision
of learning, which should be perused in order to enable us to live fully human lives’
(83). He further observes that “recent government papers pay little attention to the
aims of education, and thus to the values that should shape the standards to be
achieved, the knowledge to be transmitted and the virtues to be nourished” (85). In a
2012 book School Wars: The Battle for Britain’s Education, the author Melissa Benn
shows grave concerns about the fast fragmenting system of state education, and calls
for “a vision to unify, rather than divide” the country. It is also a vision that will
dissolve the utilitarian connection between educational achievement and economic
performance: “As our schools become more and more like the fast-food
industry—delivering a standardised, mechanised service—we need to remind
ourselves of the profound importance of education for education’s sake, rather than
education mainly as a means of economic and professional advancement” (180).

These observations follow the tenets put forward by Matthew Arnold in his
criticism of the Revised Code, which can be traced back to Wordsworth’s scepticism
of Andrew Bell’s Madras system, the most influential prototype for a national system
of education. The educational debates dominating Wordsworth’s era have continued
down to the present age. What Wordsworth proposed or opposed then are still
relevant now, whether his name and thoughts are explicitly invoked or remotely
echoed. In this regard, I hope my investigation into Wordsworth’s educational
engagement can add some historical and poetic perspectives to the current debate. However, I do not mean that Wordsworth is relevant to modern readers only because he voiced important opinions on education which still hold true. The somber note with which Adam Potkay concludes *Wordsworth’s Ethics* is worth pondering by all students and scholars of Romanticism: “We went too far in making Romantic literature the handmaiden to history, especially social history; we need boldly to present literature as crucial in its own right, both for the pleasures of its form and the ethical engagements it encourages” (204). Wordsworth wished to be considered as a teacher not by educational professionals but by general readers. His educational concern is, after all, a poet’s, and he intended to teach a poetic way of reading, feeling, and thinking. The lesson is so subtle that it is more often overheard than heard—a point well illustrated by William Hazlitt’s anecdotal account during his first visit to Wordsworth:

> Wordsworth, looking out of the low, latticed window, said, “How beautifully the sun sets on that yellow bank!” I thought within myself, “With what eyes these poets see nature!” and ever after, when I saw the sun-set stream upon the objects facing it, conceived I had made a discovery, or thanked Mr. Wordsworth for having made one for me! (118)

Hazlitt was among the earliest admirers who acknowledged Wordsworth as a teacher in the poetic sense. His recollection serves as a fine illustration of how an ideal Wordsworthian education works, and what is required of the poet as teacher and the reading audience as student. Wordsworth’s exclamation was a poet’s casual remark on an ordinary scene, yet it produced a profound and enduring effect on Hazlitt the hearer. Hazlitt recognised Wordsworth as an invaluable teacher who had taught him to see familiar objects with a poet’s sense of wonder. The joy Wordsworth felt at the scene of sun-setting and the extraordinary way it was communicated to Hazlitt testify to Arnold’s verdict on Wordsworth’s greatness half a century later.  

188 Wordsworth’s role as a teacher depends precisely on his identity as a

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188 See Arnold, ‘Wordsworth,’ 51.
poet, not, as Swinburne assumed, the reverse.

More importantly, the teaching and learning did not take place in a didactic setting, with the poet pointing out the specific beauty to Hazlitt. Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” accidentally touched Hazlitt and triggered his co-operating power of responsive and creative imagination. The poet enlarged Hazlitt’s range of sensitivity, and transferred to him not only the knowledge of appreciating nature, but also the power of discovering beauty wherever it may be. But Wordsworth could not have succeeded without Hazlitt’s possession of the poetic spirit in the first place, or his conscious exercising it afterwards. The episode, therefore, is a tribute to the affective power of Wordsworth the teacher as well as the imaginative power of Hazlitt the student.

Hazlitt was not alone in his feeling of having been unconsciously taught by Wordsworth. Another witness is Henry Reed, Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature at the University of Pennsylvania (1835-54) who produced the first American edition of *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* in 1837. In his first letter to the poet in 1836, Reed expressed a sentiment of gratitude not unlike that of Hazlitt: “I have felt my nature elevated—I have learned to look with a better spirit on all around me” (2-3). But the lesson he received from Wordsworth was beyond the feeling of joy in nature, as he continued:

I feel that I have unconsciously been taught by you a warmer and more filial attachment to old England. But what is more, in your example I have discovered the best elements of a true and rational patriotism, and guided most safely by the light of your feeling, I have a deeper love for my own country (3).

It is an extraordinary compliment paid by an American professor to an English poet. Different from Hazlitt, Reed was acquainted with Wordsworth solely through reading his poems; his general sense of elevation and enlightenment thus attests to the poet’s far-reaching educative power. But like Hazlitt, Reed became a “solitary reaper” of Wordsworth’s as well as his own poetic labour. His feeling of having “unconsciously been taught”—another common ground with
Hazlitt—describes a characteristic effect of the educative power of Wordsworth’s poetry, according to Bianca Falbo. “The poem’s message or moral is not directly stated: instead, the poem positions the reader to draw his or her own conclusion and, in so doing, effectively dissolves the boundary between author and reader,” she remarks (32). “This notion of Wordsworth—the poet as mentor—derived from the effect of the poems themselves,” Falbo continues, “was the one that Reed wanted to recover for American readers” (33).

The notion of the poet as teacher and the ideal reader as poet is also what Wordsworth wanted to communicate to readers of posterity; it is the core message of “A Poet’s Epitaph,” a poem from the 1800 Lyrical Ballads. One may remember that the epitaph reveals nothing about the poet’s life. In his “Essay upon Epitaphs” published ten years later, Wordsworth claimed that the “mighty benefactors of mankind” did not need biographical sketches in their epitaph, because it was “already done by their Works, in the memories of men” (Prose II. 61). As it happened, the poet left no epitaph for his own grave. In the churchyard of St Oswald’s Church at Grasmere, there stands a plain headstone, inscribed with the name “William Wordsworth” and the year of his death “1850.” “By reducing the inscription to naked name,” Samantha Matthews suggests, “the burden of making meaning shifts to the grave-visitors . . . . The ‘epitaph’ is transformed into a contemplative text, which allows every visitor to find at the grave a Wordsworth of their own imaginative construction” (163). The contemplative text will make sense only to those who turn to the “gothic Church” of Wordsworth’s poetic works. Ultimately, the poet’s wish to be considered as a teacher is still to be fulfilled, by successive generations of readers, from Britain and beyond.
Appendices

Appendix 1

The Title Page of James Burns’s *Select Pieces*
The Female Vagrant.

My father was a good and pious man,
An honest man by honest parents bred;
And I believe that, soon as I began
To lap, he made me kneel beside my bed,
And in his hearing there my prayers I said:
And afterwards, by my good father taught,
I read, and loved the books in which I read;
For books in every neighbouring house I sought,
And nothing to my mind a sweeter pleasure brought.

Can I forget our croft and plot of corn;
Our garden, stored with peas, and mint, and thyme,
And rose and lily, for the Sabbath-morn;
The Sunday-bells, and their delightful chime;
Appendix 3

The Illustrated Page of “The Two Shepherd Boys”

The Idle Shepherd Boys.

The valley rings with mirth and joy,
Among the hills the echoes play
A never, never ending song,
To welcome in the May.
The magpie chatters with delight;
The mountain raven’s youngling brood
Have left the mother and the nest,
And they go rambling east and west
In quest of their own food;
Or through the glittering vapours dart
In very wantoness of heart.

Beneath a tree, upon the grass,
Two boys are sitting in the sun;
Their work, if any work they have,
Is out of mind, or done.
On pipes of sycamore they play
The fragments of a Christmas hymn;
Or with that plant which in our dale
We call stag-horn, or fox’s tail,
Their rusty hats they trim:
And thus, as happy as the day,
Those shepherds wear the time away.
Appendix 4

The Illustrated Page of “Michael: A Pastoral Poem”

He with his father daily went, and they
Were as companions; why should I relate,
That objects which the shepherd loved before
Were dearer now? that from the boy there came
Feelings and emanations—things which were
Light to the sun, and music to the wind;
And that the old man’s heart seemed born again?

Thus in his father’s sight the boy grew up:
And now, when he had reached his eighteenth year,
He was his comfort and his daily hope.

While in this sort the simple household lived
From day to day, to Michael’s ear there came
Distressful tidings. Long before the time
Of which I speak, the shepherd had been bound
In surety for his brother’s son,—a man
Of an industrious life, and ample means;
But unforeseen misfortunes suddenly
Had prest upon him; and old Michael now
Was summoned to discharge the forfeiture—
A grievous penalty, but little less
Than half his substance. This unlooked-for claim,
At the first hearing, for a moment took
More hope out of his life than he supposed.
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