

AN EXAMINATION OF
WATER IMAGERY
IN THE POETRY OF
WILLIAM WORDSWORTH 1798-1807

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This paper is an examination of the water imagery in the poems of William Wordsworth published between 1798 and 1807. Water images were selected for examination because they appear with remarkable frequency throughout Wordsworth's canon and have multiple metaphoric use, often involving the expression of his most profound beliefs. The 1798-1807 period was chosen because Wordsworth's poetry of this period reveals clearly the development of his poetic power and thought, and as well, includes much of his greatest work. The particular poetry analysed consists of the 1805 version of The Prelude, the poems of the 1798 and 1800 Lyrical Ballads, and also those published in Poems in Two Volumes, 1807.

This analysis of Wordsworth's water imagery reveals that the poet recurrently used specific forms of water to express certain ideas in his work. These ideas ranged from simple emotional metaphors to complex thoughts related to his basic philosophy of existence. As described in the Introduction, the specific forms of water found to express a similar idea often enough to be considered a pattern were the sea, inland running waters such as brooks, rivers and streams, fountains, waterfalls and standing water as in pools or wells.

The sea, discussed in Chapter Two, was used by the poet to convey in simple metaphors the idea of danger and alienation and in more complex metaphors, his conception of an infinite and immortal world soul.

Inland running waters, the subject of Chapter Three, are Wordsworth's most frequent water images and have multiple symbolic

use. Brooks and small murmuring waters express Wordsworth's belief in endlessly renewing calm, joy, peace and moral rightness of a life lived through nature and in harmony with the world Truth. Stream and river images convey more elaborate ideas about the passage of life and time, liberty and the growth of man's imagination.

Chapter Four is an analysis of fountains, waterfalls and standing water in these patterns of water imagery. Fountains are revealed as symbolizing the great creative force inherent in ultimate existence and the joy and renewal of life that accompanies this force. Waterfalls, like the sea, have two distinct patterns of imagery, one, appropriately as a place of danger and the other as the "voice" of the "eternal Being."

Standing water, by contrast, was found to symbolize the negation of life, and joy, and be connected with loss, decay and death, physical, emotional or intellectual.

The underlying relationship of these more profound images is that they all express some aspect--creativity, infinity, immortality, goodness or unity--of the universal spirit Wordsworth recognized in man and nature.

Wordsworth's basic ideas are asserted to be most accurately described as "personal Platonism," or perhaps neo-Platonism. For his concept, in its reality as part of actual existence, its unity and its suggestion of "a better world" available to him who will recognize it, is Platonic, and neo-Platonic because Wordsworth, like Plotinus, gathered part of his knowledge in a mystical way. Indeed, Wordsworth's water imagery often resembles the imagery of Plotinus. -

Finally, motion is suggested as the most important single quality of water as a symbol for the poet. Quotations from various passages which describe the "eternal Being" very often contain references to "motion," and it appears that of all water's characteristics which attracted Wordsworth to use it in his symbolism, motion was the most significant.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Water was a major source of inspiration and of imagery for William Wordsworth. He was stimulated by the sight and sound of actual water to compose some of his greatest poems and employed water images as symbolic vehicles to express his most profound and intensely held beliefs. This paper is an attempt to examine and analyse the imagery which involves water whether in the sea, a river, brook, pond, fountain, or any other form in the poetry of Wordsworth from the first edition of Lyrical Ballads in 1798 to the Poems in Two Volumes of 1807. That decade, generally conceded to be the most fruitful of the poet's life, also includes the 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads which had thirty-seven new poems added to the 1798 collection, The Prelude, and various miscellaneous poems mostly published after 1807, none containing important water imagery.

William Wordsworth was born in a town where two rivers meet--the Cocker and the Derwent. He spent much of his adult life and certainly the happiest and most fruitful parts of it in the Lake District. As Mary Moorman says at the beginning of her biography of Wordsworth:

The sound of running water was always among the most precious to him of all the multitudinous sounds which reached his sensitive ears from the mysterious universe. He often felt it almost a part of his own being, and lovingly he thanked the Derwent for the first gift of 'ceaseless music' from its steady flowing stream.¹

¹Mary Moorman, William Wordsworth: A Biography The Early Years 1770-1803 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 1. _

Thus, during all his life, as a man and a poet, Wordsworth responded spontaneously and intensely to water. Sometimes it was a calm lake near Grasmere, sometimes a torrent of water in the Alps, sometimes a swiftly flowing river--the Wye, the Thames, or the Cam--sometimes the mighty ocean, or even a humble pastoral brook; all seemed to evoke the best of his poetic vision. This is true throughout his poetry, for in analysing the whole canon I could find no distinct reduction in the number of water images in the later works; indeed, they appear consistently in every type of poetry and in every period.

It might be expected that a writer who lived in close proximity to water for most of his life and who was especially drawn to the world of nature both as a person and in his search for poetic material, would have an affinity for water images. But the water images in Wordsworth's poetry are not only notable for their frequency of occurrence; they express his most deeply held and most intense feelings and ideas.

Almost every critic who discusses Wordsworth's imagery comments on the profusion of water images in his canon, for there are one or more references to water in nearly four hundred of his poems, including many of the most important and best known pieces. But no one, to my knowledge, has examined this type of imagery in detail over an extended period of his work. Miss Florence Marsh has several pages on the subject in her book, Wordsworth's Imagery² and Professor Kenneth MacLean discusses the water symbolism of The Prelude in an article,³ but I

²Florence Marsh, Wordsworth's Imagery: A Study in Poetic Vision (Hamden: Archon Books, 1963), pp. 91-96.

³Kenneth MacLean, "The Water Symbol in The Prelude (1805-06)," University of Toronto Quarterly, 17 (July, 1948), pp. 372-89.

have not found any other prolonged consideration of this particular subject. Because water imagery is so prevalent and so important in Wordsworth's poetry, I decided to examine it in detail and try to discover if there are any discernible patterns of symbolic meaning in its use, and why the poet was repeatedly drawn to it. It seemed most profitable to limit the examination to the decade from 1798 to 1807 for during that time Wordsworth produced great poetry of several different types and there was a distinct development in his style and subject matter, providing a dynamic background for analysing the water images he used in those ten years. In the poetry of this time, too, the imagery is consistently an integral part of the poem's structure, rarely simply decorative as it tended to become in some of Wordsworth's later writing. Finally, the period contains the poems which stand at the heart of Wordsworth's body of poetry and which express most intensely that search for the truth about man and the universe which was the essence of his poetic life.

The three major works of the 1798-1807 period are quite different from each other in style and subject matter. The first, Lyrical Ballads, was a project of Wordsworth and his friend, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, planned in late 1797 when they were neighbours in the Quantock Hills. Both contributed to the publication, but by far the greater number of poems were by Wordsworth in the 1798 edition and when the collection was reprinted in 1800 with a second volume of thirty-seven poems added, Coleridge was responsible for only one new poem.

The dominant theme of Wordsworth's poems in the 1798 edition

could be summed up as "the still, sad music of humanity."⁴ Most of these poems are about some humble and simple individual whose tale is told in the first person by a narrator, or anonymously. In these 1798 poems Wordsworth sought for truth in the lives of humble men, because, as he explained in the Preface to the 1800 edition:

[I]n that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are under less restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that situation our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated.⁵

These poems were not only written about ordinary men but as far as possible in the language really spoken by men. However, as many critics have pointed out, though the language approximates the "common" words of men, those words are arranged in uncommon order and express uncommon thoughts.

As Wordsworth resolved or sublimated the intense social awareness which he displayed in the 1798 Lyrical Ballads, his poetry changed. He gradually withdrew from writing about the hearts and minds of other men and turned more to nature and his own inner life for his poetic

⁴"Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey," l. 92. The quotations in this thesis are taken from the poems of Lyrical Ballads as they were originally published in 1798 and 1800, according to the facsimile edition of R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones; from the 1805 version of The Prelude as it appears in the edition of Ernest de Selincourt; and from the verbatim literatim reprint of Poems in Two Volumes, 1807, edited by Helen Darbishire.

⁵William Wordsworth, "Preface," Lyrical Ballads (1800), ed. by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen & Co., 1963), p. 239.

material. This change can be seen in the growing introspection of the 1800 poems. This introspection was accompanied by an increasing obsession with mortality; for more than half the poems added in 1800 involve the death of a person, or of some flora or fauna. John Danby remarks about some of these 1800 poems that in them, "the view of life must take in also the prospect of death."⁶ One could say that the 1798 poems were centered, compassionately, on the heart of man and it is equally valid to say that the main theme of the 1800 edition was an obsession with love and death.

Wordsworth began the writing of The Prelude, the next major work of the decade, early in 1798 as he and Coleridge were engaged in publishing Lyrical Ballads. Wordsworth was encouraged by Coleridge to write a philosophic poem which was to be entitled "The Recluse, or Views on Man, Nature and Society," and Wordsworth was eager for this great task at first, but soon began to have doubts, wondering whether he should wait until he was more mellowed by experience and had a "riper mind."⁷ In order to take stock of his capacity for this great work and to examine how far he was qualified for it through "Nature" and "Education," he began by writing in blank verse a detailed examination of his poetic development since childhood. This poem, addressed to Coleridge, was actually not published until 1850, after Wordsworth's death, and his widow then gave it the title, The Prelude.

⁶John F. Danby, The Simple Wordsworth: Studies in the Poems 1797-1807 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 79.

⁷The Prelude I, l. 237.

Wordsworth gradually gave up the idea of a great philosophical poem on "Man, Nature and Society," for he was not really equal to it. Perhaps Coleridge, had his life not been ruined by ill health and discouragement, might have risen to such a task, but Wordsworth did not have the same capacity for speculation as Coleridge. However, though The Prelude, a piece of dramatic introspection such as probably no other poet could have produced with such success, may have failed to lead into the longer work, it is still a masterpiece on its own, and unlike the proposed philosophic "epic," was ideally suited to Wordsworth's abilities. Wordsworth's autobiographical examination of his own growth as a poet is unified by the continuum of his experiences and that pervasive desire to find and express the truth which was his aim in all his writing. The most stark passages of the Lyrical Ballads are the result of Wordsworth's determined wish to make poetry "true" in every sense of the word. This desire for truth makes some parts of The Prelude rather banal, but also gives it great power in its best passages.

Wordsworth himself realized the uniqueness of one man talking so much about himself, calling it "unprecedented in literary history."⁸ His failure to publish The Prelude in his lifetime did not mean that he abandoned it after 1805. Indeed, he was constantly revising it for thirty-five years. The final version published in 1850 was in many ways different from the one he had completed in 1805, but as indicated,

⁸William Wordsworth in a letter to Sir George Beaumont, May 1, 1805, quoted in "Introduction," The Prelude (1805) ed. by Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. xii.

this paper will be based only on the 1805 version. Incidentally, in conclusion of this general discussion of The Prelude's composition and publication, it seems particularly appropriate in the context of this paper to add that one of the reasons Wordsworth gave for not publishing the poem was that it was "the tributary"⁹ of a larger work--more water imagery!

By the publication of Poems in Two Volumes of 1807, Wordsworth's horizons had widened considerably. He had married, become a (legitimate) father, lost his beloved brother John at sea, begun the estrangement from Coleridge, and widened his poetic vision to encompass a much greater view of the world.

In these 1807 poems, Wordsworth had largely retreated from his excursion into the emotions of simple rustics and his intense preoccupation with death had lessened. There appeared instead new concerns in some of his most powerful poems; a growing consciousness of the fading of his spontaneous imaginative response to the world, a search for moral strength in the midst of personal loss, and an interest in political and international events. Accompanying this change in emphasis, the metre, style and language of the 1807 poems show a much greater variety than either the Lyrical Ballads or The Prelude.

It has already been suggested that the majority of critics who discuss Wordsworth's imagery comment on the frequency of references to water. Miss F. Marsh, in the book mentioned earlier, remarks: "Water in all its aspects--its sound and its quiet, its movement and its peace,

⁹William Wordsworth in a letter to de Quincey, March 16, 1804. Quoted in "Introduction," The Prelude (1805) ed. by de Selincourt, p. xvi.

its transparency and its power to reflect--is one of Wordsworth's most all-pervasive vehicles."¹⁰ She goes on to say: "It is also one of his most troublesome to discuss because the literal stream often seems to exist for its own sake with little if any symbolic value and because the metaphorical uses of water are all inclusive."¹¹ In another statement about the problems of discussing Wordsworth's imagery, Helen Darbishire, who in my opinion understood the poet more completely than any other critic, says of the imagery in one poem, the "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood:" "The imagery in which the theme is unfolded is inseparable from it--so much one with it that it may be said to be the theme as truly as the underlying thought."¹² This statement is equally valid for other works including some of those which contain significant water imagery; the lines Wordsworth wrote in The Prelude describing his climb up Mount Snowdon and those about crossing the Simplon Pass are two examples. This closeness of imagery and thought does not make for ease of explicitation, poetic though it may be, for Wordsworth is not a simple poet by any means, as John Danby demonstrates very well in his ironically titled book The Simple Wordsworth, one of those works which remarks on the frequency of water imagery in Wordsworth's poetry.

Speaking numerically, thirty-eight of Wordsworth's poems in Lyrical Ballads contain water images; such images can be found in every

¹⁰Marsh, Wordsworth's Imagery, p. 91.

¹¹Ibid., p. 91.

¹²Helen Darbishire, The Poet Wordsworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 67.

book of The Prelude and in forty-five of the selections in Poems in Two Volumes, 1807. Of course, there is some variation in the quantity of water images in the various poems and some discrepancy in their importance. Not every reference to water in all these poems is central to the reader's understanding of the piece. As Miss Marsh indicates, certain poems contain only fleeting references to water which can scarcely be called metaphors, but in others the water images do express symbolically the essence of the poem.

In "We Are Seven," for example, the poet's little interlocutress tells him that two of her brothers have gone to sea. This "counts" as a water image, but has very little meaning in the poem, which concerns a child's inability to accept the idea of mortality. "Old Man Traveling" has another water image of similar insignificance as the old man encountered by Wordsworth tells him the object of his journey is

. . . to take
 "A last leave of my son, a mariner,
 "Who from a sea-fight has been brought to
 Falmouth
 And there is dying in a hospital."
 (ll. 17-20.)

The impact of these lines at the end of the poem describing the old man's animal-like tranquillity and patience does not depend on the reference to the sea but it is an example of one group of water images.

In many more poems, though, such as "Hart Leap Well" and "The Thorn" of Lyrical Ballads, certain passages in The Prelude, the "Elegiac Stanzas" and the sonnet "Thoughts of a Briton on the Subjugation of Switzerland" from the 1807 volumes, water symbols convey the central thought.

Perhaps the prevalence of water images in some of Wordsworth's poems may be partly explained by the fact that he often wrote about subjects which have pastoral settings--a rustic person of the Cumberland district, some anthropomorphized fauna or flora--or about his personal response to nature. "Michael," for instance, does not contain much water imagery, but the major image in the poem, the sheepfold, is located next to the "boisterous brook of Green-head Gill."¹³ Wordsworth explained in an 1800 note that the water was needed for washing the sheep.

The early books of The Prelude about Wordsworth's boyhood and schooltime in the Lake District contain many more references to water, partly because of the setting, than do the books about his experiences in London and France, or those explaining his philosophical and psychological beliefs. In a majority of instances, however, water imagery is not present in Wordsworth's poetry just as a technical detail or by chance of location or subject matter, but has deliberate symbolic meaning; indeed, in the great Prelude, it is the underlying symbol of the whole poem. This imagery is most often intentionally employed by the poet to express some feeling or idea central to the poem, though sometimes it is difficult, as has been suggested, to translate these thoughts into ordinary prose.

On examining the poetry of the three major 1798-1807 works, one finds that certain images are used recurrently to express similar ideas. Fountains, the sea, standing water (wells, pools or ponds), waterfalls,

¹³L. 491.

streams or brooks, and rivers, suggest similar thoughts in different poems. Not every metaphor involving one of these types of water, nor every reference to one of them has exactly the same connotation, but I think there are more than enough similarities to make the suggestion of recurrent patterns in Wordsworth's use of water imagery a demonstrable idea. I have found also in analysing these patterns that in some cases, more than one pattern of imagery is recurrently associated with the same form of water. One is usually a fairly straightforward simple suggestion of an ordinary idea and the other a more profound thought related to Wordsworth's central beliefs about man and the universe.

The sea, as a first example, seems to have two major connotations. The first is as a complex symbol for Wordsworth's idea of the vast eternal spirit of the universe and the second metaphoric association is with strangeness, and sometimes with loss, alienation, madness or even death. Sea images used with the first connotation can be seen in The Prelude, and in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," among others. Imagery with the second implication of the sea as an alien place of "doubt and something dark," of "some reverential fear" as Wordsworth says in an 1807 sonnet,¹⁴ can be found in "The Female Vagrant," "Ruth," "The Affliction of Margaret," "To the Same Flower," "I Travell'd Among Unknown Men," and numerous other poems. On occasion these two associations are interwoven by the poet, for example, in the "Elegiac Stanzas."

¹⁴"Where lies the Land to which yon ship must go?" 11. 12-13.

Inland waters, on the other hand, especially running brooks and rivulets, have quite a different connotation. They are associated in the poems with youth, nature at her most harmonious, beauty and childhood joy, freedom, and an affirmation of life. "It Was an April Morning," "Ruth," "Nutting," "Written in March," and "To H. C., Six Years Old," are a few random examples of poems containing this idea.

Streams and rivers have multiple meanings, and they are very common images in Wordsworth's poems. Perhaps because of his early love for the Derwent and its effect upon him, he turns to rivers and streams to symbolize his most important ideas about the flow of existence, freedom, imagination, poetic inspiration, and the nature of reality. "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey," many passages in *The Prelude*, "Thoughts of a Briton on the Subjugation of Switzerland," and "It is not to be thought of that the Flood," are a few poems in which rivers and streams are used to symbolize one or more of these themes. Like brooks and small running waters, rivers are also associated recurrently with a wholesome life in harmony with nature.

Standing water, as in pools, ponds or wells, is associated with death and decay, physical, emotional or moral. "The Thorn," the poem which begins "If Nature, for a favourite Child," "Resolution and Independence," "A Complaint," and "Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour," contain standing water images with these associations.

Fountains in Wordsworth's poetic thought are very appropriately related to the life force of nature and the creative power of the universe. "Hart Leap Well," "The Fountain," "The Two April Mornings,"

"The Brothers" and "A Complaint," are some poems in which fountains have this symbolic meaning.

Waterfalls, not unexpectedly, are connected in simple metaphors with danger and death. "Song for the Wandering Jew" and "The Pet Lamb" are two poems which have images of waterfalls with this implication. The sound of waterfalls also suggested to Wordsworth the "voice" of the eternal spirit of nature. He says in "Tintern Abbey" about his early love of nature: "The sounding cataract haunted me like a passion,"¹⁵ and one finds other similar images of waterfalls which have this second, deeper metaphoric connotation.

All these forms of water have specific separate patterns of meaning and they also convey a general symbolic meaning as surrogates for Nature in total. Water, more often than any other single element in nature--flora, mountains, animals--sums up Nature in Wordsworth's thought and when several aspects of physical nature are used to represent the "idea" of Nature, water is usually the dominant image. Perhaps this was because it was his earliest foretaste "of the calm / that Nature breathes among the hills and groves."¹⁶

And yet another, deeper level can be discovered in the symbolic patterns of Wordsworth's water imagery. These image patterns are threads of a larger pattern in which the poet is expressing the different aspects of his idea of "metaphysical reality," or that "Wisdom and

¹⁵L. 77.

¹⁶The Prelude, I, ll. 284-85.

Spirit of the universe,"¹⁷ he recognized so intensely, and whose essence he wanted to communicate in his poetry. The attributes of this "reality," symbolized in various ways through the water images are really the core of Wordsworth's thought. This thought is, I believe, essentially a kind of intuitive Platonism.

Wallace Stevens has remarked that the strongest imagination leads to a "Platonic resolution of diversity,"¹⁸ while Coleridge, whose great masters were of course, Plato and Kant, said that "everyone is born an Aristotelian, or a Platonist."¹⁹ Wordsworth had an unusually marked Platonic cast to his thought and his imagination leads not just to a resolution of diversity but to a vision of the living Soul of all the universe. It is that vision which transfuses his finest poetry with greatness and it is ultimately a Platonic vision.

Dean W. R. Inge in his book The Platonic Tradition in English Religious Thought says of Wordsworth that he is a "Truer Platonist" than Shelley for the "presence of the Divine in and behind Nature was far more intimately felt by Wordsworth, the self-taught follower of the Platonists."²⁰ Dean Inge draws a distinction (after the ideas of Professor J. A. Stewart) between traditional Platonism, like Spenser's,

¹⁷Ibid., I, 1. 428.

¹⁸Wallace Stevens, "Imagination as Value" in English Institute Essays, 1948, ed. D. A. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), p. 21.

¹⁹Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Table Talk and Omniana, ed. H. N. Coleridge (London: Oxford University Press, 1917), p. 118.

²⁰W. R. Inge, The Platonic Tradition in English Religious Thought (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1926), p. 83.

and personal Platonism like Wordsworth's, quoting Stewart's description of personal Platonism as,

. . . the mood of one who has a curious eye for the endless variety of this visible and temporal world, and a fine sense of its beauties, yet is haunted by the presence of an invisible and eternal world behind, or, when the mood is most pressing, within the visible and temporal world, and sustaining both it and himself--a world not perceived as external to himself, but inwardly lived by him, as that with which in moments of ecstasy, or even habitually, he is become one.²¹

This definition obviously applies to Wordsworth and is in many ways a good summary of the experiences which are the theme of some of his most important works. "Personal Platonism" is, in brief, the intuitive acceptance of Plato's basic view that Spirit is primal, reality is organic, values like goodness, truth and beauty are supreme and the key to life is harmonious self development. In Wordsworth's case, only a certain amount of informal scholarship enhanced his intuitive disposition to this view of existence and therefore it seems most appropriate to call his thought, after Dean Inge, "personal" as opposed to "formal" Platonism, or that based primarily on extensive scholarship and employing the formal language of the School.

Let us proceed, then, to a closer examination of the water imagery in Wordsworth's 1798-1807 work, which it is hoped will reveal that various forms of water do appear in recurrent patterns of meaning, that the more complex ones are ultimately expressions about a Platonic world in and behind the temporal one and that an understanding of these water images is of considerable importance in comprehending the poet's thought.

²¹Ibid., p. 73.

CHAPTER II

THE SEA

The sea has two major metaphoric connotations in Wordsworth's poetry. The simpler is as a representation of danger and alienation, the second and more complex is as a symbol of the vastness and infinitude of the wisdom and spirit of the universe. Wordsworth's "central experience," the "merging of his soul with the divine soul in Nature" as one eminent critic expresses it,¹ gave him a perception of that divine soul as "first and last, and midst, and without end."² He was intensely aware of this infinity as a quality of the world power which infuses all existence, and he recurrently used images of the sea to express this perception. In his highest moments of recognition of this soul, Wordsworth was intoxicated with its glory and infinite power, and an analysis of the description of these moments in his poetry suggests that he turned to the sea, which to man's eye appears infinitely vast and limitless, to communicate this idea.

These two primary connotations of Wordsworth's sea images are sometimes modified or extended to suggest a complex of related ideas, especially in the later poetry of the decade where the images in general are richer and fuller.

The first and simpler of these associations, when the sea is presented as strange and threatening, can be seen very clearly in

¹Darbishire, The Poet Wordsworth, pp. 136-37.

²The Prelude, VI, 1. 572.

"Ruth," "The Female Vagrant" and "The Brothers" from Lyrical Ballads and "The Affliction of Margaret," "The Sailor's Mother" and "The Blind Highland Boy" from the 1807 volumes. All these poems are narrative stories about love and suffering, a theme which very much interested Wordsworth, and they are quite similar in style as well, though they were written at different times, and the last, "The Blind Highland Boy," not until after Wordsworth's visit to Loch Leven in 1803.

In the first of the above poems, "Ruth," written during Wordsworth's 1799 winter in Germany, the sea appears in the background as an implied source of danger in contrast to the inland waters of England which the poet of the Lake District consistently associated with happiness and safety. Ruth's faithless lover, described as gayer than any dolphin "upon the tropic sea"³ came from "cross the ocean,"⁴ to betray her; and most important, it was over there, in America, that he fell into the evil ways which led to his betrayal. One does not want to belabour the point, but also it was at the sea-side she learned of his desertion and went mad.

"The Female Vagrant," a poem of the 1798 Lyrical Ballads, which Wordsworth constantly revised right up until 1842 in accordance with his changing social views, is similar to "Ruth" in its story. It very directly connects the sea with danger, alienation, loss and death. When the Female Vagrant and her family are driven by adverse social conditions to emigrate to America (again the source of "evil") the sea becomes a place of peril and fear. The crossing is both hazardous in

³L. 36.

⁴L. 24.

itself and an awful portent of what is to come:

. . . the equinoctial deep
 Ran mountains--high before the howling blast.
 We gazed with terror on the gloomy sleep
 Of them that perished in the whirlwind's sweep,
 Untaught that soon such anguish must ensue,
 Our hopes such harvest of affliction reap,
 That we the mercy of the waves should rue.
 (ll. 110-16.)

These storms at sea also suggest the woman's inner state, for she had been very apprehensive about the trip and pleaded with "prayers and tears"⁵ to change her husband's mind about the voyage. And Wordsworth expresses the nightmare of her war experiences in the New World with sea imagery--"while like a sea the storming army came"⁶--very clearly associating the sea with disaster. After these calamities of war, "disease and famine, agony and fear,"⁷ the Vagrant returns to England across the sea by herself, for she has lost all her family. The ocean on the return voyage is very different for it is a "glittering main"⁸ which is at rest. This rest of the "very ocean"⁹ after the storms of the outward trip emphasizes by contrast the human mourner's inability to calm the "storms of her mortal care."¹⁰ The imagery in this section of the poem seems reminiscent of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in the almost supernatural calmness of the ocean and it is associated too with the "emotional limbo" the woman has entered. The peace she finds on this "silent sea"¹¹ invested with a "heavenly silence"¹² is deceptive for it leads to more suffering and pain. She

⁵L. 97. ⁶L. 156. ⁷L. 128. ⁸L. 138.

⁹L. 139. ¹⁰L. 141. ¹¹L. 168. ¹²L. 142.

has crossed the sea into a living death, for she is outside life;

And homeless near a thousand homes I stood
And near a thousand tables pined, and wanted food.
(ll. 179-80.)

This pitiful tale very clearly illustrates in several images Wordsworth's poetic pattern of relating the sea to disaster, loss and alienation.

"The Brothers," of the 1800 Lyrical Ballads which Coleridge described as "that model of English pastoral"¹³ also contains evidence of this pattern in its imagery. In this poem, full of pathos, an elder of two brothers returns to his country home after twenty years at sea. During those years he had remained "half a Shepherd on the stormy seas,"¹⁴ imagining mountains, sheep, hills and shepherds in the waves of the sea, for sailing was really an alien way of life to him. During the shepherd-sailor's sojourn at sea, his beloved younger brother had grieved, and eventually died by accident. The death is not directly connected to the elder brother's long absence, but one has the feeling that the young man's grief was perhaps a factor in his accident. Thus the sea is presented as an alien place and the bringer, at least indirectly, of death to one brother and sorrow to the other.

"The Affliction of Margaret," from the 1807 volumes but probably written six years earlier, is about a mourning mother whose son has disappeared, and one of her great fears is that her lost son

. . . hast been summoned to the Deep,
Thou, Thou, and all thy mates, to keep
An incommunicable sleep.

(ll. 54-56.)

¹³Quoted in Moorman, Wordsworth: The Early Years, p. 479.

¹⁴L. 43.

Another story of maternal distress with the sea a source of danger is "The Blind Highland Boy." In this tale with a Scottish setting, a little blind boy sets off in a "Household Tub"¹⁵ on Loch Leven, "hurrying down / Towards the mighty sea,"¹⁶ a place of adventure to the boy but a terrifying prospect for his mother. "The Sailor's Mother," still another poem of similar style and theme, has the mother grieving because of her son's death at sea.

All the poems described above are about simple people of rural England and in all of them the sea is presented as a place of danger, alien to the character's way of life, for in his poetry Wordsworth habitually used the sea as a vehicle to convey these ideas. Even in the lyrical "I travell'd among unknown Men," "lands beyond the sea,"¹⁷ if not the sea itself, are places where the poet is disoriented and unhappy.

For the people of Lyrical Ballads and for the poet himself in a more sophisticated way, happiness was tied to a life in close contact with the green hills and inland waters of rural England. In one of the 1807 sonnets,¹⁸ Wordsworth's joy at his return to his home is expressed in the following lines:

Dear fellow Traveller! here we are once more.
 The Cock that crows, the Smoke that curls, that sound
 Of Bells, those Boys that in yon meadow-ground
 In white sleev'd shirts are playing by the score,
 And even this little River's gentle roar.
 All, all are English. Oft have I look'd around
 With joy in Kent's green vales; but never found

¹⁵L. 113.

¹⁶L1. 99-100.

¹⁷L. 2.

¹⁸"Composed in the Valley, near Dover On the Day of Landing."

Myself so satisfied in heart before.
 . . . and 'tis enough joy and pride
 For one hour's perfect bliss, to tread the grass
 Of England once again, . . .
 (ll. 1-8, 11-13.)

It should be added that there was a great deal of implied social criticism in the Lyrical Ballads, especially those of 1798. One of the problems of the eighteenth century was that small farmers and countrymen were being driven off the land by great landowners and forced to emigrate. Oliver Goldsmith, one of Wordsworth's early precursors had written about the same problem in The Deserted Village, in 1770. Thus, this association of strangeness and fear with the sea probably had its origins in Wordsworth's concern for the social problems of the poor, as well as in his own intense love for rural England.

These images using the sea as a metaphor for alienation and danger can be found in The Prelude and in other poetry of the 1807 volumes besides the narrative tales already mentioned.

The Prelude opens as the poet has been freed from the "prison"¹⁹ of the city (through his legacy from Raisley Calvert) and is in the process of returning to live in the country amid Nature at its purest, and shaking off "the heavy weight of many a weary day."²⁰ Water images typical of The Prelude where rivers and streams are very important metaphors throughout the poem, appear at once for Wordsworth wonders "what sweet stream / Shall with its murmur lull"²¹ him to his rest and whether he will follow "a twig or any floating thing / Upon a river"²² in setting the course of his new life. In this expression of delight

¹⁹I, 1. 8.

²⁰I, 1. 24.

²¹I, 11. 13-14.

²²I, 11. 31-32.

at his new freedom, Wordsworth also says he may now "quit the tiresome sea and dwell on shore,"²³ suggesting that he is like a sailor who has come home. The feeling about the sea as an alien place is related to the city in this image, for Wordsworth felt uncomfortable in cities all his life, and the whole implication of the metaphor is that the country is his real home.

One cannot discuss the sea images of The Prelude which suggest danger without mentioning the enigmatic fable of the Stone and the Shell.²⁴ De Quincey called this famous dream "sublime,"²⁵ but it is a considerable puzzle to explicate. The story is told of a friend--later changed to Wordsworth himself--who was sitting in a "rocky cave / by the sea side"²⁶ reading Cervantes. The reader fell into musing and turning his eyes towards the sea, began to think "On Poetry and geometric Truth."²⁷ These thoughts were perhaps inspired because the sea is associated by Wordsworth in the other, more complex image pattern with the vast spirit of existence and the two extremes of this spirit in intellectual terms, are science and poetry. As the man was falling asleep, a peculiar dream came to him about an Arab in a desert, carrying a Stone and a Shell. The Stone turned out to represent "Euclid's Elements" or science, and the Shell a "Book," "something of more worth," or literature.²⁸ Held to the dreamer's ear, the Shell gave forth a

²³I, 1. 35.

²⁴V, 11. 49-165.

²⁵De Quincey in Tait's Magazine for January, February and April, 1839, quoted in "Notes" The Prelude (1805) ed. de Selincourt, p. 265.

²⁶V, 11. 57-58.

²⁷V, 1. 64.

²⁸V, 11. 88-90.

prophecy in some unknown but intelligible language of "Destruction to the Children of the Earth / By deluge now at hand."²⁹ The Arab, also called a semi-"Don Quixote,"³⁰ seems to combine in his person as well as in his symbolic burdens both literature and science, for the Arabs invented mathematics, and Don Quixote is a most idealistic literary creation. This rather strange figure made off in the dream to bury the Stone and Shell for safekeeping, and the dreamer followed him, but glancing back, saw

. . . 'the waters of the deep
Gathering upon us, ' . . .
(V, 11. 130-31.)

The Arab-Quixote then disappeared across the burning desert

With the fleet waters of the drowning world
In chase of him.
(V, 11. 136-37.)

The most acceptable interpretation of the whole story seems to be that of W. H. Auden in The Enchafèd Flood.³¹ Auden suggests that the Stone and the Shell represent polarities, ultimately, of science and poetry. The poet's desire is to preserve both, and the deluge represents the anarchy which will occur if man does not hold these polarities in balance. Critics offer all kinds of explanations for this strange episode, but the detailed meaning of the whole story including the sea images, is rather obscure except that the sea is constantly associated with a grand disaster of almost Biblical proportions. When Wordsworth says later in the same book, "My drift hath

²⁹V, 11. 98-99.

³⁰V, 1. 142.

³¹W. H. Auden, The Enchafèd Flood (New York: Random House, 1950), pp. 43-90.

scarcely, / I fear, been obvious,"³² one has to agree with him!

Wordsworth's emotional response to "the devouring sea,"³³ as he called it, is well illustrated by a story in Book Twelve of The Prelude, a book about the impairment and restoration of his poetic imagination. In describing some childhood experiences which provided him with an emotional "fountain" whence he could draw poetic feeling as an adult, Wordsworth asserts his affection for travellers on public roads (where he certainly found a great deal of poetic material) and states that ever since childhood he found in these "Wanderers of the Earth" something of the same grandeur he saw in

The Mariner who sails the roaring sea
Through storm and darkness . . .
(XII, ll. 154-55.)

The perilousness the young Wordsworth early invested in the sea may be one origin of that sense of danger and strangeness which imbues so many of his sea images. Though the sea stimulated Wordsworth's imagination on occasion, it rarely seems to have suggested joy and peace to him the way inland waters did, for Wordsworth loved the rivers, brooks and streams as friends.

The sea images of the 1807 books are generally richer and more elaborate than in the earlier works, as is true throughout the poems of these volumes. The suggestion of the sea being dangerous and foreign is apparent in some poems but the images do not express this idea so directly, and it is often only one aspect of a more complex thought. One sonnet does spring to mind at once however, as a clear example of

³²V, ll. 291-92.

³³IX, l. 4.

this pattern. The poem begins "Where lies the Land to which yon Ship must go?" and as the poet muses on this question he says:

Yet still I ask, what Haven is her mark?
 And, almost as it was when ships were rare,
 From time to time, like Pilgrims, here and there
 Crossing the waters; doubt, and something dark,
 Of the old Sea some reverential fear,
 Is with me at thy farewell, joyous Bark.
 (ll. 9-14.)

"Doubt and something dark, / Of the old Sea some reverential fear" is a very accurate summary of the idea Wordsworth recurrently expresses in metaphors of the sea. In a fairly simple poem, "To The Same Flower" (the small celandine specifically) he expresses again this feeling about the sea as alien in these words addressed to the flower:

Thou art not beyond the moon
 But a thing "beneath our shoon;"
 Let, as old Magellan did,
 Others roam about the sea;
 (ll. 41-44.)

"The Solitary Reaper," that beautiful poem full of the rich imagery so characteristic of Wordsworth's style in the later part of the 1798-1807 decade, contains a line in which the sea appears as the veritable soul of strange, far-off places. Wordsworth says of the Reaper's singing:

No sweeter voice was ever heard
 In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
 Breaking the silence of the seas
 Among the furthest Hebrides.
 (ll. 13-16.)

The sensuous beauty of these limpid lines is a very striking example of Wordsworth's simple but rich poetry at its best and the image of the sea is illustrative of Wordsworth's deceptive simplicity. The line about the sea begins aggressively with a harsh-sounding verb

and then the sibilance of the last phrase, "silence of the seas," almost creates in itself the barely audible hissing of the waves. The phrase "furthest Hebrides" of the last line is associated with "Arabian Sands" mentioned in the preceding quatrain so that Wordsworth's familiar unification of disparate is achieved through the singing which penetrates the loneliest places. Once more Wordsworth finds in the sea a metaphor to express the idea of strangeness and distance.

Perhaps the most important poem in which Wordsworth used the sea as a symbol of danger and estrangement was "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peel Castle in a Storm, painted by Sir George Beaumont." The sea is a very complicated symbol in this work and it is used as a vehicle to communicate some of Wordsworth's most intense feelings. The poem was written in the summer of 1805 after the poet's beloved brother John drowned in the wreck of his East India freighter "Abergavenny." The "Elegiac Stanzas" were inspired by Wordsworth's sorrow about his brother's death, and there is a second grief in them about the lessening of his own spontaneous imaginative response to the world which was the genesis of his poetry. The sea in the poem becomes a symbol for the poet's inner state. In his halcyon days he knew Peel Castle standing beside a calm sea and he

. . . could have fancied that the mighty Deep
Was even the gentlest of all gentle things.
(ll. 11-12.)

The castle then was "sleeping on a glassy sea,"³⁴ the "glassy sea" reminiscent of the "glittering main" in "Ruth," and as deceptive. In

³⁴_{L. 4.}

these happier days Wordsworth thought he saw the "soul of truth"³⁵ in this "Elysian quiet"³⁶ but he learned when his soul had been humanized by "a deep distress"³⁷ that, like Oedipus, we are "surely blind"³⁸ and do not know real truth until we have suffered and accepted within ourselves that we cannot live apart from the laws of nature which include suffering and death. Wordsworth's early achievement of an easy joy and his flashes of

The light that never was, on sea or land,
The consecration, and the Poet's dream;
(ll. 15-16.)

which were symbolized by the "smiling sea"³⁹ are gone without hope of restoration, and he explains in the poem that he has accepted suffering as something which must be borne and out of which he has gained new, if different strength. The "sea in anger,"⁴⁰ the "deadly swell,"⁴¹ the "trampling waves"⁴² in Sir George Beaumont's picture become the symbol for that pain which must be borne as a part of nature and which gives a deeper knowledge of the "soul of truth."⁴³

The changing sea images in the poem are the underlying symbol of the whole theme and the poet's association with the sea as a place of "something dark" which could be discerned on a simpler level in other poems here becomes a complex image about human life and the loss of youth's spontaneous joy. Aldous Huxley's contention⁴⁴ that Wordsworth's easy vision of happiness in nature was possible only because

³⁵L. 31. ³⁶L. 26. ³⁷L. 36. ³⁸L. 56. ³⁹L. 38.

⁴⁰L. 44. ⁴¹L. 47. ⁴²L. 52. ⁴³L. 31.

⁴⁴Aldous Huxley, "Wordsworth in the Tropics," in Holy Face and Other Essays (London: Fleuron, 1929).

he did not really know its cruelty can be refuted not only by the details of Wordsworth's biography but by this poem, in which the poet's anguish at his brother's death and the fading of "the light that never was on sea, or land" so clearly demonstrate his knowledge of that cruelty.

The second, more complex pattern of images with the sea as a symbol of infinite reality, does not appear significantly in the Lyrical Ballads, but most metaphors involving the sea in The Prelude suggest the vastness and all-pervasiveness of the universal spirit.

In Book One of The Prelude as Wordsworth was delineating the memorable childhood experiences which contributed to the making of a poet, his main theme was how nature ministered to him as "a favor'd Being"⁴⁵ in various ways, making

The surface of the universal earth
With triumph, and delight, and hope, and fear,
Work like a sea.

(I, ll. 499-501.)

Wordsworth, who called Nature the nurse and guardian of his soul, believed that through nature he was led to the higher moral and spiritual values which were part of the universal wisdom and that the earliest steps to this knowledge were taken through his daily boyhood activities. This early influence of Nature was secondary, working indirectly through the triumph, delight, hope and fear of the poet's childhood feelings. These feelings, growing out of his activities in Nature, gave him his first intimations of the Infinite and in the lines quoted above, he likens the workings of this spirit in the

⁴⁵The Prelude, I, l. 364.

universe to a sea for as waves are only the surface of the sea, these feelings were only the outer layer of Nature's depths of wisdom. The word "surface" in the first line seems significant, for the poet is clearly suggesting that these feelings were only the very smallest part of the immensity that lay below, as the waves are just the covering of the deep sea. A further, very typical implication of this image to Wordsworth is the view that incidents of life resemble the waves on a sea, each separate and temporarily distinct, but emerging from a unified whole and then blending once more into that whole.

This has been a fairly lengthy explication of this image for the ideas it suggests are characteristic of the pattern of sea images under discussion. When Wordsworth wanted to sum up the vastness of the unchanging essence of existence, he very often used the sea for his symbol. Somehow, no other natural phenomenon suggested so completely to him the single, deep and limitless force he apprehended throughout creation.

An image in which the sea again suggests the infinity inherent in the world spirit can be found in Book Two. In these lines, Wordsworth declared:

To unorganic natures I transferr'd
 My own enjoyments, or, the power of truth
 Coming in revelation, I convers'd
 With things that really are, I, at this time
 Saw blessings spread around me like a sea.
 (II, ll. 410-414.)

These lines are a succinct description of that process through which Wordsworth moved to recognition of the essential unity of existence, for that unity is "truth." The key phrases in this passage,

"the power of truth," "revelation," "blessings" and "things that really are," give fundamental insight into Wordsworth's central beliefs. The ultimate knowledge he gained in moments of revelation was of "truth" and that "truth," or reality, brought power. Indeed, Wordsworth thought that the greatest poetry was powerful because it expressed that ultimate truth. And, especially in the context of this essay, the passage once more expresses the limitlessness of this knowledge and the blessings which accompany it by the image of a sea, the final and only reference to natural objects in the passage.

Another similar example appears as the poet continued his statement in The Prelude about the growing intensity of his youthful response to nature and his increasing awareness of the "sentiment of Being"⁴⁶ spread throughout the universe with the climactic recognition of this ultimate truth,

Beneath the wave, yea, in the wave itself
 And mighty depth of waters. Wonder not
 If such my transports were; for in all things now
 I saw one life, and felt that it was joy.
 (II, ll. 427-30.)

The word "joy" is very important in Wordsworth's belief about "reality" for he thought the recognition of this reality and a life in harmony with it brought "joy." In another part of The Prelude he described this essence of reality, or Truth, in these words:

Our destiny, our nature, and our home
 Is with infinitude, and only there;
 With hope it is, hope that can never die,
 Effort, and expectation, and desire,
 And something evermore about to be.
 (VI, ll. 538-42.)

⁴⁶Ibid., I, l. 420.

Wordsworth followed these lines, speaking about the mind that recognizes this destiny, with characteristic use of a water image to suggest the rebirth and infinite renewal of the ultimate reality and said that such a mind was,

Strong in itself, and in the access of joy
Which hides it like the overflowing Nile.
(VI, ll. 547-48.)

The sea as a metaphor to convey the unending oneness of reality appears again in Book Three in the story of Wordsworth's life at Cambridge. He was somewhat dissatisfied with his university years and one aspect he especially disliked was the artificiality of life in the town, but he tried to remember that this artificiality was, after all, a kind of microcosm of the great world

. . . no mimic shew,
Itself a living part of a live whole,
A creek of the vast sea.
(III, ll. 624-26.)

In the well-known passage in Book Four about Wordsworth's "poetic baptism" as Professor de Selincourt calls it⁴⁷ when vows were made for him and his destiny as a poet sealed, Wordsworth in describing his sense of wonder said that the whole world was full of joy and even the "Sea was laughing at a distance."⁴⁸ The image of the sea conveys the completeness of this joy, for it is intended to suggest the infinite reaches of existence.

The section of The Prelude which explains Wordsworth's attitude

⁴⁷ Ernest de Selincourt in "Notes" to his edition of The Prelude (1805), p. 263.

⁴⁸ IV, l. 333.

to the French revolution contains one very interesting prolonged metaphor of the sea in which it becomes the underlying symbol for the permanence of the world soul despite superficial waves of change.

Wordsworth had been thrown into a deep depression over England's declaration of war with France, and by the events of the French Revolution, especially the bloody policy of Robespierre, the "Chief Regent" of this "foul Tribe of Moloch"⁴⁹ as the poet described him in imagery with a Miltonic resonance. On the day of Robespierre's death, Wordsworth was walking

. . . Over the smooth sands
Of Leven's ample Aestuary . . .
(X, 11. 475-76.)

having the same day seen the grave of a beloved former teacher ("Mathew" of Lyrical Ballads). The sight of the grave and its stone inscribed with a "fragment from the Elegy of Gray"⁵⁰ had evoked tears from the poet, but also aroused in him a feeling of "gentleness and peace."⁵¹ As he walked along the shore he saw an old Romish chapel, resembling a sea rock, where in olden days mass had been said at an hour convenient for worshippers to cross the sands at low tide. On the morning of Wordsworth's walk, there was a variegated crowd of travellers wading through the inland stream nearby with the "great Sea"⁵² retired at a safe distance--at low ebb, in other words.

The poet inquired the day's news from one of these travellers and learned to his great delight that Robespierre was dead. Breathing

⁴⁹X, 11. 469-70.

⁵⁰X, 1. 500.

⁵¹X, 1. 518.

⁵²X, 1. 529.

a "Hymn of triumph,"⁵³ Wordsworth continued on his way in high spirits along the same shore where he had ridden as a schoolboy with friends when

Along the margin of the moonlight Sea,
We beat with thundering hoofs the level Sand.
(X, ll. 466-67.)

This last line is an exact repetition of the final line of the passage in Book Two where Wordsworth originally described his boyhood rides along the shore.⁵⁴ This repetition emphasizes the circular quality of the whole tale as do the references to the tide. The story is full of touches juxtaposing change and sameness and always with the ebb and flow of the "great sea" in the background. This passage, which could be considered an excellent example of Wordsworth's often very subtle and complex symbolism, pits superficial change against enduring sameness, symbolized by the sea tide, in a pattern that underlies the whole episode. Wordsworth believed that though human events are transitory and ephemeral--teachers live and die, travellers come and go, tyrants rise and fall--the eternal truth of nature endures. As Wordsworth said about nature at the end of The Prelude:

. . . this Frame of things
(Which, 'mid all revolution in the hopes
And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged.)
(XIII, ll. 448-50.)

The most important instance of sea imagery in The Prelude is in Book Thirteen, the concluding book of the 1805 version. The sea appears in the description of Wordsworth's climb up Mount Snowdon in

⁵³X, l. 544.

⁵⁴ll. 143-44.

company with a youthful friend and a shepherd. The atmosphere had a mystical quality:

It was a Summer's night, a close warm night,
Wan, dull and glaring, with a dripping mist
Low-hung and thick that cover'd all the sky,
Half threatening storm and rain.

(11. 10-13.)

The three climbers made their way silently, each thinking his own thoughts, when suddenly

. . . at my feet the ground appear'd to brighten,
And with a step or two seem'd brighter still;
Nor had I time to ask the cause of this,
For instantly a Light upon the turf
Fell like a flash: I looked about, and lo!
The Moon stood naked in the Heavens, at height
Immense above my head, and on the shore
I found myself of a huge sea of mist,
Which, meek and silent, rested at my feet:
A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved
All over this still Ocean, and beyond,
Far, far beyond, the vapours shot themselves,
In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,
Into the Sea, the real Sea, that seem'd
To dwindle, and give up its majesty,
Usurp'd upon as far as sight could reach.
Meanwhile, the Moon look'd down upon this shew
In single glory, and we stood, the mist
Touching our very feet; and from the shore
At distance not the third part of a mile
Was a blue chasm; a fracture in the vapour,
A deep and gloomy breathing-place through which
Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams
Innumerable, roaring with one voice.
The universal spectacle throughout
Was shaped for admiration and delight,
Grand in itself alone, but in that breach
Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,
That dark deep thoroughfare had Nature lodg'd
The Soul, the Imagination of the whole.

(11. 36-65.)

This passage Miss Helen Darbishire calls "alive with the impulsive moment of the experience itself" and says that it gives "an unforgettable impression of the beauty, power and mystery which Wordsworth

found in the human mind."⁵⁵ These lines surely justify the assertion that Wordsworth saw in the sea, real or symbolic, an ideal expression for the eternal, vital unity and truth he recognized in his highest moments of mystic imagination and that he invested in the sea a kind of sublime awe.

That depth, vastness and above all, unity, Wordsworth recognized in existence and which he communicated so often through water imagery, is central to the meaning of this passage. Wordsworth's sensory response to nature during that warm, close, misty night was suddenly transformed as by a flash of inner light into the mystical sense of union with infinity, the "Soul" or "Imagination" of the whole. And the sea, real, imaginary and finally mystical is the symbol of that soul in this passage as in many others. The final water image in the passage--"the homeless voice of waters"--further supports the interpretation of Wordsworth's sea images in this thesis, for "homeless" emphasizes that the waters or "Soul" have no "home," that is, no single place of origin or rest, but are equally "at home" throughout all existence. Like the sea, the "soul" reaches as far as the inner eye can see.

It has been suggested that these more profound patterns of water imagery express a central belief in Wordsworth which has a distinctly Platonic cast. The idea of the above passage is that man's imagination shares in the "Imagination of the whole" and in these moments when truth comes in revelation is both part of that infinite

⁵⁵ Darbishire, The Poet Wordsworth, p. 119.

soul and aware of it at the same time. This concept is best summed up by Wordsworth in lines from The Prelude which are very close to Plato's description of the Idea of the Good, given in his Myth of the Sun.⁵⁶ Wordsworth says,

The excellence, pure spirit and best power
Both of the object seen, and eye that sees.
(XIII, ll. 378-79.)

It should be pointed out further in the discussion of the Snowdon passage that, although the sea is the most powerful image in the lines, Wordsworth also specifically mentions "torrents and streams," bringing all waters together and enforcing the dominant conception of unity which pervades the passage. The passage seems to strengthen not only the thesis that Wordsworth's important sea imagery expresses his idea of the limitless extension of the world Soul, but as well the suggestion that he believed "waters" in general to be a natural symbol which in their clarity, their superficial change yet enduring sameness, their total unity and their motion, were the most suitable vehicle to communicate that almost inexpressible truth.

Some of the 1807 sonnets have already been mentioned but there are others which contain more complicated and more profound sea imagery. Three of Wordsworth's most beautiful sonnets come to mind at once: "On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic," "The World is too much with us," and "It is a beautiful Evening, calm and free." Wordsworth's early disdain for the sonnet form notwithstanding, his ability within the limitations of the form has rarely been surpassed

⁵⁶Republic VI, 508-10.

by any poet. His growing belief throughout the 1798-1807 decade that true freedom is attainable only in reasonable restraint, which he outlined in the "Ode to Duty" and the sonnet "Nuns fret not at their Convent's narrow room," seemed to generate a response in him to the contained form of the sonnet, something one would not have expected from the determined revolutionary "balladeer" of 1798. After the aggressive starkness of the Lyrical Ballads, one is struck by the sureness with which a poem like the Venetian sonnet manages to convey a lush ornate sensuousness even in its very first line: "Once did She hold the gorgeous East in fee."

In this sonnet an image of the sea comes as the culmination of the poet's description of the past glories of Venice and its overtones suggest again the idea of the sea as a symbol of the eternal soul. The sonnet begins thus, with Venice personified:

Once did She hold the gorgeous East in fee;
 And was the safeguard of the West: the worth
 Of Venice did not fall below her birth,
 Venice, the eldest Child of Liberty.
 She was a Maiden City, bright and free;
 No guile seduced, no force could violate;
 And when She took unto herself a Mate
 She must espouse the everlasting Sea.

(ll. 1-8.)

The first line of this poem is very close to a line in The Aeneid describing the future glories of Rome as embodied in Julius Caesar:⁵⁷ "He shall hold the East in fee." The resemblance is so close (and Wordsworth translated parts of The Aeneid) that this may very well be an intentional implication of the belief that whole man's transitory creations, such as Rome and Venice, will pass, the eternal

⁵⁷Virgil The Aeneid I, l. 289.

values which they may embody for a time will still endure. The poem's reference to the "everlasting sea" suggests a whole complex of ideas about Venice. The city rises, literally, out of the sea: it was dependent on the sea for the trade which brought it wealth from the "gorgeous East" and its position of power was maintained so long because the surrounding sea made it easily defensible. Further, there is the peculiar rite, specifically mentioned by the poet, of the symbolic wedding between the Doge as a surrogate for the city and the sea. But, the important word is "everlasting," for the sonnet is, in the last analysis, about the extinction of Venice as a republic. Once more the poet's suggestion is that the sea, a symbol for Nature and by extension the infinite essence of existence, will remain, even though the city, however glorious, has fallen.

The sea is an important symbol in another 1807 sonnet--"The world is too much with us," where Wordsworth laments his countrymen's lack of imaginative response to the world. The poet complains that the sea, which "bares her bosom to the moon" fails to stir the narrow-minded and materialistic people of Britain for they are "out of tune" with the wisdom and spirit of the universe. The actual lines containing the image are:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
 Little we see in nature that is ours;
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
 This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
 The Winds that will be howling at all hours
 And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
 For this, for every thing, we are out of tune;
 It moves us not . . .

(11. 1-8.)

The word "powers" is important for it suggests not only physical energy, but man's capacity to know the "power of truth" which comes in "revelation," through nature. The phrase "out of tune" is significant as well, for as mentioned, a basic aspect of Wordsworth's philosophy of life was the necessity of living in tune with the laws of the universe. His use of inland waters to symbolize this type of life will be discussed in a later chapter and the sea in some poems is presented as symbolizing a life "out of tune," in opposition to inland waters. Wordsworth expressed more explicitly in The Prelude, his belief in

Conformity . . .
 To the end and written spirit of God's works,
 Whether held forth in Nature or in Man.
 (IV, ll. 357-360.)

In the above sonnet, however, the sea is a symbol for that "spirit" and by implication, universal order.

The last lines of the sonnet contain a vigorous assertion that Wordsworth would rather be a "pagan" than not have this imaginative response to life. He says he would welcome paganism if he could have

. . . glimpses that would make me less forlorn:
 Have sight of Proteus coming from the sea;
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.
 (ll. 12-14.)

In these last lines the image of the sea and classical mythology concerning it emphasize that Wordsworth was using the sea not only as the symbol for the whole of Nature but for the highest level of man's participation in the infinite truth as well.

In yet another sonnet, a very gentle "reverent" poem which opens "It is a beauteous Evening, calm and free;" Wordsworth wrote,

. . . the broad sun
 Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
 The gentleness of heaven is on the Sea:
 Listen! the mighty Being is awake
 And doth with his eternal motion make
 A sound like thunder--everlastingly.
 (11. 3-8.)

Several times in his poetry Wordsworth employed the image of the sky fusing with the water beneath it, whether in a lake or the sea, as a metaphor to communicate the unity he saw in existence. It can be found, for example, in The Prelude, in the description of "that uncertain Heaven receiv'd / Into the bosom of the steady Lake."⁵⁸

In the sonnet discussed above, the line "the gentleness of heaven is on the Sea" immediately leads to the idea of the "mighty Being," emphasizing once more the close connection of the sea with that concept in Wordsworth's thought. The reference to "eternal motion" made by the "mighty Being" is especially relevant to Wordsworth's water imagery for the idea of "motion" as one way of expressing his almost ineffable conception of reality seems to be an important reason for his being drawn to water images. The perpetual motion of the sea's waves as symbolic of the perpetual changes yet constant sameness in existence has already been mentioned and the motion of flowing water expressing the great creative force is a very important pattern in Wordsworth's water imagery which will be considered later. "Motion" as the central attribute of existence is very significant in Wordsworth. For example, there is the well known line from "Tintern Abbey" about a "motion" and a "spirit" that "rolls through all

⁵⁸_v, 11. 412-13.

things"⁵⁹ and this idea of motion is particularly significant in his water images.

The most famous imagery of the sea as a symbol of that eternal Being appears in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." The 1807 title, simply "Ode," was lengthened in 1815 to improve the simple reader's comprehension of this "sometimes magnificent" (Wordsworth's phrase) but difficult to explicate, poem. Helen Darbishire's remark about the close association of imagery and theme in this work has already been quoted and the problems in this poem have provided considerable material for critical dispute. Water imagery is not dominant in the work but like all the imagery in the piece the references to water are full of meaning.

That many of the ideas of the poem are very Platonic, especially relating to the theory of metempsychosis, has been remarked by most critics and Wordsworth himself even referred to Plato as a justification for his use of this concept. Indeed, Plato's theory of metempsychosis, given in the Phaedo⁶⁰ is virtually summed up in these lines which end with the important sea imagery.

Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
Are yet a master light of all our seeing;
Uphold us, cherish us, and make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never;
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,
Nor Man nor Boy,

⁵⁹"Tintern Abbey," ll. 101-03.

⁶⁰Plato Phaedo 73-77.

immortal sea / Which brought us hither, / Can in a moment travel thither," are another symbolic description of those "spots in time" when the poet knew the eternal Truth and felt as one with it.

It seems very clear in this "Immortality Ode" that Wordsworth associated the "mighty waters" of the sea with his concept of "Truth," and though some of the other quotations selected to support this contention may exhibit the metaphoric relationship between the sea and the eternal Truth more obliquely, if one examines all these sea images within the total context of Wordsworth's poetry, for his poems are not isolated from each other but closely interrelated, and indeed dependent on one another, this assertion seems justified.

Several thoughts have been suggested in this chapter which require further expansion, one of them that inland waters represented for the poet a life "in tune" with eternal harmony. It seems appropriate therefore, to leave the "dangerous" sea and move into a discussion of these "safer" inland waters where Wordsworth felt so much happiness, and which are so important in his poetry.

CHAPTER III

INLAND WATERS

Brooks, rivulets, rivers and streams, waters with "a sweet inland murmur,"¹ are consistently associated by Wordsworth with renewal of youth, calm, joy, clarity of vision and a life in tune with nature. Rivers and streams are also used on occasion to convey more intellectual ideas about imagination, liberty and the process of life or time.

These inland running waters are probably the most common water images in Wordsworth. Two sonnet sequences are based on rivers, one real and one symbolic, and it has been mentioned that a river or stream is the dominant image in The Prelude. In addition, Wordsworth was not only drawn to rivers for his metaphors, he responded to actual rivers with great affection.

The poet's love of rivers commenced in his early childhood. The Derwent was his earliest contact with nature and a delightful playmate as well. Rivers gave him joy when he was a child and continued to do so when he became a man. In his poetry he used symbolic rivers as metaphors for important ideas like the eternal flow of life, as surrogates for all of Nature and to represent the development of imagination, man's highest faculty; and real rivers inspired some of his greatest poetry. Indeed, he seems to get pleasure even from their very names for they echo throughout his work--Thames, Derwent, Rhine, Rhone, Loire, Duddon, Nile.

¹"Tintern Abbey," l. 4.

Modern psychology holds that one's early impressions leave an imprint on one's mind that affects all future emotional and intellectual development: and psychological interpretations of literature do have some validity. It does seem safe to suggest that Wordsworth's extremely frequent and all-inclusive use of rivers in the metaphors of his poetry stems partly from his early love of the Derwent and his strong belief that the river was a powerful agent in his early response to nature. As he says in Book One of The Prelude, after examining his failure to write the "philosophic Song / Of Truth that cherishes our daily life;"²

- Was it for this
 That one, the fairest of all Rivers, lov'd
 To blend his murmurs with my Nurse's song,
 And from his alder shades and rocky falls,
 And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
 That flow'd along my dreams? For this, didst Thou,
 O Derwent! travelling over the green Plains
 Near my 'sweet Birthplace,' didst thou, beauteous Stream,
 Make ceaseless music through the night and day
 Which with its steady cadence, tempering
 Our human waywardness, compos'd my thoughts
 To more than infant softness, giving me,
 Among the fretful dwellings of mankind,
 A foretaste, a dim earnest, of the calm
 That Nature breathes among the hills and groves.
 When, having left his Mountains, to the Towers
 Of Cockermouth that beauteous River came,
 Behind my Father's House he pass'd, close by,
 Along the margin of our Terrace Walk.
 He was a Playmate whom we dearly lov'd.
 (11. 271-90.)

It is not surprising that the poet who wrote these lines was drawn to rivers for one of his most frequent and far-reaching symbols!

In Lyrical Ballads, the poems about love and suffering which

²
L. 231.

were mentioned in the preceding chapter for their metaphorical use of the sea as a place of danger and disorientation, often have inland waters as a place of haven and joy juxtaposed against the sea. The "Female Vagrant" grew up by Derwent's side"³ (like the poet) and her father gained part of his livelihood from fishing in the river. The disaster to their lives when he lost these fishing rights, when "his little range of water was denied,"⁴ was the first step in the Vagrant's downward path to unhappiness. The social criticism implied in this event, for the family was driven off its fields and waters by one of the great landowners, becomes an affirmation of the humble English country way of life, a life in harmony with nature.

"Ruth" was lured from her home by a foreign stranger's wiles and in her moments of sanity during the madness afflicting her after his betrayal, she imagined in her cell

. . . a wild brook with chearful knell
Did o'er the pebbles play.
(ll. 179-80.)

Wordsworth is obviously implying a link between sanity and a wholesome life in nature. And when "Ruth" gets out of her prison, recovered enough to live on the edge of reality at last,

Among the fields she breath'd again:
The master current of her brain
Ran permanent and free,
And to the pleasant Banks of Tone
She took her way, to dwell alone
Under the greenwood tree.
(ll. 187-92.)

The Tone is a river near the Quantock Hills where the poet had lived

³L. 1.

⁴L. 51.

and no doubt it was associated in his mind with pleasant experiences as rivers always seem to be in Wordsworth.

In "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," the running brooks are frozen over and represent the reverse of Wordsworth's usual association, for Goody Blake is being denied life. She is surrounded by destructive physical and emotional cold, and the frozen streams, fettered by ice, symbolize this.

The supernatural atmosphere of the bower in "Nutting" before the poet desecrates it, is suggested by "fairy water-breaks" which "murmur on forever."⁵ "It Was an April Morning," the first piece in "Poems on the Naming of Places" contains a clear example of the poet's vision of small moving streams as symbols of the endless joyous life that is in nature. The rivulet in this poem runs with "a young man's speed"⁶ and the "glad sound"⁷ of the brook in concert with other noises of nature seemed to Wordsworth "the voice of common pleasure"⁸ or

. . . like the wild growth
Or some natural produce of the air
That could not cease to be.
(11. 28-9.)

Still other examples of this image pattern can be discerned by the examination of more poems. In "Three Years she grew in sun and shower," the girl (Lucy) is directed by Nature to

. . . lean her ear
In many a secret place
Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face.
(11. 26-30.)

⁵L1. 32-33.

⁶L. 3.

⁷L. 23.

⁸L. 25.

Another girl of Lyrical Ballads "Poor Susan," dreams of her pastoral childhood home and "the stream"⁹ is one of the memories from her youth that delights her in captivity.

This happy association with running waters is not diminished in the 1807 poems; when for instance "Louisa" describes the girl of the title as one who is

. . . ruddy, fleet, and strong;
And down the rocks can leap along,
Like rivulets in May . . .
(ll. 4-6.)

And in a more important 1807 work, "Immortality Ode," Wordsworth linked small running waters very directly with renewal of life as he says in the last stanzas when he is reaffirming that "Though nothing can bring back the hour / Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower,"¹⁰ something of that "primal sympathy"¹¹ still remains and

I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,
Even more than when I tripp'd as lightly as they;
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day
Is lovely yet.

(ll. 195-98.)

"To H.C., Six Years Old," a poem Wordsworth wrote about Hartley Coleridge in 1802 and published in the 1807 volumes, interweaves two of the major themes conveyed by rivers and streams in Wordsworth's poetry. These are the passage of time, and youthful purity in tune with nature. Hartley, Coleridge's little son, was a great favourite of Wordsworth and indeed the poet had him buried near the plot which was to be his own grave.

⁹L. 25.

¹⁰L. 15.

¹¹L. 184.

Wordsworth's pleasure in the little boy, and the poet's central belief that childhood is the time when we see most clearly the essentials of existence, as well as his idea that life resembles a flowing stream, can be found in these lines addressed to Hartley:

Thou Faery Voyager! that dost float
 In such clear water, that thy Boat
 May rather seem
 To brood on air than on earthly stream;
 Suspended in a stream as clear as sky,
 Where earth and heaven do make one imagery.
 (ll. 5-10.)

Wordsworth frequently used this metaphor of a stream or river to describe the progression, growth and evolution of various aspects of existence. The development of his imagination is traced through the image of a stream in The Prelude where the metaphor is used to symbolize both the original, actual process and the poet's reconstruction of it in the poem; British liberty is called a stream in a sonnet of the 1807 poems¹² and there are numerous other significant instances when a river or stream is used to convey some important belief of Wordsworth. The flow of a stream or river is the most all-encompassing metaphor in Wordsworth, as well as the most frequent.

In several well known and beautiful sonnets of 1807, rivers are the central image. "To the River Duddon," paints an imaginative picture of the wild and magnificent setting of the river. This poem was later included in the sonnet series about the Duddon, an instance of Wordsworth linking a whole series of poems by the image of a real river. Another series, "The Ecclesiastical Sonnets" traces the

¹²"It is not to be thought of that the Flood." -

development of the Anglican Church in Britain and the sonnets are connected by the symbolic image of a "Holy River."

The Thames, which "glideth at his own sweet will"¹³ is the final and climactic image in Wordsworth's description of London as one of "Nature's own grand spectacles"¹⁴ in the 1807 sonnet, "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, Sept. 3, 1803." The line about the river brings man's creation and Nature's into a union; they share in the same life in this reaffirmation of Wordsworth's belief in the ultimate unity of all existence.

This sense of running waters as a manifestation of the eternal renewal of joy and life in nature is not unique to Wordsworth. The first philosophers of Western thought held that water was the essence of reality and neo-Platonism uses the image of a "river of life" as a major symbolic expression of its ideas. Wordsworth's beliefs have earlier been described as "personal Platonism," but a more appropriate description might be a "personal neo-Platonism." For Wordsworth's "Platonism," like that of Plotinus, is overlaid with a kind of mysticism, that is, the knowledge of the "Truth" in his thought is not amenable to strict logic but is partly based on intuition. The resemblance between Wordsworth's symbolic expression of his beliefs and that of Plotinus is even more striking in their use of fountains to

¹³"Composed Upon Westminster Bridge," l. 12.

¹⁴Dorothy's journal entry about their departure for France from Westminster Bridge on the morning Wordsworth was likely inspired to write the poem, describes the city as having "something like the purity of one of Nature's grand spectacles." Colette Clark, ed., Home at Grasmere (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1960), p. 299. _

convey the concept of that endless creative life force in which all existence has a part, a pattern of Wordsworth's imagery to be discussed in a later chapter.

But, even though Wordsworth shares his symbols with other poets and philosophers, few who saw running water as the representation of joy and renewal of life have expressed it with such clarity and such great delight.

Because of Wordsworth's enjoyment of running water the sight of an actual river sometimes stimulated him to spontaneous poetic composition. A walk along the Cam, for instance, resulted in the 1798 "Lines written near Richmond, upon the Thames, at Evening," later divided into two poems with the third, fourth and fifth stanzas named "Remembrance of Collins." (The poet explained in a note that in fact the Cam, not the Thames, was the source of his inspiration.) In this poem the imagery is rather confused for the river image has to convey too many ideas, which is perhaps why Coleridge recommended it be divided. But one can see clearly how intensely Wordsworth was stimulated by rivers and how many themes they suggested to him, for the river in his poem is a symbol of life's passage, of the poet's own life, and of poetry and poetic inspiration.

The most important poem inspired by an actual river was "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey," significantly placed last in the 1798 Lyrical Ballads and indeed appropriately placed, for "Tintern Abbey" was the precursor of Wordsworth's major work of the next decade, The Prelude. "Tintern Abbey" was a spontaneous composition, the only 1798 piece in blank verse, inspired by Wordsworth's return to the banks

of the Wye during a walking tour with his sister Dorothy. He actually composed it while walking but did not write it down until he returned to Bristol at the end of the journey and this story of its composition is indicative of the intense emotion rivers generated in the poet.¹⁵

The Wye in "Tintern Abbey" becomes a symbol for Nature and for the flow and continuity of human experience, since Wordsworth believed deeply that life is like a river. He thought man's experiences formed a continuous stream in the sense that "The Child is father of the Man" as he later expressed it in "The Rainbow."

"Tintern Abbey" opens with lines which immediately relate the passing of five years in the poet's life to the course of the river:

Five years have passed; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a sweet inland murmur.

(11. 1-4.)

Using the Wye as the background symbol for all of Nature, as well as for the passage of his life, Wordsworth traces in the poem his growth through the influence of nature and by contact with the "still, sad music of humanity,"¹⁶ until he reached a complete recognition of one reality, of Truth. This knowledge Wordsworth calls

. . . a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

(11. 96-103.)

¹⁵"Notes to the Poems," Lyrical Ballads, ed. Brett and Jones, p. 290.

¹⁶L. 92.

These lines provide one of the best summaries anywhere of Wordsworth's beliefs. They are not precise--the syntax has been analysed and found wanting by William Empson in Seven Types of Ambiguity¹⁷--but I think they are as clear an expression of that almost inexpressible knowledge as Wordsworth ever makes. The last line of this passage rather recalls the "rolling" waters of the poem's opening and it is no accident that the poet who found in "motion" the right word to express the quintessence of his conception of reality recurrently uses moving water as in the sea, streams and rivers or fountains, as a symbol to communicate the various aspects of that conception. The most important quality of water as a symbol for Wordsworth was its endless motion. He employs moving water to express that ultimate unity which appears in so many ways as truth, eternal existence, a moral order; and in contrast, still water to symbolize the negation of these qualities. When Wordsworth wanted a symbol for the enduring creative force that is part of ultimate reality, he chose a fountain; for the power of harmony and joy gained by a life lived under the moral order implicit in that reality, he chose brooks and streams; and for the development of man's life and his imagination which is both a part of that reality and recognizant of its existence, a river or stream.

It is characteristic of Wordsworth that in "Tintern Abbey," relating the story of his inner life and what his experiences in nature have meant in enabling him to

¹⁷William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity (New York: Octagon Books Inc., 1965), p. 174.

. . . become a living soul;
 While with an eye made quiet by the power
 Of harmony, and the deep power of joy
 We see into the life of things.
 (ll. 46-49.)

he should apostrophize the River Wye thus:

How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee
 O Sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer through the woods,
 How often has my spirit turned to thee!
 (ll. 56-58.)

Wordsworth's affection for rivers appears over and over in his work. At the opening of The Prelude, his question, "what sweet stream shall with its murmur lull me to my rest"¹⁸ has already been quoted. At Cambridge he missed intensely those "delicious rivers"¹⁹ of his home, and complaining about his studies there, for he felt they were too narrow, Wordsworth says he

could have wish'd
 The river to have had an ampler range
 And freer pace.
 (III, ll. 508-10.)

This use of rivers as symbols for the passage of his life is recurrent. In the story of his return home for a vacation this particular vision of his life as a river of flowing water appears in a slightly humorous metaphor about an enclosed brook which the poet compared to his own containment at Cambridge, describing the brook as

. . . that unruly child of mountain birth
 The froward Brook, which soon as he was box'd
 Within our Garden, found himself at once,
 As if by trick insidious and unkind,
 Stripp'd of his voice, and left to dimple down

¹⁸I, ll. 13-14.

¹⁹III, l. 361.

Without an effort and without a will,
 A channel paved by the hand of man.
 (IV, ll. 39-45.)

Again, the experiences of the trek through the Alps were

. . . but a stream
 That flow'd into a kindred stream, a gale
 That help'd me forwards, did adminster
 To grandeur and to tenderness, to the one
 Directly, but to tender thoughts by means
 Less often instantaneous in effect;
 Conducted me to these along a path
 Which in the main was more circuitous.
 (VI, ll. 673-79.)

It has already been mentioned that these metaphors of rivers as symbols for Wordsworth's life were appropriately extended by the poet to include The Prelude itself for it was, after all, a description of his life, especially his inner life.

In the story of his residence in London, Wordsworth opened the book by saying of The Prelude in lines full of water imagery:

Five years are vanish'd since I first pour'd out
 Saluted by that animating breeze
 Which met me issuing from the City's Walls,
 A glad preamble to this Verse: I sang
 Aloud, in Dythrambic fervour, deep
 But short-liv'd uproar, like a torrent sent
 Out of the bowels of a bursting cloud
 Down Scafell, or Blencathra's rugged sides
 A waterspout from Heaven. But 'twas not long
 Ere the interrupted stream broke forth once more,
 And flow'd awhile in strength, then stopp'd for years;
 Not heard again until a little space
 Before last primrose time.

(VII, ll. 1-13.)

And Book Nine, about the poet's residence in France, has a similar opening which again likens The Prelude to a river, and incidentally contains an image which pits the idea of the sea against safer inland waters.

As oftentimes a River, it might seem,
 Yielding in part to old remembrances,
 Part sway'd by fear to tread on onward road
 That leads direct to the devouring sea
 Turns, and will measure back his course, far back,
 Towards the very regions which he cross'd
 In his first outset; so have we long time
 Made motions retrograde, in like pursuit
 Detain'd.

(11. 1-9.)

Further enlarging the river image in The Prelude, Wordsworth made it the symbol for the development of his imagination, again appropriately, for the poem is in essence the story of the making of a poet and the imagination is, after all, a poet's most important faculty. The experiences of Wordsworth's life and the growth of his imagination are intermingled, reinforcing and expanding each other, so it was correct that he should use the same symbol for his life, the development of his imagination and for the story about them.

Wordsworth described symbolically the development of his "Imagination," which he said

. . . in truth
 Is but another name for absolute strength
 And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
 And reason in her most exalted mood.
 This faculty hath long been the moving soul
 Of our long labour: we have traced the stream
 From darkness, and the very place of birth
 In its blind cavern, whence is faintly heard
 The sound of waters; follow'd it to light
 And open day, accompanied its course
 Among the ways of Nature, afterwards
 Lost sight of it bewilder'd and engulf'd,
 Then given it greeting, as it rose once more
 With strength, reflecting in its solemn breast
 The works of man and face of human life,
 And lastly, from its progress have we drawn
 This feeling of life endless, the great thought
 By which we live, Infinity and God.

(XII, 11. 167-84.)

These lines give, in essence, the same thought as "Tintern Abbey" and the whole of The Prelude. Wordsworth grew to know the "great thought by which we live" first through Nature and then after overcoming his personal inner turmoils, through the "works of man and face of human life," or the "still, sad music of humanity." That he should choose a stream as the symbol of this process is significant for this thesis because it emphasizes the assertion that Wordsworth turned to water imagery for the expression of his most profound beliefs. His idea of life and experience as a unified moving whole is clearly expressed in this passage and also, another aspect of the water image patterns which is to be discussed more completely later, Wordsworth's recognition of the "voice" of Infinity in the sound of running water. This is obviously implied in the lines which make the "faintly heard" "sound of waters" a symbol of the goal towards which his imagination is moving.

The picture in the above lines of the stream of imagination flowing from darkness in a "blind cavern" to the light of open day is rather reminiscent of the Hermit in "Tintern Abbey" sitting by the fire in his cave.²⁰ Wordsworth remarked after the reference to the Hermit that the "beauteous forms" of the landscape had not been to him during his absence as "to a blind man's eye."²¹ ("To see" is the primary action verb in Wordsworth's poetry as Josephine Miles²² points

²⁰Ll. 22-23.

²¹Ll. 25-26.

²²Josephine Miles, Wordsworth and the Vocabulary of Emotion (New York: Octagon Books Inc., 1965), p. 174.

out and Wordsworth continually asserts that the goal of imagination is to "see into the life of things."²³) This idea of moving from darkness in a cave out into daylight where "reality" can be seen very much resembles Plato's Myth of the Cave.²⁴

Unquestionably, this "Platonic" image is present in the lines quoted from The Prelude and it seems to be implied by the images in "Tintern Abbey." Of course, one can question whether any direct reference to Plato's Myth was intended, but whether direct or not, the similarity is such that it does reinforce the suggestion that Wordsworth's thought is most accurately described as "Platonic."

One other contention of this thesis is supported by the Prelude stream image as well, for the underlying emphasis there is on the movement of the stream from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge or blindness to sight.

Wordsworth likened great things to rivers and streams. They gave him his earliest pleasure in nature and led him to the knowledge of that "brooding Soul" of the universe. He constantly remembered his experiences with them, sought them out wherever he lived and turned to them to express his most important ideas. More than any other single aspect of nature, inland running waters represented to him that joyous unity in creation which imagination seeks and which is divine. These waters may appear in his poems as simple images related to the lives of humble country people, as symbols of truth and liberty or as representative of the process of existence in its finest aspects. But all these images, simple or profound in meaning, are ultimately

²³"Tintern Abbey," l. 49.

²⁴Plato Republic, VII, 514.

symbolic expressions of Wordsworth's idea of the truth that lies in nature and in the mind of man. That truth may be found in the life of a humble peasant who lives under nature's laws by "Derwent's side";²⁵ it may be found in a revolutionary Frenchman, "a Spirit thoroughly faithful to itself, / Unquenchable, unsleeping, undismay'd, . . . a stream / that gather'd up each petty straggling rill / And vein of water";²⁶ or it may be in the mind of the poet himself--"the river of my mind";²⁷ but Wordsworth unfailingly turned to rivers to express his deepest and most personal conception of the truth about the life of man.

As Wordsworth saw clearly a symbol of life's passage in the flow of a river, he found with equal certainty the expression of other aspects of infinite reality in other forms of moving water. It has been mentioned previously that fountains are equated with the creative urge in existence and still water with the negation of that creative force. These forms of water, along with the waterfalls where the poet often heard the voice of the eternal spirit, suggest further patterns of imagery of sufficient importance to demand attention, and to these this examination now turns.

²⁵"The Female Vagrant," l. 1.

²⁶The Prelude, X, ll. 148-52.

²⁷Ibid., II, l. 214.

CHAPTER IV

FOUNTAINS, WATERFALLS AND STILL WATER

Fountains in Wordsworth's poetry are associated in almost all cases where they are used metaphorically with the life force of nature in its various aspects. In "Written in March," an 1807 poem which resembles a Middle English popular song, Wordsworth was celebrating the arrival of spring and he said

There's joy in the mountains;
There's life in the fountains;
(ll. 19-20.)

"There's life in the fountains" is a very accurate summation of the symbolic meaning Wordsworth most commonly attributed to fountains. Indeed the two lines are a good summary of what Wordsworth found in nature: life and joy.

"A Complaint," written in 1807 because of the "change in the manner of a friend,"¹ probably Coleridge, compares the friend's love when it was most intense to a fountain, and in its slackening to a still well, sleeping "in silence and obscurity."² The poem begins:

There is a change--and I am poor;
Your Love hath been, nor long ago,
A Fountain at my fond Heart's door,
Whose only business was to flow;
(ll. 1-4.)

and goes on to say:

¹Wordsworth in the Fenwick Notes, quoted in "Notes," Poems in Two Volumes, ed. by Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 439.

²L. 16.

Now, for this consecrated Fount
 Of murmuring, sparkling, living love,
 What have I? shall I dare to tell?
 A comfortless and hidden WELL.
 (11. 9-12.)

The phrase "this consecrated fount" with its suggestion of a religious motif is indicative of the depth of Wordsworth's belief in love as part of man's participation in the divine and as an important element in that universal creative life force. He said of love in The Prelude

. . . for here
 Do we begin and end, all grandeur comes,
 All truth and beauty, from pervading love,
 That gone, we are as dust.
 (XIII, 11. 149-52.)

In later lines of the same passage Wordsworth portrayed earthly love in all forms as a lesser aspect of a "higher love" which is part of the universal soul and

. . . comes into the heart
 With awe and a diffusive sentiment;
 Thy love is human merely; this proceeds
 More from the brooding Soul, and is divine.
 This love more intellectual cannot be
 Without Imagination, . . .
 (11. 162-67.)

These lines very clearly present love as the last, best quality of that "brooding Soul," but without any definite traditional Christian implication. It is quite striking that despite all the water imagery in these poems from 1798 to 1807, there is almost never any definite religious symbolism as one might expect. In Wordsworth's later revisions of some of his early poems he gave them a more Christian quality as he became more orthodox in his beliefs, but in the early works as they were first composed there is little or no implication of traditional religious symbolism in the water imagery.

Wordsworth saw in the best aspects of existence a vital flow or motion, known by man as love and joy, which was a part of that great, eternally regenerating "Truth." In the lines quoted previously from "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth said that in man's moments of ultimate knowledge

. . . with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.
(ll. 47-9.)

There is a close relationship in Wordsworth's vision of existence between love and joy and "life" in the sense of that immortal creative force which flows through all things, and one of his favourite images to express this vision at its most innocent and pure is the fountain.

Fountains as a concrete expression of the essence of life's force appear in quite simple metaphors in some of the 1800 Lyrical Ballads. The most obvious of the metaphors is in "The Brothers," the poem mentioned in Chapter One, about two brothers, one of whom has died during the other's absence at sea. This tale includes the symbolic story of two hillside fountains, one of which disappeared due to some natural phenomenon. The fountains are referred to in the work as "brother fountains"³ and the Pastor who relates the story to the surviving human brother says that the vanished fountain is "dead and gone."⁴ This is rather strange language in which to describe the submergence of a stream of water, but it certainly leaves no doubt as to the significance the poet intended to give the fountains, or his association of a flowing fountain with life.

³L. 144.

⁴L. 145.

In several of the "Mathew" poems from the 1800 Lyrical Ballads fountains are used to suggest that endless life force which supersedes transitory individual existence. One of these poems is actually entitled "The Fountain." Mathew, the central figure, sees in a fountain the symbol of his youth and nature's endless life, for he says, even though he has grown old the fountain is the same as it was when he was young and

'Twill murmur on a thousand years
And flow as now it flows.
(11. 23-4.)

Another Mathew poem, "The Two April Mornings," again employs a fountain to express the idea of life. To describe the "blooming" girl who reminds him of his dead daughter, Mathew says,

No fountain from its rocky cave
E'er tripp'd with foot so free.
(11. 49-50.)

The very title of the poem suggests that unquenchable flow of life in nature, and so do the two conversants, an old man and a youth. Individual "blooming" girls will fade away, but they will be replaced as surely as spring will come each April, as fountains will flow endlessly from rocky caves.

In "Hart Leap Well," a poem written at the same time as "The Brothers" and one of the few romances in Wordsworth's canon, a fountain is again a symbol of the life force which supersedes the individual and washes away man's transitory interferences with that great creative urge in nature. The unfortunate hart, a symbol of pure nature and of the wrongs committed by those who are "out of tune" with Nature, is driven to his death beside a fountain where the poet suggests the

"water was perhaps the first he drank / When he had wander'd from his mother's side."⁵

There is grief in Nature for this senseless killing and even the fountain sends forth "dolorous groans,"⁶ for

His death was mourned by sympathy divine.
The Being, that is in the clouds and air,
That is in the green leaves among the groves,
Maintains a deep and reverential care
For them the quiet creatures whom he loves.
(ll. 164-68.)

But the poem's assertion is that eventually Life will triumph and Nature "shall here put on her beauty and her bloom."⁷ Once again in this poem, Wordsworth brought together in a symbol of a fountain the infinite love and endless creative force in which all existence shares.

This belief in "the intimation of a milder day / Which was to be, the fairer world than this,"⁸ that became so critical a tenet of Wordsworth's creed and was at its most profound a metaphysical sense of an immortal creative unity in existence and at its most shallow a crude anthropomorphism, grew gradually more important in Wordsworth's poetry throughout his great decade. It is almost entirely absent in Lyrical Ballads of 1798, except in "Tintern Abbey," and rather obliquely in "We Are Seven," but it appears very frequently in the poetry of the 1800 Lyrical Ballads.

⁵Ll. 151-52.

⁶L. 136.

⁷L. 172.

⁸MSS. A and B of "The Recluse," quoted in "Notes," The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth II ed. by Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 575.

In fact, all the fountain symbolism quoted from Lyrical Ballads is of poems in the 1800 edition. As mentioned in the Introductory Chapter, Wordsworth was very much concerned with death in the 1800 poems and perhaps his growing belief in an immortal creative unity was an attempt to relieve that gloomy obsession with mortality.

The two quotations from the Poems In Two Volumes of 1807 ("A Complaint" and "Written in March") present fountains as symbols of life quite differently from the poems of Lyrical Ballads for neither has the idea of death directly juxtaposed to the vision of life. The earlier concern with mortality, and conversely, a recognition of nature's essential immortality, may have been stimulated by the miserable cold winter Wordsworth spent in Germany where he wrote many of the 1800 poems.

It has already been mentioned that there is a striking resemblance between Wordsworth's use of fountains to symbolize eternal life and Plotinus' use of the same symbol in his reinterpretation of Plato.

The fountain is seen in neo-Platonism as a symbol of the Creator, an overflowing of reality, and this overflowing fountain gives rise to everything that is. The neo-Platonic river of life (and this has already been discussed as a major recurrent image in Wordsworth) is really an overflow of the fountain, which manifests itself in many forms. But, to paraphrase Wordsworth, they are all types and symbols of the same eternity or the "one" in neo-Platonism.

Plotinus' own words (in translation, of course) describing this "One" or the "undivided source of all life" are as follows:

What then is the One? It is the possibility of all things: without whose existence all would be non-existent, and the Intelligence also non-existent, which is the primal and all-embracing Life. That which is above Life must be Life's cause; for the actuality of Life, that is, the universe of things, is not original, but is itself poured out as from a spring. Conceive a spring having no alien source; giving itself to all rivers that have gone out from it journeying awhile together in one flood before they run their several courses, yet each as it were already conscious in what place its own waters shall find issue.⁹

"Spring" in the original Greek may also be translated "fountain," and in another translation, Plotinus' further remarks about the "One" appear thus:

. . . the soul beholds the fountain of life, the fountain of intellect, the principle of being, the cause of good, and the root of soul. And these are not poured forth from this fountain, so as to produce any diminution . . . For we are not cut off from the fountain, nor are we separated from it.¹⁰

The reader is reminded of these neo-Platonic images by a passage in Book Two of The Prelude. Wordsworth is there discussing the change in his attitude to nature for she had been secondary in his boyhood pleasures, but gradually he came to seek her "for her own sake." The poet asks Coleridge, to whom The Prelude was addressed,

Who knows the individual hour in which
His habits were first sown, even as a seed,
Who that shall point, as with a wand, and say,
'This portion of the river of my mind
Came from yon fountain?'

(ll. 211-15.)

⁹Plotinus Select Passages Illustrating Neoplatonism, trans. by E. R. Dodds (London: The Macmillan Co., 1923), p. 54.

¹⁰Plotinus Select Works of Plotinus, trans. by Thomas Taylor (London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd., 1911), p. 316.

These images of the river as a symbol for the development of the mind and a fountain as its source carry a strong suggestion of Plotinus' words. Again, one cannot say definitely that there is any direct neo-Platonic influence on Wordsworth though one can assume he knew the philosopher from his Cambridge education, through Coleridge, his own extensive reading, and even from Michelangelo, some of whose sonnets Wordsworth translated, for the great Florentine was profoundly affected by neo-Platonism, even reproducing some of its symbols in his architecture. If there is no direct influence, there is still a distinct resemblance, not only in the idea of the "One" which is the source of all existence and rolls through all thinking things, all objects of all thought, but in the imagery used to express this conception. When Plotinus states that the "Real" is not an abstract uniformity but an organic life, one is reminded that Wordsworth's creed was not abstract, but a sustained attitude to life, founded on deep conviction. And when Plotinus says: "in the Real there is no poverty or incapacity: all things there are filled with life and surge with life. The stream of their Being is from one fountainhead;"¹¹ one is reminded of the very imagery Wordsworth used to express his beliefs.

As the force of the fountain is a symbol in Wordsworth's poetry for the strength of the eternal creative power including the love and joy which are implicit in it, so in the poetry the sound of rushing water, especially in waterfalls (fountains in reverse, so to speak) very often become the voice of the great Spirit for Wordsworth.

¹¹Plotinus Select Passages, trans. Dodds, p. 45.

In the two passages of The Prelude where Wordsworth related with the most intense emotion his supreme moments of imaginative awareness, and in the "Immortality Ode," another poem in which Wordsworth expressed some of his most important thoughts about man's relationship to the infinite, waterfalls speak of that infinity. The poet said in the famous Simplon Pass lines;

The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decay'd,
The stationary blasts of water-falls,
And everywhere along the hollow rent,
Winds thwarting winds, bewilder'd and forlorn,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that mutter'd close upon our ears
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
That unfetter'd clouds, and region of the Heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
Were all like the workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first and last, and midst, and without end.
(VI, ll. 556-72.)

This well known passage, which is a concise statement of that "Platonic" belief in unity so central to the understanding of Wordsworth's poetry, is dominated by waterfall imagery and the sound of that water. The imagery in these lines, full of the juxtaposition of opposites which ultimately find their unity as they are part of "one mind," speaks its message of "first and last, and midst, and without end" through the voice of "stationary blasts of waterfalls," "torrents shooting," "black drizzling crags," and the "raving stream." Hearing was the primary sense through which the poet in this experience reached that mystical awareness of the infinity and unity of creation, the idea that is always at the core of his greatest poetry whether he describes it as the "types

assertion that he could still hear it. It seems significant that in declaring he was "again strong," Wordsworth should have chosen the sound of waterfalls to symbolize that he could still attain that joy and remember the "imperial palace" whence all being comes.

In addition to their use as symbols of the "voice" of eternal unity, waterfalls, like the sea also suggest a second, quite simple metaphoric pattern in Wordsworth, especially in the poems of Lyrical Ballads. Appropriately, they are used to suggest danger and distress. In "The Pet Lamb," a rather attractive didactic pastoral, some shepherd boys allow their charge to be swept away into danger of drowning. "The Waterfall and the Eglantine," a rather glaring example of what Ruskin objected to in his discussion of the pathetic fallacy, tells the story of a thoughtless waterfall that overpowers a helpless eglantine. A rather more successful poem, "Song for the Wandering Jew," employs the image of a waterfall which finally reaches a haven as a symbol of the tormented life of the wanderer.

Though the torrents from their fountains
Pour down many a craggy steep,
Yet they find among the mountains
Resting places calm and deep.

(ll. 1-4.)

It is not recondite or especially original to use a waterfall to suggest danger or difficulty, but even though this particular pattern of metaphors is not very original or complex it does seem worth noting as one more aspect of Wordsworth's water imagery.

It has been indicated earlier that in contrast to the affirmation of life, love, joy, beauty and calm suggested to Wordsworth by

moving water, standing water was connected in his thought with death, lifelessness, loss and decay. Negation of the various aspects of the eternal soul as portrayed by flowing water, in other words.

One of the most important early examples of this association can be found in "The Thorn," that rather strange poem with its three enigmatic main symbols, one of which is a pond. The poet was stimulated to write this poem by the sight of a thorn one stormy day in the Quantock Hills, and he wrote the poem with the aim of making the thorn "permanently an impressive object."¹⁵ He added the hill of moss and the pond to complete the stark natural setting which reinforces by its bleak grandeur the story of love and suffering. The pond may be the place where the abandoned woman in her anguish killed her baby, for,

Some say, if to the pond you go,
And fix on it a steady view,
The shadow of a babe you trace,
A baby and a baby's face,
And that it looks at you;
Where'er you look on it, 'tis plain
The baby looks at you again.
(ll. 225-31.)

The poor mad mother sits beside the pond and

. . . when the little breezes make
The waters of the pond to shake,
As all the country know,
She shudders and you hear her cry
'Oh misery! oh misery!'
(ll. 205-09.)

It is clear that the pond, which in the first version of the poem provided some lighter moments for critics because of Wordsworth's

¹⁵Moorman, Wordsworth: The Early Years, p. 386. _

provision of its exact measurements--". . . three feet long, and two feet wide"--is associated with death. And, I think Wordsworth selected a pond rather than a stream or brook because he had a consistent association of death with standing water.

In the poem about "Mathew" which begins, "If Nature, for a favorite Child," the dead Mathew, who was a character based on several of Wordsworth's teachers and a packman he knew as a child, is described as "silent as a standing pool."¹⁶

A more complex water image involving death can be found in The Prelude in the poet's tale of seeing beside a "calm Lake" a heap of clothes which he later found out belonged to a drowned man. The lines describing the lake in this story are as follows:

. . . meanwhile the calm Lake
Grew dark, with all the shadows on its breast,
And, now and then, a fish up-leaping, snapp'd
The breathless stillness.

(V, ll. 463-66.)

The key words in this passage, "dark," "shadows" and especially "breathless" create an aura of death. By contrast Wordsworth earlier in The Prelude used the very word "breathing" to suggest the life he saw in nature. In Book One, when he had stolen another boy's captive bird, Wordsworth heard "among the solitary hills / Low breathings coming after me,"¹⁷ for the living spirit of Nature was affronted. And in the same book he says specifically:

Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!
Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought!
That giv'st to forms and images a breath
And everlasting motion!

(ll. 428-31.)

¹⁶L. 22.

¹⁷Ll. 328-30.

The assertion in this thesis that "motion" is the most important quality of water in Wordsworth's symbolism because he found in the idea of motion an adequate expression for his intuitive grasp of the reality which pervades all existence, seems to be supported by this quotation.

Another example of the association with still water appears in Book Six of The Prelude, as an incident of Wordsworth's walk through the Alps with his Welsh friend, Robert Jones, during a Cambridge vacation. The two travellers got lost and had to sit out a rather frightening night in the woods by the edge of Lake Como. Wordsworth described the lake in these words:

. . . the sullen water underneath,
On which a dull red image of the moon
Lay bedded, changing oftentimes its form
Like an uneasy snake.

(ll. 635-38.)

Perhaps this connection had some of its origins in Wordsworth's childhood. In Book Eleven of The Prelude when he was relating early visitings of imaginative power which he afterwards recalled in tranquillity and translated into poetry, the first of these recollections of early "spots of time"¹⁸ involved seeing a murderer's name carved in the sod beside the place of his gibbet. As the young Wordsworth turned away from this foreboding place he

saw

A naked Pool that lay beneath the hills,
The Beacon on the summit, and more near,
A Girl who bore a Pitcher on her head
And seem'd with difficult steps to force her way
Against the blowing wind. It was, in truth,

¹⁸L. 258.

An ordinary sight; but I should need
 Colours and words that are unknown to man
 To paint the visionary dreariness
 Which, while I look's all round for my lost guide,
 Did at that time invest the naked Pool
 The Beacon on the lonely Eminence,
 The Woman, and her garments vex'd and toss'd
 By the stormy wind.

(XI, 11. 303-16.)

Wordsworth believed that poetry has its genesis in emotion recollected in tranquillity, and especially, as Professor de Selincourt says, emotion "from childhood when feeling is strongest."¹⁹ Perhaps the relationship between standing water and death in some way stems partly from this experience of the poet's childhood, for Wordsworth called his childhood memories a "fountain" of emotion, to which he "often would repair and thence would drink . . ."²⁰

One major poem in the 1807 volumes which contains this association between ponds and decay is "Resolution and Independence." In this moving statement about man's unconquerable spirit, the old Leech-gatherer whom the depressed poet encountered by a pond appears "almost as an interposition of Providence." (Wordsworth said this in a commentary.²¹) The old man in the poem is a part of nature, not outside it or beside it, but in it. Indeed, he is described, through what Wordsworth later said were the "abstracting" and "modifying"²² powers of the

¹⁹ Ernest de Selincourt in "Notes" to his edition of The Prelude (1805), p. 315.

²⁰ The Prelude, XI, 1. 384.

²¹ Wordsworth in a letter to Sara Hutchinson, quoted in "Notes," Poems in Two Volumes 1807, ed. Darbishire, p. 382.

²² Wordsworth in a letter to Lady Beaumont, May 1807, quoted in "Notes," Poems in Two Volumes 1807, ed. Darbishire, p. 391.

imagination, as

Like a Sea-beast crawl'd forth, which on a shelf
Of rock or sand reposes, there to sun itself.
(ll. 69-70.)

In his decrepitude, stillness and infirmity as he watches for the leeches that provide his daily bread, the old man becomes a part of the world of nature. The stillness of his decaying form mingles with the still dark waters of the pond; only his spirit, a "thousand times more beautiful than the earth on which he dwells"²³ surmounts his frailty.

The association of the pond and the old Leech-gatherer seems more successful than that of the pond and Martha Ray in "The Thorn." Somehow, the old age of the Leech-gatherer and his occupation become more profoundly integrated with the natural setting of the poem, and Wordsworth's belief in the human spirit, which shares in nature but transcends it, is more effectively communicated to the reader. This better integration of symbol, story and theme is perhaps an example of the way Wordsworth's poetic powers developed in the 1789-1807 decade, but it seems useful to emphasize within the context of this thesis that the underlying pattern produced by the association of still water with decay and death remains the same.

Other examples of this pattern can be discovered in the 1807 poems. "Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour," one of Wordsworth's most famous sonnets describes the England Wordsworth at that time despaired of as a "fen of stagnant waters."²⁴ This image of

²³The Prelude, XIII, l. 447.

²⁴L. 3.

stagnant water as a symbol of moral and intellectual decay widens the association of still water beyond physical and emotional death and this is one more instance of the general enrichment of the 1807 poems.

The parallel between motionless water and intellectual death appears as well in another 1807 sonnet, which opens "It is not to be thought of that the Flood." Wordsworth in this poem called British freedom "this most famous Stream" and rejects the idea that its flow "in Bogs and Sands / Should perish."²⁵ And so, though it is enriched and enhanced by Wordsworth's growing poetic powers, that same association between decay or death and standing water of the earlier poems persists.

A final example of Wordsworth's use of still water in this way appears in "A Complaint," a poem mentioned earlier. The poet described the friend's love which had diminished as having been a fountain of "murmuring, sparkling, living love."²⁶ He lamented that this fountain had become "a comfortless, and hidden WELL,"²⁷ and that this change had impoverished his life. This contrast between standing water, in a well specifically, as a metaphor for emotional death and a fountain as symbolic of emotional vitality, is a very direct expression of the pattern under discussion.

It seems quite clear therefore, in Wordsworth's poetry, that he connected moving water with life in all its aspects and motionless water with the loss or negation of that life, and that these associations were related to his larger concept of reality.

²⁵ L. 7-8.

²⁶ L. 10.

²⁷ L. 11.

This discussion of still waters as the negation of the ideas symbolized by moving water leads to the conclusion that quite definitely Wordsworth did associate certain thoughts with specific forms of water and that these associations can be discerned in patterns.

Wordsworth as a person was drawn to water from his earliest childhood. He regarded it with affection, especially in small inland waters, and found in its characteristics of movement or stillness, unity, and sound, the most appropriate symbol to express his central beliefs. Its various forms are used by the poet to communicate ideas, simple or complex, about common human experiences and the profound metaphysical basis of his attitude to man, nature and the universe.

It has been suggested in this thesis that the core of Wordsworth's thought is a kind of personal Platonism, "self taught," and that the mysticism overlaying it brings it in to close communion with the ideas of Plotinus. Mr. Kenneth MacLean in the article alluded to earlier, asserts that Wordsworth "resisted Platonic abstractions,"²⁸ and the assertion is correct in suggesting that the poet's beliefs were not abstractions, for they were a concrete way of life, but Mr. MacLean is inaccurate in describing Platonism as abstract. For, it is precisely in the reality of Platonism that one finds the resemblance to Wordsworth. The poet's ideas were not only an interpretation of man and the universe, but they gave him moments of great poetic power and on a more prosaic level the strength to surmount considerable personal loss and the fading of his imagination. As Sir Walter Raleigh

²⁸ MacLean, "The Water Symbol in The Prelude (1805)," p. 388.

says of Wordsworth, he was "a poet who faced fact" and "to know him is to learn courage."²⁹ Plato's Idea of the Good is also a philosophy of values, not unrealized ideals. It is a living interpretation of life, to guide conduct and mould thoughts. Wordsworth knew more than most men that one cannot step in the same river twice, that life is a series of currents and eddies, and his own symbol of life was the river for he saw an ultimate unity in life's diversity and its essence in a constant flow yet essential sameness.

This combination of unity in diversity led Wordsworth to find in "motion," perpetually different yet perpetually the same, the cohesive factor of his water imagery and his description of the world soul. It has already been suggested that the movement of the various forms of water Wordsworth employed in his imagery is crucial to their symbolic meaning. It is through the river's flow, the fountain's force, the sea's tides and endlessly absorbed waves, the waterfall's noise and in contrast the stillness of a standing pool that one can find the centre of Wordsworth's meaning. When Wordsworth attempted to communicate his idea of Truth to the reader he spoke of the "motion that rolls through all things"³⁰ and "the mighty Being" . . . "with his eternal motion."³¹ So it is in rolling, flowing, running, working, murmuring, falling water he found the most appropriate natural symbol for expression of that Truth.

²⁹Walter Raleigh, Wordsworth (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1939), p. 228.

³⁰"Tintern Abbey," 1, 103.

³¹"It is a beauteous Evening, calm and free," 11. 6-7.

When one examines these water images of Wordsworth as they relate to each other and in the context of his thought, as has been attempted in this thesis, one realizes that for the poet of the Lake District, who loved water from his earliest childhood, they have deep emotional and intellectual significance in his poetry.

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