

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ALFOXDEN EXPERIENCE IN THE
POETIC DEVELOPMENT OF WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the effects and the influences of the Alfoxden experience on the poetic development of William Wordsworth. Accompanied by his sister Dorothy, Wordsworth took up residence at Alfoxden in July, 1797, and stayed for close to a year. By giving unselfishly of her attention, admiration, love and encouragement, and by sharing with William her fully developed sensitivity, Dorothy was able to offer her brother peace, hope, and indeed, insights into Nature and natural processes which he might have missed had she not been there. Along with Dorothy, William also shared his beautiful country estate with a charming little boy, Basil Montagu, the son of a friend. Basil helped to advance the poet's education by taking him back once more to the realm of childhood--showing him once again its innocent wisdom, and the joy and pure appreciation of the child for Nature.

Three miles from Alfoxden House was Nether Stowey, the home of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge offered Wordsworth admiration, challenge, criticism, and the chance to see beyond the day-to-day beauties of Nature to the forces which were behind and active in them. Coleridge's rationalizing powers changed many of Wordsworth's intuitive thoughts into their philosophical and metaphysical counterparts. This influence had its major effect when Wordsworth began his most philosophical poem The Prelude. Coleridge introduced Wordsworth to the powers of the supernatural on the imagination and thus opened the door for the use of these as poetic subjects. He also discussed with

Wordsworth the philosophies of Hartley and Berkeley and helped him to gain deeper insights into their ideas thus giving him a more profound understanding of the philosophy of Christianity. Slowly through Coleridge's influence, Wordsworth came more fully to "see into the life of things."

Many events took place during the months at Alfoxden. Wordsworth took many trips himself and was in turn visited by various people who played no small part in helping him to develop his poetic potential. Some of these visitors showed Wordsworth what he had been before Alfoxden, some what he then was, and, most important of all, some showed him the path he would have to travel after Alfoxden in order to fulfill his destiny.

The Alfoxden experience was a composite of many factors--the influence of Dorothy, of Coleridge, of Basil, and of many others both from the surrounding neighbourhood and beyond. But not the least of these factors was the influence of Alfoxden itself. Here, in a virtual paradise, "a living prospect," accompanied by those whom he loved best, Wordsworth regained his faith in humanity and in Nature's ability to teach Man the most important lessons and to effect on him the greatest cures. Evidence for this can be found everywhere in Lyrical Ballads, but mainly in the deeply moving lines of "Tintern Abbey." This poem, more than any other, is a summing up of the effects and influences of the Alfoxden experience on William Wordsworth--an experience which influenced not only Wordsworth himself, but indeed, the entire course of English literature from that time to the present.

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I seemed about this time to gain clear sight
Of a new world--a world, too, that was fit
To be transmitted, and to other eyes
Made visible; as ruled by those fixed laws
Whence spiritual dignity originates,
Which do both give it being and maintain
A balance, an ennobling interchange
Of action from without and from within;
The excellent, pure function, and best
power
Both of the object seen, and eye that sees.

(Wordsworth, The Prelude)

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is twofold: (1) to explore the influences and the effects of the time spent at Alfoxden between mid-July, 1797 and June, 1798, on the poetic development of William Wordsworth, and (2) to relate these particular influences and effects to his actual poetry--with special reference to Lyrical Ballads of 1798. I have chosen to deal with the Alfoxden period because I feel that it is of special significance mainly in that it was during this time that Wordsworth first came under the extended influence of another poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and because the period itself culminated in the very important joint production of these two poets, Lyrical Ballads, which Emile Legouis describes as "an epoch-making book . . . generally considered as the initial date of English romantic literature."¹

Although Coleridge was surely an important influence on Wordsworth during the latter's stay at Alfoxden, he was by no means the only one to offer the poet intelligent, admiring and sensitively encouraging company. Dorothy Wordsworth, William's sister, provided him with a friendship and an artistic relationship which generally influenced his poetic growth. In his biography of Dorothy, Ernest De Selincourt pays her a great tribute by saying: "No one, not even her brother, has captured with a more delicate perception the distinctive beauties of the countryside in which her days were passed, nor revealed with a more

¹Emile Legouis, "Some Remarks on the Composition of the Lyrical Ballads of 1798," Wordsworth and Coleridge, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1962), p. 3.

penetrating sympathy the daily goings-on of its lowly inhabitants."²
In this thesis, I would like to explore the effects of this "delicate perception" and "penetrating sympathy" on Wordsworth's poetic development and to demonstrate how, in the actual poetry, they helped him to give a subtlety of expression to his work which he might otherwise have been unable to capture.

While he was in residence at Alfoxden, Wordsworth received many visitors, both welcome and unwelcome, but most contributed in some way to his growth as an artist. Thomas Poole, a neighbourhood squire, first secured for Wordsworth the lovely mansion known as Alfoxden House, and later provided the poet with much information about the district and its lowly inhabitants--information which Wordsworth's creative imagination later transformed and immortalized in poetry. Poole himself was immortalized in one of these poems, the beautiful and moving "Michael." Michael, the shepherd of Westmoreland, was poor in material possessions, but like Poole, he was rich in virtues of integrity and honesty and shared with him what Legouis calls an "intense, though restrained, sensibility."³

Unhappiness came into Wordsworth's life in 1797 to counterbalance some of the happiness when John Thelwall, an activist and supporter of the French Revolution arrived to visit Coleridge. Thelwall, himself a poet, may have assisted Wordsworth in formulating a plan for The Excursion

²Dorothy Wordsworth, preface, p. ix.

³Legouis, p. 368.

and may also have given him ideas for the creation of "Michael," but his presence in Stowey and at Alfoxden brought unwelcome though amusing repercussions to Wordsworth. Because of this guest, and because of their own reputations, Wordsworth and Coleridge had to put up with a government spy who was sent to watch them for evidence of treasonable activities.

Charles Lamb visited during that year as did William Hazlitt, Joseph Cottle and Thomas Wedgwood. Wedgwood was an especially interesting visitor who came to tell Wordsworth and Coleridge of his scheme for the establishment of an academy for the education of the gifted--an education which, incidentally, was to take place entirely indoors. Wedgwood's plan, plus the memories of his own happy childhood and the constant companionship of little Basil Montagu who spent the year at Alfoxden with him, influenced Wordsworth's view of childhood and how it should be spent. Evidence for this can be found, I think, in sections of The Prelude and in many of the other poems written about childhood, such as "Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood," "We Are Seven," and "Anecdote for Fathers."

Wordsworth made many short trips during his Alfoxden period and visited many people who, to a certain extent, influenced his poetic development. Among these were William Godwin and the poet Robert Southey. Southey, with his adverse reviews of Lyrical Ballads, certainly had some effect on the sale of the publication and slowed its reception by the reading public. Another trip which affected Wordsworth's development not as a poet, but as a dramatist, was one he took to Bristol

in order to revise his play The Borderers for the stage. The play was rejected even in its revised form--and this had the effect of proving to Wordsworth that his real forte was poetry and not drama.

Although all of these people and events certainly influenced Wordsworth in his development both as a poet and as a man, they could not have done so as effectively had he not experienced Alfoxden itself. In his youth, Wordsworth had been an avid supporter of the French Revolution, but the terror in Paris and the invasion of Switzerland by the French in late January, 1798, made him less confident in the use of revolution as a solution to the problems of mankind, and these events made him turn once again to Nature for possible answers. The quiet beauty of Alfoxden had a healing and maturing effect on Wordsworth, and made him aware once more of Nature's great power to elevate Man above the troubles of the everyday world. The man who wrote "Tintern Abbey" in July, 1798, was a totally different one from the man who came to Alfoxden from Racedown the previous year. He was a whole person, restored to both mental and physical health by a period of convalescence and reanimation brought about by a close association and interaction with Nature. In a letter written by Dorothy Wordsworth dated August 14, 1797, there is a description of Alfoxden:

The house is a large mansion, with furniture enough for a dozen families like ours. There is a very excellent garden, well stocked with vegetables and fruit. The garden is at the end of the house, and our favourite parlour, as at Racedown, looks that way. In front is a little court, with grass plot, gravel walk, and shrubs; the moss roses were in full beauty a month ago. The front of the house is to the south, but it is screened from the sun by a high hill which rises immediately from it. This hill is beautiful, scattered irregularly and abundantly

with trees, and topped with fern, which spreads a considerable way down it. The deer dwell here, and sheep, so that we have a living prospect. From the end of the house we have a view of the sea, over a woody meadow-country; and exactly opposite the window where I now sit is an immense wood, whose round top from this point has exactly the appearance of a mighty dome. In some parts of this wood there is an under grove of hollies which are now very beautiful. In a glen at the bottom of the wood is the waterfall of which I spoke, a quarter of a mile from the house. We are three miles from Stowey, and not two miles from the sea. Wherever we turn we have woods, smooth downs, and valleys with small brooks running down them through green meadows, hardly ever intersected with hedgerows, but scattered over with trees. The hills that cradle these valleys are either covered with fern and bilberries, or oakwoods, which are cut for charcoal. . . . Walks extend for miles over the hill-tops; the great beauty of which is their wild simplicity: they are perfectly smooth, without rocks.⁴

From this description, it is easy to see why the Wordsworths loved Alfoxden and how it came to be an almost perfect place for Wordsworth to begin his new kind of poetry, a poetry that praised Nature for its healing power and rebelled against the artificially correct forms employed by the neo-classicists. It was here, in this "living prospect," where "Walks extend for miles over the hill-tops," that Wordsworth found inspiration to write some of his best and purest poetry.

The limitations imposed by a paper of this nature preclude a consideration of the day-to-day happenings at Alfoxden. However, I feel that a brief summary of the events of this period might help the reader to gain a greater appreciation of the importance of the Alfoxden experience in the life of William Wordsworth.

The agreement to lease Alfoxden was apparently signed on July 14,

⁴Early Letters, pp. 190-191.

1797, and on either the 14th or 16th of July, the Wordsworths moved into their new home.⁵ Almost from the moment of their arrival at Alfoxden, Coleridge took full advantage of their company, bringing many of his own guests along to visit Wordsworth.⁶ One of these guests was John Thelwall who arrived to visit Coleridge on July 17th only to find that Coleridge was visiting at Alfoxden.⁷ Thelwall's presence brought a feeling of suspicion and terror to the neighbourhood and resulted in the government sending a spy to watch both Wordsworth and Coleridge during the summer of 1797. This spy left in late August after finding no evidence of dangerous activity, but his visit left us with amusing accounts of the two poets' activities during his stay.

On about August 19th, Richard Reynall came to visit and he was followed a month later by Thomas Wedgwood who introduced his plan to make Coleridge and Wordsworth headmasters of his school for gifted children. On October 16th, Coleridge had finished his tragedy Osorio, and a month later, Wordsworth had finished his drama The Borderers as well. By mid-December, however, both dramas had been rejected, with

⁵Ibid., p. 190. In a letter dated August 14, 1797 Dorothy says: "It was a month yesterday since we came to Alfoxden." Editor De Selincourt adds a footnote to this saying: "That is, on Thursday, 13 July, inasmuch as the fortnight spent at S.T.C.'s cottage would have lasted from 28 June to 12 July." However, Reed, p. 201, gives July 7th as the date of the signing of the agreement to lease Alfoxden and July 16th as the probable date that Wordsworth moved into his new home.

⁶Dorothy Wordsworth. De Selincourt points out, "whenever he [Coleridge] had a guest of his own, his first impulse was to introduce him to Alfoxden," p. 82.

⁷Moorman, I, 327.

the result that Wordsworth never again wrote another play.

In November, William and Dorothy Wordsworth and Coleridge took two walking tours which proved to be of the utmost importance to Wordsworth's poetic development.⁸ It was on one of these tours that Wordsworth and Coleridge decided to write a book of verse with Coleridge concentrating on the writing of poetry having supernatural subjects and Wordsworth concentrating on poetry which revealed the beauties of everyday life. As a result of this planning, Lyrical Ballads was published in September, 1798.

In January, 1798, Coleridge received an important financial gift from the Wedgwoods which enabled him to forget economic problems and to concentrate on writing poetry. The gift also resulted in a trip to Germany for William, Dorothy and Coleridge some months later. In late January, Ménéard invaded Switzerland with 15,000 troops and, as Mark Reed points out: "W[ordsworth] later remembered that from the time of the French violation of Swiss independence his heart turned against Bonaparte and France and that he parted in feeling from the Whigs."⁹

⁸Dorothy Wordsworth, Early Letters, p. 194, cites the month for these walks as November, 1797. However, William Wordsworth, Prose Works, III, 16, claims in his note to "We Are Seven" that the date for the walks was "The Spring of the Year 1798." Knight, Coleridge and Wordsworth (London: Elkin Mathews, 1913. Reprinted by Folcroft Library Editions, 1970) maintains: "By far the most important event, in the lives of both Coleridge and Wordsworth towards the close of their residence in Somerset, was what they did during that ever memorable, and it may be called episodic, walk from Alfoxden along the sea-coast to Lynton. It was 'episodic,' because during it was mentally arranged and poetically constructed (although not written out in its final form till long afterwards) Coleridge's greatest poem, 'The Ancient Mariner.'", p. 160.

⁹Reed, pp. 213-214.

On January 20, 1798, Dorothy Wordsworth began to keep a journal of the daily events at Alfoxden; a journal which Wordsworth and Coleridge might have used to some extent in the writing of some of their poetry such as Wordsworth's "A Night Piece" and Coleridge's "Christabel." This journal has come to be a great asset to students of Wordsworth for it helps to show the profound influence of the events of the year at Alfoxden on both Wordsworth, the man and Wordsworth, the poet.

January 25th through March 5th, 1798 was a time of intense poetic creativity for Wordsworth. As Reed points out, it was during this time that he worked on "The Ruined Cottage," "The Old Cumberland Beggar," and material to be used later in his magnum opus, The Prelude. Wordsworth's conception of "The Recluse" was also being formed in his mind during this period.¹⁰ Between early March and May 16th, Wordsworth was hard at work composing "To My Sister," "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," "The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman," "Her Eyes Are Wild," "The Idiot Boy," "The Last of the Flock," "We Are Seven" and "Simon Lee."¹¹ "Peter Bell," which Dorothy recorded in her Alfoxden Journal as having been started on April 20th, was a direct result of Wordsworth's stay at Alfoxden.¹²

By early spring, the work on Lyrical Ballads was coming along so well that Wordsworth and Coleridge decided to invite their publisher

¹⁰Reed, p. 215.

¹¹Ibid., p. 221.

¹²Journals, p. 16.

Joseph Cottle down to Alfoxden so that they could begin to make arrangements to have their work published. Cottle arrived on May 9, 1798, and after an amusing visit, carried back "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" which was to have a prominent place in the volume.¹³ Shortly after Cottle's departure, probably about May 20th or perhaps a day or so later, William Hazlitt arrived for a visit. Besides giving us a delightful picture of both Wordsworth and Coleridge in his essay "My First Acquaintance With Poets," Hazlitt also contributed directly to Wordsworth's collection of poetry. As Reed points out, "W[ordsworth] compose[d] 'Expostulation and Reply' and 'The Tables Turned' on or shortly after this date, the poems having grown out of the conversation with Hazlitt."¹⁴

On May 31st, Dorothy wrote to Richard Wordsworth to tell him of their future plans for leaving Alfoxden.¹⁵ Between June 4th and June 12th, Wordsworth went to Bristol taking "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned" with him, and between the 16th and 24th of June, he returned to Alfoxden to help Dorothy move them out. They left Alfoxden on June 26th,¹⁶ and after parting with little Basil Montagu, left on a tour of the Wye River. Probably about July 14th,¹⁷ Wordsworth composed

¹³Hanson, I, 265.

¹⁴Reed, p. 238.

¹⁵Dorothy Wordsworth, Early Letters, p. 219.

¹⁶Memoirs, I, 116.

¹⁷Moorman, I, 401-402.

"Tintern Abbey," the work which David Rannie describes as "the last and greatest [poem] in the volume [Lyrical Ballads], perhaps the most characteristic breathing of the most characteristic Wordsworth spirit."¹⁸ This poem was included as the last entry of Lyrical Ballads published in the autumn of 1798.

From this brief summary of the events of Wordsworth's life between July, 1797, and September, 1798, I would like to turn now to a fuller discussion of these happenings. This must necessarily include careful consideration of the various people who both singly and collectively helped to give meaning to the daily occurrences at Alfoxden. From the most casual visitor to the most intimate friend, each person entering Wordsworth's life during this period helped him in some way to fulfill his poetic destiny. In addition, Alfoxden itself must be considered. With its romantic landscape, it became an incalculably important ingredient in the poet's maturation period. Here Wordsworth was cured of his earlier disillusionments and sought regenerative solace in Nature--a solace which then became transmuted into a pure and sublime poetry.

¹⁸Rannie, p. 91.

CHAPTER I

WHAT HUMANITY ALWAYS NEEDS IS A CHILD

From his earliest childhood, William Wordsworth enjoyed a very intimate relationship with Nature. He spent most of his earliest years either at Cockermouth or with his mother's family at Penrith on the eastern border of Cumberland.¹ In both places, he was free to roam about the countryside, learning almost from infancy both the gentle and the savage lessons of Nature. One of his earliest memories, that of the Derwent River, is recorded in The Prelude:

For this, didst thou,
O Derwent! winding among grassy holms
Where I was looking on, a babe in arms,
Make ceaseless music that composed my
thoughts
To more than infant softness, giving me
Amid the fretful dwellings of mankind
A foretaste, a dim earnest, of the calm
That Nature breathes among the hills
and groves.²

As a tiny boy, Wordsworth's love of Nature continued to grow because he was allowed freedom to interact with it in every way. As Mrs. Moorman points out:

At five years old he was bathing in that stream [Derwent], or in the small millrace that ran off from it, and rushing about naked in his father's fields, which bore the curious names of Sand Air and St. Leonard's below the bridge, where in July and August 'groves of yellow ragwort' almost hid the

¹Moorman, I, 11.

²Wordsworth, The Prelude (1850 edition), in Poetical Works, I, 275-281. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent quotations from The Prelude will be from this edition and will be acknowledged in parentheses in the text.

grass, and were like trees to his small body as he leapt amongst them.³

Almost nothing is known about Wordsworth's father John Wordsworth, although it is evident from The Prelude that William loved and respected his mother deeply. As Mrs. Moorman says, he gave "in The Prelude, the most exalted importance to the relation of the infant to its mother, regarding it as the archetype from which springs the happiness of the child's intercourse with the universe."⁴ Wordsworth's mother understood her son giving him much attention and love until she died when William was nine years old. As Ernest De Selincourt explains:

Ann Wordsworth was a fine example of the old type of motherhood. If not intellectual she was a woman of high character, and rich in common sense. Devoted to her children, and fully understanding them, she was not one of those mothers who expect their children to be prodigies, and in the desire to prove them so, turn them into prigs. She loved them for what they were rather than for what they might become. She was infected by none of the newfangled theories of education which had followed in the wake of Rousseau. She was not over-anxious or fussy, afraid to trust them out of her sight; but let them run wild in the open, disporting themselves at will in the garden and on the terrace walk, or in the fields of yellow ragwort by the river's edge; and when she read to them it was not from those improving moral tales that were just beginning to flood the market, but from stories of immemorial delight--Jack the Giant-Killer, Robin Hood, and the like, tales of romance and mystery which, instead of encouraging a morbid introspection, took them out of themselves.⁵

Even though he lost both parents early and had to depend on his grandparents and uncles for a home, Wordsworth was nevertheless very

³Moorman, I, 2.

⁴Ibid., p. 3.

⁵Dorothy Wordsworth, p. 4.

Hawkshead he was allowed to take early morning walks and to stay up all night, and if he wished, to tramp the countryside. How important this freedom was to Wordsworth can be seen in the following lines quoted from The Prelude:

Yes, I remember when the changeful earth,
 And twice five summers on my mind had
 stamped
 The faces of the moving year, even then
 I held unconscious intercourse with beauty
 Old as creation, drinking in a pure
 Organic pleasure from the silver wreaths
 Of curling mists, or from the level plain
 Of waters coloured by impending clouds.
 (I. 559-566)

Because he had such a happy relationship with Nature as a child, Wordsworth did all in his power to help the little son of a friend find the same happiness during his youthful years. The boy was Basil Montagu, the son of a young London lawyer whom Wordsworth had met during a trip to London in 1795.⁸ Although he was the son of an Earl, the elder Montagu had offended his father by marrying against his will and in so doing, was disinherited. His wife died in 1793, leaving him with a two-year-old son Basil Jr.⁹ As Mrs. Moorman explains, the situation was as follows in 1795:

Young Basil was now living rather miserably with his father, who was himself in no condition to make a small child happy; he was heart-broken at the death of his wife, and in his unhappiness had apparently reverted to wild habits and intemperance. It was then that he met Wordsworth. 'I consider,' he said in his unprinted autobiography, 'having met William Wordsworth the most fortunate event of my life.' Wordsworth found himself now

⁸Ibid., p. 261.

⁹Ibid.

called upon to act as counsellor and guide to the distraught Montagu, as he had done a few years earlier to William Mathews when he was in perplexity. 'He saw me,' says Montagu, 'with great industry, perplexed and misled by passions wild and strong. In the wreck of my happiness he saw the probable ruin of my infant. He unremittingly, and to me imperceptibly, endeavoured to eradicate my faults and encourage my good dispositions.'¹⁰

Wordsworth not only helped the father, he also helped the son. As Mrs. Moorman says: "Wordsworth hated to see children unhappy, and realized that Montagu was in no fit state to bring up a child. It so happened that by the middle of the summer a plan was formed by which at last William and Dorothy were able to live together, and Basil was to go with them and grow up under Dorothy's care."¹¹ Basil stayed with the Wordsworths both at Racedown and at Alfoxden, where he changed, as Dorothy says, "from a shivering half starved plant, to a lusty, blooming fearless boy."¹² In a letter to Mrs. John Marshall dated March 19, 1797, Dorothy explained how she and William had brought about this happy transition in little Basil:

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

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 266.

¹² Dorothy Wordsworth, Early Letters, p. 166.

first when he came he was extremely petted from indulgence and wea[k]ness of body; and perpetually disposed to cry. Upon the[se] occasions (perhaps this may be of use to you) w[e] used to tell him that if he chose to cry he must go into a certain room where he cannot be heard, and stay till he chose to be quiet, because the noise was unpleasant to us; at first his visits were very long, but he alway[s] came out again perfectly good-humoured. He found that this mode was never departed from, and when he felt the fretful disposition coming on he would say, 'Aunt, I think I am going to cry' and retire till the fit was over. He has now entirely conquered the disposition.¹³

Shortly after they got settled at Alfoxden, Wordsworth returned to Racedown to get Peggy their maid-servant, and young Basil. No doubt he had missed the little boy of whom he had complained to Francis Wrangham in a letter dated March 7, 1796: "Basil is quite well quant au physique mais pour le moral il-y-a bien à craindre. Among other things he lies like a little devil."¹⁴ From this letter we know that Basil's habit of lying was well established long before he came to Alfoxden, but it seems that it was only after their time at Alfoxden that Wordsworth realized that some of the evil actions of children come about only as a result of adult interference. In the poem "Anecdote for Fathers," subtitled in the 1798 Lyrical Ballads, "Shewing How the Art of Lying May Be Taught," Wordsworth recorded a conversation with Basil in which he persisted in asking why the child preferred to be at Kilve, located a mile from Alfoxden, rather than at Liswyn Farm, a beautiful spot on the Wye.¹⁵ During the talk, the child was at first

¹³ Ibid., pp. 180-181.

¹⁴ William Wordsworth, Early Letters, p. 168.

¹⁵ Prose Works, III, 19-20.

truthful in his response when he admitted that he could not tell and did not know why he preferred one place to the other.¹⁶ Finally, after being pestered to his limit by his adult questioner to tell "Why?" the little boy answered, "At Kilve there was no weather-cock;/And that's the reason why."¹⁷ The vital question brought out by this discussion is the one which Mrs. Moorman raises:

Can it be that Basil's habit of giving false answers--which Wordsworth complained about at Racedown--was all along due in part to the necessity of defending himself against the poet's questions, and that at Alfoxden, after a particularly long catechism, Wordsworth at last realized that it was himself, and not Basil who was to blame?¹⁸

The answer to this question must be given in the affirmative after one reads the final verse of the poem in which the poet acknowledges the child's wisdom:

O dearest, dearest boy! my heart
For better lore would seldom yearn
Could I but teach the hundredth part
Of what from thee I learn.¹⁹

It can truly be said that Wordsworth was a poet of childhood, for as Charles Lamb noted:

. . . from a familiar observation of the ways of children, and much more from a retrospect of his own mind when a child, he gathered more reverential notions of that state than fell to the lot of ordinary observers, and, escaping from the dissonant wranglings of men, has tuned his lyre, though but for occasional

¹⁶ Poetical Works, p. 68.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Moorman, p. 289.

¹⁹ Poetical Works, p. 68.

harmonies, to the milder utterances of that soft age.²⁰

Childhood to Wordsworth was an almost sacred time; a time when the human being possessed a knowledge far deeper than at any other time of his life. Wordsworth's important gift to children was to write a poetry celebrating their period of innocent wisdom so that the world could better come to understand (as it did not in the eighteenth century), that children were not miniature adults who should be seen and not heard, but were human beings in a stage of utmost importance in development from whom could be learned the most valuable and the most important lessons of life. In another poem, also written at Alfoxden, Wordsworth shows that the child, even though he cannot reason as does an adult, nevertheless is closer to the truth and to the answers of life's mysteries than is the mature man. In "We Are Seven," the adult remains firm in his conviction that reason must prevail,²¹ but Wordsworth makes it very clear that the reasoning that prevails is of a very static and unimaginative nature and comes from one who has, during the course of his maturation, travelled far "From God, who is our home."²² The little girl, on the other hand, uses no adult rationalizations to deal with death, but in her simple, intuitive way, she comes closer to a real understanding of the universe--its

²⁰George McLean Harper, William Wordsworth: His Life, Works, and Influence (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, W., 1916), I, 246.

²¹William Wordsworth, Selected Poems and Prefaces, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), notes, p. 506.

²²"Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood," Section v, Poetical Works, p. 460.

givings and its takings away, than any adult could. As David Ferry points out:

The poem exhibits this kind of irony throughout, making us read it two ways at once, either to show the obstinate naïveté of the child, who refuses to understand that her brother and sister are really dead, or to emphasize the obstinate sophistication of the speaker, who refuses to recognize the superiority of the child's wisdom. For she knows that there is an unbroken continuity between the living and the dead, which makes it possible for her to sit beside their graves and sing to them. She can sing to them and share her life with them because they are now a part of eternal nature, which is the true life--and so, being a child, is she.²³

If we view this poem in the light of the ode "Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood," we can see that it shows the little girl speaker still to be an "Eye among the blind . . ." ²⁴ "[To whom the grave/Is but a lonely bed without the sense of sight/Of day or the warm light,/A place of thought where we in waiting lie;]" ²⁵ As Ferry again points out:

The chief beauty of the poem arises from the naturalistic accuracy with which it makes its point. We really do feel that the child is naïve and unable to understand the facts of life--or rather of death--at the same time that we take pleasure in the way the speaker is confounded by her. The fact of physical death is incontrovertible. We, and the speaker, know this, and the child really is ignorant in refusing to face it. But her real ignorance equals a real wisdom, for she knows about eternal life in a way that we, being adults, cannot know about it.²⁶

²³ David Ferry, The Limits of Mortality (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), p. 84.

²⁴ "Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood," Section viii, Poetical Works, p. 461.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ferry, Limits of Mortality, pp. 84-85.

Although he had met the little girl heroine of "We Are Seven" several years before,²⁷ it was only at Alfoxden that Wordsworth was able to express the deepness of her wisdom in verse. At Alfoxden, Wordsworth saw a great deal of another child who was to inspire him to write a poem about childhood. Although he was hardly more than a baby in 1797-1798, Coleridge's son Hartley saw Wordsworth frequently, and in 1802, Wordsworth paid his friend's son a beautiful tribute in which he acknowledged the sanctity of Hartley's childhood. In this poem, one can see the seeds of the "Immortality Ode." It is quoted in part below:

O Thou! whose fancies from afar are brought;
 Who of thy words dost make a mock apparel,
 And fittest to unutterable thought
 The breeze-like motion and the self-born carol;
 Thou faery voyager! that dost float
 In such clear water, that thy boat
 May rather seem
 To brood on air than on an earthly stream;
 Suspended in a stream as clear as sky,
 Where earth and heaven do make one imagery;
 O blessed vision! happy child!
 Thou art so exquisitely wild,
 I think of thee with many fears
 For what may be thy lot in future years. 28

One of the possible fears Wordsworth may have had for Hartley Coleridge and for all children was of an educational system which would take over and keep the child apart from Nature, thus robbing him of his best and truest teacher. Such a system was proposed to Wordsworth and Coleridge at Alfoxden.

On September 15, 1797, Mrs. Moorman records that "Tom Wedgwood, the brilliant, delicate brother of John and Josiah Wedgwood," came to

²⁷Prose Works, III, 16.

²⁸"To H.C. Six Years Old," Poetical Works, p. 70.

Alfoxden, "and stayed for five days."²⁹ Although he had never before met either Coleridge or Wordsworth, it was his plan to include the two poets in a scheme he had arrived at for the education of young geniuses. His plan, perhaps patterned after the ideas of Rousseau, aimed at bringing out the best in intellectually gifted children. In a letter quoted by Mrs. Moorman, he explains his aims:

My aim is high [he writes]. I have been endeavouring some master-stroke which should anticipate a century or two upon the large-paced progress of human improvement. . . . Let us suppose ourselves in possession of a detailed statement of the first twenty years of the life of some extraordinary genius; what a chaos of perceptions! . . . How many opposing tendencies which have negatived each other. . . . How many hours, days, months have been prodigally wasted in unproductive occupation! How many false and contradictory ideas imprinted by authority!³⁰

In order to offset these problems, Wedgwood thought that a school should be established where the brilliant could be taught to develop their full potential. The ideas that he brought to discuss with Wordsworth and Coleridge were radical, to say the least. One must wonder what a poet such as Wordsworth thought of this young man who suggested that genius could only be cultivated indoors! According to Wedgwood as quoted by Mrs. Moorman, "The child must never go out of doors or leave his own apartment."³¹ He also suggested that "rational objects" and the child's "chief pleasures" must somehow be connected.³²

²⁹ Moorman, pp. 332-333.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 333.

³¹ Ibid., p. 334.

³² Ibid.

Above all, Wedgwood stressed that "idleness of mind was to be resisted; no time was to be allowed for solitary musing."³³ It would seem that of all the English poets not to suggest such a scheme to--that poet would be Wordsworth, for any reader of The Prelude and of Wordsworth's biographies must agree that freedom to explore and to enjoy Nature during boyhood and youth contributed greatly to the fostering of his genius and to his creativity as an artist. Such a plan as the one proposed by Wedgwood would be alien to everything Wordsworth himself had experienced as a child and believed in as a poet of Nature. However, Mrs. Moorman points out that although Wedgwood's ideas were not well received, they might have influenced Wordsworth to write some thoughts on the subject of this kind of education:

But there are indications that Wedgwood's theories drew from Wordsworth more than verbal criticisms. In the fifth book of The Prelude is a long passage scornfully satirizing modern systems of education which make children into infant prodigies and divorce them from their true instructress, Nature.³⁴

If Wedgwood asked the question, "Should not the nursery, then, have plain, grey walls with one or two vivid objects for sight and touch?"³⁵ then surely Wordsworth's answer can be found in The Prelude when he explains where he received most of his own meaningful education:

Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!
Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought,
That givest to forms and images a breath

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 336.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 334.

And everlasting motion, not in vain
 By day or star-light thus from my first dawn
 Of childhood didst thou interwine for me
 The passions that build up our human soul;
 Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,
 But with high objects, with enduring things--
 With life and nature--purifying thus
 The elements of feeling and of thought,
 And sanctifying, by such discipline,
 Both pain and fear, until we recognize
 A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.
 (I. 401-414)

Wedgwood concluded that "In the best regulated mind of the present day, has not there been, and is not there some hours every day passed in reverie, thought ungoverned, undirected? How astonishingly the powers and produce of the mind would be increased by a fixed habit of earnest thought. This is to be given."³⁶ Wordsworth's response to this can again be found in The Prelude, when he stresses the importance of loneliness and reverie to the maturing mind of man:

. . . for I would walk alone,
 Under the quiet stars, and at that time
 Have felt whate'er is of power in sound
 To breathe an elevated mood, by form
 Or image unprofaned; and I would stand,
 If the night blackened with a coming storm,
 Beneath some rock, listening to notes that are
 The ghostly language of the ancient earth,
 Or make their dim abode in distant winds,
 Thence did I drink the visionary power;
 And deem not profitless those fleeting moods
 Of shadowy exultation: not for this,
 That they are kindred to our purer mind
 And intellectual life; but that the soul,
 Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
 Remembering not, retains an obscure sense
 Of possible sublimity, whereto
 With growing faculties she doth aspire,
 With faculties still growing, feeling still

³⁶ Ibid.

That whatsoever point they gain, they yet
Have something to pursue.

(II. 302-322)

Wordsworth gives us an indication of what happens when a child is brought up under a system such as the one Wedgwood proposed. In Book V of The Prelude, he paints a vivid picture of what might have been one of Wedgwood's little hothouse geniuses:

Dumb creatures find him tender as a nun,
And natural or supernatural fear,
Unless it leap upon him in a dream,
Touches him not. To enhance the wonder, see
How arch his notices, how nice his sense
Of the ridiculous; not blind is he
To the broad follies of the licensed world,
Yet innocent himself withal, though shrewd,
And can read lectures upon innocence;
A miracle of scientific lore,
Ships he can guide across the pathless sea,
And tell you all their cunning; he can read
The inside of the earth, and spell the stars;
He knows the policies of foreign lands;
Can string you names of districts, cities, towns,
The whole world over, tight as beads of dew
Upon a gossamer thread; he sifts, he weighs;
All things are put to question; he must live
Knowing that he grows wiser every day
Or else not live at all, and seeing too
Each little drop of wisdom as it falls
Into the dimpling cistern of his heart:
For this unnatural growth the trainer blame,
Pity the tree.

(V. 306-329)

To Wordsworth, the child was a "Mighty Prophet! Seer Blest,"³⁷
to whom "solitude" was not only "blithe society,"³⁸ but a necessary

³⁷"Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood," Section viii, Poetical Works, p. 461.

³⁸"Characteristics of a Child Three Years Old," Poetical Works, p. 63.

requisite for the gaining of wisdom--especially the true wisdom of childhood taught by Nature. As Peter Coveney suggests:

The initial facts at least are clear. For Wordsworth, childhood was the "seed-time" of the "soul." He saw the development of the human mind as organic through infancy and youth to maturity. The relation of the Child to Nature was fundamental to his concept of the growth of the moral personality. The child was in fact an essential part of the "wisdom" he sought to convey.³⁹

Wordsworth made a great contribution to childhood and to children through his poetry--not by writing poems for children, but by writing poems that awakened the adult world to a realization that more effort should be made, not in making the child understand, but in understanding the child. This contribution was made possible not only through Wordsworth's careful, retrospective study of his own childhood, but also through his experiences with Basil Montagu, Hartley Coleridge and Tom Wedgwood at Alfoxden. It was through his association with these people and his time of quiet contemplation of the truths they taught, that Wordsworth came to a knowledge that, truly, "The Child is father of the Man,"⁴⁰ and that "Our simple childhood, sits upon a throne/ That hath more power than all the elements" (V. 508-509).

³⁹Peter Coveney, Poor Monkey: The Child in Literature (London: Richard Clay and Company, Ltd., 1957), p. 30.

⁴⁰"My Heart Leaps Up," Poetical Works, p. 62.

CHAPTER II

VISITS AND VISITORS

During the period of his residence at Alfoxden, Wordsworth visited and was visited by many people who greatly influenced his poetic development. The first of many visitors to Alfoxden arrived shortly after Wordsworth settled in his new home. As David Rannie explains:

Almost immediately after the Wordsworths entered on possession Coleridge went to stay at Alfoxden, and he was followed next morning in time for breakfast by Mrs. Coleridge, who brought with her an interesting guest. John Thelwall, born in 1764, and therefore a good deal older than Wordsworth and Coleridge, the son of a Bristol tradesman, was one of the recruits whom the west country supplied to the revolutionary liberalism of the time.¹

"Citizen Thelwall" had just been released from prison where "he had been confined, without trial, during the reactionary terror of the previous year and he was now in search of a quiet country retreat."² He had come to see Coleridge, Rannie explains, "on the strength of supposed political sympathy,"³ and Coleridge, although he did not sympathize with Thelwall to any great extent in matters of politics, enjoyed his company and was eager to introduce him to Wordsworth. As Rannie further explains:

So "Citizen John," as he was called in cant revolutionary parlance, was one of the little house-party at Alfoxden in

¹Rannie, p. 67.

²Dorothy Wordsworth, p. 77.

³Rannie, p. 67.

July, 1797; wandering through the woods and hills with the two poets, making acquaintance with the dell and its waterfall, and discussing all things in heaven and earth.⁴

In a letter to his wife dated Alfoxden, July 18, 1797, Thelwall describes his actual arrival and reception by Coleridge and Wordsworth:

'Everything but my Stella and my babes,' he writes 'are now banished from my mind by the enchanting retreat (the Academus of Stowey) from which I write this, and by the delightful society of Coleridge and of Wordsworth, the present occupier of Allfox Den. We have been having a delightful ramble to-day among the plantations, and along a wild, romantic dell in these grounds, through which a foaming, rushing, murmuring torrent of water winds its long artless course. There have we, . . . a literary and political triumvirate, passed sentence on the productions and characters of the age, burst forth in poetical flights of enthusiasm, and philosophised our minds into a state of tranquillity, which the leaders of nations might envy, and the residents of cities- can never know.'⁵

Mrs. Sandford explains that Wordsworth, Coleridge and Thomas Poole accepted Thelwall "with that perfect kind of tolerance which is, as it were, a spontaneous effect of nature, therefore happily unconscious of its own merits,"⁶ and they soon became, in Thelwall's own terms, "a most philosophical party."⁷ Thelwall claims that they discussed "the moral character of Democrats, of Aristocrats,"⁸ and the "pursuits proper to literary men--unfit for management of pecuniary affairs--

⁴Ibid., pp. 67-68.

⁵Mrs. Henry Sandford, Thomas Poole and His Friends, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1888), I, 232-233.

⁶Ibid., p. 234.

⁷Ibid., p. 233.

⁸Moorman, I, 327, cites an excerpt from Thelwall's diary which is now lost.

Rousseau, Bacon, Arthur Young!"⁹ Their conversations delved into subjects of a most profound nature, and as Mrs. Moorman says, they did not take the form of mere superficial outcries for reform either at home or in other lands:

. . . mere railing at the Government and the war was not the subject of their political discussions. It was not that either Coleridge or Wordsworth was growing indifferent to political events. Rather, their attitude, from being merely hostile, had become more detached and full of a sense of the tragedy of all human things. Wordsworth had reached his own position through writing first The Borderers and then "The Ruined Cottage." He had regained, too, the power to delight in nature, and this Coleridge was learning to share.¹⁰

Thelwall stayed in the neighbourhood only for a few days,¹¹ and he had come seeking only refuge and peace from his political problems. Although he was well received by the two poets and by Thomas Poole, his presence, according to Mrs. Moorman, "spread something like terror in the neighbourhood."¹² Poole's cousin Charlotte wrote in her diary:

July 23, 1797.--We are shocked to hear that Mr. Thelwall has spent some time at Stowey this week with Mr. Coleridge, and consequently with Tom Poole. Alfoxton house is taken by one of the fraternity, and Woodlands by another. To what are we coming?¹³

Coleridge claimed that Thelwall's visit resulted in the government's sending a spy to watch Wordsworth and himself.¹⁴ Wordsworth was

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 327-328.

¹¹Harper, I, 244. "The chief offender had left Stowey by July 27, for on that date, being his birthday, he wrote some verses at the neighbouring town of Bridgewater."

¹²Moorman, I, 328.

¹³Diary entry of Charlotte Poole quoted by Mrs. Sandford, Thomas Poole, I, 235.

¹⁴Biographia, I, 126.

also of this opinion as seen in his note to "Anecdote for Fathers":

The visit of this man to Coleridge was, as I believe Coleridge has related, the occasion of a spy being sent by the Government to watch our proceedings; which were, I can say with truth, such as the world at large would have thought ludicrously harmless.¹⁵

Mrs. Moorman, however, disagrees with this viewpoint when she states:

The spy was not sent, as Wordsworth afterward said, because of the arrival of Thelwall. Coleridge was right in saying that it was the presence of the Wordsworths themselves at Alfoxden that set the neighbours talking.¹⁶

Mrs. Moorman insists that a former servant of the Wordsworths was the first to complain about them and arouse suspicions of government officials. She quotes a letter written by this servant to the Duke of Portland, the Home Secretary. It is very amusing to think of this uneducated and perplexed servant trailing after William and Dorothy in the woods of Alfoxden and later condemning them for their suspicious behavior. In the letter quoted by Mrs. Moorman, she says:

11th August. My Lord Duke--On the 8th instant I took the liberty to acquaint your grace with a very suspicious business concerning an emigrant family, who have contrived to get possession of a Mansion House at Alfoxton, late belonging to the Rev^d Mr. St. Albyn under Quantock Hills. I am since informed that the Master of the House has no wife with him, but only a woman who passes for his Sister. The man has Camp Stools which he and his visitors take with them when they go about the country upon their nocturnal or diurnal excursions and have also a Portfolio in which they enter their observations which they have been heard to say were almost finished. They have been heard to say that they should be rewarded for them, and were very attentive to the River near them. . . . These people may possibly

¹⁵ Prose Works, III, 20.

¹⁶ Moorman, I, 329.

be under-agents to some principal in Bristol.¹⁷

Although as Lawrence Hanson claims, Walsh the spy was not sent merely because of Thelwall's visit yet the government agent persisted in his endeavours to watch the party because he had heard of Thelwall's "presence in the neighbourhood."¹⁸ Hence, Wordsworth and Coleridge had to put up with Walsh during the otherwise peaceful summer, and as a result of the spy's reports, Wordsworth was ordered to vacate Alfoxden when the lease was up in the summer of 1798.¹⁹ In spite of all the misunderstandings resulting from Thelwall's visit, he did have a great influence on Wordsworth's thought in areas of both politics and literature. As Émile Legouis explains:

A semi-atheist, though progressing by slow stages toward the mysticism of Coleridge, he [Wordsworth] saw in Thelwall a copy of himself as he had been when his faith in Godwin was at its height. And Thelwall, in spite of his "extraordinary talent," and his brief flashes of eloquence, wrung by the fiery language of a people's tribune from the most commonplace ideas, contributed to alienate him still more from his former master. Wordsworth, with his more cautious spirit, could not but feel, as he heard them once more retailed, how vain and empty were some of the declamatory phrases, how brutally precipitate some of the opinions, with which the honest Jacobin was infatuated. But little acquainted with the past, and for that very reason full of a rude faith in the future, "boastful of the strength of reason," because he had "never tried it enough to know its weakness," Thelwall's defects became strongly conspicuous in discussion with a man of such wide and varied reading as Coleridge. It was inevitable that Wordsworth should be led by their conversations to calculate the distance his own mind had travelled since the

¹⁷ Letter of Mrs. Mogg to the Duke of Portland quoted by Moorman, I, 329.

¹⁸ Hanson, I, 209.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 210-211. Also Harper, I, 250.

day, however recent, when he himself reasoned in the same manner as Thelwall.²⁰

Along with the fact that this visit made Wordsworth look at himself in retrospect and made him aware of his growth and maturity in political and humanitarian spheres, it also brought about two important literary events. The first was Coleridge's amusing account of the visit of the spy to Stowey as found in Biographia Literaria:

The dark guesses of some zealous Quidnunc met with so congenial a soil in the grave alarm of a titled Dogberry of our neighbourhood, that a SPY was actually sent down from the government pour surveillance of myself and friend. . . . After three weeks' truly Indian perseverance in tracking us, (for we were commonly together,) during all which time seldom were we out of doors, but he contrived to be within hearing, . . . He had repeatedly hid himself, he said, for hours together behind a bank at the sea-side, (our favourite seat), and overheard our conversation. At first he fancied, that we were aware of our danger; for he often heard me talk of one Spy Nozy, which he was inclined to interpret of himself, and of a remarkable feature belonging to him; but he was speedily convinced that it was the name of a man who had made a book and lived long ago.²¹

However, the second contribution to literature which possibly resulted from Thelwall's visit more directly concerned Wordsworth himself. As George Harper explains:

The world has long ago forgotten, if it ever indeed admitted, that Thelwall was a poet. Yet he was the author of much verse. Its quality is below mediocrity; but the subjects he chose and the nature of his attempt are not without significance to a student of Wordsworth. The plan of Thelwall's "Peripatetic" is similar in its mechanism to that of "The Excursion," and it is perhaps not too fanciful to think that in "Michael" we have a reminiscence of Thelwall's poem, "On Leaving the Bottoms of Gloucestershire,

²⁰Legouis, pp. 364-365.

²¹Biographia, I, 126-127.

August, 1797. . . ."22

If one compares sections of Thelwall's poem with certain sections of The Excursion, one can see the possibility of Wordsworth's efforts having been influenced by those of Thelwall. In a section of "On Leaving the Bottoms of Gloucestershire," Thelwall says:

Ah! 'tis a scene
That wakes to social rapture. Nor, as yet,
Towers from each peaceful dell the unwieldy pride
Of Factory over-grown; where Opulence,
Dispeopling the neat cottage, crowds his walls
(Made pestilent by congregated lungs
And lewd association) with a race
Of infant slaves, brok'n timely to the yoke
Of unremitting Drudgery--no more
By relative endearment, or the voice²³
Of matronly education, interspersed.

In The Excursion, Wordsworth expresses much the same thoughts about industrialization and its effects:

'Meanwhile, at social Industry's command,
How quick, how vast an increase! From
the germ
Of some poor hamlet, rapidly produced
Here a huge town, continuous and compact,
Hiding the face of earth for leagues--and
there,
Where not a habitation stood before,
Abodes of men irregularly massed
Like trees in forests,--spread through
spacious tracts,
O'er which the smoke of unremitting fires
Hangs permanent, and plentiful as
wreaths,
Of vapour glittering in the morning sun.'²⁴

²²Harper, I, 243-244.

²³John Thelwall, "On Leaving the Bottoms of Gloucestershire, where the author had been entertained by several families with great hospitality, 12 August 1797," quoted in Legouis, p. 369.

²⁴The Excursion, Book 8, 117-127, Poetical Works, p. 683.

And:

. . . The boy, where'er he turns,
 Is still a prisoner; when the wind is up
 Among the clouds, and roars through the
 ancient woods;
 Or when the sun is shining in the east,
 Quiet and calm. Behold him--in the school
 Of his attainments? no; but with the air
 Fanning his temples under heaven's blue arch.
 His raiment, whitened o'er with cotton-flakes
 Or locks of wool, announces whence he comes.
 Creeping his gait and cowering, his lip
 pale,
 His respiration quick and audible;
 And scarcely could you fancy that a gleam
 Could break from out those languid eyes,
 or a blush,
 Mantle upon his cheek. . . .²⁵

Although Wordsworth was not yet in possession of Alfoxden at the time of Charles Lamb's visit to Coleridge, one must assume that this visit of "gentle-hearted Charles"²⁶ must have had some influence on the poet. Like the visit of Thelwall, Lamb's presence must have made Wordsworth aware as he might not have been before, of the healing power of Nature in its dealings with the impassioned and the heart-sick. Before the visit, Lamb had written to Coleridge: "I see nobody. I sit and read, or walk alone, and hear nothing. I am quite lost to conversation from disuse; and out of the sphere of my little family . . . I see no face that brightens at my approach."²⁷ As Legouis explains:

²⁵The Excursion in Poetical Works, p. 685.

²⁶"This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," Poetical Works of Coleridge, p. 181.

²⁷Charles Lamb, Letters of Charles Lamb, 2 vols. ed. W. Carew Hazlett (London: George Bell & Sons, 1886), I, 179-180.

Lamb was now under a cloud; for the time he had lost his originality and his pungent wit, and thus seemed to the poets a mere pale reflexion of themselves. In the young clerk of the East India Company, who wrote doleful verses in the leisure he enjoyed between office hours, or, actually, even at his office-desk, they thought they detected a soul who was the younger sister of their own, and had "pined and hungered after Nature, . . . in the great city pent."²⁸

After his short visit with Wordsworth and Coleridge, Lamb's "cloud" was soon lifted and he was feeling much more cheerful for as Rannie says, "happy hours flowed in the meadows and among the coombs of Quantock,"²⁹ which must have restored in part at least, his zest for life. On his return to London, Lamb wrote the following to Coleridge:

I feel improvement in the recollection of many a casual conversation. The names of Tom Poole, of Wordsworth and his good Sister, with thine and Sara's are become 'familiar in my mouth as household words.' You would make me very happy, if you think W[ordsworth] has no objection, by transcribing for me that inscription of his. I have some scattered sentences ever floating on my memory, teasing me that I cannot remember more of it.³⁰

Although Lamb's visit had no direct effect on Wordsworth's poetical development, the company of this melancholy youth must have impressed the poet, for Charles, then only twenty-two, had already experienced much bitterness and unhappiness in his life and was manfully trying to meet his responsibilities in a most mature way. Ten months before Lamb's visit, his sister Mary had stabbed their mother to death in a rage of madness,³¹ and Charles had assumed full responsibility for

²⁸Legouis, pp. 361-362.

²⁹Rannie, p. 62.

³⁰Charles Lamb, quoted in Harper, I, 237.

³¹Legouis, p. 361.

his sister's care himself. Certainly Lamb's heroism impressed Coleridge, for in a poem written during his visit, the poet paid "gentle-hearted Charles" the poetic compliment of saying that for him, "No sound is dissonant which tells of life."³² In a letter to Robert Southey dated July 17, 1797, Coleridge explains the circumstances under which this poem was written:

Charles Lamb has been with me for a week--He left me Friday morning.--/The second day after Wordsworth came to me, dear Sara accidentally emptied a skillet of boiling milk on my foot, which confined me during the whole time of C. Lamb's stay & still prevents me from all walks longer than a furlong.--While Wordsworth, his Sister, & C. Lamb were out one evening;/sitting in the arbour of T. Poole's garden, which communicates with mine, I wrote these lines, with which I am pleased--³³

The lines are the now-famous "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," the first real product of Coleridge's annus mirabilis. In this poem Coleridge gives us some indication of the beauty of Alfoxden, beauty which cheered and soothed not only Lamb, but Coleridge, Dorothy Wordsworth, and most important, Wordsworth himself:

They, meanwhile,
 Friends, whom I never more may meet again,
 On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,
 Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,
 To that still roaring dell, of which I told;
 The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep,
 And only speckled by the mid-day sun;
 Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock
 Flings arching like a bridge;--that branchless ash,
 Unsunned and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves
 Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still,
 Fanned by the water-fall! and there my friends

³²"This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," Poetical Works of Coleridge, p. 181.

³³Letters, p. 334.

Behold the dark green file of long lank weeds,
That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)
Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge
Of the blue clay-stone.³⁴

Although they had many distinguished visitors during this productive period at Alfoxden, Wordsworth and Coleridge spent much time visiting and being visited by one of their immediate neighbours, Thomas Poole, who had helped both poets settle in the neighbourhood. As Legouis points out, he was the one man "whose influence . . . was second only to that of Coleridge in bringing him [Wordsworth] to a full comprehension of the principles which for him were to remain final."³⁵ Legouis further explains that for Wordsworth, Poole was almost an ideal man:

Just as Wordsworth had only come into the neighbourhood for the sake of Coleridge's society, so Coleridge himself had sought the same retreat, six months earlier, merely in order to be within easy reach of his friend Thomas Poole. This well-to-do farmer was the fixed centre of the shifting group, and the only member of it connected with the soil of the country by family and fortune. A character in whom there was much to interest, he made a fruitful impression upon Wordsworth. In spite of his coarse exterior, his want of good-breeding, his churlish manners, and the harsh and disagreeable voice in which he often told his friends unpalatable truths, Poole was an excellent example of the thoroughly developed man.³⁶

F. W. Bateson explains part of the influence Poole might have had on Wordsworth:

And the first poem that Wordsworth wrote at Alfoxden, the lost "Somersetshire Tragedy," was the result of an early

³⁴Poetical Works of Coleridge, p. 179.

³⁵Legouis, p. 365.

³⁶Ibid.

walk that Poole took with the two poets to the scene of a recent murder, 'Walford's Gibbet,' as the place is still called, about half-way between Nether Stowey and Alfoxden. Poole had known this murderer well-- he was a charcoal-burner, good-tempered, generous, popular, and enormously strong--and the story he told them impressed Wordsworth so much that he decided to base a poem on it. At the request of the two poets Poole also wrote a detailed account of the murder in prose.³⁷

Although he never finished it, the "Somersetshire Tragedy" was important because it was the "only poem of any length that Wordsworth wrote between the first draft of "The Ruined Cottage" and Lyrical Ballads,"³⁸ and had it not been destroyed, it might well have given us further clues to Wordsworth's state of mind at this crucial stage of his development. It is the poem which, Bateson implies, marks the transition between Wordsworth's deep interest in narrative poems and his new-found interest in lyrical poetry.³⁹

Thomas Poole also influenced the writing of several of Wordsworth's other poems. In his introduction to "The Idiot Boy," Wordsworth acknowledges this help:

The last stanza, 'The cocks did crow, and the moon did shine so cold,' was the foundation of the whole. The words were reported to me by my dear friend Thomas Poole; but I have since heard the same reported of other idiots. Let me add, that this long poem was composed in the groves of Alfoxden almost extempore; not a word I believe, being corrected, though one stanza was omitted. I mention this in gratitude

³⁷ F. W. Bateson, Wordsworth: A Re-interpretation (London: Longmans Green & Co., Ltd., 1958), p. 130.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. The only MS. of the poem was destroyed by the poet's grandson, Gordon Wordsworth.

to those happy moments, for, in truth, I never wrote anything with so much glee.⁴⁰

Thomas Poole also inspired Wordsworth to write what Legouis calls "one of the best of his lesser poems, 'The Farmer of Tilsbury Vale;'"⁴¹ however, Poole's greatest influence over Wordsworth can be seen in the poem "Michael," in which it seems that it was not his story-telling ability which excited Wordsworth, but Poole's character itself. As Legouis explains:

For him [Wordsworth] Poole became the perfect type of rustic character, the man who, more than any other, united in himself its striking features. Possibly Wordsworth committed the mistake of generalizing too freely from this almost unique example. When, in one of his most beautiful pastorals, he wished to portray the shepherd proprietor of Westmoreland, passionately attached to his hereditary piece of ground and his independence, full of deep and tender affection, which his blunt and uncouth manners failed to conceal, he was not merely anxious to satisfy Poole, whom he considered to be perhaps the most "competent judge" in England on the point. "I had a still further wish," he said in writing to Poole, "that this poem should please you, because in writing it I had your character often before my eyes, and sometimes thought that I was delineating such a man as you yourself would have been under the same circumstances." The comparison of course cannot be very strongly insisted on. There must always be a great difference between the Somersetshire farmer, well-informed, liberal-minded, and progressive, and the poor shepherd of Westmoreland, with his life of quiet routine. But it is sufficient that they resemble one another in the essential virtues of sturdy integrity, and intense, though restrained, sensibility.⁴²

In one section of "Michael," the old shepherd gives his son Luke the advice that "should evil men/Be thy companions, think of me, my

⁴⁰ Prose Works, III, 26-27.

⁴¹ Legouis, p. 367.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 367-368.

Son,/And of this moment; hither turn thy thoughts,/And God will strengthen thee."⁴³ Perhaps in some sense, Poole represented to Wordsworth a similar image of a good and holy man to whom the poet could, in later years, turn his mind when things were going wrong and when he was discouraged. Legouis again points out:

When it is added that Wordsworth, always so sparing of compliments, asserts that he wrote many parts of his principal work, The Excursion, in the hope of pleasing Poole, and that he asked him for "a history of [his] feelings during the perusal," one may easily form an idea of the influence which Poole exercised on his mind after a whole year of close neighbourhood.⁴⁴

In May, 1798, Wordsworth and Coleridge had two other visitors who both influenced their futures as poets and who left interesting accounts of life, as it was at Alfoxden during this productive year. One was Joseph Cottle, Wordsworth's publisher. He had been invited by the poets to visit several times, and now, since the work on Lyrical Ballads was coming along so well, both Coleridge and Wordsworth were doubly anxious for him to come so that arrangements could be made for its publication. His description of his visit is quite amusing as it is recorded in part by Hanson:

We called for Mr. Coleridge, Miss Wordsworth, and the servant, at Stowey, and they walked, while we rode on to Mr. W's house at Allfoxden, distant two or three miles, where we were supposed to dine. A London alderman would smile at our preparation, or bill of fare. It consisted of philosopher's viands; namely a bottle of brandy, a noble loaf, and a stout piece of cheese; and as there were plenty of lettuces in the garden,

⁴³"Michael," Poetical Works, p. 109, lines 405-408.

⁴⁴Legouis, p. 368.

with all these comforts we calculated on doing very well.⁴⁵

Hanson goes on to quote all the disasters that happened to the little party. First, they picked up a beggar, who, according to Cottle, made off with their cheese:

A sturdy rat of a beggar, whom we had relieved on the road, with his olfactories all alive, no doubt smelt our cheese, and while we were gazing at the magnificent clouds, contrived to abstract our treasure!⁴⁶

After the theft of the cheese, Coleridge unhitched the horse in a jerky manner, causing the brandy to fall to the stones. A servant-girl had to come to the rescue and help them unhitch their poor horse since neither Coleridge nor Wordsworth had any idea how to accomplish this mighty feat. Finally, when they did sit down to a dinner of lettuce and bread, they all realized that they had forgotten the one ingredient that might have made their dinner at least bearable: the salt.⁴⁷

Although their dinner for Cottle was a disaster, something positive was accomplished. Hanson comments that "It was finally arranged that Cottle should publish a selection of the work of each poet, the volume or volumes to be entitled Lyrical Ballads. As an earnest of progress he carried back with him 'The Ancient Mariner,' which was to head the volume."⁴⁸

William Hazlitt arrived for a visit shortly after Cottle's

⁴⁵ Joseph Cottle quoted in Hanson, I, 484-485.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 485.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 486.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 265.

departure.⁴⁹ Wordsworth was away in Bristol at the time, but returned the next day. In his essay "My First Acquaintance With Poets," Hazlitt gives his impressions of Wordsworth and Coleridge and some of the poems which were later to comprise Lyrical Ballads:

In the afternoon Coleridge took me over to All Foxden, a romantic old family mansion of the St. Aubins, where Wordsworth lived. . . . Wordsworth himself was from home, but his sister kept house, and set before us a frugal repast; and we had free access to her brother's poems, the Lyrical Ballads which were still in manuscript, or in the form of Sybilline Leaves. I dipped into these with great satisfaction, and with the faith of a novice. . . .

That morning, as soon as breakfast was over, we strolled out into the park, and seating ourselves on the trunk of an ash-tree that had stretched along the ground, Coleridge read aloud with a sonorous voice "The Ballad of Betty Foy." I was not critically or skeptically inclined. I saw touches of truth and nature, and I took the rest for granted. But in "The Thorn," "The Mad Mother," and the "Complaint of a Poor Indian Woman," I felt that deeper power and pathos which I have since acknowledged,

'In spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,'

as the characteristics of this author; and the sense of a new style and a new spirit in poetry came over me. It had to me something of the effect that arises from the turning up of the fresh soil, or the first welcome breath of spring:

'While yet the trembling year is unconfirmed.'⁵⁰

Hazlitt brings up an interesting point when he perceives the difference in the two poets and in their respective methods of composition. He explains:

There is a chaunt in the recitation both of Coleridge and Wordsworth, which acts as a spell upon the hearer, and

⁴⁹ Reed, p. 237.

⁵⁰ William Hazlitt, "My First Acquaintance With Poets," The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, 21 vols., ed. P. P. Howe (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1933), XVII, 116-117.

disarms the judgment. Perhaps they have deceived themselves by making habitual use of this ambiguous accompaniment. Coleridge's manner is more full, animated, and varied; Wordsworth's more equable, sustained, and internal. The one might be termed more dramatic, the other more lyrical. Coleridge has told me that he himself liked to compose in walking over uneven ground, or breaking through the straggling branches of a copeswood; whereas Wordsworth always wrote (if he could) walking up and down a straight gravel-walk, or in some spot where the continuity of his verse met with no collateral interruption.⁵¹

In addition to giving us a delightful picture of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Hazlitt was also responsible for adding to Wordsworth's collection of poetry. As Mark Reed comments in his notation for May 23, 1798, "W[ordsworth] composes 'Expostulation and Reply' and 'Tables Turned' on or shortly after this date, the poems having grown out of the conversation with Hazlitt."⁵² Mrs. Moorman explains Hazlitt's contribution more fully:

Hazlitt, whose conversation, as we have seen, gave rise to these two poems, was just then engaged in writing his "Essay on the Principles of Human Action," an uncompleted and ambitious work for which he had overworked himself in studying all the modern philosophers from Hobbes to Hartley. 'The lines,' said Wordsworth in the advertisement to Lyrical Ballads, 'entitled Expostulation and Reply, and those which follow, arose out of conversation with a friend who was somewhat unreasonably attached to modern books of moral philosophy.' It was these 'sages' whom Wordsworth had come to regard as dangerous guides, mainly because he felt they ignored or even disapproved of what he called the 'primary passions' of men--affection, pity, gratitude, kindness. The pure sensationalism of Hartley, the cold intellectualism of Godwin, led men away from these into an arid desert of mechanical rationalism.⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 118-119.

⁵² Reed, p. 238.

⁵³ Moorman, I, 381.

During his visit to London in December, 1797, Wordsworth paid a visit to William Godwin whose book Political Justice had so excited him a few years before.⁵⁴ Obviously, by the time of this meeting, or at least by the time of his meeting with Hazlitt, Wordsworth had lost all his faith in reason as the only answer to the world's problems. In The Borderers, Oswald kills a blind and helpless old man, and, as Charles J. Smith points out, he "thinks his remorse away, rationalizing it out of existence by a mechanistic deterministic philosophy of life."⁵⁵ By the time he wrote "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned" however, Wordsworth realized that rationalization alone could not bring satisfactory solutions to all of Man's difficulties. In these two poems, Wordsworth cautions his young friend against depending too much on "sages" and "meddling intellect" and tells him that if he has a heart which "watches and receives" with a "wise passiveness," he will gain more from Nature than he ever could gain from books. For example, in "The Tables Turned," he says:

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:--
We murder to dissect.

⁵⁴ Reed, p. 211.

⁵⁵ Charles J. Smith, "Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Growth of a Theme," Studies in Philology LIV (January, 1957), p. 56.

Enough of Science and of Art;
 Close up these barren leaves;
 Come forth, and bring with you a heart
 That watches and receives.⁵⁶

By the end of the Alfoxden experience, Wordsworth truly believed that rationalism was an inadequate philosophy for human survival, for, as he later claimed in The Prelude, it was both absurd and even impossible to attempt "to abstract the hopes of Man/Out of his feelings" (XI. 225-226). The whole of Lyrical Ballads is a revolt in one way or another against the philosophy which Wordsworth had held dear in his youth. "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned" are claims that Man's imagination and innate instinct for good and evil will carry him further into the realm of human wisdom than intellectual reasoning ever will. "The Idiot Boy" and "The Mad Mother" are based on maternal passion while "Lines Written in Early Spring" and "To My Sister" deal with primary sensations and emotional reactions to these sensations. "Simon Lee" is a vindication of the feelings of gratitude and benevolence and deals with the emotions of the common man as do "The Last of the Flock" and "Michael." As Arthur Beatty points out, "'The Last of the Flock' and 'Michael' are poems based on the 'passion of property,' of ownership, and are a counterblast to Godwin's attack on property as the great evil of society."⁵⁷ In a letter to Thomas Poole, Wordsworth explains his reason for writing "Michael" and the philosophy behind

⁵⁶ Poetical Works, p. 377.

⁵⁷ Arthur Beatty, William Wordsworth: His Doctrine and Art in Their Historical Relations (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), p. 210.

the poem:

I have attempted to give a picture of a man, of strong mind and lively sensibility, agitated by two of the most powerful affections of the human heart--the parental affection, and the love of property, landed property, including the feelings of inheritance, home and personal family independence.⁵⁸

However, although Wordsworth's changing views are shown in these poems, it is in "Tintern Abbey" where his maturing attitudes are best demonstrated:

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; 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.⁵⁹

Here, it is not rationalism which is important but the "primary passions" of pity, affection, gratitude, and the intuitive sense that there is something beyond Man which controls the universe. These passions Wordsworth had learned to value and to accept as part of the higher knowledge

⁵⁸ Wordsworth, quoted in Beatty, William Wordsworth: Doctrine and Art, p. 211.

⁵⁹ "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour. July 13, 1798," Poetical Works, p. 164, ll. 88-102. (Italics mine) Unless otherwise indicated, all other quotations will be from this edition and line numbers only will be acknowledged in parentheses in the text.

which comes to Man when he follows both his intellect and his emotions.

Many others visited Wordsworth and were visited by him during his period of residence at Alfoxden. Richard Reynall came,⁶⁰ as did Basil Montagu Sr. and Tom Wedgwood.⁶¹ While he was in London in December, Wordsworth visited Samuel Nicholson and with either James or John Tobin called upon Godwin.⁶² Also while he was in London, Wordsworth saw a great deal of Robert Southey whose adverse criticism of Lyrical Ballads was possibly partly responsible for its poor reception. While he was in Bristol in June, 1798, Wordsworth spent some time with James Losh discussing his and Coleridge's new book of poetry. As Mrs. Moorman says, "The air was indeed resounding to the Lyrical Ballads."⁶³

In a poem called "Personal Talk" published in 1807,⁶⁴ Wordsworth makes clear his feeling that: "Our daily world's true Worldlings, rank not me!" In this poem, he pays great tribute to the mind which finds its own company the most beneficial:

I am not One who much or oft delight
To season my fireside with personal talk,--
Of friends, who live within an easy walk,
Or neighbours, daily, weekly, in my sight:
And, for my chance-acquaintance, ladies bright,
Sons, mothers, maidens withering on the stalk,
These all wear out of me, like Forms with chalk

⁶⁰ Reed, p. 205.

⁶¹ Moorman, I, 332-333.

⁶² Reed, p. 211.

⁶³ Moorman, I, 400.

⁶⁴ Poetical Works, p. 383.

Painted on rich men's floors, for one feast-night.
 Better than such discourse doth silence long,
 Long, barren silence, square my desire;
 To sit without emotion, hope or aim,
 In the loved presence of my cottage-fire,
 And listen to the flapping of the flame, ⁶⁵
 Or kettle whispering its faint undersong.

In spite of this expression of independence, it is quite evident from a study of Wordsworth's Alfoxden experience that much more took place there than quiet evenings alone by the fireside. As Wordsworth himself claimed, a poet is "a man speaking to men,"⁶⁶ and as such, he needs to know men; their joys, sorrows, hopes, plans and fears. He cannot isolate himself from them and still write poetry which will elicit human response. The Alfoxden experience was a happy combination of many things--quiet evenings by the fireside, peaceful walks in the beautiful countryside, and time for Wordsworth to be alone to consolidate his thoughts and ripen his artistic powers. But the Alfoxden experience was something else as well. It was an opportunity for companionship--a chance for Wordsworth to share in the give-and-take of family life and friendship both at Alfoxden and away. It was this companionship which helped him to reach a deeper understanding of Man, and which inspired him to write much of his Alfoxden poetry. The socializing during the Alfoxden period prevented Wordsworth from becoming an isolated poet on a pedestal and helped him in a very important way

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 382.

⁶⁶ "Preface to the Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads, (1800)," Poetical Works, p. 737.

to capture and express in Lyrical Ballads the emotions of all men--in a language that all men could understand.

CHAPTER III

DOROTHY: SOURCE OF LOVE, AND THOUGHT, AND JOY

On January 20, 1798, Dorothy Wordsworth began to keep a journal of the day-to-day happenings at Alfoxden. This journal gives us a clearer picture than we have been able to obtain of the previous half year's happenings and it also gives us some indication of the immensely important role Dorothy played in the lives of both poets during that time. Some of the richness of the Alfoxden experience and the poetry that resulted from it was due to the fact that Dorothy was with William constantly--encouraging him, protecting him from the mundane cares of daily life, and most importantly, sharing with him her perception of detail and her sympathy for all living things. As Frederika Beatty explains:

The year 1798 was fruitful for Wordsworth and Coleridge, and for Dorothy Wordsworth. Without Dorothy, each poet would have been different. Her Alfoxden Journal, brief as it is, continuing only from January 20 through May 22 and covering only fourteen printed pages, was a mine of common memories for both poets. Not only is the inception of definite poems in these pages, but sometimes the actual phrases are there.¹

An example of what Ernest De Selincourt calls Dorothy's "delicate perception" and her "penetrating sympathy"² can be demonstrated by citing a portion from the Alfoxden Journal, dated January 20, 1798:

The green paths down the hill-sides are channels for streams.
The young wheat is streaked by silver lines of water running

¹Frederika Beatty, William Wordsworth of Dove Cottage (New York: Bookman Associates, Inc., 1964), p. 26.

²Dorothy Wordsworth, preface, p. ix.

between the ridges, the sheep are gathered together on the slopes. After the wet dark days, the country seems more populous. It peoples itself in the sunbeams. The garden, mimic of spring, is gay with flowers. The purple-starred hepatica spreads itself in the sun, and clustering snow-drops put forth their white heads, at first upright, ribbed with green, and like a rosebud when completely opened, hanging their heads downwards, but slowly lengthening their slender stems. The slanting woods of an unvarying brown, showing the light through the thin net-work of their upper boughs. Upon the highest ridge of that round hill covered with planted oaks, the shafts of the trees show in the light like the columns of a ruin.³

According to Dorothy's Journal, both she and William went for daily walks until the end of January.⁴ On January 25th, Dorothy records that they "Went to Poole's after tea,"⁵ and on the road either coming or going, they saw a scene which Reed claims is the one recorded in Wordsworth's poem "A Night Piece."⁶ If one compares the two descriptions of the scene, one can certainly see that Dorothy's version might have influenced William in writing his poem, and might have assisted him in giving a certain subtlety of expression to his work which he might otherwise have been unable to capture. Dorothy's Journal entry for January 25th reads as follows:

The sky spread over with one continuous cloud, whitened by the light of the moon, which, though her dim shape was seen, did not throw forth so strong a light as to chequer the earth with shadows. At once the clouds seemed to cleave asunder, and left her in the centre of a black-blue vault. She sailed along, followed by multitudes

³ Journals, p. 3.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 3-6.

⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

⁶ Reed, p. 214.

of stars, small, and bright, and sharp. Their brightness seemed concentrated (half-moon).⁷

Wordsworth's poem "A Night Place" is quoted below:

---The sky is overcast
 With a heavy continuous cloud of texture close,
 Heavy and wan, all whitened by the
 Moon,
 Which through that veil is indistinctly
 seen,
 A dull, contracting circle, yielding light
 So feebly spread, that not a shadow falls,
 Chequering the ground--from rock,
 plant, tree, or tower.
 At length a pleasant instantaneous gleam
 Startles the pensive traveller while he
 treads
 His lonesome path, with unobserving eye
 Bent earthwards; he looks up--the clouds
 are split
 Asunder,--and above his head he sees
 The clear Moon, and the glory of the
 heavens.
 There in a black-blue vault she sails along,
 Followed by multitudes of stars, that,
 small
 And sharp, and bright, along the dark
 abyss
 Drive as she drives: how fast they wheel
 away,
 Yet vanish not!--the wind is in the tree,
 But they are silent;--still they roll along
 Immeasurably distant; and the vault,
 Built round by those white clouds, enor-
 mous clouds,
 Still deepens its unfathomable depth.
 At length the Vision closes; and the mind,
 Not undisturbed by the delight it feels,
 Which slowly settles into peaceful calm,
 Is left to muse upon the solemn scene.⁸

Even in his earliest poetry, Wordsworth acknowledged his supreme debt to Dorothy for awakening in him his poetic powers. Emile Legouis

⁷ Journals, p. 4.

⁸ Poetical Works, p. 146.

asks: "Was it not in her society that he had begun his first poem, the "Evening Walk," and had he not dedicated it to her?"⁹ Many of his other poems ring out with love for her and appreciation of her influence over him. Undoubtedly "To A Young Lady" was an attempt to console Dorothy after she had been reproached for her love of taking long walks in the country--a love that Wordsworth could, from earliest boyhood, understand with his whole being. One of the most moving poems written to Dorothy is the delightful "The Sparrow's Nest," in which Wordsworth clearly shows that Dorothy had a softening influence on his coarse boyish manners:

Behold, within the leafy shade,
Those bright blue eggs together laid!
On me the chance-discovered sight
Gleamed like a vision of delight.
I started--seeming to espy
The home and sheltered bed,
The Sparrow's dwelling, which, hard by
My Father's house, in wet or dry
My sister Emmeline and I
 Together visited.

She looked at it and seemed to fear it;
Dreading, tho' wishing to be near it:
Such heart was in her, being then
A little Prattler among men.
The Blessing of my later years
Was with me when a boy:
She gave me eyes, she gave me ears;
And humble cares, and delicate fears;
A heart, the fountain of sweet tears;
 And love, and thought, and joy.¹⁰

As Legouis points out, Dorothy "softened a certain austerity there was in him [Wordsworth], and taught him to appreciate nature's

⁹Legouis, p. 295.

¹⁰Poetical Works, p. 62.

'charms minute that win their way into the heart by stealth.'¹¹ No-
 where can we see Wordsworth's recognition of this influence more clearly
 than in "To A Butterfly," in which he describes himself as the one who
 rushed headlong at Nature without seeing her delicate and subtle beau-
 ties; whereas Dorothy, the more cautious and sensitive of the two,
 recognized the most intricate and fragile offerings of Nature and lovingly
 and gently drew her brother's attention to them. As Wordsworth explains
 in this poem:

A very hunter did I rush
 Upon the prey;--with leaps and springs
 I followed on from brake to bush;
 But she, God love her! feared to brush
 The dust from off its wings.¹²

In her biography of Wordsworth, Mrs. Moorman quotes a fragment
 which she claims "betrays how they [William and Dorothy] shared more
 than the experience of the senses":¹³

In many a walk
 At evening or by moonlight, or reclined
 At midday upon beds of forest moss,
 Have we to Nature and her impulses
 Of our whole being made free gift, and when
 Our trance had left us, oft have we, by aid
 Of the impressions which it left behind,
 Looked inward on ourselves, and learned, perhaps,
 Something of what we are.¹⁴

Even as a young girl, Dorothy already knew something of what William
 was and what he would become. Only twenty months younger than William,

¹¹Legouis, p. 297.

¹²Poetical Works, p. 62.

¹³Moorman, p. 356.

¹⁴Ibid.

and his only sister, she shared a special closeness with him that she did not have with her other brothers.¹⁵ As Legouis suggests: "she had from the first, with unerring instinct, detected his superiority. It was he, of them all [her brothers], whom she admired and preferred."¹⁶

As Legouis further comments:

Dorothy was something more than a companion whose affection is merely soothing. She had a measure of genius peculiar to herself, at once active and alluring. She was not content with a mere passive admiration of her brother. With all her faith in him, the greatness which her wishes as well as her fancy anticipated for him was of a particular kind. Very early she decided in her own heart that he would be a poet, and made up her mind also as to the sort of poet he would be.¹⁷

As Norman Lacey claims, Wordsworth himself acknowledged that "At first it was Dorothy who was the main force in his restoration,"¹⁸ when, near the end of 1794, he had lost all faith in the French Revolution and in Godwinism in particular and, in fact, in mankind in general. As Herbert Read explains:

The part played by Dorothy at the time of Wordsworth's moral crisis was a simple one. By giving him her love and sympathy and daily care and presence, she destroyed that terrible physical blankness that descends upon us when we

¹⁵ Dorothy Wordsworth, Early Letters. Although Dorothy mentions her three other brothers (Richard, John and Christopher) frequently in the early letters, most of the discussion centers around William. In a letter to Jane Pollard dated July 26th, 1791, Dorothy admits: "I confess you are right in supposing me partial to William." p. 51.

¹⁶ Legouis, p. 289.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 294.

¹⁸ Norman Lacey, Wordsworth's View of Nature and Its Ethical Consequences (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965), p. 45.

are suddenly parted from someone we have loved habitually. She filled this blank, and not mutely or passively, but as an active consoling and inspiring agent.¹⁹

In The Prelude, Wordsworth claimed that it was Dorothy who "Maintained for [him] a saving intercourse/With [his] true self" (XI. 341-342), and made him begin once more to seek his true destiny:

She whispered still that brightness would
return,
She, in the midst of all, preserved me still
A Poet, made me seek beneath that name,
And that alone, my office upon earth.
(XI. 345-348)

Dorothy's influence continued through most of Wordsworth's most productive years as a poet. As H. W. Garrod points out, it fell to Dorothy's lot to perform the monumental task of interpreting Wordsworth not only to his readers, but to himself as well.²⁰ It was at Alfoxden, however, that Dorothy's influence really began to help shape her brother's poetic future, for as David Ferry suggests, it was during the Alfoxden experience that "Wordsworth [came] home to his proper attitudes, of which Dorothy [was] the exemplar, the attitudes from which he had been wrenched away (or thought he had) during his adventures among men."²¹ Lacey explains this theory more fully:

¹⁹ Herbert Read, Wordsworth: The Clark Lectures (New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1931), pp. 128-129.

²⁰ H. W. Garrod, Wordsworth: Lectures and Essays (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), p. 218. Garrod maintains: "It is no small thing that, at many points, she [Dorothy] interprets Wordsworth to us as no one else does; and a very great thing that she was so often able to interpret him to himself."

²¹ David Ferry, The Limits of Mortality (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), p. 162.

The fever of youth's search for power was shaken off. The sign of it is that he no longer looked everywhere in Nature for grandeur and immensity. . . . He was willing now to look on humble things.

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But it was undoubtedly Dorothy's influence which helped him to look on life and Nature in this way.²²

If Dorothy had not been with him at Alfoxden, Wordsworth might have overlooked many of the subjects of poems contained in Lyrical Ballads. In his note to "Peter Bell," Wordsworth claims: "In the woods of Alfoxden I used to take great delight in noticing the habits, tricks, and physiogomy of asses; and I have no doubt that I was thus put upon writing the poem out of liking for the creature that is so often dreadfully abused."²³ However, one wonders if it was not Dorothy who first drew the poet's attention to these asses as she describes them in her Alfoxden Journal, "pasturing in quietness under the hollies."²⁴ Perhaps Dorothy also drew William's attention to the dancing of withered leaves during a hailstorm as described in her Journal on March 18th.²⁵ Wordsworth's description of the same scene, a poem called "A Whirl-Blast From Behind the Hill," is quoted below:

A Whirl-Blast from behind the hill
Rushed o'er the wood with startling sound;
Then--all at once the air was still,
And showers of hailstones pattered round.
Where leafless oaks towered high above,
I sat within an undergrove

²²Lacey, Wordsworth's View of Nature, p. 46.

²³Prose Works, III, 52.

²⁴Journals, p. 6.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 12-13.

Of tallest hollies, tall and green;
 A fairer bower was never seen.
 From year to year the spacious floor
 With withered leaves is covered o'er,
 And all the year the bower is green.

But see! where'er the hailstones drop
 The withered leaves all skip and hop;
 There's not a breeze--no breath of air--
 Yet here, and there, and every where
 Along the floor, beneath the shade
 By those embowering hollies made,
 The leaves in myriads jump and spring,
 As if with pipes and music rare
 Some Robin Good-Fellow were there,
 And all those leaves, in festive glee,
 Were dancing to the minstrelsy.²⁶

Had Dorothy not been with him in this particular instance, William might have paid little or no attention to such a fleeting moment of natural beauty. Again, had Dorothy been absent on March 19th, William might have taken no notice of another insignificant offering of Nature which he later immortalized in his poem "The Thorn." In her Journal entry for March 19th, Dorothy says: "Wm. and Basil and I walked to the hill tops, a very cold bleak day. We were met on our return by a severe hailstorm. William wrote some lines describing a stunted thorn."²⁷ In his own note about the poem, William acknowledges the fact that he had often before passed this particular thorn on bright days "without noticing it,"²⁸ but a combination of the drama of the storm and the presence of his sister made Wordsworth more aware of its significance. Her sensitivity often opened his eyes and ears to details of place, object and person

²⁶ Poetical Works, p. 122.

²⁷ Journals, p. 13.

²⁸ Prose Works, III, 41.

which he might otherwise have overlooked. As Legouis explains:

The circumstances which led him to see things in detail were multiplied through the agency of his sister. More sprightly than her brother, more quick to form acquaintanceships, to chat, and to question comers and goers, she was frequently his medium of communication with the travellers they met upon the high road.²⁹

While Dorothy, as Mrs. Moorman says, "quickened his [Wordsworth's] delight in things,"³⁰ softened his crudeness and helped to tune him into the harmony of Nature, she by no means influenced just William alone during her days at Alfoxden. Dorothy also helped Coleridge to gain a new dimension in his poetry and perhaps in his character. In a letter to Cottle written circa 3 July 1797, Coleridge shows his appreciation for Dorothy's unique characteristics of mind and spirit:

Wordsworth & his exquisite Sister are with me--She is a woman indeed!--in mind, I mean, & heart--for her person is such, that if you expected to see a pretty woman, you would think her ordinary--if you expected to find an ordinary woman, you would think her pretty!--But her manners are simple, ardent, impressive--.

In every motion her most innocent soul
Outbeams so brightly, that who saw would say,
Guilt was a thing impossible in her.--

Her information various--her eye watchful in minutest observation of nature--and her taste a perfect electrometer--it bends, protrudes, and draws in, at subtlest beauties & most recondite faults.³¹

Dorothy might have influenced Coleridge to use some of his most striking imagery during the Alfoxden experience. On February 8, 1798,

²⁹ Legouis, pp. 315-316.

³⁰ Moorman, I, 344.

³¹ Letters, I, 330-331.

Dorothy writes in her Journal that the whole heath was "restless and glittering with . . . the waving of the spiders' threads,"³² and in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Coleridge asks a questions which echoes this statement: "Are those her sails that glance the Sun,/Like restless gossameres?"³³ On March 7th, William and Dorothy drank tea at Coleridge's house and Dorothy records in her Journal: "One only leaf upon the top of a tree--the sole remaining leaf--danced round and round like a rag blown by the wind."³⁴ This description probably formed the basis for the description of a lone leaf in Coleridge's "Christabel":

The one red leaf, the last of its clan,
That dances as often as dance it can,
Hanging so light, and hanging so high,
On the topmost twig that looks up at the sky.³⁵

This is by no means the only incident that is recorded by both Dorothy and Coleridge. Mrs. Moorman points out that descriptions of the moon in Coleridge's "Christabel" greatly resemble Dorothy's descriptions of it in her Journal. In "Christabel," Coleridge writes:

The thin gray cloud is spread on high,
It covers but not hides the sky.
The moon is behind, and at the full,
And yet she looks both small and dull.³⁶

In her Journal, Dorothy records: "The sky spread over with one continuous cloud, whitened by the light of the moon, . . . The sky flat,

³² Journals, p. 7.

³³ Poetical Works of Coleridge, p. 97.

³⁴ Journals, pp. 11-12.

³⁵ Poetical Works of Coleridge, p. 113.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 112.

unmarked by distances, a white thin cloud. . . . When we left home the moon immensely large, the sky scattered over with clouds. These soon closed in, contracting the dimensions of the moon without concealing her."³⁷ At the same time Dorothy records: "The manufacturer's dog makes a strange, uncouth howl, which ~~it~~ continues many minutes after there is no noise near it but that of the brook. It howls at the murmur of the village stream."³⁸ This image might be reflected in the following stanza of "Christabel":

Outside her kennel, the mastiff old
Lay fast asleep, in moonshine cold.
The mastiff old did not awake,
Yet she an angry moan did make!
And what can ail the mastiff bitch?
Never till now she uttered yell
Beneath the eye of Christabel.³⁹

The above mentioned evidence indicates that in all probability Coleridge drew on Dorothy's Journal for some of his material or at least that Dorothy and Coleridge discussed the shared experiences that went into both the journals and the poems. As Mrs. Moorman says, "Between Dorothy and Coleridge there existed an affinity of perception in regard to the smallest details of interest in the natural world; she perfected his 'eye,' which was in danger of looking too much at the Miltonic splendours of heaven."⁴⁰ As Lawrence Hanson further suggests, each helped the other to achieve the goal of creating beauty:

³⁷ Journals, pp. 4-5.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁹ Poetical Works of Coleridge, p. 115.

⁴⁰ Moorman, I, 343.

Comparison of the Journal entries and the verses of the poem suggests that Coleridge was as often the teacher as the taught in the observation of nature. But the question can become academic and can, in fact, never be solved. He and Dorothy met so frequently at this time, their interests were so similar, their delicate perception so alike, that it would seem invidious, even were it possible, to assign to the one or to the other the credit for the original observation which led to so many passages of exquisite beauty in the poems. That Dorothy played a considerable part in Coleridge's poetical development can be seen. That he played a large part in opening her eyes to hidden beauties may be assumed with confidence. The result, in any event, was beauty in which all shared; a beauty to which, often enough, Dorothy, Coleridge, and Wordsworth all contributed. To ascertain the exact proportion of their individual contributions is fortunately, perhaps, as far beyond the power of man as it would most certainly be beyond the wish of those concerned. The beauty exists; and that should satisfy.⁴¹

Dorothy's influence on Coleridge did not end solely in his poetry. As Mrs. Moorman points out, Dorothy also contributed to a softening of Coleridge's critical temper.⁴² She quotes Coleridge's description of how he had written "some half a score of more of what I thought clever and epigrammatic and devilishly severe reviews . . . but a Remark made by Miss Wordsworth to whom I had, in full expectation of gaining a laugh of applause, read one of my judgments occasioned my committing the whole batch to the Fire."⁴³

Although Dorothy and Coleridge perhaps had more in common than William and Dorothy, Dorothy's main interest was always her brother and his destiny as a poet. Even after the Alfoxden days, Dorothy was instrumental in influencing Wordsworth to write much of his best work. However,

⁴¹Hanson, I, 258-259.

⁴²Moorman, I, 323.

⁴³Coleridge quoted in Moorman, I, 324.

although her influence after Alfoxden can certainly not be disputed,⁴⁴ it was during the year 1797-98 that Dorothy inspired two of her brother's most moving poems, both of which reflect the importance of her own presence in Wordsworth's life during this time, and which also stress the importance of the whole Alfoxden experience to Wordsworth's poetic development. The first is a seemingly simple poem called "To My Sister," in which Wordsworth asks that his sister enjoy with him the beauties of Alfoxden on "the first mild day of March." It is quoted in part below:

Love, now a universal birth,
From heart to heart is stealing,
From earth to man, from man to earth:
--It is the hour of feeling.

One moment now may give us more
Than years of toiling reason:
Our minds shall drink at every pore
The spirit of the season.

Some silent laws our hearts will make,
Which they shall long obey:
We for the year to come may take
Our temper from to-day.

And from the blessed power that rolls
About, below, above,
We'll frame the measure of our souls:
They shall be turned to love.

⁴⁴Prose Works, III. Wordsworth himself acknowledges the fact that Dorothy inspired him with the idea of writing sonnets. In a note on Miscellaneous Sonnets, he says: "In the cottage of Town-End, one afternoon in 1801, my sister read to me the sonnets of Milton. I had long been well acquainted with them, but I was particularly struck on that occasion with the dignified simplicity and majestic harmony that runs through most of them--in character so totally different from the Italian, and still more so from Shakespeare's fine sonnets. I took fire, if I may be allowed to say so, and produced three sonnets the same afternoon." pp. 52-53. Other poems which Dorothy directly influenced were "To A Highland Girl," "The Redbreast Chasing the Butterfly," and parts of The Prelude, to name only a few.

Then come, my Sister! come, I pray,
 With speed put on your woodland dress;
 And bring no book: for this one day
 We'll give to idleness.⁴⁵

On March 10th, Dorothy mentions in her Journal "interesting groups of human creatures, the young frisking and dancing in the sun, the elder quietly drinking life and soul of the sun and air."⁴⁶ As Catherine Maclean points out, "This is the prose equivalent of Wordsworth's poem on 'the spirit of the season.'"⁴⁷ However, the most important influence of Dorothy lies in nothing she wrote, but rather in what she was and in what she meant to William at the time. Friend, companion, sister and fellow artist, Dorothy, with her acceptance of and admiration for her brother, helped bring him to a realization of his place in Nature and his destiny of becoming Nature's poet. As Mrs. Maclean says, "Three gifts Dorothy had--the gift of observation, the gift of receiving those impressions which become the substance of poetry, and the gift of getting in touch with all sorts of people and of envisaging their lives. And each of these gifts went to enrich Wordsworth's poetry."⁴⁸

The second poem which Dorothy greatly influenced during the Alfoxden experience was "Tintern Abbey," the poem which Rannie described as "the last and greatest in the volume [Lyrical Ballads], perhaps the

⁴⁵ Poetical Works, p. 378.

⁴⁶ Journals, p. 12.

⁴⁷ Catherine MacDonald Maclean, Dorothy and William Wordsworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), p. 39.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

most characteristic breathing of the most characteristic Wordsworth spirit."⁴⁹ Wordsworth himself held "Tintern Abbey" as a special favorite, for he explains in the note to the poem:

No poem of mine was composed under circumstances more pleasant for me to remember than this. I began it upon leaving Tintern, after crossing the Wye, and concluded it just as I was entering Bristol in the evening, after a ramble of four or five days with my sister. Not a line of it was altered, and not any part of it written down till I reached Bristol. It was published almost immediately after in the little volume of which so much has been said in these notes.⁵⁰

There could be no finer conclusion to the Alfoxden experience than "Tintern Abbey," the poem which is part prayer, part thanksgiving, and part recognition that finally, for Wordsworth, the world did make sense and that Nature did have patterns and cycles of which he was a definite and important part. This is the poem that seems most to display the healing effects of Alfoxden and its people on the poet. As Lacey explains, no one factor or person was enough to bring Wordsworth to the point at which he could write "Tintern Abbey":

At first it was Dorothy who was the main force in his restoration. Through her affection he knew that there was at least one person in the world by whom he was not despised, nor ostracized. She encouraged him to believe in himself as a poet. And her understanding of the situation with Annette, though it could not take away his sense of guilt, assuaged the pain of it. He admitted that it was Dorothy and Coleridge and lastly 'Nature's Self by (their) human love assisted' which,

Revived the feelings of my earlier life,
Gave me that strength and knowledge full
of peace,
Enlarged, and never more to be disturb'd.⁵¹

⁴⁹Rannie, p. 91.

⁵⁰Prose Works, III, 45.

⁵¹Lacey, Wordsworth's View of Nature, p. 45.

In "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth did not give Dorothy credit for planting the crevices of his soul "with flowers . . . [and] with shrubs that twinkle in the breeze" as he did later in The Prelude (XIV. 253-254). Rather, he credited her with making him aware, as Mrs. Moorman points out, "that it was not necessary to divorce nature and humanity in his affections, and that his deepest intuitions which he had known in boyhood, of the unity of all life in one joyous being, were still valid."⁵² As Mrs. Moorman goes on to explain:

To Dorothy still belonged that untamed, primitive delight in natural things which was the inheritance of her childhood. She had as yet undergone no disillusionment or conflict as her brother had, and therefore her enjoyment was not the result of thought or of any process other than the going-forth of pure affection in unsullied joy. Although Wordsworth did not 'murmur' at his own change, and recognized it as gain for which thanks must be given, he knew that a particular form of happiness most pure and precious could be his no more. But in Dorothy he could re-live the past.⁵³

In "Tintern Abbey," one can see how much Wordsworth had matured in the five years since he had last visited the Wye. Much of this maturation must certainly have taken place at Alfoxden where the poet had an almost perfect year of communing with Nature in the company of his dearest friends, Coleridge and Dorothy. In "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth admits that "Nor perchance, / If I were not thus taught, should I the more / Suffer my genial spirits to decay " (ll. 111-113). Here we realize that he understands that without Dorothy's presence he might not have been made aware of the immense growth that had taken place

⁵²Moorman, I, 406.

⁵³Ibid., p. 407.

within his own consciousness and he might not have been made to listen to "the language of [his] former heart" or to read his "former pleasures," had he not seen them in the "shooting lights" of Dorothy's "wild eyes" (ll. 117-119). As Rannie explains:

Wordsworth had been there five years before; the whole region, and especially Tintern Abbey, was for him alive with pensive reminiscence, and prophetic of deep spiritual change. As he stood there on that July day of 1798, he felt within him the drama of his soul; the boyhood of animal enjoyment; the youth of rapture in the sights and sounds of Nature; the jarring shock of humanity; the restoration of faith and love; the unspeakable sense of God. And to the great drama was added a wonderful epilogue, where the brother, finding himself in the sister, dedicates her to his own glorious fate.⁵⁴

In summing up this brief study of the influence of Dorothy on Wordsworth during his Alfoxden experience, it is evident that she played a major role in his life during this period. She helped him to see the minute detail in mundane, trivial, but beautiful offerings of Nature. With her gentleness and warm femininity, she helped him to overcome a certain coarseness which tended to give a ring of slight roughness to his earlier poetry. Being perfectly attuned to life herself, and as a cheerful and helpful companion, Dorothy helped Wordsworth to interpret his own feelings both to his readers and to himself. She took care of the day-to-day problems at Alfoxden thus freeing William for the important task of becoming a poet. Along with all of this, Dorothy's Journal contributed a certain subtlety of phrase and expression to the poetry which Wordsworth could not have captured alone. However, helpful as she was, Dorothy could not fulfill all of her brother's needs during

⁵⁴Rannie, p. 91.

this time. As Mrs. Moorman suggests:

Hitherto it was only with Dorothy that Wordsworth could feel at one, and even that unity had its limitations. Their companionship was as perfect as mutual affection and delight in 'this beauteous world' could make it. But Dorothy had not a creative intellect, and while believing profoundly in her brother's genius she could not advise, suggest, or criticize from an intellectual point of view. Wordsworth needed some other kind of reciprocation, something more challenging, masculine, and stimulating, someone who could disagree as well as encourage, someone with whom it was possible to have intellectual communion.⁵⁵

Like all human beings, Dorothy had her limitations; and we must recognize the fact that some of these limitations might have been detrimental to Wordsworth's progress as a poet had he only been subjected to her influence alone. As Hanson suggests, "Indeed, it was obvious that she discerned no omission in what Wordsworth did--and therein lay his danger."⁵⁶ Excessive praise which is not balanced by constructive criticism can be harmful to any artist--especially when the praise is given for every effort he puts forth. As Legouis explains:

The brother and sister became so thoroughly identified, and were so entirely in sympathy with one another, that the two formed together but a single being. Dorothy's approbation, the mere echo of his own, was too often to take the place in Wordsworth's mind of distinct and independent testimony.⁵⁷

And, although Dorothy certainly acted as an agent for sharpening William's sensibility toward the commonplace and the mundane, too much influence in this area for too long a period could have had negative effects. As Legouis further explains, "Wordsworth's genius ran the risk of being

⁵⁵Moorman, I, 344-345.

⁵⁶Hanson, I, 179.

⁵⁷Legouis, p. 316.

frittered away on a multitude of short poems and trivial ballads . . . meagre in subject . . . and . . . lacking in beauty of form."⁵⁸ It was left to Samuel Coleridge to supply the missing factor of intellectual stimulation for Wordsworth. He made Wordsworth look for the universal in the particular, and, although, like Dorothy, he recognized Wordsworth as a great artist, he did not merely praise his efforts--he criticized them as well. More than this, however, Coleridge helped Wordsworth to define his place in the universe, for as again Legouis points out: "It was Coleridge who provided, or rather assisted him to find, the only thing still needful to make him the poet he finally became, namely, a philosophy."⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 316-317.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 319.

CHAPTER IV

COLERIDGE: AND I BLESSED THEM UNAWARE

Although Wordsworth and Coleridge first met in 1795, it was not until June, 1797, that they first began to influence each other as poets. Emile Legouis points out that it was at Racedown, Wordsworth's home in Dorset, that the relationship began in earnest:

Their real intimacy began in June 1797, under Wordsworth's roof, where Coleridge came to spend a few weeks. It was then that Coleridge heard The Borderers read, and became so infatuated with it as to imitate it in the second part of a tragedy, entitled Osorio, of which he had already written two acts and a half. . . . It was during the same visit, however, that "The Ruined Cottage" was read to him, and although he did not at once conceive for this work the same passionate enthusiasm, it is clear that he gradually reached the conviction that this was Wordsworth's masterpiece, 'the finest poem in our language, comparing it with any of the same or similar length.'¹

Up until this time, Wordsworth had had a beneficial effect on Coleridge, but he had received little in return in the way of poetic inspiration. As Legouis again comments: "Wordsworth may have been struck by his friend's mystical conceptions, but as yet he had not made them his own. . . . The time when he would himself become the recipient was at hand. For this, however, it was necessary that they should share a united life."²

This "united life" began on July 3, 1797, when Wordsworth and Dorothy returned Coleridge's visit. During the course of their stay, Coleridge, with the help of Thomas Poole, acquired for them the lease

¹Legouis, p. 356.

²Ibid., pp. 356-357.

to Alfoxden House. As Dorothy Wordsworth explains in a letter dated August 14, 1797, Coleridge's presence at Nether Stowey only three miles away was the main reason they were interested in Alfoxden:

We spent a fortnight at Coleridge's; in the course of that time we heard that this house was to be let, applied for it, and³ took it. Our principal inducement was Coleridge's society.

From the very moment of the Wordsworths' arrival at Alfoxden, Coleridge took full advantage of their company. As David Rannie explains, "The comings and goings between Nether Stowey and Alfoxden were incessant. Almost immediately after the Wordsworths entered on possession Coleridge went to stay at Alfoxden."⁴ From the start of their relationship, one of the greatest gifts that Coleridge brought to Wordsworth was his admiration of Wordsworth's poetical talent. In various letters he had already acknowledged Wordsworth's greatness,⁵ and in one letter dated circa July 17, 1797, addressed to Robert Southey, he wrote: "Wordsworth is a very great man--the only man, to whom at all times & in all modes of excellence I feel myself inferior--."⁶ As Herbert Read explains, "Wordsworth complacently accepted all that Coleridge had to give; and this was much. In the first place, it was a tremendous faith in the genius of

³Dorothy Wordsworth, Early Letters, p. 190.

⁴Rannie, p. 67.

⁵Letters, I. In a letter to Joseph Cottle dated Thursday, June 8, 1797, Coleridge says: ". . . but in Wordsworth there are no inequalities. T. Poole's opinion of Wordsworth is--that he is the greatest Man, he ever knew--I coincide." p. 325. On June 10, 1797, in writing to John Prior Estlin, Coleridge is quoted as saying: "This is lovely country--& Wordsworth is a great man." p. 327.

⁶Ibid., p. 334.

Wordsworth, and such a faith, at a critical stage in a poet's life, can mean everything."⁷ This faith, however, was not merely affectionate acceptance of all of Wordsworth's poetical efforts. Rather, it stemmed from Coleridge's genuine appreciation of his brother poet's artistic powers and it grew from a recognition of the promise displayed in Wordsworth's early poetry. As Mrs. Moorman explains:

Coleridge's loudly proclaimed admiration, his reiteration of his faith in Wordsworth's intellectual greatness, was most precious mental food. His affection and friendship were so genuine as to dismiss any possibility of his admiration being that of a flatterer. As Coleridge craved for understanding, so did Wordsworth for praise--the praise of a mind and spirit as full of genius as his own. Coleridge razed Wordsworth's defences on that day when he leapt over the gate at Racedown; while still remaining the somewhat silent and reserved north-countryman to others, in Coleridge's company he could be joyous, eloquent, enthusiastic, warm.⁸

With his own warmth, generosity, and eloquence of speech, Coleridge was able to restore Wordsworth's confidence in himself and in other people, thus giving him a new incentive to participate in the affairs of the world rather than to retreat from them. As Lawrence Hanson says:

This admiration, constantly affirmed against the opinions of others and defended even at the jeopardy of his own reputation, was one of the most important, certainly one of the most immediately apparent influences which the new friendship brought to Wordsworth. It restored the elder man's self-respect, gave him a new and constructive enthusiasm for poetry.⁹

Along with his complete faith in Wordsworth's genius which he often expounded with no reference at all to his own abilities as a poet,

⁷ Herbert Read, Wordsworth: The Clark Lectures (New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1931), pp. 132-133.

⁸ Moorman, I, 345.

⁹ Hanson, I, 191.

Coleridge offered his new friend a relationship such as he had never before experienced. In the first place, Wordsworth had never before had a close friend so equal, but opposite to himself in both literary giftedness and personal attributes. Emile Legouis explains this point more fully:

In respect of birth, character, and early circumstances, Coleridge was almost the antithesis of Wordsworth. Two years and a half younger, and born in the county of Devon, he was an Englishman of the south, while Wordsworth was an Englishman of the north. One had sprung from "the English Italy," the other almost belonged to Scotland. . . . Wordsworth was stern and unyielding, obstinate and incapable of effusion. He had neither suppleness nor flexibility, and was inclined to hide the warmth of his feelings under an air of cold reserve, and to husband his gifts from a natural tendency to intellectual economy. Coleridge, to no less an extent, was unreserved, quick to catch enthusiasm, and captivating from the very first; but, as a set-off against this, he was weak in character, liable to sudden discouragement, and, though capable of flashes of impetuous ardour, without the power of continuous effort. His works were seldom completed, and were often of an inferior order. He was a wonderful talker, and in the domain of thought was generous to the point of ignoring the distinction between mine and thine; he artlessly appropriated the ideas of others as if they were a treasure common to all, and oftener still poured out his own for the benefit of his friends, and even of his casual acquaintances, without stint, regret, or jealousy. In fact, the mere surplus of his studies, his meditations, and his dreams provided intellectual nourishment for almost a whole generation.¹⁰

Even the shattering of one of Coleridge's dreams had a very great effect on Wordsworth. Both Coleridge and Wordsworth had held great faith in the ability of the French Revolution to bring liberty to Europe. However, when Ménéard invaded Switzerland in late January, 1798,¹¹ both

¹⁰ Legouis, p. 321.

¹¹ Reed, p. 213.

men reacted differently; Coleridge's immediate reaction provoked a later effect on the mind of the more meditative Wordsworth. Coleridge's initial reaction was to renounce all connections with the Revolution as Legouis makes clear:

Upon Coleridge that impression was sudden and irresistible. Only twelve months earlier, in his "Ode to the Departing Year," he had pronounced his country enslaved and on the brink of ruin. Again, in May 1797, he had shared the enthusiasm of Poole over the French victories, and had looked forward with exultation to the defeat of England, since not only Ireland, but also her own sailors, were in revolt against her. Now, however, he writes at once his "Recantation" or palinode, which consists of a passionate impeachment of France.¹²

This "impeachment" took the form of "France, an Ode," which he wrote in February, 1797. However, while Coleridge was voicing his displeasure at the action of France, Wordsworth was, at least for the time being, very quiet. Legouis points out that "He wrote no poem, nor did he mention the subject in any letter that has come down to us."¹³ He apparently did not discuss the incident with Coleridge either, for as Coleridge explains in Biographia Literaria, his friend's conversation "extended to almost all subjects, except physics and politics; with the latter he never troubled himself."¹⁴ Legouis comments that Wordsworth appeared at the time to give himself up to the writing of poetry by seeking in Nature "a more sheltered retreat from the distressing spectacle of nations in conflict."¹⁵ However, this does not mean that the incident did not affect

¹² Legouis, pp. 375-376.

¹³ Ibid., p. 378.

¹⁴ Biographia, I, x, 122.

¹⁵ Legouis, p. 380.

him deeply, if not directly, at least through Coleridge. As Legouis explains:

Slowly and in silence he pondered over the patriotic poems of Coleridge, and four years later his friend's sublime thoughts found expression in his poetry. There they reappear--the same, yet condensed and strengthened by their long sojourn in his mind.¹⁶

The only complaint uttered by Wordsworth at the time which might give evidence that he was affected by the invasion and by Coleridge's reaction to it could be found in the poem "Lines Written in Early Spring," where Wordsworth asks: "Have I not reason to lament/What man has made of man?"¹⁷

In spite of his doubts about man's feeling toward his fellows, Wordsworth was able, with Coleridge's help, to come out of his shell and to take an interest in the many visitors whom Coleridge brought to Alfoxden. It was through Coleridge that Wordsworth met Lamb and Thelwall, Poole and Hazlitt. Coleridge's outgoing personality complemented the more reserved personality of Wordsworth. As C. H. Herford explains:

Coleridge, both in verse and speech, already commanded both a rushing eloquence and a lyric sweetness, always beyond Wordsworth's reach; he knew vastly more, well-read as Wordsworth was, and his brilliant, apprehensive and plastic intellect made him easily master of the whole universe of speculation; where Wordsworth's mind, tenacious when his was adventurous, admitted with difficulty the intrusion of alien ideas, and drew its most vital thinking from the interpretation of his own experience. The impact of Coleridge might have swept a smaller or a more lightly built man off his feet. On Wordsworth it acted by bringing into more vivid and dynamic consciousness ideas and impulses already latent.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 381.

¹⁷ Poetical Works, p. 378.

¹⁸ C. H. Herford, Wordsworth (New York: George Routledge & Sons Ltd., 1930), pp. 89-90.

"Ideas and impulses" did not stay latent long in Wordsworth's mind once Coleridge entered his life. In early November, 1797, Dorothy Wordsworth wrote to Mary Hutchinson that the three of them, William, Coleridge and herself, had gone on a walking tour of the Valley of Stones:

[From Porlock] we kept close to the shore about four miles. Our road lay through wood, rising almost perpendicularly from the sea, with views of the opposite mountains of Wales: thence we came by twilight to Lynmouth, in Devonshire. The next morning we were guided to a valley at the top of one of those immense hills which open at each end to the sea, and is from its rocky appearance called the Valley of Stones. We mounted a cliff at the end of the valley, and looked from it immediately on to the sea.¹⁹

On November 20, Dorothy again wrote to Mary Hutchinson, this time telling her of a second walking tour. According to Dorothy, this tour resulted in a plan for the composition of what was later to become the 1798 edition of Lyrical Ballads. As she explained in the letter:

We have been on another tour: we set out last Monday evening at half past four. The evening was dark and cloudy: we went eight miles, William and Coleridge employing themselves in laying the plan of a ballad, to be published with some pieces of William's.²⁰

In his own reference to the planning of Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth implied that it was the first and not the second trip which resulted in the two poets' decision to write a book of verse. In his introduction to "We Are Seven," he says:

In reference to this poem, I will here mention one of the most remarkable facts in my own poetic history, and that of Mr. Coleridge. In the spring of the year 1798, he, my sister, and myself, started from Alfoxden pretty late in the afternoon,

¹⁹ Dorothy Wordsworth, Early Letters, p. 194.

²⁰ Ibid.

with a view to visit Linton, and the Valley of Stones near to it; and as our united funds were very small, we agreed to defray the expense of the tour by writing a poem, to be sent to the New Monthly Magazine, set up by Phillips, the bookseller, and edited by Dr. Aiken. Accordingly we set off, and proceeded, along the Quantock Hills, towards Watchet; and in the course of this walk was planned the poem of the 'Ancient Mariner,' founded on a dream, as Mr. Coleridge said, of his friend Mr. Cruikshank. Much of the greatest part of the story was Mr. Coleridge's invention; but certain parts I myself suggested.²¹

In a passage quoted from Biographia Literaria, Coleridge explains further what the two poets were trying to accomplish with their volume of poetry. Here, I think, one can readily see the tremendous impact each mind had on the other during the poets' stay in Somersetshire. Coleridge explains:

During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colors of imagination. The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moon-light or sun-set diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature. The thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such, as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them, when they present themselves.²²

²¹Prose Works, III, 16.

²²Biographia, II, xiv, 5.

Although Wordsworth contributed greatly to Lyrical Ballads, he felt that he could only make "trifling contributions"²³ to the "Ancient Mariner" itself. As Legouis points out, "His genius was not fitted to the fantastic and Coleridge alone chanted the adventures of his 'old navigator.'"²⁴ Although Wordsworth's genius "was not fitted to the fantastic," Coleridge's influence at least opened the door to allow Wordsworth's imagination to experience it. As Hugh I'Anson Fausset points out, it was really Coleridge who enabled Wordsworth to give "the charm and novelty to things of every day":²⁵

Wordsworth's matter-of factness--the uninspired commonplace which alone survived when ten years later the fire had almost burnt itself out--ensured him against the unsubstantial ecstasy which was all that Coleridge himself had to give. But it was Coleridge, with his feminine generosity and infinitely subtler mind, who kindled the fire which Wordsworth's masculine limitations were to make effective. For, as he was to write--'Of all the men I ever knew, Wordsworth has the least femininity in his mind. He is all man. He is a man of whom it might have been said--It is good for him to be alone.' It was disastrous for Coleridge to be alone.²⁶

Wordsworth's mind was ready for more than matter-of-factness when he met Coleridge. He was ready to explore beyond the ordinary events and scenes of daily life to probe for their hidden meanings. As Hanson

²³ Prose Works, III, 17.

²⁴ Emile Legouis, "Some Remarks on the Composition of the Lyrical Ballads of 1798," Wordsworth and Coleridge, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1962), p. 3.

²⁵ Biographia, II, xiv, 6.

²⁶ Hugh I'Anson Fausset, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (London: Jonathan Cape, 1926), p. 152. As a further explanation of the differences in poetic theory held by Wordsworth and Coleridge, Fausset claims: "Wordsworth's aim as a poet was that of interpretation, Coleridge's that of refuge.", p. 169.

explains, "Coleridge's praise of superstition and of the instinct in 'The Destiny of Nations' came at just the right moment."²⁷ In this poem, Coleridge claims: "Fancy is the power/That first unsensualises the dark mind,/Giving it new delights; and bids it swell with new activity."²⁸ The effect of this poem on Wordsworth was great--a point which Hanson further clarifies in the following lines:

His mind was ready, unconsciously anxious, for such a thought. He was in the midst of investigating the minds of those in whose lives, as in those of animals, instinct plays a prominent part. The suggestion put forward by Coleridge explained what had puzzled him--the lack of intelligence in these people--showing him that nature's compensation--a fine, true instinct and a responsiveness to superstition and the natural feelings--led to greater truth and a deeper because simpler joy. It went far to determine him in his purpose of basing his poetic material upon the minds, the lives, and even the speech of the poor and the young.²⁹

If one examines the contents of the 1798 edition of Lyrical Ballads, one cannot help noticing that even here, Wordsworth is beginning to develop a deep interest in superstition and instinct as they are exhibited in the lives of his poetic subjects. In his discussion of this point, however, Walter Raleigh says:

It is easy to see how, from this first conception, the scheme of the Lyrical Ballads grew up, and how there were included in it the two sorts of poems. The accidents of light and shade affected the two poets in different ways. To Coleridge the rise of the moon made witchcraft credible, and gave warrant for the boldest imaginations. To Wordsworth these imaginations seemed superfluous; the moonlight was witchcraft enough; his interest and affections turned homeward to the things of every day, now seen to be

²⁷ Hanson, I, 189.

²⁸ Poetical Works of Coleridge, pp. 62-63.

²⁹ Hanson, I, 189.

susceptible of this heavenly glamour.³⁰

This is generally true. Certainly, all the events in Wordsworth's poetry can be explained away quite easily as natural phenomena without any hint of supernatural forces at work. However, there appeared to be awakened in him--by his association with the dreamer Coleridge³¹--an interest in that which could be explained in one of two ways--the natural and the supernatural. Evidence for this can be found, I think, in poems such as "The Thorn," where the speaker says:

'I've heard, the moss is spotted red
With drops of that poor infant's blood;
But kill a new-born infant thus,
I do not think she could!
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;
Whene'er you look on it, 'tis plain
The baby looks at you again.'³²

There is evidence, too, that this fascination with the supernatural was not short-lived, for in The Prelude, we read of an incident which hints at the intelligence behind all Nature. After he steals a boat as a small boy, the adult Wordsworth writes that Nature took steps to make him aware of his misdeed:

I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat

³⁰Walter Raleigh, Wordsworth (London: Edward Arnold, 1918), pp. 72-73.

³¹Legouis claims that Coleridge "always remained to some extent a slave of his dreaming." p. 338.

³²Poetical Works, p. 159.

Went heaving through the water like a
 swan;
 When, from behind that craggy steep till
 then
 The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black
 and huge,
 As if with voluntary power instinct
 Upreared its head. I struck and struck
 again,
 And growing still in stature the grim
 shape
 Towered up between me and the stars,
 and still,
 For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
 And measured motion like a living thing,
 Strode after me.

(I. 374-385)

Although many facets of Coleridge's thought and personality intrigued Wordsworth, H. D. Traill points out that it was "by Coleridge's total individuality, by the sum of his vast and varied intellectual powers, rather than by the specific poetic element contained in them, that Wordsworth, like the rest of the world indeed, was in the main attracted."³³ The intellectual power which most impressed Wordsworth was Coleridge's ability to express verbally his thoughts on the various contemporary philosophies which intrigued him. Wordsworth even claimed that one of Coleridge's greatest strengths was his ability to convince others of the validity of his own beliefs. In 1844, in speaking of Coleridge's conversation, Wordsworth said it was like

a majestic river, the sound or sight of whose course you caught at intervals, which was sometimes concealed by forests, sometimes lost in sand, then came flashing out broad and distinct: and even when it took a turn which your eye could not follow, you always felt and knew that there was a connection in its

³³H. D. Traill, Coleridge (London: Macmillan & Co., 1884), p. 41.

parts and that it was the same river.³⁴

Although the flow of Coleridge's mind took many turns it was never totally lost to Wordsworth who followed its courses eagerly, gaining in the end, much new wisdom. Hanson explains what Wordsworth gained:

The instinct of his friend to synthesize his thoughts, his breadth of view and his depth of thought served to pull together in Wordsworth's mind the scattered emotions which possessed it, to turn his work from fragmentary descriptions of impressions and emotions into the expression of a comprehensive philosophy.³⁵

Norman Lacey claims that Wordsworth "had become afraid of the analytical use of the intellect, but after he had come to know Coleridge, he saw that he might use the intellect not destructively but creatively, to build up his earlier knowledge of Nature into a philosophy."³⁶ Read suggests in part how Coleridge helped his friend to do just this:

Coleridge's function, in this momentous relationship, was to act as a rationalising agent. Wordsworth's thought, in so far as it may be described as in any way original, was intuitive by nature. Coleridge took these intuitions, translated them into discursive terms, sought out their metaphysical analogues, combined imagination and logic, and talked, talked, talked.³⁷

Coleridge's introduction of Wordsworth to some contemporary philosophies of their day helped the older poet immensely in the development of his own philosophy. As Hanson points out, Coleridge was responsible for introducing Hartley's associationalist philosophy to Wordsworth:

³⁴ William Wordsworth quoted in Memoirs, II, 288.

³⁵ Hanson, I, 184.

³⁶ Norman Lacey, Wordsworth's View of Nature and its Ethical Consequences (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965), p. 48.

³⁷ Read, Wordsworth, p. 133.

The influence of Coleridge upon Wordsworth was apparent long before their meeting at Racedown. When they had met first in Bristol the younger man was in a flood of enthusiasm for Hartley. . . . [Coleridge] would speak of Hartley and his doctrines with uncommon warmth and conviction, his eagerness to share his enthusiasms rising with his opinion of the man he addressed. . . .

Hartley, so presented, was to perform a far more vital function in the liberation and enlargement of Wordsworth's thought than ever his philosophy had been able to do for Coleridge himself.³⁸

Arthur Beatty points out why Hartley's philosophy so appealed to Wordsworth:

The qualities of Hartley's philosophy which attracted Wordsworth were its completeness of method; its simplicity; its common-sense foundation; its reactionary tendency toward old standards which had been forgotten in the times which were "out of joint;" together with a deep spiritual enthusiasm, and the necessitarianism of Godwin and Priestley, and an insistence on sympathy and benevolence that satisfied the poet's newly awakened love for his country and his re-established domestic peace.³⁹

In his essay, Beatty also explains the main tenets of Hartley's philosophy:

Like all systems of philosophy founded on that of Locke, all innate ideas are banished; and all mental states are derived from sensation. These sensations are the primary, ultimate, and irresolvable facts of our mental life, and are the result of our direct contact with external things: and they, through the power of association, are transformed into the complexes of those forms of mental life which succeed

³⁸ Although Norman Lacey, Wordsworth's View of Nature, suggests that Coleridge "introduced him [Wordsworth] to the philosophy of David Hartley," p. 48. Hanson suggests that Coleridge was not the first to introduce Wordsworth to Hartley's philosophy, but that he was the first to discuss this philosophy with Wordsworth in a meaningful way, p. 187.

³⁹ Arthur Beatty, William Wordsworth: His Doctrine and Art in Their Historical Relations (Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), p. 109.

those that partake of the simplicity and directness of sensation. According to Hartley, association is the law of the mind, as gravitation is the law of the physical world. He is the original exponent of the law of association, in which he has been followed by the Utilitarians; and we have abundant evidence that Wordsworth gave this law his full credence.

Under the influence of this law of association, then, as Hartley conceives it, the primary sensations are transmuted, by a sort of chemical process, into "purer" forms of thought: first into ideas of a simple sort, and then into more complex ones.⁴⁰

Hartley went one step farther than Locke by pointing out that not only memory, but also imagination, reason, and the emotions played a vital part in mental growth. His was an optimistic theory⁴¹ which implied "as a necessary part of its being the notion of development."⁴² His theory stressed the importance of individualism and utilitarianism, and put forth the thesis that pleasure or happiness was the ultimate test of a philosophy and of a life.⁴³ But by far the most important idea that Wordsworth adopted from Hartley concerned the development of the mind in three distinct stages. Beatty explains this point more fully:

All that the poet had to do was to take the stages as they were furnished him . . . and give them a more definitely autobiographical, or chronological, interpretation, as (1) Childhood, the age of sensation; (2) Youth, the age of simple ideas; and (3) Maturity, the age of intellectual, complex ideas, establish his own precise significance and limits for each, and the foundation of his greatest poems and of his most characteristic theories and teaching was complete.⁴⁴

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 118.

⁴²Ibid., p. 112.

⁴³Ibid., p. 120.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 127.

According to Norman Lacey, Coleridge "interpreted Hartley to mean that all things, man, plant, and animal were symbols of reality, 'monads of the infinite mind.'"⁴⁵ Wordsworth was to take Coleridge's interpretation of Hartlean philosophy very seriously. There are many excerpts from The Prelude which are drawn from Hartley and Coleridge's interpretation of Hartley's philosophy.⁴⁶ As Herbert Read suggests:

And the idea of the relationship existing between one's feelings and ideas, so fundamental to Wordsworth's theory of poetry, was drawn from Hartley too. According to Hartley's psychology, our passions or affections are no more than aggregates of simple ideas united by association; and simple ideas are ideas surviving sensations after the objects which caused them have been removed. First, sensations, 'which arise from the impressions made by external objects upon the several parts of our bodies'; then simple ideas of sensation; finally, under the power of association, all the various faculties of the human mind, such as memory, imagination, understanding, affection and will.⁴⁷

Read points out, that from this philosophy, Wordsworth captured the truth that the purpose of poetry is "to proceed from the simple ideas inherent in the incidents and situations of common life to the exhibition of that faculty of the human mind known as affection; more briefly, the purpose of poetry is to develop feeling out of the ideas surviving from the sensations of daily life."⁴⁸ Although derivative of Hartley, the idea of poetry is here expressed in Wordsworth's own words:

⁴⁵Lacey, Wordsworth's View of Nature, p. 48.

⁴⁶One example of this influence can be seen in The Prelude Book I, ll. 581-612.

⁴⁷Read, Wordsworth, pp. 148-149.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 149.

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind, and in whatever degree, from various causes, is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will, upon the whole, be in a state of enjoyment.⁴⁹

Along with giving him his own interpretations of Hartlean philosophy, Coleridge also spoke to Wordsworth of "Spinoza's formulas concerning God-Nature,"⁵⁰ and stressed to him the importance of the philosophy of Berkeley. Like Hartley, Berkeley believed in "progressive growth of the individual mind by stages from Sense to Reason and Deity, from the 'grossly sensible' to the 'purely intelligible.'"⁵¹ Berkeley also held the idea that the mind is everything--that matter exists only insofar as man perceives it--and that he perceives it only through the help of a deity. In his own words, Berkeley explains the role of the intellect:

Sense at first besets and overbears the mind. The sensible appearances are all in all: our reasonings are employed about them: our desires terminate in them: we look no farther for realities or causes, till Intellect begins to dawn, and casts a ray on this shadowy scene. We then perceive the true principle of unity, identity, and existence. Those things that before seemed to constitute the whole of Being, upon taking an intellectual view of things prove to be but fleeting phantoms.⁵²

⁴⁹"Preface to the Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads (1800)," Poetical Works, p. 740.

⁵⁰Legouis, p. 326.

⁵¹Beatty, William Wordsworth: Doctrine and Art, p. 126.

⁵²Berkeley, quoted in Beatty, Ibid., pp. 126-127.

As Beatty points out, the above quotation "might have been written as an introductory note to "Tintern Abbey," or to "Ode. Intimations of Immortality."⁵³ Berkeley's philosophy was a new and exciting body of wisdom which affected Wordsworth as follows:

This new leaven of thought broke upon Wordsworth the sensationalist as a shining light, a resolvent of his difficulties. Here was the missing part of his philosophy. It enabled him to hold the balance between his existing sensationalism and his gropings after idealism. It gave him the knowledge and the power to transcend the senses by an imaginative act, a state of ecstasy, in which he was able to achieve an

interior life
--In which all beings live with god, themselves
Are God. . .⁵⁴

The most influential philosophy which Coleridge discussed with Wordsworth was Christianity which underlay the philosophies of both Hartley and Berkeley. George Harper claims that when John Thelwall came to Nether Stowey, Coleridge was interested in him "not only as a talented and brave revolutionist, but as an atheist, who might be converted to more moderate religious views."⁵⁵ Perhaps in a small subconscious way, Coleridge was interested in his "semi-atheist"⁵⁶ friend Wordsworth for similar reasons. His influence in this area took several years to bear fruit, and, like all other ideas, those pertaining to Christianity underwent some modification in Wordsworth's mind before they were finally accepted;⁵⁷ but

⁵³Beatty, *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁵⁴Hanson, I, 188.

⁵⁵Harper, I, 243.

⁵⁶Coleridge quoted in Harper, I, 243.

⁵⁷Legouis claims: "Wordsworth was naturally one of the first to receive the new truths from the lips of Coleridge, as he gradually

in his later life Wordsworth did profess himself to be a Christian, and certainly, Coleridge played no small part in his decision. As Legouis points out, it was Coleridge who first put into Wordsworth's mind "the idea of a mighty synthesis."⁵⁸

In summary, then, it is almost impossible to assess adequately in a few pages the total debt which Wordsworth owed to Coleridge. Coleridge's open admiration and praise of Wordsworth made others wince,⁵⁹ but made Wordsworth aware once more of his poetic worth and his value as a human being. The lively and open-hearted Coleridge introduced Wordsworth to many friends and acquaintances who would in turn open new worlds to him. Coleridge's attitude toward France after her invasion of Switzerland weighed heavily in Wordsworth's mind until he too could write of his feelings during the winter at Alfoxden when "his heart turned against Bonaparte and France."⁶⁰ Coleridge, with his interest in the supernatural, helped to produce in Wordsworth what Legouis describes as "the state of mind necessary for the reception of mysticism";⁶¹ and his interest in philosophy and religion had the effect, as Hanson says, "of lifting his

discovered them. These at first were but flashes of eloquence, whence a few ideas stood out in strong relief and sank into the depths of Wordsworth's mind, although they did not adapt themselves to its atmosphere without undergoing some modification." p. 329.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 331.

⁵⁹ Ibid. Of Charles Lamb Legouis says: "It irritated him to see Coleridge for ever on his knees before Wordsworth, and urging all his own admirers to form a prostrate rank of faithful ones with himself at the head." p. 362.

⁶⁰ Reed, p. 213.

⁶¹ Legouis, p. 326.

friend's attention in part at least to a consideration, not without scepticism, certainly, but with a steady decline of it, of matters reaching beyond the immediate affairs of the world, and so played no small part in Wordsworth's eventual emancipation."⁶² It was Coleridge who also gave immediate and practical help to Wordsworth at a time when he needed inspiration. He competed with him,⁶³ suggested that he prepare his play The Borderers for the stage,⁶⁴ and even suggested the opening stanza of one of Wordsworth's most charming poems, "We Are Seven."⁶⁵ Legouis suggests that "it was Coleridge whose influence was henceforth to infuse [Wordsworth's] poetry with new elements, whereby it would be at any rate profoundly modified if not transformed."⁶⁶ Wordsworth himself says the same thing in The Prelude:

O capacious Soul!
Placed on this earth to love and understand,
And from thy presence shed the light of love,
Shall I be mute, ere thou be spoken of?
Thy kindred influence to my heart of hearts
Did also find its way, Thus fear relaxed
Her overweening grasp; thus thoughts and things
In the self-haunting spirit learned to take
More rational proportions; mystery,
The incumbent mystery of sense and soul,
Of life and death, time and eternity,
Admitted more habitually a mild
Interposition--a serene delight

⁶²Hanson, I, 186.

⁶³George Watson, Coleridge The Poet (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc., 1966). Watson maintains that aside from deciding to write a book of poetry together, Wordsworth and Coleridge "also indulged themselves in a composition-race, on the subject of Cain." p. 87.

⁶⁴Moorman, I, 351.

⁶⁵Herford, Wordsworth, p. 100.

⁶⁶Legouis, p. 356.

In closelier gathering cares, such as become
 A human creature, howsoe'er endowed,
 Poet, or destined for a humbler name;
 And so the deep enthusiastic joy,
 The rapture of the hallelujah sent
 From all that breathes and is, was chastened, stemmed
 And balanced by pathetic truth, by trust
 In hopeful reason, leaning on the stay
 Of Providence; and in reverence for duty,
 Here, if need be, struggling with storms, and there
 Strewing in peace life's humblest ground with herbs,
 At every season green, sweet at all hours.

(XIV, 277-301)

Perhaps the greatest influence of Coleridge on Wordsworth can best be summed up by quoting a portion of one of Dorothy's letters. She was acknowledged by Coleridge to have been part owner of both his and Wordsworth's joint soul,⁶⁷ and she had this to say about her brother's most intimate and important friend:

You had a great loss in not seeing Coleridge. He is a wonderful man. His conversation teems with soul, mind, and spirit. Then he is so benevolent, so good tempered and cheerful, and, like William, interests himself so much about every little trifle. At first I thought him very plain, that is, for about three minutes . . .⁶⁸

In truth, there was nothing "plain" about this gentle man who while "yet a liveried schoolboy" (VI. 266), used to "lie and gaze upon the clouds/
 Moving in heaven" (VI. 269-270), and who tried, with the use of his "internal light" alone (VI. 271), to "See trees, and meadows, and [his] native stream/
 Far distant, thus beheld from year to year/
 Of a long exile" (VI. 271-273). Coleridge helped to evoke a transformation in Wordsworth

⁶⁷Moorman, I, 343. "Coleridge has often been quoted as saying that in these Alfoxden days he, William and Dorothy were 'three people, but one soul.'"

⁶⁸Dorothy Wordsworth, Early Letters, pp. 188-189.

by changing him from a depressed young man who could hear only "the still, sad music of humanity" (l. 91), into a great poet who had become "a living soul . . . with an eye made quiet by the power/of harmony, and the deep power of joy" (ll. 46-48).

CHAPTER V

ALFOXDEN ITSELF: A RETURN TO THE GARDEN

In a book of essays dealing with Paradise Lost, Northrop Frye claims: "Every act of the free intelligence, including the poetic intelligence, is an attempt to return to Eden, a world in the human form of a garden."¹ In Wordsworth's case, much of his finest poetry is an expression of a wish to record forever his experiences and his joys in the various Edens of his lifetime--not the least of which was Alfoxden. As Legouis points out, "Always sensitive to the cheerful or depressing influence of a locality, Wordsworth was partly indebted to the charm of Alfoxden for his rapid progress toward happiness."² To this statement I would add that not only did Wordsworth owe a debt to Alfoxden for his own personal happiness, but also for his rapid progress toward the fulfilment of his poetic destiny. For Wordsworth, Alfoxden was indeed a paradise, a paradise in which he needed to spend time in order to renew his faith in Nature and in himself. As Dorothy explains in a letter dated July 4th, 1797, Alfoxden was the perfect spot for the birth of romanticism in England:

. . . There is everything here; sea, woods wild as fancy ever painted, brooks clear and pebbly as in Cumberland, villages so romantic; and William and I, in a wander by ourselves, found out a sequestered waterfall in a dell formed by steep hills covered with full-grown timber trees. The woods are as fine as those at Lowther, and

¹Northrop Frye, The Return of Eden (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 31.

²Legouis, p. 359.

the country more romantic; it has the character of the less grand parts of the neighbourhood of the Lakes.³

The first poetic hint of the beauty of Alfoxden comes in Coleridge's "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," which was inspired by the loveliness of the countryside. He describes "The roaring dell, o'er-wooded, narrow, deep,/And only speckled by the mid-day sun," and the "most fantastic sight" of the "dark green file of long lank weeds" that "nod and drip beneath the dripping edge/Of the blue clay-stone." He goes on to describe the "wide landscape" which he hopes will soothe Charles Lamb as he gazes upon it:

Now, my friends emerge
Beneath the wide wide Heaven--and view again
The many-steepled tract magnificent
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,
With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles
Of purple shadow!⁴

Wordsworth was affected just as deeply by the beautiful scenery of Somerset, for as Legouis points out, "Almost all the Lyrical Ballads were written during the spring and summer of 1798, a spring of exceptional beauty in spite of its backwardness, a summer so marvellous that The Prelude looks back toward it as the brightest and sunniest the author had known since boyhood."⁵ Here, at Alfoxden, with its park-like setting,⁶ Wordsworth was inspired to write poetry which

³Dorothy Wordsworth, Early Letters, p. 189.

⁴Poetical Works of Coleridge, pp. 179-180.

⁵Legouis, p. 381.

⁶Dorothy Wordsworth, Early Letters, p. 190. In a letter dated August 14th, 1797, and addressed to Mary Hutchinson, Dorothy describes Alfoxden: "Here we are in a large mansion, in a large park, with seventy head of deer around us."

appealed not only to the intellect of readers, but also to their hearts. For example, it was at Alfoxden that Wordsworth wrote a poem expressing joy at the thought of the coming spring--an emotion which every man can understand. It is quoted in part below:

It is the first mild day of March:
Each minute sweeter than before,
The redbreast sings from the tall larch
That stands beside our door.

There is a blessing in the air,
Which seems a sense of joy to yield
To the bare trees, and mountains bare,
And grass in the green field.

My Sister! ('tis a wish of mine)
Now that our morning meal is done,
Make haste, your morning task resign;
Come forth and feel the sun.

.....

Love, now a universal birth,
From heart to heart is stealing,
From earth to man, from man to earth:
--It is the hour of feeling.

One moment now may give us more
Than fifty years of reason:
Our minds shall drink at every pore
The spirit of the season.

Some silent laws our hearts will make,
Which they shall long obey:
We for the year to come may take
Our temper from to-day.

And from the blessed power that rolls
About, below, above;
We'll frame the measure of our souls:
They shall be tuned to love.

Then come, my Sister! come, I pray,
With speed put on your woodland dress;
And bring no book: for this one day
We'll give to idleness.⁷

⁷"To My Sister," Poetical Works, p. 378.

In his notes to the poems comprising Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth acknowledges the part Alfoxden played in the composition of much of his work during this period. He claims that "A Night Piece" was "Composed on the road between Nether Stowey and Alfoxden, extempore."⁸ "We Are Seven" was composed while the poet was "walking in the grove at Alfoxden."⁹ "A Whirl-blast From Behind the Hill" was occasioned when Wordsworth "Observed [a similar incident] in the holly-grove at Alfoxden, where these verses were written in the spring of 1798."¹⁰ "The Thorn" came into being, according to Wordsworth, because of an observation at Alfoxden. In his note to the poem he explains:

[The Thorn] arose out of my observing, on the ridge of Quantock Hill, on a stormy day, a thorn, which I had often passed in calm and bright weather without noticing it. I said to myself, cannot I by some invention do as much to make this Thorn permanently an impressive object as the storm has made it to my eyes at this moment? I began the poem accordingly, and composed it with great rapidity.¹¹

Another poem which was directly inspired by the scenery at Alfoxden was the beautiful "Lines Written In Early Spring." Unlike "The Thorn," this poem was probably not composed "with great rapidity," but only after a period of quiet and intense contemplation. Wordsworth explains the circumstances surrounding its composition:

. . . I was sitting by the side of the brook that runs down from the Comb, in which stands the village of Alford, through the grounds of Alfoxden. It was a chosen resort of mine. The brook fell down a sloping rock, so as to make

⁸Prose Works, III, 38.

⁹Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 31.

¹¹Ibid., p. 41.

a waterfall, considerable for that country; and, across the pool below, had fallen a tree, an ash, if I rightly remember, from which rose, perpendicularly, boughs in search of the light intercepted by the deep shade above. The boughs bore leaves of green, that for want of sunshine had faded into almost lily-white; and from the underside of this natural sylvan bridge depended long and beautiful tresses of ivy, which waved gently in the breeze, that might, poetically speaking, be called the breath of the waterfall.¹²

Just as later in the century the bower was to serve Keats as "a kind of holy, natural fane harboring a divine gift of inspiration,"¹³ so too did this bower offer Wordsworth a place to contemplate not only the happiness of life, but its sadness as well. Although the solution to the problem of Man's inhumanity to Man had not presented itself to Wordsworth, at least the problem itself could be thought out and recognized as one of the deeper issues which he would have to face if he were to become a great poet. In this poem there is already a hint of what will take shape more fully a few months later in "Tintern Abbey:"

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,
The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;
And 'tis my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.

.....

The budding twigs spread out their fan,
To catch the breezy air;
And I must think, do all I can,
That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent,
If such be Nature's holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?¹⁴

¹²Ibid., p. 159.

¹³Mario D'Avanzo, Keats's Metaphors for the Poetic Imagination (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1967), p. 167.

¹⁴Wordsworth, "Lines Written in Early Spring," Poetical Works, p. 377.

Nature itself was never enough for Wordsworth: Man and Nature together were his poetical subjects, within his mind one could not be divorced from the other for any great length of time. Legouis points out that "the great charm of this somewhat ordinary country lay in the varied richness of its vegetation, in its abundant heath and fern, in the great number of its yew-trees, . . . and of its hollies which deck the undergrowth of the woods with their shining foliage."¹⁵ However, along with the beauty of the countryside, Wordsworth was also impressed by the people of Alfoxden and Nether Stowey. One person who deeply influenced Wordsworth was Thomas Poole who has been discussed in an earlier chapter. His manly but gentle ways showed Wordsworth the harmony that man can have with Nature and with his fellow human beings if he will but try. Another person who impressed Wordsworth at Alfoxden was "Simon Lee," the huntsman. In the poem, Wordsworth claimed that Simon lived "In the sweet shire of Cardigan," but in the note to the poem, he confesses that in truth, the man was from Alfoxden:

This old man had been huntsman to the Squires of Alfoxden, which, at the time we occupied it, belonged to a minor. The old man's cottage stood upon the Common, a little way from the entrance to Alfoxden Park. But it had disappeared. . . . Improvements but rarely appear such to those who after long intervals of time revisit places they have had much pleasure in. . . . The expression when the hounds were out, 'I dearly love their voice,' was word for word from his own lips.¹⁶

With the help of Dorothy, Coleridge and Thomas Poole, Wordsworth became acquainted with the people and the folklore of Alfoxden and its

¹⁵ Legouis, pp. 358-359.

¹⁶ Prose Works, III, 160.

surrounding districts. As Herford explains, "The simple village folks to whom both poets turned were for Wordsworth examples of elemental humanity, untouched by the baser influences of civilization";¹⁷ and as such, Wordsworth felt that they made fitting subjects for his new kind of poetry--a poetry which stressed the importance of day-to-day happenings in the lives of ordinary people. Herford points out that "For Wordsworth there lay an indefinable power of suggestion in the simplest incidents and characters, even in proportion to their simplicity."¹⁸ In some of the Alfoxden poems are found legends of the district, while in others, Wordsworth pays tribute to rustic characters with whom he had come in daily contact while in Somerset. As Rannie points out: "'The Thorn' grew on the Quantocks, and Wordsworth fitted a legend to it. 'The Last of the Flock' was a Holford story. 'The Idiot Boy,' the mark of so many satiric shafts, was made on foot among the Alfoxden hollies, on a theme supplied by Thomas Poole."¹⁹ "The Somersetshire Tragedy," "The Mad Mother," and "Simon Lee," to name just a few, all had their origins at Alfoxden. It was in observing the subjects of these poems or in listening to the legends of the district, that Wordsworth found toward the end of his year at Alfoxden, the solution to the problem of Man's unhappiness in the world--and the remedy for this unhappiness. As Norman Lacey explains:

¹⁷C. H. Herford, Wordsworth (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1930), p. 97.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Rannie, p. 81.

If for any reason a generation, e.g. the Hitler Youth, should become perverted, that need not be the cause of undue anxiety, for the ever-living universe, acting in conjunction with certain indestructible dispositions of the human mind, is always tending to bring men back to the truth. But it follows that truth is most likely to be found with those who live closest to nature. The countryman, because his passions 'are incorporated with beautiful and permanent forms of nature' has deeper feelings and truer thoughts than the townsman. All evils--greed, meanness, jealousy, and the greater evils of ambition and pride which disturb the equilibrium of society and create further evils of social and economic injustice--are due to getting away from nature. If man finds he has gone into wrong ways, he can be set right by returning to nature and to solitude. 'A world of fresh sensations will open upon him as his mind puts off its infirmities . . . and precious feelings of disinterested, that is, self-disregarding joy and love may be regenerated and restored.'²⁰

Witnessing the daily occurrences happening to the people of Alfoxden, and seeing the impact that Nature had on his visitors during the year in Somerset might have taught Wordsworth the most important lesson of his Alfoxden experience and hastened the poet's ability to apply this lesson to his own life. All of Wordsworth's visitors had one primary motive in mind when coming to Alfoxden: to seek personal happiness. Legouis illustrates this in more detail:

In spite of their dissimilarities, all those [visitors] of whom we have spoken had at this period one feeling in common in their sincere yearning after nature. If disheartened, they turned to her for consolation; if feeble and languid, for restoration to health; if strong and active, for an increase of vigour or for salutary relaxation. All were poets, or believed themselves to be so; all felt themselves called to an Arcadian existence. Everything they wrote at this time, both in prose and in verse, is full of reproaches against crowded city life, and against the excessive and unhealthy toil of manufacturing centres, as well as of gratitude to the sweet and

²⁰Lacey, Wordsworth's View of Nature (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965), pp. 74-75.

healthy country, the source of infinite blessings both to body and soul. But what is above all characteristic of this moment, when their feverish pursuit of a general good has been abandoned, is a new desire to be happy themselves, a quest for a certain voluptuous torpor.²¹

After a visit to Alfoxden, Charles Lamb felt improvement in his grave condition of melancholy,²² John Thelwall felt "joyous surprise that he [could] forget his political passions so easily,"²³ and Joseph Cottle wrote that while at Alfoxden:

Every interstice of our hearts being filled with happiness, as a consequence there was no room for sorrow, exercised as it now was, and hovering around at unapproachable distance. . . . If, at this juncture, tidings had been brought us that an irruption of the ocean had swallowed up all our dear brethren of Pekin, . . . 'poor things' would have been our only reply, with anguish put off till the morrow.²⁴

Wordsworth himself left a moving account of his feelings while at Alfoxden in the last lines of The Prelude. Here, addressing Coleridge, he explains the effect the region had on him both as a poet and as a man:

That summer, under whose indulgent skies,
Upon smooth Quantock's airy ridge we
 roved
Unchecked or loitered 'mid her sylvan
 combs,
Thou in bewitching words, with happy heart,
Didst chaunt the vision of that Ancient
 Man,
The bright-eyed Mariner, and rueful woes

²¹Legouis, pp. 368-369.

²²Harper, I, 237.

²³Legouis, p. 369.

²⁴Joseph Cottle, quoted in Legouis, p. 371.

Didst utter of the Lady Christabel;
 And I, associate with such labour, steeped
 In soft forgetfulness the livelong hours,
 Murmuring of him who, joyous hap, was found,
 After the perils of his moonlight ride,
 Near the loud waterfall; or her who sate
 In misery near that miserable Thorn;--
 When thou dost to that summer turn thy
 thoughts,
 And hast before thee all which then we were,
 To thee, in memory of that happiness,
 It will be known, by thee at least, my
 Friend!

(XIV. 395-411)

Alfoxden itself, then, had a very great influence on Wordsworth's poetic development. It was in the woods of Alfoxden that Wordsworth "used to take delight in noticing the habits, tricks, and physiognomy of asses,"²⁵ and out of this "delight" was born "Peter Bell." "The Thorn" grew at Alfoxden as did the "primrose tufts" and the "periwinkle." The Alfoxden weathercock salvaged little Basil from a difficult situation in which he had been placed by an overly inquisitive poet,²⁶ and Simon Lee and Michael were friends who were seen every day. "And the Alfoxden moon--for how much was the moon not responsible? . . . half the magic of "The Ancient Mariner" . . . [was] born during the moonlight nights in the Quantocks. The very theory and ground-work of the Lyrical Ballads was suggested, it seems, by the moon."²⁷ Wordsworth claims in "Tintern Abbey" that he has learned "to look on nature not as in the

²⁵ Prose Works, III, 52.

²⁶ See discussion, p. 17.

²⁷ Walter Raleigh, Wordsworth, as quoted by Emma Jean Bates, "The Influence of Coleridge on Wordsworth (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Manitoba, 1930), p. 52.

hour/Of thoughtless youth (ll. 89-90), but he learned to do this more at Alfoxden than on the banks of the Wye, and "the still, sad music of humanity" was first heard as "a thousand blended notes" one early spring in the groves at Alfoxden. Truly, as W. A. Knight suggests, "Somerset and the Quantocks were to Wordsworth "the cradle of genius and the fountain of poetical and literary inspiration."²⁸ And if we turn to the opening lines of The Prelude we can see that the first one to acknowledge this was Wordsworth himself. For one brief year, Wordsworth had returned to paradise, and what that paradise did for him can best be illustrated by the following lines:

Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze,
 A visitant that while it fans my cheek
 Doth seem half-conscious of the joy it
 brings
 From the green fields, and from yon azure
 sky.
 Whate'er its mission, the soft breeze can
 come
 To none more grateful than to me; escaped
 From the vast city, where I long had
 pined
 A discontented sojourner: now free,
 Free as a bird to settle where I will.
 What dwelling shall receive me? in what
 vale
 Shall be my harbour? underneath what
 grove
 Shall I take up my home? and what clear
 stream
 Shall with its murmur lull me into rest?
 The earth is all before me. With a heart
 Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
 I look about; and should the chosen guide
 Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,

²⁸W. A. Knight, Coleridge and Wordsworth (London: Elkin Mathews, 1913, reprinted Folcroft Library Editions, 1970), p. 115.

I cannot miss my way. I breathe again!
Trances of thought and mountings of the mind
Come fast upon me: it is shaken off,
That burthen of my own unnatural self,
The heavy weight of many a weary day
Not mine, and such as were not made for me.
(I. 1-23)

CHAPTER VI

A SUMMING UP

Through a consideration of the people and the events affecting Wordsworth during the period between July, 1797, and July, 1798, and by an investigation of the role played in his life by Alfoxden itself, I have attempted to discuss the importance of the entire Alfoxden experience to Wordsworth's poetic development. In order to demonstrate the influence of any experience on a poet, however, one must turn for evidence to poetry written after that experience. I feel that the proof that the Alfoxden experience was a significant part of Wordsworth's development lies indelibly in "Tintern Abbey," the poem written shortly after the poet took his leave of Alfoxden, for as C. H. Herford claims, "'Tintern Abbey' is truly the culmination of the poet's year there:

Composed at the close of the Alfoxden time, 'Tintern Abbey' sums up all that Alfoxden had meant to him, all that Nature, Man, and his own history meant to him in the light of his own ripe thinking and impassioned observations, quickened by the constant companionship of Coleridge and Dorothy.¹

"Tintern Abbey" was written when Dorothy and William were touring the banks of the Wye River, and although the scenery there was different in some respects from that of the Alfoxden countryside, and although none of the Alfoxden people (with the exception of Dorothy) were present during the poem's conception, nevertheless, many echoes of the Alfoxden

¹C. H. Herford, Wordsworth (London: George Routledge & Sons Ltd., 1930), p. 107.

experience can, I think, be found within the poem itself. As C. H. Herford again points out, "Tintern Abbey" owes nothing to after meditation as do many of Wordsworth's other poems,² but is a direct result of the year which changed his entire view of life.

From the very beginning of the poem, Wordsworth sets a tone of seclusion, but seclusion within a cyclical framework. He tells us that "Five years have passed; with the length/Of five long winters!" (l. 1). The seasonal cycle is immediately introduced with the emphasis placed, not on summer, the time of year when the poem was written, but on winter, the time usually associated with death. Implicit from the opening lines seems to be Wordsworth's realization that the ending of one of Nature's cycles is but a prelude to a new beginning. He can now appreciate more completely that there exists a transcendent reality which gives both Man and Nature, and, in fact, all life, a reason for being. And that he has in part unlocked that secret of being is evident throughout the poem. Implicit also from the opening lines is Wordsworth's realization that he too has come to the end of one cycle, the period of his youth. He sees in this ending a beginning as well, for now, he realizes that youth has given way to a time of greater intellectual maturity, and that the isolation he once experienced has given way to a realization of his place in the universe.

For Wordsworth the new period of maturity is in many ways a time in which the appreciation of Nature and the joy of experiencing it has

²Ibid.

deepened. "Again" he hears "These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs/With a soft inland murmur" (ll. 3-4), and "again" he beholds "these steep and lofty cliffs,/That on a wild secluded scene impress/Thoughts of more deep seclusion" (ll. 6-8). There has been a great change, however, in the poet's perception of natural imagery since his last visit to the Wye. Here, after a year of Dorothy's tutelage, he listens more carefully to the soft, almost inaudible sounds of the countryside, and he is more deeply moved by them than he was by the louder and more sensational sounds which sent him into "dizzy raptures" (l. 85) as a boy. His visionary powers, too, have been made more acute after a year of close association with Coleridge. Now, no longer satisfied with mere "colours" and "forms" (l. 79), he perceives behind these physical attributes an ordered universe in which each created entity has a definite place and plays a vital role.

With the mention of the rolling waters, Wordsworth suggests by implication yet another cycle--that of water flowing from its mountain source inland, by way of rivers to the sea and thence, by a process of evaporation and condensation, finding its way once again in its purified form to the "mountain-springs" (l. 3). As a boy, the sound of water rushing from the cataract haunted him "like a passion" (l. 77), but now, content with more "sober pleasure[s]" (l. 139), Wordsworth can listen intently and with a deeper joy to the messages of the waters' "soft inland murmur" (l. 4).

The massive cliffs which had once formed part of Wordsworth's boyhood "appetite" (l. 80) through their lonely majestic splendour, are

now seen, not as separate entities, but as mediators between heaven and earth. If we remember that "Coleridge interpreted Hartley to mean that all things, man, plant and animal were symbols of reality, 'monads of the infinite mind,'" ³ we need look no further to discern the source of the concept which Wordsworth expresses here--that the spirit of continuity evident in the landscape is more important than the landscape itself. ⁴ After his eye has been "made quiet" (l. 47) by the knowledge (gained in part at Alfoxden) that harmony and joy are both essential and integral components of Nature, he can show, by use of what might be termed "a reversal of the great chain of being," ⁵ that the inorganic cliffs, the living landscape, and the quiet sky, all blend together to form one harmonious unity.

Wordsworth suggests that one of the effects of this secluded scene is to "impress" thoughts on his mind (l. 6). This seems not unlike the effect of the bower at Alfoxden which provided an atmosphere conducive to the contemplation of such problems as that of Man's inhumanity to Man. ⁶ The idea that a scene or an experience can impress sensations on the mind which are in turn transmuted by the imagination into "Thoughts of more deep seclusion" (l. 7), seems to be taken in part from Hartley. As Arthur Beatty points out, the main thesis of Hartleian philosophy is that "the primary sensations are transmuted,

³Norman Lacey, Wordsworth's View of Nature and its Ethical Consequences (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965), p. 48.

⁴J. Benziger, "Tintern Abbey Revisited," PMLA, LXV (1950), p. 155.

⁵Ibid., p. 158.

⁶See Chapter 4, p. 74.

by a sort of chemical process, into the 'purer' forms of thought; first into ideas of a simple sort, and then into more complex ones."⁷

The first eight lines of the poem deal with the past, but the remainder of the first verse paragraph deals exclusively with the present and the present reality which has survived the poet's absence. Here Wordsworth demonstrates the effect that Man has on Nature, but he also shows that Nature has, in turn, an effect on Man as well. In some cases, there is a certain resistance on the part of Nature to Man's efforts to alter her setting, but this resistance might also be seen as an effort on the part of Nature to co-operate with Man in his attempts to become part of her. At Alfoxden, Dorothy mentioned that the landscape was "hardly ever intersected with hedgerows,"⁸ but here, they abound giving evidence of Man's intervention on the one hand and on the other, showing that as "sportive wood run wild" (l. 16), the hedgerows retain, in part at least, their natural forms.

The concept made evident in these lines is that there is no discontinuity between Man and Nature and ideas. There are pastoral farms on the landscape, but these are incorporated into the very essence of Nature since they are "Green to the very door" (l. 16). Man interrupts Nature here, but he also contributes to her with his very humanity. The "Wreaths of smoke/Sent up, in silence" (ll. 17-18) do not in any way detract from the scene, but rather, they blend harmoniously with "the

⁷Arthur Beatty, William Wordsworth: His Doctrine and Art in Their Historical Relations (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), p. 109.

⁸Dorothy Wordsworth, Early Letters, p. 191.

quiet of the sky" (l. 7), complementing the total setting with its implications of hominess and warmth. Only some men can contribute this flavour to such a setting, however: those who have learned to be sympathetic toward Nature by listening attentively to her messages. The hermit experiences solitude, but not loneliness, because his seclusion is self-imposed for the purpose of learning through his isolation from Man the key to the mystery "Of all this unintelligible world" (l. 40). Like the hermit in "the houseless woods" (l. 20), Wordsworth has, at Alfoxden, learned that one can turn "the din/Of towns and cities" (ll. 25-26) into "music" (l. 91).

In the second verse paragraph, contemplation of experience moves to an experience of joy, and this is contrasted to the mood of solitude and seclusion implicit in the first verse. Here, a process of internalization of experience occurs and the process is much the same as it was for Wordsworth at Alfoxden where he experienced a "tranquil restoration" (l. 30) from the sweet sensations both of the Alfoxden countryside itself and from the realization that along with the evil inherent in Man, there is also much good. When Wordsworth speaks of the "little, nameless, unremembered, acts/Of kindness and of love" (ll. 34-35) which help to restore Man's faith in his fellows, he might, as Mrs. Moorman suggests, be alluding to the log-splitting incident with Simon Lee,⁹ but it is more likely that he is thinking of people such as Thomas Poole who make quiet acts of love an integral part of their lives, and, in so

⁹Moorman, I, 403.

doing, lighten the burthen of the unintelligible world for all those with whom they come into contact.

This section of "Tintern Abbey" draws attention to the importance of "beauteous forms" in Wordsworth's post-Alfoxden concept of Nature. No longer content with its physical attributes alone, the poet seeks behind the physical "into the life of things (l. 49). Assisted by insights given to him by Coleridge in their discussions of Hartley and Berkeley, Wordsworth has been made more aware that with the aid of the senses and the imagination, Man can--and perhaps must--come to some appreciation of the concept that there is order behind the seeming chaos of this world and that this sense of order can be found if Man will but take the time to respond to his "affections" (l. 42). Although I am by no means implying that Wordsworth had at this time embraced the tenets of Christian dogma, still, I think he would have agreed with Hartley's view on the importance of a person having some insight into spiritual concepts. As Hartley himself explains:

Some degree of spirituality is the necessary consequence of passing through life. The sensible pleasures and pains must be transferred by association more and more every day, upon things that afford neither sensible pleasure nor sensible pain in themselves, and so beget the intellectual pleasures.¹⁰

The third paragraph of "Tintern Abbey" seems to be either a turning point in the poem or a summary. The question the reader must ask at this point is: "What is Wordsworth moving toward?" The progress made thus far seems similar to the progress made by the speaker in the

¹⁰ Hartley, quoted in Beatty, William Wordsworth: His Doctrine and Art, p. 127.

poem "My Heart Leaps Up," in which the unseen can elicit very powerful emotions through the memory. Here too, we seem to have an example of the negotiability of the senses, for now, for Wordsworth, the world of sense experience is dissolving into shadows, and the world of the imagination is taking over to provide "food/For future years" (ll. 64-65). The rainbow will, later in his poetic career, become for Wordsworth an outward manifestation of the indwelling presence of God. Here, the "sylvan Wye" (l. 56) is an outward manifestation of a transcendent force symbolizing continuity and the promise of a pattern of life which will go on indefinitely.

In the next section, Wordsworth uses the paradox of "half-extinguished thought" (l. 58) to show us emotion in action. He suggests here that to perceive in depth the truths of Nature, the human eye must be "made quiet" (l. 47) and must learn to concentrate intensely on light and the forms it creates. Light itself is for Wordsworth a creator, but here, with the metaphor "gleams of half-extinguished thought" (l. 58), he seems to be implying that there is both a coming and a going forth of ideas. Here too, the "half-extinguished thought" (l. 58) suggests "emotion recalled in tranquillity"; emotion which he has partly given up in order that he might look on Nature with wiser eyes. "Dizzy raptures" (l. 85) and "aching joys" (l. 84) are behind the poet now after his Alfoxden experience, and they have been replaced by "elevated thoughts" (l. 95) of the mysteries behind the scene before him. In a real sense, Wordsworth is here explaining that he has had to undergo a Fall in order to be capable of having these "elevated thoughts" (l. 95). He recognizes

that the "glad animal movements" (l. 74) of his youth have given way now to activity of a more profound nature. Innocence may be gone, but true wisdom is now starting to manifest itself.

As Wordsworth speaks of his childhood responses to Nature in "Tintern Abbey," he must indeed remember his conversation with little Basil Montagu on that summer day at Alfoxden when, pestered by an overly inquisitive poet, the child insisted that he preferred to be at Kilve rather than at Liswyn Farm because, "At Kilve there was no weather-cock."¹¹ Basil needed no complex analytical assessment of either location in order to satisfy himself that he preferred one over the other--he knew intuitively that he loved Kilve best because it most appealed to his senses. Partly through his conversations with Basil and partly through knowledge gained of Hartley's concept of the various stages of mental development undergone by the human mind on the road to its maturity, Wordsworth has now come to a deeper appreciation of the significance of each one of these stages. He understands now that there is a time within the human life cycle when Nature has "no need of a remoter charm/By thought supplied, nor any interest/Unborrowed by the eye" (ll. 79-81). He knows too that although he himself has passed through this stage, it has been vital in his development both as a human being and as a poet. As he looks back now to the days when "like a roe" (l. 88) he "bounded o'er the mountains" (l. 68) in a time when to him Nature was "all in all" (l. 75), he no doubt

¹¹See Chapter 1, pp. 16-17.

remembers too the days at Alfoxden when he listened to Tom Wedgwood expounding the virtues of indoor education within a grey-walled nursery. Thoughts of such a confined childhood surely would make memories of "his former pleasures" (l. 118) all the more precious and allow him to interpret "the language of [his] former heart" (l. 117) with a deeper understanding of its message.

The ability to be able to decode the language of his youthful emotions has had the effect on Wordsworth of instilling a deeper understanding of the power of Nature to supply not only sweet sensations which can be felt "in the blood, and . . . along the heart" (l. 28), but to give Man a "sober pleasure" (l. 139) through the invocation of "elevated thoughts" (l. 95) which lead to mature wisdom. Here, I think other influences of the Alfoxden experience are implicit. As Legouis suggests, it was inevitable that during his conversations with Thelwall at Alfoxden, Wordsworth had been led "to calculate the distance his own mind had travelled since the day, however recent, when he himself [had] reasoned in the same manner."¹² Wordsworth seems to affirm this conclusion in the following lines:

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue.

(ll. 88-93)

Here too, Wordsworth might be remembering the youth Hazlitt who arrived

¹²Legouis, p. 365.

at Alfoxden with his mind overburdened with the philosophies of the world and who took no time from his books to gain the "spontaneous wisdom"¹³ which would inevitably come, as it did to Wordsworth, when he studied her lessons with "wise passiveness."¹⁴ Also, "the still, sad music of humanity" (l. 91) might be an allusion to the turn taken by the French Revolution in 1798 and to Coleridge's reaction to it, or to the poverty and general misery which Godwinism, the philosophy dear to Wordsworth as a youth, had been unsuccessful in eradicating from Europe.

Wordsworth has come now to the point where he has imposed a form of order on the chaos of the universe seen in his younger days. He is aware of a "presence" (l. 94) which resides in light, water, air, sky, "and in the mind of man" (l. 99). As yet, for Wordsworth, this "presence" is not the one implied by Coleridge in "The Eolian Harp," but he has taken the step necessary in the development of all poets whose subject matter is philosophy, for as Northrop Frye points out, this "presence," called "God" or called "a spirit . . . that rolls through all things" (ll. 100-102), is the awakening force for the creation of all poetry. As Frye further explains:

From many points of view there could hardly be a greater contrast than the contrast between the "motion and a spirit" discovered by Wordsworth in Tintern Abbey and the chevalier discovered by Hopkins in the windhover, yet the tendency to anchor a spiritual vision in an empirical psychological

¹³"The Tables Turned," Poetical Works, p. 377.

¹⁴"Expostulation and Reply," Poetical Works, p. 377.

experience is common to both.¹⁵

Wordsworth here implies that he is at one with the universe and with the power which controls that universe, whatever that power may be named. The internalization of landscape is now complete, and he asks that his sister begin a similar process so that she too can store up memories which will help her through "The dreary intercourse of daily life" (l. 131). In this final verse paragraph, Wordsworth's vision has extended itself to the future, but only because at the present time, he can see the joys of his own past in the light of Dorothy's eyes.

In his biography of Dorothy, De Selincourt stresses the importance of the poem "Tintern Abbey" to Lyrical Ballads and he stresses too, the role of Wordsworth's sister in its composition:

No holiday that brother and sister ever took together left a deeper mark either upon his own memories, or upon English poetry. The lines composed on that last day of the tour, and finished as they re-entered Bristol, were at once William's greatest contribution to his coming volume and the fullest tribute to what Dorothy had been to him ever since she had joined him at Racedown, three years before.¹⁶

Wordsworth can now express the "love, and thought, and joy"¹⁷ which were a part of his sister's gift to him. He realizes that without her instruction, not only here, but at Alfoxden and Racedown as well, he would have been unable to have come to his present state of self-knowledge.

¹⁵Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 154.

¹⁶Dorothy Wordsworth, p. 88.

¹⁷See Chapter 3, p. 52.

He now wishes for her, times of quiet contemplation such as he had experienced as he walked alone on moonlit nights at Alfoxden, and he cautions her to store up memories in case "solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief" (l. 143) should, at a later date, come into her life (which indeed they did) to mar her happiness.

Wordsworth had spent a year enjoying the mists, the winds and the rains of Alfoxden, not to mention the moon which was for him a constant source of poetic inspiration. When he came to Alfoxden, he had been a convalescent from the faulty ideologies of the world and from his own personal tragedies. When he left Alfoxden, he was completely cured, and restored in his faith in Nature and in Man. Coleridge had helped to effect this cure, as had little Basil, and the many visitors to Alfoxden. Dorothy, too, had played a major role in bringing the poet back to happiness. But Wordsworth's first love was always Nature, and what better proof can we have that she had not failed him at Alfoxden than the beautiful prayer he offers for his sister in "Tintern Abbey":

. . . Therefore let the
moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee: and, in after years,
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh!
then,
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
Should be thy portion, with what healing
thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me
And these my exhortations.

(ll. 134-146)

In the five years since Wordsworth had last visited Tintern Abbey, he had himself suffered solitude, fear, pain and grief and he had seen its effects in the lives of those he loved. He had also suffered the pain brought about by "Rash judgments [and] the sneers of selfish men" (l. 129) when he had been falsely accused of being a French spy at Alfoxden. To him, the influence of "The dreary intercourse of daily life" (l. 131) was well known, for he had experienced it in his own life, and he had seen it in the face of young Charles Lamb when he had visited Alfoxden the previous summer. He knew the effects of city living, too, for he had spent days at Alfoxden listening to Coleridge tell of his childhood pent up in London's Christ's Hospital School. Godwinism had failed him, the French Revolution had been lost to him as a cause, and Annette Vallon and the little daughter whom he had never seen had apparently been cut off from him forever. But when he left Alfoxden, all was right in his world. As Legouis points out, "it was still in search of some assurance of happiness that he turned once more to nature."¹⁸ He found this assurance in the Quantock Hills where, as Legouis suggests, "At last he recognized the principle of his existence; it was joy."¹⁹ As a brother, of course, his immediate response was a wish to share this principle with his beloved sister. However, as a poet, because of the Alfoxden experience, he was able to do much more. Through his poetry, he began to share it

¹⁸ Legouis, p. 382.

¹⁹ Ibid.

with all the world.

Within fifty years of Wordsworth's departure from Alfoxden, an American writer, Henry David Thoreau, took a few essential tools and went alone into the woods of Walden, and, for a year, experienced something of the same influence from his surroundings as did Wordsworth at Alfoxden. Perhaps, if he were to sum up the effects of the Alfoxden experience on his poetic development, Wordsworth might say something similar to the words used by Thoreau when he left Walden:

I learned this, at least, from my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws will be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. . . . If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put foundations under them.²⁰

Throughout his life, one of William Wordsworth's dreams was that one day he would become a great poet. The Alfoxden experience helped him to turn this dream into a reality.

²⁰ Henry David Thoreau, Walden and Other Writings (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. 288.

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