

**WORDSWORTH.  
[LONDON-1903]**

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Wordsworth. [London-1903] by Walter Raleigh

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**WALTER RALEIGH**

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# WORDSWORTH

BY

WALTER RALEIGH

Author of

'Style,' 'The English Novel,' 'Milton,' &c.

LONDON

EDWARD ARNOLD

1903

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## INTRODUCTION

“If an author, by any single composition, has impressed us with respect for his talents, it is useful to consider this as affording a presumption that on other occasions where we have been displeased he, nevertheless, may not have written ill or absurdly ; and further, to give him so much credit for this one composition as may induce us to review what has displeased us, with more care than we should otherwise have bestowed on it.” This modest plea, addressed by Wordsworth to his contemporaries, was by them utterly rejected. It is the purpose of these pages to consider it anew ; to approach the poetry of Wordsworth with a favourable predisposition ; to attempt to read it as he would have wished it to be read, and to find in it what he attempted to express.

Literary criticism is a thing of many kinds and many shapes ; but the largest part of it perhaps is judicial. To distinguish the good from the bad, whether by a fine taste or by the aid of fixed prin-

cipling, to praise and to blame, to approve and to condemn,—these are recognised activities of the critic. And for Wordsworth, it may be said, all this has long since been done. His cause is judged. His position is secure. He has taken his rank high among the greatest. The finest part of his work has been separated from the inferior bulk, so that new readers of his poetry may make straight for the noblest numbers, without wasting time in reading what the poet, less happy than they, wasted time in writing. Is there anything worth doing, it may be asked, that yet remains to be done?

No doubt, for the rougher purposes of justice, the cause is judged. But there will always remain a certain curious minority of the human race whose desire is not so much to judge a poet as to understand him. Like psychologists in a law-court, they take little interest in the verdict, which sound sense may easily supply; much in the process, for the light it throws at odd angles upon human nature. Or, like antiquaries, they attempt to reconstruct a vanished order from fragments that others are content to use as ornaments. The critic who believes, with Wordsworth, that poets are "men speaking to men," will find something precious in the least of their remains. One problem is here which he cannot neglect. Wordsworth, besides his poetry, has left a full



body of criticism on his own work. He was a critic almost as soon as he was a poet, and his theory of poetry is inextricably entangled with his practice of it. We know that he professed a method peculiar to himself, and that his judgments passed on his own writings are at many points in violent conflict with the judgments of his contemporaries and of later critics. Of Tennyson he said, "He is not much in sympathy with what I should myself most value in my attempts, viz. the spirituality with which I have endeavoured to invest the material universe, and the moral relations under which I have wished to exhibit its most ordinary appearances." When advised to add a stanza to the *Idiot Boy*—that great rock of offence in the canon of his works—he excused himself because "the narration of the poem is so rapid and impassioned that I could not find a place in which to insert the stanza without checking the progress of it, and so leaving a deadness upon the feeling." And to many utterances like this must be added the convincing testimony that Wordsworth was habitually unconscious of inequalities in his work, and took a keen delight in crooning over to himself his least admired compositions—

Like a river murmuring  
And talking to itself when all things else  
Were still.

Finally, we know that this poet, who held himself to be not as other poets are, who obstinately followed a way of his own, and, so far from guarding his secret, explained it, at great length and with much iteration, to the world at large, does actually at times awaken in the breasts of the most judicial of his readers a new sensation, a passing suspicion, at least, of untried possibilities in the scope and power of the poetic art. What he constantly professes he does sometimes achieve. Are not his professions and his method worthy of the closest examination even where he seems to have failed?

Impatient critics, hungry for an end of the cause, have suggested a solution of the problem. They feel a certain difficulty in explaining the amazing inequality of Wordsworth's poetry. If they were quite consistent they would not attempt to explain it, but would frankly assert that it is no part of the business of a selective and judicial criticism to show how bad poems come to be written. Yet in case the question should be pressed they are ready with an answer. There were two Wordsworths. They were born on the same day, lived the same life, and wrote with the same pen. Some of the poems belong wholly to the one, some wholly to the other. More usually the partners collaborated, taking turns with the pen until the poem was complete. And the

difference between them was simply this, that the less loquacious of the two was inspired, and there is an end of the matter. So the selective and judicial method of criticism receives the stamp of divinity. The poet is no longer a man speaking to men, but a reed through which a god fitfully blows.

Any effort to understand Wordsworth, to sympathise with his aims and achievements, to look the way that he is pointing, and to accompany him on his journey, must take account of the man as a single-minded and single-hearted person, expressing himself in all his works. A criticism of a poet that omits all reference to his failures is as futile a thing as a biography of a great soldier that passes in silence over his defeats. Indeed it is from the defeats that most may commonly be learned, for there the same genius and boldness that lead to victory are seen over-reaching themselves, planning too ambitiously, trusting too superbly, until at the crisis and height they are broken by their own excess. Of Wordsworth in particular it is hardly true to say that his strength and his weakness are closely knit up together; rather they are the same; his strength at its best is weakness made perfect, his weakness is the wasteful ebullition of his strength. It may be just and necessary to pronounce some of his poems childish, and others dull or silly; it cannot