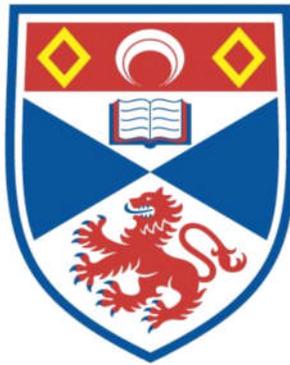


WORDSWORTH AND DEATH

JOAN LENNON

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews**



1985

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Wordsworth and Death

by

Joan Lennon

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
University of St Andrews, 1984.



I, Joan Lennon, hereby certify that this thesis which is approximately 100,000 words in length has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

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Abstract

Wordsworth is known as the poet of joy and hope, and to associate his name with death may seem at first strange. Yet, according to his own estimation, he was the poet not simply of joy but of "the very heart of man," of "human kind, and what we are," of "men as they are men within themselves." Any vision of human nature which does not take into account the facts of mortality and bereavement is blinkered and inevitably inadequate—and Wordsworth was committed to clarity of perception and the fullest insights of the Imagination. He did not shy away from the implications of "our mortal Nature;" throughout his career, he sought to portray in poetry the place of death in human life.

Two basic ways of understanding mortality are considered in this thesis: the first is death as disjunction, extinction, the end; the second is death as part of a larger continuity, a threshold, a stage. The conflict between these two visions was fundamental to Wordsworth's thought and writing. Isolation and despair were the corollaries of the first vision, while the capacity for love and hope which was essential to the life of the human spirit was nurtured and made possible by the second. Wordsworth wrestled in his writings with the effects of these different visions of death on the complexities of human nature.

The thesis has been divided into three main parts. Section I - Death in Wordsworth's Time - seeks to place the poet into a historical context. Section II - Death in Wordsworth's Life - is concerned with Wordsworth's personal experiences of loss and feelings about ^{his own} mortality. And in Section III - Death in Wordsworth's Poetry - what he had to say about death is considered in relation to some of the other major themes in his poetry.

Life, death, eternity! momentous themes
Are they - and might demand a seraph's tongue,
Were they not equal to their own support;
And therefore no incompetence of mine
Could do them wrong.

The Excursion, VIII, ll. 10-14.

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Abbreviations

a) Names:

- W.W. = William Wordsworth (1770-1850)
D.W. = Dorothy Wordsworth (1771-1855)
C.W. = Christopher Wordsworth (1774-1846)
M.W. = Mary Wordsworth (1770-1859)
R.W. = Richard Wordsworth (1768-1816)
S.H. = Sara Hutchinson (1775-1835)
I.F. = Isabella Fenwick (1783-1856)
S.T.C. = Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)
H.C.R. = Henry Crabb Robinson (1775-1867)

b) Letters, Poetry and Prose:

- Letters (1787-1805) = The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years 1787-1805 ed. Ernest de Selincourt (rev. Chester L. Shaver), second edition, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967.
- Letters (1806-1811) = The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years Part I 1806-1811 ed. Ernest de Selincourt (rev. Mary Moorman), second edition, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969.
- Letters (1812-1820) = The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years Part II 1812-1820 ed. Ernest de Selincourt (rev. Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill), second edition, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970.
- Letters (1821-1828) = The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years Part I 1821-1828 ed. Ernest de Selincourt (rev. Alan G. Hill), second edition, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978.
- Letters (1829-1834) = The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years Part II 1829-1834 ed. Ernest de Selincourt (rev. Alan G. Hill), second edition, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979.
- Letters (1835-1839) = The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years Part III 1835-1839 ed. Ernest de Selincourt (rev. Alan

G. Hill), second edition, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1982.

- Letters (1840) = The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. The Later Years Vol. II 1831-1840 ed. Ernest de Selincourt, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1939.
- Letters (1841-1850) = The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. The Later Years. Vol. III 1841-1850 ed. Ernest de Selincourt, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1939.
- PW I-V = The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1940-1949 (5 vols).
- Prelude (1798-1799) = The Prelude 1798-1799 by William Wordsworth ed. Stephen Parrish, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977.
- Prelude (1805-1806)
and
Prelude (1850) = William Wordsworth. The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850 ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and Stephen Gill, New York: W.W. Norton, 1979.
- Prose I-III = The Prose Works of William Wordsworth ed. Warwick Jack Burgogne Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974 (3 vols).
- c) Other
- Chron. (1770-1799) = Mark Layfayette Reed Wordsworth. The Chronology of the Early Years 1770-1799 Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967.
- Chron. (1800-1815) = Mark Layfayette Reed Wordsworth. The Chronology of the Middle Years 1800-1815 Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975.
- DNB = Dictionary of National Biography ed. Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1885-1900.

- Journal I, II = Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth
ed. Ernest de Selincourt, London:
Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1952 (2
vols).
- Memoirs I, II = Christopher Wordsworth Memoirs
of William Wordsworth. Poet-
Laureate. D.C.L. London: Edward
Moxon, 1851 (2 vols).
- Moorman I = Mary Moorman William Wordsworth:
A Biography: The Early Years
1770-1803 Oxford: The Clarendon
Press, 1957.
- Moorman II = Mary Moorman William Wordsworth:
A Biography: The Later Years
1803-1850 Oxford: The Clarendon
Press, 1965.

Introduction

In 1882, a member of the Wordsworth Society opened a paper, entitled "On Wordsworth's View of Death," with the words: "There is surprisingly little about Death in Wordsworth's poems ...";¹ and until recent years, most critics would appear to have agreed. The effect of John Wordsworth's death on the poet's increasing religious orthodoxy and concurrent poetic decline has been commented on,² and individual poems referring to mortality, such as the Lucy poems or "We are Seven," have been analysed and appreciated, but the subject seemed to stop there. Death was not felt to be a topic of compelling importance to the study of Wordsworth, and it is only in the last few decades that its place in Wordsworth's poetry has come to be reconsidered.

Geoffrey Hartman, in his book Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814, argues that the basis of Wordsworth's poetic impulse lay in the need to confront the thought of "an absolute death, ... a final separation from the sources of renewal,"³ that is, from nature. Difficult as it is to summarize Hartman's detailed analysis, a single quotation may suffice to show the place death holds in his interpretation:

The supervening consciousness, which Wordsworth names Imagination in Prelude VI, ... is consciousness of self raised to apocalyptic pitch. The effects of "Imagination" are always the same: a moment of arrest, the ordinary vital continuum being interrupted; a separation of the traveler-poet from familiar nature; a thought of death or judgment or of the reversal of what is taken to be the order of nature; a feeling of solitude or loss or separation. Not all of these need be present at the same time, and some are obliquely present. But the most important consequence is the poem itself, whose developing structure is an expressive reaction to this consciousness. The poem transforms static into continuous by a gradual crescendo which is the obverse of the fixating initial shock.... The poem ... is on the side of "nature" and against the "imagination" which fathered it; it hides the intense and even apocalyptic self-consciousness from which it took its rise; it is generically a veiling of its source.⁴

The Wordsworthian imagination, Hartman suggests, is antithetical to the poetry which it prompts, and is aligned instead to a consciousness of death.

David Ferry, in The Limits of Mortality, also considers death in relation to the workings of Wordsworth's poetic imagination. Like Hartman and indeed many other writers, Ferry identifies consciousness of self and consciousness of (as opposed to communion with) nature with an awareness of mortality. Of poetry he says:

If mortal man can relate himself to the eternal only through the mediation of symbols, and mortal nature is the repository of symbols, then poetry - vision by means of symbols - is the only imaginative means available to him. But if the poet really believes that there was a time when his relation to the eternal did not need the mediation of symbols, then he must always be impelled to lament that time as having possessed and made use of a higher form of imagination than poetry.

Nature is at once the source of power for such a poet, since it is the source of his symbols, and a limitation, since his awareness of it is his acknowledgment that he is mortal.⁵

Ferry sees in Wordsworth's poetry a deep ambivalence and even hatred towards itself and its subjects "Nature and Man," and a yearning towards a state in which the limits of mortality, mortal nature and mortal human nature, would be finally obliterated.

What Hartman and Ferry are primarily concerned with are theories of the imagination, and the place which the concept of mortality holds in Wordsworth's poetics. Other recent critics have taken different approaches to the

subject. David Douglas Devlin, for example, suggests in Wordsworth and the Poetry of Epitaph⁶ that the epitaph is the basic Wordsworthian poetic form, comprising as it does memory and hope, the particular and the universal, the qualities of a "spot of time." In Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin, Thomas McFarland argues that death is one aspect out of many in "the diaspractive triad ... incompleteness, fragmentation, and ruin,"⁷ which seems to him a basic Romantic construct. And John Beer, in his two books Wordsworth and the Human Heart and Wordsworth in Time,⁸ relates Wordsworth's ideas about death to concepts such as the Newtonian universe, Coleridge's idea of the One Life, and interest in hypnotism, magnetism, and trance.

Less central to the arguments of all of these critics is an approach to death and bereavement as human experiences, occurring in a particular time and place, to particular people, and responded to by a poet of the same period. Wordsworth wrote of his intentions in 1800, in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads:

The principal object ... which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature ...⁹;

in the Prelude:

... thus haply shall I teach,
Inspire, through unadulterated ears
Pour rapture, tenderness, and hope, - my theme
No other than the very heart of man,
As found among the best of those who live,
Not unexalted by religious hope,
Nor uninformed, by books, good books, though few,
In Nature's presence: thence may I select
Sorrow that is not sorrow, but delight;
And miserable love, that is not pain
To hear of, for the glory that redounds
Therefrom to human kind, and what we are ...¹⁰;

and in conversation with Henry Crabb Robinson in 1837:

[Wordsworth] repeated emphatically what he had said before to me, that he did not expect or desire from posterity any other fame than that which would be given him for the way in which his poems exhibit man in his essentially human character and relations - as child, parent, husband, the qualities which are common to all men as opposed to those which distinguish one man from another.¹¹

The emphasis of this thesis is on aspects such as these, on death and bereavement as human experiences which Wordsworth perceived around him and felt within himself, the "uncommon

man" engaged by common experience. According to Wordsworth, poets

Have each for his peculiar dower, a sense
By which he is enabled to perceive
Something unseen before,¹²

and for him, the realm of individual discovery lay not in the distant or the bizarre, but in "men as they are men within themselves."¹³ It was there, paradoxically, that his gift of expressing the "unseen" was to be exercised, for it was not, in fact, the unseen but the seen yet unperceived which was to be his subject.¹⁴ It seemed to Wordsworth that what Coleridge described as "the film of familiarity"¹⁵ must first be stripped from his readers' eyes before they could truly understand human nature. The centrality of death to Wordsworth's chosen poetic field is undeniable; the word "mortal" means equally "human being" and "subject to death." Any vision of human nature which does not take into account the facts of mortality and bereavement is blinkered and inevitably inadequate, while Wordsworth's commitment was to clarity of vision, to the Imagination,

... which, in truth,
Is but another name for absolute strength
And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
And Reason in her most exalted mood.¹⁶

Throughout his career as a poet, he wrestled with ways of truly perceiving and expressing the place of death in life.

The fundamental human perception of death is of disjunction. Dr. Johnson defined death as "the extinction of life; the departure of the soul from the body,"¹⁷ and traditional images of mortality - the grim reaper with his scythe, Fate with her shears, a shattered column, a pitcher broken at the well, the hourglass and the skeleton - all attest to a sense of death as an end, as extinction and discontinuity. The deaths of others cut through our relationships and loves, and our own deaths disjoin us from our past and what we had thought to be our earthly future. The fear of death's disjunctions ran like a black thread through Wordsworth's own life, but he, like many before him, also perceived alternatives. In the face of discontinuity the human response is to look for continuity, for patterns of meaning large enough to subsume

disjunctions. In this way, death is defused of some of its desperateness, by being translated into a subordinate stage in a longer process, rather than an arbitrary and irrevocable end. The conflict between these two visions of mortality formed an essential part of Wordsworth's writings throughout his career.

As poet of "the very heart of man," Wordsworth was not concerned only with death as a physical reality. He saw that love and hope were as essential to the life of the human spirit as food and warmth were to the human body. Without love, he wrote, "we are as dust,"¹⁸ and in his poetry he sought to portray human relatedness to others and to Nature. It seemed to him that isolation and despair were the corollaries of death perceived as the final disjunction, while the capacity for love and hope was both nurtured and made possible by a vision of continuity which over-rides death. In spite of a vivid sense that disjunction and despair might be the only realities, Wordsworth struggled against hopelessness. Sometimes with the swift conviction of inspiration, sometimes only by a painstaking labour of will, the poet combatted darkness with images of continued life. Hope and despair, continuity and disjunction, a threshold or the shutting of a door - these were the elements of what Wordsworth described as "Death and its twofold aspect."¹⁹

The purpose of this thesis is to explore Wordsworth's understanding of the place of death in human life, the different ways in which death may be perceived, and the effect of those perceptions on the interrelationships that make up "human kind, and what we are." The thesis has been divided into three main parts. Section I - Death in Wordsworth's Time - seeks to place the poet in a historical context by considering such subjects as the physical facts of mortality in his period and common attitudes to bereavement and dying. A picture of death in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has been built up primarily from sources other than Wordsworth's own writings, but comments by the poet on issues of his day relating to death have also been included.

In Section II - Death in Wordsworth's Life - Wordsworth's personal struggles with mortality are

considered. Letters, conversations, poetry and prose are drawn upon in an attempt to present a picture of the place death held in the poet's private life and thoughts, in his relations "as child, parent, husband." Both the fear of death as the all-destroyer and the hope of some larger continuity of life formed a part of his experience and understanding of mortality over the years. Although parts of the story - John's death in particular - have been told many times, the full extent of Wordsworth's long engagement with thoughts of death has not before been considered. The tracing of a theme as powerful as mortality through the course of an entire life offers insights which an exclusive emphasis on a few moments only is unable to do.

Similarly, in Section III - Death in Wordsworth's Poetry - I have not restricted my attention to the products of the most famous years only, but have drawn instead on Wordsworth's complete works. What Wordsworth had to say about death is considered under the headings of five major themes in his poetry - Childhood and Adulthood, the Individual and Family, the Individual and the Community, the Supernatural, and Graves, Monuments and Epitaphs - and one major poem - The Excursion. The first part of this section is concerned with death and relationships among the living, while the second part concentrates on relationships between the living and the dead, and the ways in which the imagination may be educated to see beyond the merely material to a clearer vision of life and death. Each chapter explores an aspect of the poet's thoughts on mortality from his earliest expressions of them, through the period of unique insights, to the end of his lesser, later years. In some ways the passage of time changed what he had to say about death enormously; in other ways, very little; but his poetic engagement with questions of "our mortal Nature"²⁰ remained unaltered for over sixty years.

Wordsworth was a poet of joy and hope, and to associate his name with death may seem at first strange. But the joy and hope that cannot face mortality is brittle and unreliable; death must be a part of human vision, if only because it cannot permanently be excluded. In the face of death and bereavement, Wordsworth struggled toward continuity and against despair. He was the poet of joy

aware of its own perishability, and of hope

... plucked like beautiful wild flowers from the ruined tombs that border the high-ways of antiquity, to make a garland for a living forehead.²¹

Notes to Introduction

1. Mrs. Owen, Cheltenham "On Wordsworth's View of Death" in Transactions of the Wordsworth Society, No. 2, p. 39. 3 May, 1882. Mrs. Owen was one of the original members of the Society.
2. For example, John Jones remarks

Wordsworth refers his great loss [of a sense of "possible sublimity"] to two causes. The first, the gradual dulling of sensibility in the face of the natural world.... The second, ... his brother's death ... (p. 50)

Wordsworth regarded his own brother's death, in 1805, as the cause of profound alteration in himself.
(p. 141)

(The Egotistical Sublime London: Chatto and Windus, 1954). Bernard Groom writes in The Unity of Wordsworth's Poetry (London: Macmillan, 1966) that "The over-whelming sorrow for his brother's death was a turning-point in Wordsworth's religious life." (p. 97), and Francis Murray Todd suggests that

The death of John Wordsworth at sea at the beginning of 1805 was a bereavement of the most profound importance in Wordsworth's development as a man and a poet.
(p. 128)

(Politics and the Poet London: Methuen and Co., 1957). Frederick Noel Wilse Bateson remarks that the loss of John "seems ... to have dessicated [Wordsworth's] soul." (Wordsworth: A Re-Interpretation London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1956, p. 172).

Compare, on the other hand, Raymond Dexter Havens, who does not feel that John's death affected the poet's devotion to "the religion of nature" as much as is generally supposed (The Mind of the Poet Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1967, first published 1941, p. 198) or, more recently, Jonathan Wordsworth's interpretation:

[Wordsworth's] compulsive seeking for repose could not go long unsatisfied.... No doubt it was the death of his favourite brother, John, in February 1805 that carried the poet over into acceptance, but the signs had all been there the previous year. (p. 33)

(William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

3. Geoffrey Hartman Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 28.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18. Hartman explains his use of the term "apocalyptic" as follows:

By "apocalyptic," as in "apocalyptic imagination," I intend the Apocalypse of St. John (the Book of Revelation), and, more generally, the kind of imagination that is concerned with the supernatural and especially the Last Things. The term may also describe a mind which actively desires the inauguration of a

totally new epoch, whether preceding or following the end of days. And since what stands between us and the end of the (old) world is the world, I sometimes use "apocalyptic" to characterize any strong desire to cast out nature and to achieve an unmediated contact with the principle of things.

Ibid., p. x.

5. David Ferry The Limits of Mortality (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), p. 47.
6. David Douglas Devlin Wordsworth and the Poetry of Epitaph (London: The Macmillan Press, 1980).
7. Thomas McFarland Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 5.
8. John Beer Wordsworth and the Human Heart (London: Macmillan Press, 1978); and Wordsworth in Time (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).
9. Prose I, p. 122. "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1800)."
10. Prelude (1805-1806), XII, ll. 237-48.
11. Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers ed. Edith Julia Morley (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1938), p. 535.
12. Prelude (1805-1806), XII, ll. 303-5.
13. Ibid., l. 225.
14. As Wordsworth said of The Excursion:

One of my principal aims ... has been to put the commonplace truths, of the human affections especially, in an interesting point of view; and rather to remind men of their knowledge, as it lurks inoperative and unvalued in their own minds, than to attempt to convey recondite or refined truths.

- Letters (1812-1820), p. 238. W.W. to S.T.C. 22 May, 1815.
15. S.T.C. Biographia Literaria ed. George Watson, (London: Dent, 1977), p. 169.
 16. Prelude (1805-1806), XIII, ll. 167-70.
 17. Samuel Johnson Dictionary of the English Language (London: Knappton, Longman, etc., 1755).
 18. Prelude (1805-1806), XIII, l. 152.
 19. PW V, pp. 1-312. The Excursion, V, l. 554.
 20. PW IV, pp. 279-85. "Immortality Ode," l. 147.
 21. Prose II, p. 16. "Reply to 'Mathetes'."

I: Death in Wordsworth's Time

The modern western picture of death is in many ways widely different from that of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Today, impersonality is the keynote of our response to mortality. The media, for example, thrust the deaths of thousands of strangers at us daily, to which, by force of numbers and the barriers that separate us, we are unable to respond.¹ On another level, the indiscriminate and largely unimaginable nature of nuclear war also feeds a sense of death as impersonal and somehow unreal. And in terms of medical practice, the ubiquitous and omnivorous death of Wordsworth's time has been changed into an event segregated, sterilized, and unseen. The majority of deaths occur in old age and few now take place in the home or in the company of assembled family and friends. The dying are kept out of sight and the dead are laid in cemeteries isolated from the rest of life, having no real place in it.

Looking back from such a context, it is difficult at first to realize just how central the experiences of death and bereavement were to Wordsworth's time. One of the purposes of this section is to attempt, briefly, a picture of death in another age, in order to give the reader some kind of historical perspective. This does not pretend to

be a full social history of mortality in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and in particular I have not attempted to portray more than very sketchily the more subtle currents of change through the period. What is intended, however, is a general overview of, first, the physical facts of death in the period (basic demographic patterns, causes of death, understanding of medicine and disease, military and legislated fatalities) and, second, the main aspects of the period's response to death and the experience of loss (major religious ideas about the after-life, attitudes to grief, literary representations of death and bereavement). Third, I hope to place Wordsworth in his historical context by considering his response to specific issues related to mortality, and the similarity or dissimilarity of his reactions to those of his contemporaries, before considering the poet and death in more detail in Sections II and III.

1.) Basic Demography

The last half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth was a period of transition for Britain in many ways, and her demographic structure was no exception. Two major aspects of the change - a rise in the population and increased in-migration¹ to the cities - affected the way in which people experienced death by altering the conditions under which they lived. Old patterns were shifting and, paradoxically, an increased population meant for some a decreased chance of survival. The third major element of the demographic picture - a high rate of infant and child mortality - showed little sign of change, however.

There is often a distinction to be drawn between what happened at a given time and what the people living at that time believed was happening. The first British census did not take place until 1801, and in the preceding period the science of statistics was not highly developed. Attitudes to the nation's patterns of mortality were based on assumptions that did not always correspond to the demographic reality. A classical education influenced many eminent demographers² to see the present state of civilization as inferior to that of ancient Greece or Rome, and these tended to accept the corollary that population numbers must also have dropped. Believers in the march of progress, on the other hand, held that the population must be growing. David Hume, in attempting to compare the population of the present-day with that of the ancient world, wrote cautiously in 1752:

If everything else be equal, it seems natural to expect that wherever there are most happiness and virtue and the wisest institutions there will also be most people.³

Arthur Young, in his Political Arithmetic (1774), argued that employment creates population; as Britain's manufactures increased, so must the numbers of her people.⁴ Richard Price, in an Essay on the Population of England (1780), held that war, emigration, high prices, luxury and taxes were depopulating the nation.⁵ However, until the writings of Thomas Malthus,⁶ there appeared to be little disagreement that a large and growing population was essential to the country's prosperity. When Thomas Love

Peacock satirized Malthusian fears of overpopulation in 1817, it undoubtedly still seemed more amusing to his contemporaries than it does to us:

Mr. Fax [Malthus]: "Bachelors and spinsters I decidedly venerate. The world is overstocked with featherless bipeds. More men than corn, is a fearful pre-eminence, the sole and fruitful cause of penury, disease, war, plague, pestilence, and famine."⁷

As the nineteenth century progressed, however, the rise in the population became indisputable, and its effects began to be felt. The Census Report of 1851 stated that "The increase of population in the half of this century nearly equals the increase of all preceeding ages;"⁸ and the pressure this created on the nation's "goods and services" was alarming, causing Benjamin Disraeli in 1845 to exclaim:

What are your invasions of the barbarous nations, your Goths and Visigoths, your Lombards and Huns, to our Population Returns!⁹

A modern demographic description of the period is far less colourful. Beginning around 1740, the rate of natural increase steadily accelerated, reaching, from around 1780 on, a level unprecedented in Britain's history and not equalled since. (See figures a and b). Earlier marriages and "increased nuptiality"¹⁰ are felt to account for a rise in the birth rate; a simultaneous substantial drop in the death rate is uniformly acknowledged by modern demographers, but its causes are hotly disputed.¹¹ A chart of the average life expectancy of different classes in different places helps to fill in a general picture of the age.¹²

Localities	Professional persons or gentry and their families	Tradesmen and their families	Labourers, artisans, servants, and their families
Unions in the County of Wilts.	50	48	33
Kendal Union	45	39	34
Derby	49	38	21
Strand Union	43	33	24
Truro	40	33	29
Kensington Union	44	29	26
Whitechapel Union	45	27	22
Leeds Borough	44	27	19
Bethnal Green	45	26	16
Bolton Union	34	23	18
Liverpool	35	22	15

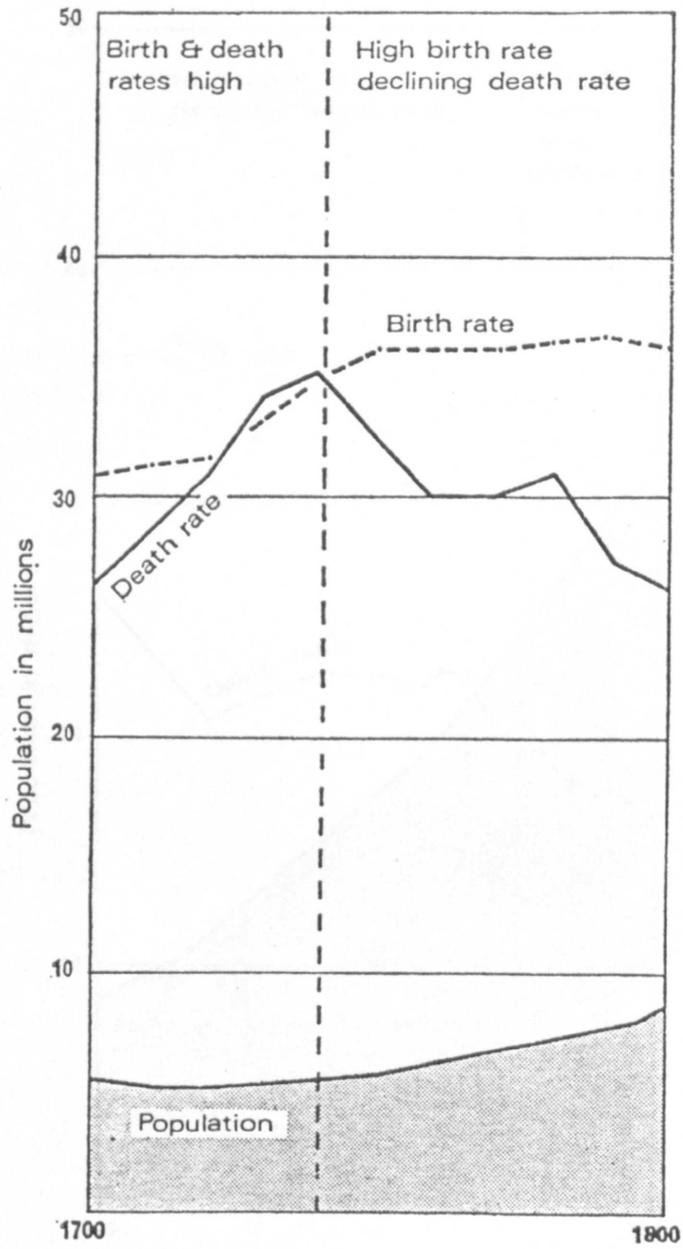


Figure a) Birth rates, death rates, and population totals in Britain, 1700 - 1800.

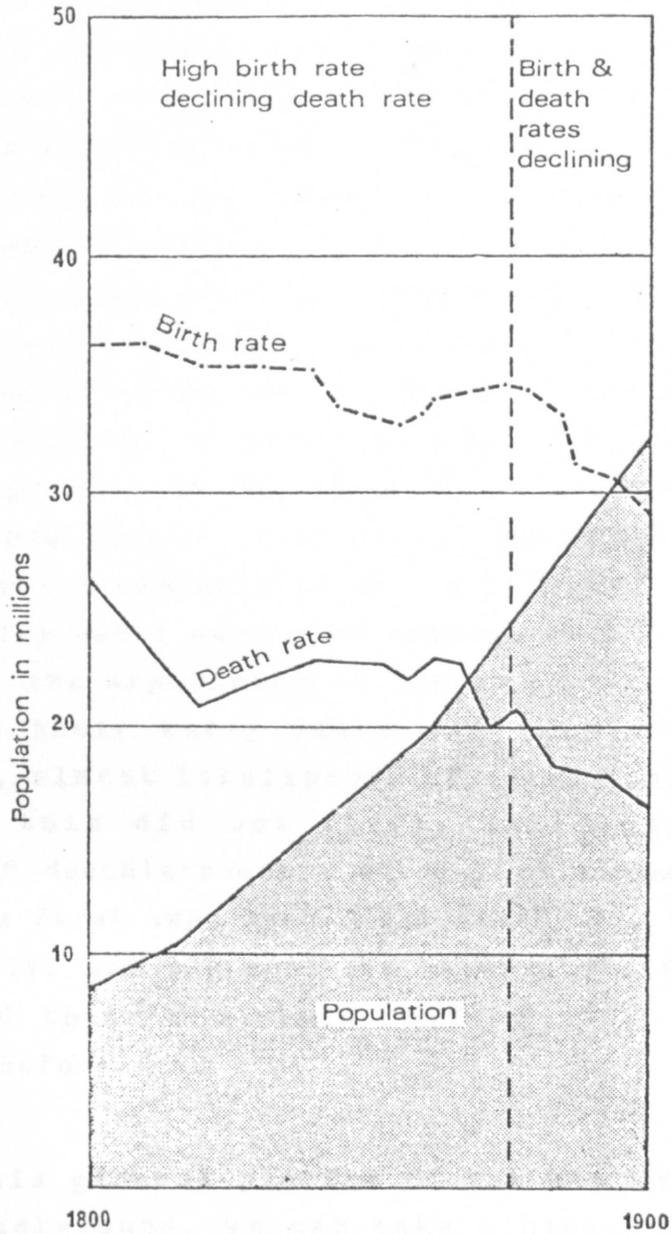


Figure b) Birth rates, death rates, and population totals in Britain, 1800. - 1900.

This period of steadily growing population was also a time of changing living patterns. In-migration was disrupting the continuity of country life, and creating conditions of appalling over-crowding and poverty in the urban and new industrial areas. Part of a large pattern of change brought on by the Industrial Revolution and contemporary agrarian reform, the move to the cities in search of prosperity was often the prelude to hard times and early death instead.

London was sometimes called "the countryman's grave," but it was even more fatal to children. In 1770, the year of Wordsworth's birth, the "London Bills of Mortality"¹³ showed the burials of children aged 5 years and under accounting for 45.1% of the total.¹⁴ In a sermon published in 1826, Gerard Thomas Noel stated that "One half of the human population are said to die in infancy."¹⁵ Although urban mortality rates were more extreme than in the rest of the country, the experience of losing a sister or brother or child in their early years was common-place. The possibility, almost likelihood, of death hung over every child, but this did not stifle childhood's ageless conviction of deathlessness. Wordsworth himself was over forty when he first experienced the death of a child within his own family, but the contrast between children's joyful vitality and their uncertain hold on life haunted his poetry long before that time.

With this general picture of the demography of the period as background, we can take a closer look at the causes of death in Wordsworth's time.

1. Wordsworth in 1835 wrote of his fears for the life of human compassion in the face of too great need:

Sights of abject misery, perpetually recurring, harden the heart of the community. In the perusal of history, and of works of fiction, we are not, indeed, unwilling to have our commiseration excited by such objects of distress as they present to us; but, in the concerns of real life, men know that such emotions are not given to be indulged for their own sakes: there, the conscience declares to them that sympathy must be followed by action; and if there exist a previous conviction that the power to relieve is utterly inadequate to the demand, the eye shrinks from communication with wretchedness, and pity and compassion languish ...

Prose III, p. 247. "Postscript, 1835."

1.) Basic Demography

1. "In-migration" is the movement of people within a country, as opposed to between countries.
2. The word "demography" does not occur until 1855, when it was used by the Frenchman Achilles Guillard. (James Bonar Theories of Population from Raleigh to Arthur Young London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1931, p. 15.)
3. David Hume "The Populousness of Ancient Nations" in Philosophical Works 4 vols, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1854) Vol. III, p. 415.
4. Arthur Young Political Arithmetic (London: W. Nicoll, 1774), pp. 61-2.
5. Richard Price An Essay on the Population of England (London: T. Cadell, 1780), p. 29.
6. Thomas Robert Malthus First Essay on Population 1798, reprinted for the Royal Economic Society (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1926). Cf. also Grosvenor Talbot Griffith Population Problems of the Age of Malthus (Cambridge: University Press, 1926), p. 90:

Populousness, national wealth and popular welfare [had come] to be regarded as entirely interdependent.... The Essay, backed up by the Census, killed the axiom that under all circumstances an increasing population is desirable.

Anti-Malthusian feeling was wide-spread and long-continued, however. (See below.)

7. Thomas Love Peacock Melincourt (London: Constable and Co., Ltd., 1924), p. 75. Cf. also Thomas Hood's satirical poem "Ode to Mr. Malthus:"

There is a dreadful surplus to demolish;
And yet some Wrongheads
With thick not long heads,
Poor metaphysicians!
Sign petitions
Capital punishment to abolish;
And in the face of censuses such vast ones
New hospitals contrive

For keeping alive,
Laying first stones, the dolts! instead of
last ones....

Why should we let precautions so absorb us,
Or trouble shipping with a quarantine -
When if I understand the thing you mean,
We ought to import the Cholera Morbus!

in Poetical Works of Thomas Hood (London: F. Warne and Co., 1890), p. 456. Wordsworth responded angrily to Malthusian ideas:

It is monstrous to affirm with Mr Malthus, that the World is overpeopled - yet they err grievously on the other side who talk as if there were no obligations upon people to reflect before marriage how their children are to be maintained. If impolitic or unjust laws stand in the way of the earth being as productive as it might be, and impediments are thus thrown in the way of marriage, that is no reason why poor people should go about marrying as fast and as recklessly as they can - still less is it a reason, as Mr M lays it down, that they should not marry at all -

Letters (1829-1834), pp. 405-6. W.W. to Lady Beaumont. 8 July, 1831.

8. Quoted in John Towers Ward, ed., Popular Movements c. 1830-1850 (London: Macmillan Press, 1970), p.5.

9. Benjamin Disraeli Sybil or the Two Nations (London: Peter Davies, 1927), p. 160.

10. Richard Lawton "Regional Population Trends in England and Wales, 1750-1971" in John Hobcraft and Phillip Rees, ed., Regional Demographic Development (London: Croom Helm, 1977), p. 32.

11. William Petersen (Malthus London: Heinemann, 1979) feels that the enclosure movement and related agricultural innovations, producing a supply of food improved in quality and quantity, was mainly responsible for the drop in the death rate (pp. 162-3), while George Melvyn Howe (Man, Environment and Disease in Britain New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1972) describes the same period as "a time of unprecedented malnutrition." (p. 181). The verdict of Thomas McKeown and R.G. Brown ("Medical evidence related to English population changes in the 18th century" in Population Studies (London) 9 (2), 1955), that "The chief indictment of hospital work at this period is not that it did no good, but that it positively did harm." (p. 125), is disputed by John Woodward (To Do the Sick No Harm London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), who also queries the statistical basis of Florence Nightingale's reports to government. Jenner's discovery of cow-pox vaccine is accepted by most as having reduced the mortality rate of small-pox, but its effect on the overall death rate is doubted by Petersen (p. 160). Leslie Clarkson (Death, Disease and Famine in Pre-Industrial England Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), among others, suggests that "Some diseases, it seems, had a life cycle of their own, regardless of the state of the food supplies" (p. 38), but Petersen also finds this theory dubious in relation to the rate of death (p. 160).

12. Howe, p. 165. Howe appears to have drawn these figures from Sir Edwin Chadwick's Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain (1842) (ed. M.W. Flinn, -Edinburgh: University Press, 1965), pp. 220-7.

13. A collation of statistics on burials and christenings occurring "within the bills of mortality" - originally 109 parishes in and around London (the exact limits of the area varied from time to time).

14. Compare this figure with the percentage of total deaths in 1980 which occurred in the 4 years and under bracket in England and Wales: Total 581,385; 4 years and under 9,085; percentage of total 1.6%. (compiled from Annual Abstract of Statistics ed. Ethel Lawrence, No. 119, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1983, pp. 33-4.)

15. Gerard Thomas Noel "The Brevity of Human Life" in Sermons, Intended Chiefly for the Use of Families (London: John Hatchard and Son, 1826), p. 307. Noel (1782-1851) was successively vicar of Rainham, Essex, and Romsey, Hampshire. He was a close friend of Bishop Samuel Wilberforce (1805-1873), a well-known and influential High-Churchman. (DNB, Vol. 41, pp. 91-2.)

Figures:

a) George Melvyn Howe Man, Environment and Disease in Britain (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1972), p. 140.

b) Ibid., p. 185.

2.) Causes of Death:

a) Living Conditions

This was a time in which government investigators and private campaigners produced innumerable reports on the living conditions of "the lower orders" who continued to crowd into the cities. Two examples taken from the latter end of the period are representative of their findings: James Smith's report to Parliament on the state of housing in Leeds was submitted in 1845:

... close squares of houses, or yards, as they are called, ... have been erected for the accommodation of working people. Some of these, though situated in comparatively high ground, are airless from the enclosed structure, and being wholly unprovided with any form of under-drainage, or convenience, or arrangements for cleansing, are one mass of damp and filth.... The ashes, garbage, and filth of all kinds are thrown from the doors and windows of the houses upon the surface of the streets and courts.... The privies, as usual in such situations, are few in proportion to the number of inhabitants. They are open to view both in front and rear, are invariably in a filthy condition, and often remain without the removal of any portion of the filth for six months. The feelings of the people are blunted to all seeming decency, and from the constantly contaminated state of the atmosphere, a vast amount of ill-health prevails, leading to listlessness, and inducing a desire for spirits and opiates; the combined influence of the whole condition causing much loss of time, increasing poverty, and terminating the existence of many in premature death.¹

The new industrial regions brought their own variety of squalor and suffering. Alexis de Tocqueville described the Manchester area in 1835:

Thirty or forty factories rise on the top of the hills.... The wretched dwellings of the poor are scattered haphazard around them.... Heaps of dung, rubble from buildings, putrid, stagnant pools are found here and there among the houses and over the bumpy, pitted surfaces of the public places.... But who could describe the interiors of these quarters set apart, home of vice and poverty, which surround the huge palaces of industry and clasp them in their hideous folds. On ground below the level of the river and overshadowed on every side by immense workshops, stretches marshy land which widely spaced muddy ditches can neither drain nor cleanse. Narrow, twisting roads lead down to it. They are lined with one-storey houses whose ill-fitting planks and broken windows show them up, even from a distance, as the last refuge a man might find between poverty and death. None-the-less the wretched people reduced to living in them can still inspire jealousy of their fellow beings. Below some of their miserable dwellings is a row of cellars to which

a sunken corridor leads. Twelve to fifteen humans are crowded pell-mell into each of these damp, repulsive holes.²

Undoubtedly, people living under conditions like these would sicken and die at a rapid rate, but what also concerned these writers was the spiritual life of the people, the facts of vice and indecency as well as of dampness and dirt. To Wordsworth also this aspect seemed of great importance. His writings about conditions in the cities were concerned with the disruption of traditional ways of life and with the attendant moral confusion. In 1812 he wrote from London:

... the lower orders have been for upwards of thirty years accumulating in pestilential masses of ignorant population; the effects now begin to show themselves, and unthinking people cry out that the national character has been changed all at once, in fact the change has been silently going on ever since the time we were born; the disease has been growing, and now breaks out in all its danger and deformity.³

Twelve years earlier, in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, he had pointed with anxiety to "the encreasing accumulation of men in cities" as one of

... a multitude of causes unknown to former times ... now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor.⁴

The herding together of so many in the unhealthy atmosphere of the cities produced spiritual deadening and danger. Nor were the rich exempt from these effects: though placed far beyond the pains of physical want, they were similarly deprived by the opulent busyness of their lives. Wordsworth wrote of

... the pure absolute honest ignorance, in which all worldlings of every rank and situation must be enveloped, with respect to the thoughts, feelings, and images, on which the life of my Poems depends.... what have they [the poems] to do with routs, dinners, morning calls, hurry from door to door, from street to street, on foot or in Carriage ... what have they to do (to say all at once) with a life without love?⁵

To lead a life without love was to be in some sense dead, and throughout his writing career, Wordsworth continued to stress in his poetry the need for relationship and love as essential to the life of the spirit.

In Books VIII and IX of The Excursion,⁶ the Wanderer

deplored the conditions under which the new manufacturing poor lived and worked, speaking out against child labour, the break-up of the family, and the death of liberty of spirit. But, as the Solitary reminded him, people in the countryside also suffered from bad housing, low wages, long hours and poverty of body and mind. Changes brought about by the enclosure movement, and the supplanting of traditional cottage industries (such as spinning and weaving) by factories and machines,⁷ were added in this period to the age-old hardships of rural life. Writers such as George Crabbe, William Cobbett, and Benjamin Disraeli⁸ pointed out conditions in the countryside. Wordsworth also revealed much of the lives of the rural poor in his early poems - "The Female Vagrant," for example, or "The Last of the Flock," "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," "Michael," or "Repentance," "The Old Cumberland Beggar." But a comment he made in 1808 points out a difference between the work of writers like Crabbe and his own:

... nineteen out of 20 of Crabbe's Pictures are mere matters of fact; with which the Muses have just about as much to do as they have with a Collection of medical reports, or of Law cases.⁹

Wordsworth was not interested simply in the description of physical conditions which contributed to a high mortality rate: he was interested in the life and death of the human spirit.

b) Disease

The scene was laid for disease to do its work by the conditions under which people lived, conditions determined by factors such as housing, nutrition, and employment. To these must be added a number of basic misconceptions about the nature of illness and its treatment which greatly increased the likelihood of fatalities.

In Wordsworth's library at the time of his death was a volume of medical advice in the form of a long poem: The Art of Preserving Health by Dr. John Armstrong. The first book of the poem was entitled "Air," and advised:

Ye who amid this feverish world would wear
A body free of pain, of cares a mind;
Fly the rank city, shun its turbid air;
Breathe not the chaos of eternal smoke

And volatile corruption, from the dead,
The dying, sickening, and the living world
Exhaled, to sully heaven's transparent dome
With dim mortality. It is not air
That from a thousand lungs reeks back to thine,
Sated with exhalations rank and fell,
The spoil of dunghills, and the putrid thaw
Of Nature; when from shape and texture she
Relapses into fighting elements:
It is not air, but floats a nauseous mass
Of all obscene, corrupt, offensive things.¹

The miasmatic theory, which lay behind Dr. Armstrong's strictures on city air and James Smith's remarks about "the contaminated state of the atmosphere," was fundamental to the understanding of disease throughout this period. It was held that miasmas, or mists rising up out of the earth, caused disease and death.² Churchyards were considered to be one source of miasma: Dr. Lyon Playfair estimated that 2,572,580 cubic feet of poisonous gas was exhaled by London's dead every year.³ But a country lane might also exude the mists: Charlotte Brontë ascribed the illness of two of her characters to a "sweet poisoned breeze, redolent of honey-dew and miasma,"⁴ met with on an innocent evening walk in the countryside. The relation between sanitation, water supply and disease was only gradually recognized as the nineteenth century progressed and, as a result, horrifyingly unhygienic practices were commonplace. Haworth's water supply, for example, was allowed to filter through a crowded churchyard to the village below, in spite of protest from Mr. Brontë;⁵ and until 1850 one of London's drinking-water companies had its intake a few feet from the mouth of the Westbourne, Ranelagh's common sewer.⁶ While sanitation for the poor was the worst, methods of hygiene were not particularly practised by the upper classes either, and Prince Albert himself died from the effects of bad sanitation.⁷

A consideration of two "Bills of Mortality," one for the year of Wordsworth's birth, 1770, and one for 1832 (the last year in which causes of death appear in the year-end compilation), offers a rough picture of disease in the period. (See figures c and d). Endemic enteric disease was a natural consequence of the lack of sanitation and hygiene, and lay behind more deaths than doctors of the period could identify. The names of some of those they did

The LONDON GENERAL BILL of

CHRISTENINGS and BURIALS from December 12, 1769, to December 11, 1770.

Died under 2 Year: of Age	7990	20 and 30	- 1789	60 and 70	- 1468	100	- 0
Between 2 and 5	2127	30 and 40	- 2178	70 and 80	- 1026	102	- 1
5 and 10	926	40 and 50	- 1092	80 and 90	- 397	103	- 1
10 and 20	875	50 and 60	- 1603	90 and 100	- 56	107	- 1

D I S E A S E S.				CASUAL DEATHS	
		Evil	6	Miscarriage	5
		Fever, malignant	187	Mortification	68
		Fever, Scarlet	68	Palsy	18
Abortive & Stillborn	715	Fever, Spotted	18	Pleurisy	18
Aged	1230	Fever, and Purples	3214	Polypus	6
Ague	8	Fistula	8	Quinsy	2
Apoplexy & Sudden	325	Flux	15	Rash	7
Asthma & Tifick	427	French Pox	57	Rheumatism	4
Bedridden	9	Gout	63	Rickets	2
Bleeding	9	Gravel, Strangury, and Stone	24	Rising of the Lights	2
Bloody Flux	1	Grief	5	Scurvy	1986
Bursten & Rupture	11	Headach	2	Small Pox	13
Cancer	44	Head-mould	2	Sores and Ulcers	26
Canker	4	Hot, shrehead, and Water in the Head	39	Sore Throat	3
Chicken pox	2	Jaundies	162	St Anthony's Fire	3
Childbed	270	Leptosyphume	9	Stoppage in the Stomach	32
Cholick, Gripes, Twitting of the Guts	6	Inflammation	70	Swelling	2
Cold	3	Itch	1	Teeth	792
Consumption	459	Leprosy	1	Thrush	68
Convulsions	614	Lethargy	7	Tympany	3
Cough, and Hooping Cough	218	Livergrown	2	Vomiting and Loofe	5
Diabetes	4	Lunatick	83	Suffocated	3
Dropfy	839	M-adles	325	Worms	7
					6

Christened { Males 8761 } Buried { Males 11210 } Increased in the Burials. this Year 587.
 { Females 8348 } { Females 11224 }

Figure c)

**A GENERAL BILL OF ALL THE CHRISTENINGS AND BURIALS,
FROM DECEMBER 14, 1831, TO DECEMBER 11, 1832.**

Christened	{ Males - 13,501 }	Total	Buried -	{ Males - 14,280 }	Total	
	{ Females 13,470 }	26,974		{ Females 14,326 }	28,606	
Whereof have died,	5 and 10	1270	40 and 50	3086	80 and 90	848
under 2 years	5443	1113	50 and 60	3041	90 and 100	105
Between 2 and	20 and 30	2215	60 and 70	2949	100...1	103 ... 1
5 years -	2678	2749	70 and 80	2194	108.....	103 1

Increase in the Burials reported this year 3269.

DISEASES.					
Abscess - - - -	185	Fever, (Scarlet) - -	388	Sore Throat and Quinsey	25
Age, and Debility -	2948	Fever, (Typhus) - -	253	Spasm - - - - -	106
Apoplexy - - - -	470	Fistula - - - - -	4	Stone and Gravel -	23
Asthma - - - - -	1050	Gout - - - - -	65	Stricture - - - - -	28
Cancer - - - - -	100	Hæmorrhage - - - -	60	Thrush - - - - -	121
Childbirth - - - -	343	Heart, diseased - -	118	Tumour - - - - -	29
Cholera - - - - -	3200	Hernia - - - - -	37	Venereal - - - - -	5
Consumption - - - -	4499	Hooping Cough - - -	677	Worms - - - - -	6
Constipation of the	} 35	Hydrophobia - - - -	3	Unknown Causes -	837
Bowels - - - - -		Inflammation - - - -	2555	Stillborn - - - - -	912
Convulsions - - - -	2075	Inflamm. of the Bowels	604	Total of Diseases	28,111
Croup - - - - -	100	— Lungs and Pleura	98		
Dentition or Teething	373	— of the Brain -	73	CASUALTIES.	
Diabetes - - - - -	12	Insanity - - - - -	197	Drowned - - - - -	119
Diarrhœa - - - - -	47	Jaundice - - - - -	56	Died by Visitation of God	65
Dropsy - - - - -	978	Jaw-locked - - - -	11	Excessive Drinking -	12
Dropsy on the Brain	858	Liver, diseased - - -	336	Executed * - - - -	1
Dropsy on the Chest	118	Measles - - - - -	675	Found Dead - - - -	1
Dysentery - - - - -	22	Miscarriage - - - -	19	Killed by various Accid.	215
Epilepsy - - - - -	48	Mortification - - - -	262	Murdered - - - - -	3
Erysipelas - - - -	75	Paralysis - - - - -	240	Poisoned - - - - -	8
Fever - - - - -	872	Rheumatism - - - -	60	Suicides - - - - -	71
Fever, Intermit. or Ague	31	Scrophula - - - - -	18	Total of Casualties -	495
		Small Pox - - - - -	771		

* Executed this year within the Bills of Mortality 4, of which number only 1 has been reported to have been buried as such.

Figure d)

diagnose - "Bloody Flux," "Twisting of the Guts," "Strangury" - speak vividly of a time before pain-killers and antibiotics. Medical advances in two areas, however, may have helped to bring down mortality rates.⁸ Edward Jenner's discovery of cow-pox vaccine reduced the fatality of small-pox beginning in the late eighteenth century (for example, 8.8% of deaths in the 1770 Bill and 2.7% in 1832).⁹ And a possible element in the reduction of "deaths by dentition" (for example, 3.3% in 1770 as compared to 1.3% in 1832) may have been the burgeoning of the false teeth industry, which offered an alternative to rotting and septic teeth.¹⁰

Less useful concepts in preventative medicine included hanging up glass walking sticks in houses to protect the inhabitants from malarial disease,¹¹ and the avoidance of cucumbers by those who feared cholera.¹² Hospitals did exist but were usually dirty and squalid, and the vast majority of all illnesses and deaths occurred in the home. Practices such as bleeding, purging, starving, and dosing with opium were the norm, and the chance of successful cures limited. The Wordsworth household had frequent recourse to doctors over the years and anxiously sought remedies for the illnesses that plagued them, from William's trachoma to Dora's tuberculosis, but Dorothy Wordsworth's description of the death of a child in a lonely Scottish cottage suggests that access to the medical profession was not always an unmixed blessing:

It appeared that the child, now lying dead, had long been languishing; but they knew not what ailed it, the Doctor living far off; so that it was too expensive, as the woman said, to call him in; but it was our questions which called forth that observation; for I daresay it was a thing never thought of. These poor people in lonely places have a few simple remedies, which they resort to, and when they fail are spared much of the anxiety and perplexity which we are tormented with, who know more of the various diseases that beset all periods of life, and can call in medical help at our pleasure ...¹³

c) War

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Britain was involved in three major wars: The Seven Years' War (1755-1763), the American War of

Independence (1774-1782), and the Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815, with little intermission). Among European countries after 1815 there was a period of formal peace, broken only by skirmishing. Britain involved herself in wars in China and India from about 1839 on, but the European peace did not end until 1854 with the beginning of the Crimean War.

These wars were fought with weapons that were inaccurate and inefficient. The armies' matchlocks and muskets would not work in the rain; the navies' cannon had increased in range and accuracy little in 250 years.¹ More deadly than the weaponry of the day were the diseases attendant upon the military life: brought on by inadequate clothing, shelter, food, hospital care² and sanitation, many more of the troops died of endemic and epidemic disease than in battle.³

In 1793, Wordsworth referred to the war with France as

... an infatuation which is now giving up to the sword so large a portion of the poor and consigning the rest to the more slow and more painful consumption of want.⁴

Even though Britain's wars in this period were not fought on her own soil, civilian mortality was still affected. Economic conditions at home were directly linked to the fighting abroad; trade and industrial employment were disrupted; grain importation during bad harvest years was hindered.⁵ In *The Excursion*, Wordsworth's Wanderer describes how, during the war years,

... many rich
Sank down, as in a dream, among the poor;
And of the poor did many cease to be,
And their place knew them not.⁶

Women and children also would go to the wars with their men, and shared both the conditions of the life, and the high mortality rate.⁷ In the "Salisbury Plain" poems, Wordsworth described the sufferings of such a woman whose husband and children had died with the troops in America, and of a man pressed into the brutalities of fighting against his will.⁷ Nevertheless the poet was not a pacifist,⁸ and though in later years he retained a sense of the horrors of war,⁹ he did not hesitate to advocate killing or being killed, rather than suffering dishonour or the loss of liberty.¹⁰

d) The Law

War was not the only legalized form of killing during this period; there was also judicial death. Sir William Blackstone wrote:

... though ... we may glory in the wisdom of the English law, we shall find it more difficult to justify the frequency of capital punishment to be found therein; inflicted (perhaps inattentively) by a multitude of successive independent statutes, upon crimes very different in their natures. It is a melancholy truth, that among the variety of actions which men are daily liable to commit, no less than an hundred and sixty have been declared by act of Parliament to be felonies without benefit of clergy; or, in other words, to be worthy of instant death. So dreadful a list, instead of diminishing, increases the number of offenders. The injured, through compassion, will forbear to prosecute; juries, through compassion, will sometimes forget their oaths, and either acquit the guilty, or mitigate the offence; and judges, through compassion, will respite one-half of the convicts, and recommend them to the Royal mercy. Among so many chances of escaping, the needy and hardened offender overlooks the multitude that suffer; he boldly engages in some desperate attempt to relieve his wants, or supply his vices; and if, unexpectedly, the hand of justice overtakes him, he deems himself peculiarly unfortunate in falling at last a sacrifice to those laws which long impunity has taught him to contemn.¹

Blackstone published his Commentaries between 1765 and 1769; by the end of George III's reign in 1820, there were over two hundred capital statutes in British law.² At the same time however, as Blackstone suggests, there was a growing unease at the state of the law, particularly as the nineteenth century went on. Agitation, culminating in a series of Acts in 1837, reduced the number of capital statutes to fifteen. However, conditions in prisons and on transport-ships continued to be appalling, and even deteriorated under the pressure of increased over-crowding. Typhus was known as "prison fever"³ or "the gaol distemper,"⁴ and the fatality rate from diseases of all kinds was very high. Reformers such as John Howard and Elizabeth Fry, novelists from Smollett and Fielding⁵ to Dickens, groups like "The Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline and for the Reformation of Juvenile Offenders" sought to expose and improve the situation, but a prison term still meant for many a death sentence.⁶

Public executions were, throughout this period, great crowd-drawers.⁷

"Sir, executions are intended to draw spectators. If they do not draw spectators, they don't answer their purpose."

Dr. Johnson.⁸

There were a variety of ways to be hanged, of which "the new drop" latterly used at Newgate was only one. Often, the victim was simply left to strangle, having been "turned off" a ladder or a cart, while in some cases the convict's friends would pull at his or her feet to hasten the process.⁹ Although hanging was the most usual, it was not the only capital punishment. Women could be burned at the stake for treason or for killing their husbands, for coining or debasing the coinage;¹⁰ when Phoebe Harris was burned before Newgate Prison in 1786, 20,000 people came to watch.¹¹ And for men convicted of treason, there was the aristocratic fate of decapitation. When three insurrectionist weavers were charged with treason in 1817, however, class feelings required that they be first hanged and then be-headed.¹² An Act passed in 1752¹³ allowed for the public dissection of a criminal's body, or the hanging of it in chains at the place of the crime.¹⁴ Any of these spectacles, it was thought, would serve to warn the poor and the wicked against breaking the law.

To underline the message, the hawkers of dying speeches and true confessions were sometimes joined at executions by leafleteers from the Society for the Promoting of Christian Knowledge, who were thus able to make contact with many of the lower orders "not commonly accessible to Christian effort."¹⁵ Children were supposed particularly to benefit from the sight of a good hanging,¹⁶ but for many people, it was just an excuse for a holiday. Archdeacon Bickersteth, giving evidence before a Select Committee of the House of Lords, described a public execution which took place in Shrewsbury in 1841:

... the town was concerted for the day into the fair. The country people flocked in their holiday dresses, and the whole town was a scene of drunkenness and debauchery of every kind.... Children and females contributed to the larger portion of the attendance.¹⁷

Wordsworth draws on the carnival atmosphere of such an event to heighten the horror of the gibbetting in

"Adventures on Salisbury Plain:

They left him hung on high in iron case,
And dissolute men, unthinking and untaught,

Planted their festive booths beneath his face;
And to that spot, which idle thousands sought,
Women and children were by fathers brought.¹⁸

It is doubtful how far holiday gatherings like these deterred anyone from committing a crime, however.

Wordsworth's attitude towards judicial death changed during the course of his life. In 1793, he echoed Blackstone's criticism of harsh punishments, in "A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff:"

... our penal code is so crowded with disproportioned penalties and indiscriminate severity that a conscientious man would sacrifice in many instances his respect for the laws to the common feelings of humanity; and there must be a strange vice in that legislation from which can proceed laws in whose execution a man cannot be instrumental without forfeiting his self-esteem and incurring the contempt of his fellow citizens.¹⁹

However, the poet wrote energetically against the total abolition of the death penalty during the agitations for reform in the late 1830's.²⁰ His new attitude was founded, at least in part, on his fear of losing completely the structures of society he valued so deeply and which seemed to him suddenly perishable.

This outline of some of the major causes of death provides a basis for a consideration of the treatment of the dead during this period, first in terms of the places and conditions of their burial, and second with regard to funereal customs and rites, and persistent superstitions about death.

2.) Causes of Death:

a) Living Conditions

1. "Report on the Condition of the Town of Leeds" in British Sessional Papers: House of Commons ed. Edgar L. Erickson (Illinois: Readex Microprint Edition, University of Illinois, 1961), 1845, vol. 18, pp. 677.
2. Alexis de Tocqueville "Journey to England" (1835) in Journeys to England and Ireland (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p. 106. Cf. also Elizabeth Gaskell Mary Barton. A Tale of Manchester Life (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1981), especially Chapter 6. Mary Barton was first published in 1848, which was also the year of "An Act for promoting the Public Health," (Cap. 63) 31 Aug., 1848. This Act marked the beginning of legislation against cellar-dwellings, and laid down guidelines for improvement of drainage and cleansing in urban areas. (A Collection of the Public General Statutes passed in the 11th and 12th Year of the Reign of Her Majesty Queen Victoria London: G.E. Eyre and W. Spottiswoode, 1850, pp. 719-788.)
3. Letters (1812-1820), p. 21. W.W. to Catherine Clarkson. 4 June, 1812.
4. Prose I, p. 128. "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" (1800).
5. Letters (1806-1811), pp. 125-6. W.W. to Lady Beaumont. 21 May, 1807. Lovelessness can also be the result of a life made barren by labour and care, or starved of part of its natural food by imprisonment in cities, as Wordsworth describes in the Prelude:

True it is, where oppression worse than death
Salutes the being at his birth, where grace
Of culture hath been utterly unknown,
And labour in excess and poverty
From day to day pre-occupy the ground
Of the affections, and to Nature's self
Oppose a deeper nature; there, indeed,
Love cannot be; nor does it easily thrive
In cities, where the human heart is sick,
And the eye feeds it not, and cannot feed.

Prelude (1805-1806), XII, ll. 194-203.

6. PW V, pp. 1-312. The Excursion (1814).

7.

From the last decade of so of the [eighteenth] century
... rural industry had to face growing competition from
urban mills and mechanization. As a result rural
industry was of declining economic value to the rural
poor.

Peter Clark "The Rural Poor" in Poverty and Social Policy 1750-1870 (Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1974), Black IV Units 12-16, p. 7. Cf. also the I.F. note to "The Force of Prayer" in which Wordsworth speaks of the adverse effects of "the spread of manufacturies:"

... I used to be delighted with observing the number
of substantial cottages ... each having its little plot
of fertile ground won from the surrounding waste. A
bright and warm fire, if needed, was always to be found

in these dwellings. The father was at his loom; the children looked healthy and happy. Is it not to be feared that the increase of mechanic power has done away with many of these blessings, and substituted many evils? Alas! if these evils grow, how are they to be checked, and where is the remedy to be found? Political economy will not supply it; that is certain, we must look to something deeper, purer, and higher.

PW IV, p. 421.

8. Cf., for example, George Crabbe "The Village" (1783), "The Parish Register" (1807) and "The Borough" (1810) in Poems (Cambridge: University Press, 1905); William Cobbett Rural Rides (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1953); Benjamin Disraeli Sybil or the Two Nations (London: Peter Davies, 1927).

9. Letters (1806-1811), p. 268. W.W. to Samuel Rogers. 29 Sept., 1808.

b) Disease

1. John Armstrong "The Art of Preserving Health," ll. 64-78, in The Poetical Works of Armstrong, Dyer, and Green (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1858). A copy of this poem was in Wordsworth's library at the time of his death. ("Catalogue of the [...] Library of the Late [...] William Wordsworth [...] " auctioned in 1859. Transactions of the Wordsworth Society, No. 6, p. 237.)

2. In "Adventures on Salisbury Plain" (The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth, ed. Stephen Gill, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975, pp. 123-54), Wordsworth speaks of "fever, from polluted air incurred" (l. 364) and "The breathing pestilence that rose like smoke!" (l. 436).

3. Hugh Meller London Cemeteries: An Illustrated Guide and Gazeteer (Amersham: Avebury Pub. Co., 1981), p. 8.

4. Charlotte Brontë Shirley (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 474.

5. Elizabeth Gaskell The Life of Charlotte Brontë (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 148, 340.

6. William Petersen Malthus (London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 159.

7. James Stevens Curl The Victorian Celebration of Death (Newton Abbot, Devon: David and Charles, 1972), p. 21. Nevertheless, the exacerbating effect of over-crowding in the poorer areas was so severe that Sir Edwin Chadwick wrote in his Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain (1842) (ed. M.W. Flinn, Edinburgh: University Press, 1965):

... we find, on inquiry into the sanitary condition of the population of different districts, that the average chances of life of the people of one class in one street will be 15 years, and of another class in a street immediately adjacent, 60 years.

p. 219.

8. Cf. footnote 11 in chapter on Demography.

9. Dorothy Wordsworth refers in two of her letters from

Fornsett in 1792 to the inoculation of the children there. (Letters (1787-1805), pp. 71 and 80.)

10. Dorothy, William and Sara Hutchinson all record in their letters and journals the agonies of tooth-ache and the acquisition of false teeth. Human teeth were used for the front parts of false teeth and provided another market for the resurrectionists' trade. (Charles Frederick Victor Smout The Story of the Progress of Medicine Bristol: John Wright and Sons Ltd., 1964, p. 115) False teeth were sometimes referred to as "Waterloo teeth," because corpses on battlefields also provided a source for the human parts. (Elizabeth Longford Wellington: Pillar of State Frogmore, St Albans, Herts: Panther Books, 1975, p. 490)

11. In the possession of Nottingham Castle Museum.

12. Advice of the London Board of Health (Norman Richard Longmate King Cholera London: Hamish Hamilton, 1966, p. 161; and Robert John Morris Cholera 1832 London: Croom Helm, 1976, p. 175).

13. Journal II, p. 367. "Journal of My Second Tour in Scotland (1822)."

Charts:

d) The Gentleman's Magazine (London: D. Henry) 1770, Vol. 40, p. 628. Note five deaths from Grief.

e) Ibid., 1832, Vol. 102, Part 2, p. 662. Note "65: Died by visitation of God." Modern historians diagnose the major killers of Wordsworth's time as typhoid, typhus, influenza, TB, smallpox, and cholera (the pandemic reached Britain first in 1831-1833 and again in 1848-1849). (George Melvyn Howe Man, Environment and Disease in Britain New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1972; and Leslie Clarkson Death, Disease and Famine in Pre-Industrial England Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975.)

c) War

1. "Weapons and Delivery Systems" in Encyclopaedia Britannica (Chicago: William Benton, Pub., 1974), 15th edition, Vol. 19, pp. 684-5.

2. Cf. Wordsworth's "Squib on Colonel Evans" (1838):

Our hospitals, too,
They are matchless in story;
Where her thousands Fate slew,
All panting for glory. (ll. 17-20)

PW IV, p. 389; and, of course, Florence Nightingale's letters and reports.

3. Leslie Clarkson Death, Disease and Famine in Pre-Industrial England (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), p. 123. A report filed with the French Council of Health in January 1793 from the military hospital at Brussels gives a probably representative picture of wartime hospital fatalities. Deaths are divided into the following categories: Fevers (a broad term including meningitis, malaria, typhus, typhoid fever, pneumonia, scurvy, late stages of dysentery and tetanus, advanced cases of hospital gangrene and various intermittent, low-grade fevers) 553; Wounded 156; Itch 304; Venereal 163; Total: 1116. (David M. Vess Medical Revolution in France 1789-1796 Gainesville:

University Presses of Florida, 1975, p. 138.)

4. Prose I, p. 49. "A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff" (1793).
5. Peter Clark "The Rural Poor" in Poverty and Social Policy 1750-1870 (Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1974) Block IV, Units 12-16, p. 7.
6. PW V, pp. 1-312. The Excursion, Book I, ll. 543-6.
7. The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth ed. Stephen Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975.)
8. Wordsworth would have liked to have been a soldier and felt he had "talents for command." (Memoirs II, p. 457.) Cf. also Letters (1812-1820), p. 2. W.W. to Lord Lonsdale. 6 Feb., 1812.
9. Cf., for example, his sonnet "After Visiting the Field of Waterloo" (1820), in which the myth of martial glory is supplanted first by an actual scene of the battlefield gradually obliterated by domestic use, and then by a sense of horror at the lifeless bodies buried underneath:

A winged Goddess - clothed in vesture wrought
Of rainbow colours; One whose port was bold,
Whose overburdened hand could scarcely hold
The glittering crowns and garlands which it brought -
Hovered in air above the far-famed Spot.
She vanished; leaving prospect blank and cold
Of wind-swept corn that wide around us rolled
In dreary billow, wood, and meagre cot,
And monuments that soon must disappear;
Yet a dread local recompense we found;
While glory seemed betrayed, while patriot-zeal
Sank in our hearts, we felt as men should feel
With such vast hoards of hidden carnage near,
And horror breathing from the silent ground!

PW III, p. 167.

10. Cf., for example, among the "Poems Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty" (PW III): "To the Men of Kent. October, 1803" (p. 120); "Lines on the Expected Invasion. 1803" (p. 121); "Anticipation. October, 1803" (p. 122); "Feelings of a Noble Biscayan ... 1810" (p. 136); and others.

d) The Law

1. Sir William Blackstone Commentaries on the Laws of England 4 vols, (London: S. Sweet, 1836) Vol. IV, pp. 18-19. A copy of the Commentaries was in Wordsworth's library at the time of his death. ("Catalogue of the [...] Library of the Late [...] William Wordsworth [...]", auctioned in 1859. Transactions of the Wordsworth Society, No. 6, p. 200.) Cp. Oliver Goldsmith's analysis in The Vicar of Wakefield (pub. 1766) (Toronto: Macmillan Co., 1944), pp. 244-5:

It is among the citizens of a refined community that penal laws, which are in the hands of the rich, are laid upon the poor. Government, while it grows older, seems to acquire the moroseness of age; and, as if our property were to become dearer in proportion as it

increased - as if the more enormous our wealth the more extensive our fears - all our possessions are paled up with new edicts every day, and hung round with gibbets to scare every invader.

I cannot tell whether it is from the number of our penal laws, or the licentiousness of our people, that this country should show more convicts in a year than half the dominions of Europe united. Perhaps it is owing to both; for they mutually produce each other. When, by indiscriminate penal laws, a nation beholds the same punishment affixed to dissimilar degrees of guilt, from perceiving no distinction in the penalty, the people are led to lose all sense of distinction in the crime, and this distinction is the bulwark of all morality: thus the multitude of laws produce new vices, and new vices call for fresh restraints.

2. Leslie Clarkson Death, Disease and Famine in Pre-Industrial England (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), p. 125.

3. George Melvyn Howe Man, Environment and Disease in Britain (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1972), p. 145.

4. Ford K. Brown Fathers of the Victorians. The Age of Wilberforce (Cambridge: University Press, 1961), p. 152.

5. David Daiches and John Flower Literary Landscapes of the British Isles: A Narrative Atlas (New York and London: Paddington Press Ltd., 1971), pp. 54-5.

6. Charles Frederick Victor Smout The Story of the Progress of Medicine (Bristol: John Wright and Sons, 1964), p. 112.

7. In describing the power of a single passion taking hold of a city crowd, Wordsworth mentions executions as one incident likely to produce a mob mentality,

... when half the city shall break out
Full of one passion, vengeance, rage, or fear ...
To executions, to a street on fire,
Mobs, riots, or rejoicings ...

Prelude (1805-1806), VII, ll. 645-8.

Wordsworth himself was not above the lure of seeing someone die: while in London in 1812 he made arrangements to watch the execution of John Bellingham, assassin of the politician Spencer Perceval. Public feeling among the lower orders ran high in favour of Bellingham, however, and when the chance of a safe vantage-point did not materialize, Wordsworth did not pursue his desire to attend. He wrote:

I did not think myself justified, for the sake of curiosity in running any risk. - I should have been miserable if I had brought my life or limbs into any hazard upon such an occasion.

The Love Letters of William and Mary Wordsworth ed. Beth Darlington (London: Chatto and Windus, 1982), p. 161. W.W. to M.W. 17-18 May, 1812.

8. James Boswell Life of Johnson (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co., 1896), vol. VI, p. 26.

9. Daiches and Flower, p. 55. Cf. Thomas Hood's poem "The Last Man" in Poetical Works of Thomas Hood (London: F.

For hanging looks sweet, - but, alas! in vain
My desperate fancy begs, -
I must drink my cup of sorrows quite up,
And drink it to the dregs, -
For there is not another man alive,
In the world, to pull my legs!

10. David Cooper The Lesson of the Scaffold (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1974), pp. 3-4; Horace Bleakley The Hangmen of England (London: Chapman and Hall, 1929), pp. 137-9. It is Bleakley who includes coining and debasing the coinage in the list of burnable offences, and who identifies Phoebe Harris as "a coiner and a daughter of coiners." Cooper includes only treason and husband-killing, and though mentioning Phoebe Harris, does not give her offence.

11. She would have been first strangled with a chain, according to Cooper (pp. 3-4) or hung at the stake, according to Bleakley (pp. 137-9). The last such burning took place in 1789.

12. Cooper, p. 4.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

14. Cf. "An Unpublished Tour" in Prose II, pp. 333-4, for a description of a gibbet in the Vale of Hawkshead and the Prelude for a description of one near Penrith Beacon.

15. Christian Spectator, 1846, quoted in Robert Kiefer Webb The British Working Class Reader 1790-1848 (London: George Unwin and Allen, 1955), p. 27.

16. Cf., for example, Mrs. Sherwood's The History of the Fairchild Family (London: Hatchards and G. Routledge and Son, 1876) (first published 1818-1847), pp. 33-8, in which three children are taken by their father to see a man gibbeted for the murder of his brother, to stop them quarrelling amongst themselves.

17. "Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords Appointed to take into Consideration the present Mode of carrying into effect Capital Punishments" May, 1856, p. 3 in British Sessional Papers: House of Commons ed. Edgar L. Erickson (Illinois: Readex Microprint Edition, University of Illinois, 1961), Vol. VII, p. 17.

18. The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth ed. Stephen Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975). "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," (pp. 123-54), ll. 820-4.

19. Prose II, pp. 39-40. "A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff" (1793).

20. A resolution to abolish capital punishment was first introduced in parliament in 1840, where it was defeated by 161 votes to 90. These 90 votes marked a high point in the tide towards abolition, however, and when, five months later, a more moderate resolution restricting the death sentence to the crimes of murder and high treason was introduced, it was defeated by an even greater majority. The change in opinion may have been affected by the murder of Lord William Russell by Francois Courvoisier (see execution broadside in Chapter 4 of this section) which occurred in the interim. The Chartist and Anti-Corn Law agitations of the 1840's further eroded support for the abolitionists, interest in the issue in parliament waned,

and it was not until 1965 that capital punishment finally was abolished. (Cooper, pp. 45-53.)

3.) Disposal of the Dead:

a) Churchyards and Cemeteries

In the countryside, the churchyard was not just a "cinerary depot"¹ for the area's inhabitants. The church and its graves stood as a centre to the life of a rural community, both during the week and on Sundays. School-room and school-ground were often adjacent to the churchyard, and for many adults as well it was a secular meeting-place. Wordsworth described the week-day churchyard at Hawkshead:

Along the eastern end of the Church runs a stone seat, a place of resort for the old people of the Town, for the sickly, and those who have leisure to look about them. Here sitting in the shade or in the sun, they talk over their concerns, and a few years back were amused by the gambols and exercises of more than a 100 Schoolboys, some playing soberly on the hill top near them, while others were intent upon more boisterous diversions in the fields beneath.²

On Sundays, the majority of the inhabitants would attend church, gathering before and after the services in the graveyard to greet neighbours and friends. In the "Essay Upon Epitaphs," Wordsworth wrote of the "chasten[ing]" effect of their surroundings on such a Sunday gathering:

The sensations of pious cheerfulness, which attend the celebration of the sabbath-day in rural places, are profitably chastened by the sight of the graves of kindred and friends, gathered together in that general home towards which the thoughtful yet happy spectators themselves are journeying. Hence a parish-churchyard, in the stillness of the country, is a visible centre of a community of the living and the dead; a point to which are habitually referred the nearest concerns of both.³

Generations of families might lie in a single plot; neighbours in life became neighbours in death; and those who had "gone before" were not bundled away and forgotten, but the memory of them was kept alive by the frequent, perhaps daily, sight of their graves. Christopher Wordsworth, using the language of the pulpit and The Book of Common Prayer,⁴ described the effect of the graves in a local churchyard:

The neighbouring churchyard, need I say, would present to our imaginations those closing hours of your earthly pilgrimage in another most interesting, and deeply instructive, and affecting combination.... they who shall survive, our neighbours and our kinsfolk, who have surrounded our corpse at the solemn hour of interment, are further to derive, as they shall

habitually repair hither for the exercise of prayer and praise, - mild and salutary admonitions, even from our graves also, - while we whisper to them from thence, that as we are so they soon must be, and prompt them, from our condition and the daily spectacles of mortality which they shall behold, to learn how frail and uncertain their own tenure is, and so to number their days, that they may seriously apply their hearts to that holy and heavenly wisdom here, which may, in the end, bring them to life everlasting, through the merits, and for the sake of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.⁵

There was a basic ambivalence in this vision of the churchyard, between acknowledging the corpse as an empty shell and continuing to regard it as the person.⁶ Churchyard homilies did not try too rigorously to divorce the two concepts, but strove to use both in directing the mourners' thoughts to heaven and the conduct of a good life. And even if the dead body lay tenantless now, theologians argued that on the Last Day it would rise up to be renewed and re-united with the soul. The body would become part of the person once again, and must be respectfully housed in the interim.⁷

There was, however, no explanation here for the "preternatural terror" associated with graveyards on moonless nights; the foundation of such fears lay in older folk beliefs of troubled ghosts, wicked imps and goblins. "An Architect" mocked at one custom arising from such beliefs in The Gentleman's Magazine in 1802:

We all know the general custom, practice, or superstition, if you please, of interring the dead on the South side of our churches, in preference to the North side; so much so, that this latter place is never dug open but to throw therein poor unfortunate strangers who may happen to die in the parish, and those who sign their own *felo de se*. Yet all do not know why or wherefore there is such a dissolutionary partiality to this South portion of dust to receive defunct mortality. The cause is thus defined. On this said Southern point the "warm" sun darts his genial influence, within whose ray no imp, or fairy, or demon of ill, or spectre pale, can haunt the silent graves, to torture hovering souls unwilling to quit their clay-cold corpses, to seek in midway air an imperfect immortality. Chilling blasts, damps, and space for rites infernal, premeditating direful wreck on holy fanes, mark the Northern sod; on every blade of blighted grass lurks some supernatural foe to quiet in man's last abode. The Church overshadows this precluded spot; there, where the all-cheering orb of day is never "felt", has Fancy bred a train of dreaded miseries, driving fading Life to sink in Death's more

blest domain, midst hallowed mould, midst spirits good,
and good men's prayers!⁸

Sometimes the older superstitions broke out in more violent form: for example, when a woman named Poll Pilsworth poisoned some children and then herself, "the people would not permit her to be buried in the churchyard," pulled her coffin away on a sledge and drove two stakes through her corpse.⁹ The Annual Register in 1812 recorded the burial of a murderer and suicide:

The stake was immediately driven through the body, amidst the shouts and vociferous execrations of the multitude, and the hole filled up and well rammed down;¹⁰

and in 1823 the burial of a son who had first killed his father and then himself is described:

The warrant for the interment of the unfortunate parricide in the cross-roads was issued by the coroner.... [the grave was] at the cross-road formed by Eaton Street, Grosvenor Place, and the King's Road.¹¹

In the cities, other new barbarities were developing. Parish churchyards in the urban areas were inadequate to cope with a rapidly increasing and constantly dying population. The churchyard described in Bleak House, though fictional, was based on accurate observation:

"There!" says Jo, pointing. "Over yinder. Among them pile of bones, and close to that there kitchin winder! They put him wery nigh the top. They was obliged to stamp upon it to git it in. I could unkniver it for you with my broom if the gate was open. Thats why they locks it, I s'pose," giving it a shake. "It's always locked. Look at that rat!" cries Jo, excited. "Hi! Look! There he goes! Ho! Into the ground!"¹²

A parliamentary committee in 1842 received the testimony of Henry Helsden in answer to the question, "How are the graves made?" He replied:

... in accordance with [the plan] generally observed or adopted throughout London: this is, the opening, what is called a public grave, thirty feet deep, perhaps; the first corpse interred was succeeded by another, and up to sixteen or eighteen, and all the openings between the boards were filled with smaller coffins of children. When this grave was crammed as full as it could be, so that the topmost coffin was within two feet of the surface that was ... considered occupied.¹³

A more lurid description of the same arrangement is given in an anonymous poem "The Cemetery:"

In foul accumulation, tier on tier,
Each due instalment of the pauper bier,

Crushed in dense-pack'd corruption there they dwell,
'Mongst earthly rags of shroud, and splinter'd shell.
A quagmire of old bones, where darkly bred,
The slimy life is busy with the dead.
Reeks from that bloated earth miasma's breath,
The full-fed taint of undigested death,
Thence, like the fumes from sleeping glutton's throat,
The noisome vapours of her surfeit float.¹⁴

Out of this grisly over-crowding arose business opportunities for those interested in the marketing of "quarried flesh."¹⁵ Speculative graveyards needed to dispose of as many bodies and coffins as possible in order to absorb more bodies, coffins, and burial fees. Corpses were chopped up, burned, quick-limed, and dumped into the sewer system, and coffins were recycled or sold as firewood to the poor. Bodies could also be valuable when sold to manure manufacturers or to doctors for dissection.¹⁶ The bodies of executed criminals were the only legal source of cadavers for the medical profession,¹⁷ but resurrectionists¹⁸ or sack-'em-up men offered an illegal supplementary supply. This practice led in turn to the use of a variety of devices to foil or trap the body-snatchers: spring-guns, trip-wires, booby-traps, mortsafes, bolted lead coffins, and mortuaries in which the bodies were kept until putrefaction set in - all were designed to ensure the continued presence of relatives and loved ones in the grave.¹⁹

In spite of these horrors, many people clung to the traditions of the country churchyard, where the generations of a family were laid together beside their church. The agitation for interment in cemeteries outside city bounds and away from human habitation was hindered by the reluctance of government and populace to consider change. The cholera epidemics of the 1830's and 40's may have been finally responsible for forcing those in power to close the urban graveyards, but much of the campaigning was aimed, not at considerations of health, but at a very different area of concern. In 1839, George Walker argued that

Burial places in the neighbourhood of the living are ... [not only] the harbingers, if not the originators of pestilence; [but] the cause, direct or indirect, of inhumanity, immorality, and irreligion.²⁰

John Strang in Necropolis Glasguensis pleaded:

We would ask ... any one who has ever wandered into the

mighty cineral depot which surrounds Glasgow Cathedral, or into the crowded sepulchre which lies in the very centre of that city, whether he did not feel his heart shrink from "The churchyard ground with bones all black and ugly grown," and ardently long that those dreary receptacles could be metamorphosed into grassy glades, the contemplation of whose verdant freshness might form a pleasing contrast to the thought of the faded forms and mouldering ashes that slept within their gloomy precincts?²¹

A garden cemetery, he continued, was

... one of the most eloquent advocates of religion and morality - one of the most potent incentives to private worth and public virtue - one of the greatest foes to preternatural terror and superstition, and one of the most convincing arguments for the existence of taste and civilization.²²

The potential power of the churchyard to inspire and uplift was lost if it was a scene of physical horror and degradation. However, the segregation of burial grounds outside cities was seen by some as a segregation of life from death, of humanity from eternity. Writers such as Strang and Walker tried to assuage these fears,²³ by recreating in the garden cemetery some of the aspects of a meeting-place between the living and the dead which urban over-crowding had so horribly caricatured. Wordsworth's own thoughts on places of burial as a nexus of the living and the dead will be considered in more detail in Section III; it is sufficient to note here that his belief in the healing influence of Nature on grief was explicitly shared by a number of his contemporaries in the cemetery movement.

b) Funerals

In stark contrast to the often gruesome resting places to which the corpse was taken, was the importance attached to funerals and their trappings. In the Victorian period, ostentatious display at funerals grew to grotesque proportions, but this did not begin suddenly in 1837. An undertaker's account in 1824 recorded an order for the following:

... a strong coffin with white satten lining and pillow, mattress, sheets, strong outside Oak Case covered with superfine black cloth, best silvered Nails and rich ornaments, silvered black Ostrich feathers, man to carry Do.¹

The account also included silk-scarves, hatbands and gloves, feather-pages and wands, mutes on horseback, silk

dressings for poles, best black velvets and sets of ostrich feathers, cloaks, pages, truncheons, crape, attendants, rooms on the road, and coachmen, turnpikes and feathermen; total cost, £803 11s 0d.² Nelson's funeral in 1806 was a spectacle in the grand manner, as a contemporary description shows:

I have just returned from such a sight as will never be seen in London again. I managed at an inconveniently early hour to get me down into the Strand, and so down Norfolk Street to a house overlooking the river. Every post of vantage wherever the procession could be seen was swarming with living beings, all wearing mourning, the very beggars having a bit of crape on the arms ... [here follows a long description of the funeral barges] ... On the following morning, the 9th, the land procession, which I also contrived to see, started from the Admiralty to pass through the streets of London to St. Paul's, between dense crowds all along the route. This procession was of great length, and included Greenwich pensioners, sailors of the 'Victory', watermen, judges and other dignitaries of the law, many members of the nobility, public officers, and officers of the army and navy; whilst in it were carried conspicuously the great banner, gauntlets, helmet, sword, etc., of the deceased. The pall was supported by four admirals. Nearly 10,000 military were assembled on this occasion, and these consisted chiefly of the regiments that had fought in Egypt, and participated with the deceased in delivering that country from the power of France. The car in which the body was conveyed was peculiarly magnificent. It was decorated with a carved resemblance of the head and stern of the 'Victory', surrounded with escutcheons of the arms of the deceased, and adorned with appropriate mottoes and emblematical devices, under an elevated canopy in the form of the upper part of a sarcophagus, with six sable plumes, and a viscount's coronet in the centre, supported by four columns, representing palm trees, entwined with wreaths of natural laurel and cypress. As it passed, all uncovered, and many wept. I heard a great deal said among the people about 'poor Emma' (Emma, Lady Hamilton), and some wonder whether she will get a pension or not. On the whole, the procession was most imposing, and I am very glad I saw it all, although I am much fatigued at it, from standing about so much and pushing in the crowd, and faint with the difficulty of getting food, every eating-place being so full of people; and surely, though a nation must mourn, equally certain is it that it must also eat.³

Yet it was not only among the rich and mighty that funerals and a material show of respect seemed so important. In 1835, Wordsworth recorded a pathetic incident showing the desire of even the poorest to provide a "proper" funeral and burial for their dead:

A case was reported, the other day, from a coroner's inquest, of a pair who, through the space of four years, had carried about their dead infant from house to house, and from lodging to lodging, as their necessities drove them, rather than ask the parish to bear the expense of its interment: - the poor creatures lived in hope of one day being able to bury their child at their own cost.⁴

And Dorothy Wordsworth described how the poor of their own area st^rove to provide an arval⁵ or funeral meal regardless of their position or prospects.⁶

In the urban areas, Burial Clubs offered an answer for the poorer classes. By paying a regular amount to these "friendly societies," members were guaranteed the cash necessary for funeral costs when they occurred. Some of these organizations were fraudulent, however, and people took to joining many clubs as a multiple insurance. This in turn led to more sinister temptations. Thomas Carlyle in Past and Present (1843) wrote:

At Stockport Assizes ... a Mother and a Father are arraigned and found guilty of poisoning three of their children, to defraud a 'burial society' of some 31.8s due on the death of each child: they were arraigned, found guilty; and the official authorities, it is whispered, hint that perhaps the case is not solitary, that perhaps you had better not probe further into that department of things.⁷

And in the same year, Sir Edwin Chadwick reported to Parliament:

A minister in the neighbourhood of Manchester ... was ... often shocked by a common phrase amongst women of the lowest class - "Aye, aye, tha child will not live; it is in the burial club."⁸

As Wordsworth said in "Hart-Leap Well," "To freeze the blood I have no ready arts,"⁹ and the horrors that were meat and drink to Carlyle's muse were not his concern. He did, however, record in notes and some of his poems funeral customs familiar to him since childhood, such as placing a basin of boxwood at the door of the bereaved house,¹⁰ the tolling of the passing-bell at the time of death and at the interment,¹¹ or the open coffin and the viewing of the corpse.¹² What was simple and time-honoured appealed to Wordsworth most, particularly those rites and ceremonies that invited thoughts of our common humanity, rather than insisting in death on the distinctions power or money draw in life,

The differences, the outside marks by which
Society has parted man from man,
Neglectful of the universal heart.¹³

A simple funeral, with a verse of a psalm sung at each
house along the way, was what Wordsworth wished for
himself,¹⁴ and the Wanderer speaks for him when he says:

Oft on my way have I
Stood still, though but a casual passenger,
So much I felt the awfulness of life,
In that one moment when the corse is lifted
In silence, with a hush of decency;
Then from the threshold moves with song of peace,
And confidential yearnings, tow'rds its home,
Its final home on earth. What traveller - who -
(How far soe'er a stranger) does not own
The bond of brotherhood, when he sees them go,
A mute procession on the houseless road;
Or passing by some single tenement
Or clustered dwellings, where again they raise
The monitory voice ...¹⁵

Wordsworth's society was one which laid great store by
its traditions of respect to the bodies of the dead. In
the next chapter we will consider other expressions of the
period's attitudes to death, as found in the religious and
secular literature of the time.

3.) Disposal of the Dead:

a) Churchyards and Cemeteries

1. John Strang Necropolis Glasguensis (Glasgow: Atkinson and Co., 1831), p. 33.
2. Prose II, p. 330. "An Unpublished Tour." In his Guide through the District of the Lakes, Wordsworth noted that "the Places of Worship ... have mostly a little school-house adjoining," and in a footnote he continued:

In some places scholars were formerly taught in the church, and at others the school-house was a sort of anti-chapel to the place of worship, being under the same roof.

(Prose II, p. 204n.) Cf. also PW I, pp. 4-39. "An Evening Walk" (1794 version), ll. A49-52.

3. Prose II, pp. 55-6. "Essays upon Epitaphs." Later in the "Essays," Wordsworth mentions the practice in Scotland whereby people chose to be buried in the parish in which they had been born, even when most of their lives had been spent elsewhere. The poet comments:

Nor can I refrain from saying that this natural interchange by which the living Inhabitants of a Parish have small knowledge of the dead who are buried in their Church-yards is grievously to be lamented wheresoever it exists. For it cannot fail to preclude not merely much but the best part of the wholesome influence of that communion between living and dead which the conjunction in rural districts of the place of burial and place of worship tends so effectually to promote.

Ibid., p. 66. "Essays Upon Epitaphs."

4. Cf. "A commendatory prayer for a sick person at the point of departure" in "The Order for the Visitation of the Sick," The Book of Common Prayer.
5. C.W. Sacred Edifices: A Sermon (London: J.G. and F. Rivington, 1836), p. 39.
6. Wordsworth speaks of this ambivalence in the "Essays Upon Epitaphs:"

Simonides, it is related, upon landing in a strange country, found the corpse of an unknown person lying by the sea-side; he buried it, and was honoured throughout Greece for the piety of that act. Another ancient Philosopher, chancing to fix his eyes upon a dead body, regarded the same with slight, if not with contempt; saying, "See the shell of the flown bird!" ... Each of these Sages was in sympathy with the best feelings of our nature; feelings which, though they seem opposite to each other, have another and a finer connection than that of contrast. - It is a connection formed through the subtle process by which, both in the natural and the moral world, qualities pass insensibly into their contraries, and things revolve upon each other.... so the contemplative Soul, travelling in the direction of mortality, advances to the country of everlasting life; and, in like manner, may she continue to explore those

cheerful tracts, till she is brought back, for her advantage and benefit, to the land of transitory things - of sorrow and of tears.

Prose II, pp. 52-3. "Essay Upon Epitaphs."

7. As Wordsworth says in the "Essays Upon Epitaphs:" "We respect the corporeal frame of Man, not merely because it is the habitation of a rational, but of an immortal Soul." (Ibid., p. 52.)

8. The Gentleman's Magazine (London: D. Henry), 1802, Part II, Vol. 72, p. 209. Cf. PW II, pp. 33-4. "'Tis Said That Some Have Died for Love," 1800:

'Tis said that some have died for love:
And here and there a church-yard grave is found
In the cold north's unhallowed ground
Because the wretched man himself had slain (ll.1-4)

9. Arthur Frederick Messiter Notes on Epworth Parish Life in the 18th Century (London: Elliot Stock, 1912), pp. 78-9. This incident took place in 1791 or 1792.

10. Annual Register (London: C. and J. Rivington), 1812, Chronicle p. 4. Fifty-four volumes of the Annual Register were in Wordsworth's library at the time of his death, but none for the years 1812 or 1823. ("Catalogue of the [...] Library of the Late [...] William Wordsworth [...]", auctioned in 1859. Transactions of the Wordsworth Society, No. 6, p. 237.)

11. Annual Register, 1823, Chronicle pp. 142-3.

12. Charles Dickens Bleak House (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 278. Cf., for example, George Alfred Walker's testimony for the "Report from the Select Committee on the Health of Towns," June 1840, p. 215 in British Parliamentary Papers (Health General Vol. 2), Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1970, regarding an open grave "twenty-two feet deep ... within a few feet of the windows of the house."

13. "Report from the Select Committee on the Health of Towns," June 1842, p. 1 in Ibid. Henry Helsden was collecting clerk for James Binyon Cooper (iron founder of Drury Lane) and assistant dissenting minister at the burial-ground in Golden-lane, Barbican.

14. Anon. The Cemetery. A brief appeal to the feelings of Society on Behalf of Extra Mural Burial (London, 1848), quoted in James Stevens Curl The Victorian Celebration of Death (Newton Abbot, Devon David and Charles, 1972), p. 136.

15. Ibid.

16. John Morley Death, Heaven and the Victorians (London: Studio Vista, 1971), pp. 33, 37-8.

17. The "General Bill of All the Christenings and Burials" for 1832 has this comment: "Executed this year within the Bills of Mortality 4, of which number only 1 has been reported to have been buried as such." This could mean either gibbetting or dissection for the other three corpses.

18. Examples of other slang phrases relating to death are "Eternity Box," "Scold's Cure," and "A Wooden Surtout" for a coffin, an "Earth Bath" for a grave, and a "Dustman" for a corpse. (Capt. Grose, Hell-Fire Dick, et al. 1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue ed. Max Harris, Adelaide,

Australia: Bibliophile Press, 1971).

19. Charles Frederick Victor Smout The Story of the Progress of Medicine (Bristol: John Wright and Sons Ltd., 1964), p. 114. Cf. also Thomas Hood's urban ballad "Mary's Ghost:"

'Twas in the middle of the night,
To sleep young William tried;
When Mary's ghost came stealing in,
And stood at his bed-side.

O William dear! O William dear!
My rest eternal ceases;
Alas! my everlasting peace
Is broken into pieces.

I thought the last of all my cares
Would end with my last minute;
But tho' I went to my long home,
I didn't stay long in it.

The body-snatchers they have come,
And made a snatch at me;
It's very hard them kind of men
Wont let a body be!

You thought that I was buried deep,
Quite decent like and chary,
But from her grave in Mary-bone
They've come and boned your Mary.

The arm that used to take your arm
Is took to Dr. Vyse;
And both my legs are gone to walk
The hospital at Guy's.

I vowed that you should have my hand,
But fate gave us denial;
You'll find it there, at Dr. Bell's
In spirits and a phial.

As for my feet, the little feet
You used to call so pretty,
There's one, I know, in Bedford Row,
The t'other's in the City.

I can't tell where my head is gone
But Doctor Carpue can;
As for my trunk, it's all packed up
To go by Pickford's van.

I wish you'd go to Mr. P.
And save me such a ride;
I don't half like the outside place,
They've took for my inside.

The cock it crows - I must be gone!
My William, we must part!
But I'll be yours in death, altho'
Sir Astley has my heart.

Don't go to weep upon my grave,
And think that there I be;
They haven't left an atom there
Of my anatomie.

in Poetical Works (London: F. Warne and Co., 1890), pp. 123-5.

Those interred in churches had less to worry from resurrectionists, but were considered by some to be more of a nuisance to the living than those buried outdoors. Bodies were laid in crypts underneath the building or, as in the parish church at Hawkshead, simply in the soil below the pews (Thomas William Thompson Wordsworth's Hawkshead London: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 168.). In 1771, Matt Bramble offered this complaint for his author, Tobias Smollett:

When we consider, that in our churches, in general, we breathe a gross stagnated air, surcharged with damps from vaults, tombs, and charnel-houses, may we not term them so many magazines of rheums, created for the benefit of the medical faculty? and safely aver, that more bodies are lost, than souls saved, by going to church, in the winter especially, which may be said to engross eight months in the year. I should be glad to know, what offence it would give to tender consciences, if the house of God was made more comfortable, or less dangerous to the health of valetudinarians; and whether it would be an encouragement to piety, as well as the salvation of many lives, if the place of worship was well floored, wainscotted, warmed, and ventilated, and its area kept sacred from the pollution of the dead. The practice of burying in churches was the effect of ignorant superstition, influenced by knavish priests, who pretended that the devil could have no power over the defunct if he was interred in holy ground; and this, indeed, is the only reason that can be given for consecrating all cemeteries, even at this day.

(The Expedition of Humphry Clinker London: Oxford University Press, 1966, pp. 180-1). Ninety years later, it would appear that not much had changed:

The opening of the service recalls my wandering thoughts. I then find, to my astonishment, that I have been, and still am, taking a strong kind of invisible snuff, up my nose, into my eyes, and down my throat. I wink, sneeze, and cough. The clerk sneezes; the clergyman winks; the unseen organist sneezes and coughs (and probably winks); all our little party wink, sneeze, and cough. The snuff seems to be made of the decay of matting, wood, cloth, stone, iron, earth, and something else. Is the something else, the decay of dead citizens in the vaults below? As sure as Death it is! Not only in the cold damp February day, do we cough and sneeze dead citizens, all through the service, but dead citizens have got into the very bellows of the organ, and half choked the same. We stamp our feet to warm them, and dead citizens arise in heavy clouds. Dead citizens stick upon the walls, and lie pulverised on the sounding-board over the clergy-

man's head, and, when a gust of air comes, tumble down upon him.

(Charles Dickens The Uncommercial Traveller (pub. 1860) London: Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 86). Nevertheless, the installation of new, hard-to-move pews at Hawkshead marked the virtual end of the practice there (Thompson, p. 168); and the Interment Acts of the 1850's had a similar effect in the cities.

20. George Alfred Walker Gatherings from Graveyards (London: Longman and Co., 1839), p. iii.

21. Strang, pp. 33-4. Cf. also Wordsworth's remarks in the "Essays Upon Epitaphs:"

... let a man only compare in imagination the unsightly manner in which our monuments are crowded together in the busy, noisy, unclean, and almost grassless church-yard of a large town, with the still seclusion of a Turkish cemetery, in some remote place; and yet further sanctified by the grove of cypress in which it is embosomed.

Prose II, p. 54. "Essay Upon Epitaphs;" and also John Edward's poem "All Saints Church, Derby" which Wordsworth quotes in that essay (p. 55).

22. Strang, p. 57. Gradually the idea of extramural burial became more acceptable, cemetery companies were formed, and in 1850 "An Act to make better Provision for the Interment of the Dead in and near the Metropolis" prohibited burials within London, within two hundred yards of any dwelling, or under or close to Chapels. (A Collection of the Public General Statutes passed in the 13th and 14th Year of the Reign of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, Cap. 52 London: G.E. Eyre and W. Spottiswoode, 1850, pp. 589-624.). Similar legislation applied the prohibitions to other urban centres in the second half of the nineteenth century.

23.

Some curates regretted the end of the religious association between church and graveyard, the distance of several miles between a field where the dead lay and a church where the living worshipped. They mourned the breaking of a hallowed nexus.

William Owen Chadwick The Victorian Church Part I 1829-1859 (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1971), p. 328. It is difficult to assess how far the modern segregation of death may have its roots in the extramural cemetery movement of this time.

b) Funerals

1. Quoted in James Stevens Curl The Victorian Celebration of Death (Newton Abbot, Devon: David and Charles, 1972), pp. 7-8.

2. Ibid.

3. Quoted in Richard Patrick Boyle Davey A History of Mourning (London: Jay's, 1889), pp. 75-77. The opening of this book includes the wonderful sentence:

Although tradition has not yet informed us whether our first parents made any marked change in their scanty garments on the death of their near relatives, it is certain that the fashion of wearing mourning and the institution of funereal ceremonies and rites are of the most remote antiquity.

p. 3.

4. Prose III, p. 245. "Postscript, 1835."

5. Thomas William Thompson describes an arval as a

... ritual funeral feast, of which all who were bidden, usually two from each house "in the bidding," must partake, as it was in the honour of the deceased, and was often spoken of as his or her arval. According to custom, it consisted of ale, oat bread and white bread, and sometimes cheese, and was not thought of as refreshment as has sometimes been stated.

Wordsworth's Hawkshead (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 277.

6. Journal I, p. 59. 3 Sept., 1800; D.W. George and Sarah Green. A Narrative ed. Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 55-6; Letters (1812-1820), p. 226. D.W. to S.H. 8 April, 1815.

7. Thomas Carlyle Past and Present ed. Richard Altick (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), p. 9.

8. Sir Edwin Chadwick "Supplementary Report on the results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns" in British Parliamentary Papers (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1971), Health General, vol. 4, p. 64.

9. PW II, pp. 249-54. "Hart-Leap Well" (1800), l. 98.

10. Ibid., p. 55. W.W.'s note to "The Childless Father" (1800).

11. PW I, pp. 255-8. "The Westmoreland Girl" (1845).

12. Ibid., p. 364. I.F. note to "The Pet Lamb" (1800).

Wordsworth also wrote a sonnet on the "Funeral Service" of the Book of Common Prayer, to be included among the "Ecclesiastical Sonnets" (PW III, p. 399).

13. Prelude (1805-1806), XII, ll. 217-20.

14. Eric Sutherland Robertson Wordsworthshire (London: Chatto and Windus, 1911), p. 332.

Wordsworth enjoined it on his family that "should it befall him to die at Rydal Mount, his body should be borne to Grasmere Church on the shoulders of neighbours, no house being passed without some words of a funeral psalm being sung at the time by the attendants bearing it."

Robertson does not give his source for this quotation.

15. PW V, pp. 1-312. The Excursion, II, ll. 553-566.

4.) Attitudes to Death

In approaching a nation's attitudes to mortality over a period of time, it is important to remember a number of things. One is the deep-seated conservatism of popular customs and attitudes regarding death. Changes in physical conditions and the experiences of death which result from them do not always entail an immediate change in interpretation and response - often the lag in adjustment of attitude can take decades or longer. The second point, related to the first, is that the loudest voices are not always the most representative of an age. The doubts and disquisitions of an articulate intelligentsia may shake its own circle to the core, while around it, the vast majority of people go on in their old ways and beliefs. The examples I have chosen as representative of attitudes to death during this time are, inescapably, the products of an educated minority, but I have avoided as far as possible the more individualistic expressions of doubt or conviction and concentrated instead on concepts and responses which recur throughout the period. The works of clergymen, novelists and poets whose popularity has not necessarily survived, yet which were read and listened to with respect in their day have been drawn upon, as have those aspects of more enduring writing which was most in keeping with the practices and prejudices of the age. This chapter will consider the nature of the after-life, customs and beliefs regarding dying, consolation for the bereaved, the role of sensibility and the concept of death as a moral sanction - issues central to the period's attitudes to mortality. From an understanding of these attitudes and their context, it should be possible to perceive more clearly the place of death in Wordsworth's own thoughts and writings.

a) The Nature of the After-Life

Belief in the immortality of the soul and the existence of an after-life was not so thoroughly a part of religious thought in this period that it was taken for granted. Sermons were preached and published, treatises printed, Nature, Reason, and Revelation cited as proof for and against the existence of a "trans-sepulchral world."¹ However, generally speaking, some notion of an after-life

was found in all religious denominations, and was probably shared by most people.² The idea that death did not mark an abrupt end, that there was a continuation beyond the grave, gave pattern and meaning to people's lives by placing their daily experiences in a larger context. What followed death was felt to relate directly to what preceded it; the eternal world would balance and redress the apparent inconsistencies and injustices of the material world. There was a critical continuity in the individual's life between conduct and consequence which would become apparent when the threshold of death had been crossed.

Although this was commonly held to be the general outline, an insistent curiosity about the details of the life after death was a characteristic of the age. As one writer put it:

In the number of those themes which invite the most profound inquiry, there is one on which, of all others we look with the most anxious and yearning solicitude, longing for light as they that watch for morning. It is a theme, in regard to which the posture of thousands of human spirits is that of seekers and suitors surrounding an oracle, standing as with bowed heads and hands folded on the bosom, silently, reverently, but most earnestly, awaiting the awful response. We allude to the mode of our existence in another world; to the forms and conditions of being to which we are introduced through the mysterious gateway of death. This is the grand question of questions to every self-conscious and reflecting mind;³

or, in the words of the Wesley hymn:

And am I born to die?
To lay this body down?
And must my trembling spirit fly
Into a land unknown?

...
Soon as from earth I go,
What will become of me?⁴

The nature of the after-life, heaven, hell, and the intermediate state, were subjects on which many wished to know as much as possible.

The types of questions asked about the after-life and the types of answers postulated during this period were frequently expressive of an intense human desire for continuity in spite of the trauma of death. What place, for example, was there in eternity for human relationships? In heaven, would the blessed remember each other from

earth? The celestial regions, it was believed, were inhabited by angels and the souls of the righteous, glorying in the presence of God, but would the loving ties between parents and children, lovers and friends survive the change? or would they be destroyed at death along with the other dross of this life? Samuel Richardson's Pamela expressed a desire for individual recognition in heaven, a continuation of relationships formed in life:

For, although, as you were pleased to question t'other day ... whether the happiness of the blessed was not too exalted a happiness to be affected with the poor ties of relationship and sense, which now delight and attach so much to them our narrow minds and conceptions; yet cannot I willingly give up the pleasing, the charming hope, that I shall one day rejoice, distinguishingly rejoice, in the society of my best beloved husband and friend, and in that of my dear parents: And I will keep and encourage this dear hope, so consolatory to me in the separation which dearest friends must experience, so long as it can stand me in any stead; and till I shall be all intellect, and above the soothing impression which are now so agreeable to sense, and to conjugal and filial piety.⁵

In Ann Brontë's The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, written at the other end of this period, the same longings and anxieties are described. The answer was still unknown, but Gilbert's need to reject an impersonal heaven was as strong as Pamela's had been:

"And must we never meet again?" I murmured, in the anguish of my soul.

"We shall meet in heaven. Let us think of that," said she in a tone of desperate calmness; but her eyes glittered wildly, and her face was deadly pale.

"But not, as we are now," I could not help replying. "It gives me little consolation to think I shall next behold you as a disembodied spirit, or an altered being, with a frame perfect and glorious, but not like this! - and an heart, perhaps, entirely estranged from me."

"No, Gilbert, there is perfect love in heaven!"

"So perfect, I suppose, that it soars above distinctions, and you will have no closer sympathy with me than with any one of the ten thousand thousand angels and the innumerable multitude of happy spirits around us."

"Whatever I am, you will be the same, and, therefore, cannot possibly regret it; and whatever that change may be, we know it must be for the better."

"But if I am to be so changed that I shall cease to adore you with my whole heart and soul, and love you beyond every other creature, I shall not be myself; and, though, if ever I win heaven at all, I must, I know, be infinitely better and happier than I am now, my earthly nature cannot rejoice in the anticipation of

such beatitude, from which itself and its chief joy must be excluded."⁶

Theologians were able to cite various Biblical passages which could be interpreted to suggest that there would be recognition in heaven: for example, II Samuel 12:23, where David says of his dead child: "I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me;" the appearance of Moses and Elias in recognizable form, Matthew 17:3; or the description of Lazarus in heaven, Luke 16:23.⁷ Many, however, referred to the company of heaven only in more general terms. Andrew Thomson wrote:

... there all our contentions shall be forgotten; and, united in the bonds of everlasting love, we shall join together in the grateful, and harmonious, and never-ending song of praise, to Him whose kindness has never forsaken us, and who has provided a rest for the people of God'.⁸

The Book of Common Prayer makes use of general phrases such as "the Communion of Saints"⁹ and "partakers of thy heavenly kingdom"¹⁰ when referring to the righteous dead. Nonetheless, when John Keble came to write his poem on the Funeral Service in The Christian Year, he had no qualms about including in it the trust in a communion of distinguishable saints:

'Tis sweet, as year by year we lose
Friends out of sight, in faith to muse
How grows in Paradise our store.¹¹

The belief that people would meet their loved ones at the gates of heaven was popularly accepted, and was the source of a deep comfort and religious serenity to many.

Out of the idea of a heavenly reunion arose other questions. Would, for example, the loved one remain at the age of death forever, to be met in heaven as last seen on earth? Thomas de Quincey wrote to Dorothy Wordsworth on the death of little Catharine Wordsworth in 1812:

Oh dear Friend - what a comfortable what a blessed faith is that of a true Christian, who believes that no more change will pass over us than may take away our frailties and impurities - of which she sweet innocent could have none - and is assured that he shall meet and know again the child as a child, and his beloved as his beloved!¹²

Mr. Meagles' belief in Little Dorritt was the opposite:

It would be of no use to tell us that our dead child was a mere infant. We have changed that child according to the changes in the child spared to us, and

always with us. As Pet has grown, that child has grown; as Pet has become more sensible and womanly, her sister has become more sensible, by just the same degrees. It would be hard to convince me that if I was to pass into the other world to-morrow, I should not, through the mercy of God, be received there by a daughter, just like Pet, as to persuade me that Pet herself is not a reality at my side.¹³

And do the dead in heaven observe the living, watching over and perhaps encouraging those still involved in time and temptation? While canonical answers to these questions were not forthcoming, popular conviction leaned towards pleasant thoughts of ties between the dead and the living that still remained, and hopes for the future that would satisfy the needs of each individual heart.

The promise of reunion was not offered to everyone, however. In a Unitarian article entitled "By whom will Heaven be tenanted?", it was estimated that according to Evangelical principles only 10,500,000 people would even be eligible for heaven, out of the 938,000,000 thought to be the world's population.¹⁴ And not everyone whose denominational affiliations were correct would necessarily rise to bliss. Under these circumstances, how could the saved be happy while conscious that family and friends were isolated and in torment? Charles Lamb wrote a poem rejecting the idea of saints unmoved by the suffering of past companions:

Some few groans more, death comes, and there an end.

'Tis darkness and conjecture all beyond;
Weak Nature fears, though Charity must hope,
And Fancy, most licentious on such themes,
Where decent reverence well had kept her mute,
Hath o'erstock'd hell with devils, and brought down
By her enormous fablings, and mad lies,
Discredit on the Gospel's serious truths,
And salutary fears. The man of parts,
Poet or prose declaimer, on his couch
Lolling, like one indifferent, fabricates
A Heaven of gold, where he, and such as he,
Their heads encompassed with crowns, their heels
With fire wings garlanded, shall tread the stars
Beneath their feet, heaven's pavement, far removed
From damned spirits, and the torturing cries
Of men, his brethren, fashion'd of the earth,
As he was, nourish'd with the self-same bread,
Belike his kindred, or companions once,
Through everlasting ages now divorced,
In chains, and savage torments, to repent
Short years of folly on earth. Their groans unheard
In Heav'n, the saint nor pity feels, nor care,
For those thus sentenced - pity might disturb

The delicate sense, and most divine repose,
Of spirits angelical.¹⁵

But to many theologians the answer was more rigorously stern:

[It will not be possible] for the happiness of the faithful to know diminution or change, even should any be absent from the company of immortal spirits in heaven, who were of their fellowship or kindred on earth.... The spirits of the just cannot love aught which God loveth not; and their happiness, being complete, as it needeth not the participation of others to perfect it, so the exclusion of others diminisheth it not: else had Abraham bewailed, and Lazarus found no rest, when the wretched Dives was in torments, from which he implored relief, but implored in vain.... Between him and the blessed, "There was a great gulf fixed" - an impassable barrier - even the perfect love of God: a barrier which, whilst it excluded sympathy with the condemned, excluded, as a necessary consequence, any feeling that might diminish that fulness of joy, which the love and presence of their heavenly Father extend to the righteous. So impossible will it be for the pure and holy spirits of the blessed to love that which God loveth not, or to know diminution of happiness, when once admitted into the mansions of the blessed.¹⁶

Sadistic conclusions like these deeply troubled more and more of Wordsworth's contemporaries as the nineteenth century progressed, as did the concept of an eternal hell generally. A growing reassessment of the nature of crime and punishment in the human sphere fostered doubts about the nature of an never-ending imprisonment in hell. Universalists¹⁷ cited passages of Scripture such as I Corinthians 3:15 ("If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire") or I Timothy 2:3-4 ("God our Saviour; / Who will have all men to be saved")¹⁸ as arguments against an after-life of never-ending torment. Disputes arose over the correct translation of the Greek word αἰώνιος. Usually rendered as "endless," "eternal," or "everlasting," it could also be translated as "for ages" or "long-enduring." Such a change radically modified the accepted understanding of some statements about hell in the Bible. To many, this kind of interpretation was tantamount to tampering with Holy Writ, and "there is no saying to what [such things] will at length lead us."¹⁹ Richard Whately, in his book A View of Scriptural Revelation concerning a Future State, discouraged any conjecture whatsoever on the subject:

Some, who have not observed this rule [of keeping to Scripture as they find it], have ventured, first, to conjecture, and afterwards confidently to teach, that the punishment of the wicked in the next world will not be eternal; which they contend is inconsistent with the goodness of God: and that all will at length be brought to immortal happiness.... if such conjectures are to be indulged at all, there is no saying to what they will at length lead us. If we are to measure the dealings of God by the standard of our own reason, we shall find ourselves at a loss to explain any future punishment at all; for it is certain that the object proposed by human punishment is, the prevention of future crimes, by holding out a terror to transgressors; we punish a man, not because he has offended, but that others may be deterred from offending by his example; now how any such purpose can be answered by the future punishment of the wicked, whether for a time, or for ever, we can by no means conceive. And yet if there is any truth in God's word, we are sure that the wicked will not go unpunished.

The truth is, we had better abstain from conjectures on a subject manifestly beyond the reach of our present faculties.²⁰

Although conjecture may have been frowned upon, contemplation of the orthodox hell and its punishments was urged upon readers and congregations most earnestly. One clergyman wrote:

Ponder seriously eternal death. Think of despair unrelieved by a single hope; of sorrow unmitigated by a single solace; - think of the mind tortured by remorse on account of its wilful obstinacy and cruel ingratitude; - think of this doom as secured beneath the seal of God, and the rivet of eternity.... How will the viper of remorse prey upon their vitals never to be shaken into the flame! How shall the eternal tear course down their cheek never to be dried! How shall the sigh heave from the bosom never to be interrupted! How shall the fire rage within them never to be quenched! "They seek for death, but cannot find it; they desire to die, but death flees from them."²¹

The ways in which hell was spoken of varied according to speaker and audience, from the genteel restraint of a dean who admonished his upper-class congregation "If you do not repent, you will go to a place where I have too much manners to name before this good company,"²² to the moral blackmail of the evangelical "Mrs. Jones," haranguing a group of poor women about a new Sunday School:

Remember, if you slight the present offer, or if, after having sent your children a few times, you should afterwards keep them at home under vain pretences, you will have to answer for it at the day of judgment. Let not your poor children, then, have cause to say, "My fond mother was my worst enemy. I might have been bred up in the fear of the Lord, and she opposed it for the

sake of giving me a little paltry pleasure. - For an idle holiday, I am now brought to the gates of hell!" My dear women, which of you could bear to see your darling child condemned to everlasting destruction? ... Is there any mother present, who will venture to say - "I will doom the child I bore to sin and hell, rather than put them or myself to a little more present pain, by curtailling their evil inclinations!" ... If there be any such here present, let that mother who values her child's pleasure more than his soul, now walk away, while I set down in my list the names of all those who wish to bring their young ones up in the way that leads to eternal life, instead of indulging them in the pleasures of sin, which are but for a moment.²³

The implication of much evangelical literature was that hell was much more of a concern for the poor than it was for the well-to-do. And in temporal terms, it was felt that the hope of heaven and the fear of hell were essential moral sanctions without which crime, particularly committed by the "lower orders," was inevitable. In the words of the servant William Wilson, condemned to death in a Hannah More story:

A rich man, indeed, who throws off religion, may escape the gallows, because want does not drive him to commit those crimes which lead to it; but what shall restrain a needy man, who has been taught that there is no dreadful reckoning? Honesty is but a dream without the awful sanctions of heaven and hell. Virtue is but a shadow, if it be stripped of the terrors and the promises of the Gospel.²⁴

Although not everyone would have expressed themselves so categorically, it was quite widely felt that a disbelief in eternal punishment was better held privately than "published abroad."²⁵

Henry Crabb Robinson records a conversation between Wordsworth and his friend Frederick William Faber in 1843, in which

W[ordsworth] declared in strong terms his disbelief of eternal punishment, which Faber did not attempt to defend.²⁶

Wordsworth himself made no written statement on the matter, but the implications of his few poetic references to hell²⁷ tend to corroborate Robinson's report. With the exception of his description of St. Bartholomew's Fair in London ("What a hell / For eyes and ears! what anarchy and din / Barbarian and infernal"²⁸), Wordsworth uses hell in his poems as an emblem of evil,²⁹ as a mythological place (synonymous with the Underworld),³⁰ or as a belief held in

the past which had powerfully affected the imagination of the guilty,³¹ but not in a way that suggests support for the idea of post-mortal punishment and unceasing divine vengeance. In this he was part of the steady though gradual movement away from an emphasis on the idea of hell, which began during his lifetime and has continued until the present day.

It was not only the ultimate destination of the soul that was of concern in this period, however. Questions were also asked, and theories propounded, about "the intermediate state" or the time between an individual's death and the Last Day. What became of a person's soul between the moment of dying, and the moment of the body's resurrection? Richard Whately's book on "a Future State" points out the discrepancy between popular convictions on this subject and sound theology:

... it is common to hear persons when speaking of those of the departed, of whose final salvation they are confident, speak of them as in heaven - as admitted to that blissful state in which they are to continue for ever, - as made partakers of the kingdom, etc. And yet you are expressly told in Scripture, and profess it among the Articles of your belief, that it is at the end of the world, that Jesus Christ will come to judge all men, and pronounce their final doom; that then, and not before, there will be a resurrection of the dead ("Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" John 6:54) and that each will then have his just portion assigned him, whether of reward or punishment. Matt. 24:31-46.³²

The problem of explaining the intermediate state was not new in Protestant theology: Luther and Calvin had both put forward theories on the subject. Luther held that the soul fell into a deep dreamless sleep from which it awoke at the Last Day to be reunited with its body, while Calvin postulated the idea of a time of waiting in which the soul consciously experienced a prelusive joy or anguish. Each of these theories had adherents in Wordsworth's time. Some Tractarians leaned towards the theory of a purgatorial experience for the disembodied soul previous to its final judgment and, because of this, revived the ritual of prayers for the dead.³³ The Book of Common Prayer explicitly rejected the idea of Purgatory, but in its references to, for example, "them that sleep in the Lord

Jesus"³⁴ or to the "joy and felicity" of the life with God enjoyed by "the spirits of them that depart in the Lord,"³⁵ it suggested no single clear alternative.

Wordsworth sometimes spoke of his dead loved ones as already in heaven, already, as he said of Thomas, "received among the number of blessed and glorified Spirits."³⁶ In later years, and when less overpoweringly distraught, he did strive to express himself with greater theological accuracy, as when he wrote of Lady Beaumont's death: "she was ripe for the change, blessed by God! and I trust is, or is destined to be, a glorified spirit."³⁷ And the Wanderer in The Excursion, in speaking to the bereaved Solitary, says:

I cannot doubt that they whom you deplore
Are glorified; or, if they sleep, shall wake
From sleep, and dwell with God in endless love.³⁸

As we shall see, however, it was not so much the details, contradictions and implications of the period's beliefs in the after-life that concerned Wordsworth, as sustaining a belief in the after-life at all.

The way in which life after death is generally perceived has altered dramatically since Wordsworth's time, but even more complete has been the change in customs and beliefs surrounding dying, the experience of passage out of life into what lies beyond it.

b) Dying

Even in an age when death and dying were so much more visible than in our own, the human tendency to put off thinking about mortality until tomorrow appears to have been common. Preachers of all persuasions deemed it necessary to remind their congregations frequently that life was short and death certain.

This world is the monarchy of death, where, with quenchless appetite, he sits enthroned. He is attended by the sallow visages, the livid forms, the shivering spectres, of disease and woe.... O! what is this world but the great charnel-house of the dead, but the awful cemetery of the dust of our fathers!¹

Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay.

In the midst of life we are in death.²

Jeremy Taylor's Holy Living and Holy Dying was read and admired throughout this period; in it, he spoke of the ubiquity of death in majestic prose:

... all the successions of time, all the changes in nature, all the varieties of light and darkness, the thousand thousand of accidents in the world, and every contingency to every man, and every creature, doth preach our funeral sermon, and call us to look and see how the old sexton Time throws up the earth, and digs a grave where we must lay our sins or our sorrows, and sow our bodies, till they rise again in a fair or an intolerable eternity. Every revolution which the sun makes about the world, divides between life and death; and death possesses both those portions by the morrow....

... death reigns in all the portions of our time; the autumn with its fruits provides disorders for us, and the winter's cold turns them into sharp diseases, and the spring brings flowers to strew our hearse, and the summer gives green turf and brambles to bind over our graves. Calentures and surfeit, cold and agues, are the four quarters of the year, and all minister to death; and you can go no whither but you tread upon a dead man's bones.³

Not everyone was able to treat the subject so impressively, as an extract from a funeral sermon by David Wilson shows:

The time cannot be long when this momentary abode shall be laid aside. The vapor of human life will soon be dispersed. The post will soon have hurried by; the eagle have fixed on the prey to which it hastens; the brief tale of life be told. At the command of his Lord the traveller quits his tabernacle, the soldier strikes his tent, the shepherd leaves his tenement.... In a moment the frail tabernacle crumbles into dust. The seeds of a thousand deaths lie planted in our frame, any one of which springs up in a moment to a fatal maturity.⁴

As in the past, the point of reminding people about death was to encourage them to live in a way which was consistent with heavenly reward. Viewing life as a journey⁵ and the after-life as the destination or goal defused some of death's terror, and helped to bring home the idea that life, death and eternity had a continuity for which the individual was responsible. As Christopher Wordsworth put it,

By what stroke of death we shall any of us die, gradual or sudden, sooner or later, by this or that sickness, in this or that among the sundry kinds of death, it is not for us to know. It is of far more importance, that we consider, that from none of us can the blow be very far distant. Have we reflected then, have we entered into due thought and calculation, in what moral state

we shall be found at that day; in what manner and circumstances we shall die, spiritually considered; what the temper of our mind probably may be, in which we shall close our eyes; or, much more, what is the prevailing and habitual character of our spiritual condition, and in what degree of preparation we stand for eternity? ...

None, it is certain, but the true Christian, who lives habitually in this state [of closeness to God] can hope to die in it; none but they who live according to the will of God, can hope to commit effectually the keeping of their souls to him.⁶

The clergy did not need to depend exclusively on their own assertions, however. The frequent experience of the deaths of others, and the customs surrounding death-beds and dying, did much to reinforce the preachers' message.

Richard Whately drew up, in order to refute, a list of "Prevailing Mistakes Respecting a Christian Departure," which provides us with a useful overview of commonly accepted attitudes at the time. These are (here summarized) that:

1. it is necessary that there be ample time to prepare for death
2. it is dreadful to die suddenly without warning, even for the good
3. a dying person must be informed of his or her state
4. a clergyman must be in attendance and the dying person must receive the sacrament in the last moments; if this occurs, the dying one is absolved of any past neglect of communion
5. a death-bed repentance is an infallible passport to heaven
6. the dying one must express confidence in his or her own salvation
7. death must come easily, without pain or struggle in the last moments
8. the body must be properly interred in consecrated ground with a Church service, and the bones must not afterwards be moved.⁷

As Whately and others pointed out, there was no basis in Scripture for any of this,⁸ and a dependence on such ideas could dangerously draw attention away from a proper preparation for death throughout life. With Dr. Johnson, they may well have exclaimed: "It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives. The act of dying is not of importance, it lasts so short a time,"⁹ but the spirit of the age was against them.

To die alone was considered a fearful fate:¹⁰ family, friends, priest or minister, neighbours, children, passers-by, all would be welcomed into the death-chamber (not

necessarily a separate room: many families had only one room to live or die in). Dying was not considered as an affair only between the dying person and God, but as a time of particular significance for any who witnessed it also. Sermons and devotional literature of all kinds made use of this belief as a powerful instrument of exhortation, leading their listeners to the foot of righteous or unrighteous death-beds and expostulating with them there.¹¹ Dying, it was pointed out, was a time for looking forward and back, as the connections between conduct and consequences, this world and the next, became ever clearer. James Hervey described the feelings of the wicked in such a position:

When the last sickness seized their frame, and the inevitable change advanced; when they saw the fatal arrow, fitting to the strings; saw the deadly archer, aiming at their heart; and felt the envenom'd shaft, fastened in their vitals - Good God! what fearfulness came upon them! What horrible dread overwhelmed them! How did they stand shuddering and aghast, upon the tremendous abyss of eternity, yet unable to maintain their standing on the verge of life.

O! what pale reviews, what startling prospects, conspire to augment their sorrows! They look backward, and behold! a most melancholy scene! Sins unrepented of; mercy slighted; and the day of grace ending! They look forward, and nothing presents itself but the most righteous Judge; the dreadful tribunal; and most solemn reckoning.¹²

There was no escape, and although some might hold with the efficacy of death-bed repentance, a sudden conviction of life-long guilt must often have paralyzed the will to plead, and the terror of hell in one who expected momentarily to be engulfed by it must have been horrible to witness.

For the righteous, however, the death-bed offered a unique opportunity for testifying to their gratitude and faith. Comfort, warning and instruction could be passed on to those gathered round, wise words that would influence the survivors long after the speaker's death. Henry Venn, in his book The Complete Duty of Man (1812), urged Christian parents to consider the efficacy of a righteous death-bed's example:

If an opportunity could be found of bringing your child to the bedside of a departing saint, this object would infinitely exceed the force of simple instruction. Your child would never forget the composure and

fortitude, the lively hope and consolation painted on the very countenance of the Christian; nor his warm expressions of love, and gratitude to the Saviour, for a heaven of peace within, and assurance of pardon, instead of gloomy thoughts and foreboding apprehensions, or stupid insensibility to any future existence, the general case of dying men.¹³

And John James rehearsed with righteous parents how they might fill such a role for their own children when the time comes:

You are a parent. Your eye rests upon the loved children weeping round you.... No word may pass; but you read their thoughts: and you, for whom they weep, are yourself the soother of their grief. Faith wins for herself a triumph here also. You fear not.... You remind them of his gracious goodness to you hitherto, through a long and varied life; you recount his many merciful providences to you, and your numerous deliverances from impending danger or trouble; you gratefully acknowledge his long-suffering towards you, in giving you added years to prepare for eternity: you cannot doubt his goodness now! You now too reap the reward of that Christian spirit, which in life you delighted to exercise towards your fellow-creatures. You give assurance to those around you, for their guidance and instruction, that peace is in your heart.... Thus whilst you speak comfort to the mourning survivors, by showing that your faith is upon the Rock, and that your hope maketh not ashamed, you endeavour to point these truths for their practical instruction, that when they come to the same awful hour, they too "may find peace in the day of their visitation."¹⁴

The extent to which dying was commonly viewed as an event of enormous power and significance, both for the one dying and for those who remained, is emphasized if we consider its place in the secular literature of the time. An uneventful death-bed scene was unheard of in the period's novels and poetry. The death-bed confession, for example, was a favourite device used by writers to clarify plots and remove impediments to the happiness of living characters¹⁵ because it was believed that the emotional force of impending death was irresistible, a power before which nothing could be held back. As the Pastor in The Excursion said, death is "the transit ... that shows / The very Soul, revealed as she departs,"¹⁶ and the terrors of dying could elicit the revelation of facts that it had been the business of a lifetime to keep hidden. Crimes were confessed to in closing chapters or stanzas which had hitherto hindered the path of hero or heroine to prosperity and happiness: for example, the dying confession of

Spalatro in The Italian,¹⁷ Mr. Square in Tom Jones,¹⁸ or Aunt Reed in Jane Eyre.¹⁹ In other works, the sheer force of virtue revealed in its last moments would bring about reconciliation or an end to misunderstanding or doubt among the good but temporarily benighted survivors. In Helen (1834), for example, the fatally ill Lady Davenant looks upon her daughter and estranged son-in-law with a "deathful expression:"

"We have not time to lose," continued she, and moving very cautiously and feebly, she half-raised herself - "Yes," said she, "a moment is granted to me, thank Heaven!" She rose with sudden power and threw herself on her knees at the General's feet: it was done before he could stop her.

"For God's sake!" cried he, "Lady Davenant! - I conjure you -"

She would not be raised. "No," said she, "here I die if I appeal to you in vain - to your justice, General Clarendon, to which, as far as I know, none ever appealed in vain - and shall I be the first? - a mother for her child - a dying mother for your wife - for my dear Cecilia, once dear to you."²⁰

The General and Cecilia are reconciled; Lady Davenant can die in peace; and the story ends triumphantly. Wordsworth did not make much use of the death-bed scene, finding his moments of emotional revelation in other areas of life, but an exception is found in "Adventures on Salisbury Plain"²¹ (1795-c.1799) which is very much in the same style as the preceding example. A runaway murderer meets by accident his dying wife, who without recognizing him expresses her unflinching faith and love:

But when he heard her thus with labouring breath
And pain and weakness tell the wretchedness
His hand had wrought, and, in the hour of death,
Saw her lips move his name and deeds to bless,
At such a sight he could no more suppress
The feelings which did in his heart revive;
And, weeping loud, in this extreme distress
He cried, "O bless me now, that thou should'st live
I do not wish or ask: forgive me, now forgive."

To speak the change that voice within her wrought
Nature by sign or sound made no essay;
A sudden joy surprized expiring thought,
And every mortal pang dissolved away.
Borne gently to a bed, there dead she lay;
Silently o'er her face the husband bent.
A look was on her lips which seem'd to say,
"Comfort to thee my dying thoughts have sent." (ll. 766-82)

It is this experience which brings about a crisis in the fugitive's remorse, and leads him bravely to give himself

up.

Scenes such as these carried conviction because dying was commonly perceived as an event of significance and special potency, during which solemn and awesome things were likely to occur. Nevertheless, in spite of new spiritual strength gained, encouragement or warnings received, those who remained still had the pains of bereavement and loss to face, and grief and faith to reconcile.

c) Bereavement

Charles Wesley wrote, in the words of a hymn, that we should "Rejoice for a brother deceased" since "Our loss is his infinite gain."¹ It was argued that to grieve too much for a loved one now safely in God's hands was not right; although human nature felt bereaved, faith should be serene and, if possible, joyful at the joy of the freed soul. The tone and emphasis of this advice to the bereaved heart altered during the period, however. For example, the vicar in Henry Fielding's novel Amelia (1751) tries to convince his children of the folly of grief:

"O, my dear children," cries he, "how vain is all resistance, all repining! Could tears wash back my angel from the grave, I should drain all the juices of my body through my eyes; but O, could we fill up that cursed well [in which she drowned] with our tears, how fruitless would be all our sorrow!" ... He then proceeded to comfort us with the cheerful thought that the loss was entirely our own, and that my mother was greatly a gainer by the accident which we lamented. "I have a wife," cries he, "my children, and you have a mother, now amongst the heavenly choir: how selfish, therefore, is all our grief! how cruel to her are all our wishes!"²

This is logical but chilling. The conviction that sensibility and virtue were closely related grew in strength during this period, and softened somewhat the earlier arguments against grief. In The Mysteries of Udolpho (1792), St. Aubert urges his daughter Emily to balance in her grief for her mother the varied claims of sensitivity and restraint:

Your sorrow is useless. Do not receive this as merely a common-place remark, but let reason therefore restrain sorrow. I would not annihilate your feelings, my child, I would only teach you to command them; for whatever may be the evils resulting from a too

susceptible heart, nothing can be hoped from an insensible one; that, on the other hand, is all vice - vice, of which the deformity is not softened, or the effect consoled for, by any semblance or possibility of good.³

Wordsworth's brother Christopher published a sermon in 1814 in which he speaks as gently as possible about human grief:

... do not indulge a long protracted, unprofitable, and unavailing sorrow: but rather weigh the reasons that there are for resignation; and look forward to that which shall be hereafter, as they that sorrow indeed, but not without hope. That our Lord did not design to condemn every expression of grief, and the overflow of our natural affections on these occasions, is clear from the sympathetic concern which he shewed towards this mother of Nain. No. The moral design of the discipline of the Gospels is not to introduce a senseless indifference; or a stoical apathy: but this is the desire of our Master, that we should learn how many reasons there are, why we should set always bounds to our grief, and submit ourselves with resignation, and even with thankfulness to the will of the Lord.⁴

Many people had great difficulty reaching through their sorrow to comforts such as these, particularly those faced with the death of a child. If they could not come to terms with their loss, they became additionally burdened by guilt at the weakness or absence of their faith.⁵ The rhetorical questions asked in Christopher Wordsworth's sermon express what was a characteristic approach to "the mysterious dispensation of Providence,"⁶ the seemingly arbitrary cruelty of children's deaths:

Is it not lawful for God to do what he will with his own? Who can resist his will? Does he not know what is best for our children far better than we can do, who know nothing, while he sees the end from the beginning? Does he not also will for our children what is best, with a far wiser and purer love than we can do? Can we tell that the child has not been taken away from much sorrow that was to come? or from much sin? from temptations, under which his virtuous principles might have given way? and his faith failed? and he have fallen into ignominy among men, and have brought down our grey hairs with sorrow to the grave? and have been condemned to everlasting woe?⁷

And James Hervey, in his "Meditations Among the Tombs," urges mourning parents to "Consider this ... and dry up your tears:"

Why should you lament, that your little ones are crowned with victory, before the sword was drawn, or the conflict begun? Perhaps, the supreme disposer of events foresaw some inevitable snare of temptation forming, or some dreadful storm of adversity impending.

And why should you be so dissatisfied with that kind precaution; which housed your pleasant plant, and removed into shelter a tender flower before the thunders roared; before the lightnings flew; before the tempest poured its rage? O remember! they are not lost, but taken away from the evil to come.⁸

In an age when so many children died, thoughts such as these must have been sought again and again by grieving parents. Wordsworth and his family turned to them in their bereavement, not only at the deaths of their children, but in other moments of loss as well, for the basis of religious comfort lay in the idea of a benign, providential design. The belief that death and sorrow served some good purpose, that life, death and the life after death were all part of a single meaningful pattern, was the only comfort possible, and it was towards this belief that Wordsworth and his contemporaries struggled.

As we have seen, a new gentleness towards the feelings of the bereaved emerged during this period. The capacity to feel emotion came to be regarded as a virtue, or at any rate, as an essential prerequisite for virtue. And, in the realms of sensibility, extremes of grief and sympathetic sorrow took pride of place over such vulgar emotions as cheerfulness or simple joy.

d) Sensibility

Emotion had become a keynote of character, whether in the composition of a hero or heroine, or in the reader who was able to appreciate the shades of feeling they displayed. The attitudes of people in novels and poems to death was seen as a particularly telling test of their emotional capacity, a type of touchstone for sensibility. There were as many ways of applying this touchstone as there were writers, but a few basic patterns were evident: on the one hand, low or bad people were afraid to die, but were indifferent, hypocritical, or coarse about the deaths of others; on the other, good characters were noble and brave in the face of their own deaths, sincere and openly sorrowful at the loss of others. In Vanity Fair (1847-8), for example, the indifference with which the inhabitants of Queen's Crawley allow Lady Crawley to die, and the alacrity

with which the widower Sir Pitt proposes to Becky Sharp are expressive of the quality of their characters, while Amelia's distraction and long grief over the worthless George Osborne's death is part of her virtuous sensibility.¹ Similarly, Madame D'Alberg in The Banished Man (1794) reveals the sensibility and nobility of her character by her efforts to succour a fatally wounded man who has appealed to her for help. The Abbé Heurthofen, on the other hand, has no sympathy for the dying man's plight:

The Abbé cast a look of dissatisfaction on the sufferer, who remained on his mattress on the floor. "... If this gentleman is a French loyalist, as I suppose he is, from the order I see at his breast, we are doing him no service, and incurring an additional risk ourselves, by admitting him into the castle. The patriots will be upon us in another day. Nothing in my apprehension can equal the frenzy of our staying here, unless it be admitting people who must encrease our danger." "Go, Sir," said Madame D'Alberg; "If you have these fears, take care of your own safety. The Priest and the Levite we know are but too apt to turn away from the wounded stranger."²

The rest of the novel proves the Abbé consistently a coward, a liar, and a villain.

Another example may be taken from Henry Fielding's Tom Jones (1749):

'Honour,' says Sophia, 'rather than submit to be the wife of that contemptible wretch I would plunge a dagger into my heart.' - 'O lud! ma'am!' answered [Mrs. Honour], 'I am sure you frighten me out of my wits now. Let me beseech your la'ship not to suffer such wicked thoughts to come into your head. O lud! to be sure I tremble every inch of me. Dear ma'am, consider, that to be denied Christian burial, and to have your corpse buried in the highway, and a stake drove through you, as farmer Halfpenny was served at Ox Cross; and, to be sure, his ghost hath walked there ever since, for several people hath seen him. To be sure it can be nothing but the devil which can put such wicked thoughts into the head of anybody; for certainly it is less wicked to hurt all the world than one's own dear self; and so I have heard said by more persons than one.'³

Mrs. Honour is shown to be silly, superstitious and selfish, while Sophia in a single sentence reveals herself a heroine. There was a problem here, however. Suicide was abhorrent, and heroines and heroes could not be allowed to practise it, but the sentiment of "Death before Dishonour" was the sign of a noble mind, and the preservation of an unsullied spirit preferred in countless passionate speeches

to the cowardly or unvirtuous saving of one's life. In practice, particularly for heroines, it was often a matter of dishonour and death. If a female character were raped or seduced, she usually died of a decline afterwards, like Clarissa Harlowe,⁴ or was murdered deliberately by her assailant, like Antonia in The Monk,⁵ or unwittingly by her virtuous lover, like Zelica in Lalla Rookh.⁶ It was difficult for writers to find acceptable places for their fallen characters,⁷ but death tidied them off the scene and left God to disentangle their misfortune from their guilt. As the otherwise kindly Colonel Brandon said of Eliza, seduced and abandoned in Sense and Sensibility (1811):

That she was, to all appearance, in the last stages of consumption, was - yes, in such a situation it was my greatest comfort. Life could do nothing for her, beyond giving time for a better preparation for death
...

However, readers' sensibilities were not exercised only by the noble or ignoble sentiments of the living. The buried dead also touched their emotions, and many pages of poetry and prose brought them into the company of corpses and tombs. The settings most immediately associated with death - churchyards, vaults, charnel-houses, especially at night - held a great fascination for readers and writers both, and depending on the colouring, were redolent of horror and the sublime, or of gentle melancholy. The physical aspects of mortality, such as decay, corpses and skeletons, combined with superstitions regarding ghosts, devils and the walking dead, appealed to what has been called the gothic imagination. Wordsworth wrote: "To freeze the blood I have no ready arts"⁹ and, with the exception of some youthful imitations, he did not attempt to harrow his readers' sensibilities in that way. But for the gothic writers and their insatiable audiences, there was an irresistible frisson about the world of the dead, especially when faced by a young, beautiful, breathing heroine or hero. The more pornographically minded, such as Monk Lewis and Charles Maturin, presented scenes of rape and supernatural torment underground in vaults and tombs.¹⁰ Imitators of the popular poem "Lenora"¹¹ handed brides over into the arms of walking corpses and devils. Others, such as Mrs. Radcliffe,¹² ran their characters through the

gauntlet of crypts and graveyards unscathed, but behind it all was the feeling that the vicinity of the dead was dangerous and frightening. It was as if an intermediate state existed, different from anything Calvin or Luther had proposed. Gothic writing suggested a strange grey area where the boundaries between life and death became indistinct. The wicked who were spiritually dead, and spirits who were physically dead, here had dealings with each other, and any manner of moral or physical aberration was possible. Impending, unexpected, unknowable horror was the keynote of the atmosphere, whether or not anything particularly ghastly actually occurred. The assurances of religion, which tidily compartmentalized this world and the next, and declared the dead body to be nothing but an empty shell of one who has gone to God, did not seem to touch the realms of darkness conjured up by the gothic imagination. There was, however, another school of writing which did bring religion into this tantalizing world of tombs, charnel-houses, and corpses.

The founders of what came to be called the graveyard school were writing before Wordsworth's lifetime - Thomas Parnell's "A Night-Piece on Death" was published in 1722; Edward Young's Night Thoughts, 1742-5; Robert Blair's The Grave, 1743; James Hervey's Meditations Among the Tombstones, 1748; Thomas Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard, 1751 - but were read avidly throughout this period. The atmosphere of a graveyard poem depended on the season and the time of day or night: the voice of gentle melancholy was heard in the churchyard at twilight or in autumn, while darker thoughts preferred midnight, and winter. Disciples of the school provided magazine readers over the years with a steady diet of meditations on death: the subject-matter ensured their popularity, for as Mr. Farrar observed in an 1875 edition of Blair's The Grave:

... a dissertation on death and its concomitant accidents is generally sure of many readers; the thoughtful accept it with inquiring reverence, the vulgar with morbid curiosity.¹³

A common pattern in graveyard writing was to cater to "morbid curiosity" about death, ghosts and decay while plying the reader with sound epitaphic wisdom. For

example, in Parnell's "Night-Piece," the poet writes:

Hah! while I gaze, pale Cynthia fades,
The bursting earth unveils the shades!
All slow, and wan, and wrapp'd in shrouds,
They rise in visionary crowds,
And all with sober accents cry,
"Think, mortal, what it is to die."¹⁴

A personified Death, introduced amidst "hollow groans," croaking ravens and charnel-house bones, advises the reader not to fear, for

Death's but a path that must be trod,
If man would ever pass to God.¹⁵

Blair speaks of a buried beauty:

Methinks! I see thee with thy head low laid,
Whilst surfeited upon thy damask cheek
The high-fed worm, in lazy volumes rolled,
Riots unscared ...¹⁶

in a poem which also contains a description of Christ's ascent into heaven, a sermon against suicide, and a vision of the resurrection of the dead at the Last Day. It was a popular combination, by which the feelings could be exercised and the purposes of morality served.

Solitary musings in a graveyard also gave the writer an opportunity to reveal personal sorrows and depression. The second verse paragraph of Young's unrelenting Night Thoughts offers a sample of the oppressively intimate tone that was to recur in sonnets and magazine poems for more than a century:

From short (as usual) and disturb'd repose
I wake: how happy they that wake no more!
Yet that were vain, if dreams infest the grave.
I wake, emerging from a sea of dreams
Tumultuous; where my wreck'd desponding thought
From wave to wave of fancy'd misery
At random drove, her helm of reason lost.
Though now restor'd, 'tis only change of pain,
(A bitter change) severer for severe:
The day too short for my distress; and night,
E'en in the zenith of her dark domain,
Is sunshine to the colour of my fate.¹⁷

The indulgence of a pleasurable melancholy for its own sake was not unknown and, as Wordsworth describes from his own experience, neither was a certain manipulation of reality to cater to the sensibilities and their exercise. Among the Alps for example, in the midst of a happy holiday full of excitement and the beauties of nature, the poet confessed to having played with melancholy,

Dejection taken up for pleasure's sake,
And gilded sympathies, the willow wreath,
Even among those solitudes sublime,
And sober posies of funereal flowers,
Culled from the gardens of the lady Sorrow,
Did sweeten many a meditative hour.¹⁸

At other times in his youth and early manhood, his imagination was happiest among extremes of sorrow or of eery gloom:

... the elder-tree that grew
Beside the well-known charnel-house had then
A dismal look: the yew-tree had its ghost,
That took its station there for ornament:
Then common death was none, common mishap,
But matter for this humour everywhere,
The tragic super-tragic, else left short.¹⁹

The delights of melancholy were not the exclusive possession of the young Wordsworth or of his time, but the Age of Sensibility, perhaps more than any other, enjoyed its own gentle version of those pleasures to the full.

e) Morality

As we have seen, the line between sensibility and morality was almost indistinguishable in much of the literature of the period. The capacity for emotion and the capacity for virtue were felt to be closely interdependent, if not virtually identical, and so it is not surprising that a scene aimed at wringing the heart-strings also served as a moral exemplar. Take for example the death-bed of Lord Ballafn, in Clara Reeve's Fatherless Fanny (1819), who has been mortally wounded in a duel and is at last about to "pay the forfeit of his crimes:"

... the unhappy nobleman breathed his last just eight and forty hours after the duel, in the most excruciating tortures both of mind and body.

Mr. Hamilton [a victim of Lord Ballafn's injustice] visited him, to pronounce forgiveness for the injuries he had sustained from the dying sinner, but alas, the sight of him threw Lord Ballafn into a delirium that ended in his dissolution; and thus the wretched sufferer was deprived of the consolation the christian charity of the godlike Hamilton had intended to bestow upon him.

Oh, sons of vice, children of folly ... pursue your evil courses - rise from one degree of vice to another - attain its very climax - yet, let but death lay his cold hand upon you, and all your boasted hardihood vanishes. The soul, horror struck, dreads to leave its tenement of clay, and hell commences here, 'ere spirit and body part.'

With this may be compared the death-bed of Madame St. Aubert, whose calm hope and tranquil retrospection is presented in The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794):

The progress of this disorder was marked, on the side of Madame St. Aubert, by patient suffering, and subjected wishes. The composure, with which she awaited her death, could be derived only from the retrospect of a life governed, as far as human frailty permits, by a consciousness of being always in the presence of the Deity, and by the hope of a higher world. But her piety could not entirely subdue the grief of parting from those whom she so dearly loved. During these her last hours, she conversed much with St. Aubert and Emily, on the prospect of futurity, and on other religious topics. The resignation she expressed, with the firm hope of meeting in a future world the friends she left in this, and the effort which sometimes appeared to conceal her sorrow at this temporary separation, frequently affected St. Aubert so much as to oblige him to leave the room.²

The good character may suffer in the process of dying, but the physical side of death and dissolution is unimportant compared with their expressed confidence in God's approval and love. The death of Adam in The World Before the Flood (1812) offers a spectacle that was intended to benefit both heart and soul:

Bright through the smouldering ashes of the man,
The saint brake forth, and Adam thus began.
- O ye, that shudder at this awful strife,
This wrestling agony of Death and Life,
Think not that He, on whom my soul is cast,
Will leave me thus forsaken to the last;
Nature's infirmity alone you see;
My chains are breaking, I shall soon be free;
Though firm in God the Spirit holds her trust,
The flesh is frail, and trembles into dust.
Horror and anguish seize me; - 'tis the hour
Of darkness, and I mourn beneath its power;
The Tempter plies me with his direst art,
I feel the Serpent coiling round my heart....
- I will not curse Him, though his grace delay;
I will not cease to trust Him, though he slay....
O let thy glory light me to the grave,
That these, who witness my departing breath,
May learn to triumph in the grasp of Death.'³

Graveside musings also lent themselves naturally to the promulgation of moral lessons. The graveyard poet or essayist could present characters from all human classes and types, brought together from widely diverging lives to one narrow meeting-place. The miser, the beauty, the libertine, the scholar, the sexton, the squire and the pauper - all have death in common. The vanity of earthly

aspirations could be contrasted to the earthy end to which all must come, or to the after-life where virtue and faith were the criteria and God was the judge. These were themes capable of a thousand variations; it was hoped that where the heart had first been softened by pity or remorse, the way for morality and religion to enter in would be clear.

Literature catering for the more delicate susceptibilities of the heart was aimed primarily at the middle- and upper-class adult reader, while another less genteel approach was used for the "lower orders" of society, and for children. As we have seen, religious literature aimed at the poor emphasized hell-fire and damnation as moral sanctions peculiarly appropriate to the situation of the unfortunate and the unprosperous. Penny and ha'penny broadsides provided the primary secular reading matter of the poor,⁴ and though any ballad or tale might be printed and sold, the most popular were execution broadsides. As a street patterer said in 1850, "There's nothing beats a stunning good murder after all."⁵ In a letter to Mary written in 1812, Wordsworth describes a ballad pedlar in action. She was selling broadsides on the life and death of John Bellingham, who had been hanged for the assassination of the politician Percival Spencer:

As I was walking in South Audley street I came to a Woman who with a small bundle of Papers in her hand was crying out - Here is the life of Bellingham who etc - There was a small group of people about her, and a little Boy among the number, who seemed to doubt if the ballad-like Papers she was offering for sale, were really the Thing they purported to be. Yes says the Woman emphatically pointing to their title which was in Large Letters, "life, and life he had, for his heart stirred about six hours after his Body was dead. This the Surgeons have declared, and you may read in the Newspaper of this day, and, so going off triumphantly she exclaimed, and a good deed he did." Nothing can be more deplorably ferocious and savage than the lowest orders in London, and I am sorry to say that tens of thousands of the Middle class and even respectable Shop-keepers rejoice in this detestable murther, and approve of it.⁶

More often, however, execution broadsides denounced the criminal's act and urged the justice of the sentence, as in the "Life Trial Confession and Execution of F.B. Courvoisier..." or the "Horrid Murder of Seven Persons." Details of blood and violence helped to ensure that the audience shared this view, as well as catering to their

LIFE TRIAL AND CONFESSION, AND EXERCISES

OF F. B. COURVOISIER, for the MURDER OF LORD WILLIAM RUSSELL, Farewell Letter to his Parents, Sister, and the rest of the Family, with good advice to all Persons in trust.

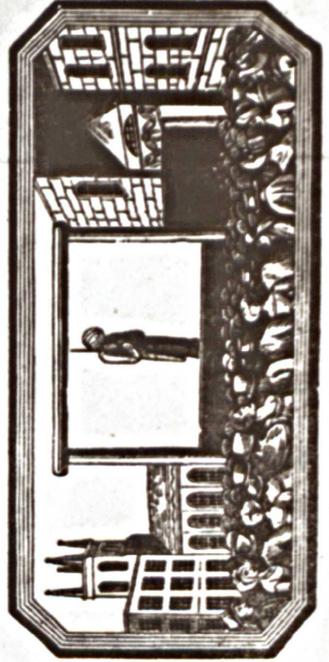
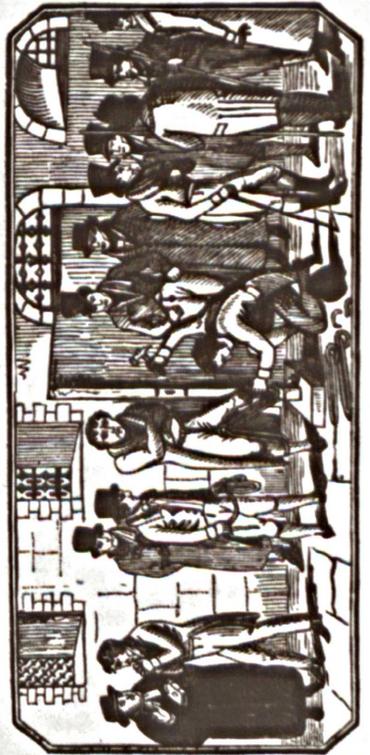
Attention give to bold and young,
Of high and low degree,
Think while this mournful tale is sung,
Of my sad misery and woe,
I'm sure has been a friend,
For which I must my life resign,
My time is near an end.

Oh! hark! what noise that dreadful sound,
It lets me die in one hour,
It is the bell that sounds my knell,
How solemn is the toll,
See thousands are assembled,
Around the fatal place,
To gaze on my approaching fate,
And witness my disgrace.

There are many sympathizing hearts,
Who feel another's woe,
Even now appears in sorrow,
For my sad overthrow,
Think of the aged man I drew,
Then pity's at an end,
I robbed him of property and life,
And the poor man of a friend.

Let pitying passions not intrude,
Far to lead you away,
From sleep to sleep it will delude
And bring you to decay.
Think of the wretch a Cooperator,
Who thus dies on a tree,
A death of shame, I've sought to blame,
But my own dishonesty.

Mercy on earth I'll not implore,
To spare it would be vain,
My hands are dyed with human gore,
None can wash off the stain.
But the merits of a Saviour,
Whose mercy alone I crave,
Good Christians pray, as thus I do,
I may his pardon have.



Horrid Murder Of SEVEN PERSONS.



Good people all I pray draw near,
Of a wholesale murder you shall hear,
The like among savages could not be found,
As did take place near Uxbridge town.
Seven poor souls near Uxbridge fell,
By a murderer's hand, how sad to tell.

At Denham village there did dwell,
A man named Marshall known full well,
With his wife and family as you shall hear,
Together with his aged mother dear.

On Monday, May the twenty third,
To Marshall's cottage there repaired,
Two labourers as we may read,
Who brought to light these dreadful deeds.

They could not make the inmates hear,
Which fill'd their minds with dread and fear
They forced the door, mark what I say,
And a fearful sight there met their gaze.

Upon the floor covered with wounds,
Mrs. Marshall and her sister found;
The floor in pools was covered o'er,
By the monster, with the victims gore.

In the back room there lay we hear,
The grandmother, and three children dear,
Their heads were smash'd, they were still in
death,

Oh, shame upon that heartless wretch.

Poor Marshall's body they soon found,
Covered with sacks upon the ground,
His poor head by the monster had been smash'd
With a sledge hammer or an axe.

Marshall's sister was there on that fatal night
Expecting soon to be made a wife,
But by the murderer's hand she died,
And a corpse lay the expectant bride.

That poor soul, 75 years of age,
Could not escape the monster's rage,
To her side one little darling press'd,
Tho' her aged eyes were closed in death.

It was malice caused these dreadful deeds,
Which makes each feeling heart to bleed,
But may we ne'er have again to tell,
Where so many by a murder's hand has fell.

Now the horrid murderer has been found,
At a lodging-house in Reading town,
He is more than fiend, he is not a man,
And deserves to die by the hangman's hand.

These deeds have caused much grief around
The country, as well as Uxbridge town,
For justice one and all do cry,
While tears of sorrow fill each eye.

Disley, Printer, 57, High Street, St. Giles.

Figure f)

"morbid curiosity." Crimes committed by youth and beauty had a slightly different appeal, and received a different slant in presentation:

"Copy of Verses, Made Upon the Unfortunate Beauty, Miss Elizabeth Taylor, now under Sentence of Death in Newgate, for robbing her Master"

In Highgate as I now do tell,
One Betsey Taylor there did dwell,
Who was a beauty of renown,
But now her roses are pull'd down.

With Mr. Hooker did reside,
A young man wish'd her for his bride,
They fix'd upon the wedding day,
But all their joys are fled away.

Her brother was a wicked blade,
This poor young girl he did persuade,
To rob her master, wicked deed!
Which makes her tender heart now bleed....

[the weeping beauty at the bar, condemned to die,
supported by her faithful sweetheart]

With aching heart she now must lie,
Until the day that she must die,
When drest in white from top to toe,
To meet her fate this maid will go.

So maidens now take warning all,
Reflect upon her wretched fall,
And when you hear the dread bell toll,
Fall on your knees, pray for her soul ...⁷

The wish to warn by example, which was felt to be the purpose of capital punishment and public hangings, was common to execution broadsides of all complexions.

Much of the children's literature of the period approached the question of moral sanctions in a similar manner. Death was the punishment of the wicked child, who was disobedient, or cruel, or blasphemous, or played truant. The good child was serious, industrious, submissive to adults, and had a proper sense of the closeness of death; material prosperity and earthly success would ultimately be such a child's reward, in a long life of faith and good works. The History of Little King Pippin compares wicked and good children:

... as George Graceless, Neddy Neverpay, and two or three other boys, as wicked as themselves, were playing at marbles in the churchyard, George Graceless's brother Jack, who was a very good-natured little boy, happed to stop his brother George's marble by accident, upon which he flew into a violent passion, took the Lord's name in vain, called his brother a fool, and made use of a great many other wicked expressions,

which so shocked Little King Pippin, who was sitting on a tombstone, just by, reading Mrs. Winlove's Lectures, that he could not forbear speaking to little Graceless; pray, Master Graceless, says he, do you know the consequences of these shocking expressions? did you never read in your Bible, that "Whosoever calleth his brother a fool, is in danger of hell fire?" and don't you know, that one of the commandments says, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless, that taketh his name in vain?" Where can you expect to go when you die? Pooh, says little Graceless, don't tell me any of your nonsensical stuff about dying, I have many a good year to live yet.⁸

George Graceless is drowned before night-fall, and "The rest of his companions began ... to see the folly and wickedness of neglecting their books for idle mischief."⁹ Their change of heart comes too late, however, and wild beasts are allowed by God to devour them in the night, while the sanctimonious Pippin lives to a righteous, ripe old age crowned with prosperity and success.

It was not felt that children should be protected from the mention of death in their books. A picture alphabet "For the Instruction and Amusement of Boys and Girls," for example, contains rhymes such as

V was a Vulture, a large bird that fed
On the putrid remains of the slaughter'd and dead¹⁰

or

Y is a letter that stands for a Yew,
A tree dark and shady, that by a tomb grew;¹¹

and "The Death and Burial of Cock Robin" is unremittingly funereal:

Who kill'd Cock Robin?
I says the Sparrow,
With my bow and arrow,
And I kill'd Cock Robin.

Who saw him die?
I, said the Fly,
With my little eye;
And I saw him die.

Who catch'd his blood?
I, said the Fish,
With my little dish,
And I catch'd his blood.

Who made his shroud;
I, said the Beetle,
With my little needle,
And I made his shroud ...¹²

The poem chooses a grave-digger, a parson, a clerk, a coffin bearer, a link bearer, a chief mourner, pall

bearers, a psalm singer, and a bell toller from among the birds and animals.

Although such an emphasis on mortality seems to a modern reader totally inappropriate, the fact that children's lives were so uncertain, and the conviction held by many that the plea of youth would not exempt anyone from God's judgment and wrath, explains the insistence in children's literature on this subject. Some children were undoubtedly frightened and harmed by these tales of death and sudden punishment, but for many, the inability which Wordsworth describes of "admit[ting] the notion of death as a state applicable to my own being"¹³ triumphed over the efforts of the adult world to "instruct and amuse" them.

"Do you know where the wicked go after death?"

"They go to hell," was my ready and orthodox answer.

"And what is hell? Can you tell me that?"

"A pit full of fire."

"And should you like to fall into that pit, and to be burning there for ever?"

"No, sir."

"What must you do to avoid it?"

I deliberated a moment; my answer, when it did come, was objectionable: "I must keep in good health and not die."¹⁴

The attitudes of this period to death found expression in a wide range of writings, from the ecclesiastical monograph to the halfpenny broadside, from the gothic novel to the Sunday sermon. Discussions of death were not segregated to any particular form: novelists and poets concerned themselves with questions of eschatology, while theologians and crusaders used stories and poems as well as sermons and tracts to spread their views. Neither was "our mortal Nature" considered unseemly or taboo: death was felt to be a topic of pressing importance to everyone, from the babe in arms to the oldest woman or man.

The centrality of the awareness of death in this period is an essential factor in understanding both Wordsworth and his time. The fact that thoughts and feelings concerning death received a great deal of attention was not simply the result of an intellectual

knowledge that all flesh is mortal - as we have seen, the personal application of that truth came no more easily to the poet's contemporaries than it does to us - but, at least partially, because of the intimate, obtrusive presence of the deaths of others. Overcrowded and unhygienic living conditions, over-work and under-feeding, low wages and fluctuating availability of the staples of life killed off the poor with depressing regularity, aided by the constant presence of endemic, and occasional outbursts of epidemic, disease. The more wealthy were cushioned from many of these hardships, but dirtiness and disease were still able to defeat them in large numbers. Sickness, dying, death, the laying-out of the dead, and the final watch over their bodies almost invariably took place at home, whether that home was a single cellar room or an aristocratic mansion. Out on the streets and in the fields, there were public executions to be seen and the rotting remains of gibbeted criminals, and, in the cities, overflowing graveyards forced the sight and smell of death onto any passer-by. And in gothic novels and hell-fire sermons, the ghastly and the horrid sides of death and decay predominated, whether proffered for vicarious entertainment or to awaken the soul to everlasting danger.

Not every reminder of death was unpleasant, however. The central position in rural life of the country church and churchyard, for example, fed gentle thoughts of death and offered consolation to the lonely and the bereaved. The rise of sensibility encouraged an equating of tears with virtue, and the luxury of a gentle melancholy in the face of that which is transitory. And the individual who managed to live this life according to the lights of Christian righteousness could expect, after death, a happy reunion with loved ones gone before, and a heavenly after-life of unending bliss. Experiences of mortality that seemed to speak of loss, finality, physical destruction and rending despair, could be softened and re-interpreted in the strength of faith, to become only moments in a long pattern of life, birth and re-birth leading, almost imperceptibly, into the healing light of eternity.

Wordsworth himself was never threatened by the kind of

poverty that kills; neither was he for the majority of his life in daily contact with urban conditions and death rates. But no reasonably informed person could escape some knowledge of what was being suffered; and even if the writers of journals, newspapers and novels had failed, the stream of beggars - women, children, broken artisans, unemployed labourers, discharged soldiers - that passed more fortunate doors, told their own tale. The issues of his day that related to mortality, such as the conditions of the poor or capital punishment, the theory of an eternal hell or funeral customs, were of deep interest to Wordsworth throughout his long life. Such issues, and the responses of the poet's contemporaries to them, form an essential background to Wordsworth's own more personal feelings about bereavement and death. From such a background, it is possible to approach the poet's private experiences and reactions with a clearer understanding of the ways in which he was representative of the period in which he lived, and the ways in which he was unique.

4.) Religious Attitudes to Death:

a) The Nature of the After-Life

1. George Bush Anastasis: or The Doctrine of the Resurrection of the Body. Rationally and Scripturally Considered (London: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), p. 32. Bush was Professor of Hebrew at New York City University.

2. However, the middle and later 19th century perceived with anxiety a decline in the belief in heaven and hell among the new urban labouring class. Cf., for example, Horace Mann The Religious Census 1851:

There is a sect, originated recently, adherents to a system called "Secularism"; the principle tenet being that, as the fact of the future life is (in their view) at all events susceptible of some degree of doubt, while the facts and necessities of a present life are matters of direct sensation, it is therefore prudent to attend exclusively to the concerns of that existence which is certain and immediate - not wasting energies required for present duties by a preparation for remote, and merely possible, contingencies. This is the creed which, virtually though not professedly, is entertained by the masses of our working population; by the skilled and unskilled labourer alike - by hosts of minor shopkeepers and Sunday traders - and by miserable denizens of courts and crowded alleys. They are unconscious Secularists - engrossed by the demands, the trials, or the pleasures of the passing hour, and ignorant or careless of a future. These are never or but seldom seen in our religious congregations; and the melancholy fact is thus impressed on our notice that the classes which are most in need of the restraints and consolations of religion are the classes which are most without them.

(In Edward Royle, ed. Radical Politics 1790-1900: Religion and Unbelief London: Longman, 1979, p. 92.)

3. Bush, pp. 31-2.

4. John Wesley A Collection of Hymns, for the Use of the People Called Methodists (London: John Mason, 1838), Hymn 43.

5. Samuel Richardson Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded (London: Henry Sotheran and Co., 1883), Vol. III, pp. 129-30. A copy of Pamela in German was in Wordsworth's library at the time of his death. ("Catalogue of the [...] Library of the Late [...] William Wordsworth [...]", auctioned in 1859. Transactions of the Wordsworth Society, No. 6, p. 251.)

6. Anne Brontë The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), pp. 220-1. Gilbert's last words in this extract have similarities to the opening of Book V, The Prelude, in which Wordsworth speaks of books:

Tremblings of the heart
It gives, to think that the immortal being
No more shall need such garments; and yet man,
As long as he shall be the child of earth,
Might almost weep to have' what he may lose
(11. 21-5)

7. Cited by John James in Christian Watchfulness, in the Prospect of Sickness, Mourning, and Death, fourth edition, (London: J.G.F. and J. Rivington, 1841), Chapt. 54. James was Canon of Peterborough.

8. Andrew Mitchell Thomson Sermons and Sacramental Exhortations (Edinburgh: W. Whyte and Co., 1831), p. 477. Thomson (1779-1831) was minister of St. George's Church in Edinburgh from 1814 to the time of his death. (DNB, vol. 56, pp. 234-5.)

9. In the Apostles' Creed, for example.

10. In "The Order of the Ministration of the holy Communion."

11. John Keble The Christian Year (London: Cassell, Petter and Galpin, n.d.), p. 373. The conclusion of Canon James, that recognition in heaven was likely, probably represented the feelings of most people:

To argue against this view of the subject, or to check the cherished hopes to which it gives rise, because we cannot now comprehend how there can be, in the resurrection of the dead, individual recognition, and distinction of families amid the countless and mingled families of mankind, then to be gathered together, is to reason as if our present faculties were for ever to remain, as they now are, limited.... Away then with doubts and fears, which are adapted rather to the lower views of a worldly mind, and suit well the sceptic and the infidel, who dare not look to immortality ...

pp. 383-4.

12. John Emory Jordan De Quincey to Wordsworth: A Biography of a Relationship (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), p. 265.

13. Charles Dickens Little Dorritt (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 19.

14. The Christian Reformer vol. VII, Jan. 1840, pp. 97-101.

15. Quoted in Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers, ed. Edith Julia Morley, 3 vols, (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1938), pp. 125-6.

16. James, pp. 344-5.

17. Universalists believed that everyone would ultimately achieve heaven. "Purgatorial universalists" held that there must first be a period of purifying punishment, before restoration to God's grace; "Antinomian universalists" held that there would be no punishment for the wicked at all. (Geoffrey Rowell "The Origins and History of Universalist Societies in Britain, 1750-1850" in The Journal of Ecclesiastical History Vol. 22, 1971, pp. 35-56.)

18. These texts are cited in Anne Brontë, pp. 191-2.

19. [Richard Whately] A View of Scriptural Revelations concerning a Future State: laid before his parishioners by A Country Parson (London: B. Fellowes, 1829), p. 181. Whately (1787-1863) held various positions at Oxford University from 1811-1831, when he was made Archbishop of Dublin (Letters (1829-1834), p. 729n.) When in 1837 Wordsworth's friend Sir William Rowan Hamilton was elected President of the Irish Academy instead of Whately, Wordsworth expressed his opinion of the Archbishop:

The Electors have done great credit to themselves by appointing you, and not a little by rejecting the Ultra-liberal Archbishop ...

(Letters (1835-1839), p. 499. W.W. to Sir William Rowan Hamilton. 21 Dec., 1837.)

20. Whately, pp. 183-4.

21. Richard Winter Hamilton A Sermon ... on the Occasion of the Execution of Mr. Joseph Blackburn, Attorney at Law, for Forgery ... (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1815), pp. 37-8. Hamilton (1794-1848) was minister at Albion Independent Chapel in Leeds where he was so popular a preacher that a new and larger chapel, Belgrave Chapel, was erected for him. (DNB, vol. 24, pp. 204-5.)

22. Quoted in a sermon by John Wesley (in Horton Davies Worship and Theology in England. From Watts and Wesley to Maurice 1690-1850 Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 168.

23. Hannah More "The Sunday School" in Complete Works 6 vols, (London: H. Fisher, R. Fisher, and P. Jackson, 1834) Vol. I, pp. 187-8. Wordsworth owned at least one volume of Hannah More's works, according to the evidence of his "Loan Book." (Chester L. Shaver and Alice C. Shaver Wordsworth's Library: A Catalogue New York: Garland Pub., 1979, p. 180).

24. Ibid. "The History of Mr. Fantom" Vol. I, p. 31.

25.

And as for the danger of my belief, I would not publish it abroad, if I thought any poor wretch would be likely to presume upon it to his own destruction, but it is a glorious thought to cherish in one's own heart, and I would not part with it for all the world can give!

Anne Brontë, p. 192. Cf. also Geoffry Rowell's comments:

Men were wary of publishing their doubts about hell because of the personal risk involved in admitting to disbelieving in hell, and because of genuine moral scruples concerning the collapse of the fabric of society if such views became widespread.

Hell and the Victorians (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 29.

26. Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers ed. Edith Julia Morley (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1938), p. 628.

27. Nine references to "hell" (and "hell's") as compared with approximately 600 references to "heaven" (and derivatives). (Lane Cooper A Concordance to the Poems of William Wordsworth London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1911.)

28. Prelude (1805-1806), VII, ll. 658-60. The 1850 version of the passage changes the words "What a hell" to "What a shock." Scenes from hell are also included among the suggestions offered to his readers of what Peter Bell saw in the moonlit pool (PW II, pp. 331-82. "Peter Bell," ll. 511-15 and alternate versions), but Wordsworth's intentions were to mock at our diseased expectations rather than to present convictions of his own.

29. Hell as an emblem of evil:

a) Rivers is described as a "hell-hound." The Borderers (1797-9), V. iii, l. 261.

b) Napoleon is described as "That soul of Evil ... from

Hell let loose." PW III, pp. 155-63. "Ode. The Morning of the Day Appointed for a General Thanksgiving. January 18, 1816," l. 95.

c) "For deep as hell itself, the avenging draught / Of civil slaughter." PW III, p. 369. "Wars of York and Lancaster," ll. 8-9, in "Ecclesiastical Sonnets," Part II, No. XVI (1821).

d) The Reign of Terror in France: "... blasts / From hell came sanctified like airs from heaven." Prelude (1805-1806), X, ll. 314-15.

e) Opposites coming together to serve the French Revolution: "... rival advocates that came / From regions opposite as heaven and hell." PW V, pp. 1-312. The Excursion, II, ll. 230-1.

f) France to free herself, "tho' Pride's perverted ire / Rouze Hell's own aid." PW I, pp. 42-91. "Descriptive Sketches" (1793), ll. 780-1.

30. Hell as a mythological place:

a) "Hell to the lyre [of Orpheus] bowed low." PW II, pp. 323-30. "On the Power of Sound" (1828), l. 126.

b) "The darkest Pit / Of the profoundest Hell, chaos, night" is less awe-inspiring than "the mind of Man." Home at Grasmere by William Wordsworth ed. Beth Darlington (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), MS. B, ll. 984-5, 989. In MS. D, "Hell" is changed to "Erebus," which in Greek mythology is a place of darkness between earth and Hades.

31. Hell as a historical belief:

What differ night and day
Then, when before the Perjured on his way
Hell opens, and the heavens in vengeance crack
Above his head uplifted in vain prayer
To Saint, or Fiend, or to the Godhead whom
He had insulted - Peasant, King, or Thane?

PW IV, p. 43. "The Black Stones of Iona," ll. 6-11, in "Itinerary Poems of 1833," No. XXIV.

32. Whately, pp. 42-3.

33. Geoffrey Rowell Hell and the Victorians (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 90. Although not unaware of its abuses, Wordsworth wrote sympathetically about the original Roman Catholic practice of prayers for the dead, describing it as a natural continuation of love beyond the moment of death. In "Other Influences" (1821), he wrote:

Ah, when the Body, round which in love we clung,
Is chilled by death, does mutual service fail?
Is tender pity then of no avail?
Are intercessions of the fervent tongue
A waste of hope? - From this sad source have sprung
Rites that console the Spirit, under grief
Which ill can brook more rational relief:
Hence, prayers are shaped amiss, and dirges sung
For Souls whose doom is fixed! (ll. 1-9)

PW III, p. 351. "Ecclesiastical Sonnets," Part I, No. XX. And in "Stanzas Suggested in a Steamboat off Saint Bees' Head ..." (1833), the poet suggests that the practice was not only evil:

Are not, in sooth, their Requiems sacred ties
Woven out of passion's sharpest agonies,
Subdued, composed, and formalized by art,
To fix a wiser sorrow in the heart?
The prayer for them whose hour is past away
Says to the Living, profit while ye may?
A little part, and that the worst, he sees
Who thinks that priestly cunning holds the keys
That best unlock the secrets of St. Bees.

(ll. 73-81)

PW IV, pp. 25-30. Wordsworth expatiates on this point in his note to the poem (Ibid., pp. 403-4).

34. Book of Common Prayer, "A Prayer for a sick child."

35. Ibid., "Order for the Burial of the Dead." Cf. also "A Prayer for a sick person, when there appeareth small hope of recovery;" "A commendatory Prayer for a sick person at the point of departure;" other passages in "The Order of the Burial of the Dead;" the Thirty-Nine Articles; and the three creeds.

36. Letters (1812-1820), p. 56. W.W. to Basil Montagu. 27 Dec., 1812.

37. Letters (1829-1834), p. 92. W.W. to Sir George Beaumont. 19 July, 1829.

38. PW V, pp. 1-312. The Excursion, IV, ll. 188-90.

b) Dying

1. Richard Winter Hamilton A Sermon ... on the Occasion of the Execution of Mr. Joseph Blackburn, Attorney at Law, for Forgery ... (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1815), pp. 35-6.

2. "The Order for the Burial of the Dead" in The Book of Common Prayer.

3. Jeremy Taylor Holy Living and Holy Dying (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1850), pp. 300-2. Note Ptolemaic cosmology in the first paragraph. Wordsworth highly recommended Holy Living and Dying to a young friend, suggesting she make it "one of your constant companions." (Letters (1821-1828), p. 542. W.W. to Harriet Douglas. Sept., 1827).

4. David Wilson A Sermon Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. William Goode ... (London: G. Brimmer, 1816), pp. 3-5. Wilson (1778-1858) was vicar of St. John's Chapel, Bedford Row, Bloomsbury when he wrote this sermon, and was then made Bishop of Calcutta in 1832. With regard to his skill as a preacher, Thomas Seccombe wrote:

His style of preaching was vigorous; his short pithy sentences were meant to have the effect of goads, and they were often pungent; but, as his biographer admits, 'things were said many times that might have been better left unsaid. But though men might smile, they never slept.' (p. 89)

(DNE, vol. 62, pp. 87-9.)

5. One of the images commonly used in discourses on death was that of life as a journey, as, for example:

He is on a journey from this world to another. Neither his home nor his rest are here. His stay is short and uncertain. His progress to his final destination

ceaseless and rapid. The Christian, like the Apostle, deliberately considers this to be his situation.... he willingly looks forward to Heaven as his exalted country. He views himself as a stranger and pilgrim upon earth. His citizenship ... is in Heaven. He regards himself as passing through a valley of tears to his Father's mansion.

Wilson, p. 3; or Bishop Horne's description of the righteous:

... having been always accustomed to think of themselves as strangers in the earth, they constantly regarded death as a departure to that other and better country of which they lived in perpetual expectation, and could therefore not be surprised or alarmed at being called to take possession, as knowing they began their journey in order to finish it.

The Works of the Right Reverend George Horne, D.D. Late Lord Bishop of Norwich, second edition, (London: R.C. and J. Rivington [and others], 1818), Vol. III, p. 344. Horne (1730-1792) was the Bishop of Norwich, and a close friend of Hannah More, who wrote of his death that "a more delightful or edifying death-bed cannot well be imagined." (DNE, vol. 27, pp. 356-7; Ford K. Brown Father of the Victorians Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961, p. 459.)

6. C.W. "The Death of Stephen. A Funeral Sermon" in Sermons, Vol. II, pp. 343, 345-6.

7. [Richard Whately] A View of Scriptural Revelations concerning a Future State: laid before his parishioners by a Country Parson (London: B. Fellowes, 1829), Chapter 11. Re. number 2 of Whately's list, cf. the lament of the widow in "Peter Bell" who, on learning that her husband has been drowned, grieves not only for his death, but for its too sudden nature:

O wretched loss - untimely stroke!
If he had died upon his bed!
He knew not one forewarning pang ...

PW II, 33-82. "Peter Bell," ll. 1046-8.

8. The Book of Common Prayer, however, implies the importance of at least some of these concepts: for example, the words of the Litany: "... from sudden death, Good Lord deliver us ..."; and in the Order for Burial: "... suffer us not, at our last hour, for any pains of death, to fall from thee ..."

9. James Boswell Life of Johnson 6 vols, (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co., 1896) Vol. II, p. 253.

10. In The Borderers (1797-1799), the hero Mortimer wonders in a state of guilt-ridden semi-madness

... why the wisest thing
That the earth owns must never chuse to die
But some one must be near to count his groans. -
The wounded deer retires to solitude -
And dies in solitude - all things but man,
All die in solitude. (V.iii, ll. 32-7)

(The Borderers by William Wordsworth ed. Robert Osborn, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982). The play does not answer Mortimer's question, but in both the cases of abandonment which it contains (that of Rivers' captain and the blind Herbert), it is the horror of dying alone which is emphasized. In "The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman" (1798), Wordsworth is concerned with "the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature," which he hoped to illustrate in that poem "by accompanying the last struggles of a human being at the approach of death, cleaving in solitude to life and society" ("Preface to Lyrical Ballads" (1800) in Prose I, p. 126). Even in a society in which dying alone was traditionally accepted, Wordsworth believed that the human heart would yearn for companionship in its last moments as strongly as for life itself.

11. Cf. for example, John Warton Death-bed Scenes and Pastoral Conversations 2 vols, (London: John Murray, 1827); or Vol. III of Horne.

12. James Hervey Meditations and Contemplations (Bungay: Brightly and Childs, 1816), pp. 56-7. Hervey (1714-1758) was the curate of Bideford, North Devon when he wrote these essays. At the time of his death he was the vicar of Weston Favell, Northamptonshire. (DNB, vol. 26, pp. 282-4.)

13. Quoted in Geoffrey Rowell Hell and the Victorians (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 7-8.

14. John James Christian Watchfulness, in the Prospect of Sickness, Mourning, and Death, fourth edition, (London: J.G.F. and J. Rivington, 1841), pp. 293-5.

15.

Incredible disturbances take place beside death-beds (real or presumed); misguided husbands extend themselves in agony on the floor, rush out to fight duels in the shrubbery with unrecognized sons and brothers, and rush back dripping with blood into the sick-room; false friends are unmasked and villains threaten vengeance across the counterpane; mysteries hang on the tantalizing edge of solution, while the physician vainly pleads that repose is the patient's one chance of life; forgiving friends hide behind the curtains of the repentant wrongdoer's deathbed, and erupt at the right moment of the conversation to assure him of pardon and receive his expiring breath or arrest his decay ...

Joyce Marjorie Sanxter Tompkin, The Popular Novel in England 1770-1800 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), pp. 59-60.

16. PW V, pp. 1-312. The Excursion, V, ll. 666-7.

17. Ann Radcliffe The Italian or the Confessional of the Black Penitents. A Romance (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

18.- Henry Fielding The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling ed. Fredson Bowers (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974.) Wordsworth owned a copy of Tom Jones, according to the evidence of his "Loan Book." (Chester L. Shaver and Alice C. Shaver Wordsworth's Library: A Catalogue New York, Garland Pub., 1979, p. 93).

19. Charlotte Brontë Jane Eyre (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1971).

20. Maria Edgeworth Helen (London: Macmillan and Co., 1896), pp. 488-90.

21. The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth ed. Stephen Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 123-54.

c) Bereavement

1. John Wesley A Collection of Hymns, for the Use of the People Called Methodists (London: John Mason, 1838), Hymn 49. Cp. the opening lines of Wordsworth's "Elegiac Stanzas (Addressed to Sir G.H.B. Upon the Death of his Sister-in-Law)," which express a similar sentiment:

O for a dirge! But why complain?
Ask rather a triumphal strain
When FERMOR'S race is run;
A garland of immortal boughs
To twine around the Christian's brows,
Whose glorious work is done. (ll. 1-6)

PW IV, pp. 269-70.

2. Henry Fielding The History of Amelia (London: G. Routledge and Sons, n.d.), p. 259. Wordsworth owned a copy of Amelia, according to the evidence of the "Manuscript Catalogue." (Chester L. Shaver and Alice C. Shaver Wordsworth's Library: A Catalogue New York: Garland Pub., 1979, p. 93).

3. Ann Radcliffe The Mysteries of Udolpho. A Romance (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 20.

4. C.W. "Jesus Raises from the Dead the Widow's Son" in Sermons 2 vols, (London: F.C. and J. Rivington, 1814), Vol. I, pp. 46-7.

5. Linda A. Pollock Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 134.

6. C.W. "The Widow's Son," Vol. I, p. 47.

7. Ibid., pp. 47-8.

8. James Hervey Meditations and Contemplations (Bungay: Brightly and Childs, 1816), p. 9.

d) Sensibility

1. William Makepeace Thackeray Vanity Fair (London: Oxford University Press, n.d.).

2. Charlotte Smith The Banished Man (London: T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, 1794), pp. 24-5.

3. Henry Fielding The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling ed. Fredson Bowers (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 349-50.

4. Samuel Richardson The History of Clarissa Harlowe (London: Henry Sotheran and Co., 1883). Wordsworth owned a copy of Clarissa, according to the evidence of his "Loan Book." (Chester L. Shaver and Alice C. Shaver Wordsworth's Library: A Catalogue New York: Garland Pub., 1979, p. 214).

5. Matthew Gregory Lewis The Monk. A Romance (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

6. Thomas Moore The Poetical Works of Thomas Moore (London: F. Warne and Co., 1889).

7. Joyce Marjorie Sanxter Tompkin cites the novels of Robert Bage as exceptions to this formula. (The Popular

Novel in England 1770-1800 Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961, pp. 202-3). Cf. also Wordsworth's attitude to Mary of Buttermere in the Prelude (1805-1806), VII, ll. 350-3.

8. Jane Austen Sense and Sensibility (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933-4), p. 207.

9. PW II, pp. 249-54. "Hart-Leap Well," l. 98.

10. In, for example, Lewis The Monk; or Charles Robert Maturin Melmoth the Wanderer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963).

11. Godred Augustus Bürger, translated by William Taylor of Norwich, "Lenora" in Monthly Magazine, i (March 1796), pp. 135-7.

12. In, for example, Udolpho.

13. Robert Blair The Grave. A Poem (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1875), p. xvii.

14. Thomas Parnell Poetical Works (London: Bell and Daldy, 1866), pp. 94-5.

15. Ibid., p. 95.

16. Blair, p. 45.

17. Edward Young Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality (Newcastle upon Tyne: K. Anderson, 1803), Night I, ll. 6-17. Wordsworth knew the Night Thoughts well enough to quote them while grieving for his brother in 1805. (Letters (1787-1805), p. 557. W.W. to Sir George Beaumont. 12 March, 1805).

18. Prelude (1805-1806), VI, ll. 482-7. Cf. also Wordsworth's tone in PW I, pp. 42-91. "Descriptive Sketches."

19. Prelude (1805-1806), VIII, ll. 526-32. Cf. also ll. 533-41 and 610-23.

e) Morality

1. Clara Reeve Fatherless Fanny (London: J. Tallis, 1819), pp. 370-1.

2. Ann Radcliffe The Mysteries of Udolpho. A Romance (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 19.

3. James Montgomery The World Before the Flood, second edition, (London: Longman, Hurst, Reese, Orme, and Brown, 1813), pp. 87-8.

4. Wordsworth wrote of the "half-penny Ballads, and penny and two-penny histories" read by the poor in his own rural area:

I have so much felt the influence of these straggling papers, that I have many a time wished that I had talents to produce songs, poems, and little histories, that might circulate among other good things in this way, supplanting partly the bad; flowers and useful herbs to take place of weeds. Indeed some of the Poems which I have published were composed not without a hope that at some time or other they might answer this purpose.

Letters (1806-1811), p. 248. W.W. to Francis Wrangham. 5 June, 1808.

5. Quoted in Martha Vicinus The Industrial Muse (London: Croom Helm, 1974), p. 10.

6. The Love Letters of William and Mary Wordsworth ed. Beth Darlington (London: Chatto and Windus, 1982), p. 179.

W.W. to M.W. 23 May, 1812.

7. John Holloway and Joan Black, ed. Later English Broadside Ballads (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975) Vol. I, pp. 67-8.

8. Anon. The History of Little King Pippin (Wellington, Salop: F. Houlston and Son, n.d.), pp. 12-13. (facsimile of copy from Victoria and Albert Museum, printed by The Scholar Press, 1979)

9. Pippin, p. 16.

10. H.S. The Picture Alphabet, for the Instruction and Amusement of Boys and Girls (Otley: William Walker, 1830), p. 23. (facsimile of copy from Victoria and Albert Museum, printed by The Scholar Press, 1979)

11. H.S., p. 26.

12. Anon. The Death and Burial of Cock Robin (York: J. Kendrew, n.d.), pp. 4-7. (facsimile of copy from Victoria and Albert Museum, printed by The Scholar Press, 1979) Although there is no date on the title page, there is a woodcut of Cock Robin's coffin on p. 11 which shows the date 1805.

13. PW IV, p. 463. I.F. note to "Immortality Ode."

14. Charlotte Brontë, p. 27.

Figures:

e) Sheila M. Smith The Other Nation. The Poor in English Novels of the 1840's and 1850's (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 14/15.

f) Smith, p. 158/9.

II: Death in Wordsworth's Life

The purpose of this section is to illustrate, from letters, poems, recorded conversation and prose, Wordsworth's response to mortality over the years, as it affected him in his "essentially human character and relations - child, parent, husband,"¹ citizen, friend. Wordsworth's life may be divided roughly into three main periods: his childhood, youth and early manhood, in the years leading up to John's death (1770-1805); middle age (1805-1830); and old age (1830-1850). In each of these divisions I have considered, first, specific deaths which affected the poet, and his response to them; and second, an overview of his more general thoughts on death during each period, with an emphasis on his thoughts and feelings about his OWN mortality. Just as essential as an understanding of the historical context of Wordsworth's poetry is an understanding of its personal context, the events and emotions of the life from which it arose. Bereavement and the awareness of mortality are not isolated concepts in Wordsworth's poetry; they touch upon and profoundly affect human relationships at every level. In the poet's life, also, we will see that death and the awareness of death have their place in every stage and relationship, and that the concerns of the poetry with the effect of death on the

family, for example, or the perceptions of children, or the bonds between living and dead, have their counterparts in the concerns of Wordsworth's day-to-day existence.

1.) The Early Years (1770-1805)

Wordsworth, like so many of his contemporaries, was exposed to personal loss at an early age.

The time of my infancy and early boyhood was passed partly at Cockermouth, and partly with my mother's parents at Penrith, where my mother, in the year 1778, died of a decline, brought on by a cold, the consequence of being put, at a friend's house in London, in what used to be called "a best bedroom". My father never recovered his usual cheerfulness of mind after this loss, and died when I was in my fourteenth year, a schoolboy, just returned from Hawkshead, whither I had been sent with my elder brother Richard, in my ninth year.¹

This bald account of the death of his parents was dictated by the poet in 1847 when he was an old man, bowed down under the weight of other griefs,² and it is not surprising that it reveals little of his emotions as a child. Wordsworth's reactions in his boyhood can only be pieced together from poems and letters written some years afterwards, but from these it becomes evident that themes important to the poet's whole life stemmed from his early experiences of loss.

The seeds of Wordsworth's intense feelings for family, for example, were sown first by his experiences while his mother was alive, and then by the shattering effect of her and his father's deaths. His mother was the emotional centre of Wordsworth's "Fair seed-time,"³ and his description of her in the Prelude shows the natural strength of the family bonds she had created, the warmth and security of that small community:

Behold the parent hen amid her brood,
Though fledged and feathered, and well pleased to part
And straggle from her presence, still a brood,
And she herself from the maternal bond
Still undischarged; yet doth she little more
Than move with them in tenderness and love,
A centre of the circle which they make
... Early died
My honoured Mother, she who was the heart
And hinge of all our learnings and our loves:
She left us destitute, and, as we might,
Trooping together.⁴

In fact, the sister and brothers felt more "squandered abroad"⁵ than "trooping together," for Dorothy was sent to stay with relatives and the boys, as they became old enough, went to school at Hawkshead. With Mr. Wordsworth's death in 1783, the children were separated even more

completely, for they were now without a physical home and centre to return to, and "the Lowther debt" had its own dampening effect on their freedom and prospects. Dorothy's letters describe the feelings of helplessness, frustration and loneliness which drew the children towards each other:

Many a time have Wm, J, C, and myself shed tears together, tears of the bitterest sorrow, we all of us, every day, feel more sensibly the loss we sustained when we were deprived of our parents, and every day do we receive fresh insults.... [We] always finish our conversations which generally take a melancholy turn, with wishing we had a father and a home. Oh! Jane, I hope it may be long ere you experience the loss of your parents, but till you feel that loss you will never know how dear to you your Sisters are ...⁶

And in 1793, she wrote:

We have been endeared to each other by early misfortune. We in the same moment lost a father, a mother, a home, we have been equally deprived of our patrimony by the cruel Hand of lordly Tyranny. These afflictions have all contributed to unite us closer by the Bonds of affection notwithstanding we have been compelled to spend our youth far asunder.⁷

Wordsworth longed for the same things as did Dorothy. In "The Vale of Esthwaite" (c.1786-8), he wrote of his feelings for her after their father's death:

Sister, for whom I feel a love
Which warms a Brother far above,
On you, as sad she marks the scene,
Why does my heart so fondly lean?
Why but because in you is given
All, all, my soul would wish from Heaven?
Why but because I fondly view
All, all that Heav'n has claimed, in you?⁸

The desire for a home, family, affection, had become centred on Dorothy and the hope of a future life together.

The death of Mr. Wordsworth was also the occasion of a "spot-of-time," an experience of intense vision which was to become a source of imaginative power and poetic inspiration in William's later life. In the Prelude he describes how, in boyish impatience to reach home for the Christmas holidays, he had climbed a hill to watch for the horses that were due to fetch him.

... 'twas a day
Stormy, and rough, and wild, and on the grass
I sate half-sheltered by a naked wall;
Upon my right hand was a single sheep,
A whistling hawthorn on my left, and there,
With those companions at my side, I watched,
Straining my eyes intensely, as the mist

Gave intermitting prospect of the wood
And plain beneath.⁹

The horses did arrive and the holiday began, but when, soon afterwards, William's father died, the intense concentration and longing of his hill-top wait took on a new significance.

The event,
With all the sorrow which it brought, appeared
A chastisement; and when I called to mind
That day so lately past, when from the crag
I looked in such anxiety of hope;
With trite reflections of morality,
Yet in the deepest passion, I bowed low
To God, Who thus corrected my desires.¹⁰

The solemn emotions surrounding his father's death overlaid in his memory the scene on the crag, investing it with disturbing power and significance. At first he sought to analyse this over-flowing of troubling emotion onto a seemingly unconnected incident in narrowly religious terms, trying to explain the connection as one of cause and effect, or attitude and consequence. But later it became clear to him that his experience was of another kind, having to do with the enriching and "vivifying"¹¹ of his feelings, not their punishment or repression. The motions of the imagination that could link those hours of intense perception with his unexpected bereavement remained mysterious to Wordsworth, but in that mystery he came to recognize a source of vision that was to haunt his poetry and his adult life.

There were other more palpable ways in which Wordsworth's future as a poet was affected by the death of others in these early years. Two men in particular, who had been close to him and had nurtured in different ways his sense of a calling, died leaving him with a deepened feeling of commitment and of trust to be fulfilled. Wordsworth's response to their "legacies of trust" laid the foundation of a pattern that would continue through his life, a sense of being responsible to the dead for the proper exercise of his gift, of being challenged and sustained in his struggles by those who had gone before.

The first of these figures was William Taylor, Wordsworth's school-master at Hawkshead. Taylor had died in 1786 at age thirty-two, when William was only sixteen; in the Prelude, he describes how a visit to his grave years

later brought back memories of Taylor's illness and sad death-bed farewell:

A week, or little less, before his death
He had said to me, 'My head will soon lie low';
And when I saw the turf that covered him,
After lapse of full eight years, those words,
With sound of voice and countenance of the Man,
Came back upon me, so that some few tears
Fell from me in my own despite.¹²

Yet Wordsworth's sadness was tempered with gratitude:

I thought with pleasure of the verses graven
Upon his tombstone, saying to myself:
He loved the Poets, and, if now alive,
Would have loved me, as one not destitute
Of promise, nor belying the kind hope
Which he had formed, when I, at his command,
Began to spin, at first, my toilsome songs.¹³

The memory of Taylor's faith in him and his potential acted as a support to the young poet long after the teacher's death.

Similarly, the death of Raisley Calvert in 1795 was an event of personal sadness to William, but was also of significance to his sense of himself as a poet. Wordsworth attended Calvert, who was only twenty-one, through the last months of his life as he was dying of tuberculosis. At Calvert's death, William received a legacy of £900, which he described to Sir George Beaumont in 1805 in the following way:

... this bequest was from a young man with whom, though I call him Friend, I had had but little connection; and the act was done entirely from a confidence on his part that I had powers and attainments which might be of use to mankind. This I have mentioned, because it was his due, and I thought the fact would give you pleasure.¹⁴

The Calvert legacy allowed William and Dorothy to be together, to start out in the kind of independent, loving family life for which they had yearned, and which was to nurture Wordsworth's greatest poetry. In the two poetic tributes William wrote for Raisley, he speaks of a partnership with the dead man: in them, gratitude for Calvert's financial support is strong, but the confidence in Wordsworth which stood behind the gift also looms large in the poet's mind. In the Prelude, he wrote:

A Youth (he bore
The name of Calvert - it shall live, if words
Of mine can give it life,) without respect

To prejudice or custom, having hope
That I had some endowments by which good
Might be promoted, in his last decay
From his own family withdrawing part
Of no redundant patrimony, did
By a bequest sufficient for my needs
Enable me to pause for choice, and walk
At large and unrestrained, nor damped too soon
By mortal cares. Himself no Poet, yet
Far less a common spirit of the world,
He deemed that my pursuits and labours lay
Apart from all that leads to wealth, or even
Perhaps to necessary maintenance,
Without some hazard to the finer sense;
He cleared a passage for me, and the stream
Flowed in the bent of Nature.¹⁵

And in a sonnet probably composed between 1802 and 1804, he described Calvert's continuing place in his life:

Calvert! it must not be unheard by them
Who may respect my name that I to thee
Owed many years of early liberty.
This care was thine when sickness did condemn
Thy youth to hopeless wasting, root and stem -
That I, if frugal and severe, might stray
Where'er I liked; and finally array
My temples with the Muse's diadem.
Hence, if in freedom I have loved the truth;
If there be aught of pure, or good, or great,
In my past verse; or shall be, in the lays
Of higher mood, which now I meditate;-
It gladdens me, O worthy, short-lived, Youth!
To think how much of this will be thy praise.¹⁶

Others besides these two men expressed confidence in Wordsworth in his early years as a poet - Coleridge, for example - but the fact that with them the bond of trust lay between the living and the dead somehow gave it a quality of its own. Death placed a special sanctity on the relationship, and the spiritual and material legacies of Taylor and Calvert played a valuable part in Wordsworth's development.

These were individual deaths which significantly influenced Wordsworth's early life. But how did he respond to the idea of his own mortality, and what picture did he have of the nature of death generally?

First, let us consider Wordsworth's understanding of death as a child. In later years, the poet described his childhood vision of mortality as having two main, related aspects. The first of these was an innate conviction of

immortality: in the Memoirs, he is quoted as saying "At that time I could not believe that I should lie down quietly in the grave, and that my body would moulder into dust;"¹⁷ and to Isabella Fenwick, he stated:

Nothing was more difficult for me in childhood than to admit the notion of death as a state applicable to my own being. I have said elsewhere -

A simple child
That lightly draws its breath,
And feels its life in every limb,
What should it know of death!' -

But it was not so much from [feelings] of animal vivacity that my difficulty came as from a sense of the indomitableness of the spirit within me. I used to brood over the stories of Enoch and Elijah, and almost to persuade myself that, whatever might become of others, I should be translated, in something of the same way, to heaven.¹⁸

The second element of his understanding of mortality was the gift of vivid perception, at times amounting to an inability to distinguish between object and self. As the Fenwick note goes on to say:

With a feeling congenial to this [conviction of immortality], I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own material nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality. At that time I was afraid of such processes. In later periods of life I have deplored, as we have all reason to do, a subjugation of an opposite character.¹⁹

The "indomitableness of the spirit within" denied the possibility that life might end in death, that the separation of body and soul and the disintegration into nothingness of the material self could ever occur. In the same way, Wordsworth's spirit would sometimes overflow the bounds of his individual self, denying the separation of its life from the natural life about it. It was at this point that Wordsworth as a boy would consciously try to draw back from his own powers and reassert the distinction between himself and nature.

These two elements - a sense of personal immortality and a powerfully intimate relationship to Nature - formed part of a number of incidents which Wordsworth was later to describe in poetry: times when, as a child, he was exercised by thoughts of death. The poem "Address from the Spirit of Cockermouth Castle" is an example. In it,

Wordsworth recalls an intimation of mortality experienced more than 50 years earlier. (It is the Castle which speaks):

Thou look'st upon me, and dost fondly think
Poet! that, stricken as both are in years,
We, differing once so much, are now Compeers,
Prepared, when each has stood his time, to sink
Into the dust. Erewhile a sterner link
United us; when thou, in boyish play,
Entering my dungeon, didst become a prey
To soul-appalling darkness. Not a blink
Of light was there; - and thus did I, thy Tutor,
Make thy young thoughts acquainted with the grave;
While thou wert chasing the wing'd butterfly
Through my green courts; or climbing, a bold suitor,
Up to the flowers whose golden progeny
Still round my shattered brow in beauty wave.²⁰

A comparison is being drawn between the poet's understanding of death as an old man and his understanding when he was a boy. The old man sees in the ruined castle an emblem of himself: a shattered structure that soon will disintegrate and disappear into the dust. Unaided, a ruined building does not renew itself, but makes an end, and the old man knows that once dead he too will cease to exist in this world. To the boy, however, the idea of the grave is associated with the absence of light - "a lonely bed without the sense or sight / Of day or the warm light"²¹ - but not the absence of self. Then, having imbibed the idea of death in darkness, he steps out into the midst of flowers, butterflies, grass and breezes, beauty and colour - images of natural vitality and brilliance enhanced by contrast with the blackness underground. Butterflies emerge from a chrysalid tomb; flowers renew themselves year after year; wind and sun come and go and come again. The boy's awareness of the grave is acquired in company with this continuous vitality of Nature, and he participates in that vitality through the vividness of his perception. Death is to him a stage not an extinction - "a place of thought where we in waiting lie"²² - and as Nature carries on through cycles and change, so will he.

At another point in his childhood, Wordsworth witnessed the recovery of a man's body, drowned in the lake at Hawkshead. In later years, he used the scene as poetic material entirely for its horror,²³ emphasizing the ghastly

contrast between the serenity of the natural setting and the ghoulish appearance of the corpse pulled up from the lake-bed by its hair. As a child, however, William did not respond to this aspect of what he had seen at all. In the Prelude, he tells how

... the dead man, 'mid that beauteous scene
Of trees and hills and water, bolt upright
Rose, with his ghastly face, a spectre shape
Of terror even; and yet no vulgar fear,
Young as I was, a child not nine years old,
Possessed me, for my inner eye had seen
Such sights before, among the shining streams
Of faery land, the forests of romance.
Thence came a spirit hallowing what I saw
With decoration and ideal grace;
A dignity, a smoothness, like the works
Of Grecian art, and purest poetry.²⁴

There are two ways in which a totally unknown dead man may be said to be terrifying: one is the ghastliness or repulsiveness of his appearance; and the other is the way in which thoughts of personal mortality well up at the sight of that to which all human flesh will one day come. The boy is not frightened at the dead man's looks, because of their familiarity. "The mind / Is lord and master"²⁵ and makes no distinction between what it sees and what it is accustomed to seeing within itself; the drowned man in that beautiful setting takes his place among the pictures of the inner eye and is subsumed by what is already known and felt. Thoughts of his own death did not enter the boy's mind, because he could not believe that mortality applied to him. So Wordsworth was free to assimilate the scene, as he described in the 1798-1799 version of the Prelude, as one of

... numerous accidents in flood or field,
Quarry or moor, or 'mid the winter snows,
Distresses and disasters, tragic facts
Of rural history that impressed my mind
With images, to which in following years
Far other feelings were attached, with forms
That yet exist with independent life
And, like their archetypes, know no decay.²⁶

Not every image of mortality entered Wordsworth's mind as a child so gently, however. Strength of perception also exposed him to darker feelings relating to death, which were very different from the exhilarating insights at Cockermouth Castle or the idealized vision at Hawkshead.

Later he was to describe these feelings as "shadings of mortality," "imports from the world of death,"

... strong,
Deep, gloomy were they, and severe; the scatterings
Of awe and tremulous dread.²⁷

One incident of this kind occurred when he was about five years old, and out riding with the servant James. Separated from his companion, William stumbled upon the scene of a past murder and gibbetting:

The gibbet-mast was mouldered down, the bones
And iron case were gone; but on the turf,
Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought,
Some unknown hand had carved the murderer's name.
The monumental writing was engraven
In times long past; and still, from year to year,
By superstition of the neighbourhood,
The grass is cleared away, and to this hour
The letters are all fresh and visible.²⁸

Recognizing where he is, the boy climbs back onto the bare common, and sees

A naked pool that lay beneath the hills,
The beacon on the summit, and, more near,
A girl who bore a pitcher on her head,
And seemed with difficult steps to force her way
Against the blowing wind. It was, in truth,
An ordinary sight; but I should need
Colours and words that are unknown to man,
To paint the visionary dreariness
Which, while I looked all round for my lost guide,
Did at that time invest the naked pool,
The beacon on the eminence,
The woman and her garments vexed and tossed
By the strong wind.²⁹

The boundaries between the two settings, and between what the boy feels within and what he sees outside himself, have disappeared. A sense of the indignity and horror of death, of murder and gibbetting, invests an ordinary view of a pool, a hill and a beacon with an emotional colouring beyond anything evident to the physical eye alone. The woman struggling against the strong wind begins to take on the stature of an archetype, an emblem of human nature struggling against all that life can bring of sorrow and pain. William's own temporary loss of his companion begins to assume the same aspect, and the bare landscape becomes an image of the cold, harsh setting of human existence. The scene is flooded with a feeling of "visionary dreariness," as is the child's heart at the thought that this might truly be the nature of things. "Colours and

words" are not adequate to describe the depth to which his feelings sink.

It was in some ways a prophetic landscape, for there were intimations here of feelings and fears that would haunt Wordsworth's later life: the cruel senselessness of death; the unrelenting dreariness of grief; the loneliness and isolation of bereavement; the fear that "friends, by death disjoined, may meet no more."³⁰ Yet the actual landscape, revisited when the poet was a young man, did not depress his then high spirits at all: his joyful feelings were, on the contrary, intensified by the intensity of what had gone before.

When in the blessed time of early love,
Long afterwards, I roamed about
In daily presence of this very scene,
Upon the naked pool and dreary crags,
And on the melancholy beacon, fell
The spirit of pleasure and youth's golden gleam;
And think ye not with radiance more divine
From these remembrances, and from the power
They left behind? So feeling comes in aid
Of feeling, and diversity of strength
Attends us, if but once we have been strong.³¹

The materials of the imagination could be completely unexpected, but, whether exhilarating or depressing in the first instance, Wordsworth held that its workings throughout life were "full / Of ... beneficent influence."³²

Between childhood experiences such as these and the poetry that was to express them, Wordsworth espoused a variety of poetic stances regarding death. As a youth, he dabbled in different types of poetic conventions and ways of representing human mortality.³³ His own death might appear in ghastly gothic and sickly sentimental guise in the course of a single poem:

Now as we wander'd through the gloom
In black Helvellyn's inmost womb
The spectre made a solemn stand,
Slow round my head thrice wav'd his hand....
Shudder'd the fiend, the vault among
Echoed the loud and dismal song.
'Twas done: the scene of woe was o'er;
My breaking soul could bear no more....
While terror shapeless rides my soul,
[] together are we hurled
Far, far amid the shadowy world.
And since that hour, the world unknown,

The world of shades is all my own.³⁴
 ... oft when fades the leaden day
 To joy-consuming pain a prey,
 Or from afar the midnight bell
 Flings on mine ear its solemn knell,
 A still Voice whispers to my breast
 I soon shall be with them that rest....
 Ah! may my weary body sleep
 In peace beneath a green grass heap,
 In Churchyard, such at death of day
 As heard the pensive sighs of Gray;
 And if the Children loitering round
 Should e'er disturb the holy ground,
 Come, oh come with pensive pace
 The violated sod replace,
 And, what would even in death be dear,
 Ah! pour upon the spot a tear.³⁵

Youthful styles and postures such as these would be left behind, but there were also experiences in this period which held a more lasting place in Wordsworth's imagination. At the age of fourteen, for example, he was overcome by a flood of emotion towards his surroundings which led suddenly to the thought of his own death. His first attempt at expressing this experience came three years after, in the "Vale of Esthwaite:"

... if Heaven bear me far away
 To close the evening of my day,
 If no vast blank impervious cloud
 The powers of thought in darkness shroud,
 Sick, trembling at the world unknown
 And doubting what to call her own,
 Even while my body pants for breath
 And shrinks at the [] dart of Death,
 My soul shall cast the wistful view
 The longing look alone on you.
 As Phoebus, when he sinks to rest
 Far on the mountains in the west,
 While all the vale is dark between
 Ungilded by his golden sheen,
 A lingering lustre softly throws
 On the dear hills where first he rose.³⁶

If adulthood must bring with it discontinuity, the last moments of his life would be a return to the beginning and a renewal of contact with what had been lost.

On the other hand, the sight of Grasmere from one of its surrounding hills spoke to the boy Wordsworth of a type of life that did not involve disjunction with the things he valued. The experience is described in the opening lines of "Home at Grasmere:"

Once to the brow of yonder Hill I stopped,
 While I was yet a School-boy (of what age
 I cannot well remember, but the hour

I well remember though the year be gone),
 And with a sudden influx overcome
 At sight of this seclusion, I forgot
 My haste - for hasty had my footsteps been,
 As boyish my pursuits - [and sighing said],
 "What happy fortune were it here to live!
 And if I thought of dying, if a thought
 Of mortal separation could come in
 With paradise before me, here to die."
 I was no Prophet, nor had even a hope,
 Scarcely a wish, but one bright pleasing thought,
 A fancy in the heart of what might be
 The lot of others, never could be mine.³⁷

In "The Vale of Esthwaite" (written a few years after that "sudden influx"), Wordsworth puts aside the thoughts of premature death with which he had been playing and describes just such a life for himself, a description which succeeding years would prove to be uncannily accurate:

But cease my soul, ah! cease to pry
 Through Time's dark veil with envious eye,
 That pow'r who gave and only knows
 The hour when these sad orbs shall close
 May hold before me Nature's page
 Till dim seen by the eyes of age;
 Then basking in the noontide blaze
 Here might I fix my feeble gaze
 As on a Book, companion dear
 Of childhood's ever merry year,
 Retrace each scene with fond delight
 While memory aids the orbs of sight.

Perhaps my pains might be beguil'd
 By some fond vacant gazing child;
 He the long wondrous tale would hear
 With simple unfastidious ear
 For while I wandered round the vale
 From every rock would hang a tale,
 While he with questions dear and dear
 Call'd tale from tale and tear from tear.³⁸

And if the passage from youth to adulthood can be pinpointed, it came for Wordsworth at the start of his life with Dorothy which, in many ways was to fulfil his prophecy.

The idea of making a new home together had grown progressively stronger during the years of William and Dorothy's youthful dependence and separation. Theirs was to be a domestic life of "Happiness arising from the exercise of the social Affections in Retirement and rural Quiet."³⁹ Safe within such a family circle, with a full life of companionship behind them, death would be a gentle thing, a quiet close to a quiet life without any sense of

rending or struggle or despair. William described their dream in "An Evening Walk" (1793):

- Ev'n now she [the Moon] decks for me a distant scene
(For dark and broad the gulph of time between)
Gilding that cottage with her fondest ray,
(Sole bourn, sole wish, sole object of my way;
How fair it's lawn and silvery woods appear!
How sweet it's streamlet murmurs in mine ear!)
Where we, my friend, to golden days shall rise,
'Till our small share of hardly-paining sighs
(For sighs will ever trouble human breath)
Creep hush'd into the tranquil breast of Death.⁴⁰

With Calvert's legacy, the dream became a reality. Wordsworth began to re-discover himself, after a period of confusion in which conflicting thoughts on the political situation in France, the philosophical concepts of William Godwin, and the exact nature of his own future, had left him troubled and unsure. Dorothy was essential to his recovery; she was closely identified in William's mind with the true continuity of his life. She had

Maintained for me a saving intercourse
With my true self; for, though impaired and changed
Much, as it seemed, I was no further changed
Than as a clouded, not a waning moon:
She, in the midst of all, preserved me still
A Poet, made me seek beneath that name
My office upon earth, and nowhere else.⁴¹

In "Tintern Abbey" (1798), Wordsworth speaks of the things to which Dorothy had returned him: Nature, and a relationship to Nature that strives to be a communion. If he should die before her, it is among these things that her consolation will lie.

Nor, perchance -
If I should be where I no more can hear
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams
Of past existence - wilt thou then forget
That on the banks of this delightful stream
We stood together; and that I, so long
A worshipper of Nature, hither came
Unwearied in that service: rather say
With warmer love - oh! with far deeper zeal
Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget,
That after many wanderings, many years
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!⁴²

Now, the sight of his sister rejoins Wordsworth to his own "past existence;" and later, Dorothy's memories of him and his love of Nature will remain as part of her own love and communion. His relationship with her and with the scene

before them will not end at his death, but be carried on by Dorothy in a continuity of memory and love. The man in his poem "'Tis Said That Some Have Died for Love," written in the next year, has on the contrary become completely unfitted for this type of consolation in bereavement. He is out of tune with Nature and her life, and he wishes on her continuous rhythms the same experience of shattering and disjunction that his Barbara's death had brought to him.

"The clouds pass on; they from the heavens depart:
I look - the sky is empty space;
I know not what I trace;
But when I cease to look, my hand is on my heart.

O! what a weight is in these shades! Ye leaves,
That murmur once so dear, when will it cease?...

Roll back, sweet Rill! back to thy mountain-bounds,
And there for ever be thy waters chained!...
Be anything, sweet Rill, but that which thou art now..

Thou one fair shrub, oh! shed thy flowers,
And stir not in the gale.

For thus to see thee nodding in the air,
To see thy arch thus stretch and bend,
Thus rise and thus descend, -

Disturbs me till the sight is more than I can bear."⁴³

Gently but firmly William warns Dorothy against any such strife:

Ah gentle Love! if ever thought was thine
To store up kindred hours for me, thy face
Turn from me, gentle Love! nor let me walk
Within the sound of Emma's voice, nor know
Such happiness as I have known to-day.⁴⁴

Relationship to Nature is to be Dorothy's consolation when he is gone, speaking to her of continued life and not of death.

Others besides themselves were attuned to the life in Nature, and these others would also help to carry on something of William and Dorothy after their deaths. Wordsworth wrote in "Michael" (1800) of "Youthful Poets who among these hills / Will be my second self when I am gone"⁴⁵ and in "It was an April morning" (1800) of "Shepherds, who ...

Years after we are gone and in our graves,
When they have cause to speak of this wild place,
Will call it by the name of EMMA'S DELL.⁴⁶

The thoughts and words of kindred spirits will maintain the memory of William and Dorothy and their way of life into the future, long after they themselves are dead and gone.

These were comfortable thoughts; death had for

Wordsworth a gentle face in this period. The grave seemed to him a peaceful place, not of dissolution and separation but of silent companionship and rest. Dorothy wrote in her Journal, April 29, 1802, how

We then went to John's Grove, sate a while at first. Afterwards William lay, and I lay, in the trench under the fence - he with his eyes shut, and listening to the waterfalls and the birds. There was not one waterfall above another - it was the sound of waters in the air - the voice of the air. William heard me breathing and rustling now and then, but we both lay still, and unseen by one another; he thought that it would be as sweet thus to lie so in the grave, to hear the peaceful sounds of the earth, and just to know that our dear friends were near. ⁴⁷

The idea of death as a happy state is also found in an odd poem belonging to about this time:

(i)

I have been here in the Moon-light,
I have been here in the Day,
I have been here in the Dark Night,
And the Stream was still roaring away.

(ii)

These Chairs they have no words to utter,
No fire is in the grate to stir or flutter,
The cieling and floor are mute as a stone,
My chamber is hush'd and still,
 And I am alone,
 Happy and alone.

Oh who would be afraid of life,
The passion the sorrow and the strife,
 When he may be
 Shelter'd so easily?
May lie in peace on his bed
Happy as they who are dead.

Half an hour afterwards

I have thoughts that are fed by the sun.
 The things which I see
 Are welcome to me,
 Welcome every one:
I do not wish to lie
 Dead, dead,
Dead without any company;
 Here alone on my bed,
With thoughts that are fed by the Sun,
And hopes that are welcome every one,
 Happy am I.

O Life, there is about thee
A deep delicious peace,
I would not be without thee,
 Stay, oh stay!
Yet be thou ever as now,
Sweetness and breath with the quiet of death,

Be but thou ever as now,
Peace, peace, peace.⁴⁸

Death seemed a peaceful haven from sorrow and strife, and William in his blessedness had found such a haven during life. Even in this happy poem, however, he is not unaware of the "thought / Of mortal separation,"⁴⁹ of the possibility of being "Dead, dead, / Dead without any company." The two visions of death - as terrible, tyrannical and rending, or gentle and happy - are contrasted in another poem probably dating from the same period:

Methought I saw the footsteps of a throne
Which mists and vapours from mine eyes did shroud -
Nor view of who might sit thereon allowed;
But all the steps and ground about were strown
With sights the ruefullest that flesh and bone
Ever put on; a miserable crowd,
Sick, hale, old, young, who cried before that cloud,
"Thou art our king, O Death! to thee we groan."
Those steps I clomb; the mists before me gave
Smooth way; and I beheld the face of one
Sleeping alone within a mossy cave,
With her face up to heaven; that seemed to have
Pleasing remembrance of a thought foregone;
A lovely Beauty in a summer grave!⁵⁰

The image of a sleeping beauty, unharmed by death and attended by pleasing memories, the idea of the happy dead, or of lying quietly in the grave with a sense of friends at hand and the life of Nature carrying on around one - these were the faces of mortality for Wordsworth in his early manhood. Compared with the morbidity of some of his contemporaries, or the obsession of others with trans-sepulchral legalities and punishment, Wordsworth's vision of death at this time seems extraordinarily benignant and unafraid. But before many years were over, his ability to perceive death as a thing of peace and tranquil beauty was to be sorely tried.

Notes to Section Two

1. Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers ed. Edith Julia Morley (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1938), p. 535.

1.) The Early Years (1770-1805)

1. Memoirs I, p. 8.

2. For example, the deaths of the poet's grandson, nephew, and brother in 1845-6, and the death of his daughter Dora in July of 1847, a bereavement from which he never fully recovered.

3. Prelude (1805-1806), I, l. 305.

4. Ibid., V, ll. 246-52, 256-60. In "Home at Grasmere," Wordsworth also compares himself and Dorothy to birds scattered by the Fowler, Death, then reunited in adult life:

Long is it since we met to part no more,
Since I and Emma heard each other's call
And were Companions once again, like Birds
Which by the intruding Fowler had been scared,
Two of a scattered brood that could not bear
To live in loneliness.

MS. B, ll. 171-6. (Home at Grasmere ed. Beth Darlington, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977.)

5. Letters (1787-1805), p. 16. D.W. to Jane Pollard. c. 27 Jan., 1788.

6. Ibid., p. 3. D.W. to Jane Pollard. July, 1787.

7. Ibid., p. 88. 16 Feb., 1793.

8. PW I, pp. 270-83. "The Vale of Esthwaite," ll. 528-35.

9. Prelude (1805-1806), XI, ll. 356-64. Cf. also PW I, pp. 270-83. "The Vale of Esthwaite," ll. 416-27.

10. Ibid., ll. 368-75.

11. Ibid., l. 260.

12. Prelude (1805-1806), X, ll. 501-7.

13. Ibid., ll. 509-15.

14. Letters (1787-1805), p. 546. W.W. to Sir George Beaumont. 23 Feb., 1805.

15. Prelude (1805-1806), XIII, ll. 349-67.

16. PW III, p. 20. "To the Memory of Raiseney Calvert."

17. Memoirs II, p. 476.

18. PW IV, p. 463. I.F. note to "Immortality Ode."

19. Ibid.

20. PW IV, p. 23. "Address from the Spirit of Cockermouth Castle."

21. PW IV, pp. 279-85. "Immortality Ode," ll. 121/2.

22. Ibid.

23. PW II, pp. 331-82. "Peter Bell" (1798).

24. Prelude (1805-1806), V, ll. 470-81.

25. Ibid., XI, ll. 271-2.

26. Prelude (1798-1799), I, ll. 280-7.

27. Prelude (1850), IV, ll. 248-53.

28. Prelude (1805-1806), XI, ll. 291-9.

29. Ibid., ll. 304-16.

30. PW II, pp. 36-7. "To - ", l. 4.

31. Prelude (1805-1806), XI, ll. 318-28.

32. Ibid., XI, ll. 278-9.

33. In his earliest poetry, we find love-lorn maidens

sinking gracefully to an early grave (PW I, pp. 265-7. "A Ballad," c. 1787); elegant Augustan elegies written by mourning widowers (Ibid., p. 265. "Sonnet Written by Mr. - Immediately After the Death of His Wife," c. 1787); worms eagerly devouring dead boys (Ibid., pp. 267-9. "Dirge Sung by a Minstrel," c. 1787-8); the re-telling of classical sorrows (Ibid. "The Death of a Starling - Catullus," c. 1786, p. 263; "Orpheus and Eurydice - Vergil," c. 1788, pp. 283-5; "In part from Moschus - Lament for Bion," c. 1788, pp. 286-7); and human sacrifices in the fanes of mystical druids (Ibid., pp. 270-83. "The Vale of Esthwaite," c. 1787).

34. PW I, pp. 270-83. "The Vale of Esthwaite," ll. 350-3, 356-9, 374-8.

35. Ibid., ll. 440-5, 456-65.

36. Ibid., ll. 498-513. Wordsworth also included the incident in the Prelude (1798-9), Part II, ll. 161-74:

And there I said,
That beauteous sight before me, there I said
(Then first beginning in my thoughts to mark
That sense of dim similitude which links
Our moral feelings with external forms)
That in whatever region I should close
My mortal life I would remember you,
Fair scenes! that dying I would think on you,
My soul would send a longing look to you:
Even as that setting sun while all the vale
Could nowhere catch one faint memorial gleam
Yet with the last remains of his last light
Still lingered, and a farewell lustre threw
On the dear mountain-tops where first he rose.

Omitted from the Prelude (1805-1806), a version of these lines reappeared in the Prelude (1850), VIII, ll. 462-75, and also as the "Extract from the Conclusion of a Poem, Composed in Anticipation of Leaving School" (PW I, p. 2), published by Wordsworth among his "Poems Written in Youth."

37. Home at Grasmere, MS. B, ll. 1-16.

38. PW I, pp. 270-83. "The Vale of Esthwaite," ll. 478-97.

39. Letters (1787-1805), p. 93. D.W. to Jane Pollard. 16 June, 1793.

40. PW I, pp. 4-39. "An Evening Walk" (1793), ll. 413-22.

41. Prelude (1805-1806), X, ll. 915-21.

42. PW II, pp. 259-63. "Tintern Abbey," ll. 146-59.

43. Ibid., pp. 33-4. "'Tis Said That Some Have Died for Love," ll. 17-22, 29-30, 36, 39-44.

44. Ibid., ll. 48-52.

45. Ibid., pp. 80-94. "Michael," ll. 38-9.

46. Ibid., pp. 111-12. "It was an April morning," ll. 42, 45-7.

47. Journal I, pp. 139-40. 29 April, 1802.

48. PW IV, pp. 365-6. "I have been here."

49. Home at Grasmere, ll. 12-13.

50. PW III, p. 16. "Methought I saw the footsteps of a throne."

2.) The Middle Years (1805-1830)

The year 1805 marked the beginning of a new understanding of mortality for the poet. Wordsworth's earlier visions of gentle death, sanctified by nature and part of her continuing life, proved inadequate to support him under the bereavements of his middle years. More and more he began to seek for consolation in the perceptions of the Church of England, its vision of the nature of mortality and the relation of death to life. The thought that dying might mean the end of life, its arbitrary extinction, was one which troubled him deeply but which, in spite of great effort, he was not always able to avoid. Only time and the consolations of religion were able to soften the bereavements of these years, and to soothe the doubts and anxieties that attended them.

The first grief of the middle years was the sinking of the Abergavenny and the drowning of her captain, John Wordsworth. The poet described the disaster in his poem "To the Daisy:"

Ah! hopeful, hopeful was the day
When to that Ship he bent his way,
To govern and to guide:
His wish was gained: a little time
Would bring him back in manhood's prime
And free for life, these hills to climb,
With all his wants supplied ...

Ill-fated Vessel! - ghastly shock!
- At length delivered from the rock,
The deep she hath regained;
And through the stormy night they steer;
Labouring for life, in hope and fear,
To reach a safer shore - how near,
Yet not to be attained!

"Silence!" the brave Commander cried;
To that calm word a shriek replied,
It was the last death-shriek.
- A few (my soul oft sees that sight)
Survive upon the tall mast's height;
But one dear remnant of the night -
For Him in vain I seek.

Six weeks beneath the moving sea
He lay in slumber quietly;
Unforced by wind or wave
To quit the Ship for which he died,
(All claims of duty satisfied);
And there they found him at her side;
And bore him to the grave.

John was special to the Grasmere family in many ways:

... we were not Brother and sister with him in blood only but had the same pleasures the same loves in almost everything;²

"His tender soul was awake to all our feelings."³ John was "a silent Poet,"⁴ and between him and them lay "a store / Of undistinguishable sympathies."⁵ Once he had achieved some financial success in his profession, John hoped to be able to retire to Grasmere and become part of the life there. His earnings were to be shared with his brother and sister, and their mutual affection was to enrich all of their lives. Each of these qualities, plans and hopes tied them together in a more than familial closeness, which William would celebrate for them all in his poetry. The news of John's drowning was a "ghastly shock" to the little community, cutting through their loves, their vision of the future, and their sense of security.

This first major bereavement of their adulthood stirred up in William and Dorothy fears for the other lives linked to theirs. On the day the news arrived, William wrote to Richard: "We wish you were with us. God keep the rest of us together! the set is now broken;"⁶ and later

I am sometimes half superstitious, and think that as the number of us is now broken some more of the set will be following him. I used always to think that John and you would be the longest lived of any of us.⁷

Dorothy's cry to Christopher was "let us who are left cling closer to each other."⁸ It was as if death had breached the wall of their security and might now enter at will.

Six years earlier, William had explored the idea of irreplaceable loss, in his poems "Two April Mornings" and "The Fountain." Now he was faced with it in his own life:

Our loss is one which never can be made up; had it come earlier in life or later it would have been easier to bear; we are young enough to have had hope of pleasure and happiness in each others company for many years, and too old to outgrow the sorrow. Besides such a man as our Brother, considering his education etc, is not to be looked for; and we were not Brother and sister with him in blood only but had the same pleasures the same loves in almost everything.⁹

Of his father's death, Wordsworth had written that "I mourn because I mourned no more;"¹⁰ and later, of his mother, that she was "lost too early for the frequent tear."¹¹ Now fortitude, patience and resignation were the qualities he must espouse to face a sorrow that "will ne'er be old."¹²

I have borne up as well as I could; but oh my dear Friends! what have we not endured! But the will of God be done ... We shall endeavour to be resigned: this is all I can say; but grief will have its course.... God grant us patience, for this life needs it above all other qualities.¹³

I trust in God that I shall not want fortitude but my loss is great, and irreparable.¹⁴

And what of hope? In a letter to Sir George Beaumont, Wordsworth analyses the basis of his belief in "another and a better world":

... a thousand times have I asked myself, as your tender sympathy led me to do, "why was he taken away?["] and I have answered the question as you have done. In fact, there is no other answer which can satisfy and lay the mind at rest. Why have we a choice and a will, and a notion of justice and injustice, enabling us to be moral agents? Why have we sympathies that make the best of us so afraid of inflicting pain and sorrow, which yet we see dealt about so lavishly by the supreme governor? Why should our notions of right towards each other, and to all sentient beings within our influence differ so widely from what appears to be his notion and rule, if everything were to end here? Would it be blasphemy to say that upon the supposition of the thinking principle being destroyed by death, however inferior we may be to the great Cause and ruler of things, we have more of love in our Nature than he has? The thought is monstrous; and yet how to get rid of it except upon the supposition of another and a better world I do not see. As to my departed Brother who leads our minds at present to these reflections, he walked all his life pure among many impure. Except a little hastiness of temper when any thing was done in a clumsy or bungling way, or when improperly contradicted upon occasions of not much importance, he had not one vice of his profession. I never heard an oath or even an indelicate expression or allusion from him in my life, his modesty was equal to that of the purest Women. In prudence in meekness, in self-denial, in fortitude, in just desires, and elegant and refined enjoyments, with an entire simplicity of manners, life and habit, he was all that could be wished-for in man: strong in health, and of a noble person, with every hope about him that could render life dear; thinking of and living only for others; and we see what has been his end! So good must be better; so high must be destined to be higher.

When to the grave we follow the renown'd
For valour, virtue, science, all we love,
And all we praise; for worth, whose noon-tide
beam,

Enabling us to think in higher style,
Mends our ideas of ethereal powers;
Dream we, that lustre of the moral world
Goes out in stench, and rottenness the close?
Why was he wise to know, and warm to praise,
And strenuous to transcribe in human life
The mind almighty? Could it be that fate

Just when the lineaments began to shine,
And dawn the Deity, should snatch the draught,
With night eternal blot it out [?"]¹⁵

Reason in the face of pain is shown here, rather than a purely submissive faith. The goodness of humankind necessitates a good God; the exercise of goodness in this world requires some recognition in another. The idea of death as the final cutting off of spiritual as well as physical life made a mockery both of what Wordsworth had observed (patterns of human good), and of what he had deduced (the pattern of divine goodness, culminating in Heaven). It was unthinkable that the grave could be the end.

John was to continue after death in other ways as well. In the month of his death, William wrote:

... he encouraged me to persist, and to keep my eye steadily on its object. He would work for me, (that was his language), for me, and his Sister; and I was to endeavour to do something for the world.... This is the end of his part of the agreement, of his efforts for my welfare! God grant me life and strength to fulfill mine! I shall never forget him, never lose sight of him, there is a bond between us yet, the same as if he were living, nay far more sacred, calling upon me to do my utmost, as he to the last did his utmost to live in honour and worthiness.¹⁶

And later:

Oh! my dear friend I shall never forget him! his image if my senses remain, will be with me at my last hour and I will endeavour to die as he did, and what is of still more consequence perhaps, to live as he did.... For myself I feel that there is something cut out of my life which cannot be restored, I never thought of him but with hope and delight, we looked forward to the time not distant as we thought when he would settle near us when the task of his life would be over and he would have nothing to do but reap his reward. By that time I hoped also that the chief part of my labours would be executed and that I should be able to shew him that he had not placed a false confidence in me.... But let me stop - I will not be cast down were it only for his sake I will not be dejected. I have much yet to do and pray God to give me strength and power - his part of the agreement between us is brought to an end, mine continues and I hope when I shall be able to think of him with a calmer mind that the remembrance of him dead will even animate me more than the joy which I had in him living.¹⁷

The partnership was to continue in spite of death.

Three minor poems written in John's memory survive from this period. In "Distressful gift!",¹⁸ Wordsworth

sorrows over a book into which he had copied his verses for John to read on shipboard. John was a part of the life expressed in the poems; they were his as much as they were William's:

Alas, alas, it is a Tale
Of Thee thyself; fond heart and frail!
The sadly-tuneful line
The written words that seem to throng
The dismal page, the sound, the song,
The murmur all to thee belong,
Too surely they are thine. (ll. 8-14)

When John was alive, the book of verses was to have acted as a link between them, in spite of the miles that separated him from Grasmere. In continuing after the wreck to write poetry into the book, William consciously seeks to maintain such a link in spite of death's separation:

Some solace thus I strive to gain,
Making a kind of secret chain,
If so I may, betwixt us twain
In memory of the past. (ll. 18-21)

But it is not enough. Wordsworth ends the poem with a plea for patience under sorrow and for protection from future depredation.

And now - upon the written leaf
With heart oppress'd by pain and grief
I look, but, gracious God,
Oh grant that I may never find
Worse matter or a heavier mind,
Grant this, and let me be resign'd
Beneath thy chast'ning rod. (ll. 36-42)

"To the Daisy"¹⁹ contains a poetic account of John's hopes and career at sea, and of his shipwreck. After the busyness and violence of the sailor's life and death, Wordsworth describes his brother as sleeping quietly, first under the sea and then in a sea-side churchyard. To have moved his body at all would have been a "Vain service!" (l. 57), had it not been that he

Should find an undisturbed retreat
Near what he loved, at last -

That neighbourhood of grove and field
To Him a resting-place should yield. (ll. 62-5)

Yet Wordsworth does not here affirm his earlier vision of the grave as a gentle place, surrounded by "the peaceful sounds of the earth."²⁰ Instead the poem ends on a classical elegiac note: nature mourns her loss, natural life goes on, but the dead one knows nothing of it, entombed in a "senseless grave" (l. 70):

The birds shall sing and ocean make
A mournful murmur for his sake;
And Thou, sweet Flower, shalt sleep and wake
Upon his senseless grave. (ll. 67-70)

In "Elegiac Verses In Memory of My Brother, John Wordsworth,"²¹ William describes how the news of the wreck first reached the Grasmere family:

All vanished in a single word,
A breath, a sound, and scarcely heard.
Sea - Ship - drowned - Shipwreck - so it came,
The meek, the brave, the good, was gone;
He who had been our living John
Was nothing but a name. (ll. 35-40)

Their "Mutual hope was dust" (l. 32); their future life together, that "day / Of blessedness to come" (ll. 29-30), was cut off; it seemed that the message of John's death was

Oh do not Thou too fondly brood,
Although deserving of all good,
On any earthly hope, however pure! (ll. 68-70)

But although the substance of their hope and the security of their affections had been undermined by John's death, Wordsworth speaks of consolations and relief, and the possibility of a surer peace in the future:

I only look'd for pain and grief
And trembled as I drew more near,
But God's unbounded love is here
And I have found relief. (before l. 1, MS.)

From many a humble source, to pains
Like these, there comes a mild release;
Even here I feel it, even this Plant
Is in its beauty ministrant
To comfort and to peace. (ll. 46-50)

These three pieces document the vacillations of Wordsworth's distress under the first shock of his grief (an earlier poem on his sorrow had been lost "except for a few lines, as it came from me in such a torrent that I was unable to remember it"²²), but they do not achieve the stature of great, or even particularly good, poetry. The poet has been unable to distance himself from his thoughts sufficiently to perceive in them, or conceive of them, any real structure or pattern. Wordsworth's own definition of poetry, as "tak[ing] its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity,"²³ points up the nature of their weakness: they are expressions of raw emotion, formlessly buffeting the poet about; he is the emotion's victim rather than its master. In the struggle to come to grips with his loss,

the poet grasps at ways of mitigating its finality (a book of poems, a shared love of the countryside), but can retain a hold on nothing. In the third poem, however, although the vacillations still continue, there are signs that a new vision is beginning to appear out of the chaos. When Wordsworth wrote the words "Peace built on suffering will endure" ("Elegiac Verses," l. 1, MS.), he was anticipating one of his greatest poems, also inspired by the death of John, "Peele Castle."

The basis of the poem, "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle,"²⁴ is a comparison of two paintings of a scene made up of Peele Castle, the shore, and the sea. One is a picture that Wordsworth imagines he might have painted "if mine had been the Painter's hand" (l. 13); the other is an actual painting by Sir George Beaumont. Wordsworth's picture was to portray his vision of the Castle during a summer holiday. In describing the actual land- and seascape which he then saw, Wordsworth repeatedly unites measures of the passage of time (weeks, days, seasons) with the idea of permanence, the antithesis of time:

I was thy neighbour once, thou rugged Pile!
Four summer weeks I dwelt in sight of thee:
I saw thee every day; and all the while
Thy Form was sleeping on a glassy sea.

So pure the sky, so quiet was the air!
So like, so very like, was day to day!
Whene'er I looked, thy Image still was there;
It trembled, but it never passed away.

How perfect was the calm! it seemed no sleep;
No mood, which season takes away, or brings. (ll. 1-10)

Few things are as unsubstantial as a reflection on water or stillness on the sea, and yet the image seemed to the poet a promise of continual peace and calm. The picture inspired by this scene would have expressed his feeling of security, safety from change and the attacks against joy which the passage of time inevitably brings:

I would have planted thee, thou hoary Pile ...
Beside a sea that could not cease to smile;
On tranquil land, beneath a sky of bliss.

Thou shouldst have seemed a treasure-house divine
Of peaceful years; a chronicle of heaven....

A Picture had it been of lasting ease,
Elysian quiet, without toil or strife;
No motion but the moving tide, a breeze,

Or merely silent Nature's breathing life.

Such, in the fond illusion of my heart,
Such Picture would I at that time have made:
And seen the soul of truth in every part,
A steadfast peace that might not be betrayed.

(ll. 17, 19-22, 25-32)

The picture would have been an emblem of the poet's vision, his understanding of the nature of human life. Then death ripped suddenly through the poet's security, forcing him to see clearly the folly of his earlier perception. Beaumont's picture of the Castle in a storm now seems to Wordsworth "the soul of truth:"

This work of thine I blame not, but commend;
This sea in anger, and that dismal shore.

O 'tis a passionate Work! - yet wise and well,
Well chosen is the spirit that is here;
That Hulk which labours in the deadly swell,
This rueful sky, this pageantry of fear!

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

(ll. 43-52)

There is no protection from the loss and pain that time brings, neither is there any escape. A true perception must acknowledge and include bereavement and death, loss and change. What Wordsworth had described was purely private and internal: a memory of a scene, an imaginary unpainted picture. Now he is cut off forever from that "fond illusion" and must build again on the basis of common human experience.

A deep distress hath humanised my Soul....

Farewell, farewell the heart that lives alone,
Housed in a dream, at distance from the Kind!
Such happiness, wherever it be known,
Is to be pitied; for 'tis surely blind. (ll. 36, 53-6)

The virtues expressed by the ship and the Castle in Sir George Beaumont's picture are those of struggle, labour, and bravery, and to these Wordsworth adds the human virtue of hope. Struggle and change are the nature of this life, as are bereavement and loss, but hope looks ahead and beyond.

... welcome fortitude, and patient cheer,
And frequent sights of what is to be borne!
Such sights, or worse, as are before me here. -
Not without hope we suffer and we mourn. (ll. 57-60)

Wordsworth wrote in the Prelude, completed during this

period, of

... a private grief
Keen and enduring, which the frame of mind
That in this meditative history
Hath been described, more deeply makes me feel;
Yet likewise hath enabled me to bear
More firmly.²⁵

The poetic expression of his acceptance of John's death in "Peele Castle" represents a high point of achievement, which the poet in his sorrow was not always able to maintain. But time and poetry offered him what consolation they could, to which was added "the supposition of another and a better world."²⁶

Shortly after John's death, when Dorothy was writing to a friend about young Dora's charm and "genius," she broke off abruptly with the words:

... - but poor darling! we may never get her reared. It is a saying amongst the old wives that a child is "over sensible to live" and I believe there is more truth in this than one would wish to think; I know the tears came into my eyes the other morning when our Servant, looking at Dorothy, said to me suddenly "She has over many pretty ways that Child!"²⁷

That adults in the early nineteenth century should fear for the lives of children was natural, but for seven more years the Wordsworths' anxieties were belied. Then in 1812, within six months of each other, Catharine and then Thomas died suddenly and unexpectedly.

I am grieved to the heart when I write to you - but you must bear the sad tidings - Our sweet little Catharine was seized with convulsions on Wednesday night at 1/2 before ten or 1/2 past 9 o'clock. The fits continued till 1/4 after 5 in the morning, when she breathed her last. She had been in perfect health, and looked unusually well - her leg and arm had gained strength - and we were full of hope. In short, we had sent the most delightful accounts to her poor Mother. It is a great addition to our affliction that her Father and Mother were not here to witness her last struggles, and to see her in the last happy weeks of her short life - - She never forgot Quincey - dear Innocent, she now lies upon her Mother's Bed, a perfect image of peace - this to me was a soothing spectacle after having beheld her struggles. It is an unspeakable consolation to us that we are assured that no foresight could have prevented the disease in this last instance.... The disease lay in the Brain, and if it had been possible for her to recover, it is much to be feared that she would not have retained the Faculties of her Mind.²⁸

Catharine was four years old when she died. Ever

since her first "stroke" in 1810, she had been partially crippled and mentally slower than before. As Dorothy said:

... she was never the same child - before she was the quickest creature I ever saw - the liveliest in catching ideas. It was not so afterwards.²⁹

The knowledge that had she recovered she might well have been severely handicapped offered some comfort, and may perhaps have made it easier for William to say: "Catharine [...] has been removed to a happier world.... [it is] a happy translation for her."³⁰

I write with a full heart; with some sorrow, but most oppressed by an awful sense of the uncertainty and instability of all human things.³¹

It was William's concern for Mary, rather than his own sorrow, which dominated his letters following Catharine's death:

Her [Mary's] health has suffered: but I clearly see that neither thought nor religion nor the endeavours of friends, can at once quiet a heart that has been disturbed by such an affliction. We must wait patiently and do what we can.³²

Mary's depression was to continue for a long time and both Dorothy and William expressed fears that she might die of grief - Dorothy in her letters,³³ and William in the story of the Solitary's wife for which he drew on this sad year's experiences.³⁴

How did the other children respond to their sister's death? Dorothy described their reactions in a letter to Catherine Clarkson:

After her death John became a comfort to us, though in deep distress, for he was so very much afflicted; but the thoughtfulness and good sense, and delicate feeling which he shewed, made us lean upon him as a support, a support for us and his dear Mother, and the other helpless little ones. Poor Willy soon ceased to inquire after Kate; but it was many days before he got the better of his loss; he was fretful and knew not what to do with himself. Dorothy was at Appleby - she was always particularly fond of Catharine, and when she heard of her death was much afflicted for a time; but she is of a volatile nature, and the next day was as happy as ever. She came home last Thursday and we were surprized at her joyfulness, but at night when she went to bed she knelt down before me to say her prayers, and as usual prayed for her Brothers and sister, I suppose without thinking of her. I said to her when she had done - My dear child you have no Sister living now - and our Religion does not teach us to pray for the dead. We can do nothing for them - our prayers will not help them - God has taken your Sister to himself. -

She burst into a flood - an agony of tears - and went weeping and silent to her bed - and I left her after some time still weeping - and so she fell asleep.³⁵

In "We are Seven," William had presented a dialogue between a child's denial of death's disjunctions and an adult's orthodox insistence on its reality. In the poem, the child was more than a match for the man, but Dora succumbed under the weight of her aunt's arguments, which told her that the relation between her and her sister had been completely severed. Even prayer, which reaches the unseen God, could not reach or help Catharine. It is no wonder that Dora cried.

Thomas was away with Mary at the time of Catharine's death, but on his return home, her grave became a daily presence in his life: the house overlooked the churchyard; he passed through the graveyard to and from school every day; it was his playground,³⁶ and the goal of evening walks with his mother.³⁷ Christopher Wordsworth, his father's biographer, wrote in the Memoirs: "[Thomas's] pleasure was to go to Grasmere Churchyard, and sweep the leaves from his sister's grave;"³⁸ his poetic counterpart in the poem "Maternal Grief" plants flowers on the grave and visits them every evening. When, less than six months after Catharine's death, Thomas became fatally ill, his father and aunt wrote of him:

He did not appear to suffer much in body, but I fear some thing in mind as he was of an age to have thought much upon death a subject to which his mind was daily led by the grave of his Sister ...³⁹

... the last words he said were 'I am getting better.' - Yet he had had the fear of death for a few minutes during a coughing fit - and he said to his Mother 'I shall die, I shall die' - and he trembled very much - but agony though it must have been, it could only be the shapeless dread of the moment. - Yet it was heart-rending to hear it!⁴⁰

There is in the language William used about Thomas's death a sense of an all-powerful God "doing what he will with his own."⁴¹ The earthly relationship between parent and child is subordinated to the relationship between God and God's creature, which exists in a context of eternity and infinity. Wordsworth wrote that "the sweet Innocent yielded up his soul to God," and continued:

For myself ... I dare not say in what state I am; I loved the Boy with the utmost love of which my soul is

capable, and he is taken from me - yet in the agony of my spirit in surrendering such a treasure I feel a thousand times richer than if I had never possessed it.⁴²

Later he wrote:

I trust that almighty God has received him among the number of blessed and glorified Spirits.... God preserve [you] and all yours, and leave me what I now possess though I feel by a slender hold.⁴³

The epitaph Wordsworth wrote for Thomas's tombstone is a plea for resignation and belief in the divine pattern, in the face of bereavement:

Six months to six years added he remained
Upon this sinful earth, by sin unstained:
O blessed Lord! whose mercy then removed
A Child whom every eye that looked on loved;
Support us, teach us calmly to resign
What we possessed, and now is wholly thine!⁴⁴

The text on Catharine's tombstone was Mark 10:14 "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God." Such a text in such a place was an admonition against grief and parents' selfish desire to hold back their children from the home of God. The poem on Thomas's tombstone spoke similarly of resignation, patience, and trust. For these admonitions to have effect, however, the family needed to escape from the constant sight of the graves in the churchyard outside their door.

I have found it absolutely necessary that we should quit a Place, which, by recalling to our minds at every moment the losses we have sustained in the course of the last year, would grievously retard our progress towards that tranquillity of mind which it is our duty to aim at.⁴⁵

It was not a complete break that was desired, however.

... we should wish to be within a walk of Grasmere - and should wish to keep up the bond betwixt the living and the dead by going weekly to the parish Church beside which their bodies are laid; and I do not think there will be any thing unkindly in the sadness produced by the sight of those dear hills.⁴⁶
[Dorothy]

Brother and Sister now rest side [by side] in Grasmere Churchyard where we hope that our dust will one day mingle with theirs.⁴⁷ [William]

The relationship between living and dead was to be maintained through life, and into death.

Two poems inspired by the experiences of 1812 are "Maternal Grief,"⁴⁸ an overflow from the Solitary's tale in

The Excursion, and the sonnet "Surprised by Joy."⁴⁹ Widely different in style and in their capacity to move the modern reader,⁵⁰ the two poems nevertheless have similarities.

"Maternal Grief" opens with the words:

"Departed Child! I could forget thee once
Though at my bosom nursed; this woeful gain
Thy dissolution brings, that in my soul
Is present and perpetually abides
A shadow, never, never to be displaced
By the returning substance, seen or touched
Seen by mine eyes, or clasped in my embrace.
Absence and death how differ they! and how
Shall I admit that nothing can restore
What one short sigh so easily removed? -
Death, life, and sleep, reality and thought,
Assist me, God, their boundaries to know,
O teach me calm submission to thy Will!" (ll. 1-13)

The confusion of inner and outer, thought and reality, shadow and substance which the mother experiences in her grief is like that which Wordsworth had felt as a boy, but she has no clarifying tree or wall to grasp. In the face of death's sudden and absolute severance, the mother is left with all the internal aspects of her relationship to her child intact. She calls upon God to reconcile her mind to the reality of her loss by piercing the confusion within, and restoring a sense of reality subordinate to the pattern of the divine will. The rest of the poem ("faithfully set forth from my Wife's feelings and habits after the loss of our two children"⁵¹) describes how "time / Softened her pangs" (ll. 54-5) and faith brought serenity. Going to her child's grave,

... the Mother does not miss
Dear consolation, kneeling on the turf
In prayer, yet blending with that solemn rite
Of pious faith the vanities of grief;
For such, by pitying Angels and by Spirits
Transferred to regions upon which the clouds
Of our weak nature rest not, must be deemed
Those willing tears, and unforbidden sighs,
And all those tokens of a cherished sorrow,
Which, soothed and sweetened by the grace of Heaven
As now it is, seems to her own fond heart
Immortal as the love that gave it being. (ll. 70-81)

Love is immortal but grief is not, no matter what the mourner in "her own fond heart" may feel, for heaven marks the end of all sorrow. Not only will the griever then be comforted, but the one for whom she mourns even now deserves no grief, being already "Transferred to regions

upon which the clouds / Of our weak nature rest not." "The vanities of grief" are only venial, however, and the reality of heaven will absolve and absorb them all.

In "Surprised by Joy" also, there are discrepancies between the inner vision of the parent and the external reality of death:

Surprised by joy - impatient as the Wind
I turned to share the transport - Oh! with whom
But Thee, deep buried in the silent tomb,
That spot which no vicissitude can find?
Love, faithful love, recalled thee to my mind -
But how could I forget thee? Through what power,
Even for the least division of an hour,
Have I been so beguiled as to be blind
To my most grievous loss! - That thought's return
Was the worst pang that sorrow ever bore,
Save one, one only, when I stood forlorn,
Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more;
That neither present time, nor years unborn
Could to my sight that heavenly face restore.

Momentarily the poet forgets that his child is gone and responds instead to an inner continuity, within which he automatically turns to share his living joy with her. For a brief space of time, the shadow of her memory is stronger than the reality of her death, but when the poet seeks to involve her in the fluidity of life, he is brought up with a jolt. There is no communication with the dead; it is the nature of life to ebb and flow, but death is stark and unchanging; the child is as utterly dead now as at the first moment of loss. It is not God in this poem who clarifies the distinctions between thought and reality; instead, the harsh finality of death vanquishes the inner vision, bereaving the poet all over again. The utmost tenacity of human grief is unable to match death's unchanging fact, "which no vicissitude can find." At the end of "Maternal Grief," the poet draws back from the mother's present sorrow to show the reader a larger and longer conception of death and heaven. At the end of "Surprised by Joy," he draws back from a single moment of mourning to show a seemingly endless vista of bereavement. In the first poem, human grief is proved inappropriate, and in the second, inadequate.

The experience of death in the inner circle of the family - John, Catharine, Thomas - deepened in Wordsworth a

need for the religious faith he knew others possessed and the comforts on which they could draw. In response to bereavements in the wider circle of his family and his friends, it was of these consolations that he wrote, seeking to strengthen himself and others in the struggle for faith.

The letters of sympathy sent from the Wordsworth household during these years also reveal an essential kindness and fellow-feeling with those who grieved. When, for example, Christopher's wife Priscilla died in 1815 after the still-born birth of their fifth child,⁵² Dorothy and William stood ready to rally round him with all the affection and sympathy that their own strong familial feelings awoke in them. William wrote:

Let us hear from you immediately; and who you have with you; some female friend I trust. If you wish that Dorothy should come to Bocking she will do so, as soon as you desire - Heaven preserve you, and what remains to you on earth of yours: for her who is gone she is among the blessed - farewell, our prayers shall not be wanting on your behalf - for myself as a Husband I feel for you to the utmost - I would write more could I suggest any consolation; I only can assure you, of what you well know, our heart-felt sympathy and our wish to relieve you, in any way you can point out -⁵³

And when Southey's nine-year-old son died in the next year, there was this response:

My dear S.

It would have done no good to break in upon you. I was therefore silent after I first heard so suddenly of your affliction. Even now I can offer nothing but my sympathy and that of Mary and the rest of this family with you and the Mother of the departed. As soon as you feel, I will not say the least inclination, but no aversion to see me as a friend and one who has been a fellow sufferer, pray let me know and I will come over. Let this suffice for the present adding only my fervent prayer that God may enable you and your family to support this and every other affliction to which His will may subject them. Assured that your heart will echo this prayer for me and mine when it shall please the Almighty to exercise us with affliction, I remain my dear Southey

your very affectionate and faithful friend
Wm Wordsworth⁵⁴

In these passages, Wordsworth is speaking the language of religious consolation, grounded in a vision of this life as a trial set by a loving but inscrutable God, which leads the righteous through death to the community of heaven. Personal bereavement had convinced him that there were no

other possible consolations than faith and hope.

You will indeed stand in need of resignation and patience and all the passive virtues; and these will not desert you because in your mind, they will be supported by faith and hope, without whose assistance I think it utterly impossible for a good man of tender heart to bear up under an affliction as heavy as your's.

Whether I look back or forward I sorrow for you; but I doubt not that in time your retrospective thoughts will be converted into sweet though sad pleasures; and as to your prospective regards in connection with this dear Child, as they will never stop short of another and a more stable world, before them your disappointments will melt away; but they will make themselves felt as they ought to do, since it will be for a salutary purpose.⁵⁵

Death has a purpose; we will meet again; resignation and patience are the key - these are the concepts with which Wordsworth sought to comfort his friends in trouble. As he said in 1817, "It is the only support to be depended on, and happy are they to whom it is vouchsafed."⁵⁶

Also in 1816, Richard Wordsworth died at the age of 48. The correspondence surrounding his illness and death had largely to do with his will, the legal position of his one-year-old son and the anxieties these produced, as Richard had frequently been over-cautious and dilatory about such family matters. However, Dorothy's way of speaking of his death is probably representative of what was felt by her brother and the family at the Mount:

His sickness and the anxiety attending upon it latterly affected us very much, the contemplation of the death of a Brother was solemn and distressing - and when all was over we felt it deeply, though we were very thankful when God had taken him from his sufferings - and heartily do we join in Christopher's prayer that God may give us grace to profit by the awful event. We have seen very little of Richard for many years therefore as a companion his loss will not be great; but when we did meet he was always amiable and affectionate; and there has been in all our connections with him a perfect harmony. It is a great comfort to us that he died in the house of his Brother and that his body rests where Christopher may probably also spend his latter days.⁵⁷

The idea of dying among family, and being buried in a place where family connections might be maintained, spoke to a deep human need for continuity and community. Part of the tragedy of the American Frederick Goddard's drowning in Switzerland in 1820 was the absence of any such ties of

home or kin. In the poem⁵⁸ he wrote about the young man's death (Goddard was only twenty), Wordsworth calls on the "sympathising Powers of air" to alleviate if they can this isolation, to bring

Herbs moistened by Virginian dew,
A most untimely grave to strew,
Whose turf may never know the care
Of kindred human hands! (ll. 43, 45-8)

The accident occurred shortly after Goddard had left the Wordsworths, who were on holiday, and the "Elegiac Stanzas" were written, in part, to reach out in sympathy to his mother in the United States. The death must have awakened memories of John's drowning, and one stanza in particular seems an echo of the earlier "Elegiac Verses in Memory of My Brother, John Wordsworth:"

Oh GODDARD! - what art thou? - a name -
A sunbeam followed by a shade!
Nor more, for aught that time supplies,
The great, the experienced, and the wise:
Too much from this frail earth we claim,
And therefore are betrayed. (ll. 25-30)

Faith and hope seemed the only consolations in bereavement, yet Wordsworth was aware within himself of weaknesses and fears. He wanted to believe and to be allowed to share in the comforts of belief offered to others, but he did not always succeed. The lingering death of Tom Monkhouse, his cousin-by-marriage, caused William to express his sense of frailty in a poem addressed to Mary:

O dearer far than light and life are dear,
Full oft our human foresight I deplore;
Trembling, through my unworthiness, with fear
That friends, by death disjoined, may meet no more!

Misgivings, hard to vanquish or control,
Mix with the day, and cross the hour of rest;
While all the future, for thy purer soul,
With "sober certainties" of love is blest.

That sigh of thine, not meant for human ear,
Tells that these words thy humbleness offend;
Yet bear me up - else faltering in the rear
Of a steep march: support me to the end.

Peace settles where the intellect is meek,
And Love is dutiful in thought and deed;
Through Thee communion with that Love I seek:
The faith Heaven strengthens where he moulds
the Creed.⁵⁹

Even with such faith, however, human grief must have its place. Sir George Beaumont's death in 1827 when he was in his seventies caused Wordsworth to write in gentle sorrow:

His illness was not long; and he was prepared by habitually thinking on his latter end. But it is impossible not to grieve for ourselves, for his loss cannot be supplied.⁶⁰

Two years later, Lady Beaumont followed her husband: "she was ripe for the change, blessed be God! and I trust is, or is destined to be, a glorified spirit."⁶¹ But for those left behind, "The shock was [nonetheless] very painful:"

It is seven and twenty years since I first became acquainted with the lamented Pair whom we have lost. We soon became united in affectionate intercourse, which has known no abatement, but our friendship rather strengthened with time, and will survive in my heart till it ceases to beat.⁶²

The consciousness of death does not only enter a person's life through the intimate connections of family and friendship, however, but through the interrelationships of society also. The death of a king or of a little-known neighbour are events of public as well as of personal importance because of the human structures and groupings upon which a country is built. What were Wordsworth's responses to those great deaths, and obscure, which touched him in his capacity as a citizen during these middle years?

The years 1805-6 saw the death of three great public figures: Nelson, Pitt, and Fox. A wave of emotion spread across the country with the news of Lord Nelson's victory and death, from which the Wordsworths were not immune, as Dorothy reveals in a letter to Lady Beaumont:

We were at Breakfast when Mr Luff's Maid-servant opened the door, and, shewing only her head, with an uncouth stare and a grin of pleasure told us that there had been a great victory, and Lord Nelson was shot. It was a blow. I was not collected enough to doubt, and burst into tears; but William would not believe all at once, and forced me to suspend my grief till he had made further inquiries. At the Inn we were told that there were "great rejoicings at Penrith - all the Bells ringing". "Then, I exclaimed, he cannot be dead!" but we soon heard enough to leave us without a doubt, and bitterly did we lament for him and our Country.⁶³

It was perhaps in reaction to the national hysteria that Wordsworth wrote as coldly on the subject as he later did, in a letter to Sir George Beaumont. His comments accompanied the poem "Character of the Happy Warrior," inspired in part by the death of Nelson, although also drawing on the character of his brother John Wordsworth.

You will find that the Verses are allusive to Lord Nelson, and they will shew that I must have sympathized with you in admiration of the Man, and sorrow for our loss. Yet considering the matter coolly there was little to regret.... Few men have ever died under circumstances so likely to make their death of benefit to their Country: it is not easy to see what his life could have done comparable to it. The loss of such men as Lord Nelson is indeed great and real; but surely not for the reason which makes most people grieve, a supposition that no other such man is in the Country: the Old Ballad has taught us how to feel on these occasions:

I trust I have within my realm
Five hundred good as he.⁶⁴

William Pitt's death, too, is spoken of in this very cool light. Although of his party, Wordsworth distrusted Pitt as too selfishly ambitious ("[Pitt's] first wish (though probably unknown to himself) was that his Country should prosper under his administration; his next, that it should prosper...").⁶⁵ The poet did not particularly wish Fox to be in charge of the government either, but he had long admired him as an individual⁶⁶ and when the news came that Charles James Fox was dying, Wordsworth's response was far from unfeeling:

"Lines Composed at Grasmere, during a walk one Evening, after a stormy day, the Author having just read in a Newspaper that the dissolution of Mr. Fox was hourly expected."⁶⁷

Loud is the Vale! the Voice is up
With which she speaks when storms are gone,
A mighty unison of streams!
Of all her Voices, One!

Loud is the Vale; - this inland Depth
In peace is roaring like the Sea;
Yon star upon the mountain-top
Is listening quietly.

Sad was I, even to pain deprest,
Importunate and heavy load!
The Comforter hath found me here,
Upon this lonely road;

And many thousands now are sad -
Wait the fulfilment of their fear;
For he must die who is their stay,
Their glory disappear.

A Power is passing from the earth
To breathless Nature's dark abyss;
But when the great and good depart
What is it more than this -

That Man, who is from God sent forth,
Doth yet again to God return? -
Such ebb and flow must ever be,

Then wherefore should we mourn?

In the face of an individual death, the Old Ballad had turned to the life of the many; although one may die, the nation and the species will go on. In his poem on Fox, however, Wordsworth places the individual in relation to a different type of continuity. He acknowledges that something is in one sense coming to a close, that the death of such a great man is the irreparable loss of a stay, a glory, a power. Yet in another sense, his death is not an end, but only part of a pattern of ebb and flow, beginning with God and returning there. "Such ebb and flow must ever be, / Then wherefore should we mourn?" What gives the poem its force, however, is not so much its message alone as the contrast between the message and the setting. The first two stanzas vividly describe the life of Nature, which has its own "ebb and flow" but at the same time carries on with an indomitable vitality and power. Individual human mortality has no special place in its surging life; Nature receives with indifference even great individuals into the "breathless ... dark abyss" of death. "The Comforter" of Bunyan and the Bible represents a totally different order, which Wordsworth in his sorrow turns from Nature to embrace. His intense awareness of the life in Nature is as vivid as it had ever been, but his acknowledgment is nonetheless complete, that in sorrow, the human heart must look elsewhere.

Tragedy was also to be found nearer to hand. When George and Sarah Green were lost on the local fells in a snowstorm in 1808, the Wordsworth family was active in organizing care for the six children left orphaned. Sally Green was already an inmate of their home and they took over responsibility for her future; Dorothy and Mary joined the Committee in charge of the orphans' affairs; and Dorothy and William both wrote accounts of the tragedy⁶⁸ and solicited contributions from their friends. Although he never published it, William also wrote a poem on the event: "Elegiac Stanzas composed in the Churchyard of Grasmere, Westmorland, a few days after the Interment there of a Man and his Wife, Inhabitants of the Vale, who were lost upon the neighbouring Mountains, on the night of the nineteenth of March last."⁶⁹ In the poem, Wordsworth

describes how the Greens were lost, and how quickly their children were consoled and returned to childish joys. But there are also a number of stanzas in contemplation of the grave: the poet contrasts the violence of their dying and the peace of their deaths, the danger of "that living night" and the safety of the grave. In the storm the couple had become bewildered and separated, and had perished in the darkness "a few wild steps" (l. 16 and 18) apart:

Now lodge they in one Grave, this Grave
A House with two-fold Roof,
Two Hillocks but one Grave, their own,
A covert tempest-proof

And from all agony of mind
It keeps them safe and far;
From fear, and from all need of hope,
From sun, or guiding Star.

Our peace is of the immortal Soul,
Our anguish is of clay;
Such bounty is in Heaven, so pass
The bitterest pangs away....

Now do those sternly-featur'd Hills
Look gently on this Grave,
And quiet now is the depth of air
As a sea without a wave.

But deeper lies the heart of peace
In shelter more profound;
The heart of quietness is here,
Within this Church-yard ground.

O Darkness of the Grave! how calm
After that living night,
That last and dreary living one
Of sorrow and affright!

O sacred Marriage-bed of Death
That holds them side by side,
In bond of love, in bond of God,
Which may not be untied! (ll. 20-31, 40-55)

Wordsworth's childhood vision of the grave as a peaceful retreat is modified here by the stanza in which Heaven and the immortal soul are mentioned. Yet the use of the word Heaven is ambiguous; it may as easily refer to Providence as to a place. The images of house, roof, covert, marriage-bed create the impression that the Greens are truly there, in the grave, protected and at peace, and not their empty shells only. It is their spiritual condition that Wordsworth describes, the end for them of fear and sorrow and "agony of mind," found there in "the heart of

quietness ... / Within this Church-yard ground."

A death of more national interest occurred in 1820 and it is only fair, if embarrassing, to include Wordsworth's response to it. William Wordsworth to Lord Lonsdale:

My Lord

I sincerely condole with your Lordship, on the lamented death of our most gracious and venerable Sovereign. We were prepared for the shock, having heard previously that the King was not expected to live three days. Your Lordship will feel much on this occasion; the best consolation of us all, lies in the reflection that George the Third will be ranked by posterity among the best and wisest Kings that ever sate upon the throne of England.⁷⁰

It is difficult to acquiesce in Wordsworth's estimation here. However, in his sonnet "On the Death of His Majesty (George the Third),"⁷¹ the solemnity of a monarch's passing is expressed, with the awesome sense of history which it inspires, and this may hold true regardless of the individual monarch in question. The king's madness is powerfully described as an imprisonment in darkness, and in spite of the reasons for thankfulness at his release, Wordsworth claims the right of the nation to grieve.

Ward of the Law! - dread Shadow of a King!
Whose realm had dwindled to one stately room;
Whose universe was gloom immersed in gloom,
Darkness as thick as life o'er life could fling,
Save haply for some feeble glimmering
Of Faith and Hope - if thou, by nature's doom,
Gently hast sunk into the quiet tomb,
Why should we bend in grief, to sorrow cling,
When thankfulness were best? - Fresh-flowing tears,
Or, where tears flow not, sigh succeeding sigh,
Yield to such after-thought the sole reply
Which justly it, can claim. The Nation hears
In this deep knell, silent for threescore years,
An unexampled voice of awful memory!

On a far less solemn level, and as a sidelight on his character, it is interesting to note Wordsworth's taste for newspaper murder accounts. Mary wrote to Edward Quillinan:

Wm. being from home at the time the murder was fresh, I always passed it over in the papers, as is my way with murders; but since, having been his reader, we had only just got into the spirit of the horrible tragedy when your observation about the pork chops so tickled Wm. that he is greedy not to lose a sentence on the subject; so if the rest of us are not, we soon shall be tired with it.⁷²

Sara Hutchinson writing to her cousin John includes a request from William for a report of a spontaneous combustion case:

By the bye could you find among your papers ([the] Carlisle Patriot I am sure contained it) that account of a mans being blown to pieces in blowing out a candle - it was in two of our papers about 2 months ago - William wishes very much to see the account.⁷³

Sara must have shared this taste, for in one of the few letters extant written to her by William, he brings her up to date on the latest:

D. no doubt has told you the dreadful news of Watson murdering his aged Mother; he gave her 25 wounds including two fractures; the Coroner's inquest brought in a verdict of wilful murder.⁷⁴

And Dorothy herself writes:

Murders we do read and were horror struck with that of Mr and Mrs Brown and the confession of the murderer - Good God! If the thought of murder is to come in that way into the head of a person apparently not insane, nobody seems to be safe; but it seems to us that all these murders have been committed by people of no education, and are strong arguments in favour of the early and universal education of the Children of the Poor. Blessed be your Father and all good people who labour in this holy work! Pray tell us anything further that you know, which is not in the papers, respecting Mr and Mrs Brown their family and the Murderer. What you have told us, affected us very much.⁷⁵

The spiritual poverty behind violence, and the nation's responsibilities, could not be ignored.

How did the experiences of the middle years affect Wordsworth's thinking about his own death? The passage of time softened the harshness of his grief for John and the children and, by his late forties, the response of the poet to the thought of his own mortality also took on a temperate, resigned and gentle tone. He did not struggle against the process of aging but sought to welcome it and to be the poet of its insights, now that he was no longer the poet of youth. In "Ode to Lycoris. May, 1817," Wordsworth advises himself and Dorothy:

... something whispers to my heart
That, as we downward tend,
Lycoris! life requires an art
To which our souls must bend;
And, ere the flowing fount be dry,
As soon it must, a sense to sip,
Or drink, with no fastidious lip.
Then welcome, above all, the Guest [Spring]
Whose smiles, diffused o'er land and sea,
Seem to recall the Deity

Of youth into the breast:
May pensive Autumn ne'er present
A claim to her disparagement!
While blossoms and the budding spray
Inspire us in our own decay;
Still, as we nearer draw to life's dark goal,
Be hopeful Spring the favourite of the Soul!⁷⁶

And in "Upon [September, 1819]," he writes:

Departing summer hath assumed
An aspect tenderly illumed,
The gentlest look of spring;
That calls from yonder leafy shade
Unfaded, yet prepared to fade,
A timely carolling....

Nor doth the example fail to cheer
Me, conscious that my leaf is sere,
And yellow on the bough: -
Fall, rosy garlands, from my head!
Ye myrtle wreaths, your fragrance shed
Around a younger brow!

Yet will I temperately rejoice;
Wide is the range, and free the choice
Of undiscordant themes;
Which, haply, kindred souls may prize
Not less than vernal ecstasies,
And passion's feverish dreams.⁷⁷

Expressions such as "as we downward tend," "in our decay,"
"ere the flowing fount be dry, / As soon it must," and "Me,
conscious that my leaf is sere," are softened by
affirmations of contentment with life as it is. The basis
of joy has not changed with the years, though the
experience and the expression of it have. These poems
echo, albeit palely, the message of "Tintern Abbey:"

Not for this
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts
Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
Abundant recompense.⁷⁸

In his late fifties, the poet again writes of a sense
of life's passage. Now he looks beyond the end of life, to
the end of all change:

Once I could hail (howe'er serene the sky)
The Moon re-entering her monthly round,
No faculty yet given me to espy
The dusky Shape within her arms imbound,
That thin memento of effulgence lost
Which some have named her Predecessor's ghost.

Young, like the Crescent that above me shone,
Naught I perceived within it dull or dim;
All that appeared was suitable to One
Whose Fancy had a thousand fields to skim;
To expectations spreading with wild growth,
And hope that kept me with her plighted troth....

Now, dazzling Stranger! when thou meet'st my glance,
Thy dark Associate ever I discern;
Emblem of thoughts too eager to advance
While I salute my joys, thoughts sad or stern;
Shades of past bliss, or phantoms that, to gain
Their fill of promised lustre, wait in vain.

So changes mortal Life with fleeting years;
A mournful change, should Reason fail to bring
The timely insight that can temper fears,
And from vicissitude remove its sting;
While Faith aspires to seats in that domain
Where joys are perfect - neither wax nor wane.⁷⁹

The passing of his own life is also the subject of a sonnet in which he writes:

... my soul hath fears
Breathed from eternity; for as a dart
Cleaves the blank air, Life flies: now every day
Is but a glimmering spoke in the swift wheel
Of the revolving week. Away, away,
All fitful cares, all transitory zeal!
So timely Grace the immortal wing may heal,
And honour rest upon the senseless clay.⁸⁰

In the late 1820's, nervousness began to show itself in his letters when friends prepared for absences or long trips:

I have just received your Letter, announcing that your destination is Ceylon - it is a weary distance - but you say that the climate is good. How long are you to be absent? Mrs Field you say goes with you - Take with you our best wishes for your joint health and prosperity - and safe return. - We may meet again - but I am growing old - and all is dark. God bless you.⁸¹

Within the course of the last fortnight I have heard of the deaths of two among the most valued of my Schoolfellows - Godfrey Sykes, Sol: of the Stamp Off. - and Mr. Calvert, probably unknown to you by name - So we are thinned off - but you live in the light of Hope - and you are in the right as long as you can - but why not run down for a fortnight or three weeks - we should be so glad to see you! - and really the absence you talk of is a little formidable to a man so near 60 as I am.⁸²

The thought that death might soon separate him from his friends made their presence ever more precious to him. And then in 1829 came Dorothy's first severe illness. She was away at Whitwick where Wordsworth's eldest son John was curate, and was so ill that "the old Women at my bedside talked of me to each other as if quite sure that I must die!"⁸³ When the immediate danger to her life had passed, Wordsworth wrote to Henry Crabb Robinson:

You talk of the more than chance of your being absent upwards of two years - I am sorry for it on my own

account the more so as I have entered my 60th year - Strength must be failing and snappings off, as the danger my dear sister has just escaped, lamentably proves, ought not to be long out of sight.

What a shock that was to our poor hearts. Were She to depart the Phasis of my Moon would be robbed of light to a degree that I have not courage to think of -
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Although Dorothy was not to die until 1855, this illness marked the sad beginning of her life's eclipse. And although by 1830 life was far from over for Wordsworth either, many of the years to come would be spent under the shadow of grief.

2.) The Middle Years (1805-1830)

1. PW IV, pp. 260-2. "To the Daisy," ll. 8-14, 36-56.
2. Letters (1787-1805), p. 545. W.W. to Thomas Clarkson. 16 Feb., 1805.
3. Ibid., p. 559. D.W. to Mrs. John Marshall. 15 and 17 March, 1805.
4. PW II, pp. 118-23. "When to the attractions of the busy world," l. 80.
5. Ibid., ll. 106-7.
6. Letters (1787-1805), p. 540. W.W. to R.W. 11 Feb., 1805.
7. Ibid., p. 571. 19 March, 1805.
8. Ibid., p. 550. D.W. to C.W. 27 Feb., 1805.
9. Ibid., pp. 544-5. W.W. to Thomas Clarkson. 16 Feb., 1805.
10. PW I, pp. 270-83. "The Vale of Esthwaite," l. 433.
11. PW III, p. 395. "Catechising," l. 13.
12. PW IV, pp. 258-60. "Peele Castle," l. 39.
13. Letters (1787-1805), pp. 544-5. W.W. to Thomas Clarkson. 16 Feb., 1805.
14. Ibid., p. 548. W.W. to Sir George Beaumont. 23 Feb., 1805.
15. Ibid., pp. 556-7. 12 March, 1805. The quotation is from Edward Young's Night Thoughts VII, ll. 205-17.
16. Ibid., p. 547. 23 Feb., 1805.
17. Ibid., p. 565. W.W. to James Losh. 16 March, 1805.
18. PW IV, pp. 372-3. "Distressful Gift!"
19. Ibid., pp. 260-2. "To the Daisy."
20. Journal I, p. 140. 29 April, 1802.
21. PW IV, pp. 263-5. "Elegiac Verses in Memory of My Brother, John Wordsworth."
22. Letters (1787-1805), p. 586. W.W. to Sir George Beaumont. 1 May, 1805.
23. Prose I, p. 148. "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1800)."
24. PW IV, pp. 258-60. "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont."
25. Prelude (1805-1806), XIII, ll. 416-21.
26. Letters (1787-1805), p. 556. W.W. to Sir George Beaumont. 12 March, 1805.
27. Letters (1787-1805), p. 632. D.W. to Lady Beaumont. 27 Oct., 1805.
28. Letters (1812-1820), pp. 23-4. D.W. to Thomas de Quincey. 5 June, 1812.
29. Ibid., p. 45. D.W. to Catherine Clarkson. 16 Aug., 1812.
30. Ibid., p. 24. W.W. to Catherine Clarkson. 11 June, 1812.
31. Ibid., p. 25.
32. Ibid., p. 26. W.W. to C.W. June, 1812.
33. Ibid., pp. 60-1. D.W. to Catherine Clarkson. 5 Jan., 1813.
34. PW V, pp. 1-312. The Excursion, Book III.
35. Letters (1812-1820), pp. 33-4. D.W. to Catherine Clarkson. 23 June, 1812. Re. Dorothy's words "our Religion does not teach us to pray for the dead. We can do nothing for them - our prayers will not help them - God has taken your Sister to himself," cp. C.W.:

But, after all, with regard to those that are gone, little can be done. Their lot is decided. They are in the hands of God; kept in store for the revelation of the great day. Even no prayer is to be put up any longer in their behalf.

(Sermons London: R.C. and J. Rivington, 1814, Vol. II, p. 49.)

36. Ibid., p. 59. D.W. to Mrs. Cookson. 31 Dec., 1812.

37. PW II, pp. 51-4. "Maternal Grief."

38. Memoirs I, p. 380.

39. Letters (1812-1820), p. 51. W.W. to Robert Southey. 2 Dec., 1812.

40. Ibid., p. 63. D.W. to Catherine Clarkson. 5 Jan., 1813.

41. C.W. Sermons Vol. I, pp. 47-8.

42. Letters (1812-1820), p. 51. W.W. to Robert Southey. 2 Dec., 1812.

43. Ibid., p. 56. W.W. to Basil Montagu. 27 Dec., 1812.

44. PW IV, p. 254. "Six months to six years added."

45. Letters (1812-1820), p. 66. W.W. to Lord Lonsdale. 8 Jan., 1813.

46. Ibid., p. 61. D.W. to Catherine Clarkson. 5 Jan., 1813. Cf. also W.W. "Essay upon Epitaphs I" in Prose II, pp. 55-6.

47. Ibid., p. 69. W.W. to Samuel Rogers. 12 Jan., 1813.

48. PW II, pp. 51-4. "Maternal Grief."

49. PW III, p. 16. "Surprised by Joy."

50. Contemporary taste may very well have preferred "Maternal Grief."

51. PW II, p. 477.

52. Two others had died in infancy.

53. Letters (1812-1820), p. 251. W.W. to C.W. 13 Oct., 1815.

54. Ibid., pp. 305-6. W.W. to Robert Southey. 21 April, 1816.

55. Ibid., p. 306. 26 April, 1816.

56. Ibid., p. 361. W.W. to Benjamin Haydon. 20 Jan., 1817.

57. Ibid., p. 318. D.W. to Catherine Clarkson. 26 May, 1816.

58. PW III, pp. 193-6. "Elegiac Stanzas."

59. PW II, pp. 36-7. "To - "

60. Letters (1821-1828), p. 518. W.W. to Robert Southey. Feb. or March, 1827.

61. Letters (1829-1834), p. 92. W.W. to the new Sir George Beaumont. 19 July, 1829.

62. Ibid.

63. Letters (1787-1805), pp. 649-50. D.W. to Lady Beaumont. 29 Nov., 1805.

64. Letters (1806-1811), p. 7. W.W. to Sir George Beaumont. 11 Feb., 1806. Cf. description of Nelson's funeral for example of the nations's emotion. Cf. also "Descriptive Sketches," PW I, ll. 348-365, where Wordsworth is much less blasé about the noble deaths of the great. Mary Moorman suggests that Wordsworth had never forgiven Nelson for "one great crime," the crushing of the Neapolitan rebellion by breach of faith. (Moorman II, p. 63.)

65. Letters (1806-1811), p. 7. W.W. to Sir George Beaumont. 11 Feb., 1806.

66. Cf. Letters (1787-1805), pp. 312-15. W.W. to Charles James Fox. 14 Jan., 1801.
67. PW IV, pp. 266-7. "Lines Composed at Grasmere ..."
68. D.W. George and Sarah Green. A Narrative ed. Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1969); W.W.: Letters (1806-1811), pp. 213-14. W.W. to Francis Wrangham. 17 April, 1808.
69. Letters (1806-1811), pp. 219-20. W.W. to S.T.C. 19 April, 1808.
70. Letters (1812-1820), p. 578. W.W. to Lord Lonsdale. 2 Feb., 1820.
71. PW III, pp. 40-1. "On the Death of His Majesty (George the III)."
72. Letters of Mary Wordsworth 1800-1855 ed Mary E. Burton (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 104. M.W. to Edward Quillinan. 12 Nov., 1823.
73. The Letters of Sara Hutchinson from 1800 to 1835 ed. Kathleen Coburn (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), p. 155. S.H. to John Monkhouse. 7 May, 1819.
74. Letters (1812-1820), p. 119. W.W. to S.H. 4 Oct., 1813.
75. Ibid., p. 116. D.W. to Catherine Clarkson. Sept., 1813.
76. PW IV, pp. 94-6. "Ode to Lycoris. May, 1817," ll. 37-54.
77. Ibid., pp. 99-101. "Upon the Same Occasion [September, 1819]," ll. 1-6, 13-24.
78. PW II, pp. 259-63. "Tintern Abbey," ll. 85-8.
79. PW IV, pp. 163-4. "Once I could hail," ll. 1-12, 31-42.
80. PW III, p. 38. "Conclusion. To - ", ll. 7-14.
81. Letters (1821-1828), p. 695. W.W. to Barron Field. 20 Dec., 1828.
82. Letters (1829-1834), p. 16. W.W. to H.C.R. 27 Jan., 1829. William Calvert, Raisley Calvert's older brother.
83. Ibid., p. 73. D.W. to H.C.R. 2 May, 1829.
84. Ibid., p. 69. W.W. to H.C.R. 26 April, 1829.

3.) The Later Years (1830-1850)

The later years of Wordsworth's life were not separated from the middle by dramatic events. Old age inevitably brings with it a gradual increase in the deaths of contemporaries, and the loss of younger friends and family members carries a poignant irony for the old. Wordsworth's long life necessarily exposed him to such saddening thoughts and experiences, and they formed a gloomy background to his last years. In particular, he felt deeply the deaths of the poets and writers of his generation, a special community which was passing away before his eyes. As he wrote in 1830:

Your account of [Sir Walter Scott's] seizure grieved us all much. Coleridge had a dangerous attack a few weeks ago; Davy is gone. Surely these are men of power, not to be replaced should they disappear, as one has done.¹

As the 1830's progressed, more and more writers of Wordsworth's generation began to disappear, names contemporary with his own throughout his long career - Scott, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Lamb, Crabbe.

On one level, Wordsworth responded to these deaths as became a man of piety and a sympathetic nature. He wrote to John Lockhart at the news of Sir Walter Scott's death:

[His] death is indeed a 'Release', so that the language of condolence would be out of place here. Be assured however that every member of my family sympathizes deeply with you and Mrs Lockhart and Miss Scott ...²

When Coleridge was dying he said:

He and my beloved Sister are the two Beings to whom my intellect is most indebted and they are now proceeding as it were pari passu along the path of sickness, I will not say towards the grave but I trust towards a blessed immortality;³

and at his old friend's death a few weeks later Wordsworth wrote to Sara's husband:

... we sincerely congratulate you and his dear Daughter upon the calmness of mind and the firm faith in his redeemer which supported him through his painful bodily and mental trials, and which we hope and trust have enrolled his Spirit among those of the blessed.... [Though] I have seen little of him for the last 20 years, his mind has been habitually present with me, with an accompanying feeling that he was still in the flesh. That frail tie is broken and I, and most of those who are nearest and dearest to me must prepare and endeavour to follow him.⁴

And of the death of Charles Lamb:

Your letter brought a great shock to us all.... It seems to us upon reflection that his Sister will bear the loss of him better than he could have borne that of her; and we are bound to believe so, as it has pleased God to take him first.⁵

Even the painful severing by death of that relationship between brother and sister is described as only temporary, and under God's control.

The sacred tie
Is broken; yet why grieve? for Time but holds
His moiety in trust, till Joy shall lead
To the blest world where parting is unknown.⁶

On another level, however, Wordsworth was afflicted with a deep sense of gloom, of "Power ... passing from the earth,"⁷ of irreplaceable loss. At this time, his anxiety over the affairs of the nation was strong and unrelenting. The changes he saw threatening on all sides seemed to him a break from the values and virtues of the past, a disruption of the human relations which had constituted the country as he knew it. He did not see in the political agitations of the day a continuation of the struggle for liberty, but an end to it, akin to the later parts of the French Revolution and not to the earlier.

A spirit of rash innovation is every where at war with our old institutions, and the habits and sentiments that have thus far supported them; and the ardor of those who are bent upon change is exactly according to the measure of their ignorance. - Where men will not, or through want of knowledge, are unable to, look back they cannot be expected to look forward; and therefore, caring for the present only, they care for that merely as it affects their own importance. Hence a blind selfishness is at the bottom of all that is going forward.⁸

The loss of so many friends in these years fed his depression: it seemed in some ways that an old order was breaking down and coming to an end.

I cannot give way to the expression of my feelings upon this mournful occasion [the death of Coleridge]; I have not strength of mind to do so - The last year has thinned away so many of my Friends, young and old, and brought with it so much anxiety, private and public, that it would be no kindness to you were I to yield to the solemn and sad thoughts and remembrances that press upon me.⁹

The death of James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, in 1835 called forth a poetic response from Wordsworth based on this accumulative gloom. The poem itself, "Extemporary Effusion on the Death of James Hogg,"¹⁰ refers to a series

of deaths, Hogg's being only one of many therein lamented. There is in the poem a piling up of phrases expressing mortality - "breathes no longer" (l. 9), "low he lies" (l. 10), "death ... / Has closed [his] eyes" (ll. 11-12), "sleeps in earth" (l. 18), "vanished from his lonely hearth" (l. 20), "drop and disappear" (l. 28), "departed" (l. 33), "gone before" (l. 34), "gathered" (l. 35), "sunk into a breathless sleep" (l. 40) - culminating at last in "their Poet dead" (l. 44). The rhythm of the seasons, the earth's motion, the vitality of nature provide a background to this repeated beat of human death. In life, Wordsworth and Hogg had seen the Yarrow flowing through its valley; now Hogg sees nothing. Wordsworth and Scott had walked along pathways strewn with golden leaves; now Scott is motionless "mid mouldering ruins" (l. 10). In life, a river may freeze over and be freed in spring; Coleridge frozen in death is trapped in endless winter, oblivious to the "steadfast course" of "the rolling year twice measured" (ll. 14, 13). Lamb is linked to the natural counterpart his name denotes by the attributes of gentleness and frolicsomeness, but he, unlike the creatures that announce new life every spring, has vanished forever. Life is a realm of light, wind, wave and motion; death is a "sunless land" (l. 24). It is not in dying that the poet's friends are segregated from Nature, for all things die; the difference lies in the poet's sense of finality in their deaths.

Like clouds that rake the mountain-summits,
Or waves that own no curbing hand,
How fast has brother followed brother
From sunshine to the sunless land!...

Our haughty life is crowned with darkness,
Like London with its own black wreath,
On which with thee, O Crabbe, forth-looking,
I gazed from Hampstead's breezy heath. (ll. 21-4, 29-32)

In the poem, images from human life are used to express the unrenewable: "mouldering ruins," for example, cannot repair themselves or grow into new buildings; Lamb's hearth was lonely, in part, because neither he nor his sister had children; and London's "black wreath" combines the funereal with the medical face of death: the mourning wreath that expresses the end of life, its ashes, and the miasmatic smog

believed to be responsible for the city's many mortalities. The human is at odds with the natural, and the poet's sorrow is only intensified by his awareness of other forms of vital continuity about him.

The catalogue of deaths brings Wordsworth inevitably to the thought of his own.¹¹ He is the oldest of them all: when will he too "drop and disappear?" (l. 28). However, the thought of his own age brings to his mind the fate of Felicia Hemans: "Sweet as the spring" (l. 38), she died "ere her summer faded" (l. 39). Her premature cutting off was doubly sad; at least he and the others had had a full allotment of years. They had achieved the human equivalent of autumn, and when death came, it found them "ripe fruit" to be "seasonably gathered" (l. 35). There is consolation to be found in thus identifying the human with the natural pattern, for the emphasis is shifted away from the black finality of death towards that of a full development of life. An awareness of the finality of human mortality in this natural context cannot be escaped, but the poem closes with an affirmation of at least a shared relationship of grief. As in a classical pastoral elegy, Wordsworth describes Nature as touched by the loss of a poet:

With sharper grief is Yarrow smitten,
And Ettrick mourns with her their Poet dead. (ll. 43-4)

Hope of the Christians' heaven is not mentioned, nor is the immortality in this world of poetry itself; the most that can be offered is the tribute of grief.

Wordsworth seldom expressed so starkly such a vision of the finality of death. More often he responded to the steady dropping away of his contemporaries and of much younger friends and relatives with sympathy, sorrow, and the consolations of religion. It was inevitable that, as the years passed, the news of deaths among acquaintances, family and friends should find frequent mention in the poet's correspondence.

These last seven weeks have been very melancholy ones, as we have lost no less than 7 or 8 intimate acquaintances or friends and relatives, of all ages from 23 to 70 inclusive.¹²

Not less than 14 of our Relatives, friends, or valued acquaintance have been removed by death within the last

3 or 4 months.¹³

Among my friends the yellow leaf has been falling and the green leaf swept off lately in an appalling way -
14

Against this sombre background, however, stand out a few losses which touched upon the inner circle of his life.

In 1835, Sara Hutchinson died unexpectedly while Dorothy, who had been thought mortally ill at the same time, recovered into the half-life she was to lead until the end. Sara's death seemed surrounded by a special sanctity, and William and the others were sustained in their bereavement by the image of her own faith. In announcing her death, he said "I write through tears, but they are not the tears of sorrow:"¹⁵

I saw her within an hour after her decease, in the silence and peace of death, with as heavenly an expression on her countenance as ever human creature had. Surely there is food for faith in these appearances; for myself, I can say that I have passed a wakeful night, more in joy than sorrow, with that blessed face before my eyes perpetually, as I lay in bed.¹⁶

In the next year Wordsworth turned this experience into poetry: in a sequel to the sonnet "Methought I saw the footsteps of a throne" (1802),¹⁷ with its vision of death as a peacefully sleeping woman, he wrote:

Even so for me a Vision sanctified
The sway of Death; long ere mine eyes had seen
Thy countenance - the still rapture of thy mien -
When thou, dear Sister! wert become Death's Bride:
No trace of pain or languor could abide
That change: - age on thy cheek was smoothed - thy cold
Wan cheek at once was privileged to unfold
A loveliness to living youth denied.
Oh! if within me hope should e'er decline,
The lamp of faith, lost Friend! too faintly burn;
Then may that heaven-revealing smile of thine,
The bright assurance, visibly return:
And let my spirit in that power divine
Rejoice, as, through that power, it ceased to mourn.¹⁸

Lines were also added to another poem which describes the Bird of Paradise in constant search of heaven, an emblem of the righteous life:

... us, how blest,
How happy at all seasons, could like aim
Uphold our Spirits urged to kindred flight
On wings that fear no glance of God's pure sight,
No tempest from his breath, their promised rest
Seeking with indefatigable quest

Above a world that deems itself most wise
When most enslaved by gross realities!¹⁹

I cannot forbear to record that the last seven lines of this Poem were composed in bed during the night of the day on which my sister Sara Hutchinson died about 6 p.m., and it was the thought of her innocent and beautiful life that, through faith, prompted the words-
'On wings that fear no glance of God's pure sight,
No tempest from his breath.'²⁰

Sara with her good sense and humour had been an integral part of Wordsworth's household for most of his married life, and she was sorely missed.

In 1845-6, death struck at three generations of the family: Wordsworth's grandson Edward died in Italy, then John his nephew (Richard's son), and then Christopher his brother. While Christopher's death was imminent, William wrote of his response to these repeated sorrows:

Where lies the truth? has Man, in wisdom's creed,
A pitiable doom; for respite brief
A care more anxious, or a heavier grief?
Is he ungrateful, and doth little heed
God's bounty, soon forgotten; or indeed,
Must Man, with labour born, awake to sorrow
When Flowers rejoice and Larks with rival speed
Spring from their nests to bid the Sun good morrow?
They mount for rapture as their songs proclaim
Warbled in hearing both of earth and sky;
But o'er the contrast wherefore heave a sigh?
Like those aspirants let us soar - our aim,
Through life's worst trials, whether shocks or snares,
A happier, brighter, purer Heaven than theirs.²¹

The joy of natural things rejoicing in a new day is contrasted to the piling up of human sorrow. The answer to grief does not lie in this world, however: though Nature may renew herself in happiness, Wordsworth looks instead through trouble to heaven and an eternal happiness. The poem he wrote for his grandson also addresses the problem of human sorrow, and the gap that can occur between what the mind thinks about mortality and the after-life, and what the heart feels. Confronted with bereavement, Wordsworth's faith struggled to progress from intellectual acceptance of religious concepts, to emotional conviction and commitment.

Why should we weep or mourn, Angelic boy,
For such thou wert ere from our sight removed,
Holy, and ever dutiful - beloved
From day to day with never-ceasing joy,
And hopes as dear as could the heart employ
In aught to earth pertaining? Death has proved
His might, nor less his mercy, as behoved -

Death conscious that he only could destroy
The bodily frame. That beauty is laid low
To moulder in a far-off field in Rome;
But Heaven is now, blest Child, thy Spirit's home:
When such divine communion, which we know,
Is felt, thy Roman burial-place will be
Surely a sweet remembrancer of Thee.²²

The grave holds only an empty shell, while that which is truly the child, his spirit, is now with God in heaven. These are things which the mind knows; if the heart could also feel them, sorrow would pass and the boy's grave become a "sweet remembrancer" rather than an anguish.

Wordsworth's struggle for faith was by no means always in vain, but in 1847 he was struck a blow from which his spirit never fully recovered. For many years his letters had recorded the family's anxiety over Dora's health, anxiety which lay at the bottom of the resistance to her marriage to Edward Quillinan. As early as 1821, fear for her haunted William's sleep, and was exorcised in a poem incongruously lodged among The Ecclesiastical Sonnets:

I saw the figure of a lovely Maid
Seated alone beneath a darksome tree,
Whose fondly-overhanging canopy
Set off her brightness with a pleasing shade.
No Spirit was she; that my heart betrayed,
For she was one I loved exceedingly;
But while I gazed in tender reverie
(Or was it sleep that with my Fancy played?)
The bright corporeal presence - form and face -
Remaining still distinct grew thin and rare,
Like sunny mist; - at length the golden hair,
Shape, limbs, and heavenly features, keeping pace
Each with the other in a lingering race
Of dissolution, melted into air.²³

The poet tried to explain his dream in terms of "Patriotic Sympathies" in the next sonnet,²⁴ but "human fears"²⁵ were explanation enough.

Dora's final illness began at Christmas, 1846; in the closing months of her life she returned home to Rydal Mount where she died in July, 1847. In his letters Wordsworth struggled with his sorrow as of old:

We bear up under our affliction as well as God enables us to do, but O my dear Friends our loss is unescapable.²⁶

I must bid you farewell with a prayer that our sorrows may, through God's mercy, prove a help to us, an unflinching help on our way to Heaven.²⁷

A year later he wrote:

The beloved daughter whom it has pleased God to remove from this anxious and sorrowful world I have not mentioned; but I can judge of the depth of your fellow-feelings for us. Many thanks to you for referring to the text in Scripture which I quoted to you so long ago. 'Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.' He who does not find support and consolation there will find it no where. God grant that it may be continued to me and mine, and to all sufferers!²⁸;

and again in 1849:

I cannot speak of my departed child further than to thank you, in my own name and that of her mother, for the affectionate expression of your sympathy; 'Thy will be done' is perpetually in my thoughts. Upon that rock our consolation is built.²⁹

To those closest to him, Wordsworth revealed a deep depression. Six months after Dora's death, when the poet's grief showed no signs of easing, Henry Crabb Robinson recorded in his diary this conversation with James, the Rydal Mount gardener:

Jan. 8th [1848] ... Talked with him about the excessive grief of Mr. W - . James said: 'It's very sad, sir. He was moaning about her, and said, "Oh, but she was such a bright creature," and I said, "But do you not think, sir, that she is brighter now than she ever was?" And then Master burst out into a flood of tears.'³⁰

In February, Mary wrote to Isabella Fenwick:

I do feel sorrow to tell you that I have no help from my beloved Mourner - he is bowed to the dust - and our dear comers and goers seem rather to have increased, than dissipated his dejection. His mind and spirits (except for a brief while when, with almost indifferent Persons, he can rally a little and appear quite himself) is in the lowest state of humiliation and deep sorrow. But I doubt not you will agree with me in the hope that this will work for good and that time will bring comfort - May the Almighty in his mercy see fit to send support ere long.³¹

Almost a year after her loss, the sight of the road Dora had last travelled before taking to her bed could still undermine Wordsworth's precarious control. Mary wrote:

But alas! where can we find a place or object on earth to look upon that is not beset with like hauntings! Could but the thoughts be fixed on that blessed Heaven where we trust she now is, we should there find comfort.³²

William echoed her wish in December 1848, repeating the sentiment of his earlier poem "O dearer far than light and life are dear:"

Mary bears up with a religious resignation, which is in the true spirit of the Gospel of Christ. I wish I

could come nearer her excellence in this and every respect. - 33

To the end of Wordsworth's life, this bereavement remained present to him. When he was dying, Mary said to him, "William, you are going to Dora," and when their niece Ebba came into his room on the following day, the old man said, "Is that Dora?"³⁴

The pattern of Wordsworth's thoughts on aging and the approach of death did not alter dramatically in his later years. He had acquired early both the appearance of an old man,³⁵ and an old man's mode of speech in which the immanence of death is habitually acknowledged. The deaths of friends reminded him of his own mortality;³⁶ the youth of some spoke to him of his own age;³⁷ separation from others reminded him of the final parting soon to come.³⁸ On the other hand, Wordsworth was not unaware of lapses in this consciousness that death would come to him also. On a journey in 1830 he wrote:

At Chapel, while my Pony was baiting I strolled into the Church-yard as usual. There was one, and only one monument of the Dumfries character, a white and shewy Obelisk; I walked towards it, commenting with too much self-complacency upon the vanity of Man, and received a sudden shock from these words engraven on the side that faced me - 'The Lord will deliver thee into the hands of Death, and ere long O Reader thou shalt be with me';³⁹

and fifteen years later, at the death of Mrs. Coleridge:

Link after link is broken, and yet for the most part we do not bear these severings in mind as we ought to do.⁴⁰

In response to thoughts of severing and separation, religion offered the ideas of continuity and future reunion: death was (for the good) a passage to a better life, where one would meet with family and friends gone before. As Wordsworth wrote in 1831,

... men of our age are little disposed to [?doubt] that such a change, however Friends may grieve for it at the time, is for the better.⁴¹

In a poem on a portrait of Jemima Quillinan, he described the family at Rydal Mount as

A household small and sensitive, - whose love,
Dependent as in part its blessings are
Upon frail ties dissolving or dissolved
On earth, will be revived, we trust, in heaven.⁴²

In thinking of Catharine and Thomas, dead for almost thirty years, Wordsworth described as one of life's fairest things the "hope that we, yet bound to Earth, may share / The joys of the Departed."⁴³

In this world, too, some memory of that "sensitive household's" human relationships and communion with nature would survive, through "the naming of places" and the poet's art.⁴⁴ To the hill "Wansfell," Wordsworth wrote:

Bountiful Son of Earth! when we are gone
From every object dear to mortal sight,
As soon we shall be, may these words attest
How oft, to elevate our spirits, shone
Thy visionary majesties of light,
How in thy pensive gloom our hearts found rest.⁴⁵

In the poem "Forth from the jutting ridge" (1845), Wordsworth sought to make permanent the memory of the sisters Sara and Mary, their special love for each other and for two particular peaks, first by naming the hills and then by writing about them. In this way, the poet enables future generations to perceive the pinnacles in the light of human memory and love. As long as the hills and their beauty survive, the memory of Sara and Mary that has been "blended" with the natural scene will also continue.

Now are they parted, far as Death's cold hand
Hath power to part the Spirits of those who love
As they did love. Ye kindred Pinnacles -
That, while the generations of mankind
Follow each other to their hiding-place
In time's abyss, are privileged to endure
Beautiful in yourselves, and richly graced
With like command of beauty - grant your aid
For MARY's humble, SARAH's silent claim,
That their pure joy in nature may survive
From age to age in blended memory.⁴⁶

In old age, Wordsworth looked back as well as forward, sometimes with happiness, sometimes with distress. In a poem to Mary, he spoke again of her calm vision that could encompass this world and the next without doubt or fear:

Morn into noon did pass, noon into eve,
And the old day was welcome as the young,
As welcome, and as beautiful - in sooth
More beautiful, as being a thing more holy:
Thanks to thy virtues, to the eternal youth
Of all thy goodness, never melancholy;
To thy large heart and humble mind, that cast
Into one vision, future, present, past.⁴⁷

In the poem "In Sight of the Town of Cocker-mouth," Wordsworth looked back to the loss of his parents and his

children and forward to his own quiet return to dust. Of his living children he sought forgiveness for past misunderstanding, and asked that love may rule their memory of him when he is gone.

A point of life between my Parents' dust,
And yours, my buried Little-ones, am I;
And to those graves looking habitually
In kindred quiet I repost my trust.
Death to the innocent is more than just,
And, to the sinner, mercifully bent;
So may I hope, if truly I repent
And meekly bear the ills which bear I must:
And You, my Offspring! that do still remain,
You may outstrip me in the appointed race,
If e'er, through fault of mine, in mutual pain
We breathed together for a moment's space,
The wrong, by love provoked, let love arraign,
And only love keep in your hearts a place.⁴⁸

There is a sad story told of him in the Memoirs, how on a tour along the River Duddon he met Lady Richardson early one morning in the churchyard:

He said he had not slept well, that the recollection of former days and people had crowded upon him, and, most of all, my dear sister; and when I thought of her state, and of those who had passed away, Coleridge, and Southey, and many others, while I am left with all my many infirmities, if not sins, in full consciousness, how could I sleep? and then I took to the alteration of sonnets, and that made the matter worse still.⁴⁹

To Isabella Fenwick the poet described himself:

I ... feel myself in so many respects unworthy of your love and too likely to become more so. Worldly-minded I am not, nor indifferent to the welfare of my fellow creatures; on the contrary, my wish to benefit them within my humble sphere strengthens, seemingly, in exact proportion to my inability to realise those wishes, in any project which I may engage in. What I lament most is that the spirituality of my Nature does not expand and rise the nearer I approach the grave, as yours does, and as it fares with my beloved Partner.⁵⁰

The last poem Wordsworth is thought to have written speaks obliquely of the patterns of hope and doubt in his own life:

Who but is pleased to watch the moon on high
Travelling where she from time to time enshrouds
Her head, and nothing loth her Majesty
Renounces, till among the scattered clouds
One with its kindling edge declares that soon
Will reappear before the uplifted eye
A Form as bright, as beautiful a moon,
To glide in open prospect through clear sky.
Pity that such promise e'er should prove
False in the issue, that yon seeming space
Of sky should be in truth the steadfast face

Of a cloud flat and dense, through which must move
(By transit not unlike man's frequent doom)
The Wanderer lost in more determined gloom.⁵¹

The last years of Wordsworth's life were darkened by grief over Dora's death. Writing to Isabella Fenwick on his seventy-ninth birthday, he said: "I wish I could add that I was more at ease in the recesses of my own nature, but God's will be done."⁵² His own dying, however, was gentle and seemingly undisturbed by fears or doubts. Ill with pleurisy and weakened by what was referred to as "medical discipline,"⁵³ Wordsworth faded undramatically out of life. A few days before the end, when asked by his son John if he wished to receive Holy Communion, the poet replied "That is just what I want."⁵⁴ Then on April 23, as his son-in-law Edward Quillinan recorded in his journal:

Mr. Wordsworth breathed his last calmly, passing away almost insensibly, exactly at 12 o'clock, while the cuckoo clock was striking the hour.⁵⁵

Telescoped together, as they have unavoidably been in this account, the bereavements experienced over the eighty years of Wordsworth's long life may seem overpoweringly sad. In fact, death visited the Wordsworth circle no more frequently than it did most families during the period; the poet was a child of his age in this, and in many of his reactions to his experiences and his sorrows. But how far is it possible to summarize Wordsworth's response to the losses he suffered; how far do his reactions fall into a pattern?

Two visions of mortality may be traced through Wordsworth's life: the one is of death as part of a larger continuity; the other, of death as a power of final disjunction and destruction, that beyond which there is nothing. Although aspects of each vision changed for him with time, both interpretations of mortality continued to recur through the years, and neither appears to have attained any final ascendancy in the poet's mind.

In his early life, Wordsworth sought to place between himself and experiences of disjunction the security of a

"household small and sensitive"⁵⁶ of kindred hearts, participating in patterns of affection and closeness to Nature that transcended individual lives. Behind this lay a vision of the "One great society alone on earth, / The noble Living and the noble Dead,"⁵⁷ made up of poets, prophets "each with each / Connected in a mighty scheme of truth,"⁵⁸ shepherds, any with "thinking hearts"⁵⁹ and feeling minds. In "the milder day / Which is to come,"⁶⁰ the affections and perceptions of such as these would be the norm of human life rather than the exception. It was an earthly vision of spiritual continuity, reaching from the past on into the future. Wordsworth had not repudiated the Church of England or its articles of faith; his reluctance to become a member of its clergy, for example, was not based on religious doubt, but on a distaste for "vegetating on a paltry curacy."⁶¹ His poems during these years show no marked hesitation in mentioning the Christians' God.⁶² But emotionally, Wordsworth felt the reality of Nature and her inter-relation with humanity far more deeply than he could that of the transcendent deity described in much contemporary theology, and it is not therefore surprising that his image of continuity should centre on this world, where "we find our happiness, or not at all!"⁶³ As late as 1825, he wrote to Sir George Beaumont:

Theologians may puzzle their heads about dogmas as they will, the religion of gratitude cannot mislead us. Of that we are sure, and gratitude is the handmaid to hope, and hope the harbinger of faith. I look abroad upon Nature, I think of the best part of our species, I lean upon my friends, and I meditate upon the Scriptures, especially the Gospel of St. John; and my creed rises up of itself with the ease of an exhalation yet a fabric of adamant.⁶⁴

Sadly, neither the religion of gratitude, nor the faith that "Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her,"⁶⁵ had explicit structures to offer when dealing with the shattering effects of death. Wordsworth found himself unprepared. The death of John and subsequent bereavements breached the wall of the poet's security, and though time might heal the break and old convictions rise up again, the awareness of weakness could not now be escaped.

On the other hand, the pattern of continuity offered

by contemporary Christianity to which Wordsworth turned, more and more exclusively, was explicitly equipped to deal with bereavement. The concept of a transcendent after-life shifted the main emphasis of hope and desire away from this world, and on to the next. Death became a positive requirement en route to a better existence, and the "milder day to come" a promise of something that all the righteous, reunited, would experience together. Wordsworth could see the power of its consolations, both from his observation of their effect on those around him and from his own reasoning, and he wished to believe. Sometimes he was successful, but at others, his faith could not keep pace with his needs. Behind both visions of continuity, the earthly and the heavenly, was the fear that death marked the end of all life, an arbitrary snuffing-out beyond which there was only darkness. This fear was never completely laid in Wordsworth's mind, and it continued to raise its ugly head at times of depression or stress throughout his life.

In the course of Wordsworth's eighty years, his thoughts on mortality were sometimes ambivalent and inconsistent. Neither fear nor faith exclusively ruled the poet's feelings about death, and if pure and tidy patterns of response do not emerge it is not surprising, for as Wordsworth wrote in the Prelude:

... who shall parcel out
His intellect by geometric rules,
Split like a province into round and square?...
Hard task [it is] to analyse a soul ...⁶⁶

The events of the poet's life and his reactions to them, however, do provide a background essential to an understanding of his work, of the changes in the ways death is presented in his poetry and the shifts of emphasis in its areas of concern. In the section which follows we will be considering the theme of death in Wordsworth's poetry, and from a knowledge of the poet's personal experiences of bereavement and thoughts on his own mortality, it is possible to approach both the consistencies and vacillations of his poetic attitudes with a better understanding of their context.

3.) The Later Years (1830-1850)

1. Letters (1829-1834), p. 310. W.W. to Samuel Rogers. 30 July, 1830. Sir Humphry Davy wrote verse as a young man, before becoming involved in a scientific career. (W.W. and M.W. The Love Letters of William and Mary Wordsworth ed. Beth Darlington London: Chatto and Windus, 1982, p. 133.)
2. Letters (1829-1834), p. 556. W.W. to John Lockhart. 24 Sept., 1832.
3. Ibid., p. 536. W.W. to William Hamilton. 25 June, 1832.
4. Ibid., pp. 727-8. W.W. to Henry Nelson Coleridge. 29 July, 1834.
5. Letters (1835-1839), p. 2. W.W. to Thomas Noon Talfourd. 1 Jan., 1835.
6. PW IV, pp. 272-6. "Written After the Death of Charles Lamb," ll. 128-31.
7. Ibid., pp. 266-7. "Lines ...", l. 17.
8. Letters (1829-1834), p. 557. W.W. to Robert Griffith. 6 Oct., 1832.
9. Ibid., p. 728. W.W. to Henry Nelson Coleridge. 29 July, 1834.
10. PW IV, pp. 276-8.
11. Cp. Wordsworth's thoughts in "Resolution and Independence," ll. 29-49, 113-16 (PW II, pp. 235-40).
12. Letters (1829-1834), p. 651. W.W. to Robert Jones. 29 Oct., 1833.
13. Ibid., p. 688. W.W. to Samuel Rogers. 14 Jan., 1834.
14. Letters (1835-1839), p. 22. W.W. to Henry Taylor. Feb., 1835.
15. Ibid., p. 65. W.W. to H.C.R. 24 June, 1835.
16. Ibid., p. 66. W.W. to Robert Southey. 24 June, 1835.
17. PW III, p. 16.
18. Ibid., p. 17.
19. PW IV, pp. 126-7. "Upon Seeing a Coloured Drawing of the Bird of Paradise in an Album."
20. Ibid., p. 430. I.F. note.
21. PW IV, p. 19.
22. Ibid., p. 266.
23. PW III p. 385. "Ecclesiastical Sonnets," Part III, No. I.
24. Ibid. Part III, No. II.
25. PW II, p. 216. "A slumber did my spirit seal," l. 2.
26. Letters (1841-1850), p. 1313. W.W. to Edward Moxon. 9 Aug., 1847.
27. Ibid., p. 1315. W.W. to I.F. 6 Dec., 1847.
28. Ibid., p. 1319. W.W. to John Peace. 18 Nov., 1848.
29. Ibid., p. 1323. W.W. to John Taylor Coleridge. 19 Feb., 1849.
30. Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers ed. Edith Julia Morley (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1938), p. 673.
31. Letters of Mary Wordsworth 1800-1855 ed. Mary E. Burton (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 293. M.W. to I.F. 2 Feb., 1848.
32. Ibid., p. 297. M.W. to I.F. May, 1848.
33. Letters (1841-1850), p. 1320. W.W. to I.F. 7 Dec., 1848.
34. Memoirs II, p. 506; and Moorman II, p. 606.
35. Cf. incident told to de Quincey by Wordsworth:

He [Wordsworth] was travelling by a stage-coach, and seated outside, amongst a good half-dozen of fellow-passengers. One of these, an elderly man, who confessed to have passed the grand climacterical year (9 multiplied into 7) of 63, though he did not say precisely by how many years, said to Wordsworth, upon some anticipations which they had been mutually discussing of changes likely to result from enclosures, etc., then going on or projecting - "Ay, ay, another dozen of years will show us strange sights; but you and I can hardly expect to see them." - "How so?" said Wordsworth. "How so, my friend? How old do you take me to be?" - "Oh, I beg pardon," said the other; "I meant no offence - but what?" looking at Wordsworth more attentively - "you'll never see threescore, I'm of opinion"; meaning to say that Wordsworth had seen it already. And, to show that he was not singular in so thinking, he appealed to all the other passengers; and the motion passed (nem. con.) that Wordsworth was rather over than under sixty. Upon this he told them the literal truth - that he had not yet accomplished his thirty-ninth year.

"Literary and Lake Reminiscences: The Lake Poets: William Wordsworth" in The Collected Writings of Thomas de Quincey ed. D. Masson (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1889), Vol. II, p. 249.

36. For example, Letters (1835-1839), p. 19. W.W. to Francis Wrangham. 2 Feb., 1835.

37. For example, Ibid., p. 751. W.W. to Henry Reed. 23 Dec., 1839.

38. For example, Letters (1840), pp. 1039-40. W.W. to I.F. 14 Sept., 1840.

39. Letters (1829-1834), pp. 338-9. W.W. to D.W. 8 Nov., 1830.

40. Letters (1841-1850), p. 1260. W.W. to Derwent Coleridge. 29 Sept., 1845.

41. Letters (1829-1834), p. 394. W.W. to Robert Jones. 7 June, 1831.

42. PW IV, pp. 124-5. "The Foregoing Subject [Lines Suggested by a Portrait from the Pencil of F. Stone] Resumed," ll. 29-32.

43. Ibid., p. 151. "Upon Perusing the Foregoing Epistle Thirty Years After Its Completion," ll. 12-13.

44. The painter's art is also able to preserve. Cf. W.W.'s private poem "On a Portrait of I.F. Painted by Margaret Gillies" (PW III, pp. 411-12) written in 1840 and first published in the Memoirs.

We gaze - nor grieve to think that we must die,
 But that the precious love this friend hath sown
 Within our hearts, the love whose flower hath blown
 -Bright as if heaven were ever in its eye,
 Will pass so soon from human memory;
 And not by strangers to our blood alone,
 But by our best descendants be unknown,
 Unthought of - this may surely claim a sigh.
 Yet, blessed Art, we yield not to dejection;
 Thou against Time so feelingly dost strive:
 Where'er, preserved in this most true reflection,

An image of her soul is kept alive,
Some lingering fragrance of the pure affection,
Whose flower with us will vanish, must survive.

45. PW III, p. 60. "Wansfell!", ll. 9-14.
46. PW II, p. 123. "Forth from a jutting ridge," ll. 16-26.
47. PW III, p. 55. "On the Same Subject [To a Painter]," ll. 7-14.
48. PW IV, pp. 22-3. "In Sight of the Town of Cokermonth."
49. Memoirs II, p. 451.
50. Letters (1841-1850), p. 1223. W.W. to I.F. 19 Sept., 1844.
51. PW IV, p. 18. "Who but is pleased to watch the moon."
52. Letters (1841-1850), p. 1323. W.W. to I.F. 7 April, 1849.
53. Memoirs II, p. 505. This probably entailed bleeding and the application of blisters.
54. Ibid., p. 506.
55. Ibid., pp. 506-7.
56. PW IV, pp. 124-5. "The Foregoing Subject [Lines Suggested by a Portrait from the Pencil of F. Stone] Resumed," l. 29.
57. Prelude (1805-1806), X, ll. 969-70.
58. Ibid., XII, ll. 301-2.
59. PW II, pp. 249-54. "Hart-Leap Well," l. 100.
60. Home at Grasmere ed. Beth Darlington (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), MS. B, ll. 238-9.
61. Letters (1787-1805), p. 59. W.W. to William Mathews. 23 Sept., 1791.
62. A very rough estimate is that Wordsworth mentions God in his poems to 1802 approximately fifty times.
63. Prelude (1805-1806), X, l. 728.
64. Letters (1821-1828), p. 351. W.W. to Sir George Beaumont. 28 May, 1825.
65. PW II, pp. 259-63. "Tintern Abbey," ll. 122-3.
66. Prelude (1805-1806), II, ll. 208-10, 232.

III: Death in Wordsworth's Poetry

Wordsworth saw the individual as part of a complex network of connections and interrelationships to others and to the natural world. How people perceived death depended to a large extent on their place in such a network: a child, for example, understood death differently than did an adult; those who left descendants behind them saw it differently from those who were the last of a line; a murderer differently from a judge. The altering of any strand in such a network could profoundly change the individual's perception of death and, concomittantly, his or her perception of life. In his poetry, Wordsworth sought to express the conflicts between different visions of death, whether disjunctive or subordinate to some larger continuity.

In the first three chapters of this section, Wordsworth's poems concerning death and the relationships between children and adults, between the individual and family, and between the individual and community are considered. The poet explored the different perceptions of mortality which arose from these relationships, the ways in which understandings changed and came into conflict with one another, the ways in which visions of life and death

were intimately intertwined. But it was not only relationships among the living which influenced perception, for the dead, too, may reach out to touch those who remain. The next two chapters of this section concentrate on Wordsworth's poetic interest in "things supernatural," epitaphs and graves, and the ways the imagination may be educated to see beyond the merely material. It was part of the Poet's task to extend the range of his readers' perceptions, and to Wordsworth it seemed that "what we are" and the place of death in that reality were all too often blurred over by habitual spiritual astigmatism. The Excursion, the subject of the last chapter, considers all these themes against a backdrop of various natural settings, each of which influences the kind of insight into "our mortal Nature" achieved by the characters.

In each chapter, an aspect of Wordsworth's poetic understanding of death is explored, from its earliest expression to its latest. Change in what he had to say was inevitable, for the experiences out of which he wrote were not static. In some areas, change amounted to a complete reversal; in others, his vision altered very little. But in his concern about the nature and meaning of death and the desire to explore such questions in poetry, Wordsworth remained constant throughout the sixty years of his poetic career.

1.) Childhood, Adulthood and Death

Death was an overwhelming threat to children in Wordsworth's time, yet one of the gifts of childhood seemed to be a strong sense of personal immunity, a self-confidence which could over-ride even an intimate acquaintance with human mortality. Wordsworth was aware of how his own feelings about death had altered since childhood; at the same time, he was equally aware of other, associated changes: the dulling of perception, the loss of habitual feelings of relationship to Nature - intangible qualities that had "died away into the light of common day."¹ It was a source of deep sorrow to the poet that childhood and adulthood should differ so profoundly, and he tried to discover patterns of continuity within life that would minimize the difference. In 1802 he wrote:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.²

In spite of his wishes, however, Wordsworth's early poems were filled with a sense of the differences between childhood and adulthood, and this was particularly so in the poems concerning death. It seemed to Wordsworth that where adults perceived death as a disjunction or an end, children were close to patterns of continuity which could subsume death, and perceived it therefore differently. In his early years as a poet it seemed to him that children had much to teach, and he strove to nurture those aspects of adult life which manifested a continuity with the insights of childhood. Gradually, however, the poet's gaze turned away from the past and towards the future. Rather than concerning himself with seeking to make adults more like children, Wordsworth began to think that there was no real spiritual difference between them, and that both had a single spiritual concern: to lead a life consistent with a heavenly life-after-death. The adult's task was to lead the child towards a clearer understanding of our mortal nature, not the other way around. In his later poems, Wordsworth's individual insights became submerged into the

vision of his time, and his message differed little from that of countless other contemporary writings on children and death.

a) Conflicting Visions

In his early poetry, Wordsworth wrote about the ability of children to deny death, as adults understand it, altogether. A sense of personal immunity was part of his own childhood:

I used to brood over the stories of Enoch and Elijah, and almost to persuade myself that, whatever might become of others, I should be translated, in something of the same way, to heaven.¹

I could not believe that I should lie down quietly in the grave, and that my body would moulder into dust.²

The 1794 revisions to "An Evening Walk" contain a description of Grasmere churchyard and the children playing there.

What tribes of happy youth have gambolled here,
Nor in their wild mirth ever thought how near
Their sensible warm motion was allied
To the dull earth that crumbled at their side.
Even now of that gay train who there pursue
Their noisy sports with rapture ever new
There are to whom the buoyant heart proclaims
Death has no power oer their particular frames.³

These children are filled with a sense of life so strong that it seems proof against anything, even death itself.

The opening stanza of "We are Seven"⁴ might seem to suggest a repetition of this theme:

A simple child, dear brother Jim,
That lightly draws its breath,
And feels its life in every limb,
What should it know of death? (ll. 1-4)

The poem is not, however, about a child's sense of her own deathlessness, but about her understanding of the deaths of others. The little girl answers the poet's questions about her family by explaining that there are seven children: two at Conway, two at sea, two in the churchyard, and herself. The adult's view is that the two dead children can no longer be counted as part of the family - "the set is now broken."⁵ To the child this makes no more sense than if the poet had insisted she was an only child, because her other brothers and sisters lived at Conway or were at sea. He tries to draw her attention to the physical nature of

death, and the extent of the difference between her living self and their dead bodies:

You run about, my little maid,
Your limbs they are alive;
If two are in the church-yard laid,
Then ye are only five. (ll. 33-6)

But the child has ample physical evidence of her own to back up her sense of the situation. "Their graves are green, they may be seen" (l. 37); and, with the exactitude which she knows adults appreciate she locates them: "Twelve steps or more from my mother's door, / And they are side by side." (ll. 39-40). The living activities of family continue to include the dead ones:

"My stockings there I often knit,
"My 'kerchief there I hem;
"And there upon the ground I sit -
"I sit and sing to them.

"And often after sunset, Sir,
"When it is light and fair,
"I take my little porringer,
"And eat my supper there." (ll. 41-8)

Then, patiently, she tells how and when they died, explaining the events to the poet with the same euphemisms and expressions that adults had used with her:

"God released her from her pain" (l. 51)
"she went away" (l. 52)
"in the church-yard she was laid" (l. 53)
"My brother John was forced to go" (l. 59)
"he lies by her side" (l. 60)

The poet is lulled by the familiarity of the language into thinking that the little maid has come round to his way of thinking and asks her, again, "How many are you then ... / If they two are in Heaven?" (ll. 61-2). But he has misread her. The language which expresses to him non-existence has in common with her own speech words of physical reality: "lie" and "go away" are to her the same type of words as "see," "knit," "hem," "sit," "sing," "eat," "play," "run," or "slide." Her relationship with Jane and John has changed, as it did when they were ill, but it has not been broken. What the child sees as change within continuity, the poet sees as a cutting off, a discontinuity, an end. The poem closes in a stalemate between them.

"But they are dead; those two are dead!
"Their spirits are in heaven!"

'Twas throwing words away; for still
The little Maid would have her will,
And said, "Nay, we are seven!" (ll. 65-9)

In "We are Seven," the adult and the child each hold out firmly for their own understanding of the nature of death. With time, however, the child will grow into an adult herself and lose her confidence and her sense of continuity. It would appear to be an argument which the adult of the poem need only be patient to win. For Wordsworth, however, there was no satisfaction in winning. He grieved over the loss of childhood vision, and speculated on the significance of a physical death which can pre-empt such loss. The death of children held a two-fold meaning in his early poetry: on the one hand, he describes the sad end of a young life; on the other, the possibility of another form of continuing existence, protected and allowed to flourish by means of physical death.

In "There was a Boy,"⁶ Wordsworth describes a boy hooting with the owls of an evening and receiving in the ensuing silence a vivid impression of the beauty around him. It is a picture of intense, concentrated vitality, followed by the words:

This boy was taken from his mates, and died
In childhood, ere he was full twelve years old.
Pre-eminent in beauty is the vale
Where he was born and bred: the church-yard hangs
Upon a slope above the village-school;
And, through that church-yard when my way has led
On summer-evenings, I believe that there
A long half-hour together I have stood
Mute - looking at the grave in which he lies! (ll. 26-34)

The adult does not "sit and sing to him," but instead stands mute above his grave; although the beauty of the landscape is still accessible, the child is not. In the original version, Wordsworth had spoken of himself as the hooting boy and had not described a death. Why was the death then added?

It may be useful to look briefly here at a poem written by Wordsworth in 1802, "To H[artley] C[oleridge], Six Years Old,"⁷ a poem which is similar in some ways to Thomas Gray's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College."⁸

Like Gray, Wordsworth looks at the happiness of young Hartley with a mind separated from him by a consciousness of adult sorrows: "I think of thee with many fears / For what may be thy lot in future years" ("To H.C.," ll. 13-14) - Pain, Grief, injuries. Gray concludes his poem with the thought that the carefree children he observes will soon enough join him in adulthood, and their ignorance of the future is to be cherished in the meantime, for therein lies the safeguard of their joy:

Why should they know their Fate?
Since Sorrow never comes too late,
And Happiness too swiftly flies.
Thought would destroy their Paradise.
No more; where Ignorance is Bliss,
'Tis Folly to be wise. ("Ode," ll. 95-100)

Wordsworth, however, comes to a different conclusion. For him, there is something more to the joy of children than mere ignorance of pain; a greatness and glory to childhood itself which makes the child a "best Philosopher" and "Seer blest!"⁹ His fears for Hartley's future give way to a longing that, for him, childhood's glory may continue into adulthood. In spite of his own experience of loss, Wordsworth hopes against hope that this exquisite child will achieve that continuity. Surely Nature will not allow the loss of his communion with her, will protect the relationship, either by absorbing the child into herself or by preserving his closeness to her into adult life.

Nature will either end thee quite;
Or, lengthening out thy season of delight,
Preserve for thee, by individual right,
A young lamb's heart among the full-grown flocks. (ll. 21-4)

To live on into adult stolidness and imperception is an unthinkable fate for such a one.

Thou art a dew-drop, which the morn brings forth,
Ill fitted to sustain unkindly shocks,
Or to be trailed along the soiling earth;
A gem that glitters while it lives,
And no forewarning gives;
But, at the touch of wrong, without a strife
Slips in a moment out of life. (ll. 27-33)

It is possible to see the death in "There was a Boy" in a similar way. Physical death saves the boy from the loss of that ability to be at one with Nature which the first part of the poem describes. If, however, the boy was originally intended by Wordsworth to be himself, the death takes on another possible significance. It may be that it

is his own childhood which lies in the grave before him and which he mourns. The poet is conscious of the beauty around him still but is cut off from the experience of communion which he had known before. As a boy,

... sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain-torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven received
Into the bosom of the steady lake. (ll. 18-25)

Then, he had received the beauty into himself "unawares;" now, he is deeply aware of the loveliness, but divided from it, a division expressed in part by the direction of his gaze (down, into the grave) and in part by his own silence. It is not the stillness following and intensifying a joyful participation in Nature, but a "Mute" silence, an inability to speak. In concluding a poem on the perceptions of childhood with the death of a child, the poet expresses his own experience of loss and feeling of bereavement at what the years have taken away.

The attitude of the poet towards children and death in these poems is deeply ambivalent, encompassing as it does an awareness of conflicting visions of the meaning of mortality. In a series of poems written in Germany in the winter of 1798-9, Wordsworth considered this ambivalence closely.

In the figure of Lucy, Wordsworth has created the Child of Nature, and in the poems associated with her he explores the ways in which physical death and growth into adulthood may be related for such a one. The character first appears as a child and then as a young woman described in terms of child-like qualities of relationship to Nature, self-sufficiency and fearless joy. In each of the five poems written about her in this period,¹⁰ death is seen from an adult point of view as a disjunctive force, cutting across Lucy's young life and bringing to an end the hopes of those who loved her. Yet in each poem, another kind of continuity is hinted at, and another vision of death suggested.

The first of these poems is "Lucy Gray; or, Solitude."¹¹ It is divided into two parts: a narrative section which tells the story of Lucy's death in a storm (ll. 13-56), and a frame section which speculates on the nature of death and the possibilities of post-mortem existence (ll. 1-12, 57-64). The two titles of the poem can be divided between the two sections, for in the narrative part it is the parents' interpretation of the events which predominates, while in the frame stanzas more distanced observers look at Lucy, "the solitary child" (l. 4).

The parents see Lucy as the child of the Gray family, and her loss as the breaking up of that family. They understand death as an ending or disjunction, for which the abrupt breaking off of the footmarks in the snow is an apt symbol. Though there is a hope of renewal and reunion, it can only be realised through more death: after the parents, too, have died, "In heaven we all shall meet" (l. 42), a vision of the after-life which is based on the familiar, familial patterns of this life. Wordsworth's own remarks about the writing of the poem acknowledge its factual basis, its grounding in the common life and perceptions around him, but beyond this grounding are the possibilities of another vision.

In 1816, Henry Crabb Robinson recorded part of a conversation with Wordsworth in his diary:

He stated, what I had before taken for granted, that most of his Lyrical Ballads were founded on some incident he had witnessed or had heard of, and in order to illustate how facts were turned into poetry he mentioned the origin of several poems; Lucy Gray, that tender and pathetic narrative of a child mysteriously lost on a common, was occasioned by the death of a child who fell into the lock of a canal. He removed from his poem all pertaining to art, and it being his object to exhibit poetically entire solitude, he represents his child as observing the day-moon which no town or village girl would ever notice.¹²

The Isabella Fenwick note, dictated in 1843, describes the factual events on which the poem is based, and then continues:

The way in which the incident was treated and the spiritualizing of the character might furnish hints for contrasting the imaginative influences which I have endeavoured to throw over common life with Crabbe's

matter of fact style of treating subjects of the same kind.¹³

The ideas of "entire solitude," the child's attunedness to the natural world, and "the spiritualizing of the character" are explored more deeply in the frame section, and form the basis of another vision of the after-life altogether.

Oft I had heard of Lucy Gray;
And, when I crossed the wild,
I chanced to see at break of day
The solitary child.

No mate, no comrade Lucy knew;
She dwelt on a wide moor,
- The sweetest thing that ever grew
Beside a human door!

You yet may spy the fawn at play,
The hare upon the green;
But the sweet face of Lucy Gray
Will never more be seen....

- Yet some maintain that to this day
She is a living child;
That you may see sweet Lucy Gray
Upon the lonesome wild.

O'er rough and smooth she trips along,
And never looks behind;
And sings a solitary song
That whistles in the wind.

(stanzas 1-3, 15-16; ll. 1-12, 57-64)

Although she is described in the frame stanzas as a "solitary child," we do not have the impression that she is unhappy or lonely. She is aligned with the joy of natural creatures: "the fawn at play," "the hare upon the green;" and in the narrative section the poet says of her, "Not blither is the mountain roe" (l. 25). Her joyful relation to Nature is not shared: "No mate, no comrade Lucy knew." Even her tie to her own human family is described as tenuous: she was "The sweetest thing that ever grew / Beside a human door!" By presenting Lucy as only lightly held within the physical bounds of a human family, and identifying her with wild creatures, joyful and at home in Nature, Wordsworth prepares us for "the spiritualizing of the character." If the human child is dead, then she "Will never more be seen," but the vision of Lucy after her death is a vision of someone who has stepped outside that definition. It is not the sad wailing ghost of a human child that appears, seeking in vain her mother and the town, but a happy, self-sufficient child of Nature, singing

"a solitary song" that blends with the wind. Death has not changed her or cut her off from her life in Nature; what the vision of her suggests is that the continuity of her relationship to Nature has been maintained, though her relationship to her parents has been severed. She is separate from an adult world and "never looks behind," but to some is granted the sight of her and with that sight, an intimation of a life in Nature in which death as disjunction has no part.

"A slumber did my spirit seal"¹⁴ was probably the next poem of the cycle to be written, and in it, Wordsworth has pared to the bone the elements of relationship between Lucy and those who observe her. Nevertheless the same conflict of vision, between death as a disjunction or as a continuation and protection, is being considered.

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

The poet feels that death has disjoined him from Lucy; his sense of separation from her is underlined by the kind of language used to describe each of them. Lucy is connected to the material world, though largely by negation: she is described as "a thing," and her death as the withdrawal of the physical powers of motion, hearing and sight. She seems all body, "Rolled round." The poet, on the other hand, describes himself in terms of spirit and emotion, though again by negation: his spirit is sealed in and asleep instead of reaching out and perceptive, and he does not experience an essential human fear. The inclosing of his spirit and the death of Lucy's body are both conditions of isolation; neither state allows perception or communication. The division in the poet's mind of himself and Lucy into entities of spirit and of matter, now separated by death, is like the disjunction of soul and body of which the adult in "We are Seven" speaks. It is also suggestive, however, of a separation between the poet

and his beloved even before her death, as a result of his own spiritually mummified state.

In the first stanza, the poet denies death; he cannot believe his beloved could be subject to time or aging or that she could cease to be. The basis of his denial is not a vision of continuity that may transcend the disjunctiveness of death, but an insistence on a static state. In the second stanza, he describes Lucy in death as utterly ended, cut off from volition, motion, perception, communication. She seems to him to have indeed become static now, and as unchanging as a rock or a stone. He could not perceive her as a creature living, growing, and aging under the jurisdiction of Nature and the cycles of the natural world, and throughout the poem he refuses to see that jurisdiction as anything but a disruptive tyranny: "earthly years" and "earth's diurnal course" are to him emblems only of mortality and the threat of discontinuity.

If the story had ended at the word "stones," one might have read in the poem only the poet's desolation. But the company which Lucy keeps in death includes trees. The inclusion of this single image suggests another interpretation of the relation of Lucy to Nature. The rolling cycles of the days and years in nature bring renewal as well as death, continuous patterns of ebb and flow in which trees participate and which they may be seen to represent. In "Lucy Gray," Wordsworth had closed the poem with an explicit description of the child on the moors, alive to Nature, untouched by death. Here, there is only the barest suggestion of a continuity which could subsume Lucy and her dying, embodied in the rhythms and life-cycles of trees. It is to this suggestion that we must look for "the spiritualizing of the character," and the raising of Lucy beyond the finality of physical death. By the use of a single word, Wordsworth offers the reader a new interpretation and a new insight of hope.

The next poem, "She dwelt among the untrodden ways,"¹⁵ is also concerned with perceptions of Lucy, her life and death, but here the poet attempts to offer the view of the world in general, as well as his own.

She dwelt among the untrodden ways

Beside the springs of Dove,
A maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
- Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!

The implication of the first ten lines of the poem is that Lucy has slipped out of life virtually unnoticed. As in Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard,"¹⁶ she is a flower "born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air" (ll. 55-6). Because her surroundings are "untrodden" she has seen few people and few have seen her. There are no acquaintances or strangers to praise her and very few habitually close enough to love her. The natural images which are associated with her partake of these qualities of solitude, of being both unseen and unaccompanied: the violet "Half-hidden" by a mossy stone is unperceived by all but a few, and the single star in an empty sky knows no kindred spirits in its solitude. As far as the world at large is concerned, there is not a great deal of difference between Lucy alive and Lucy dead.

The extra stanzas and lines of the 1799 manuscript version blur the starkness of Lucy's solitude without substantially altering it.

My hope was one, from cities far
Nursed on a lonesome heath;
Her lips were red as roses are,
Her hair a woodbine wreath. (before l. 1)

And she was graceful as the broom
That flowers at Carron's side;
But slow distemper checked her bloom,
And on the Heath she died. (ll. 8/9)

Long time before her head lay low
Dead to the world was she. (ll. 9-10)

The first two words place the poet as lover firmly in Lucy's "lonesome" landscape. Nevertheless, he is still only there as an observer, as one who hoped to come closer, not as Lucy's accepted mate. Linking her to the rose, the woodbine and the broom tells us little more about her than do the comparisons of her to a star or a violet. Perhaps less, for in such an accumulation of commonplace images the

reader's picture of Lucy becomes more general and less precise. The violet and star images gain freshness and vividness from their unexpected juxtaposition, but in a clutter of rose and woodbine and broom and violet and star the sense of Lucy's special separateness is lost. Neither her beauty nor her grace have any bearing on her solitariness in Nature.

In the final version of the poem, Lucy's progression from life to death is almost imperceptible: unknown, unseen, she lived and then "ceased to be." Yet for the poet it is not so:

... she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!

The difference between his separateness from Lucy before her death and after lies in its finality: the poet is faced with a gulf, a blank, an end. To the world it was the passing of a shadow and happened almost unawares, but the end of the poem pushes at the reader the enormity of the poet's loss and his intense awareness of the event that has cut her off. Lucy's quiet slipping out of life is for him an instant of terrible disjunction. His bare cry expresses a bereavement that cannot be shared and an emptiness that cannot be filled.

In "A slumber did my spirit seal," the possibility of Nature's continuing life which could subsume mortality occurs to the poet after Lucy has died. In "Strange fits of passion have I known,"¹⁷ however, an intimation of natural continuity precedes the thought of Lucy's death. As the poet travels across the landscape, we see him drawn into a wonderful passive absorption. The motion of his horse, the motion of the moon, the motion of his heart's desire become part of one another, inter-connected and all converging on Lucy's home:

I to her cottage bent my way
Beneath an evening-moon.

Upon the moon I fixed my eye,
All over the wide lea;
With quickening pace my horse drew nigh
Those paths so dear to me.

And now we reached the orchard-plot;
And, as we climbed the hill,

The sinking moon to Lucy's cot
Came near, and nearer still.

In one of those sweet dreams I slept,
Kind Nature's gentlest boon!
And all the while my eyes I kept
On the descending moon.

My horse moved on; hoof after hoof
He raised, and never stopped. (ll. 7-22)

In "A slumber did my spirit seal," the poet's sleep was a dream of stasis that denied Nature. Here the poet's dream is one of motion, absorption into moving Nature and her patterns. His experience is akin to that which Lucy finds in death in the other poems of the cycle. He is awakened from it by the sudden breaking off of one of the interconnected motions, which thrusts upon him the thought of disjunctions of other sorts:

When down behind the cottage roof,
At once, the bright moon dropped....

"O mercy!" to myself I cried,
"If Lucy should be dead!" (ll. 23-4, 27-8)

The way in which the moon disappears is particularly apposite as a symbol of young death. Instead of completing its arc across the sky and setting in the fullness of time as determined by the cycles of the earth, the moon is suddenly taken from sight by an intervening hill.¹⁸ Yet the moon will reappear. What destroys the poet's calm is the realization that Lucy cut off from his living sight would not return.

The poet began his journey with the lines:

When she I loved looked every day
Fresh as a rose in June. (ll. 5-16)

In the words "every day" we hear the attitude of "A slumber did my spirit seal" and "Peele Castle," which excludes the thought of death only to be shattered by its reality. At the end of the poet's journey, he is struck by an awareness of what her death would mean to him: the sudden blank, the darkness of bereavement. In the 1799 manuscript version of the poem, the poet tells Lucy his thought:

I told her this: her laughter light
Is ringing in my ears:
And when I think upon that night
My eyes are dim with tears. (after l. 28)

For her it is a laughing matter, and indeed, throughout the Lucy cycle, she shows no fear of death. For the poet, it is a matter for tears: her death is his unalterable loss.

Before publishing the poem, Wordsworth removed this final stanza and added the opening one:

Strange fits of passion have I known:
And I will dare to tell,
But in the Lover's ear alone,
What once to me befell. (ll. 1-4)

Only another Lover can understand what the loss of Lucy would mean to him; Lucy herself cannot know. Within the confines of the cycle she never experiences bereavement, and the poet must turn to another audience to tell "What once to [him] befell," his visions and his fears.

Elements from earlier Lucy poems appear again in "Three years she grew in sun and shower,"¹⁹ elements identified with Lucy, her separateness, and her special relationship with Nature. The happy fawn and the storm in this poem are echoes from "Lucy Gray," the "mute insensate things" ("Three years she grew," l. 18) are reminiscent of "A slumber did my spirit seal," stars and flowers of "She dwelt among the untrodden ways." Nature's speech describes the growth of Lucy as a process in which her ability to perceive deepens as she imbibes more and more of the qualities of what she is perceiving. The final stanza, however, is spoken by the poet, and raises questions in the reader's mind about this process:

Thus Nature spake - The work was done -
How soon my Lucy's race was run!
She died, and left to me
This heath, this calm, and quiet scene;
The memory of what has been,
And never more will be. (ll. 37-42)

How old was Lucy when she died? When did this growth into communion with Nature take place: before her death, or after it? Did she die to preserve her relationship to Nature or to attain it? As far as Nature is concerned, none of these questions is of importance: the continuity of Lucy's relationship with her is not broken at any point; death does not affect it. And to some extent, though for different reasons, they are not of importance to the poet either. His loss is absolute, the scene before him empty; how or when it came to be so doesn't matter now. The poet's language is full of images of finality: a work that is finished, a race that is over, an irretrievable past.

The landscape before him is beautiful but empty; for him, Lucy is not there.

The Lucy poems explore different visions of mortality by considering the death of a young girl, its possible meanings, and the conflicting reactions of those who remain after she is gone. In "Ode. Intimations of Immortality Recollected from Early Childhood,"²⁰ Wordsworth is also concerned with conflicting visions of "our mortal nature," as presented by the different perceptions of death in childhood and adulthood. It is the last poem in which the poet acknowledges an essential difference, and may be seen as a transition from his earlier to his later understanding on the subject of children, adults and death.

The ode falls into four main sections in which the poet concentrates on different aspects of the question. In stanzas I-IV, which made up the original version of the poem, the poet speaks of his knowledge of loss, of separateness from the children about him, and of disjunction from his own childhood joy. In stanzas V-VI, he considers that which precedes childhood, suggesting that the pattern of change which he has experienced may extend beyond life to pre-birth. In stanzas VII-VIII, the poet concentrates on the child who, if his speculation is correct, stands in transition between two worlds, one immortal and in the past, the other mortal and in the future, and he grieves as the child so willingly embraces that future. Finally, in stanzas IX-XI, he concentrates on the adult who looks back with longing to childhood and yet is thoroughly bound by the present. Gradually the poet must learn to acknowledge that it is the future towards which he must turn, and the world beyond the death to come on which he must depend. In later years, Wordsworth was to propound this message whole-heartedly; here, in the "Immortality Ode," it seems to be wrung from him almost against his will.

In the motto of the poem,²¹ Wordsworth expresses his desire for continuity, for a life which develops consistently from childhood to adulthood to old age, with the joyful relation of childhood to Nature as its basis. In the opening stanzas of the poem itself, however, he

states what he knows to be so: there has been a change.

It is not now as it hath been of yore (l. 6)

The things which I have seen I now can see no more (l. 9)

... there hath past away a glory from the earth (l. 18)

In the midst of joy and celebration and the sight of children's communion with the life of nature, the poet is aware of his own separateness and the knowledge of grief.

- But there's a Tree, of many, one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone (ll. 51-3)

To me alone there came a thought of grief (l. 22)

Even in these stanzas, Wordsworth intimates that there are adult compensations in this state of things: some joy may still be shared, and grief may find "A timely utterance" (l. 23) in poetry. But in 1802, the poem ends with a reiteration of the knowledge of loss:

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream? (ll. 56-7)

When Wordsworth returned to the poem in 1804, he extended this pattern of loss of which he had personal knowledge back into a time of which he could not know, and speculated on that which precedes life. Perhaps the passage from childhood into adulthood merely echoes the passage from a past existence into this. "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting" (l. 57), the end of one stage and the beginning of another, a disjunction bridged by a continued vision of glory.

Not in entire forgetfulness
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come (ll. 62-4)

Its loss is gradual.

Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy (ll. 67-8)

At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day. (ll. 76-7)

At the same time, another gradual process is taking place to compensate for the dying away of celestial vision. Earth and earthly things, a different reality but a not "unworthy" (l. 81) one, offer themselves to the growing child and gradually gain ascendancy.

In stanzas VII and VIII, the poet considers the child in terms of these simultaneous processes. The child exists in transition, not only between two visions of reality, but

also between two realms of reality, and Nature is the manifestation of both. On the one hand, there is the realm of mortality, made up of human love and creativity, human grief and death, earth and earthly things which share in our mortality - all of which the child is eager to embrace. On the other hand, there is the realm of immortality, the knowledge of "that imperial palace whence he came" (l. 85), which the child takes for granted. The Youth in stanza V who is described as "Nature's Priest" (l. 73), and the poet's memory of his own childhood vision of the natural world "Apparelled in celestial light" (l. 4) speaks of the ability to perceive and respond to the divinity in Nature. In stanza VIII, the poet goes further. The child is intimate with divinity itself, the child's nature an extension of the immortal nature. For the adult, the vision of mortal Nature is predominate, and though the poet is aware of intimations of immortality, they are only flashes of light in the dark. The darkness which dominates adult perception is the knowledge of mortality, "the darkness of the grave" (l. 118). The child's vision, on the other hand, is "Haunted for ever by the eternal mind" (l. 114), dominated by the light of the knowledge of immortality. Wordsworth describes the child as one

... over whom thy Immortality
 Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,
 A Presence which is not to be put by;
 To whom the grave
 Is but a lonely bed without the sense or sight
 Of day or the warm light
 A place of thought where we in waiting lie
 (ll. 119-21, 121/2)²³

The child perceives death, like the passage from pre-existence to this life, as only another transition, and the grave as a place of waiting like the womb, a "living place" (MS. M). The adult yearns for that certainty but, overpowered by the knowledge of mortality, is engulfed instead by a sense of death as the end of life, and the grave as a place of dissolution and decay.

What comforts are there then in adulthood? In the last stanzas of the poem, Wordsworth concentrates on these. The memory of Nature experienced as a "world[] not realised" (l. 146) is one - "not realised" in the sense of not made real, concrete, material - the overpowering

experience of Nature as manifesting something immaterial and immortal. Just the memory of such a vision is enough to ease "The spell / Of that strong frame of sense in which we dwell" (ll. 153/4, MS. L), the "prison-house" (l. 67) of "our mortal Nature" (l. 147). Further, although loss must be acknowledged, the poet states that

We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,

In years that bring the philosophic mind. (ll. 180-7)

"Primal sympathy," that communion with divine Nature which returns from time to time even in adulthood; "soothing thoughts," the product of human creativity, such as the "timely utterance" of poetry; "faith" and "philosophy" as substitutes for childhood's "High instincts" (l. 147) and certainty - these are the sources of strength the adult must embrace. The "faith that looks through death" faces the future rather than the past, and looks beyond the death to come rather than back to the birth that has been. And finally, for the adult there is a communion with Nature "in her own natural kind" (l. 79), a foster-mother who shares mortality with her foster-child. An intenser love for and joy in this mortal Nature than childhood knew is the adult's gift, because of the adult's more intimate understanding:

I only have relinquished one delight
To live beneath your more habitual sway.
I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day
Is lovely yet;
The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

(ll. 191-204)

Wordsworth closes this poem on the differences between adulthood and childhood and their perceptions of life and death with an assertion that although something has been

lost, something "not unworthy" has been gained in attaining to adult vision. Perhaps the poet should shift the emphasis of his attention away from the lost perceptions of childhood and focus instead on the realm of adulthood, the present and the future? Although Wordsworth does not go as far as this in the "Immortality Ode," such a view was to be the basis of his writings on the relations between children, adults and mortality in the years to come.

b) With Heaven in Mind

In Book VII of the 1805-1806 Prelude, Wordsworth speaks of two children: the dead baby of Mary of Buttermere, and a boy he had seen at a London theatre. Mary's child had nothing to fear from death; in spite of the adventurer's deceptions, mother and child are innocent and "Without contamination" (l. 352).¹

Beside the mountain chapel, sleeps in earth
Her new-born infant, fearless as a lamb
That thither comes, from some unsheltered place,
To rest beneath the little rock-like pile
When storms are blowing. Happy are they both -
Mother and child! (ll. 354-9)

The boy at the theatre, however, is surrounded by "dissolute men / And shameless women" (ll. 386-7), "the wretched and the falsely gay" (l. 396). The poet sees the innocent child set beside what he may with time become, and his response is like that in "To H.C." - a denial that so much can be lost:

He hath since
Appeared to me oft times as if embalmed
By Nature; through some special privilege,
Stopped at the growth he had; destined to live,
To be, to have been, come and go, a child
And nothing more, no partner in the years
That bear us forward to distress and guilt,
Pain and abasement. (ll. 398-405)

Wordsworth admits the worst:

... he perhaps,
Mary! may now have lived till he could look
With envy on thy nameless babe that sleeps,
Beside the mountain chapel, undisturbed. (ll. 408-11);

but the vision of innocent continuity is stronger:

So have I thought of him a thousand times
And seldom otherwise. (ll. 407-8)

The 1850 version shows a shift away from such visionary confidence to a conviction that innocence will surely die.

Charms and spells

Muttered on black and spiteful instigation
Have stopped, as some believe, the kindest growths.
Ah, with how different spirit might a prayer
Have been preferred, that this fair creature, checked
By special privilege of Nature's love,
Should in his childhood be detained for ever!
But with its universal freight the tide
Hath rolled along, and this bright innocent,
Mary! may now have lived till he could look
With envy on thy nameless babe that sleeps,
Beside the mountain chapel, undisturbed. (ll. 370-81)

The envy of the living man for the dead child comes from a consciousness that, as he is, he must fear to die and, as he is, there is no peace in living. Like the children in some of Wordsworth's earlier poems, Mary's baby has been protected by death from a great loss which the boy in the theatre will almost inevitably grow up to sustain. But the difference between the man and the child in relation to mortality is now no longer seen as one of perception but of innocence, of the right to enter a joyful after-life rather than an understanding of what that after-life may be.

In the earlier poems, Wordsworth had seen the source of continuity in the past, seeking to make adult existence as consonant as could be with childhood, before the dying away of perceptions had made a break in life. In the later poems, the poet looks instead to the future for the basis of how to live, and the break he concentrates on is the physical dying that is to come. On the other side of death is heaven, and the poet encourages children to live their lives with this in mind. The goal is to make this life as consistent with the after-life as possible, and thereby to nullify, as much as can be, the terrors of death.

In 1817, Wordsworth wrote "The Longest Day. Addressed to my Daughter, Dora."² Although the poem begins with the picture of a poet, a playing child, and a beautiful landscape, it is so only briefly, for the child is called away from her play and the shades of evening "Steal the landscape from the sight" (l. 26). The poet's thoughts no longer incline him to learn from the child and her perceptions, nor to try to protect her from the losses he himself has sustained in leaving childhood behind. Now he would share with the child the convictions of adulthood: that human life is "a gradual declination" (l. 35) into the

grave; that the message of Nature, the return each year of youth and beauty, is misleading, however much it may flatter human hopes and feelings of deathlessness. Wordsworth enjoins his daughter to

Be thou wiser, youthful Maiden!
And when thy decline shall come,
Let not flowers, or boughs fruit-laden,
Hide the knowledge of thy doom.

Now, even now, ere wrapped in slumber,
Fix thine eyes upon the sea
That absorbs time, space, and number;
Look thou to Eternity! (ll. 41-8)

The poet urges on his young daughter precepts by which she may create in her life a continuity with a future of old age, death, and heaven. Echoing the advice of so many theologians, Wordsworth calls her to use her life as a preparation for what comes after life, her time as a preparation for eternity. If from childhood Dora espouses virtue and duty in this life, she will be ensured in the next

... those palms of honour
Which selected spirits wear,
Bending low before the Donor,
Lord of Heaven's unchanging year! (ll. 73-6)

Similarly, in "The Poet's Dream"³ (pub. 1842), Wordsworth advises the pious Norman Boy to live an earthly life consistent with heaven's life:

God for His service needeth not proud work
of human skill;
They please Him best who labour most to do in peace
His will:
So let us strive to live, and to our Spirits will
be given
Such wings as, when our Saviour call, shall bear
us up to heaven. (ll. 65-8);

and his story of "The Westmoreland Girl"⁴ (1845) concludes with the prayer:

... that Grace divine may raise
Her humane courageous spirit
Up to heaven, thro' peaceful ways. (ll. 90-2)

The reactions of this girl to the deaths of her parents illustrate the kind of child Wordsworth now admires. As an infant, she had comforted her father at her mother's death-bed with instinctive pity:

Still upon his cheek are living
Touches of her infant hand,
Dear caresses given in pity,
Sympathy that soothed his grief,

As the dying mother witnessed
To her thankful mind's relief. (ll. 35-40)

In a way, she took on her mother's role, first in her consoling of her father and then in the protective feelings she had towards the small and weak of the natural world.

Scarcely less than sacred passions,
Bred in house, in grove, and field,
Link her with the inferior creatures,
Urge her powers their rights to shield. (ll. 45-8)

She was loving and happy, "Left among her native mountains / With wild Nature to run wild" (ll. 27-8). But, for Wordsworth, to be "exquisitely wild"⁵ is no longer enough.

Listen yet awhile; - with patience
Hear the homely truth I tell,
She in Grasmere's old church-steeple
Tolled this day the passing bell.

Yes, the wild Girl of the mountains
To their echoes gave the sound,
Notice punctual as the minute,
Warning solemn and profound.

She, fulfilling her sire's office,
Rang alone the far-heard knell,
Tribute, by her hand, in sorrow,
Paid to One who loved her well.

When his spirit was departed,
On that service she went forth;
Nor will fail the like to render
When his corse is laid in earth. (ll. 57-72)

There must be another component in her character if she is to become "a blest example" (l. 83) and fit for heaven: a faithfulness to the practices and ritual of revealed religion, fruit of "a pious training" (l. 77) and the "steadfast outward power" (l. 78) of the Church. She must take on her father's role as well as her mother's. As sexton, his membership in the Church and his participation in its life was not merely nominal, but official and committed. The Westmoreland Girl must combine relationship to the church militant with a lesser, though "Scarcely less than sacred" (l. 45) relationship to the natural world. Thus prepared for a righteous life, she need have no fear of death.

Wordsworth's attitudes to the relations between adults and children and the differences in their understanding of death changed during the course of his poetic career. Initially, the search for a vision of human existence which

could contain death's disjunctions led the poet to the beginning of life, to look in childhood for a basis for continuity. He saw in children an image of his own past, and recognized in their assertions and perceptions about death a freedom from fear which he had lost. Even the nature of the disjunctions they faced seemed different. The children in Grasmere Churchyard or the little girl in "We Are Seven" denied that death as the adult poet understood it existed at all. The actual physical death of children in other poems left him doubting whether what had happened in them resembled what he believed would surely happen to him if he were to die. Some of these poems explored the idea of death into Nature, while others expressed the poet's fear of a death to Nature, which life lasting into adulthood threatened. Wordsworth looked back into childhood in part to mourn what had been lost, in part to celebrate in memory, and in part to strengthen and sustain those echoes of an earlier vision which still remained. In spite of a desire for "days ... bound each to each" he was forced to acknowledge a spiritual disjunction between the state of children and of adults.

As the special insights of his own childhood faded and the vision of other modes of existence failed to sustain him in the personal bereavements of his life, Wordsworth began to turn away from the past. Instead, he looked into the future for a basis for continuity, and found it in the belief of his time in a Christian after-life, for which everything temporal was a preparation. Adults and children shared the common task of making their lives as consistent with the after-life in heaven as possible. On this level, there was no spiritual difference between them, and side by side the poet and the child must firmly face the future and the consequences which death would usher in.

In these poems, Wordsworth is concerned with individual lives and the disjunctions that must be faced in them. In his poems on the family and death, the poet's emphasis is also on the individual, but considered now in relation to a larger number of people and in the context of a longer sweep of time. In exploring death's power to shatter the bonds of a family, or to destroy patterns of

life stretching back for generations, Wordsworth considers other kinds of continuity and other sources of strength.

1. Prelude (1805-1806), XII, l. 240.

1.) Childhood and Death

1. PW IV, pp. 279-85. "Immortality Ode," l. 77.
2. PW I, p. 226.

a) Conflicting Visions

1. PW IV, p. 463. I.F. note to "Immortality Ode."
2. Memoirs II, p. 476.
3. PW I, pp. 4-39. "An Evening Walk," ll. A49-52.
4. PW I, pp. 236-8. In relation to this poem, it is worth noting Wordsworth's comments twelve years later:

Forlorn, and cut off from communication with the best part of his nature, must that man be, who should derive the sense of immortality, as it exists in the mind of a child, from the same unthinking gaiety or liveliness of animal spirits with which the lamb in the meadow, or any other irrational creature is endowed; who should ascribe it, in short, to blank ignorance in the child; to an inability arising from the imperfect state of his faculties to come, in any point of his being, into contact with a notion of death; or to an unreflecting acquiescence in what had been instilled into him!

Prose II, pp. 50-1. "Essays Upon Epitaphs."

5. Letters (1787-1805), p. 540. W.W. to R.W., speaking of the death of their brother John. 11 Feb., 1805.
6. PW II, p. 206.
7. PW I, p. 247.
8. Thomas Gray and William Collins: Poetical Works ed. Roger Lonsdale, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 20-3.
9. PW IV, pp. 279-85. "Immortality Ode," ll. 111, 115.
10. The grouping of what have come to be known as "the Lucy poems" is a subject on which opinions differ. The first five poems which speak of a Lucy who dies ("Lucy Gray," "A slumber did my spirit seal," "She dwelt among the untrodden ways," "Strange fits of passion have I known," and "Three years she grew in sun and shower") may be grouped by date of composition, as they were all written during William and Dorothy's stay in Germany during the winter of 1798-9. Coleridge's speculation that "A slumber did" referred to the possibility of Dorothy's death has been used as the basis for identifying Lucy and Dorothy in the other poems as well, and for interpreting them as an expression of Wordsworth's struggles with a guilty love for his sister. On this basis, the poem "Lucy Gray" would not belong to the grouping. It is equally possible, however, that the other Lucy poems written in this period grew out of Dorothy's tale of a child lost in a snowstorm, and the thoughts it aroused in Wordsworth about the nature of death and the experience of bereavement generally. On this basis, "Lucy Gray" may be seen as the first poem of the series. The poems were originally published in Vol. II of the 1800 Lyrical Ballads in this order: "Strange fits of

passion," "She dwelt among" and "A slumber did" were grouped together, followed by other poems; then "Lucy Gray," followed by other poems; then "Three years she grew."

The sixth Lucy poem, "I travelled among unknown men" (PW II, pp. 30-1), was written in 1801, after Wordsworth's return to England. Although it contains mention of the death of Lucy, the primary emphasis of the poem is the poet's feelings towards his country.

11. PW I, pp. 234-6.

12. Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers ed. Edith Julia Morley, (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1938), p. 190. 11 Sept., 1816.

13. PW I, p. 360.

14. PW II, p. 216.

15. Ibid., p. 30.

16. Gray, pp. 33-9.

17. PW II, p. 29.

18. In the boat-stealing scene, Book I of the Prelude, an opposite motion raises a disapproving cliff above the horizon.

19. PW II, pp. 214-16.

20. PW IV, pp. 279-85.

21. These verses were the 1815 motto; when the poem was first published in 1807, Wordsworth prefixed the words "Paulo majora canamus," (roughly, "Let us sing for a little time of great things") from Virgil's Fourth or Messianic Eclogue which celebrates the birth of a god-like child.

22. A slave by definition has no independent existence, and is defined entirely by relation to a master.

b) With Heaven in Mind

1. As opposed to the more common fictional treatment of "fallen women." Cf. Attitudes to Death: d) Sensibility.

Mary of Buttermere was an innkeeper's virtuous daughter who unknowingly entered into a bigamous marriage with John Hayfield, a man later hanged for forgery. The baby who died was the child of this marriage. (William Wordsworth: The Prelude. A Parallel Text ed. James Coutts Maxwell, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971, p. 552).

2. PW I, pp. 249-51.

3. Ibid., pp. 253-5.

4. Ibid., pp. 255-8.

5. Ibid., p. 247. "To H.C. Six Years Old," l. 12.

2.) The Family, the Individual and Death

Beyond the span of any individual life there is the life of the family and its generations. In this larger context, the individual becomes a link between ancestry and posterity, taking part in a human continuum of past, present and future. The physical relationship between parent and child is part of the biological continuation of a line but, at the same time, a way of life may be passed on also from one generation to the next. Wordsworth saw this non-physical legacy of values, habits, relationships to the community and the land, as more important to the inner spirit and the life of the affections than the simple ties of blood.¹ Within such a framework of inherited values and patterns of relationship, the idea of death may lose much of the terror of finality, for the individual life is carried on into the future by descendants, and a spiritual continuity extending backward and forward in time binds all together.

One of Wordsworth's concerns in his poetry was for those who suddenly find themselves cut off from this familial continuity. In a time of change, old patterns of living may be rejected or destroyed, and always there is the chance that untimely death may take the new generation instead of the old. Wordsworth considered the responses of characters faced with such disjunctions from the past or the future. In some of his poems he portrayed only the nature of their loss and the power of their grief. In others, he explored the sources of consolation open to the bereaved, whether through other forms of human continuity or through the consolations of religion. But again and again Wordsworth returned in his poetry to the conviction that, although nothing can replace the dead, the life of the affections cannot be allowed to die with them, for, as he wrote in the Prelude: "That gone, we are as dust."²

a) Family, the Land and Death

Wordsworth's early theories on the family were based on his observation of the life of the rural poor. He saw in the relation of country people to their land and their flocks an essential sustenance for their human affections as well as for their bodies. In 1801, he wrote to Charles

James Fox:

The domestic affections will always be strong amongst men who live in a country not crowded with population, if these men are placed above poverty. But if they are proprietors of small estates, which have descended to them from their ancestors, the power which these affections will acquire amongst such men is inconceivable by those who have only had an opportunity of observing hired labourers, farmers, and the manufacturing Poor. Their little tract of land serves as a kind of permanent rallying point for their domestic feelings, as a tablet upon which they are written which makes them objects of memory in a thousand instances when they would be otherwise forgotten. It is a fountain fitted to the nature of social man from which supplies of affection, as pure as his heart was intended for, are daily drawn.... the most sacred of all property is the property of the Poor.¹

As an illustration of this theory, Wordsworth wrote "The Last of the Flock"² (1798). In the poem, a shepherd is forced by hard times to sell off the flock which he had raised himself, the product of a lifetime's work. He compares the dwindling of his sheep to the draining away of his own life's blood:

Another still! and still another!
A little lamb, and then its mother!
It was a vein that never stopped -
Like blood-drops from my heart they dropped. (ll. 61-4)

Entwined with his love for his flock is his love for his children. They cannot be untangled, and the one dies as the other is wrenched up by its roots:

Sir! 'twas a precious flock to me,
As dear as my own children be;
For daily with my growing store
I loved my children more and more.
Alas! it was an evil time;
God cursed me in my sore distress;
I prayed, yet every day I thought
I loved my children less;
And every week, and every day
My flock it seemed to melt away. (ll. 81-90)

The Ancient Mariner alone on an empty sea, surrounded by dead men and living monsters, is not more spiritually desperate than Wordsworth's plain shepherd. The inner life of the man is being gradually strangled, and when the last of the flock is to be sold, the shepherd speaks like one who feels he has nothing left to live for.

- This lusty Lamb of all my store
Is all that is alive;

And now I care not if we die,
And perish all of poverty. (ll. 37-40)

The poem was written against a system which could kill the inner life of a man in order to sustain his physical existence, and destroy his love for his family in order to feed their bodies.

In "Michael"³ (1800), another form of "spiritual murder" countenanced by the community is portrayed. An old shepherd's lands have become forfeit for another man's debt. Michael is faced with a choice of evils: if he sells out, he will have given away the land that had been passed on to him in trust from his forefathers; if he sends Luke to the city for money, he will have divorced his son from the way of life which was equally part of that inheritance. To break with the pattern of generations could rob the prospect of death of the tranquillity and peace it had held for his parents.

I have been toiling more than seventy years,
And in the open sunshine of God's love
Have we all lived; yet if these fields of ours
Should pass into a stranger's hand, I think
That I could not lie quiet in my grave. (ll. 228-32)

On the other hand, Michael's love for his son is so deeply a part of his life that Isabel takes Luke aside and says to him "Thou must not go / ... For if thou leave thy Father he will die" (ll. 295, 298). In the end it is decided that Luke must go to work in the city to repair their losses, save the land, and then return to them and their way of life.

In his parting words to his son, Michael tries to draw for Luke a picture of his place in a long pattern of lives:

- Even to the utmost I have been to thee
A kind and good Father: and herein
I but repay a gift which I myself
Received at others' hands; for, though now old
Beyond the common life of man, I still
Remember them who loved me in my youth.
Both of them sleep together: here they lived,
As all their Forefathers had done; and when
At length their time was come, they were not loth
To give their bodies to the family mould.
I wished that thou should'st live the life
they lived. (ll. 361-71)

To help him keep to the spirit of that life while absent from its substance, Michael asks him to lay the corner-stone of a sheep-fold, the building of which will be a

covenant of trust between them.

The plan ends in tragedy and Luke is forced to flee the country. His failure to prove prosperous means that the land must be sold, while his failure to remain constant to the innocence and virtue of "the life thy Fathers lived" (l. 410) means that the continuity is broken at a spiritual level as well. The sheep-fold, "emblem" (1800: l. 410) of that life, is never finished, and its ruined walls are all that remain when Michael dies.

It is not only in the city, however, that temptation occurs. In "Repentance"⁴ (c. 1801-1802), Wordsworth describes the feelings of those who have succumbed without ever leaving home and have exchanged their "birthright" (l. 24) of land for a purseful of money. Their lives had been entwined in and sustained by the land and the flocks: just to look at them was "like youth in my blood!" (l. 32). When the "Tempter" (l. 5) came to them the woman tried to hold out: "Allan, be true to me, Allan, - we'll die / Before he shall go with an inch of the land!" (ll. 7-8). On one level, her words are heroic exaggeration: she and her husband are not engaged in a physical battle in which physical death is a danger. On another level, however, what she says is quite true: they are fighting to save an intangible spiritual life bound up with the land, against an enemy who attacks them with gold. In the end, they surrender, the land is sold, "and our birthright was lost" (l. 24); repentance comes too late.

Now I cleave to the house, and am dull as a snail;
And, oftentimes, hear the church-bell with a sigh,
That follows the thought - we've no land in the vale,
Save six feet of earth where our fore-fathers lie!
(ll. 33-6)

Cut off from that living relationship to her fields, the woman's thoughts turn sadly to the churchyard and to death. The grave will mark the end of their individual lives, but the sale of the land marked the end of a long living pattern of generations from which their son has been disjoined. They have exchanged a spiritual legacy for "spiritless pelf" (l. 24, MS. 3) and so have no life in the vale to pass on. The pattern has been broken, and while she and her husband may lie with their forefathers, their son "Who must now be a wanderer" (l. 26) will be divorced even

from this part of his birthright.

b) The Last of the Line

Sometimes, however, it is physical death that cuts through the pattern of the generations. Wordsworth was concerned with the feelings of those whom the death of others leaves suddenly isolated from the future, those who are the last of a line. It was a special bereavement under which they suffered and, at various times of his life, the poet examined different sources for the strength they needed to carry on living.

In some of his early poems, Wordsworth considered strengths drawn from the human sphere, as for example in "Old Man Travelling. Animal Tranquillity and Decay."¹ The poem was linked in its original form (1796-7) to "The Old Cumberland Beggar."² Although the two poems parted company before reaching their final versions, each is concerned with the nature and power of human dignity, which is seen as a plant of slow growth, a product of time, continuity, almost of habit. In "The Old Cumberland Beggar," Wordsworth wishes to protect the old man, not from pain and death, but from the loss of the dignity that is born of a long-standing relation to the community and to Nature. In "Old Man Travelling," the poet creates within a much smaller compass a picture of the gifts of time:

- He is insensibly subdued
To settled quiet: he is one by whom
All effort seems forgotten; one to whom
Long patience hath such mild composure given,
That patience now doth seem a thing of which
He hath no need. He is by nature led
To peace so perfect that the young behold
With envy, what the Old Man hardly feels. (ll. 7-14)

In the version first published in the Lyrical Ballads (1798), the poem continues:

- I asked him whither he was bound, and what
The object of his journey; he replied
"Sir! I am going many miles to take
A last leave of my son, a mariner,
Who from a sea-fight has been brought to Falmouth,
And there is dying in an hospital. - " (ll. 15-20)

These lines were later dropped, perhaps because Wordsworth felt they sentimentalized or undermined the picture of tranquillity he had presented, or perhaps because their

specific and circumstantial nature jarred with the more intangible, almost idealized qualities attributed to the old man. Nevertheless the idea of the final lines, that bereavement and sorrow can still come to him, is not antithetical to the description of peace won through time. What is impressive about the old man's spiritual composure is not that it denies mortality, but that it can contain so great a sorrow and not be destroyed by it.

Figures like this old man, the Discharged Soldier, or the Leech-gatherer, deeply impressed Wordsworth by an almost transcendent quality of calm in the midst of suffering. He did not wish to suggest that they were indifferent or divorced from that suffering, but that they had, through the years and by the steady accretion of habits of patience, achieved a human dignity that could accommodate it. In the calm of "The Sailor's Mother"³ (1802), Wordsworth perceives a lineage of strength which reaches back even beyond her own life.

A Woman on the road I met,
Not old, though something past her prime:
Majestic in her person, tall and straight;
And like a Roman matron's was her mien and gait.

The ancient spirit is not dead;
Old times, thought I, are breathing there;
Proud was I that my country bred
Such strength, a dignity so fair:
She begged an alms, like one in poor estate;
I looked at her again, nor did my pride abate.

(ll. 3-12)

The poet is not unaware of the extravagance of his claims (the poem continues: "When from these lofty thoughts I woke" l. 13), and the language of the woman telling her tale does not make them seem any less incongruous. Nevertheless Wordsworth is not afraid of making high claims for the poor and the lowly. As in the "Old Man Travelling," he might have eliminated the tale of her bereavement and left only a more rarefied description of noble "gait and mien." But the story of the dead son remains and gives to the strength and dignity the poet had perceived a human reality.

Just as homely are the setting and protagonist of "The Childless Father"⁴ (1800), but for him Wordsworth invokes only our sympathetic respect for sorrow borne in dignified silence. Unlike the lover in "'Tis Said That Some Have

Died for Love" (1800), Timothy does not set himself against the continuing patterns of life; he does not reject the bright colours and communal joy of the hunt. Ellen's death is described primarily in communal terms: the poet refers to sprigs of boxwood which those attending the funeral would throw into the grave, and the bearing of the coffin out of the house by mourners and friends. The impact of an empty hut is there - "One Child did [the coffin] bear, and that Child was his last" (l. 12) - but the community has offered what it could. Timothy's dignity lies in accepting his personal sorrow and bereavement, and in carrying on in spite of it:

Old Timothy took up his staff, and he shut
With a leisurely motion the door of his hut.

Perhaps to himself at that moment he said;
"The key I must take, for my Ellen is dead."
But of this in my ears not a word did he speak;
And he went to the chase with a tear on his cheek.

(ll. 15-20)

Old Timothy, his sorrow and his continuing engagement in the patterns of life offer pale variations on a theme which Wordsworth presented most vividly in the figure of Matthew. Matthew, like Lucy, is a character in whom some features have been highlighted by the poet and others honed away until each has become almost archetypal. For Lucy, the Child of Nature, Wordsworth named no particular source; of Matthew, he wrote:

... poems connected with Matthew would not gain by a literal detail of facts. Like the Wanderer in "The Excursion", this Schoolmaster was made up of several both of his class and men of other occupations. I do not ask pardon for what there is of untruth in such verses, considered strictly as matters of fact. It is enough if, being true and consistent in spirit, they move and teach in a manner not unworthy of a Poet's calling.⁵

Wordsworth created in Matthew the Man of Joy, and then confronted his image with the fact of death. The four elegies that arose out of this creative confrontation deal with Matthew's own death, while "The Two April Mornings"⁶ and "The Fountain,"⁷ which we will consider here, are primarily concerned with Matthew's response to the deaths of others.

The basis of "The Two April Mornings" (1799) is a comparison of two spring mornings, separated in time by thirty years, but physically so similar that one appears "the very brother" (l. 28) of the other. In each, the colours of the dawn, the renewal of life and beauty in the spring, and the pleasure of the people walking out to meet the day seem in glad harmony together. Yet in each, the thought of death cuts through this harmony and separates the human from the natural.

In the original morning, thirty years before that with which the poem opens, Matthew's plan to participate in what the "sweet season gave" (l. 30) is cut short by the sight of his daughter's grave. His feelings are like those later expressed by Wordsworth in "Surprised by Joy:" a sudden flood of love and a deep conviction of loss.

Six feet in earth my Emma lay;
And yet I loved her more,
For so it seemed, than till that day
I e'er had loved before. (ll. 37-40)

Then, as if from under the shadow of death, emerges another girl, as vividly alive as Emma is now utterly dead.

... turning from her grave, I met,
Beside the churchyard yew,
A blooming Girl, whose hair was wet
With points of morning dew.

A basket on her head she bare;
Her brow was smooth and white:
To see a child so very fair,
It was a pure delight!

No fountain from its rocky cave
E'er tripped with foot so free;
She seemed as happy as a wave
That dances on the sea. (ll. 41-52)

In human form, she suggests the ever-renewing cycles of Nature. Where one dies, another rises up to take its place; the patterns of the seasons replace and reproduce over and over again. For Emma dead, another girl is offered, blooming, happy, with the dew still wet on her hair.

There came from me a sigh of pain
Which I could ill confine;
I looked at her, and looked again:
And did not wish her mine! (ll. 53-6)⁸

There is no substitution or replacement possible, for human loss is final and unique. With the full awareness of how much he loved Emma in his heart, Matthew is able to

acknowledge and accept the extent of his bereavement, even in the face of Nature's messages of renewal and resurrection.

In the other morning, which opens the poem, it is this very power of Nature to reproduce herself which reminds Matthew of his irrevocable loss. The beauty of the morning is just like that of the earlier day: colours, clouds, sky and field are the same. Matthew's thoughts are carried back to the moment of acknowledgment and acceptance he had reached so long ago and, in different words, he repeats his achievement. "And Matthew stopped, he looked, and said, / 'The will of God be done!'" (ll. 3-4).

This traditional expression of resignation and acceptance is only part of the story, however. Having traced Matthew's memories of Emma and the unknown girl, the poem in its last stanza suddenly leaps forward into the present, to the poet's memory of Matthew:

Matthew is in his grave, yet now,
Methinks, I see him stand,
As at that moment, with a bough
Of wilding in his hand. (ll. 57-60)

Matthew's memory had recreated for him a scene in which Nature's continual renewal is contrasted to the unique unalterable fact of human loss, but the poet's memory offers him a vision in which the two contrasting elements have come together: Matthew, reliving his moment of acknowledgment of loss, holds in his hand a sign of Nature's gift of new life. In his later poetry, Wordsworth would not have hesitated to make explicit analogies to the human hope of resurrection after death. Here, however, the poet's thoughts are turned another way. To maintain relationship to Nature in spite of the knowledge of mortality, to participate in spite of the awareness of difference, is the goal of those who have left childhood behind. The poet as an adult is writing in-between his own easy communion with Nature when younger and Matthew's hard-won position at the other end of life. He cannot go back, but the memory of Matthew "at that moment" is like a beacon on a hill to him, pointing out what is possible. The claims and assertions of the last stanza of the "Immortality Ode" are translated here into a human form, in a vision that is not dimmed by death.

In "The Fountain. A Conversation" (1799), other themes are blended with those considered in "The Two April Mornings." Matthew speaks of how an awareness of aging and change can also separate the human from Nature. The stream he lies beside flows on the same, year after year; the blackbird and the lark have no sad memories or fears for the future, but live and die instead at peace: "With Nature never do they wage / A foolish strife" (ll. 41-2). Matthew does not feel part of this harmony, and entwined with thoughts of the changes in his own life is the memory of those who have died.

... we are pressed by heavy laws;
And often, glad no more,
We wear a face of joy, because
We have been glad of yore.

If there be one who need bemoan
His kindred laid in earth,
The household hearts that were his own;
It is the man of mirth.

My days, my Friend, are almost gone,
My life has been approved,
And many love me! but by none
Am I enough beloved. (ll. 45-56)

At this point, the poet offers himself to Matthew as a replacement for the dead:

"Now both himself and me he wrongs,
The man who thus complains!
I live and sing my idle songs
Upon these happy plains;

And, Matthew, for thy children dead
I'll be a son to thee!"
At this he grasped my hand, and said,
"Alas! that cannot be." (ll. 57-64)

Like the unknown girl in "The Two April Mornings," Matthew's young friend is presented as a happy creature, at home in Nature and as yet untouched by adult sorrows and bereavement. He clearly does not understand what the old man has been saying to him and blithely sweeps aside his complaints. Matthew cannot accept his offer,⁹ for there is no replacing "His kindred laid in earth." Nevertheless, the poem ends as the preceding one had: in spite of his knowledge of loss, Matthew "match[es]" (l. 9) the murmur of the stream with a song of his own,

About the crazy old church-clock,
And the bewildered chimes. (ll. 71-2)

He is not afraid to make jokes at time, or to be, in spite

of his awareness of death, a "grey-haired man of glee" (l. 20). Like Wordsworth himself, Matthew is the poet of a joy that strives to face grief and loss without dying, and to contain the knowledge of human mortality without passing away.

In 1807, Wordsworth turned again to the theme of the last of a line, but the sorrows he chose to explore were not now those of his own humble neighbours. His characters are high-born ladies of times past, who find consolation not only in the simple dignity of endurance and human continuity, but in a more rarefied sphere of religious experience.

"The Force of Prayer or, The Founding of Bolton Abbey. A Tradition,"¹⁰ is set in the twelfth century. Lady Romilly's only son has drowned in the River Wharf, and Wordsworth seeks to delineate the nature of her bereavement by comparing her position as a mother to that of a lover or a wife:

If for a Lover the Lady wept,
A solace she might borrow
From death, and from the passion of death: -
Old Wharf might heal her sorrow.

She weeps not for the wedding-day
Which was to be to-morrow:
Her hope was a further-looking hope,
And hers is a mother's sorrow.

He was a tree that stood alone,
And proudly did its branches wave;
And the root of this delightful tree
Was in her husband's grave! (ll. 41-52)

As if arranging griefs in degrees of severity, Wordsworth suggests that the pain of a lover can be salved by action, and the river that had killed and separated might also kill to reunite. The mother's loss, however, is not of this order. Her perspective is longer, reaching back through death to her husband, the boy's father, and reaching forward beyond her own lifetime to the future. Her link to both is snapped at Romilly's death, and it seems that there is no response possible save "ENDLESS SORROW!" (l. 7). Certainly, action as described in "The Borderers" ("transitory - a step, a blow, / The motion of a muscle - this way or that"¹¹) has no place in such a context. Instead, out of the darkness of her sorrow comes the

thought of establishing a Priory and, at length, her desire is achieved. For the pattern of human life which her son's death has shattered, there is now an endlessly repeated pattern of prayer and rite; for the focus on a human future, there is a focus on God. Even the river Wharf, who had strangled her human hopes, is subsumed in this other pattern.

The stately Priory was reared;
And Wharf, as he moved along,
To matins joined a mournful voice,
Nor failed at even-song.

And the Lady prayed in heaviness
That looked not for relief!
But slowly did her succour come,
And a patience to her grief.

Oh! there is never sorrow of heart
That shall lack a timely end,
If but to God we turn, and ask
Of Him to be our friend! (ll. 57-68)

The language of the final stanza may undermine the poem by its glib complacency, and it is unlikely that Wordsworth meant to suggest that the Lady's sorrow for her dead son was entirely forgotten. But with time and prayer came the patience to bear her grief and the strength to look beyond it.

The same themes of suffering, endurance and faith are found in "The White Doe of Rylstone,"¹² also written in 1807. While "The Force of Prayer" describes the founding of Bolton Abbey, "The White Doe" is set in the time following its destruction. The action of the poem traces the downfall of Richard Norton and his sons in "The Rising of the North," a rebellion of Catholic northerners against the Protestant Elizabeth I. Norton and eight of his sons are executed, and Francis, a Protestant, is killed while carrying his father's banner back to Bolton Priory. All this is of secondary importance in the poem, however, and was included by Wordsworth only as background to the fate of the family's one remaining daughter and her struggle with sorrow. This, he felt, was "the true action of the poem."¹³

There is a ponderous inevitability about "The Fate of the Nortons;" at no point does the poem suggest to us that the tide of disastrous events may turn, or that any of the

characters may have a change of heart. Francis' prophecy to Emily in Canto Two carries with it complete conviction:

The time is come that rings the knell
Of all we loved, and loved so well:
Hope nothing ...
... for we
Are doomed to perish utterly....
Espouse thy doom at once, and cleave
To fortitude without reprieve.
For we must fall, both we and ours ...
The blast will sweep us all away
One desolation, one decay!...
- But thou, my Sister, doomed to be
The last leaf on a blasted tree ...
Be strong; - be worthy of the grace
Of God, and fill thy destined place:
A Soul, by force of sorrows high,
Uplifted to the purest sky
Of undisturbed humanity!

(ll. 528-30, 532-3, 544-6, 554-5, 566-7, 583-7)

Yet there are important differences between the path Francis points out to his sister, and the one she actually takes. A vision of their dead mother brings to Emily's mind the danger of following his injunctions to them both too far, of becoming entrapped in "that most lamentable snare, / The self-reliance of despair!" (ll. 1055-6). Somewhere between impossible hope and utter despair must lie her way, and she repeats to herself her task:

Her duty is to stand and wait;
In resignation to abide
The shock, AND FINALLY SECURE
O'ER PAIN AND GRIEF A TRIUMPH PURE (ll. 1069-72)

The shock comes, but the poet draws a veil over the first years of her bereavement. He then shows her to us as she has become, when she returns from wandering to view the desolation that was Rylstone.

... the ravage hath spread wide
Through park and field, a perishing
That mocks the gladness of the Spring!
And, with this silent gloom agreeing,
Appears a joyless human Being,
Of aspect such as if the waste
Were under her dominion placed....
The mighty sorrow hath been borne,
And she is thoroughly forlorn:
Her soul doth in itself stand fast,
Sustained by memory of the past
And strength of Reason; held above
The infirmities of mortal love;
Undaunted, lofty, calm, and stable,
And awfully impenetrable. (ll. 1576-82, 1621-8)

In the same way that Rylstone's desolation is at odds with

the spring and new life, Emily's "holy, / Though stern and rigorous, melancholy" (ll. 1596-7) is at odds with the traces of living human affection still visible in her face. Her spiritual posture is strong but rigid, "self-reliant," and based on the excluding despair from which she had thought to warn Francis. Then, like the vision of their mother, the White Doe appears to Emily in her solitude. To the poet, this is a "moment ever blest!" (l. 1665), for it carries with it the seeds of a new life for Emily, a softening of her despair into a finer sorrow.

And will not Emily receive
This lovely chronicler of things
Long past, delights and sorrowings?
Lone Sufferer! will not she believe
The promise in that speaking face;
And welcome, as a gift of grace,
The saddest thought the Creature brings? (ll. 1673-9)

"Shun will she not, she feels, will bear" (l. 1699).
And now she must begin again, leave Rylstone, retrace her memories afresh, and accept them in the strength of a new companionship. In time she returns, able to

Receive[] the memory of old loves,
Undisturbed and undistrest,
Into a soul which now was blest
With a soft spring-day of holy,
Mild, and grateful, melancholy:
Not sunless gloom or unenlightened,
But by tender fancies brightened. (ll. 1754-60)

Now she can hear in the ringing of the Rylstone bells the old words "God us ayde" (l. 1762); now she can face the extent of her loss without despair. Her spirit is subdued, but not dead, and the relationship with the White Doe satisfies her human need to love and be loved.

Her sanction inwardly she bore,
And stood apart from human cares:
But to the world returned no more,
Although with no unwilling mind
Help did she give at need, and joined
The Wharfedale peasants in their prayers.
At length, thus faintly, faintly tied
To earth, she was set free, and died. (ll. 1858-65)

Francis' prophecy has been fulfilled, though by a different path, and the Doe lives on among the same scenes, calm and pensive, like an image of Emily's spiritual achievement.

The task of the White Doe was to reunite her mistress to the web of interrelatedness from which she had been torn

by tragedy. By breaking through the shell of her despair, the creature freed Emily from an attitude that excluded the spiritual renewal she sought. Only the faintest of ties to this earth was required, but without it, Emily could not achieve the beatification¹⁴ that so supremely fitted her for other worlds.

When, almost forty years later, Wordsworth wrote again on the subject of solitude and bereavement, his message retained similarities to that of "The White Doe," but he had returned to more humble characters and aspirations. In two poems written in 1846, Wordsworth looked at ordinary old people of his own time, left at the end of their lives without family or friends. He does not show them seeking the company of memories to ease their loneliness, nor waiting with serenity and faith for a heavenly reunion with loved ones gone before. Instead, both poems are concerned with the present and with the living. At age 75, Wordsworth still placed his faith in the life of the affections and their engagement in this world.

"I know an aged Man,"¹⁵ although suffering from all the sentimentality of Victorian genre painting, nevertheless does express this conviction of the importance of the affections, as well as the old disapproval of institutions which demean the poor. The old man in the poem is the last of his line ("Wife, children, kindred, they were dead and gone" l. 25), yet he has in his solitude one friend still. Wordsworth draws a picture of the old man's companionship with a robin:

Dear intercourse was theirs, day after day;
What signs of mutual gladness when they met!
Think of their common peace, their simple play,
The parting moment and its fond regret.

Months passed in love that failed not to fulfil,
In spite of season's change, its own demand....

One living Stay was left, and in that one
Some recompense for all that he had lost.

(ll. 13-18, 27-8)

But the fate Wordsworth had feared for the Old Cumberland Beggar befalls him, and he is torn away from home and companion to the life of a prisoner in the work-house. Thrust unnaturally among many strangers, the old man's heart remains true to the bird and "shunned all [other] converse" (l. 24). Sad as is his plight, the bereaved old

man is faithful to his affections: "still he loves the Bird, and still must love / ... friendship lasts though fellowship is broken!" (ll. 31-2). The tragedy of his old age is not lovelessness, but the cruel separation human laws have placed between his love and its object. Fifty years after writing "The Old Cumberland Beggar," Wordsworth's concern over the effect of institutions like the workhouse on the humanity of the poor is still strong.

The "Sonnet to an Octagenarian"¹⁶ describes in more formal language the destitution of heart that can come in old age, when death has taken family and friends.

Affections lose their object; Time brings forth
No successors; and, lodged in memory,
If love exist no longer, it must die, -
Wanting accustomed food, must pass from earth,
Or never hope to reach a second birth.
This sad belief, the happiest that is left
To thousands, share not Thou; howe'er bereft,
Scorned, or neglected, fear not such a dearth.
Though poor and destitute of friends thou art,
Perhaps the sole survivor of thy race,
One to whom Heaven assigns that mournful part
The utmost solitude of age to face,
Still shall be left some corner of the heart
Where Love for living Thing can find a place.

Wordsworth does not deny the worst that time can bring: the solitude of bereavement, the sealing up and dying away of love. Earlier he had written of a sustaining love of Nature, keeping alive the human spirit in old age:

Dear Child of Nature, let them rail! ...
Thy thoughts and feelings shall not die,
Nor leave thee, when grey hairs are nigh,
A melancholy slave;
But an old age serene and bright,
And lovely as a Lapland night,
Shall lead thee to thy grave.¹⁷

Now, as an old man himself, his picture of age has become much more sombre, and his aspirations for his characters more limited. A "corner of the heart" to love some "living Thing" is all that Wordsworth now prophesies for his octagenarian, yet this modest prospect is rich in comparison to the complete death of love that faces many. Dependent as he was on his own family for the life of his affections, Wordsworth's message to the octagenarian and to himself is still "New loves must be sought if old ones are lost, for without love, we are as dust."

In his early poems on the interconnections between different types of affection (love of the land, love of family, emotional bonding to the past and the future), Wordsworth was concerned with revealing the existence of such patterns to those familiar only with "hired labourers [...] and the manufacturing Poor,"¹⁸ or with an upper class "life without love."¹⁹ To threaten the property of statesmen or others like them was also to threaten an entire structure of intangible relationships which, once destroyed, could not be resurrected. The kind of death he wished to portray was not bodily but spiritual, the withering up of an invisible legacy of love and a sense of belonging. The poet wanted to warn his time against unthinking destruction and spiritual murder.

Wordsworth's purpose in his poems on physical death in the family was somewhat different. In them, he wrote about characters who had lost the objects of their familial affections through the arbitrary power of death, yet who had found sustenance for their inner lives in other ways. A balance must be struck between a full acknowledgement of irreplaceable loss and a continuing engagement in the life of this world. The habits of relationship must be renewed and maintained in spite of death: for some of Wordsworth's characters, the habits themselves carried consolation; for others, they made accessible the comforts of religion; and for others, they allowed the bereaved to draw sustenance from a love of Nature, her creatures, or other human beings. Wordsworth did not change his attitudes on this subject and, at the end of his poetic career as at its beginning, he wrote about the heart's need to look beyond its dead.²⁰

Wordsworth's poems on death and the family consider the individual in terms of a small group of people tied together, on the simplest level, by the bonds of blood. But the individual is also part of a larger grouping, that of society or the community, which is tied together by laws, conventions and standards of behaviour. In his poems on the individual and the community, Wordsworth was concerned with the sense of isolation suffered by criminals who had broken those laws, and the relationship between two

faces of death within society, murder and capital punishment.

2.) The Family and Death

1. In 1808-9, Wordsworth wrote:

Love and admiration must push themselves out towards some quarter: otherwise the moral man is killed. Collaterally they advance with great vigour to a certain extent - and they are checked: in that direction, limits hard to pass are perpetually encountered: but upwards and downwards, to ancestry and posterity, they meet with glad some help and no obstacles; the tract is interminable.

Prose I, p. 328. "Convention of Cintra."

2. Prelude (1805-1806), XIII, l. 152.

a) Family, the Land and Death

1. Letters (1787-1805), pp. 314-5. W.W. to Charles James Fox. 14 Jan., 1801. W.W. had sent Fox a copy of the Lyrical Ballads (second edition), and was drawing his particular attention to the poems "The Brothers" and "Michael."

2. PW II, pp. 43-6.

3. Ibid., pp. 80-94.

4. Ibid., pp. 46-7.

b) The Last of the Line

1. PW IV, p. 247.

2. Ibid., pp. 234-40.

3. PW II, pp. 54-5.

4. Ibid., pp. 55-6.

5. PW IV, p. 415. I.F. note to "Matthew."

6. Ibid., pp. 69-71.

7. Ibid., pp. 71-3.

8. A similar statement is recorded in the "Essays Upon Epitaphs:"

The Duke of Ormond said of his Son Ossory, "that he preferred his dead Son to any living Son in Christendom," - a thought which ... has an infinitude of truth!

Prose II, p. 88.

9. It is only in the later versions of the poem that Matthew even takes the poet's hand: originally the line "At this he grasped my hand" was "At this he grasped his hands."

10. PW IV, pp. 88-90.

11. The Borderers by William Wordsworth ed. Robert Osborn, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), III v, 11. 60-1.

12. PW III, pp. 281-90.

13. Memoirs II, p. 311. And in the I.F. note, Wordsworth says:

The anticipated beatification, if I may so say, of [Emily's] mind, and the apotheosis of the companion of her solitude, are the points at which the Poem aims, and constitute its legitimate catastrophe, far too

spiritual a one for instant or widely-spread sympathy, but not therefore the less fitted to make a deep and permanent impression upon that class of mind who think and feel more independently, than the many do ...

PW III, p. 543.

14. Ibid.

15. PW IV, pp. 160-1.

16. Ibid., p. 162.

17. PW II, pp. 287-8. "To a Young Lady Who Had Been Reproached for Taking Long Walks in the Country" (c. 1802), ll. 1, 13-18.

18. Letters (1787-1805), pp. 314-15. W.W. to Charles James Fox. 14 Jan., 1801.

19. Letters (1806-1811), p. 126. W.W. to Lady Beaumont. 21 May, 1807.

20. The death of Dora in 1847 was too much for Wordsworth, however, and the type of all-excluding despair against which he had written dogged him until the end of his life.

3.) The Community, the Individual and Death

Beyond the private circle of family and friends there is the community, made up of many individuals tied together by common laws and conventions, mutual trust, pooled responsibilities and benefits. To commit a crime, particularly murder, is to cut through these ties and to step outside the structure of communal relationships. The feeling of isolation that the criminal then suffers can be terrible, but the only way to return within the community involves paying the price that has been set on the crime. In Wordsworth's time, escape from isolation back into the life of the community was, paradoxically, often possible only through the facing of a death sentence.

In some of his early poems, Wordsworth explored from the criminal's point of view the conflicts between loneliness and the fear of death, between violence and remorse, an individual's actions and the community's response. His criminals were victims first, driven by injustice or deceit into committing crimes alien to their usual characters. Under the influence of William Godwin's theories of crime and punishment,¹ Wordsworth questioned how far criminals were different from other people, and in his poem "The Convict" (1796), he claimed brotherhood with the man in chains.² In the "Adventures on Salisbury Plain" (1795-c.1799) and "The Borderers" (1797-1799), however, Wordsworth accepted for his poetic framework the idea that murderers stand in isolation, outside the community they have wronged. The death of another has excluded them, and their own deaths are the price society will require of them if they are caught or if they return voluntarily under the community's jurisdiction.

In later years, Wordsworth became less concerned with portraying the struggles and fears of criminals, and more involved in expressing the point of view of the society against which their crimes were committed. The revisions he made to the ending of "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," for example, in preparation for its publication in 1842 as "Guilt and Sorrow," illustrate a new sense of responsibility for portraying the state sympathetically.³ The human judicial system is presented as an instrument of God, and is shown to be dignified and seemly in the pursuit

of its duty. Human justice, as both the criminal and the court perceive it, is satisfied with the murderer's death, while on a higher plane, Christ as the Saviour offers His Atonement for the forgiveness of the sinner. Wordsworth's "Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death," written in the years 1839-1840, also argue the rightness of this arrangement. Society needs all its powers to maintain itself, and the power of death must be one of these.

a) Isolation and Death

At the beginning of his poetic career, Wordsworth considered the issue of murder and its punishment from the criminal's point of view, and this was the subject of two of his early longer works, the "Adventures on Salisbury Plain" and his only play, "The Borderers."

The "Adventures on Salisbury Plain"¹ (1795-c.1799) opens with a kindly interchange between a Sailor and a poor old Soldier as they meet in the wide expanse of Salisbury Plain. The younger man's response to his companion shows him to be caring, social and gentle, but soon after their short fellowship is over, the reader learns of the deed that has cut him off from all but brief encounters with others. Maddened by the repeated injustice of the powerful, with nothing to give his family after years of labour, the Sailor had killed a man, robbed him and fled, "the murderer's fate to shun" (l. 99). The landscape of Salisbury Plain, through which he now wanders, is physically hostile and harsh, but is also figuratively expressive of the fugitive's emotional world. By means of a catalogue of negatives, Wordsworth creates a picture of isolation, dreariness and dread: no spire, no tree, no meadow, no brook, no smoke, no sound save the wind or a desert lark, no home, no shelter, only a single figure disappearing in the distance to make the loneliness complete.² Then, in the midst of this "vacant ... plain" (l. 71), an image of what the Sailor flees appears before him:

... as he plodded on, with sudden clang
A sound of chains along the desert rang:
He looked, and saw on a bare gibbet nigh
A human body that in irons swang,

Uplifted by the tempest sweeping by,
And hovering round it often did a raven fly.

It was a spectacle which none might view
In spot so savage but with shuddering pain
Nor only did for him at once renew
All that he feared from man, but roused a train
Of the mind's phantoms, horrible as vain.
The stones, as if to sweep him from the day,
Roll'd at his back along the living plain;
He fell and without sense or motion lay,
And when the trance was gone, feebly pursued his way.
(ll. 112-126)

Remorse and fear fluctuate within, while without, a storm beats down on him and no human light (no gypsy fire, no labourer's kiln, no sick man's taper, no toll-gate lamp³) shines to comfort or welcome. When shelter finally does appear, it is in the form of a deserted building called "the dead house of the Plain" (l. 189) where, the poet tells us, a "murder'd corse" (l. 216) had been found hidden beneath the floor. As it happens, the Sailor learns nothing of this; it is enough that the reader knows how his outer path is dogged by the images of his inner turmoil.

The Female Vagrant whom he meets in that place and the tale she tells may seem irrelevant to the progress of his own story, but in fact they have much in common. Each has suffered the oppression of the powerful; each has been forced to "Protract a cursed existence ... wading at the heels of war" (ll. 386, 385); each has been cut off from family, she by death, he by his crime; and each is homeless and isolated in their own land. Yet they differ at one important point: the woman has only suffered evil, while the Sailor has acted it. At the end of her story, the Female Vagrant is relieved and strives to cheer her companion also, but "His thoughts ... still cleav[ed] to the murder'd man" (l. 597). She has innocent hopes of meeting her dead loved ones again in heaven (ll. 599-600), but the guilty Sailor can trust in no such prospect. His plight is even more comfortless than hers.

The bare plain has one last incident in store for the haunted Sailor. Drawn by the sound of screaming, he and the Female Vagrant come upon a father who has been savagely beating his child. The Sailor intervenes, at which the father,

... confident in passion, made reply
With bitter insult and revilings sad,
Called him vagabond, and knave, and mad,
And ask'd what plunder he was hunting now;
The gallows would one day of him be glad.
Here cold sweat started from the sailor's brow,
Yet calm he seem'd, as thoughts so poignant would
allow;

Nor answer made, but stroked the child, outstretch'd
His face to earth, and the boy turn'd round
His batter'd head, a groan the Sailor fetch'd.
The head with streaming blood had dy'd the ground,
Flow'd from the spot where he that deadly wound
Had fix'd on him he murder'd. Through his brain
At once the griding iron passage found;
Deluge of tender thought then rush'd amain
Nor could his aged eyes from very tears abstain.
(ll. 633-648)

Faced yet again with what he has done, the Sailor makes explicit the difference between guilt and sorrow: "happy thou, poor boy! compared with me, / Suffering not doing ill, fate far more mild." (ll. 651-2).

At last their journey on the open plain is ended and the two travellers drop down into a pleasant valley. There they meet with human welcome, food, kindness, warmth, everything the night on Salisbury Plain had denied them. And this welcome is extended not only to themselves, but to a dying woman on a passing wain.

Fervently cried the housewife, "God be prais'd,
I have a house that I can call my own;
Nor shall she perish there, untended and alone!"
(ll. 718-20)

This is the community taking responsibility for its own, but on an unofficial level: authority, in the form of the overseers, had already rejected the woman. She is a victim of injustice like the Female Vagrant, able to speak innocently of heaven ("I thank you all; if I must die, / The God in heaven my prayers for you will hear" ll. 728-9) because she has "meekly suffered" (l. 740). More particularly, as her death-bed story reveals, she is the victim of the Sailor's injustice: she is his wife and has suffered the consequences of his deed and the suspicions it aroused, until they have worn her down to death. The Sailor begs her forgiveness, but cannot receive the comfort her dying moments extend to him, for he is still cut off by his guilt:

Silently o'er her face the husband bent.
A look was on her lips which seem'd to say,

"Comfort to thee my dying thoughts have sent."
But not to him, it seem'd, on other things intent.

For him alternate throbb'd his pulse and stopped;
And when at table placed the bread he took
To break it, from his faltering hands it dropp'd,
While on those hands he cast a rueful look.
His ears were never silent, sleep forsook
His nerveless eyelids stiffen'd even as lead;
All through the night the floor beneath him shook
And chamber trembled to his shuddering bed;
And oft he groan'd aloud, "Oh God that I were dead!"
(11. 780-792)

The cottagers continue to act as become the members of a community: they do not "Repine mortality's last claim to grant" (l. 795) and "In due time with due observance" (l. 796) they see to it that the woman is buried. And, when they realize the Sailor's guilt, they also have no hesitation in upholding the community's laws:

"Though we deplore it much as any can,
The law," they cried, "must weigh him in her scale;
Most fit it is that we unfold this woful tale."
(11. 808-10)

Instead, the Sailor himself chooses to acknowledge the community's right to punish him:

Confirm'd of purpose, fearless and prepared,
Not without pleasure, to the city strait
He went and all that he had done declar'd.
"And from your hands," he added, "now I wait,
Nor let them linger long, the murderer's fate."
Nor ineffectual was that piteous claim.
(11. 811-16)

In accordance with the law, they hang his corpse on a gibbet. It is a spectacle aimed at "educating" the community through fear, but as such it has little success. The community's members feel no horror at the sight and instead flock round it with their children in holiday mood, as if to a carnival. The only one to whom its real horror is revealed is the fugitive, "some kindred sufferer" (l. 825) on the run, who,

... driven, perchance,
That way when into storm the sky is wrought,
Upon his swinging corpse his eye may glance
And drop, as he once dropp'd, in miserable trance.
(11. 825-8)

Having returned within the confines of the community, the Sailor in death becomes one of its tools against outsiders, and the story ends where it began.

In "The Borderers"⁴ (1797-1799), written during the same period as "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," Wordsworth exchanged the setting and usages of his own time for those of an earlier age. In the Isabella Fenwick note, he said:

As to the scene and period of action little more was required for my purpose than the absence of established Law and Government - so that the Agents might be at liberty to act on their own impulses.⁵

He chose the time of the Barons' Wars in the thirteenth century, and his hero's resorting to a trial by ordeal draws on the customs and beliefs of that age. For the most part, however, the play's concern with criminal isolation and murder was as pertinent to Wordsworth's own time as to the Middle Ages.

There are two main characters in the play. On the one hand there is Mortimer, leader of a band of Borderers pledged to fight against injustice and to champion the innocent in troubled times. On the other is Rivers, a man who has rejected all "the tyranny / Of moralists and saints and lawgivers" (III.v ll. 28-9), whose "energies are most impressively manifest in works of devastation,"⁶ and who is "in the habit of considering the world as a body which is in some sort at war with him."⁷ The two men have characteristics in common: both have stepped outside established society; both are accustomed to solving problems with the sword. Mortimer, however, is part of a community, bound together through love and high principles, while Rivers relies only on himself and the wisdom of "an independent intellect" (III.v l. 33).⁸ Jealousy, hurt pride and loneliness make it impossible for him to co-exist passively with the Borderer, and the main action of the play is based on Rivers' attempt to create in Mortimer a version of himself.

Although not revealed until Act IV, a crime Rivers had committed in his youth is the template for the acts into which he tries to manoeuvre the trusting Borderer. In a calm at sea, Rivers had been duped by the lies of his companions and the force of his own passions into marooning his innocent Captain on a bare rock, leaving him there to certain death.

Rivers: 'Twas a spot -
Methinks I see it now - how in the sun
Its stony surface glittered like a shield:

It swarmed with shapes of life scarcely visible;
And in that miserable place we left him -
A giant body mid a world of beings
Not one of which could give him any aid,
Living or dead.

Mortimer: A man by men deserted,
Not buried in the sand - not dead nor dying,
But standing, walking - stretching forth his arms:
In all things like yourself, but in the agony
With which he called for mercy - and even so,
He was forsaken.

(IV.ii ll. 37-49)

Just as Rivers' deed is the pattern for the action of the drama, this image of isolation and the shadow of death occurs throughout the play as a motif of the effect of crime, on criminals and victims alike. Rivers' own angry isolation stems from it, and leads him finally to death on the Borderers' daggers. Each time the image appears Rivers is at hand to influence Mortimer's interpretation of it, until finally the younger man becomes incapable of judging with any uprightness at all.

The motif is introduced first in the person of a maiden, seduced and then deserted by the Lord Clifford, and now existing in a Life-in-Death whose focus is the churchyard:

Rivers: ... she lives alone,
Nor moves her hand to any needful work.
She eats the food which every day the peasants
Bring to her hut, and so the wretch has lived
Ten years; and no one ever heard her voice.
But every night at the first stroke of twelve
She quits her house, and in the neighbouring
 church-yard
Upon the self same spot, in rain or storm,
She paces out the hour 'twixt twelve and one,
She paces round and round, still round and round,
And in the church-yard sod her feet have worn
A hollow ring; they say it is knee-deep -

(I.iii ll. 11-22)

Rivers teaches Mortimer to see in this figure "a skeleton of Matilda" (II.i l. 33), who is the Borderer's beloved. Rivers has told him that Matilda's blind father, Herbert, is not her real parent but a villain who plans to sell her to this same Clifford. As a result, Mortimer's righteous anger is deflected from its appropriate object, the man who has reduced the unknown maiden to such a state, and is directed instead at an innocent, feeble, and blind old man. There is no connection between the two women, but Rivers'

distortions lead the Borderer to perceive one, and a step in his re-making is thus achieved.

Next, Rivers draws Mortimer and Herbert away from all human habitation (beyond "the sound of any clock" II.iii l. 90⁹) to a ruined castle in the midst of a wilderness. Here Mortimer is meant to murder the blind old man who, he has been told, would have played the pander to Lord Clifford's lusts. Rivers' choice of setting serves to underline this lie, for the deserted ruin had been in the past the scene of some of Clifford's orgies. This should keep vividly before the Borderer why he must kill Herbert, by linking the old man and Clifford in his mind. In fact Herbert, lying in the dungeon, helpless, isolated and unprotected, has more in common with the victims of Clifford than with the lord himself. In spite of Rivers' clever stage-managing, however, Mortimer is torn between his normal compassion and impulse to protect the weak, and the thought that this murder is required by the idea of justice which Rivers has taught him. He wavers, and even when persuaded by Rivers' taunts and arguments to descend into the dungeon with sword in hand, is unable to kill his sleeping victim. The ties of common humanity which should hold him back from such a deed are presented to him in a series of hallucinations or, perhaps, supernatural interventions. An unspeaking presence lays a restraining hand on his shoulder; he feels an invisible string round his wrist and the blind man's guide dog, cruelly killed by Rivers, pulling him away; then, in spite of the darkness, he sees in the sleeping old man's face the likeness of Matilda.

- It put me to my prayers - I cast my eyes upwards, and through a crevice in the roof I beheld a star twinkling over my head, and by the living God, I could not do it-
(II.iii ll. 289-91)

The restraining hand is like a reminder of the claims of brotherhood, under which he has no right to murder, while the ghost of the guide dog should re-awaken in him a sense of responsibility, as part of a human community, to care for the weak. His vision of Matilda places before him the entwined claims of his love for her and her love for her father. And the sight of the star in heaven lifts his thoughts away from his own passions to "the living God." Without understanding all that has been urged against the

been perverted by Rivers' lies, Robert the peasant has been perverted by cruelty and fear, tampered with before the action of the play begins.¹⁰ Human injustice has left him unfit to carry out heaven's justice, and the old man dies alone, mocked by wind-blown bells in a ruined chapel.

When Herbert is dead, Rivers reveals his part in the crime and claims Mortimer's eternal companionship, but the Borderer rejects him¹¹ and other members of the band rush in and kill him. Mortimer chooses for his own expiation to take upon himself Herbert's ordeal and to live in total isolation with his guilt until death sets him free of it:

I will go forth a wanderer on the earth,
A shadowy thing, and as I wander on
No human ear shall ever hear my voice,
No human dwelling ever give me food
Or sleep or rest, and all the uncertain way
Shall be as darkness to me, as a waste
Unnamed by man! and I will wander on
Living by mere intensity of thought,
A thing of pain and thought compelled to live,
Yet loathing life, till heaven in mercy strike me
With blank forgetfulness - that I may die.

(V.iii ll. 265-75)

Accepting the fact that his crime has excluded him from the life of the community, Mortimer chooses to punish himself with isolation and asks for release into death, not from human justice, but only from God's.

As we have seen, the passage of time and the pressure of events led Wordsworth gradually away from his focus on the individual to a deeper and more anxious concern for society and social structures. A nervous dread of change sullied his vision in later years, and although the objects of his wishes remained constant - human dignity, human relationship, human love - the way towards these goals increasingly appeared to him to lie through the establishment and the status quo. Murder and its punishment were now a concern primarily in relation to society, and only secondarily in relation to the criminal.

b) The Justification of Capital Punishment

Wordsworth's swing away from the radical sympathies of his youth has distressed admirers from Shelley¹ through to the present day, and there are few more depressing documents to illustrate the change than the "Sonnets Upon

the Punishment of Death."² In them, the poet displays his skill in linking together a number of separate sonnets in series, developing an argument with dignity and fluency, and manipulating the sonnet form to underline and emphasize his points. Yet to many the series is one of the most chilling and barren things he ever wrote.

The series was written in 1839 - 1840, and was first published with a running commentary by Sir Henry Taylor in the Quarterly Review of Dec. 1841.³ The occasion of the sonnets was the continued agitation for a total abolition of capital punishment, following the amendments to the law in 1837. Wordsworth took up the cause of the anti-abolitionists, arguing, with them, that human society was not yet ready for the end of the death penalty.

The first sonnet⁴ does not concern itself with the morality of capital punishment, but instead suggests in all compassion that there are differences between criminals and other people. To the innocent, the view of Lancaster Castle, the sea, sky and land are beautiful and soothing. Even if those who look upon the scene have been victims of injustice, their sad or angry thoughts are redirected in gratitude to God "For all his bounties upon men bestowed" (l. 7). The place has taken its name, however, from the tears of those who are excluded from such thoughts. It is called the "Weeping Hill" (l. 8) because it offers to criminals bound for Lancaster Prison the first sight of their destination, where they are to find "lingering durance or quick death with shame" (l. 11). The criminal, excluded from a healing communion with God and nature in which gentler griefs are lost, can only weep. The message, like that of the Salisbury Plain poems, is that the guilty and the sorrowful carry different burdens.

Liberal readers are softened by this opening sonnet; their sensibilities are awakened by beauty and by grief. This is right and good, says Wordsworth: "Tenderly do we feel by Nature's law / For worst offenders" (Sonnet II, ll. 1-2). More specifically, he suggests that we should feel compassion for the state of the criminal before the crime, for it was a sense of separation from the relations of God with humans and humans with each other that first made such

action possible.

... though the heart will heave
With indignation, deeply moved we grieve,
In afterthought, for Him who stood in awe
Neither of God nor man, and only saw
Lost wretch, a horrible device enthroned
On proud temptations, till the victim groaned
Under the steel his hand had dared to draw. (ll. 2-8)

Not only do the feelings of criminals and innocent people differ, but our feelings for them must also be distinguished. Compassion for the criminal, however salutary, is of a lower order than compassion for the "unforewarned" (l. 12) victim, the victim's friends and family, and the society in general for whom laws are meant to offer protection. "Judgments and aims and acts" (l. 11) must follow the higher compassion, and not the lower.⁵

The octave of the third sonnet seeks to strengthen this idea through the example of Lucius Junius Brutus who, out of a higher compassion and sense of duty, killed his two sons for treason. Wordsworth calls his action "A theme for praise and admiration high" (Sonnet III, l. 4). In the sestet, he then offers a present-day example:

... some, we know, when they by wilful act
A single human life have wrongly taken,
Pass sentence on themselves, confess the fact,
And to atone for it, with soul unshaken
Kneel at the feet of Justice, and, for faith
Broken with all mankind, solicit death. (ll. 9-14)⁶

The criminals who give themselves up are related to Brutus because they have, though belatedly, placed the demands of conscience and duty to society above personal feelings and the preservation of merely physical life. As the opening of the fourth sonnet suggests, there are worse things than death.⁷

In the next six sonnets (IV - IX), Wordsworth presents his arguments for the necessity of capital punishment. Although proposed with some obscurity, the main points of his case are that the threat of death is necessary, first, to prevent crime, specifically murder used as a cover-up for other crimes ("Far oftener then, bad ushering worse event, / Blood would be spilt that in his dark abode / Crime might lie better hid" Sonnet VIII, ll. 7-9);⁸ second, to maintain the moral tone of society as a whole; and third, to maintain the power and vitality of the State, a

concept separate from that of "society."

Wordsworth's first point is the most familiar of the arguments in support of capital punishment, and is central to the belief that executions, and particularly public executions, have a salutary terror which prevents crime. In Sonnet VI, Wordsworth adds the suggestion that individual conscience would be weakened by the absence of the death penalty and less able "to punish crime, and so prevent" (Sonnet VI, l. 8).⁹ Proverbial wisdom had always preached that "Murder will out" (l. 10), and this conviction too would be undermined. Worse, in sonnet VIII, the poet suggests that the abolition of the death penalty would slacken the desire of some people to bring criminals to trial,¹⁰ and thereby might provoke others to lynching and personal revenge.

... should the change
Take from the horror due to a foul deed,
Pursuit and evidence so far must fail,
And, guilt escaping, passion then might plead
In angry spirits for her old free range,
And the "wild justice of revenge" prevail.

(Sonnet VIII, ll. 9-14)

The implication that there is no point in catching a criminal one isn't allowed to kill is at best unpleasant, and the distinction between that and the "wild justice of revenge" appears less clear than the poet might wish.

Wordsworth's second argument sprang from his fear that the absence of capital punishment would produce a relaxation of society's moral musculature. Society is a community of individuals living under laws and subscribing to standards, but without the punishment of death as a sanction, Wordsworth felt that there would be nothing to prevent thoughts of crime from "debas[ing] the general mind" (Sonnet IV, l. 9) and "Tempt[ing] the vague will tried standards to disown" (l. 10).

Last, he was afraid of a dangerous weakening of the State. The State, as distinct from society, may be defined as the executive body in charge of those laws and standards which control "the general mind" of the community.

What is a State? The wise behold in her
A creature born of time, that keeps one eye
Fixed on the statutes of Eternity,
To which her judgments reverently defer.
Speaking through Law's dispassionate voice the State

Endues her conscience with external life
And being, to preclude or quell the strife
Of individual being, to elevate
The grovelling mind, the erring to recal,
And fortify the moral sense of all.

(Sonnet IX, ll. 5-14)

Wordsworth's language exalts the role of the State to one of almost God-like influence, responsible for far more than public order, and due almost religious obedience and honour.

Not to the object specially designed,
Howe'er momentous in itself it be,
Good to promote or curb depravity,
Is the wise Legislator's view confined.
His Spirit, when most severe, is oft most kind,
As all Authority in earth depends
On Love and Fear, their several powers he blends,
Copying with awe the one Paternal mind.
Uncaught by processes in show humane,
He feels how far the act would derogate
From even the humblest functions of the State;
If she, self-shorn of Majesty, ordain
That never more shall hang upon her breath
The last alternative of Life or Death.

(Sonnet V)¹¹

If God is a God of wrath as well as of mercy, of hell as well as heaven, the State in imitating God must work for the long-term good of the people through fear as well as through love.¹²

The spirit in which the State should exercise its mandate of fear is considered in Sonnet VII.¹³ Old Testament retributive justice and the concept of revenge were adequate only for a past age and were replaced by Christ's doctrines of love, patience, and long-suffering. When Wordsworth applies these doctrines to the judicial system of his own day, however, he sees them as a prohibition of a vindictive spirit in punishing criminals, not as a prohibition of punishment itself.

... lamentably do they err who strain
[Christ's] mandates, given rash impulse to controul
And keep vindictive thirstings from the soul,
So far that, if consistent in their scheme,
They must forbid the State to inflict a pain,
Making of social order a mere dream.

(Sonnet VII, ll. 9-14)

Wordsworth was convinced that without the power to rule through fear, the State and the order it protected would dissolve.¹⁴

In Sonnets X-XII, Wordsworth turns to a consideration

of the criminal as an individual. In Sonnet X,¹⁵ the body of the poem is given over to presenting the case for the opposition: life is sacred; a soul sent into death is denied the chance of repentance, for once dead there can be no change; killing is a responsibility too awesome for any earthly tribunal to take upon itself; mercy should prevail. Wordsworth retains only the couplet for his own view: to all these arguments he replies

Even so; but measuring not by finite sense
Infinite Power, perfect Intelligence.

(Sonnet X, ll. 13-14)

Carrying on from this couplet, the next sonnet¹⁶ suggests that it is better to send the criminal's soul on to the next world and let God cope with it. Perpetual imprisonment "needs must eat the heart / Out of his own humanity" (Sonnet XIV, ll. 2-3),¹⁷ and transportation allows too much scope for a relapse into further crime. Better and more truly merciful is execution, for God sees more clearly than do humans and may, at will, "waft ... the contrite soul to bliss" (Sonnet XI, l. 14). In Sonnet XII, Wordsworth paints a portrait of the condemned prisoner, penitent, softened, in awe of God and State, prepared with the Sacrament and his own remorse to pass from the court's judgment to the Last Judgment. It was a picture comfortingly familiar to the readers of contemporary novels, broadsides and sermons. To them, a change of heart that was not sealed by death was a disappointing and ultimately unreliable affair.

The closing sonnets of the series (XIII "Conclusion"¹⁸ and XIV "Apology"¹⁹) turn to the future and the human society that is to come. Wordsworth maintains that "hopeful signs abound" (Sonnet XIII, l. 8) and that things are getting better. If people will only have faith in God, the death penalty will abolish itself and disappear "for lack of use" (Sonnet XIII, l. 13). The poet obliquely acknowledges his opponents' right to differ with him and rounds off the series, which had begun by citing the compassion common to both sides, with a reference to common hope, and

... trust that, whatsoe'er the way
Each takes in this high matter, all may move

Cheered with the prospect of a brighter day.
(Sonnet XIV, ll. 12-14)

Wordsworth's early concern in his poems on death and the community was the psychology of the criminal. He explored the ways in which ordinary human beings can be driven to break through the bonds and restrictions that tie communities together, to take a life, and then to be so tormented by the resulting sense of isolation that their own death seems a blessed release. His later poems concentrated more on the significance of murder to the life of the community. The common subscription of all members to the laws and conventions of a community was essential to its existence, and the aggression of one individual against another was also an attack on the structure of society. Wordsworth argued that it was the community's right to defend itself against such assaults and to demand redress, and the death penalty seemed to him potentially to serve these purposes.

Common to both early and later approaches to the subject was Wordsworth's conviction that no one could live in isolation and remain human. Relation to others was essential; to be cut off "needs must eat the heart / Out of [a criminal's] humanity,"²⁰ and there was little difference on this level between guilt imprisoned or at large.²¹ The death penalty was the community's attempt to reforge the bonds which the murderer had shattered. The criminal was repatriated by paying what was due; the victim was avenged; and, it was argued, future criminals were warned to stay within the law. The wholeness of the community in this way was re-asserted and its members reassured.

To this point we have been considering different perceptions of mortality and the ways in which these are affected by change in the patterns of human relationships, to others and to Nature. In the next chapters, the emphasis will be instead on relationships between the living and the dead, and on perception as a capacity to be educated and enlarged by the meeting of their separate worlds.

3.) The Community and Death

1. Cf., for example, William Godwin Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), first published 1793.
2. PW I. "The Convict," ll. 45-8 and after l. 52 in MS. version.
3. The closing stanzas of "Adventures on Salisbury Plain" (1795 -c.1799) were:

Confirm'd of purpose, fearless and prepared,
Not without pleasure, to the city strait
He went and all which he had done declar'd:
"And from your hands," he added, "now I wait,
Nor let them linger long, the murderer's fate."
Nor ineffectual was that piteous claim.
Blest be for once the stroke which ends, tho' late,
The pangs which from thy halls of terror came,
Thou who of Justice bear'st the violated name!

They left him hung on high in iron case,
And dissolute men, unthinking and untaught,
Planted their festive booths beneath his face;
And to that spot, which idle thousands sought,
Women and children were by fathers brought;
And now some kindred sufferer driven, perchance,
That way when into storm the sky is wrought,
Upon his swinging corpse his eye may glance
And drop, as once he dropp'd, in miserable trance.
(ll. 811-28)

These were altered in "Guilt and Sorrow" (pub. 1842) to:

Confirmed of purpose, fearlessly prepared
For act and suffering, to the city straight
He journeyed, and forthwith his crime declared:
"And from your doom," he added, "now I wait,
Nor let it linger long, the murderer's fate."
Not ineffectual was that piteous claim:
"O welcome sentence which will end though late,"
He said, "the pangs that to my conscience came
Out of that deed. My trust, Saviour! is in thy name!"

His fate was pitied. Him in iron case
(Reader, forgive the intolerable thought)
They hung not: - no one on his form or face
Could gaze, as on a show by idlers sought;
No kindred sufferer, to his death-place brought
By lawless curiosity or chance,
When into storm the evening sky is wrought,
Upon his swinging corse an eye can glance,
And drop, as he once dropped, in miserable trance.
(ll. 649-66)

The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth ed. Stephen Gill, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975). "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," pp. 123-54; "Guilt and Sorrow," pp. 220-83.

a) Isolation and Death

1. The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth ed. Stephen Gill, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 123-54.
2. "Adventures," ll. 48-72.
3. *Ibid.*, ll. 174-80.
4. The Borderers by William Wordsworth ed. Robert Osborn, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982).
5. Borderers, p. 814.
6. *Ibid.* p. 63. (Wordsworth's essay on the character of Rivers.)
7. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
8. Wordsworth describes his own experience with the temptations of individual reason in the Prelude:

What delight!
How glorious! in self-knowledge and self rule,
To look through all the frailties of the world,
And, with a resolute mastery shaking off
The accidents of nature, time, and place,
That make up the weak being of the past,
Build social freedom on its only basis,
The freedom of the individual mind,
Which, to the blind restraints of general laws
Superior, magisterially adopts
One guide, the light of circumstances, flashed
Upon an independent intellect.

Prelude (1805-1806), X, ll. 819-30.

9. Robert Osborn comments on this line:

As The Borderers is ostensibly set in the thirteenth century, it is hardly surprising that they are "not within the sound of any clock." Wordsworth, however, commonly measures distance from civilization in terms of the distance from church clocks ...

Borderers, p. 150.

10. Cf. William Godwin Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), Book VII "Of Crime and Punishment:"

Punishment undoubtedly may change a man's behaviour.... But it cannot improve his sentiments, or lead him to a form of right proceeding but by the basest and most despicable motives. It leaves him a slave, devoted to an exclusive self-interest, and actuated by fear, the meanest of the selfish passions.

p. 267.

11. In the 1842 version, Marmaduke (Mortimer) does offer Oswald (Rivers) a companionship of sorts:

... to endure,
That is my destiny. May it be thine:
Thy office, thy ambition, be henceforth
To feed remorse, to welcome every sting
Of penitential anguish, yea with tears.
When seas and continents shall lie between us -
The wider space the better - we may find

In such a course fit links of sympathy,
An incommunicable rivalship
Maintained, for peaceful ends beyond our view.
(11. 2269-78)

But the band prefers that Oswald die on the spot.

b) The Justification of Capital Punishment

1. Cf. "To Wordsworth" in The Poems of Shelley ed. Thomas Hutchinson, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 526.

2. PW IV, pp. 135-41.

3. Sir Henry Taylor's comments offer a sympathetic contemporary view of the series and will be quoted in the notes below.

4. "This sonnet prepares the reader to sympathise with the sufferings of the culprit...." Sir Henry Taylor "Wordsworth's Sonnets" in The Quarterly Review (Dec. 1841), p. 42. In his description of Lancaster Castle in "An Unpublished Tour" (1811-12), Wordsworth had also spoken of feelings of sympathy for convicts imprisoned there, prompted by the contrast between their state and that of those who were free. But, he added, just as there is physical liberty there is also spiritual liberty, and the one is valueless without the other:

... here antiquity is fresh and renovated, and the massy, formidable, and venerable aspect of castellated architecture unites in a style worthy of the purpose to which the building is applied with the neatness, airiness and lightness which modern humanity and taste have studiously introduced. In the several Courts immediately under the eye, the Debtors and various orders of Prisoners are seen pacing to and fro, amusing themselves or pursuing their occupations in the open air. The construction of their Prison-house makes it evident that it is impossible for them to escape, and at the same time shews that no comfort or accommodation is wanting which their pitiable condition will allow. While the Spectator stands upon this eminence - the breezes passing by in freedom, and the clouds sailing at liberty over his head - the wide circumjacent region exhibits in the fields the cheerfulness and fertility, and in the Waters and Mountains the uncontrollable motions and the inexhaustible powers of Nature. The contrast is striking, and it is impossible not to be touched by a depressing sympathy with the unfortunate or guilty Captives under his eye. There is a counterpoise, however, in the majesty of the building, by its appearance and construction admirably fitted to announce and give effect to those coercive duties of civil polity which the infirmities of Men have rendered necessary. But happy, if I may be here indulged in this course, are they upon whose bodies neither the will of an arbitrary Ruler or the laws of a justly offended country have imposed any restraints. What a sorrowful state is captivity, what a blessed one is liberty! Vain exclamation, whatever may have tempted us to utter it, if we forget that liberty of body is a

worthless or dangerous possession if the mind be enslaved and that there is no true freedom but for him who is preserved by his own exertion and by the blessing of Providence from the burden of inordinate desires, sordid habits, and pining discontents, and unreasonable sorrows. Then, and in that case only, is he at large ...

Prose II, pp. 290-1. "An Unpublished Tour."

5. "... the next [sonnet] cautions [the reader] as to the limits within which his sympathies are to be restrained." Taylor, p. 42.

6. Cp. "Adventures on Salisbury Plains" (1795-c.1799), stanza 91 and "Guilt and Sorrow," stanza LXXIII. The revisions which produced this final version of the Salisbury Plain Poems took place in 1841, the year after the "Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death" were completed.

7.

In the third and fourth sonnets the reader is prepared to regard as low and effeminate the views which would estimate life and death as the most important of all sublunary considerations.

Taylor, p. 42.

8. Sonnet VIII begins:

Fit retribution by the moral code
Determined, lies beyond the State's embrace;
Yet, as she may for each peculiar case,
She plants well-measured terrors in the road
Of wrongful acts. (ll. 1-5)

Sir Henry Taylor writes:

In the eighth sonnet Mr. Wordsworth disavows the doctrine - sometimes fallaciously employed on his own side of the question - which would strive to measure out the punishments awarded by the law in proportion to the degrees of moral turpitude. Legislative enactments can be but rough and general, either in their admeasurements or in their definitions, and the jurisdiction which they create must be limited to subject-matter for which it is in their power to provide means of adequate inquiry and adjudication - that is, for crime, as distinguished both from guilt and from sin. This limitation is admitted by Mr. Wordsworth: but at the same time he does not allow that prevention of crime is the sole end of punishment. On the contrary, he considers the State as representing, guiding, and supporting the moral sense of the community, and only abstaining from giving effect to that sense by penal law in so far as it may labour under an incapacity for doing so.

Taylor, p. 45.

9.

The sixth sonnet adverts to the effects of the law in preventing the crime of murder, not merely by fear, but by horror; not only by exciting a practical apprehension of the doom of death, but by investing the

crime itself with the colouring of dark and terrible imaginations.

Taylor, p. 43.

10. Cp. Blackstone's remarks to the contrary in Section I: Causes of Death: The Law.

11.

In the fifth, the poet rejects the notion that the State has no right to exact the forfeiture of life, and repudiates a repeal of capital punishment on any such ground, as being not only of evil consequence in its effect upon crime, but as striking at all the public benefits which flow from a reverence on the part of the People for the authority of the State. This view is adduced, of course, not as in itself an argument in favour of punishment by death, but as bearing against that particular argument for its abolition which alleges a defect of authority on the part of the State.

Taylor, p. 43.

12. Cp. Wordsworth's comments in the Prelude on his education in Nature through love and fear.

13.

With the seventh sonnet Mr. Wordsworth commences the consideration of the subject in reference to religious views. That has always appeared to us to be far from a religious view, though commonly advanced under the name of religion, which objects to what is called "cutting a man off in his sins," on the ground that it is taking into the hands of man issues which ought to be left in the hands of God, and which it belongs to God alone to dispose; as if man and man's hands, and all the issues that come out of man's hands, were not equally in the disposal of God's providence, and as if man were not ordained by that providence to be the minister of God's justice upon earth. The only really religious view of the subject in our minds, is that which recognises the responsibilities of man in respect of all the agencies and issues which human judgment can reach, and teaches that man must, as he would answer before God, do all that in him lies to prevent crime, and exercise the best of his human judgment to discover wherein that all consists, being assured that, in doing his best to prevent crime upon earth, he is doing the part which belongs to him in regard to issues beyond the grave. It is manifest that the sudden death of sinners enters into the dispensations of Providence; and whenever it appears to be good for mankind, according to the arrangements of Providence, that such death should be inflicted by human ministration, it is as false a humility, as it is a false humanity and a false piety, for man to refuse to be the instrument.

But when this argument is extended to the abolition of the punishment of death even for Murder, it appears to us to be even more imperfect. Those by whom it is used consider it as over-riding all other questions, and the inquiry whether the punishment is or is not efficacious for the prevention of crime, is one which they will not entertain, because that, they say, is a question of mere human expediency, whereas the other is a point of religious obligation. Yet they

admit that the religious obligation turns upon a sinner being cut off in his sins. Now, assuming that we are all sinners, and assuming also the efficiency of the punishment for prevention - say to the extent of preventing one half of the murders which would be committed without it - it follows that the State, by sparing to cut off A who murdered B, would be the occasion of C murdering D, and E murdering F; - that is, of two persons being cut off in their sins by the hand of the murderer, instead of one by the hand of the executioner. This is an issue which human judgment can distinctly reach and take account of, and in respect of which, therefore, God has devolved upon man a responsible agency.

Taylor, pp. 44-5.

14. Wordsworth is extreme in his assertion that the abolitionists of his day would wish to prohibit all punishment for crime and not only the death penalty, but the idea is not untypical of his political imagination in later years. The poet saw as vivid possibilities long-term horrors, towards which actual present political choices might conceivably be the first step. Many of his less palatable statements on current affairs derived from his feeling of being in some senses a Cassandra.

15. "In the tenth, the religious view is resumed."
Taylor, p. 46.

16. .

In the eleventh and twelfth the alternatives of secondary punishment are adverted to - solitary imprisonment and transportation... on the ground of a moral preference in respect of the criminal, Mr. Wordsworth would inflict death rather than transportation or imprisonment for life.

Taylor, pp. 46-8.

17. Cp. PW I, pp. 312-14. "The Convict."

18.

In the thirteenth sonnet Mr. Wordsworth anticipates that a time may come when the punishment of death will be needed no longer; but he wishes that the disuse of it should grow out of the absence of the need, not be imposed by legislation. We have stated already what is our own belief, and the tenour of the evidence taken in 1836, as to the state of feeling in the country. But if we are in error, or if a change shall take place, and public sentiment shall bear strongly against punishment by death, there will be an amply sufficient, if not an undue, leaning on the part of the Judges and Secretaries of State towards a conformity with it, and Juries will in general have a sufficient reliance upon that leaning to encourage them to convict where they ought. And, on the other hand, if the consequence of a premature legislative abolition should be to multiply crimes to a fearful extent and place life in unusual jeopardy, public opinion might be thrown violently to the other side - the legislation of a weak and short-sighted benevolence might be reversed in the natural course of things by the legislation of passion, or at least by a severe legislation passionately administered - and then our last state would be worse than the

first.

Taylor, pp. 48-9.

19.

... followed by another, entitled "Apology", with the transcription of which we terminate the grave and responsible but welcome task, of bringing before the public opinions of such high authority upon such a momentous theme.

Taylor, p. 49.

20. PW IV, pp. 135-41. "Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death," Sonnet XI, ll. 2-3.

21. Cp. note 4. above.

4.) The Supernatural

The vision of "things supernatural" in Wordsworth's time lay for the most part outside the accepted orthodox pattern of death and a Christian after-life. Ghosts and spectres managed somehow to side-step the idea that death marked the end of this life; although they were technically dead they continued to impinge on ordinary mortals from a shadowy world of their own. They were, however, able to make contact with the living only at certain physical and psychological points. Graveyards at night, ruined castles in the darkness of a storm, a gibbet on some solitary barren moor - these were the kinds of places appropriate to the meeting of the two worlds. Elements of both life and death mingled in such scenes, and the guilt, fear, or grief of the living would be met with vengeance, reassurance or warning from beyond the grave.

Wordsworth made use of traditional ideas of landscapes and subjects appropriate to meetings between the living and the "undead" in his earliest poetry, but soon he began to treat the supernatural in his own way. "The Danish Boy," for example, is an experiment in which ordinary ghostly attributes are combined with unghostly sunshine and natural beauty. Then, in "The Thorn," "Peter Bell," and "Hart-Leap Well," Wordsworth sought to go beyond a reforging of literary conventions, to a reforming and purifying of his readers' imaginations instead. He became concerned less with ghosts and more with the mind's response to the unknown. In 1836, he was to say in conversation with Henry Crabb Robinson:

I have no difficulty in believing in miracles since I consider as superstition the imagined knowledge and certainty which men suppose they have as to the laws of nature.¹

Similarly, phenomena in nature that seemed supernatural did not appear to him necessarily unbelievable. He saw in them tools for educating the human imagination, casting out "superstition," and paving the way for a clearer perception of reality, life and death.

In later years, Wordsworth's approach to the supernatural once again changed. Returning to more conventional ideas of visitations in human form from beyond the grave, the poet wrote two poems about ghosts from

classical stories ("Laodamia" and "Dion"), and one about a woman of his own time who thinks she sees an angel ("The Widow on Windermere Side"). Uninspiring to modern readers as the results were, there was at least some consistency in his attitude to the visions he described. The purpose of these supernatural occurrences was, at one level at any rate, to extend the understanding of characters and readers, and to make clear aspects of the truth that had not been perceived before.

a) Supernatural Conventions

Wordsworth's first poetic ventures into the realm of the supernatural reveal a youthful delight in unquiet ghosts and chilling spectres. A single quotation from "The Vale of Esthwaite,"¹ written when he was between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, may act as a representative for a poem teeming with supernatural beings and occurrences of the most devotedly gothic variety:

Now did I love the dismal gloom
Of haunted Castle's pannel'd room
Listening the wild woods wailing song
Whistling the rattling doors among;
When as I heard a rustling sound
My haggard eyes would turn around,
Which strait a female form survey'd
Tall, and in silken vest array'd.
Her face of wan and ashy hue
And in one hand a taper blue;
Fix'd at the door she seem'd to stand
And beckoning slowly wav'd her hand.
I rose, above my head a bell
The mansion shook with solemn knell ... (ll. 240-53)

Dangerous druids and unfriendly spirits seem as fascinated by the young Wordsworth as he was by them, and more than once in the course of the poem he becomes their trembling victim.

Less egocentric is "A Ballad,"² written in 1787. The opening stanza of the poem suggests a thoroughly traditional balladic theme, the haunting of an unfaithful lover by the heart-broken ghost of the betrayed:

"And will you leave me thus alone
And dare you break your vow?
Be sure her Ghost will haunt thy bed
When Mary shall lie low." (ll. 1-4)

As death approaches, the maiden's "waft" (l. 34) or doppelganger is seen, "With wan light standing at a door, /

Or shooting o'er the green" (ll. 35-6). Though she dies at last of a broken heart there is no more mention of hauntings, however, for

... soon Religion shed
Hope's cheering ray to light her to
Her dark, her wormy bed. (ll. 30-2)

The maiden dies and is given Christian burial in a Christian churchyard, from which it does not appear likely that she subsequently stirred.

In the 1794 revisions to "An Evening Walk,"³ Wordsworth includes long-dead druids and bards in his landscape, as well as the ghosts of good men, strolling in the gloom:

So while the Spirits of the virtuous rove
Haunts once their pleasure, mountain, lake, or grove
So have I at the stillest watch of night
Seen through the trees slow-gliding forms of light,
And as from gloom to gloom their radiance led
Oft have I paused with joy and holy dread,
To hear low voices die along the glade
And echoes whispered from each hill and shade.
Which long to these good men, now cold in earth,
Shall owe their sweetest notes of morning mirth.
(A 413-26)

A similarly beneficent vision of spirits is found in "Salisbury Plain"⁴ (1793-4):

- Long bearded forms with wands uplifted shew
To vast assemblies, while each breath of night
Is hushed, the living fires that bright and slow
Rounding th' aetherial field in order go.
Then as they trace with awe their various files
All figured on the mystic plain below,
Still prelude of sweet sounds the moon beguiles
And charmed for many a league the hoary desert
smiles.(ll. 191-8)

But this benign form of the supernatural is less dominant in the poem than that which is evil and horrifying, appropriate to the barren, storm-beaten setting and the solitary, fear-ridden man. Seeking shelter from the wild night, Wordsworth's character approaches the ruins of Stonehenge, only to be driven back by "A voice as from a tomb" (l. 81):

"Oh from that mountain-pile avert thy face
Whate'er betide at this tremendous hour.
To hell's most cursed sprites the baleful place
Belongs, upreared by their magic power.
... oft at dead of night, when dreadful fire
Reveals that powerful circle's reddening stones,
'Mid priests and spectres grim and idols dire,
Far heard the great flame utters human groans

... warrior spectres of gigantic bones,
Forth-issuing from a thousand rifted tombs,
Wheel on their fiery steeds amid the infernal glooms."
(ll. 82-5, 91-4, 97-9)⁵

This spectral warning serves little practical purpose in the poem, but the incident must have appeared to the young Wordsworth as a natural adjunct to the landscape he had described and in which his character had been placed.

"The Danish Boy"⁶ was written in 1798, after the poet had already developed other less traditional approaches to the supernatural. In this poem, Wordsworth has taken a number of accepted ghostly conventions and combined them with a vision of warm sunlight, sweet song and green grass, to produce a very individual effect.

Wordsworth did not appear to be completely satisfied with his poem. He called it "A Fragment,"⁷ "entirely a fancy,"⁸ and "intended as a prelude to a ballad poem never written."⁹ In a note appended to the poem in 1827, Wordsworth went into more detail about this unwritten ballad:

These stanzas were designed to introduce a Ballad upon the Story of a Danish Prince who fled from Battle, and, for the sake of the valuables about him was murdered by the Inhabitant of a Cottage in which he had taken refuge. The House fell under a curse, and the Spirit of the Youth, it was believed, haunted the Valley where the crime had been committed.¹⁰

The ballad itself appears to have been conceived along traditional lines, with a curse and haunting falling in vengeance on the place of a great crime. In "The Danish Boy," however, these conventional elements are only uneasily visible under a surface of apparent serenity and natural beauty.

The setting is idyllic:

Between two sister moorland rills
There is a spot that seems to lie
Sacred to flowerets of the hills,
And sacred to the sky. (ll. 1-4)

The dell is "lovely" (l. 22), a "flowery cove" (l. 50); and the ghost who haunts it is not ghastly or horrible, but also "lovely" (l. 49), "blest / And happy" (ll. 49-50), with a fresh and spring-like beauty:

A Spirit of noon-day is he;
Yet seems a form of flesh and blood....
A regal vest of fur he wears,
In colour like a raven's wing;

It fears not rain, nor wind, nor dew;
But in the storm 'tis fresh and blue
As budding pines in spring;
His helmet has a vernal grace,
Fresh as the bloom upon his face. (ll. 23-4, 27-33)

Violence, whether natural or human, clings around the description of the boy but seems unable to touch him directly: he is "A thing no storm can e'er destroy" (l. 10); he sits beside a "tempest stricken tree" (l. 6), a "corner-stone by lightning cut" (l. 7), a ruined hut, and two mysteriously severed sods, and yet remains happy and singing:

There sits he; in his face you spy
No trace of a ferocious air,
Nor ever was a cloudless sky
So steady or so fair....
From bloody deeds his thoughts are far. (ll. 45-8, 51)

It is discomfiting, however, that in spite of the fact that the boy's song is pleasing to flocks and mountain-ponies on distant hills, no bird or beast or even insect will enter the dell in which he sits, whether to eat or rest or to make a home. And why are not the turfs on the place like a grave near the blasted tree affected by the passage of time and the ministry of weather? Neither "heat, nor cold, nor rain, nor wind ... / Nor sun, nor earth, nor sky" (ll. 44/5, 1800 version)¹¹ can bind them together and heal their severing. The presence of the Danish Boy seems to have excluded the processes of time from the dell, and this can appear either as a wonderful preservation of beauty, or as a sinister rejection of natural covering-over and renewal.

The lovely Danish Boy is blest
And happy in his flowery cove;
From bloody deeds his thoughts are far;
And yet he warbles songs of war,
That seem like songs of love,
For calm and gentle is his mien;
Like a dead Boy he is serene. (ll. 49-55)

Is there an irony in these lines? The Danish Boy is dead; why does the poet describe him as like a dead boy? The serenity of the dead was thought to lie in having left behind the troubles and conflicts of this life, either for the peace of heaven or of a quiet sleep. Wordsworth's private vision of the happy dead at this time leaned towards the thought of peaceful sleep, enhanced by a

warming subconscious awareness of the presence of friends, pleasant memories, and the continuing life of Nature.¹² The Danish Boy seems as serene as if he had achieved this state, yet the processes of Nature do not come near him, and monuments to conflict and crime are his only companions. He is as serene as if he had left behind mortal cruelty and destruction, yet emblems of them are part of his daily surroundings. Is his sweet enjoyment of this sunny yet frozen valley altogether innocent? Is it possible that the pleasures of vengeance are his, and that he enjoys the fact that time cannot heal what the curse has done? Wordsworth does not tell us. However, by leaving his readers unsure as to whether they have been shown a vision of child-like beauty and unending charm, or of a sinister sadistic supernaturalism, the poet achieves a far more subtly troubling effect than could his exclusively gothic contemporaries.

Nevertheless, Wordsworth was not primarily concerned in his poetry with gratuitously stirring up his readers' feelings. More often his aim was to educate, and in three poems written between 1798 and 1800, "The Thorn," "Peter Bell," and "Hart-Leap Well," the poet proposed to educate his readers' imaginations, by means of the supernatural.

b) The Education of the Imagination

In 1817, Coleridge commented on the structure of the Lyrical Ballads in Biographia Literaria. Although not all of these three poems appeared in the Lyrical Ballads, his remarks are pertinent to Wordsworth's approach to the supernatural in them.

Two classes of poem had been planned:

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.... 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.

... it was agreed that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at

least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analagous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.¹

Despite Coleridge's categories of intention, divided between himself and William, most of what he says in these passages may be applied to Wordsworth's attempts in "The Thorn," "Peter Bell," and "Hart-Leap Well." In these poems, the poet makes use of ordinary people met with in ordinary life, such as sea-captains, village women, shepherds, travelling potters. He places them in situations that are suggestive of the supernatural, and portrays, through them, "such emotions as would naturally accompany such situations." But his purpose in doing so is to purify both their vision and his readers', to strip away "the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude," and to educate the imagination to the point where it can perceive the supernatural as natural, and the natural as if it were supernatural.

One of Wordsworth's stated purposes in writing "The Thorn" was "to exhibit some of the general laws by which superstition acts upon the mind."² The narrator of the poem, a retired sea-captain, is an excellent subject for such an exploration, and in a note to the piece Wordsworth describes the ways in which the minds of such men may be expected to move:

Superstitious men are almost always men of slow faculties and deep feelings; their minds are not loose, but adhesive....

It was my wish in this poem to show the manner in which such men cleave to the same ideas; and to follow the turns of passion, always different, yet not palpably different, by which their conversation is swayed.³

Wordsworth reveals the workings of the narrator's mind through his relationship to the second voice in the poem.

This second voice responds to the various discrete elements of the sea-captain's story⁴ by trying to discover their links with one another, like the poet of Wordsworth's definition who "carr[ies] everywhere with him relationship."⁵ The role of the second voice is to put again and again a single question: "What is the connection between Martha Ray and her mountain-top setting?", a question from which the narrator, in "the turns of passion," repeatedly shies. It is this pattern of question and evasion on which the poem is based.

Like the original impetus for writing the poem - Wordsworth's sudden vision of a thorn-tree in a storm⁶ - the narrator's collection and recitation of information about Martha Ray was first prompted by an encounter with her in a storm. The habitual tenor of his mind is established in his introduction to the story of this meeting. He says to his listener:

"But that she goes to this old Thorn,
The Thorn which I described to you,
And there sits in a scarlet cloak,
I will be sworn is true.
For one day with my telescope,
To view the ocean wide and bright,
When to this country first I came,
Ere I had heard of Martha's name,
I climbed the mountain's height: - " (ll. 166-74)

Time is approached in an orderly fashion, events in the past being neatly placed in relation to each other, according to precedence; the evidence of the narrator's senses, by which "he will be sworn," are garnered in an orderly, scientific way. Out of Nature's immensity, imaged in the great sweep of "ocean wide and bright" and the height of a mountain, the old sailor's concern is with distant discrete human objects, ships and boats, perceived through a medium which subdivides Nature into humanly manageable forms. A storm which suddenly overwhelms him, although also achieving a narrowing of vision for him ("I could see / No object higher than my knee" ll. 175-6), directs and focuses his attention on something other than distant freighters. He is swept away by the wind, running "Head-foremost, through the driving rain" (l. 183), part of a wild uncontrollable power, and he seeks for something fixed and steady to place between himself and the elements.

What he finds is a different kind of stasis altogether: Martha Ray, "seated on the ground" (l. 187). She is utterly exposed to the elements, unprotected, without "screen [or] fence" (l. 178), and in her face the narrator sees a grief as unmediated and exposed as is her body. It is too much for him, and he turns away.

"I did not speak - I saw her face:
Her face! - It was enough for me;
I turned about and heard her cry,
'Oh misery! oh misery!'" (ll. 188-91)

In this incident we see the basic pattern of the narrator's response acted out: the building up of ordinary details of time and place around a strange central fact from which he shrinks.

The poem opens with the narrator's description of a setting which troubles him by the way in which it disturbs his habitual orderly vision of things. He begins:

"There is a Thorn - it looks so old,
In truth, you'd find it hard to say
How it could ever have been young,
It looks so old and grey.
Not higher than a two years' child
It stands erect, this aged Thorn;
No leaves it has, no prickly points;
It is a mass of knotted joints,
A wretched thing forlorn.
It stands erect, and like a stone
With lichens it is overgrown." (ll. 1-11)

The due course of linear time, of youth growing naturally into age, seems thwarted or confused when applied to the Thorn. Extreme age and extreme youth are uneasily superimposed in the narrator's description, as are images of defencelessness and indestructability. The comparison of the Thorn to "a two years' child" anticipates the infant's grave in stanza V and the dispute about the fate of Martha Ray's baby, but it is also suggestive of the vulnerability of the tree, unprotected by leaves or thorns or anything in the landscape around it. At the same time, however, the little tree is vulnerable through sheer age. Instead of being covered with "prickly points" which would protect it by inflicting pain outwards on its enemies, the Thorn is described as "a mass of knotted joints," an arthritic image suggestive of a debilitating inward pain. Yet the Thorn continues to survive, and "stand erect" as if it existed outside the realm of decay as well as growth,

"like a stone." By the tree is an equally disturbing pool. In the original version of the poem, the narrator struggles to normalize the pond by measuring it, along with the other physical dimensions of the scene.⁷ But he is unable to escape the fact that the little pool "of compass small, and bare / To thirsty sun and parching air" (ll. 32-3), is like the Thorn in continuing to exist in spite of logic or the normal processes of time and season.

From these images of exposure and endurance, the narrator's mind turns with evident relief to the picture of the little mound. His delight in the "beauteous heap" (l. 36), the "fresh and lovely sight" (l. 35), is expressed in a series of genteel phrases which lull the reader by their obvious sincerity: "hand of lady fair" (l. 41), "the darlings of the eye" (l. 43), "Ah me! what lovely tints" (l. 45). It is not until the last lines of stanza V, when the burial imagery from line 22 reappears, that the reader realizes that "This heap of earth" (l. 49) is covered by the same mosses that threaten to drag down the little tree. The comparison of the mossy mound to an infant's grave is natural, considering the tale of Martha Ray and her baby which the narrator is about to tell. At the same time, however, the image of a child, covered over and protected by "a beauteous heap" (l. 36) of moss, is in stark contrast to the exposed child-like Thorn, besieged by "heavy tufts of moss" (l. 14) which seek to bury a tree that refuses to go under. The Thorn and the little hill, though linked by the moss and the tale the narrator is about to tell, have each a very different significance.

Into this setting is introduced Martha Ray. The narrator describes her as exposed to the same forces that beat against the Thorn and the pond. She makes no attempt to protect herself or to escape, but neither is she overwhelmed by such physical hardship. Instead she carries on, day and night, in all weathers, repeating her lament: "Oh misery! oh misery! / Oh woe is me, oh misery!" (ll. 65-6, etc.). The second voice asks:

"Now wherefore, thus, by day and night,
In rain, in tempest, and in snow,
Thus to the dreary mountain-top
Does this poor Woman go?
And why sits she beside the Thorn
When the blue daylight's in the sky

Or when the whirlwind's on the hill,
Or frosty air is keen and still,
And wherefore does she cry? -
O wherefore? wherefore? tell me why
Does she repeat that doleful cry?" (ll. 78-88)

To which the narrator replies: "I cannot tell" (l. 89). He describes again the elements of the mountain setting and urges his listener to visit the site, but only when Martha is not there.⁸ The second voice seeks again the connection between the woman and the scene:

"But wherefore to the mountain-top
Can this unhappy Woman go,
Whatever star is in the skies,
Whatever wind may blow?" (ll. 100-103);

and again the narrator cannot say.⁹ What the narrator is able to say, however, is what other people think the connection is, and here the conflict between ideas of exposure and containment, timelessness and time, once again becomes evident.

From conversation with villagers and neighbours, the narrator has gathered the few details of Martha's story. In telling the tale, the old man makes use of phrases expressing an orderly, deliberate progression of time and events: "Full twenty years are past and gone" (l. 104); "And they had fixed the wedding day, / The morning that must wed them both" (ll. 111-12); "full six months after this" (l. 122); "her time drew near" (l. 142). There is even a ponderous inevitability about the chain of events he describes, as if only the end of the movement of time in death could have broken the sequence: the narrator does not exclaim: "If only Stephen had been faithful!" but instead: "O guilty Father - would that death / Had saved him from that breach of faith!" (ll. 131-2). And indeed the processes of time, as the child grew in Martha's womb, were plain to "any eye" (l. 127). Yet on another level she seems to have stepped outside the progression of events in which the narrator would present her, at the moment of Stephen's betrayal:

"Poor Martha! on that woeful day
A pang of pitiless dismay
Into her soul was sent;
A fire was kindled in her breast,
Which might not burn itself to rest." (ll. 117-21)

The child is her last link to the plane of linear time and

human relationship; its birth and death break the final tie, and from that point she seems to have entered a realm of timeless grief and solitude.

Did Martha begin going to the mountain-top to escape village stares and whispers? If so,

"What could she seek? - or wish to hide?
Her state to any eye was plain;
She was with child, and she was mad." (ll. 126-8)

The open mountain was no place to hide her condition. Was she then in process of selling her soul to the devil or meeting with the unquiet dead?

"... all that winter, when at night
The wind blew from the mountain-peak,
'Twas worth your while, though in the dark,
The churchyard path to seek:
For many a time and oft were heard
Cries coming from the mountain head:
Some plainly living voices were;
And others, I've heard many swear,
Were voices of the dead." (ll. 155-63)

In the churchyard, death is contained and sanctified, marking a definite and decent end to the progression of human chronology. The wild mountain-top offers no such securities, particularly on a dark winter's night. But the narrator, uneasy as he is, cannot accept that Martha is in league with spectres. He has seen her himself, he tells his listener, years after her betrayal, on the bare mountain to which she still climbs. Again the second voice asks:

"But what's the Thorn? and what the pond?
And what the hill of moss to her?
And what the creeping breeze that comes
The little pond to stir?" (ll. 199-202);

and again the old man replies: "I cannot tell."

There are other village theories which hold that Martha murdered her baby there on the mountain-side, hanging it on the Thorn, or drowning it in the pond, or stabbing it and sprinkling its blood over the moss, and then covering over her crime by burying its body under the heap of earth. "Some say" (l. 214) that if you look into the pond the shape of a baby can be seen, and if you were to dig in the mossy hill a baby's bones would be revealed. The setting has so far conspired to keep covered what is hidden, however: the "creeping breeze" (l. 201) blurs over the little pool, and the mosses and grasses stir and shake

"full fifty yards around" (l. 228) to warn away sleuthful villagers with spades. Nothing can be proved and, indeed, the narrator does not believe that Martha could have "kill[ed] an new-born infant thus" (l. 212). The tales of shaking grass and shadows leave him troubled and unsure; uneasily he returns to that which is knowable and known:

"I cannot tell how this may be,
But plain it is the Thorn is bound
With heavy tufts of moss that strive
To drag it to the ground;
And this I know, full many a time,
When she was on the mountain high,
By day, and in the silent night,
When all the stars shone clear and bright,
That I have heard her cry,
Oh misery! oh misery!
Oh woe is me! oh misery!" (ll. 232-42)

In spite of the second voice's prodding, the narrator's understanding at the end of the poem has not progressed beyond what it was at the beginning. The mountain setting speaks to him of what he does not want to know, about Martha and about his response to her. At the same time, however, he has been disqualified for accepting the villagers' understanding of her, their categories of madwoman, criminal, witch, by his face-to-face human encounter with her. He cannot unsee what he saw, but he also cannot accept its implications. The old man is being asked to acknowledge a power of feeling in Martha which unbearably extends the limits of his orderly, time-bound, material understanding. Faced with a spot-of-timelessness, like the boy Wordsworth grasping at a wall, he turns away in search of measurable manageable orderly facts to steady himself against the assault. Like the mosses and the parching wind he would align himself with the forces of linear time in their desire to cover over, bury, and transmute; the mosses that have succeeded in covering over "the infant's grave" seem to him beautiful, reassuring and proper. It is the continued existence of the Thorn and the pool which horrifies him, as does Martha's unending moment of grief.¹⁰ He wants all these things to die, to be overtaken by time, and to end. Having looked into Martha's face, however, he knows that she lives only in her grief, and subconsciously he senses that to wish that grief to end is to wish her death. The elements of his understanding

must not be brought together, yet he is unable to drop the subject. As Wordsworth suggests, his mind is ponderous and "adhesive;" he cannot forget and he cannot assimilate, and so he must go over and over the same ideas, following "the turns of passion."

"The turns of passion" are also the subject of the poem "Peter Bell."¹¹ There is a great difference in tone between it and "The Thorn," however, a difference which may be explained in part by a shift of emphasis in the poet's purposes. In both poems, Wordsworth is concerned with the education of his hero, but here, more directly, he also wishes to engage and purify his readers' imaginations with regard to the supernatural. Somewhat ponderously, he seeks to joke with them about their preference for "unnatural" stimulation by presenting a thoroughly unpleasant protagonist acting under the same prejudices.

In the Prologue, the poet states his position:

Long have I loved what I behold,
The night that calms, the day that cheers;
The common growth of mother-earth
Suffices me - her tears, her mirth,
Her humblest mirth and tears.

The dragon's wing, the magic ring,
I shall not covet for my dower,
If I along that lowly way
With sympathetic heart may stray,
And with a soul of power.

These given, what more need I desire
To stir, to soothe, or elevate?
What nobler marvels than the mind
May in life's daily prospect find,
May find or there create? (ll. 131-45)

That Peter does not share the poet's views is made plain in the description of him in the early stanzas of Part First:

He roved among the vales and streams,
In the green wood and hollow dell;
They were his dwellings night and day, -
But Nature ne'er could find the way
Into the heart of Peter Bell.

In vain, through every changeful year,
Did Nature lead him as before;
A primrose by a river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more. (ll. 241-50)

In an age that frequently equated sensibility and virtue, Wordsworth was not suggesting anything extraordinary in drawing a connection between Peter's insensibility and his

wickedness. Having described the ecstasies some can feel at the sight of a lovely landscape, the poet goes on to say:

With Peter Bell, I need not tell
That this had never been the case;
He was a Carl as wild and rude
As ever hue-and-cry pursued,
As ever ran a felon's race. (ll. 271-5)

But Wordsworth adds two other dimensions to this simple equation. One is that Peter's relationship to Nature is a condition of pitiable poverty:

As well might Peter, in the Fleet,
Have been fast bound, a begging debtor; -
He travelled here, he travelled there; -
But not a value of a hair
Was heart or head the better. (ll. 236-40)

The other is that Peter's state is not simply the product of negation: in spite of his insensibility to her beneficent influences, Nature has not been to him "as is a landscape to a blind man's eye:"¹²

Though Nature could not touch his heart
By lovely forms, or silent weather,
And tender sounds, yet you might see
At once that Peter Bell and she
Had often been together.

A savage wildness round him hung
As of a dweller out of doors;
In his whole figure and his mien
A savage character was seen
Of mountains and of dreary moors.

To all the unshaped half-human thoughts
Which solitary Nature feeds
'Mid summer storms or winter's ice,
Had Peter joined whatever vice
The cruel city breeds. (ll. 286-300)

To Wordsworth, the relationship between the natural and the human is rarely neutral or passive. Like the Georgian youth in the poem "Ruth,"¹³ Peter's association with Nature has not simply failed to "lead[] to love of mankind,"¹⁴ but has produced in him a deepened inability to perceive with truth other humans or himself at all. Peter's thoughts are "unshaped" and "half-human," and his life is ruled by a particular type of unreality. This is the background of the character Wordsworth has chosen in order to study the effects of "supernatural" stimulation.

The basis of the story is a journey through a moonlit landscape, a setting which for Wordsworth had always held

particular imaginative power but which, for different reasons, was equally a favourite of writers on the supernatural. As Peter moves through this setting in Part First, the poet unobtrusively offers descriptions presenting his own view of what surrounds his hero: the beauty of a November night, the sky, moon and murmuring river, the lovely green plot. At the same time, Wordsworth also offers hints of potential spookiness lurking in the background, such as the ominous shadows in the quarry, or the ass' eery immobility. Peter at first pays no heed to his surroundings, but gradually he begins to be the prey of anxieties and qualms. His violence against the strange animal increases, as does the tension in the atmosphere and in the reader. A crisis occurs when the ass suddenly starts to bray:

What is there now in Peter's heart!
Or whence the might of this strange sound?
The moon uneasy looked and dimmer,
The broad blue heavens appeared to glimmer,
And the rocks staggered all around - (ll. 481-5);

but Peter's reaction, after the first fright, is to rearrange himself so as to deceive any human observation. Then, however, he is confronted with an unnamed "startling sight" (l. 499) beneath the surface of the pool of water:

Is it the moon's distorted face?
The ghost-like image of a cloud?
Is it a gallows there portrayed?
Is Peter of himself afraid?
Is it a coffin, - or a shroud? (ll. 501-5)

The poet plays on his readers' expectations, suggesting idols, imps, wicked fairies and scenes from hell, while Peter's reactions imitate the terror of countless heroes and heroines faced with the supernatural in contemporary tales:

Ah, well-a-day for Peter Bell!
He will be turned to iron soon,
Meet Statue for the court of Fear!
His hat is up - and every hair
Bristles, and whitens in the moon!
- He looks, he ponders, looks again;
He sees a motion - hears a groan;
His eyes will burst - his heart will break -
He gives a loud and frightful shriek,
And drops, a senseless weight, as if his life were
flown! (ll. 521-30)

Following dramatic convention, Wordsworth ends Part First

there.

After such a build-up, it is an anti-climax in Part Second to learn that what Peter saw in the water was not preternatural at all, only the body of a drowned man, "one / In his last sleep securely bound!" (ll. 551-2). Peter has been temporarily awed by his fright, however, and even though the dead man is powerless to harm him and would normally seem no concern of his, when the ass signs to him that he should mount and ride away, the Potter submits:

"I'll go, I'll go, what e'er betide
He to his home my way will guide
The cottage of this drowned man" (ll. 593-5)

The journey that ensues is punctuated by sights and sound which Peter continues to interpret as supernatural. A cry is heard, which causes "little Bess" in Wordsworth's circle of listeners to "tremble and look grave" (l. 627) with fright. The poet explains that it is a human cry, that of the dead man's son who seeks him through the night. Like the dead man himself, the boy is a legitimate object of pity and concern, but can seem anticlimactic to an imagination keyed up to other-worldly horrors. Peter, unlike Bess or the reader, does not learn who - or what - has made the cry, and hears in it a supernatural warning.

It wrought in him conviction strange;
A faith that, for the dead man's sake
And this poor slave [the ass] who loved him well,
Vengeance upon his head will fall,
Some visitation worse than all
Which ever till this night befell....

That unintelligible cry
Hath left him high in preparation, -
Convinced that he, or soon or late,
This very night will meet his fate -
And so he sits in expectation! (ll. 660-5, 691-5)

Strange shapes in the rocks which change as Peter and the ass move by them, a leaf blown by the wind,¹⁵ drops of blood from the animal's wound dripping in the road - these are all natural events, but to Peter in his state of nervous apprehension, they are fraught with dire significance. Sometimes he rallies, and achieves with relief habitual perceptions, but soon returns to the thought of the drowned man and the ass and his own ominous sense of connection to them. And so the poet leaves him at the end of Part Second.

In Part Third, the poet draws the reader more fully into his confidence, so that together they may watch the final stages of Peter's education. In the Prologue he had said:

A potent wand doth Sorrow wield;
What spell so strong as guilty Fear!
Repentance is a tender Sprite;
If aught on earth have heavenly might,
'Tis lodged within her silent tear. (ll. 146-50)

Now he elaborates on that earlier statement, making plain what type of supernaturalism is under consideration in the poem. He speaks of "Spirits of the Mind!" (l. 783) and their mode of operation on the material world:

Dread Spirits! to torment the good
Why wander from your course so far,
Disordering colour, form, and stature!
- Let good men feel the soul of nature,
And see things as they are.

I know you, potent Spirits! well,
How, with the feeling and the sense,
Playing, ye govern foes or friends,
Yok'd to your will, for fearful ends -
And this I speak in reverence!

But might I give advice to you,
Whom in my fear I love so well;
From men of pensive virtue go,
Dread Beings! and your empire show
On hearts like that of Peter Bell. (ll. 761-75)

Peter is a recalcitrant subject. Eager to avoid the pains of a newly-awakened conscience, he employs sophistry ("This poor man never, but for me, / Could have had Christian burial" ll. 809-10), cynicism ("No doubt the devil in me wrought; / I'm not the man who would have thought / An Ass like this was worth the stealing!" ll. 813-15), and "spiteful mirth" (l. 833) to rally and reinforce his usual state of mind. But "the Spirits" will not let him be. The sound of miners blasting underground presents itself to him as a forewarning that the earth might at any moment open to engulf him because of his wickedness. The sight of a ruined chapel reminds him of his own bigamy; a furze bush brings before his eyes an image of the dying Highland girl he had betrayed; the curses and shouts from a wayside inn recall the hard-hearted joys and vices of his life.

... turned adrift into the past,
He finds no solace in his course;
Like planet-stricken men of yore,

He trembles, smitten to the core
By strong compunction and remorse. (ll. 881-5)

The voice of a preacher reaches him in the midst of his heightened emotion, and the call to repentance and the promise of forgiveness seem to Peter a direct message to himself. He breaks down and cries "Sweet tears of hope and tenderness" (l. 961).

From his normal state of hard and self-centred imperception, Peter has moved through self-centred superstitious dread to a softened, but still self-centred remorse. The final stage for Peter comes when the ass brings him at last to the dead man's cottage, where he must face the hopes and sorrows of others. In his present sensitized state, he has no barriers left to place between himself and the family's grief; he cannot help but perceive them vividly.

And now is Peter taught to feel
That man's heart is a holy thing;
And Nature, through a world of death,
Breathes into him a second breath,
More searching than the breath of spring.

(ll. 1071-5)

The "world of death" refers not only to the tragedy of the father's drowning, but also to the state of Peter's spirit in the years leading up to this night. Wordsworth speaks in the Prelude of the imperception produced by "the laws of vulgar sense" which

... substitute a universe of death,
The falsest of all worlds, in place of that
Which is divine and true.¹⁶

This had been the habit of Peter's life for years, a blind reliance on the material, as far as it affected his own self-interest, and no further. As a result, he had been moving about in "the falsest of all worlds," and only by the experiences of that night had he begun to perceive the truth. "Imagination teaching truth"¹⁷ might be the sub-title of this poem. It was necessary for Peter to progress beyond a vision that excluded the spiritual, but it was also important that he go beyond one which was only attuned to sensational supernaturalism. He must become engaged in common reality to become truly alive. Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* had travelled halfway round the world, meeting with strange sights and other-worldly horrors, to achieve an understanding of life's inter-

relationships. The "Spirits of the Mind" had taken Peter on a much shorter journey, through a much more ordinary landscape, but the result was in many ways the same. The last joke in the poem, however, may have been directed at Coleridge after all. Wordsworth's mental traveller is only an ordinary man, who emerges from his education without preternatural powers or hypnotic eyes, a common mortal who

Forsook his crimes, repressed his folly,
And, after ten months' melancholy,
Became a good and honest man. (ll. 1133-5)

The poem laughs at the desire for supernatural wonders, supernal or infernal, when the reclamation of a single human heart to common reality is wonder enough.

In "Hart-Leap Well,"¹⁸ Wordsworth approaches the supernatural with more apparent subtlety. There is, for example, a strange, eery quality to Wordsworth's description of the hunt of the Hart. As in a dream, the landscape across which Sir Walter rides, first "With the slow motion of a summer's cloud" (l. 2), then fast as "a falcon flies" (l. 11), seems recalcitrant and odd. Companions and dogs have dropped away, and although Sir Walter shouts and halloos, he is surrounded by "a doleful silence in the air" (l. 12). He is alone:

A rout this morning left Sir Walter's Hall,
That as they galloped made the echoes roar;
But horse and man are vanished, one and all;
Such race, I think, was never seen before....

Where is the throng, the tumult of the race?
The bugles that so joyfully were blown?
- This chase it looks not like an earthly chase;
Sir Walter and the Hart are left alone.

(ll. 13-16, 25-8)

The first mention of the Hart seems ominous, as if it were Sir Walter and not the animal that is in danger. But the poet's omission of the last struggle between them, at the end of which the Hart is dead, initially reassures the reader.

The Knight himself feels no uneasiness: if he is restless, it is only with joy at the sight of the dead body. Like the boy in "Nutting," Sir Walter's response to the Hart's destruction is luxuriating and lascivious. In order to consolidate and repeat his luscious feelings, his

thoughts turn at once to plans for the building of "a pleasure-house" (l. 57) on the spot, a place for, among other things, sexual conquest and illicit love. It is to be "A place of love for damsels that are coy" (l. 60),

"And in the summer-time when days are long,
I will come hither with my Paramour;
And with the dancers and the minstrel's song
We will make merry in that pleasant bower."
(ll. 69-72)

Twice Wordsworth describes him as "lean[ing] against a thorn" (ll. 33, 37), and "gaz[ing] upon the spoil with silent joy" (l. 36). The thorn is traditionally the symbol of love's cruelty; to lean against the thorn, an emblem of suffering. There is no awareness on Sir Walter's part that he is parodying pain, just as he had shown no awareness of anything untoward in the silence and strangeness around him during the chase; as unconscious is his redesigning of the scene before him now. Each sign of the Hart's last desperate moments of life - the three hoof-prints on the hill, the spring of water that still trembles to the breath of its dying groan, the dell itself - rapidly loses any significance in relation to the animal and is transmuted into an extension of the Knight's vision of pleasure. The spring is to be contained in "A cup of stone" (l. 82); the hoof-marks are to be covered over with stone pillars; a mansion to last "Till the [stony] foundations of the mountains fail" (l. 73) is to be erected in the dell. It is not surprising that, as Sir Walter turns away to begin these projects, the Hart is described by the poet as "stone-dead:"

Then home he went, and left the Hart, stone-dead,
With breathless nostrils stretched above the spring.
- Soon did the Knight perform what he had said;
And far and wide the fame thereof did ring.
(ll. 77-80)

Everything occurs as Sir Walter wishes, but at the close of the First Part of the poem, Wordsworth turns his back on the Knight in a stanza which is the counterpart in tone and structure to that in which Sir Walter's dismissal of the Hart is described:

The Knight, Sir Walter, died in course of time,
And his bones lie in his paternal vale, -
But there is matter for a second rhyme,
And I to this would add another tale. (ll. 93-6)

"Part Second" is concerned with the aftermath of Sir

Walter's deed, as the poet finds it many years later. The eeriness that had moved across the landscape with the Knight has settled on the dell and deepened there, and the remainder of the poem offers interpretations of what is strange in the scene. The poet states his position in the opening stanza:

The moving accident is not my trade;
To freeze the blood I have no ready arts:
'Tis my delight, alone in summer shade,
To pipe a simple song for thinking hearts.

(ll. 97-100)

The poet wishes to make clear that the reader need not expect either sentimentality or gothic horror out of what is to follow, but only an ungarnished account. The circumstantial detail of his description - "As I from Hawes to Richmond did repair" (l. 101); "Three aspens at three corners of a square" (l. 103); "one not four yards distant, near a well" (l. 104) - shows Wordsworth's desire to ground his interpretation in common reality, even to the point of the ploddingly matter-of-fact. He describes what he sees carefully and unsensationally. Sir Walter's marks on the landscape have decayed to the point where a stranger would only just think, "Here in old time the hand of man hath been" (l. 112). The natural elements are dreary and lifeless: branchless, leafless trees; dry grass;

I looked upon the hill both far and near,
More doleful place did never eye survey;
It seemed as if the spring-time came not here,
And Nature here were willing to decay. (ll. 113-16)

Before we come to the poet's interpretation of what he sees, however, a grey-haired Shepherd is introduced. While he is speaking, the Shepherd identifies himself, by a phrase here and there,¹⁹ and by the tone of his conversation, with Wordsworth's intended audience of "thinking hearts." It is he who tells the poet about the chase, and other details of the place which he might otherwise not have known: that no animal will drink from Sir Walter's cup of stone, for example, or that sometimes at night a groan rises from the water of the spring. What is significant, however, is the way in which he speaks of the Hart. He rejects the idea that a human murder and a post-mortal desire for human vengeance haunts the place, and in talking about the Hart he does not present it only

as an object of human lusts. The Shepherd seems to enter into the spirit of an animal existence, in which the terms of experience and emotion are deep, simple, and inarticulate. Birth and death, water, peace and rest, fear, the bonds between parent and child, instinctive patterns of motion and place - all these things and others "we cannot tell" (l. 146) played a part in the richness of the Hart's life, a richness which Sir Walter had killed and paved over. To the Shepherd it seems that "the spot is curst" (l. 124) in memory of "that unhappy Hart" (l. 140), and that it will remain so until every sign of the Knight has disappeared: the trees of his arbour, his pillars, and his fountain of stone.

At first it might seem that there is little for the poet to add to this: the Shepherd has indicted Sir Walter simply by his imaginative perception of reality. The poet's unfortunate tone of condescension - "Grey-headed Shepherd, thou hast spoken well" (l. 160); "One lesson, Shepherd, let us two divide" (l. 177) - is irritating to modern ears, and the sudden cluttering of the story with personified "Beings" and "Natures" seems pompous and redundant when compared to the old man's simple tale. The closing lesson ("Never to blend our pleasure or our pride / With sorrow of the meanest thing that feels." ll. 179-80), like the moral stanza in "The Ancient Mariner",²⁰ merely spells out what had already been implied in the contrast between Sir Walter's and the Shepherd's responses to the Hart. What the poet does add, however, is an explicit sense of purpose in the supernatural qualities of the scene before them. The dreariness and barrenness of the landscape are not only passive expressions of "sympathy divine" (l. 164), in grief for the fallen beast, but are meant also to serve in the gradual educating of the human heart.

It is worth considering lines written at about this time in "Home at Grasmere," in which the poet speaks of the sudden influx of feeling which he and Dorothy had experienced in the face of the dreariness of this dell:

And when the trance
Came to us, as we stood by Hart-Leap Well -
The intimation of the milder day

Which is to come, the fairer world than this -
 And raised us up, dejected as we were
 Among the records of that doleful place
 By sorrow for the hunted beast that there
 Had yielded up his breath, the awful trance -
 The Vision of humanity and of God
 The Mourner, God the Sufferer, when the heart
 Of his poor Creatures suffers wrongfully -
 Both in the sadness and the joy we found
 A promise and an earnest that we twain,
 A pair seceding from the common world,
 Might in that hallowed spot to which our steps
 Were tending, in that individual nook,
 Might even thus early for ourselves secure,
 And in the midst of these unhappy times,
 A portion of the blessedness which love
 And knowledge will, we trust, hereafter give
 To all the Vales of earth and all mankind,
 (MS. B, ll. 236-56)²¹

"Love and knowledge" are the foundations of true perception, and Wordsworth here speaks the language of a millenarianism based on a purified human imagination, gradually to come into its own, full of power, in relationship with Nature, to generate good.

In "Hart-Leap Well," the poet writes of Sir Walter's pillars, arbour and fountain:

She [Nature] leaves these objects to a slow decay,
 That what we are, and have been, may be known;
 But at the coming of a milder day
 These monuments shall all be overgrown. (ll. 173-6)

What may appear to be supernatural or unnatural, such as the strangely slow decay of Sir Walter's works, the air of gloom over the dell, or the perversion of ordinary seasonal renewal in the landscape, is in fact part of Nature's "ministry,"²² by which she seeks to make known to the human imagination its short-comings and its potential. Sir Walter perceived nothing; the grey-haired Shepherd in his wisdom, and Dorothy and William in their "blessedness" begin to see; and in time to come, "love and knowledge" will prevail, supernatural "intervention"²³ will no longer be needed, and "These monuments [to blindness] shall all be overgrown."

Nature as a living, dynamic power is central to these poems, but as time passed, the emphasis on its numinous qualities in Wordsworth's writing began to die away, and other forms of the supernatural took its place.

c) Patrician Ghosts and Christian Angels

In later years, Wordsworth's poetic approach to the supernatural became less strongly individualistic. In 1814 and 1816, he retold the classical tales of Laodamia and Dion, and the spectral visitations they had experienced, and then in 1837, he wrote of the madness of his neighbour's parishioner, a poor woman who saw the ghost of her son descending like an angel. The ghosts in each case emerge from an accepted supernatural context and are expressive of codes and conventions commonly held by the age in which they appear. Nevertheless their presence still serves to a certain extent a Wordsworthian purpose: that of extending the understanding of the mind and the clear perception of the heart.

Of "Laodamia"¹ Wordsworth was to say: "It cost me more trouble than almost anything of equal length I have ever written."² The difficulty lay not so much in the body of the poem, in which the ghost of Protesilaus appears to his wife, but in Laodamia's reaction to the visitation and the effect this has on her post-mortal existence. Protesilaus advises her that, although the gods have approved her "fidelity" (l. 40) and "fervent ... love" (l. 76), she is deficient in reason and emotional control, the virtues of moderation and restraint. He sets before her his own example, that of "lofty thought, / In act embodied" (ll. 137-8) (he had leapt first upon the Trojan shore to fulfil the oracular conditions of their victory, even though it meant that he himself would be killed), and urges her:

"Be thy affections raised and solemnised.

"Learn, by a mortal yearning, to ascend -
Seeking a higher object. Love was given ...
That self might be annulled ... " (ll. 144-6, 149)

But his counsel is unavailing and as he turns to leave her sight, Laodamia falls to the floor "a lifeless corse" (l. 157).

Wordsworth's original reaction to Laodamia's death was a lenient one, consistent with contemporary prejudices in favour of excessive sensibility. He wrote:

Ah, judge her gently who so deeply loved!
Her, who, in reason's spite, yet without crime,
Was in a trance of passion thus removed;

Delivered from the galling yoke of time
And these frail elements - to gather flowers
Of blissful quiet 'mid unfading bowers.

(ll. 158-63, 1815-1820 version)

But Wordsworth was not satisfied; as he wrote to his nephew in 1830, "To what purpose then the mission of Protesilaus - He exhorts her to moderate her passion - the exhortation is fruitless - and no punishment follows."³ The offending stanza was to go through seven versions between 1815 and 1845,⁴ ending with

Thus, all in vain exhorted and reproved,
She perished; and, as for a wilful crime,
By the just Gods whom no weak pity moved,
Was doomed to wear out her appointed time,
Apart from happy Ghosts, that gather flowers
Of blissful quiet 'mid unfading bowers.

Laodamia's understanding had not been changed by the efforts of the supernatural, and she must take what the code against which she had sinned saw to be the consequences. Wordsworth, in altering the result, was seeking to remain consistent with the ethic of duty and classical restraint which the poem was intended to portray.

Just how far Wordsworth's vision had changed since, for example, "Hart-Leap Well," is shown by the image with which "Laodamia" ends. He writes:

... tears to human suffering are due;
And mortal hopes defeated and o'erthrown
Are mourned by man, and not by man alone,
As fondly he believes. - Upon the side
Of Hellespont (such faith was entertained)
A knot of spiry trees for ages grew
From out the tomb of him for whom she died;
And ever, when such stature they have gained
That Ilium's walls were subject to their view,
The trees' tall summits withered at the sight;
A constant interchange of growth and blight!

(ll. 164-74)

This incident was the original impetus for writing,⁵ but in the poem that resulted it has become only an extraneous detail, burdened with disclaimers ("as fondly he believes"; "such faith was entertained"), and bearing little relation to the rest of the work. Wordsworth is no longer primarily interested in natural supernaturalism, though the classical convention of Nature grieved by human sorrow can still find a place in his poetry. The poet's sense of humans in relation to a moral order has eclipsed his awareness of a creature in relation to Nature.

In "Dion,"⁶ written two years later, Nature plays a similarly peripheral role. Dion's political career has become sullied by an expedient killing; when an angry Phantom appears to him, he recognizes its presence as an indictment of his guilt. Over and over she sweeps the floor before him:

Ye Gods, thought He, that servile Implement
Obeys a mystical intent!
Your Minister would brush away
The spots that to my soul adhere;
But should she labour night and day,
They will not, cannot, disappear;
Whence angry perturbations, - and that look
Which no philosophy can brook! (ll. 96-101)

The Phantom reveals to him the extent of his crime. Rather would Dion be punished by the Furies, and know that what he suffered had been known to others too, than to be thus isolated even from other criminals by his crime. But the height of both his virtue and his opportunities had measured the depth of his fall, and in the end only death could pay for his betrayal of honour and its code. Dion accepts the price. Nature mourns his loss of virtue (ll. 42-5) and his death (l. 111), but is powerless to aid him in the strictly human arena in which he has tried, and failed.

In "The Widow on Windermere Side,"⁷ Wordsworth turned to a supernatural convention of his own time, that of the consoling angel visitant. His heroine, an honest, industrious widow, burdened by "a weight / Of blameless debt" (ll. 4-5) and grief for the deaths of her children, is a familiar figure in his poetry. Like other Wordsworthian sufferers, grief begins to affect the nature of her perceptions:

The Mother mourned, nor ceased her tears to flow,
Till a winter's noon-day placed her buried Son
Before her eyes, last child of many gone -
His raiment of angelic white, and lo!
His very feet bright as the dazzling snow
Which they are touching; yea far brighter, even
As that which comes, or seems to come, from heaven,
Surpasses aught these elements can show. (ll. 15-22)

The shift in tense of "are touching" suggests a momentary participation by the poet in the widow's vision, but the modifying phrase "or seems to come" draws back from such a

thought. Natural explanations for what she thinks she sees are offered unobtrusively: her son appears to her in a blaze of white light on a day of dazzling snow, or descending in shafts of light from clouds or the waving branches of trees. Clearly she is mad, since "spiritual presence [has] gained a power / Over material forms" (ll. 26-7). What had been for Wordsworth an attribute of the vital imagination has become for him now a definition of insanity. Still, he does not deny all value to her state. The poet's first reaction - "Oh, gracious Heaven, in pity make her thine!" (l. 28) - is followed by the thought:

But why that prayer? as if to her could come
No good but by the way that leads to bliss
Through Death, - so judging we should judge amiss.
(ll. 29-31)

The good that does come to her is a prefiguring of heaven, which she experiences in her madness. In the midst of her trials, "She smiles as if a martyr's crown were won" (l. 37), and while still alive, "in earthly ecstasies / Her own angelic glory seems begun." (ll. 41-2). The supernatural in the poem is identified with the Christian after-life, and the widow's mad visions offer her, and the reader, insights into the nature of heavenly bliss.

The supernatural, as Wordsworth's period saw it, pertained to those things which lay outside the realm of ordinary, material life and accepted concepts of space, time, and the nature of death. The human mind is frightened by perceptions which stretch or contradict its habitual vision, yet it is irresistibly fascinated by the unfamiliar, and particularly by the unknown world that lies beyond the grave. Wordsworth's earliest poems about ghosts and spectres were an expression of his own fascination, presented through the literary conventions of his time. Soon, however, he became interested as well in the resistance of the mind to the unknown, and the combination of attraction and repulsion that confrontation with the supernatural could produce. To interpret supernatural phenomena imaginatively, and therefore accurately, it seemed to him that the mind's eye must be educated, its vision cleared, and its range extended. And with clarity of vision came the conviction that the unknown and the

known formed part of a single reality.

In his greatest years as a poet, Wordsworth considered the supernatural in relation to the life in Nature which extended beyond and animated its material form. Later, Nature became less prominent and other forms of the "unearthly," such as classical mythology or his own period's vision of a Christian heaven, provided the poet with a framework for his poems. These failed to draw from Wordsworth the same poetic power as had his more personal vision of a numinous Nature. Nevertheless, he continued to hold to the belief that the supernatural impinged on mortal life in order to exercise human understanding of reality, and to extend the perceptions of the human imagination.

More tangible, but no less powerfully educative, is another point of meeting between the worlds of the living and the dead - the churchyard grave. Wordsworth was drawn in many of his poems to a contemplation of the grave, and of the thoughts and emotions that the sight of a tomb or monument excites. In these poems, the poet examined the close relationship in human thought between the two visions of death as the continuation or as the end of life, and the ways in which such apparently contradictory concepts could be brought into harmony with one another.

4.) The Supernatural

1. Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers ed. Edith Julia Morley, (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1938), pp. 481-2.

a) Supernatural Conventions

1. PW I, pp. 270-83. "The Vale of Esthwaite."
2. Ibid., pp. 265-7. "A Ballad."
3. Ibid., pp. 4-39. "An Evening Walk."
4. The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth ed. Stephen Gill, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 21-38. Wordsworth describes his own experience on Salisbury Plain in the Prelude, when he saw such things for himself in "an antiquarian's dream:"

... 'twas my chance
To have before me on the downy Plain
Lines, circles, mounts, a mystery of shapes
Such as in many quarters yet survive,
With intricate profusion figuring o'er
The untilled ground, the work, as some divine,
Of infant science, imitative forms
By which the Druids covertly expressed
Their knowledge of the heavens, and imaged forth
The constellations; I was gently charmed,
Albeit with an antiquarian's dream,
I saw the bearded teachers, with white wands
Uplifted, pointing to the starry sky,
Alternately, and the plain below, while breath
Of music seemed to guide them, and the waste
Was cheered with stillness and a pleasant sound.

Prelude (1805-1806), XII, ll. 338-53.

5. The poet's own vision, which did not include an interpretive voice, is described in the Prelude:

While through those vestiges of ancient times
I ranged, and by the solitude o'ercome,
I had a reverie and saw the past,
Saw multitudes of men, and, here and there,
A single Briton in his wolf-skin vest,
With shield and stone-axe, stride across the wold;
The voice of spears was heard, the rattling spear
Shaken by arms of mighty bone, in strength,
Long mouldered, of barbaric majesty.
I called upon Darkness - and it took,
A midnight darkness seemed to come and take
All objects from my sight; and lo! again
The Desert visible by dismal flames;
It is the sacrificial altar, fed
With living men - how deep the groans! the voice
Of those in the gigantic wicker thrills
Throughout the region far and near, pervades
The monumental hillocks, and the pomp
Is for both worlds, the living and the dead.

Prelude (1805-1806), XII, ll. 318-36.

6. PW II, pp. 156-8. "The Danish Boy."
7. The poem was entitled only "A Fragment" in the 1800-

- 1832 versions, then "The Danish Boy. A Fragment" from 1836.
8. PW II, p. 493. I.F. note to "The Danish Boy."
 9. Ibid.
 10. Ibid. W.W. note to "The Danish Boy," 1827 edition.
 11. The stanza which contained these lines was excluded from all later versions, perhaps because it was too potentially sinister, and upset the delicate balance between evil and innocence after which the poet was striving.
 12. See Section II: The Early Years.

b) The Education of the Imagination

1. S.T.C. Biographia Literaria ed. George Watson (London: Dent, 1977), pp. 168-9.
2. PW II, p. 512. W.W. note to "The Thorn."
3. Ibid.
4. Cf. Coleridge's remarks about the similar tendency of "the rustic:"

... the rustic, from the more imperfect development of his faculties, and from the lower state of their cultivation, aims almost solely to convey insulated facts, either those of his scanty experience or his traditional belief; while the educated man chiefly seeks to discover and express those connections of things, or those relative bearings of fact to fact, from which some more or less general law is deductible.

Biographia Literaria, pp. 196-7.

5. Prose I, p. 141. "Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1850)."
- 6.

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 ...

PW II, p. 511. I.F. note to "The Thorn."

7.

"Not five yards from the mountain path,
 This Thorn you on your left espy;
 And to the left, three yards beyond,
 You see a little muddy pond
 Of water - never dry." (ll. 27-31)

The 1798 version continues with these lines on the pond:

"I've measured it from side to side;
 'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide."

8. Martha viewed through the open door of her hut is a manageable sight, however. Her connection to human society while under cover and within the village is not problematical to the narrator.

9. In the 1798 version the narrator insists again and again that his listener view the scene, saying "Perhaps when you are at the place / You something of her tale may trace." (ll. 103/104).

10. Wordsworth's brief mention of this poem in the Prelude identifies Martha and the Thorn with each other by the shared attribute of misery: he speaks of "her who sate / In misery near the miserable Thorn" (Prelude (1805-1806), XIII, ll. 402-3).

11. PW II, pp. 331-82. "Peter Bell" (1819 version).

12. Ibid., pp. 259-63. "Tintern Abbey," l. 24.

13. Ibid., pp. 227-35. "Ruth," ll. 115-150.

14. Prelude (1805-1806), VIII, title.

15. Cp. Wordsworth's boyhood feelings of guilt and disapproving Nature in the Prelude (1805-1806), I, ll. 324-32, 372-427.

16. Ibid., XIII, ll. 140-3.

17. Ibid., XI, l. 45.

18. PW II, pp. 249-54. "Hart-Leap Well."

19. For example: "a simple song" (l. 100) and "my simple mind" (l. 146); "alone n summer shade" (l. 99) and "sitting in the sun" (l. 139); "To freeze the blood I have no ready arts" (l. 98) and the stanza in which the Shepherd rejects the theory that the place is cursed because of the vengeance of a murdered ghost.

20.

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God that loveth us,
He made and loveth all. (ll. 614-17)

Coleridge Poetical Works ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 186-209.

21. Home at Grasmere ed. Beth Darlington, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977).

22. Prelude (1798-1799), I, l. 79.

23. Ibid.

c) Patrician Ghosts and Christian Angels

1. PW II, pp. 267-72. "Laodamia."

2. Ibid., p. 519. I.F. note to "Laodamia."

3. Letters (1829-1834), pp. 215-16. W.W. to John Wordsworth (C.W.'s son). March, 1830.

4. Other versions of the stanza are found in The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth ed. William Knight, 8 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1896):

1827: By no weak pity might the Gods be moved;
She who thus perished not without the crime
Of Lovers that in Reason's spite have loved,
Was doomed to wander in a grosser clime,
Apart from happy Ghosts, that gather flowers
Of blissful quiet 'mid unfading bowers.

1832: ... Was doomed to wear out her appointed time,
Apart from happy Ghosts - ...

1836-7 margin corrections:

She perished thus, admonished and reproved
In vain; and even as for a wilful crime
By the just Gods...

Thus, though forewarned, exhorted, and reproved,
She perished, and even as for a wilful crime...

1840: She - who, though warned, exhorted, and reproved
Thus died, from passion desperate to a crime -
By the just Gods...

Vol. VI, pp. 7-8.

n.d.: She whom a trance of passion thus removed
As she departed not without crime
Of Lovers who in Reason's spite have loved
Was doomed to wander in a joyless clime
Apart from happy Ghosts, that gather flowers
Of blissful quiet 'mid Elysian bowers.

Vol. II, p. 532, Addendum. Copied by W.W. on the back of a
letter to Haydon (n.d.).

5. PW II, p. 518. I.F. note to "Laodamia."

6. Ibid., pp. 272-8. "Dion."

7. Ibid., pp. 94-5. "The Widow on Windermere Side."

5.) Graves, Monuments and Epitaphs

It was natural that graves and monuments should so commonly act as the focus of writings on death. They were the last tangible emblems of physical life, and an earnest of spiritual resurrection and continuation. They were at once symbols of what had been lost and a reassurance of what still was, providing a point of reference for the thoughts and feelings of the living, regarding their own mortality and that of others. Poetry inspired by the contemplation of graves and monuments held an important place in the literature of Wordsworth's time, and it was a form he used himself frequently throughout his career.

In some of his early poems, Wordsworth considered ways in which life on earth may continue after death, whether through some type of personal consciousness in the grave, or through the memories of the living. He experimented with some of the conventions of contemporary graveyard writing, in order to express his own insights into the nature of mortality and the relations between the living and the dead. Then, in 1810, Wordsworth wrote the three "Essays Upon Epitaphs," in which he revealed the extent to which he had developed and refined those insights. An epitaph, like a grave, marked a point of nexus between two worlds. Although his own epitaph writing did not meet the highest standards set by his essays, Wordsworth's epitaphs and some of his other short poems of later years expressed a deep admiration for the faith that was able to harmonize these worlds. In his epitaphs and poems in contemplation of a grave or monument Wordsworth sought to bring together apparently antithetical aspects of death and bereavement, to express their essential harmony, and to leave the reader in peace and spiritual tranquillity. Within the confines of contemporary religion, his task was still to portray the ways in which life continues after death and disjunction is overcome.

a) Personal Consciousness and the Memories of Others

In Wordsworth's early poetic contemplations of the grave two types of earthly "after-life" are suggested. One is a possibility of personal consciousness continuing after death, a level of gentle awareness in the individual of

self, Nature, others, life, while lying in the grave. The other is a continuing existence in the minds of others, who carry the memory of the dead one on into the living future.

As we have seen, Wordsworth's early image of "the happy dead" was based on ideas of the similarity between life and death. In "I have been here in the Moonlight"¹ (1802), the poet writes of life at its best as partaking of the qualities of quietness and peace that are associated with death. The image of the sleeping beauty "With her face up to heaven; that seemed to have / Pleasing remembrance of a thought foregone,"² or his words to Dorothy about the sweetness of the grave with "the peaceful sounds of the earth"³ about and the knowledge "that our dear friends were near,"⁴ speak of death as if it were a distillation of life, rather than its extinction. And in the "Immortality Ode," death - for the child at least - is merely an extension of life, the grave

... but a lonely bed without the sense or sight
Of day or the warm light,
A living place where we in waiting lie.⁵

Time and sorrow, however, gradually altered this equation of attributes in the poet's mind, and in two poems written after John's drowning, life is described as a scene of strife and violence from which the grave is a calm retreat. In "Glen Almain,"⁶ written in 1805, Wordsworth at first suggests that the burial place for the bard Ossian should be a site violent and torn like the battle-scenes and tumult he had portrayed in life:

He sang of battles, and the breath
Of stormy war, and violent death;
And should, methinks, when all was past,
Have rightfully been laid at last
Where rocks were rudely heaped, and rent
As by a spirit turbulent;
Where sights were rough, and sounds were wild,
And everything unreconciled;
In some complaining, dim retreat,
For fear and melancholy meet. (ll. 5-14)

Looking about him at the actual landscape of the glen, however, he realizes that the tradition which places the bard's body here is expressive of a deeper truth:

... this is calm; there cannot be
A more entire tranquillity....
It is not quiet, is not ease;
But something deeper far than these:

The separation that is here
Is of the grave; and of austere
Yet happy feelings of the dead. (ll. 15-16, 25-9)

"The separation that is here" is that between life and death, between anguish and peace, destruction and quiet happiness. Death appears to the poet now as a protection from the turbulence and pain of human life, less rich perhaps in range of emotion, yet more surely happy in its inviolable tranquillity. As he was to write later, under another sorrow, the grave is "That spot," alone on earth, "which no vicissitude can find."⁷

When Wordsworth turned his hand to a poem on the deaths of George and Sarah Green⁸ in 1808, the same type of imagery came to his mind. Their lives had been harsh and over-burdened by poverty, and they had died lost in a storm on the mountains one night, falling down a precipice in the dark and dashed on the rocks below. Standing over their grave, the poet is filled with a sense of contrast between the violence of their dying and the peacefulness that embraces them now:

O Darkness of the Grave! how calm
After that living night,
That last and dreary living one
Of sorrow and affright! (ll. 49-52)

They lie together now in "A covert tempest-proof" (l. 24), safe from "all agony of mind ... / From fear, and from all need of hope" (ll. 25, 27). The poet writes: "Our peace is of the immortal Soul, / Our anguish is of clay" (ll. 29-30); it is as if the Greens could only hope for escape from pain at last by escape from mortal life. The harshness of the landscape has softened around them, and they are safely lodged in "A House with two-fold Roof" (l. 22), in the "sacred Marriage-bed of Death" (l. 53):

Now do those sternly-featur'd Hills
Look gently on this Grave,
And quiet now is the depth of air
As a sea without a wave.⁹

But deeper lies the heart of peace
In shelter more profound;
The heart of quietness is here,
Within this Church-yard ground. (ll. 41-8)

In death, the Greens have found a peace deeper than life could offer, and a secure tranquillity such as they had never known.

Robert Burns, in his poem "To Ruin,"¹⁰ had also seen

death as a release from the wretchedness of life, and the grave as a place of peace from care. The sight of the Bard's grave had at first inspired in Wordsworth a chilling sorrow:

I shiver, Spirit fierce and bold,
At thought of what I now behold:
As vapours breathed from dungeons cold
Strike pleasure dead,
So sadness comes from out the mould
Where Burns is laid.

And have I then thy bones so near,
And thou forbidden to appear?
As if it were thyself that's here
I shrink with pain;
And both my wishes and my fear
Alike are vain. (ll. 1-12)¹¹

This is perhaps the closest Wordsworth came in his poetry to the physical horror of lying consciously in the tomb which so many of his contemporaries imagined so vividly.¹² But, remembering Burns' vision, he is comforted by the thought that the dead poet is, on the contrary, happy and at peace.

But wherefore tremble? 'tis no place
Of pain and sorrow, but of grace,
Of shelter, and of silent peace,
And "friendly aid";
Grasped is he now in that embrace
For which he prayed. (ll. 12/13)

These examples of Wordsworth's vision of peace in the grave do not imply negation or a nothingness preferable to pain, but instead express a spiritual consciousness, after death, of positive tranquillity and rest, occurring not in a vacuum or in heaven, but in the midst of a particular natural setting. Other poems he wrote during these years base the hope of an earthly after-life on the memories of others left behind, and in these, too, the unchanging forms of landscape and the repeating patterns of the seasons play a part.

Physically, the dead in these poems are dead indeed: there is no suggestion that they are "not dead, but sleep[]" (Luke 8:52). In "Matthew"¹³ (1798-9), for example, the school-master in death is described as

... silent as a standing pool;
Far from the chimney's merry roar,
And murmur of the village school. (ll. 18-20);

and in the "Address to the Scholars of the Village School

of - ",¹⁴ Wordsworth draws a ghoulish comparison between a childish imitation of death and the utter lifelessness of a real corpse:

I kissed his cheek before he died;
And when his breath was fled,
I raised, while kneeling by his side,
His hand: - it dropped like lead.
Your hands, dear Little-ones, do all
That can be done, will never fall
Like his till they are dead. (ll. 5-11)

Death has cut off Matthew, the man of joy, from all that gave him pleasure. As a living teacher, he had undergone an imprisonment of sorts, "confined for hours" (l. 16) in a school-room, yet still he was aware of Nature and the endless changes of weather and wind. Now,

... stretched beneath his grass-green mound
He rests a prisoner of the ground.
He loved the breathing air,
He loved the sun, but if it rise
Or set, to him where now he lies,
Brings not a moment's care. (ll. 20-5)

Yet in spite of this, Matthew lives on in the lives he had touched and influenced. He had been while alive a loving and creative agent in the village, and his works live on after him as an integral part of daily feelings, thoughts, and actions. In the "Address," the poet writes:

Long time his pulse hath ceased to beat;
But benefits, his gift, we trace -
Expressed in every eye we meet
Round this dear Vale, his native place.

To stately Hall and Cottage rude
Flowed from his life what still they hold,
Light pleasures, every day renewed;
And blessings half a century old. (ll. 57-64)

In "The Brothers,"¹⁵ Wordsworth, through the persons of the Priest and the sailor Leonard, speaks of the after-life bestowed by memory among the inhabitants of his native mountains:

Priest: We have no need of names and epitaphs;
We talk about the dead by our fire-sides....
The thought of death sits easy on the man
Who has been born and dies among the mountains.

Leonard: Your Dalesmen, then, do in each other's
thoughts

Possess a kind of second life ...
(ll. 178-9, 182-5)

In the "naming of places" and in the writing of poetry, Wordsworth hoped to ensure for himself and his household

such a second life, "As long as verse of mine shall breathe
the air / Of memory, or see the light of love."¹⁶

Among his early works which consider the possibilities of an earthly after-life are three "graveyard" poems published in the 1800 Lyrical Ballads, in which we see Wordsworth experimenting with various conventions as vehicles for his own ideas. In "To a Sexton," he chose a favourite subject of magazine poets, the heedless grave-digger; in "A Poet's Epitaph," he made an attempt at satire; and in "The Brothers," he added an element of drama to the tradition of graveyard musings.

b) Experiments with Conventions

In Wordsworth's time, poems about sextons were common. A grave-digger was generally portrayed as being without sensibility and, not infrequently, would die and be buried himself in the last stanzas as an implied indictment of hard-heartedness.¹ Wordsworth's tone in "To a Sexton"² (1798-9) is more cheerful, though in the 1845 version of the poem, he does reproach his character gently for being "too heedless" (l. 23). What the poem is concerned with, however, is the custom in some parishes of removing the bones of the dead from the ground after a certain number of years and depositing them in a charnel- or bone-house, and the violence this does to the human desire for continuity even in death, even in the grave. The poet compares the sexton's activities to those following a bloody battle, where the dead, violently cut off, are stacked indiscriminately together. Death has not come to the inhabitants of this churchyard so: "These died in peace each with the other, - / Father, sister, friend, and brother" (ll. 7-8). The relationships of life should be allowed to continue into death; neighbours in life should be allowed to remain "Neighbours in mortality" (l. 28). The dispensation the poet asks for others ("From this platform, eight feet square / Take not even a finger-joint: / Andrew's whole fire-side is there." ll. 10-12) is also pleaded for himself:

Thus then, each to other dear,
Let them all in quiet lie,
Andrew there, and Susan here,

Neighbours in mortality.
And should I live through sun and rain
Seven widowed years without my Jane,
O Sexton, do not then remove her,
Let one grave hold the Loved and Lover! (ll. 25-32)

The purpose of Wordsworth's use of the convention was not the conventional one of reminding us of our common humanity and common mortality, but to say for the dead what they could not say for themselves: "Leave us in peace, in the company of those we loved in life."

"A Poet's Epitaph,"³ written at about the same time as "To a Sexton," makes use of another convention of graveyard writing, in which the deceased addresses the living from the grave. In satirical poems based on this convention, a poet is able to criticize persons and professions while assuming the superior knowledge and personal immunity of the dead. Wordsworth's few attempts at satire were unfortunate, and through most of "A Poet's Epitaph" he only succeeds in sounding petulant. His characters are largely common-places which had been the stock-in-trade of satirists for generations: the cold politician, for example, or the false-hearted lawyer, the worldly parson, forthright soldier, and soulless scientist.⁴ The "self-sufficing" (l. 31) moralist is more peculiarly Wordsworthian, reminiscent of Rivers/Oswald in The Borderers (also written about this time, 1797-9). But where the poet's individual preoccupations show through most clearly is in the figure of the rustic swain.

Although he is indebted to Gray's "Elegy in a Country Church-Yard" for some of this character's attributes⁵ and to Burns' "A Bard's Epitaph" for others,⁶ Wordsworth has added to these elements his own particular emphasis. The swain is a double figure, presented both as an object of poetry and as a poet, an image of Wordsworth himself, a "second self."⁷ As an object of poetry, Wordsworth steps outside the generalizing tradition of satire, and requires for his swain the same loving perception of individual worth that he had asked for Simon Lee. The swain is

... retired as noontide dew,
Or fountain in a noon-day grove;
And you must love him, ere to you
He will seem worthy of your love. (ll. 41-4)

As a poet, one who like himself perceives truth "In common

things" (l. 49) and who has known both the outer beauty of Nature and the inner heart's response, Wordsworth greets the swain as an equal, almost an equivalent, to himself. From beyond the pale of death he invites him to treat his grave as if it were a bed or the foundation of a home.

- Come hither in thy hour of strength;
Come, weak as is a breaking wave!
Here stretch thy body at full length;
Or build thy house upon this grave. (ll. 57-60)

The dead poet invites the living swain to act out the identity he feels between them, to lie on the grave as he lies in it, to abide in the place where he abides. The poem which had begun as a complacent indictment of stereotyped humanity ends in a claim of kinship between the poet and the swain, and a yearning for a vicarious earthly continuity.

In "The Brothers,"⁸ Wordsworth follows in the footsteps of writers such as Young and Hervey, who walked about among tombs and tombstones speculating on the inhabitants below. What differentiates Wordsworth's use of the convention, however, is the dramatic tension he achieves by dividing between two characters what is usually a solitary musing, and investing information in one character which the other secretly desires. Leonard, returning unrecognized to the vale of his birth after years at sea, leads the unsuspecting Priest to gradually reveal the story of his brother's death, unable to ask for information outright because of conflicting emotions of hope and fear. There is an irony in the Priest's judgment, when he first criticises Leonard to his wife as a heedless Tourist, uninvolved in the realities of life (ll. 1-5, 104-12), and in his attempt to introduce another grave's story (ll. 194-7). Leonard, too, is deluded when he reads the changes in the landscape around him as a kind of earnest that it is not his brother's grave he sees before him, but one he had known in earlier years and had forgotten. Looking about him he suggests to the Priest that, "even among these rocks," one

Can trace the finger of mortality,
And see, that with our threescore years and ten
We are not all that perish. (ll. 128-31)

The surface meaning of his words is that it is not humans

only who pass away, but beneath this meaning lies the hint of another: that not everyone attains to threescore years and ten; that some, like James, die young. The Priest apparently answers Leonard's remark as the sailor intended it, but in fact, he too is unconsciously offering comment on the one brother's false hopes and the other brother's demise:

Ah, there, indeed, your memory is a friend
That does not play you false. - On that tall pike
(It is the loneliest place of all these hills)
There were two springs which bubbled side by side,
As if they had been made that they might be
Companions for each other: ten years back
Close to those brother fountains, the huge crag
Was rent with lightning - one is dead and gone,
The other, left behind, is flowing still.
(ll. 138-45)

Finally, the truth is revealed, and James's story is told to the end. It is more than Leonard can bear, and he turns his back on the vale and on his hopes of renewing the ties of life there once again.

... his early years
Were with him in his heart: his cherished hopes
And thoughts which had been his an hour before,
All pressed on him with such a weight, that now,
This vale, where he had been so happy, seemed
A place in which he could not bear to live:
So he relinquished all his purposes....

... he went on shipboard, and is now
A seaman, a grey-headed Mariner. (ll. 421-7, 434-5)

With the closing words of the poem, Wordsworth evokes the image of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, his solitude and homelessness. Leonard's bereavement, unspectacular as it is, has isolated him as deeply as the curse of the spirits had Coleridge's old seaman. The isolation which Wordsworth describes is even, in some ways, the deeper of the two, for Leonard's ordinary human grief, which has disjoined him forever from happy memories and "cherished hopes," is walled about with silence, a silence that will only end with life.

In the ten years that followed these experiments, Wordsworth's mind was drawn again and again to the question of bereavement and the relation between the living and the dead. Out of his thoughts during those years came three "Essays Upon Epitaphs," the poet's most extended consideration in prose of our mortal nature.

c) "Essays Upon Epitaphs"

At the very heart of the three "Essays Upon Epitaphs"¹ is Wordsworth's vision of the relationship between a conviction of immortality and the exercise of human love. The poet locates at the dawn of consciousness an "intimation or assurance within us, that some part of our nature is imperishable" (p. 50):

If we look back upon the days of childhood, we shall find that the time is not in remembrance when, with respect to our own individual Being, the mind was without this assurance. (p. 50)

He goes on to suggest that the conviction of immortality is an essential foundation of human love from the very beginning, that without it, the child's affections would never learn to grow, but would wither and starve instead. The sense of death and destruction impending over every relationship or tentative reaching out would freeze the motions of love at their source.

... it is to me inconceivable, that the sympathies of love towards each other, which grow with our growth, could ever attain any new strength, or even preserve the old, after we had received from the outward senses the impression of death ... if the same were not counteracted by those communications with our internal Being, which are anterior to all these experiences.... Were we to grow up unfostered by this genial warmth [i.e. the conviction of immortality], a frost would chill the spirit, so penetrating and powerful, that there could be no motions of the life of love.

(pp. 51-2)

According to Wordsworth, the human heart is equipped from the start with innate defences against the disjunctive power of death, and the life of the affections essential to the human spirit is made possible by the belief that death does not mark the end. A world without such a conviction would be the grey and loveless world of the spiritually dead:

... if the impression and sense of death were not ... counterbalanced, such a hollowness would pervade the whole system of things, such a want of correspondence and consistency, a disproportion so astounding betwixt means and ends, that there could be no repose, no joy.... a world in which each man ... moved about like a shadow ... (p. 52)

In such a world there would be no epitaphs or monuments, for these serve to continue love beyond death. When speaking of the technique in epitaph-writing of addressing the living in the person of the deceased,

Wordsworth said that "This shadowy interposition ... harmoniously unites the two worlds of the living and the dead by their appropriate affections" (p. 60) and, indeed, this statement may be applied to what the poet considered good epitaphs generally. The "appropriate affections" of the living are found in their sorrowful and loving memory of the departed, while the dead extend "commiseration and concern" (p. 89) to those yet remaining in the world. These are the things an epitaph should express: a continuing relationship of human love, modified and refined by mortal separation, but not broken.

It had been objected that epitaphs varied too little, and that there was in them such a uniformity of characterization and sentiment that the casual churchyard browser might exclaim with Lamb, "Where are all the bad People buried?" (p. 63). Wordsworth responded to this difficulty from a number of stand-points. To Johnson's charge that epitaphs are so unparticularized because of a lack of special objects for praise or of variety of character in humanity, he replied:

The objects of admiration in human-nature are not scanty, but abundant: and every man has a character of his own, to the eye that has skill to perceive it. The real cause of the acknowledged want of discrimination in sepulchral memorials is this: That to analyse the character of others, especially of those whom we love, is not a common or natural employment of men at any time ... and, least of all, do we incline to these refinements when under the pressure of sorrow, admiration, or regret, or when actuated by any of those feelings which incite men to prolong the memory of their friends and kindred, by records placed in the bosom of the all-uniting and equalising receptacle of the dead. (pp. 56-7)

Wordsworth said of graveyards that they were the places above all others where the common nature of humanity is evident; there, love, sorrow, hope, and the concerns of virtue (p. 59) are brought to all minds with equal pertinence. A good epitaph is one which not only acknowledges but draws on this truth to engage readers of all conditions. And if the dead are uniformly described as if without stain, that tendency is in accordance with another universal human truth: that loss refines the heart's perceptions.

The character of a deceased friend or beloved kinsman is not seen, no - nor ought to be seen, otherwise than is a tree through a tender haze or a luminous mist, that spiritualizes and beautifies it; that takes away, indeed, but only to the end that the parts which are not abstracted may appear more dignified and lovely; may impress and affect the more.... parts and proportions are brought into distinct view which before had been only imperfectly or unconsciously seen: it is truth hallowed by love - the joint offspring of the worth of the dead and the affections of the living!²
(p. 58)

Nice distinctions, points of difference, or examination of "living frailties" (p. 58) have no place in an epitaph, for they are out of harmony with the emotions of bereavement, the particular awareness in a graveyard of common humanity, and the illuminated and purified perceptions of love and sorrow.

A good epitaph should express the nature of virtue in its style as well as in its content. Wordsworth criticized the fashion in epitaph-writing of pairing positive human qualities as if they were in conflict, such as in the line "Though meek, magnanimous; though witty, wise" (p. 74), because he felt it belied the reality of goodness. Folly and vice are antithetical in their nature, full of contradictions and inconsistencies (p. 80), but virtue is constituted otherwise:

In the mind of the truly great and good every thing that is of importance is at peace with itself; all is stillness, sweetness, and stable grandeur. Accordingly the contemplation of virtue is attended with repose. A lovely quality, if its loveliness be clearly perceived, fastens the mind with absolute sovereignty upon itself; permitting or inciting it to pass, by smooth gradation or gentle transition, to some other kindred quality.... If then a Man, whose duty it is to praise departed excellence ... should upon all occasions exhibit that mode of connecting thoughts which is only natural while we are delineating vice ... we may be assured that the nobler sympathies are not alive in him; that he has no clear insight into the internal constitution of virtue; nor has himself been soothed, cheered, harmonized, by those outward effects which follow every where her goings, - declaring the presence of the invisible deity. (pp. 80-1)

It is the nature of virtue that the epitaph should seek to imitate, not the nature of vice.

Wordsworth was concerned with the motions of the human mind and heart, the ways in which thoughts and emotions operate, and in the first essay he wrote of the relation

between apparently contradictory concepts which arise in contemplating the bodies of the dead. The action of Simonides,³ for example, in piously burying the abandoned body of a stranger is contrasted to the words of another philosopher who scorned a corpse, saying "See the shell of the flown bird!" (p. 52). Yet, Wordsworth maintained, these thoughts "have another and a finer connection than that of contrast" -

It is a connection formed through the subtle process by which, both in the natural and the moral world, qualities pass insensibly into their contraries, and things revolve around each other. As, in sailing round the orb of this planet, [a voyager heading towards the setting sun arrives in the place where it rises, and vice versa]; so the contemplative Soul, travelling in the direction of mortality, advances to the country of everlasting life; and, in a like manner, may she continue to explore those cheerful tracts, till she is brought back, for her advantage and benefit, to the land of transitory things - of sorrow and of tears.

(p. 53)

These are paradoxes of a universal and permanent significance, as distinct from the transitory and erratic antitheses of individual frailty, and as such they are the proper material of the epitaph. Yet it is not enough that an epitaph state what is true, and in a manner which does not contradict that truth. In the second essay, Wordsworth wrote:

... it is not only no fault but a primary requisite in an Epitaph that it shall contain thoughts and feelings which are in their substance common-place, and even trite. It is grounded upon the universal intellectual property of man; - sensations which all men have felt and feel in some degree daily and hourly.... But it is required that these truths should be ... uttered in such connection as shall make it felt that they are not adopted - not spoken by rote, but perceived in their whole compass with the freshness and clearness of an original intuition. The Writer must introduce the truth with such accompaniment as shall imply that he has mounted to the sources of things - penetrated the dark cavern from which the River that murmurs in every one's ears has flowed from generation to generation. (pp. 78-9)

The task of the good epitaph is to strip away the "film of familiarity" obscuring simple truths and to bring the reader back into contact with forgotten realities. But, as in other forms of writing, readers must also play their part:

... as from these primary sensations [of the human heart] such composition speaks, so, unless correspondent ones listen promptly and submissively in the inner cell of the mind to whom it is addressed, the voice cannot be heard: its highest powers are wasted.

(p. 70)

The reader too must be lovingly and creatively involved in the inter-relation of mourner, mourned, and their "joint off-spring," the epitaph.

These, then, are the elements of Wordsworth's approach to the epitaph. First, there is the intimate interconnection between a conviction of immortality and the exercise of human love. This is the foundation of the rest, from which the desire to be remembered and to remember arises, and which determines the nature of the memorial. An epitaph is an expression of human love which continues in spite of death's disjunction, and in which both the living and the dead participate. The living express sorrow, regret and admiration; the dead extend their loving concern. If many epitaphs seem lacking in originality, this is a function of the universal nature of death and the experience of loss. Human particularities and frailties are perceived in a new light after death; faults and inconsistencies are superseded by a truer vision. Those things which jarred are made smooth, like the motion of thoughts of virtue in the mind, without disjunctions or contradictions. Yet universal truths have a way of becoming clichés, and as such may pass unperceived. They can only be brought back to life if, first, it is evident that the epitaph-writer has pierced their disguise and perceived them as truths, and second, if the reader of the epitaph has within a corresponding capacity to receive what is being offered. The worth of the dead and the sorrow of the survivors, the particular and universal aspects of human nature, the loving concern of the dead for the living and the regret of the living for the dead, the reader, writer and the object of their attention - all meet in an epitaph and are reconciled to one other. Tranquillity and peace are the final result; properly perceived,

... a grave is a tranquillising object: resignation in course of time springs up from it as naturally as the wild flowers, besprinkling the turf

with which it may be covered, or gathering round the monument by which it is defended. (p. 60)

Like language itself, the purpose of the epitaph is to "uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet" (p. 85).

After reading the "Essays Upon Epitaphs," Wordsworth's own epitaphs are an anti-climax: he found them extremely difficult to compose,⁴ and the results of his efforts did not come up to the highest standard he had laid down in the essays, that of "giv[ing] to universally received truths a pathos and spirit which shall re-admit them into the soul like revelations of the moment" (p. 83). Nevertheless, the poet did strive to fulfill at least some of his own criteria - for example, a balance between the individual and the universal aspects of human nature, an expression both of the worth of the deceased and of the writer's sincere admiration and grief, a sense of commiseration and concern on the part of the dead for the living.

In an epitaph for Mary Vernon⁵ (pub. 1835), Wordsworth offered a few brief notices of her life and death, followed by the lines:

Reader! if to thy bosom cling the pain
Of recent sorrow combated in vain;
Or if thy cherished grief have failed to thwart
Time still intent on his insidious part,
Lulling the mourner's best good thoughts asleep,
Pilfering regrets we would, but cannot, keep;
Bear with Him - judge Him gently who makes known
His bitter loss by this memorial Stone;
And pray that in his faithful breast the grace
Of resignation find a hallowed place. (ll. 13-22)

The speaker of the epitaph appeals to the common human experience of grief at the loss of a loved one, and the not uncommon experience of grief at imperfections and failings that persist, in spite of the heart's desire to honour the dead by imitating their virtues in life. By suggesting a similarity in their losses and sorrows, readers of the epitaph are drawn into sympathetic communion with the bereaved husband, and the gentle judgment and prayer for resignation and strength which he asks for himself are the answers to their needs also. Even though the deceased does not address the reader, concern for the living and their struggles "pervade and brood over"⁶ these lines.

An example of a more direct expression of the concern

of the dead for the living is found in the inscription written by Wordsworth for a cenotaph, in memory of Frances Fermor⁷ (1824). Having stated briefly the virtues of the deceased and the strength of her character, the poet turns his attention to those who remain:

This Tablet, hallowed by her name,
One heart-relieving tear may claim;
But if the pensive gloom
Of fond regret be still thy choice,
Exalt thy spirit, hear the voice
Of Jesus from her tomb!

I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE. (ll. 7-13)

As a good epitaph requires, the deceased has both expressed her own faith, and offered to the living mourner an answer to grief. Another example is found in the epitaph to Owen Lloyd⁸ (1841), in which the poet explains how the deceased had asked particularly that his body should be buried in the parish where he had been vicar, so that

... his Flock,
When they no more their Pastor's voice
Could hear to guide them in the choice
Through good and evil, help might have,
Admonished, from his silent grave,
Of righteousness, of sins forgiven,
For peace on earth and bliss in heaven. (ll. 16-22)

The concern felt in life is thus shown to continue after death and into the grave.

The epitaphs Wordsworth wrote in response to the deaths of his more intimate friends, however, are less correct and more personal. Perhaps because of this, or perhaps because of a greater predisposition to be interested, the modern reader may find the lines he wrote for Southey and for Lamb less tepid than those for Sir George Beaumont's sister-in-law, or Wordsworth's own brother's brother-in-law. In the "Essays Upon Epitaphs," he wrote:

The reader ought to know who and what the man was whom he is called upon to think of with interest. A distinct impression should be given (implicitly where it can, rather than explicitly) of the individual lamented. - But the writer of an epitaph is not an anatomist, who dissects the internal frame of the mind; he is not even a painter, who executes a portrait at leisure and in entire tranquillity: his delineation, we must remember, is performed by the side of the grave; and, what is more, the grave of one whom he loves and admires. (pp. 57-8)

In Southey's epitaph,⁹ written in 1843, our sense of the

deceased is gained only in part through the explicit description of his achievements and attributes. More vividly, our sense of the man is filtered through Wordsworth's feelings, which find expression implicitly in the images of those things his friend has left behind. Something has gone from the world they had shared for so many years; there is a new emptiness; something has come to an end.

Ye vales and hills whose beauty hither drew
The poet's steps, and fixed him here, on you
His eyes have closed! And ye, lov'd books, no more
Shall Southey feed upon your precious lore....
His joys, his griefs, have vanished like a cloud
From Skiddaw's top ... (ll. 1-4, 15-16)

The lines which close the inscription ("he to heaven was vowed / Through his industrious life, and Christian faith / Calmed in his soul the fear of change and death." ll. 16-18) are a statement of faith in Southey's faith, and undoubtedly hold the answer for Wordsworth's and the reader's similar fears. However, the confident assertiveness of some of the earlier epitaphs is not found here; we see Southey's faith through the eyes of one who had "love[d] and admire[d]" him for many years but who could not always match his religious serenity. We receive a more vivid sense of the deceased through this hint of a comparison than we might have done from a less personal tribute.

The epitaph for Charles Lamb is worth quoting in full, in the original version sent to Edward Moxon in 1835,¹⁰ because it shows Wordsworth achieving a far more evocative result by breaking some of his own rules than he was usually able to in works of this kind.

To the dear memory of a frail good Man
This Stone is sacred. Here he lies apart
From the great City, where he first drew breath,
Was rear'd and taught, and humbly earned his bread;
To strict labours of the Merchant's desk
By duty chained. Not seldom did those tasks
Teaze, and the thought of time so spent depress,
His Spirit, but the recompence was high;
- Firm Independence, Bounty's rightful Sire:
Affections, warm as sunshine, free as air!
And, when the precious hours of leisure came,
Knowledge and wisdom, gained from converse sweet
With books, or while he ranged the crowded streets
With a keen eye, and overflowing heart:
Hence truths poured out in Works by thoughtful love
Inspired, - and potent over smiles and tears.

From the most gentle Creature nursed in fields
 Had been derived the name he bore - a name,
 Wherever Christian Altars have been raised,
 Hallowed to meekness, and to innocence;
 And if in him meekness at times gave way
 Provoked out of herself by troubles strange,
 Many and strange, that hung about his life;
 Or suddenly dislodged by strong rebound
 Of animal spirits that had sunk too low,
 Or by impetuous fancy and quaint views
 Of domineering humour, overcome -
 And if too often, self-reproached he felt
 That innocence belongs not to our Kind -
 He had a constant friend in Charity;
 Her who, among the multitudes of Sins
 That she can cover, left not his exposed
 To an unforgiving judgment from just Heaven -
 O, he was good; if e'er a good Man lived!

For one thing, as Wordsworth himself admitted,¹¹ it is far too long. For another, it is a portrait which does "dissect the internal frame of mind,"¹² though with affection and a sense of that charity by which its subject needed to be befriended. The admission that Lamb was "a frail good Man" will probably draw the attention of the reader far more readily than the declarations of perfected virtue found in the poet's other funereal inscriptions, but it strays perilously close to the kind of analysis Wordsworth had declared unsuitable in an epitaph. The Christian ideals of innocence and meekness which Lamb's name denoted are coupled in the epitaph with his human failures to live up to those ideals, "provoked ... by troubles strange," "dislodged," "overcome," and "self-reproached." Wordsworth said in the letter in which the epitaph was transcribed, that

Chiabrera has been here my model - ... His Epitaphs are characteristic and circumstantial - so I have endeavoured to make this of mine.¹³

But if the epitaphs which Wordsworth translated¹⁴ are representative of Chiabrera's work, the Italian poet chose to portray his subjects as full of virtues only and without faults. The final words of Wordsworth's poem - "O, he was good; if e'er a good Man lived!" - glance obliquely at epitaphs who admit no frailty, and in this too, the poet transgresses, suggesting a possible disparagement in a place where comparison is held to be invidious indeed. Yet in spite of all these irregularities, the lines to Lamb remain Wordsworth's most successful attempt at an epitaph

because they express most vividly "truth hallowed by love."¹⁵

It was not only in essays or in epitaphs, however, that Wordsworth expressed his thoughts on memorials and mortality in the later years. A number of other short poems were also written, inspired by graves and monuments.

d) In Admiration of Tranquillity

As we have seen, Wordsworth had long been drawn to the idea of death as quiet and peaceful, a gentle merging of one mode of existence into another, with only the slightest of perceptible disjunctions between them. In his later years, images of peace in death, and of tranquil piety in life, attracted him as the subject of poetry. For example, in 1820, he wrote a sonnet on "A Parsonage in Oxfordshire,"¹ in which he describes a churchyard merging imperceptibly with the garden of the manse.

Where holy ground begins, unhallowed ends,
Is marked by no distinguishable line:
The turf unites, the pathways intertwine;
And, wheresoe'er the stealing footstep tends,
Garden, and that Domain where kindred, friends,
And neighbours rest together, here confound
Their several features, mingled like the sound
Of many waters, or as evening blends
With shady night. Soft airs, from shrub and flower,
Waft fragrant greetings to each silent grave;
And while those lofty poplars gently wave
Their tops, between them comes and goes a sky
Bright as the glimpses of eternity,
To saints accorded in their mortal hour.

Such a comingling of living garden and the graves of the dead, of natural beauty and heavenly thoughts leading gently from one to the other, offers a vision of mortality in which wrenching and disjunction have no place. Life and death are in harmony and pass imperceptibly into each other, this life into death, death into the life to come.

There was a special quality of religious tranquillity in the face of human mortality which Wordsworth felt could only be achieved by yoking the emotions derived from Nature to the more cerebral convictions of faith. In the "Essays Upon Epitaphs," he wrote:

... when death is in our thoughts, nothing can make amends for the want of the soothing influences of nature, and for the absence of those types of

renovation and decay, which the fields and woods offer to the notice of the serious and contemplative mind.²

The poet regretted the grassless barrenness of urban graveyards, and was a dedicated planter and nurterer of trees in his own local churchyard.³ In the essay, Nature was viewed allegorically: her efficacy in soothing the bereaved heart lay in the way in which she seemed to offer images of human truth writ large. Wordsworth spoke of her as a receptacle of "many tender similitudes."⁴ In "A Place of Burial in the South of Scotland"⁵ (1831), he wrote of "Bereft Ones ... weep[ing] / Their prayers out to the wind and naked skies" (ll. 7-8) which were an image of their grief, and the joy of Christian hope expressed in the "jubilate from the choirs of spring" (l. 14).

Less explicitly, however, there were also suggestions of a more creative beneficence in Nature, hints of which enrich otherwise careful, unmemorable expressions of orthodoxy which the sight of monuments or graveyards often provoked in Wordsworth in these later years. The poet no longer drew attention to Nature as a Spirit, but he still sometimes wrote of her as a healing spiritual power. "On the Wayside between Preston and Liverpool,"⁶ for example, he was moved by the sight of a pile of turf kept and tended as a memorial to the man whose last deed had been to build it. It was an expression of "Filial Piety" and "reverence" (l. 10) and as such the poet honoured it. "Rude Mausoleum!" he called it, and then continued, "but wrens nestle there, / And red-breasts warble when sweet sounds are rare." (ll. 13-14). The "but" suggests that these words express a different quality than the description of human piety which preceded them, that the birds' "sweet sounds" are not to be understood only as emblems of piety's cheerful resignation. The continuing existence of the pile of turf through fifty years of wind and weather is not like the supernatural timelessness in "The Danish Boy" or the strange slow decay in "Hart-Leap Well," which dumb creatures shun. The work of human hands and human piety has here been blessed by Nature's approval, and her presence furthers that work by offering a "soothing influence" to aid in the search for tranquillity. Nature is shown as quietly, but not passively, in league with

faith.

On another of his travels, the poet was struck by the contrast between "The Earl of Breadalbane's Ruined Mansion"⁷ and the elaborate modern mausoleum in its grounds. Never overly impressed by funereal pomp, Wordsworth was here disturbed by the curious irony of a habitation for the living left in ruins while a house for the dead stood by in such excellent repair. He wrote:

Well sang the Bard who called the grave, in strains
Thoughtful and sad, the "narrow house." No style
Of fond sepulchral flattery can beguile
Grief of her sting; nor cheat, where he detains
The sleeping dust, stern Death. How reconcile
With truth, or with each other, decked remains
Of a once warm Abode, and that new Pile,
For the departed, built with curious pains
And mausolean pomp? Yet here they stand
Together, - 'mid trim walks and artful bowers,
To be looked down upon by the ancient hills,
That, for the living and the dead, demand
And prompt a harmony of genuine powers;
Concord that elevates the mind, and stills.

The scene is full of nagging discords and incongruities. The "curious" pomp of the mausoleum is at odds with the matter-of-fact realities of human grief and physical mortality. It is too much out of proportion with these realities to be able to soothe the honest emotions of bereavement, and seems to have forgotten that what is housed within is senseless dust. Set in contrast to the ruined mansion, the mausoleum suggests a sense of confused priorities and imperception of the relative requirements of life and death. Like some of the epitaphs Wordsworth criticized in the "Essays Upon Epitaphs," the scene before him now over-stimulates the mind in analysis and the delineation of incongruities, but cannot harmonize and leave in peace. "The ancient hills" that surround the scene offer their own judgment by drawing the mind away from false discord to its proper pursuit. The relationship of the living and the dead should be one of genuine harmony, based on that clear apprehension of the nature of each which "demand[s] and prompt[s]" thoughts which at once inspire and make tranquil. Nature acts as an ancient touchstone of reality, pointing up the transitory aberrations of human pride and confusion, and returning the mind to the genuine bed-rock of truth.

It is not only Nature that is thus able to clarify and tranquillize human responses to mortality, however. In "Monument of Mrs. Howard,"⁸ written in 1833, Wordsworth finds similar solace in a work of art:

Stretched on the dying Mother's lap, lies dead
Her new-born Babe; dire ending of bright hope!
But Sculpture here, with the divinest scope
Of luminous faith, heavenward hath raised that head
So patiently; and through one hand has spread
A touch so tender for the insensate Child -
(Earth's lingering love to parting reconciled,
Brief parting, for the spirit is all but fled) -
That we, who contemplate the turns of life
Through this still medium, are consoled and cheered;
Feel with the Mother, think the severed Wife
Is less to be lamented than revered;
And own that Art, triumphant over strife
And pain, hath powers to Eternity endeared.

Like a good epitaph, the statue expresses a meeting of different aspects of death. Sorrow is reconciled to faith; earthly love and pious hope can both be traced in the lines of the figure's hand and head. The universal and the harmonious overlay a moment of individual suffering and raise it above itself, without eradicating its particular reality. And the stillness and solidity of the medium give to a transitory moment the weight of permanent truth, allowing the observer time to be both moved and comforted. Tranquillity and resignation in the face of loss, as expressed in the monument and in the poem, seemed to Wordsworth in his later years to be the attributes of true piety, "triumphant over strife / And pain" and "to Eternity endeared."

We have been considering a number of scattered poems, drawn from many different stages in Wordsworth's poetic development, many of them among the "fugitive pieces" which the poet felt had too often distracted him from larger, more important enterprise.⁹ The Excursion, however, is the product of sustained effort on Wordsworth's part, a poem into which he put the fruit of many years of thought on many subjects, and in particular, his thoughts on the experience of bereavement and the nature of death.

5.) Graves, Monuments and Epitaphs

a) Personal Consciousness and the Memories of Others

1. PW IV, pp. 365-6. "I have been here in the Moonlight."
2. PW III, p. 16. "Methought I saw the footsteps of a throne," ll. 12-13.
3. Journal I, p. 140. 29 April, 1802.
4. Ibid.
5. PW IV, pp. 279-85. "Immortality Ode," ll. 121/2.
6. PW III, pp. 35-6. "Glen Almain."
7. PW III, p. 16. "Surprised by Joy," l. 4.
8. Letters (1806-1811), pp. 219-20. W.W. to S.T.C. 19 April, 1808.
9. Cp. the lines Wordsworth had written in 1806 while expecting the news of the death of Fox:

Loud is the Vale; - this inland Depth
In peace is roaring like the Sea;
Yon star upon the mountain-top
Is listening quietly. (ll. 4-7)

PW IV, pp. 266-7. "Loud is the Vale."

10.

And, thou grim pow'r, by life abhorr'd,
While life a pleasure can afford,
Oh! hear a wretch's pray'r!
No more I shrink appall'd, afraid;
I court, I beg thy friendly aid,
To close this scene of care!
When shall my soul, in silent peace,
Resign life's joyless day?
My weary heart its throbbings cease,
Cold-mould'ring in the clay?
No fear more, no tear more,
To stain my lifeless face,
Enclasped, and grasped
Within thy cold embrace!

Robert Burns Poems and Songs ed. James Kinsley (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 19-20. "To Ruin," ll. 15-28.

11. PW III, pp. 65-7. "At the Grave of Burns, 1803."
12. Fear of premature burial was aggravated during outbreaks of cholera, for the victims of that disease were frequently buried with extreme rapidity.
13. PW IV, pp. 68-9. "Matthew."
14. Ibid., pp. 256-8. "Address to the Scholars of the Village School of -"
15. PW II, pp. 1-13. "The Brothers." In a note to the poem Wordsworth comments:

There is not anything more worthy or remark in the manners of the inhabitants of these mountains, than the tranquillity, I might say indifference, with which they think and talk upon the subject of death. Some of the country churchyards, as here described, do not contain a single tombstone, and most of them have a very small number.

p. 468. A similar thought is expressed in The Excursion:

These Dalesmen trust
The lingering gleam of their departed lives
To oral record, and the silent heart;
Depositories faithful and more kind
Than fondest epitaph ... (VI, ll. 610-14)

PW V, pp. 1-312.

16. Wordsworth wrote these lines to describe his hopes for the epitaph on Charles Lamb (PW IV, pp. 272-6. "Written After the Death of Charles Lamb," ll. 48-9), but they are also appropriate to his hopes for himself.

b) Experiments with Convention

1. An example is "The Song of The Grave-Digger. By Charles Dance:"

Poor mortals imagine they stand on the ground
Supported by all that is solid and sound;-
'Tis a plank - and, beneath it, my work's to
be found -

I gather them in,
I gather them in.

The child, strong and healthy, careers on the heath -
Not thinking - not caring - scarce knowing of death;
In an instant he draws his last innocent breath:

I gather him in,
I gather him in.

[and so on with the youth, the 50-year-old, the dotard, the drunkard, the rich man]

E'en while he was speaking, the moralist elf
Was digging - unthinking - a pit for himself;
His spade and his mattock are laid on the shelf:
They've gathered him in,
They've gathered him in.

in The Athenaeum, 1834, p. 537. Or Robert Blair The Grave (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1875):

See! yonder maker of the dead man's bed,
The sexton! hoary-headed chronicle,
Of hard, unmeaning face, down which ne'er stole
A gentle tear ...

... Thus hand in hand

The sot has walked with death twice twenty years;
And yet ne'er younker on the green laughs louder,
Or clumbs a smuttier tale ...

... Poor wretch! he minds not

- That soon some trusty brother of the trade
Shall do for him what he has done for thousands.

p. 59.

2. PW II, pp. 134-5. "To a Sexton." There is a cheery Sexton in The Excursion as well, who offends the Solitary's sensibilities in Book V, ll. 218-41.

3. PW IV, pp. 65-7. "A Poet's Epitaph."

4. Cf. Lamb's criticism: "The Poet's Epitaph is disfigured, to my taste, by the common satire upon parsons and lawyers ..." PW IV, p. 414.
5. For example, his idleness and shyness, the murmuring of his voice, his love of nature and his contentedness with what life has brought. ("Elegy in a Country Church-Yard" in Thomas Gray and William Collins Poetical Works, ed. Roger Lonsdale, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 33-9).
6. Burns addresses from his grave those whose gifts and failings resemble his own. ("A Bard's Epitaph" in Robert Burns Poems and Songs ed. James Kinsley, London: Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 247.)
7. PW II, pp. 80-94. "Michael," l. 39.
8. PW II, pp. 1-13. "The Brothers."

c) Essays Upon Epitaphs

1. Prose II, pp. 49-96. "Essays Upon Epitaphs."
2. Cf. closing stanza of "Elegiac Stanzas (Addressed to Sir G.H.B. Upon the Death of his Sister-in-Law)" (1824):

Thou takest not away, O Death!
 Thou strikest - absence perisheth,
 Indifference is no more;
 The future brightens on our sight;
 For on the past hath fallen a light
 That tempts us to adore. (ll. 49-54)

PW IV.

3. Wordsworth wrote a sonnet on Simonides' deed which was published in the Morning Post in 1803. (PW III, p. 408) Cf. also in the closing stanza of "Ruth" (1799), a similar sense of the importance of burial, even for one otherwise uncared for by the community:

... when thy days are told,
 Ill-fated Ruth, in hallowed mould
 Thy corpse shall buried be,
 For thee a funeral bell shall ring,
 And all the congregation sing
 A Christian psalm for thee. (ll. 253-8)

PW II, pp. 227-35.

4. Cf., for example, The Letters of Mary Wordsworth 1800-1855, ed. Mary E. Burton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), pp. 88 and 92. M.W. to Edward Quillinan. 19 Sept., 1822 and 19 Oct., 1822.
5. PW IV, p. 254. "By a blest Husband guided."
6. Prose II, p. 89. "Essays Upon Epitaphs."
7. PW IV, pp. 255-6. "Cenotaph."
8. PW IV, p. 255. "Epitaph in the Church-Yard of Langdale, Westmoreland."
9. PW IV, p. 278. "Inscription for a Monument in Crosthwaite Church, in the Vale of Keswick."
10. Letters (1835-1839), pp. 116-17. W.W. to Edward Moxon. 20 Nov., 1835.
- 11.

The first objection that will strike you, and every one, is its extreme length, especially compared with epitaphs as they are now written - but this objection

might in part be obviated by engraving the lines in double column, and not in capitals.

Chiabrera has been here my model - tho' I am aware that Italian Churches, both on account of their size and the climate of Italy, are more favourable to long inscriptions than ours -

Letters (1835-1839), p. 114. W.W. to Edward Moxon. 20 Nov., 1835.

12. Prose II, p. 57. "Essays Upon Epitaphs."

13. Letters (1835-1839), p. 114. W.W. to Edward Moxon. 20 Nov., 1835.

14. PW IV, pp. 248-53.

15. Prose II, p. 58. "Essays Upon Epitaphs."

d) In Admiration of Tranquillity

1. PW III, pp. 41-2. "A Parsonage in Oxfordshire." Cf. also M.W.'s description:

One thing I must mention that struck us exceedingly, which was in passing through a thicket towards the West end of the church, not many yards from the door, one low, inobtrusive head and foot stone met our eyes, so quickly connecting the dead with the living, and with the sweetest things in nature - birds and flowers - that you can not conceive any thing more tenderly affecting than its appearance there.

The Letters of Mary Wordsworth 1800-1855, ed. Mary E. Burton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 58. M.W. to S.H. 30 May, 1820.

2. Prose II, p. 54. "Essays Upon Epitaphs."

3. Cf., for example, PW IV, p. 435. I.F. note to "Epistle to Sir George Howland Beaumont."

4. Prose II, p. 54. "Essays Upon Epitaphs."

5. PW III, pp. 265-6. "A Place of Burial in Southern Scotland."

6. Ibid., p. 50. "Filial Piety."

7. Ibid., p. 270. "The Earl of Breadalbane's Ruined Mansion, and Family Burial-Place, Near Killin." Wordsworth was also disturbed by the sight of "A Gravestone Upon the Floor in the Cloisters of Worcester Cathedral" (PW III, p. 48), whose inhabitant seemed to "claim, among the dead, [an] awful crown" (l. 9) and "dared the grave to agitate" (l. 8). To those who are confronted with this anguish, Wordsworth offers a quieting thought: "Stranger, pass / Softly! - To save the contrite, Jesus bled." (ll. 13-14).

8. PW IV, pp. 45-6. "Monument to Mrs. Howard."

9. Cf., for example, Wordsworth's comments on his writing of sonnets:

... from want of resolution to take up anything of length, I have filled up many a moment in writing Sonnets, which, if I had never fallen into the practice, might easily have been better employed.

Letters (1821-1828), p. 126. W.W. to Walter Savage Landor. 20 April, 1822.

6.) The Excursion

A consideration of The Excursion offers a fitting conclusion to this study of death in the poetry of Wordsworth for a number of reasons. The writing of the poem spans both the period of Wordsworth's greatness and of his decline, and illustrates the poet's consistent concern over the years with the question of "our mortal Nature." As a major segment of the never-completed Recluse, The Excursion was to Wordsworth a work of great importance, in which he invested much time, effort and thought. The result was a poem of more than 300 pages,¹ over which some of his contemporaries expressed ecstatic approval,² others disappointment,³ and which today (with the exception of the often-excerpted "Ruined Cottage") goes largely unread. The philosophy it propounds is complex and comprehensive, progressively revealed through conversations extending over a number of days, many miles and a variety of settings, and including the life stories of some twenty individuals and families over and above the four main characters. On a canvas of this size, the danger of becoming rambling and formless is enormous but, although Wordsworth's epic must undoubtedly plead guilty to the charge of discursiveness, it is not without shape.

The poem's nine Books fall into four main sections on the basis of four main settings, each of which imposes a particular emphasis on the conversation of the characters. In spite of the wide range of subjects covered by these conversations, they remain nevertheless primarily centred on a few basic questions. What place does grief and bereavement have in human life? How does our attitude to death affect our perception of the whole of life? What is the nature of "our mortal Nature?" In each of the main settings, Wordsworth's characters explore different aspects of such issues at leisure and at length.

The title of the poem indicates its format: a physical excursion from one setting to another. It also describes, however, the nature of the characters' discussions, for they are engaged in mental "excursions," striving to move from one point of view, one vision to another, exercising "the mind's excursive powers" (IV, l. 1263). In Book I, the setting sparks the telling of a tale, in which

different visions of the relation of Nature to human bereavement present themselves and are wrestled with. In Books II-IV, a wild lonely valley in the mountains provides the setting for a discussion on the nature of grief and isolation, and what relationship there may be between this material reality and a spiritual one beyond it. Books V-VII are set in a country churchyard and the conversation naturally centres on the lives and deaths of the parish, as seen through the loving eyes of its Pastor. In the final Books of the poem, the more secular and social setting of the Parsonage elicits a wider-ranging discussion on the physical and spiritual conditions of this life, but the company soon returns out-of-doors. There, surrounded by a gentle natural landscape, they are rewarded with a vision of heaven, and the poem ends on a note of hope. The Excursion is meant as a journey of education, for the Poet, for the Solitary, and for the reader, a journey that is not to end with the poem itself. New excursions may be hoped for, new healing and new understanding; like the poet of "Lycidas," Wordsworth ends his long work with the thought: "Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new."⁴

a) The Ruined Cottage

The Excursion began life in 1797-9 as "The Ruined Cottage,"¹ in which Wordsworth considered the relation of Nature to human bereavement. At first sight it might seem that the ensuing eight Books of the larger poem are tied only very tenuously to their origin by the linking figures of the Wanderer and the Poet. However, the problems which Wordsworth addresses in "The Ruined Cottage" are the same as those with which the rest of the poem is concerned. His response to those problems varied as the poet's vision of death altered, but he nevertheless retained the original study largely intact² as an integral part of the search.

The introductory lines of "The Ruined Cottage," which lead up to the telling of Margaret's story, offer three different experiences of relationship between Nature and people. First, there is a description of a man looking out from beneath a tree, whose perception of the summer's noontide is modified and influenced by Nature in her capacity as a mediating, gentling power.³ Second, there is

the poet, who experiences Nature as a harsh, uncomfortable force, against which he vainly seeks to protect himself as he toils across the open Common. And third, there is the Wanderer, towards whom the poet journeys, who sits in a place desolated by the hand of Nature, yet who sees instead an inner vision. In the lines which follow, these three experiences of Nature's relation to human life - a gentle mediator, an indifferent unsympathetic power, or a physical reality unable to over-ride an inner vision - are explored in terms of a specific story of human grief and bereavement, as experienced by its subject the woman Margaret, by her friend the Wanderer, and by his friend the Poet.

Let us first consider the experience of Margaret. The grief under which she suffers is the loss of her husband, Robert. Broken by ill health and hard times, he leaves her to order to join the army and earn for his family all he can - the enlistment money. The arrival of the Wanderer two months later finds Margaret bowed down with grief and uncertainty and, at first, unable to respond to her old friend at all. When she has told him her tale, however, she recovers a little, and they are able to speak together of hope and the future. "With a brighter eye she looked about" (l. 280), and the Wanderer leaves her working in their garden, preparing the soil for the crops to come in the months ahead, an image of hope in action.

When the Wanderer next returns to the cottage, Margaret is not there. Her home and garden have begun to show signs of disrepair and the encroachments of wild Nature, and when Margaret appears, it is clear that she too has changed. Her gaze is fixed on another scene than the one before her, with its fields and seasons and tasks. She admits to the Wanderer:

... many days

About the fields I wander, knowing this

Only, that what I seek I cannot find. (ll. 349-51)

Margaret acknowledges the wisdom of accepting immediate reality, and asks of heaven "patience to endure the things / Which I behold at home" (ll. 360-1). Yet as she serves the Wanderer she does not look at him, but instead within, showing in her household actions "The careless stillness

which a thinking mind / Gives to an idle matter" (ll. 382-3). So much does Margaret appear to live in an inner world that, in spite of the obvious decline in her physical condition, it seems at times as if she no longer existed in the physical world at all. To herself, she feels "as if my body were not such / As others are, and I could never die" (ll. 356-7), and the sighs which hang about her seem to have no physical origin.

... still she sighed,
But yet no motion of the breast was seen,
No heaving of the heart. While by the fire
We sate together, sighs came on my ear;
I knew not how, and hardly whence they came.
(ll. 383-7)

The weary round of Margaret's thoughts centres on her uncertainty:

She had learned
No tidings of her husband; if he lived,
She knew not that he lived; if he were dead.
She knew not he was dead. (ll. 396-9)

A straw-chain guarding the bark of a young apple-tree has fallen away, but Margaret makes no effort to repair it, seeing even this fact of the outer world only in terms of her inner vision.

Margaret stood near, her infant in her arms,
And seeing that my eye was on the tree
She said, "I fear it will be dead and gone
Ere Robert come again." (ll. 423-6)

It is her child, an emblem of the future, who dies, while Robert's loom and staff and Sunday clothes are kept in their places, in readiness for him and in step with her inner vision of the past.

Margaret blesses the Wanderer at their first parting in a voice of cheerfulness and determination; at their next she thanks him for his good-will, but not for his encouragement to persevere with "ordinary" life; at their final parting she makes no attempt to hide her obsession from him:

... and in such sort
That any heart had ached to hear her begg'd
That wheresoe'er I went I still would ask
For him whom she had lost. (ll. 440-3)

In the years that follow it is the same. Passers-by are seen by Margaret only in terms of her inner yearning; instead of the loving welcome of the past she now offers

only questions about her husband. When she "look[s] abroad" (l. 454), it is in hope of seeing there the vision she holds in her mind,

... and evermore her eye
Was busy in the distance, shaping things
Which made her heart beat quick. (ll. 455-7)

Outwardly, she spins "with backward steps" (l. 462), tied by "a belt of flax" (l. 460), while inwardly she is bound to an image in the past for which she has turned her back on time. Around her, however, Nature continues to wipe out the signs of that past, breaking down the walls of the home she and Robert had built up together, sapping its roof. Margaret pays no heed to the growing desolation:

... still
She loved this wretched spot, nor would for worlds
Have parted hence; and still that length of road
And this rude bench one torturing hope endeared,
Fast rooted at her heart. (ll. 486-90)

Margaret's bereavement, her strange "widowhood," follows this pattern to the end: a single-minded, ever-intensifying inwardness of vision, matched in the outer world by the steady obliteration of the human by the natural. It is a wonder such a balance could sustain life as long as it does, but at last, she dies.

The Wanderer's thoughts have been led to Margaret and her tale by his surroundings, and the old man shares with the poet both the details of her story and the complexities of his own feelings of grief and bereavement. He begins with the words "I see around me there / Things which you cannot see" (ll. 67-8), asserting an inner vision which in terms of the outer natural world no longer exists. All things pass away;

... we die, my Friend,
Nor we alone, but that which each man loved
And prized in his peculiar nook of earth
Dies with him or is changed, and very soon
Even of the good is no memorial left. (ll. 68-72)

Nature's obliterating hand smooths over any sign of human love and creativity on the material world; all is levelled over and lost, and "no memorial left." The Wanderer cannot help but acknowledge this to be true as he sits amidst such desolation, and yet he still maintains

The Poets in their elegies and songs
Lamenting the departed call the groves,
They call upon the hills and streams to mourn,

And senseless rocks, nor idly; for they speak
In these their invocations with a voice
Obedient to the strong creative power
Of human passion. Sympathies there are
More tranquil, yet perhaps of kindred birth,
That steal upon the meditative mind
And grow with thought. Beside yon spring I stood
And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel
One sadness, they and I. (ll. 73-84)

The Wanderer has experienced here a merging of inner and outer visions, an instant of communion in which it seems that Nature and he participate in the same feelings of bereavement. As if in reaction to the imaginative achievement of that moment, however, the old man then becomes aware of a deepening disjunction between his memories and what he sees before him, between inner and outer sights. One scene is characterized by human love and welcome, by Margaret and her happy home. The other is expressed in images of natural desolation and decay:

She is dead,
The worm is on her cheek, and this poor hut,
Stripp'd of its outward garb of household flowers,
Of rose and sweet-briar, offers to the wind
A cold bare wall whose earthy top is tricked
With weeds and the rank spear-grass. She is dead,
And nettles rot and adders sun themselves
Where we have sate together while she nurs'd
Her infant at her breast. (ll. 103-11)

The Wanderer's vision of human love and welcome is cruelly parodied in the actual ruined hut, which offers "A cold bare wall" to the wind and houses the creatures of the heath. The first scene has been obliterated by the second, and exists now only in the old man's mind. The contrast between them serves to feed his sorrow, and his "wiser mind / Sinks, yielding to the foolishness of grief" (ll. 118-19).

The strength of the Wanderer's sorrow and the vividness of his inner vision of Margaret lead him on to tell her story to the Poet until, as if suddenly becoming aware of the effect he may be having on his audience, he stops. With an effort, the old man turns from his memory of Margaret speaking "to me here beneath these trees" (l. 184) to the trees as he sees them now, from the human grief of the scene he remembers to the happy natural peace of this summer noon. There is in the scene before them a message to both speaker and listener. The Wanderer asks:

Why should a tear be in an old man's eye?
Why should we thus with an untoward mind

And in the weakness of humanity
From natural wisdom turn our hearts away,
To natural comfort shut our eyes and ears,
And feeding on disquiet thus disturb
The calm of Nature with our restless thoughts?

(ll. 192-8)

Although natural processes and cycles may destroy and kill, they are also the bringers of contentment and joy, as the sights and sounds of the grove in a bright summer's noon prove. To the Wanderer there is a reproach in the peace of the scene before them: he and the Poet must not reject Nature's comforting example by dwelling on pain and the past. Like the dreaming man described at the beginning of the book, they must learn to accept Nature's ability to soften and distance her harshness, to allow the past to pass gently away, and to become at one with present peace. As if to give this message time to work upon his readers, Wordsworth here makes a break in his story, and marks the end of Part One.

In the Poet's varying reactions to the breaking off of the tale, Wordsworth offers us a commentary on the ambivalence of the Wanderer's own responses in Part One. At first, the tale passes from the Poet's mind "like a forgotten sound" (l. 204), the way of natural wisdom which the old man had just advocated. Then, there is a shift:

In my own despite
I thought of that poor woman as of one
Whom I had known and loved....
... the things of which he spoke
Seemed present. (ll. 206-8, 211-12)

The Poet is now aware of two scenes, one outward and in the present, one internal and in the past. Although the inner scene leaves him with a sense of "heartfelt chillness in my veins" (l. 213), his initial perception of the outer scene as empty, desolate and dreary has now given way to a vision of the ruin as "tranquil" (l. 218) and the sun as "comfort[ing]" (l. 216). The deepening complexity of the Poet's reaction to the story mirrors the ambivalence of the Wanderer's response.

When the Poet asks the old man to continue his tale, the Wanderer's reply is directed both at the younger man and at himself. It might seem like "wantonness" (l. 221) to rehearse the misery of others, "Even of the dead" (l. 224), but this need not necessarily be so. The "mournful

thoughts" (l. 227) with which they will be occupied if he goes on with the story have, like the poets' invocations, a positive shaping power: "A power to virtue friendly" (l. 229). Truly perceived, there is value in grief and "future good" (l. 226) in looking inward and backward, rather than outward and at the present.

The Wanderer is, somewhat uneasily, about to tell a tale that exists in the mind alone,

A tale of silent suffering, hardly clothed
In bodily form, and to the grosser sense
But ill adapted, scarcely palpable
To him who does not think. (ll. 233-6)

As we have seen, Margaret's life gradually becomes wholly inward, and unresponsive to the encroachment of time and natural change about her. Similarly, in the course of telling her tale, the Wanderer is overcome by the vividness of her presence to his mind's eye. There are moments when Margaret seems to him to be somehow outside time, somehow still in existence:

A momentary trance comes over me,
And to myself I seem to muse on one
By sorrow laid asleep or borne away,
A human being destined to awake
To human life, or something very near
To human life, when he shall come again
For whom she suffered. (ll. 369-75)

His vision is not one which can sustain itself, however: she is dead and his heart "sinks" within him.

The Wanderer's tale ends and the Poet is silent. He has taken the full force of the story and the old man's sorrow into himself, and at first can only grieve, "in weakness" (l. 495) and "in ... impotence" (l. 500). The feeling of "a brother's love" (l. 499) for Margaret comes to comfort him and then reveals to him traces of her that even yet remain in the scene before him,

That secret spirit of humanity
Which, 'mid the calm oblivious tendencies
Of nature, 'mid her plants, her weeds, and flowers,
And silent overgrowings, still survived. (ll. 503-6)

The Poet relates his inner vision of her, not to the emblems of her obliteration, but to the traces of her presence which yet remain in spite of Nature's "calm oblivious tendencies" and "silent overgrowings." The Wanderer, however, relates his memory of Margaret to a

different perception of Nature altogether. His advice to the Poet ("Be wise and cheerful, and no longer read / The forms of things with an unworthy eye" ll. 510-11), and his description of Margaret in death ("She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here" l. 512), stem from an image of natural tranquillity which the scene before them had offered him once before in the past. The "rank spear-grass" (l. 108) which had expressed to him the desolation of Margaret and her love by indifferent Nature was, at the time of which he now speaks, "silver'd o'er" (l. 515) by a beautifying, mediating Nature, offering

So still an image of tranquillity,
So calm and still, and looked so beautiful
Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind,
That what we feel of sorrow and despair
From ruin and from change, and all the grief
The passing shews of being leave behind,
Appeared an idle dream that could not live
Where meditation was. I turned away
And walked along my road in happiness. (ll. 517-25)

Though Nature has undoubtedly destroyed Margaret and her "peculiar nook of earth" (l. 70), and though at times the memory of what has been and now is lost forever can overwhelm the present, neither of these perceptions is that of the "wiser mind" (l. 118). Those who "read / The forms of things with a []worthy eye" (ll. 510-11) will, after struggling with other visions, accept the comfort that Nature offers them.

The closing lines of the Book gently corroborate the Wanderer's advice. As they sit among their thoughts, he and the Poet are "Admonished" (l. 530) by the sun's "slant and mellow radiance" (l. 527) and the melodies of birds to return to the present and enjoy "the sweet hour coming on" (l. 530). Nature at her gentlest mediates with twilight beauty the harshnesses of the day, and the Poet and the Wanderer leave behind "those silent walls" for walls peopled by the living, "A rustic inn" where they will receive a living welcome.

b) The Solitary's Valley

The next three Books of The Excursion¹ concentrate on the story of the Solitary, and are centred in the valley in which he lives. There are a number of similarities between the story of Margaret and of this

lonely man. Each of them has known the happiness of marriage and family, and lost that joy. Each has longed for reunion with their loved ones, he across the barrier of death, she across a gulf of absence and uncertainty. Each becomes indifferent to the world around them and its ongoing reality, living only for an inner vision and sorrow. The Wanderer describes the Solitary at an early stage of his bereavement:

... he wept, he prayed
For his dismissal, day and night, compelled
To hold communion with the grave, and face
With pain the regions of eternity.
An uncomplaining apathy displaced
This anguish; and, indifferent to delight,
To aim and purpose, he consumed his days,
To private interest dead, and public care.
So lived he; so he might have died. (II, ll. 202-10)

Here, however, the parallels between their stories end, for the Solitary, unlike Margaret, does not sink steadily into death beneath the weight of his longing. Instead, he returns to the outer world, drawn back into relationship with public concerns by the lure of the French Revolution, only to suffer loss in another way. His new hopes are disillusioned and die; his spirit takes "a mortal taint" (II, l. 245) from the evil things in which he placed his trust. He disjoins himself both from his clerical calling and from the faith it represents, and finds himself separated from "them whom he had laid / In earth's dark chambers, with a Christian's hope!" (II, ll. 247-8) not only by physical death but also by the loss of that hope. When he cuts himself off a second time from the outside world to live in solitude, he is divided from humanity (both living and dead) by a bitter cynicism as well as by grief.

This is the Wanderer's version of the Solitary's story, told to the Poet as they travel towards the valley in order to prepare his mind for the encounter that is to come. The Solitary himself is given the opportunity to tell his own tale in Book III, and the differences between his perceptions and those of the Wanderer form the basis for the rest of Books III and IV.

With the death of his two children, the Solitary finds his happiness and security "shattered" (III, l. 638) with

ferocious suddenness. The deep disjunctiveness of death is expressed vividly in his description of their loss:

- Our blooming girl,
Caught in the gripe of death ...

... was conveyed
From us to inaccessible worlds, to regions
Where height, or depth, admits not the approach
Of living man, though longing to pursue....
The brother followed; and was seen no more!

(III, ll. 638-9, 641-4, 649)

Their mother, too, is separated from him, first by the greater achievements of her faith, then by the depth to which she sinks, into "a gulf obscure of silent grief" (III, l. 675), and finally, by her death. The rest of the Solitary's experiences of hope and despair are also presented with a vividness and a strength of emotion that is in contrast to the Wanderer's gentler rendition. More important, however, than this quite natural difference between the two versions are the different conclusions the tellers draw from the story and the different evaluations of the Solitary's present state of mind. The Wanderer sees his condition as a "malady" (II, l. 306): his spirit has taken a "mortal taint" (II, l. 245); its perceptions are diseased and urgently require correction and cure. The Solitary, on the other hand, is convinced that his picture of human nature (his own and that of others) is dreadfully accurate, and that his decision to withdraw into solitude and isolation is a reasoned response to that understanding. Death is the desired end of his existence, not as a gateway to a new and better life but as the true "sanctuary / From doubt and sorrow," to be found only in "the senseless grave" (III, ll. 223-4).

... sleep
Doth, in my estimate of good, appear
A better state than waking; death than sleep:
Feelingly sweet is stillness after storm,
Though under covert of the wormy ground!

(III, ll. 277-81)²

The emphasis of his vision is on the earth-bound, mortal aspects of this life and he judges all things accordingly, even the works of Nature. While the sight of weather-worn stones of strange shape inspires in the Wanderer thoughts which rise up "until the scale / Of time and conscious nature disappear, / Lost in unsearchable eternity!" (III, ll. 110-12), for the Solitary these same

shapes are "Fraught rather with depression than delight" (III, l. 156). All things speak to him of his own condition, a subject for "Pity and scorn, and melancholy pride" (III, l. 142). Imperception may seem to the Solitary preferable to the despair which his own too-clear vision of mortal nature induces, but given the fact that he himself does perceive, there is a certain smug satisfaction in looking the worst in the face unflinchingly. The Solitary takes an intellectual pride in cynicism and gloom.³

In Book IV, the old man musters his arguments. While not denying that "Man is of dust" (IV, l. 140), the Wanderer bears witness to the existence in humankind of a spiritual aspect also, which continually aspires beyond itself. The Solitary is not despondent because there is no spiritual reality, but because he is unable to sustain his perception of that reality. The Wanderer defines sorrow as the child of such incapacity:

... ethereal hopes are [man's],
Which, when they should sustain themselves aloft,
Want due consistence; like a pillar of smoke,
That with majestic energy from earth
Rises; but, having reached the thinner air,
Melts, and dissolves, and is not longer seen.
From this infirmity of mortal kind
Sorrow proceeds, which else were not....
For who could sink and settle to that point
Of selfishness; so senseless who could be
As long and perseveringly to mourn
For any object of his love, removed
From this unstable world, if he could fix
A satisfying view upon that state
Of pure, imperishable, blessedness,
Which reason promises, and holy writ
Ensures to all believers? (IV, ll. 140-7, 153-61)

The story of the death of the old Pensioner, related in Book II, might seem to corroborate the Solitary's vision of human life and sorrow: isolated, unloved, the old man faces death alone on a mountain-side, and after he is buried in the ground, grief for him barely outlives the day. Yet at the heart of the incident lies the Solitary's vision on the mountain, which proclaims vividly another interpretation of human life and death. The sight is one which

... a step,
A single step, that freed me from the skirts
Of the blind vapour, opened to my view. (II, ll. 829-31)

Before him is an image of heaven, seen in a natural
skyscape of clouds after storm, and for a moment the
Solitary steps out of his fog of despondency and is able to
perceive beyond himself.

That which I saw was the revealed abode
Of Spirits in beatitude: my heart
Swelled in my breast. - "I have been dead," I cried,
"And now I live! ... " (II, ll. 872-6)

The moment of insight does not last, however; his habitual
sense of isolation is borne in upon him again, and the
vision becomes for him one of inaccessibility. His cry of
"now I live!" collapses into "Oh! wherefore do I live?"
(II, l. 876) - "And with that pang I prayed to be no more!"
(II, l. 877). The vision first reveals to him his own
state of spiritual "deadness"⁴ by suddenly raising him up
onto a plane in which the spirit can live; then, he draws
back into himself, contracting into despondency, and
praying for a release from longing into non-existence. It
is not the vision of "the abode of Spirits" which changes,
but the Solitary's perception of it which does so. "The
apparition faded not away ... " but " ... I descended."
(II, ll. 880-1).

This is an apposite illustration of the nature of
human grief according to the Wanderer's definition: an
inability to sustain spiritual vision. Some mourning for
the death of loved ones is proper and right, but to be
overwhelmed by sorrow as the Solitary has been is wrong,⁵
and caused by this perceptual handicap. The Wanderer tells
him

If grief be something hallowed and ordained,
If, in proportion, it be just and meet,
Yet, through this weakness of the general heart,
Is it enabled to maintain its hold
In that excess which conscience disapproves.

(IV, ll. 148-52)

Excess, too, is the key to the Solitary's other grief, "The
loss of confidence in social man" (IV, l. 261): as his
hopes had been too high, now his disappointment is too
severe; as his perception of human potential had been
extreme and inaccurate, so too now is his perception of
human worthles^sness. The Solitary's response throughout has
lacked clear-sightedness, the one capacity on which it has
been shown he prides himself.

The Wanderer states at the beginning of his

dissertation the basic tenet of his faith and its bearing on his understanding of grief and bereavement:

One adequate support
For the calamities of mortal life
Exists - one only; an assured belief
That the procession of our fate, how'er
Sad or disturbed, is ordered by a Being
Of infinite benevolence and power;
Whose everlasting purposes embrace
All accidents, converting them to good. (IV, ll. 10-17)

Yet the old man does not expect to convince his desponding friend simply by asserting that he must have the faith that he has not. Instead, he prepares to lead the Solitary towards convincement by means of a capacity which he does have - a susceptibility to Nature.

The Wanderer is concerned here with Nature as a medium in which and through which divinity can be discerned. Although by no means a substitute for revealed religion, Nature nevertheless constantly strives to draw her admirers beyond her material self to God. And her accessibility is described as being even greater than that promised by Christ in the Gospels:⁶ as the Wanderer says of her,

How bountiful is Nature! he shall find
Who seeks not; and to him, who hath not asked,
Large measure shalt be dealt. (IV, ll. 466-8)

The old man urges his friend to make Nature his companion, to weary himself in physical pursuits in the open air, not only for his body's health but also for his spirit's. To deny the spirit within relations with the spiritual dimension of the outer natural world is to deny the inner soul food and light by which to live. It is possible to be with Nature and perceive only that which is material, but the Solitary must strive against such a condition, for this is as deadening as having no contact with her at all. It would be better to be a superstition-ridden pagan than to see and hear only

The repetitions wearisome of sense,
Where soul is dead, and feeling hath no place;
Where knowledge, ill begun in cold remark
On outward things, with formal inference ends.
(IV, ll. 620-3)⁷

Throughout history, people have been drawn through Nature to the divine; by truly perceiving the material world they have discovered the immaterial and the spiritual. The

Wanderer offers examples from religions of the past - Persian, Chaldean, Greek - which believed in a natural world animated by gods, goddesses and divine manifestations of all kinds. Though a staunch Christian himself, the old man praises the impulse behind such religion, even "Though far misled" (IV, l. 944).

Beyond their own poor natures and above
They looked; were humbly thankful for the good
Which the warm sun solicited, and earth
Bestowed; were gladsome, - and their moral sense
They fortified with reverence for the Gods;
And they had hopes that overstepped the Grave.
(IV, ll. 935-40)

Modern materialist science and philosophy are blind to the all-pervading spiritual dimension of Nature which these ignorant pagans perceived, and see instead only isolated facts and phenomena,

Viewing all objects unremittingly
In disconnection dead and spiritless ...
... waging thus
An impious warfare with the very life
Of our own souls! (IV, ll. 961-2, 966-8)

Such lifeless philosophies are not the proper guides for the Solitary's despair. If grief is the inability of the soul to sustain moments of insight into the divine, then it is to Nature and her "DIVINITY" (IV, l. 984) that the Solitary should look, seeking in a true relationship with Nature both the opportunities for such moments, and the ever-increasing strength to sustain them. The Wanderer has now said all that he can in this setting; on the next day and in the next Book, the disputants must move on.

c) The Churchyard

In Book I, different readings of the setting had illustrated different interpretations of the relation of Nature to human mortality and bereavement. Nature could be seen as a force indifferent to sorrow and destructive of human life; it could be ignored in favour of an inner vision; or it could be seen as a mediating power with which the heart could commune and from which it could draw comfort. In Books II-IV, the Wanderer had sought to lay before the Solitary a vision of Nature as manifesting the divine. If ceaseless grief at the loss of others is the result of a human inability to perceive the divine pattern

then, the Wanderer argued, the bereaved one should seek out Nature to soothe sorrow and strengthen the capacity for sustained spiritual perception. In Books V-VII, the three characters (the Wanderer, the Poet and the Solitary) move out of the barely inhabited valley into another more peopled setting, which a fourth character (the Pastor) will interpret for them. The question of human grief and mortality will now be considered in yet another light.

The Solitary has renewed the discussion of the day before and is prepared to argue further in support of his gloomy view of our mortal nature. The graves about him seem to offer an apt illustration for his thoughts, which recoil from the previous day's heights of spiritual vision and admonitions to hope. To his companions he says

... stoop, and place the prospect of the soul
In sober contrast with reality,
And man's substantial life. If this mute earth
Of what it holds could speak, and every grave
Were as a volume ...
We should recoil, stricken with sorrow and shame,
To see disclosed, by such dread proof, how ill
That which is done accords with what is known
To reason, and by conscience is enjoined;
How idly, how perversely, life's whole course,
To this conclusion, deviates from the line.

(V, ll. 248-52, 254-9)

To compare "the prospect of the soul" with "this conclusion" is exactly what the next hundred pages of the poem will be doing, in the course of which another very different interpretation of the graveyard setting will be propounded. But first, a new character must be introduced, and the nature of the dispute laid out before him.

The Wanderer explains to the Pastor the nature of their discussion:

Is Man
A child of hope?...
... A living power
Is virtue, or no better than a name,
Fleeting as health or beauty, and unsound?
So that the only substance which remains ...
Among so many shadows, are the pains
And penalties of miserable life,
Doomed to decay, and then expire in dust!

(V, ll. 465-5, 471-8)

Hope and trust in the reality of a divine purpose which subsumes all disjunctions are on one side; on the other is the belief that, in spite of the promises of life's springtime, disillusion, death and decay are the

inescapable final harvest of our nature. The Pastor's immediate reponse to the challenge is to caution that we are too close to ourselves to perceive human nature with absolute clarity. Drawing back from a discourse on epistemology, however, he suggests simply that one's vision of human existence will depend on one's approach. This is not perhaps a strikingly original idea, but in the illustration which follows, new weight and significance is given to it.

Thus, when in changeful April fields are white
With new-fallen snow, if from the sullen north
Your walk conduct you hither, ere the sun
Hath gained his noontide height, this churchyard,
filled

With mounds transversely lying side by side
From east to west, before you will appear
An unillumined, blank, and dreary, plain,
With more than wintry cheerlessness and gloom
Saddening the heart. Go forward, and look back;
Look, from the quarter whence the lord of light,
Of life, of love, and gladness doth dispense
His beams; which, unexcluded in their fall,
Upon the southern side of every grave
Have gently exercised a melting power;
Then will a vernal prospect greet your eye,
All fresh and beautiful, and green and bright,
Hopeful and cheerful....

- This contrast, not unsuitable to life,
Is to that other state more apposite,
Death and its two-fold aspect! wintry - one,
Cold, sullen, blank, from hope and joy shut out;
The other, which the ray divine hath touched,
Replete with vivid promise, bright as spring.

(V, ll. 531-47, 552-7)

In this illustration, Nature clothes the setting in significance for the human observer to read. From one viewpoint, the message of the snow on the graves and the uninterrupted prospect of wintry gloom is that life and death too are disconsolate states, admitting of no hope or happiness. From another viewpoint, which shows the graves brightened by sun and warmth into "a vernal prospect," it is possible to read in the setting a message of hope and new life, a resurrection out of grief and into joy, out of dark decay and into celestial bliss. The interpretation is in the eye of the beholder; Nature can be read to corroborate either side of the debate. The Pastor's contribution to the discussion is not to end here, however, for the Wanderer asks him now to tell the stories of some

of those who lie beneath the earth here at their feet, giving "for our abstractions, solid facts; / For our disputes, plain pictures" (V, ll. 637-8). The Pastor complies.

Some of the tales told by the Pastor are of specific relevance to the Solitary's gloomy vision. The Botanist, for example, (VI, ll. 95-211), who achieved peace of mind through natural pursuits, had suffered a loss similar in some ways to the Solitary's - separation from a loved one. The stories of the Miner who persevered (VI, ll. 212-61) and of the youth who didn't (VI, ll. 262-375) each reflect on the Solitary's own weakness and "abused talents" (VI, Argument). The Priest who, in his old age, lost all his family and was left alone in the world (VII, ll. 31-29)¹ suffered a bereavement like the Solitary's, yet remained active and social, "A man of hope and forward-looking mind / Even to the last!" (VII, ll. 276-7). Other stories which offer little obvious resemblance to that of the Solitary nevertheless provide "morals" which the Wanderer's friend might well take to heart. The strength and energy in adversity of the avaricious woman (VI, ll. 675-777), though in an ignoble cause, nevertheless illustrate "elements of virtue, that declare / The native grandeur of the human soul" (VI, ll. 665-6) - a "native grandeur" which the Solitary had denied existed. Similarly, the compensations of the blind man's sightlessness (VII, ll. 481-55) suggest to the Wanderer thoughts of

How, likewise, under sufferance divine,
Darkness is banished from the realms of death,
By man's imperishable spirit, quelled
(VII, ll. 528-30)

- thoughts which might help the Solitary in his sad hopelessness. But it is neither the content of the stories nor the morals that may be drawn from them that contain the Pastor's message. This lies in the tone of the telling and the atmosphere of loving concern that informs both the stories and the churchyard itself.

The Pastor's stories are "Authentic epitaphs" (V, l. 651) and share with the epitaph the task of teaching his listeners "To prize the breath we share with human kind; / And look upon the dust of man with awe" (V, ll. 656-7), to perceive both life and death in another, truer way. The

Poet later describes the churchyard as the

... one Enclosure where the voice that speaks
In envy or detraction is not heard;
Which malice may not enter ...
Where love and pity tenderly unite
With resignation; and no jarring note
Intrudes, the peaceful concert to disturb
Of amity and gratitude. (VI, ll. 638-40, 642-5)²

The Pastor's description goes further:

To a mysteriously-united pair
This place is consecrate; to Death and Life,
And to the best affections that proceed
From their conjunction; consecrate to faith
In him who bled for man upon the cross;
Hallowed to revelation; and no less
To reason's mandates; and the hopes divine
Of pure imagination; - above all,
To charity, and love, that have provided,
Within these precincts, a capacious bed
And receptacle, open to the good
And evil, to the just and the unjust;
In which they find an equal resting-place ...
(V, 903-15)

The churchyard is the manifestation of a belief in an after-life, suggested and confirmed by revelation and reason, imagination and faith, consecrated to Death and Life as "mysteriously-united" rather than mutually exclusive. It is the visible expression of the love of the living for the dead, and of a belief in divine love. And it is the place in which thoughts of the true nature of human life can reach us, repeated on monuments and gravestones and silently expressed even by the unornamented graves - the conviction that

... life is love and immortality,
The being one, and one the element.
There lies the channel, and original bed,
From the beginning, hollowed out and scooped
For Man's affections - else betrayed and lost,
And swallowed up 'mid deserts infinite!
This is the genuine course, the aim, and end
Of prescient reason....
Life, I repeat, is energy of love
Divine or human; exercised in pain,
In strife, in tribulation; and ordained,
If so approved and sanctified, to pass,
Through shades and silent rest, to endless joy.
(V, ll. 1002-9, 1012-16)

The message of the churchyard has been interpreted for the little group by the Pastor. His simple recitation of human lives and deaths, truly told in a tone "hallowed by love,"⁴ draws the disputants quietly into harmony with the

peace and tranquillity of the setting. Death is at once transcended and sanctified by love and the conviction of immortality which attends it. The Solitary's own vision of disjunction and decay has been gently countered, and the process of his education taken one step further.

d) The Parsonage and its Environs

The Solitary has been drawn into the society of others carefully and by degrees: first by the introduction of a single new character (the Pastor) into the debate; second by the stories of numbers of people either safely dead or only glimpsed at a distance. When the Pastor tries to bring him into contact with living society at a much closer range, by inviting him home, the "pensive Sceptic of the lonely vale" (VIII, l. 1) seeks to substitute a conversation about people for an actual encounter with them. The emphasis of this conversation, and of that which continues at the Parsonage when he finally submits to entering, is on the physical and spiritual conditions of human existence in the present day, particularly among the masses of the poor. Yet it is still the Solitary's condition that is being addressed. The hopelessness and spiritual "deadness" which result from the physical oppression of the poor differ little from that caused by intellectual disillusion and grief, and the conversation itself, by exercising the Solitary's feelings of concern for others, works towards his cure.

At the beginning of Book IX, the Wanderer states his belief in "An active Principle" informing all things.

Whate'er exists hath properties that spread
Beyond itself, communicating good,
A simple blessing, or with evil mixed;
Spirit that knows no insulated spot,
No chasm, no solitude; from link to link
It circulates, the Soul of all the worlds.
This is the freedom of the universe;
Unfolded still the more, more visible,
The more we know. (IX, ll. 10-18)

The Wanderer had earlier urged the Solitary to turn to Nature in his sorrow in order to strengthen his perception of the divine and the eternal. The more he truly knew of Nature, the Wanderer had argued, the more his friend would know of the reality of the spirit and the less he would grieve. Here, the old man re-asserts his vision of Nature

not only as a storehouse of divine images and allegories, but as the home of the same spiritual essence as that which is called the soul in humans. To live, the human soul must be allowed communion with the spirit without, in Nature and in others. To this definition of what sustains the life of the spirit, the Wanderer now adds the necessity of hope and, for the life of hope, the necessity of meditated action:

The food of hope
Is meditated action; robbed of this
Her sole support, she [i.e. hope] languishes and dies.
We perish also; for we live by hope
And by desire; we see by the glad light
And breathe the sweet air of futurity;
And so we live, or else we have no life. (IX, ll. 20-6)

The Pastor's and the Wanderer's definitions of the essence of life complement each other: in one, the "energy of love" (V, l. 1012) is coupled with a conviction of immortality; in the other, the communion of the inner spirit with that which is without is paired with active hope. Unfortunately, however, the physical conditions under which many of their compatriots struggle lead to the destruction of that essence and of the spirit itself.

The Wanderer is not without admiration for the new industrialism, the improvements in transportation and agriculture, and the other technical advances which have so altered the face of the country since his younger days. Nevertheless he is also keenly aware of "the darker side / Of this great change" (VIII, ll. 151-2), and in this concern the Solitary joins him. The ceaseless round of industrial labour, the use of human beings as if they were senseless tools, the breaking down of the family's loving bonds create a new and falsely-applauded version of the old oppression of rural poverty and over-work. Under conditions such as these the body will wear out, sicken and die, but the inner spirit also cannot live. The Solitary describes the oppressed:

On themselves
They cannot lean, nor turn to their own hearts
To know what they must do; their wisdom is
To look into the eyes of others, thence
To be instructed what they must avoid:
Or rather, let us say, how least observed,
How with most quiet and most silent death,
With the least taint and injury to the air

The oppressor breathes, their human form divine,
And their immortal soul, may waste away.
(IX, ll. 143-52)¹

The life and death of the body and of the spirit, although intimately intertwined, are not identical; the oppressed are doubly "murdered" by the conditions which they are forced to suffer.

The conversation on the present day travels far, encompassing many subjects; all serve to further the Solitary's re-education by exercising his ability to perceive beyond himself. But Wordsworth did not wish his poem to end on an exclusively human note. Nature reminds the group of her special role in the life of the spirit by showing another spectacular sunset. It is the Pastor who reads the sight for them, praying

Eternal Spirit! universal God!
Power inaccessible to human thought,
Save by degrees and steps which thou hast deigned
To furnish; for this effluence of thyself,
To the infirmity of mortal sense
Vouchsafed; this local transitory type
Of thy paternal splendours,
... - accept the thanks
Which we, thy humble Creatures, here convened,
Presume to offer ... (IX, ll. 614-20, 622-4)

The Solitary has come a long way since Book II. His "solitary" experience on the mountain-side is repeated now in the company of friends, who engage together in a "vesper-service" (IX, l. 755) in the open air. Heaven and the splendours of the after-life are still only known through the agency of a "transitory" image, yet this time the image produces gratitude in those who see it, rather than despair. As the Pastor had said, life and death have each "a two-fold aspect"

... wintry - one,
Cold, sullen, blank, from hope and joy shut out;
The other, which the ray divine hath touched,
Replete with vivid promise, bright as spring.
(V, ll. 554-7)

The man who had lived so long under the shadow of death's "wintry" aspect has travelled some little distance into the light of hope, a journey that does not end with the close of the poem.

"Another sun,"
Said he, "shall shine upon us, ere we part;
Another sun, and peradventure more." (IX, ll. 779-81)

The sun, "lord of light, / Of life, of love, and gladness" (V, ll. 540-1) is to preside some few days more over the heart and mind of the Solitary. The poem which began with Margaret's desolated hut and the Solitary's isolated despair closes in an assertion of hope and a vision of "our mortal Nature" which transcends isolation and grief, revealing death itself to be "Replete with vivid promise" (V, l. 557), a beginning and not an end.

It is not surprising that what Wordsworth had to say about death changed a good deal over the sixty years of his poetic career, for his own life did not remain static, and some of the convictions and intuitions of his early years did not stand up to the procession of sorrows initiated by John's drowning in 1805. Wordsworth's poems on children and adults, for example, and the different ways they perceive mortality, expressed at first a yearning towards the past and childhood vision; later, he wrote instead of an "adult" vision centred on the future, and of death understood in terms of an after-life in heaven. Similarly, his early poems on graves and burial were concerned with forms of continued existence in this world, while his later writings concentrated on the hope of new life in a world to come. The change in emphasis in his poems on the community and death, from an advocacy of the criminal's point of view to one of society and the status quo, was the result of a constricting nervous dread at the way of the world which grew with age. The shift from an exclusive portrayal of the poor and their griefs to an interest in the bereavements of the aristocracy as well may have come about simply through the discovery that the rich were people, too. And along with changes in attitude and approach such as these went an undeniable drop in the quality of much of Wordsworth's poetry. The intensity of Wordsworth's early vision seems to have burnt itself out, though periodic flashes of power continued to illuminate the poet's writings to the end.

In spite of the fact that Wordsworth's poetry on mortality did change with time, the framework of his exploration of death and grief remained the same. It seemed to him that an awareness of mortality does not come upon the individual in a vacuum, but in the midst of a web of overlapping relationships and interconnections, some with other people, some with Nature. Depending on a person's place within such a web, death would be perceived one way or another; if relationships changed, the understanding of death may also alter. It seemed to him that, on the one hand, feelings of isolation and despair were linked to a sense of death as the final disjunction, while on the other, love and hope were the corollaries of a belief in a larger continuity. The full life and health of the human spirit depended on the active exercise of the heart's affections, and this was impossible where a sense of discontinuity and death predominated. It was evident to him that a person's vision of death influenced the whole of his or her life and could not be segregated from it. Insights such as these laid the foundation of Wordsworth's continuing struggle to portray the essence of human mortality in poetry.

Wordsworth's commitment was to clarity of vision and, therefore, to the Imagination,

... which, in truth,
Is but another name for absolute strength
And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
And Reason in her most exalted mood.¹

In spite of a vivid awareness of the alternatives, he sought to portray in his poetry the children of such clarity: a truer sense of human relatedness, a strengthened capacity for love and hope, a belief in continuity greater than death or disjunction, grief or fear. His search was not for a way to exclude mortality from our thoughts, but to find a place for it in a pattern of meaning where it would not longer terrify and dismay. Some of the poetic results of Wordsworth's search still inspire us and extend the limits of our vision; some do not; but from a careful consideration of them all much can be learned of the encounters of one of the greatest poets of the English language with one of the most important concepts of human consciousness - the awareness of death.

6.) The Excursion

1. As printed in PW V.
2. For example, James Montgomery (author of The World Before the Flood) wrote this eulogy:

The poem in my opinion, an opinion confirmed by repeated perusals of it, is incomparably the greatest and most beautiful work of the present age of poetry; and sets Mr. W. beyond controversy above all the living, and almost all the dead, of his fraternity.

Letters (1812-1820), p. 213. D.W., quoting from a letter by John Edwards (the poet quoted by W.W. in the "Essays Upon Epitaphs," Prose II, p. 55), to Catherine Clarkson. 16 March, 1815.

3. For example, William Hazlitt commented:

[The Excursion] is more than any thing in the world like Robinson Crusoe's boat, which would have been an excellent good boat, and would have carried him to the other side of the globe, but that he could not get it out of the sand where it stuck fast.

The Complete Works of William Hazlitt ed. P.P. Howe (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1930). "Lectures on the English Poets," vol. 5, p. 156.

4. The Poetical Works of John Milton ed. Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955). "Lycidas," vol. 2, pp. 163-70, l. 193.

a) The Ruined Cottage

1. The history of "The Ruined Cottage" and its various versions has been ably charted by Jonathan Wordsworth (The Music of Humanity London: Nelson, 1969), Mark Reed (Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Early Years 1770-1799 Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967 and Wordsworth: Chronology of the Middle Years 1800-1815 Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), and James Butler (The Ruined Cottage and the Pedlar by William Wordsworth Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979). In choosing MS. D for particular consideration in this chapter I am following in the footsteps of Jonathan Wordsworth, seeing it, as he does, as "the best balanced and most coherent surviving version of The Ruined Cottage." (p. 31).

2. In the final version of the poem which became Book I of The Excursion, lines describing the life of the Wanderer are added and some of the details of Margaret's story are softened or altered. For example, the passage describing her in death which begins "She is dead, / The Worm is on her cheek ..." (MS. D, ll. 103-116) becomes in the published version

She is dead,
The light extinguished in her lonely hut,
The hut itself abandoned to decay,
And she forgotten in the quiet grave (I, ll. 507-10),

thus making the contrast between this picture and the later

one of the silvered spear-grass (MS. D, ll. 512-25; I, ll. 941-56) much less vivid. As late as 1845 other changes were made, possibly in response to criticism such as John Wilson's (PW V, p. 415) concerning the lack of explicit Christianity in the poem. The Wanderer's closing speech in this Book is altered to include reference to Margaret praying and thus finding consolation in her sorrow. She is described as

One,
Who, in her worst distress, had ofttimes felt
The unbounded might of prayer; and learned, with soul
Fixed on the Cross, that consolation springs,
From sources deeper far than deepest pain,
For the meek Sufferer. (I, ll. 934-9)

The old man's own grief also finds relief more explicitly consistent with the message of the rest of The Excursion. His original reliance on imaginative "meditation" (MS. D, l. 524) becomes a stated belief that human sorrow can hold no

... dominion o'er the enlightened spirit
Whose meditative sympathies repose
Upon the breast of Faith. (I, ll. 953-5)

Although these changes clutter up the poem with concepts considered more fully in the later Books, they do not alter the primary concern of "The Ruined Cottage" with the relationship of Nature to human bereavement and death.

3. Wordsworth returns to the image of this man in Book IX, when the Wanderer compares the "disencumbered" perceptions of old age to those of one who sits on an eminence:

For on that superior height
Who sits, is disencumbered from the press
Of near obstructions, and is privileged
To breathe in solitude, above the host
Of ever-humming insects, 'mid thin air
That suits not them. (IX, ll. 69-74)

b) The Solitary's Valley

1. PW V, pp. 1-312.

2. Cp. Wordsworth's description of the grave as a sanctuary after storm in his poem on George and Sarah Green. (Letters 1806-1811, pp. 219-20. W.W. to S.T.C. 19 April, 1808).

3. Cp. Wordsworth's strictures on "that most lamentable snare, / The self-reliance of despair" (ll. 1055-6) in "The White Doe." (PW III, pp. 281-340).

4. Cp. the Wanderer's description of the life of his own spirit. In spite of the poverty of his childhood,

By [God's] grace
The particle divine remained unquenched;
And, 'mid the wild weeds of a rugged soil,
Thy bounty caused to flourish deathless flowers,
From paradise transplanted: wintry age

Impends; the frost will gather round my heart;
If the flowers wither, I am worse than dead!

PW V, pp. 1-312. The Excursion, IV, ll. 50-6.

5. Cp. Section I: Attitudes to Death: Bereavement.

6.

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall
find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

Matthew 7:7 and Luke 11:9.

7. Cp. PW III, pp. 18-19. (c. 1802-1804)

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everthing, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. - Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

c) The Churchyard

1. Cp. Section III: Death, the Individual and the Family:
The Last of the Line.

2.

It is such a happiness to have, in an unkind World, one
Enclosure where the voice of detraction is not heard;
where the traces of evil inclinations are unknown;
where contentment prevails, and there is no jarring
tone in the peaceful Concert of amity and gratitude.

Prose II, pp. 63-4. "Essays Upon Epitaphs."

3. Cp. Prose II, pp. 50-2. "Essays Upon Epitaphs."

4. Ibid., p. 58.

d) The Parsonage and its Environs

1. Cp. the Female Vagrant's speech in "Salisbury Plain"
(1793-1794):

Oh! dreadful price of being to resign
All that is dear in being! better far
In Want's most lonely cave till death to pine
Unseen, unheard, unwatched by any star,
Or in the streets and walks where proud men are,
Better our dying bodies to obtrude,
Than dog-like, wading at the heels of war
Protract a curst existence, with the brood
That lap (their very nourishment!) their brothers' blood.
(ll. 307-15)

The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth ed. Stephen Gill, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 21-38.

1. Prelude (1805-1806), XIII, ll. 167-70.

Conclusion

In 1806, Wordsworth wrote of his vocation:

... unto me I feel
That an internal brightness is vouchsafed
That must not die, that must not pass away....
Possessions have I, wholly, solely mine,
Something within, which yet is shared by none -
Not even the nearest to me and most dear -
Something which power and effort may impart.
I would impart it; I would spread it wide,
Immortal in the world which is to come.
I would not wholly perish even in this,
Lie down and be forgotten in the dust,
I and the modest partners of my days,
Making a silent company in death.
It must not be, if I divinely taught
Am privileged to speak as I have felt ...¹

Wordsworth chose as his poetic domain "man in his essentially human character and relations."² In spite of the changes in vision which sorrow and a long life inevitably brought, the poet remained true to his choice and, as we have seen, continued to face up to the centrality of death to his poetic concern. Throughout his career, Wordsworth sought to portray the place of death in human life.

The historical^C context of Wordsworth's poems was one in which an awareness of mortality figured prominently. The physical realities of death were forced upon the

consciousness of the poet and his contemporaries intimately and insistently, and questions such as the existence and nature of the after-life, the correct way to die or to grieve, or where and how the dead should be housed, were matters of "popular" concern. Within Wordsworth's immediate circle, parents, children, family and friends were taken, and no stage of his life from childhood to old age was secure from the encroachments of death. As a poet he wrote movingly of experiences of "mortal separation,"³ of the way in which old confidences may crumble and disappear, and "mortal fears" rise up to haunt us. Yet, in spite of a vivid sense that discontinuity and despair might be the reality of human existence, Wordsworth sought for patterns of continuity to believe in which could subsume death and disjunction, grief and fear. At different stages of his life, the basis of those patterns varied: in his early years as a poet, his vision of continuity centred on this world, on relationship to Nature and to kindred hearts; later, it was to the next world he looked, and an earthly life made consistent with the life in heaven. But throughout his career, the conflict between two visions of death - as disjunctive, an end, or as part of a continuing pattern - remained an important component of Wordsworth's poetry.

The Poet's task was not simply one of observing and describing reality, however. To Wordsworth it seemed that his must also be an active role. In the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1850), he wrote:

[The Poet] is the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed; the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time.⁴

By educating the imagination, by extending the range of human vision beyond the limits of the familiar, Wordsworth hoped to draw his readers towards new perceptions of life and death. Isolation, despair and an overwhelming sense of death as the final disjunction are the result of failure of vision, while the educated imagination sees more and more

clearly the interrelatedness of human life, its foundation in love and hope, and the place of death in its continuing pattern. It was Wordsworth's task to "teach" and to "inspire," sharing with his readers visions of

Sorrow that is not sorrow, but delight;
And miserable love, that is not pain
To hear of, for the glory that redounds
Therefrom to human kind, and what we are.⁵

Wordsworth challenges us with the drama of "what we are" rather than "what we do;" his wish was not to "freeze the blood" but instead to "pipe a simple song for thinking hearts,"⁶ and to involve his readers in such a way that their perceptions may be strengthened and revived. Death, grief and bereavement were major figures in the drama, never leaving the stage for long, but greater than them all was hope.

Not without hope we suffer and we mourn.⁷

Our destiny, our nature, and our home
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.⁸

Notes to Conclusion

1. Home at Grasmere ed. Beth Darlington (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), MS. B, ll. 885-7, 897-908.
2. Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers ed. Edith Julia Morley (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1938), p. 535.
3. Home at Grasmere, MS. B, l. 11.
4. Prose I, p. 141.
5. Prelude (1805-1806), XII, ll. 245-8.
6. PW II, pp. 249-54. "Hart-Leap Well," ll. 98, 100.
7. PW IV, pp. 258-60. "Peele Castle," l. 60.
8. Prelude (1805-1806), VI, ll. 538-42.

Appendix

a) Poems Published at the Time of Wordsworth's Death

1.) "Memorial Verses. April 27, 1850"

Goethe in Weimar sleeps, and Greece,
Long since, saw Byron's struggle cease.
But one such death remain'd to come.
The last poetic voice is dumb.
We stand today at Wordsworth's tomb.

When Byron's eyes were shut in death,
We bow'd our heads and held our breath.
He taught us little; but our soul
Had felt him like the thunder's roll.
With shivering heart the strife we saw
Of Passion with eternal Law,
And yet with reverential awe
We watch'd the fount of fiery life
Which flow'd for that Titanic strife.

When Goethe pass'd away, we said, -
'Sunk, then, is Europe's sagest head.
Physician of the iron age,
Goethe has done his pilgrimage.'
He took the suffering human race,
He scann'd each wound, each weakness, near,
And struck his finger on the place,
And said, 'Thou aildest here, and here.'
He look'd on Europe's dying hour,
Of fitful dream and feverish power,
His eye plunged down the seething strife,
The turmoil of expiring life:
He said, 'The end is everywhere;
Art still has truth; take refuge there!'
And he was happy, if to know
Causes of things, and far below
His feet to see the lurid flow
Of terror, and insane distress,
And headlong fate, be happiness.

And Wordsworth! Ah, pale Ghosts, rejoice!
For never has such soothing voice
Been to your shadowy world convey'd
Since erst, at morn, some wandering Shade
Heard the clear song of Orpheus come
Through Hades, and the mournful gloom.
Wordsworth is gone from us - and Ye,
Ah, may ye feel his voice as we!
He too upon a wintry clime
Was fallen, on the iron time.
He found us when the age had bound
Our spirits in a brazen round:
He spoke, and loos'd our heart in tears.
He tore us from the prison-cell
Of festering thoughts and personal fears,
Where we had long been doom'd to dwell.
He laid us, as we lay at birth,
On the cool flowery lap of Earth:
Smiles broke from us, and we had ease,

The hills were around us, and the breeze
Went o'er the sunlit fields again:
Our foreheads felt the wind and rain:
Our youth came back; for there was shed
On spirits that had long been dead,
Spirits deep-crush'd, and closely furl'd,
The freshness of the early world.

Ah! since dark days still bring to light
Man's prudence and man's fiery might,
Time may restore us, in its course,
Goethe's sage mind, and Byron's force;
But where shall Europe's latter hour
Again find Wordsworth's healing power?
Others will teach us how to dare
And against fear our breast to steel;
Others will strengthen us to bear -
But who, ah who, will make us feel?
The cloud of mortal destiny,
Others will front it fearlessly -
But who, like him, will put it by?

Keep fresh the grass upon his grave,
O Rotha, with thy living wave.
Sing him thy best; for few or none
Hears thy voice right, now he is gone.

A. [Matthew Arnold] in Fraser's Magazine for Town and County vol. XLI, 1850, p. 630.

2.) "The Poetry of Wordsworth"

The voice of Nature, in her changeful moods,
Breathes o'er the solemn waters as they flow;
And 'mid the wavings of the ancient woods,
Murmurs, now filled with joy, now sad and low.
Thou gentle Poet, she hath tuned thy mind
To deep accordance with the harmony
That floats above the mountain summits free,
A concert of Creation on the wind,
And thy calm strains are breathed as tho' the Dove
And Nightingale had given thee for thy dower
The soul of music and the heart of love;
For with a holy tranquillizing power,
They fall upon the spirit, like a gleam
Of quiet starlight on a troubled stream.

in Dublin University Magazine Vol. 36, July, 1850, p. 52.

3.) He who would win the crown of poetry,
What needs he? Faith that mountains would remove -
And he must have the gift of prophecy,
To read all signs on earth - in heaven above;
And he must have all knowledge, and must be
Wise as the serpent - harmless as the dove;
And he must have abundant charity,
For all the rest were nothing without love,
Then must he have all hope, to bide his time,
And he must purge his sick heart now and then

Of hope deferred, and ask fresh hope again,
And trust, till very trusting seem a crime,
So shall he win his laurels soon or late,
And his reward shall be exceeding great.

Robert Ferguson in The Literary Gazette and Journal of the Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, etc. May 11, 1850. p. 331.

4.) "On the Death of Wordsworth"

Weep not when the Poet dies,
For his soul is ever living!
Ah, not only in the skies,
But on earth immortal! giving
Endless joy! fine sympathies
And fountains of delight unsealing
In every heart of righteous feeling!

Weep not, then, if Wordsworth sleep,
For his spirit never sleepeth!
O'er the blue lake's crystal deep
Still its watch of love it keepeth!
On the mountain's loftiest steep
It hovers still, as nobler soaring
In nature, nature's God adoring.

Free as those lakes from sully'ing leaven,
Towering as those mountain-heights,
And pointing, aye, like them to heaven;
His spirit bright and calm incites,
To all that's good and great! be given
To us, oh God, some sparks of that pure flame,
Which wafteth to the sphere of light from whence
it came.

Eleanor Darby in *Ibid.*, June 8, 1850, p. 397.

5.) "Wordsworth"

Dear friend, who read the world aright,
And in its common forms discern
A beauty and a harmony
The many never learn;

Kindred in soul of him who found
In simple flower and leaf and stone,
The impulse of the sweetest lays
Our Saxon tongue has known; -

Accept this record of a life
As sweet and pure, as calm and good,
As a long day of blandest June
In green field and in wood.

How welcome to our ears, long pained
By strife of sect and party noise,
The brook-like murmur of his song
Of Nature's simple joys!

The violet by its mossy stone,
The primrose by the river's brim,
And chance-sown daffodils have found
Immortal life through him.

The sunrise of his breezy lake,
The rosy tints his sunset brought,
World-seen, are gladdening all the vales
And mountain-peaks of thought.

Art builds on sand; the works of pride
And human passion change and fall,
But that which shares the life of God
With Him surviveth all.

"Written on a blank leaf of his [Wordsworth's] Memoirs by J.C. Whittier" [probably J. Greenleaf Whittier, American poet, 1807-1892] in Transactions of the Wordsworth Society, p. 125.

b) Poems Written During Wordsworth's Life which refer to his Death

1.) "To Wordsworth"

Those who have laid the harp aside
And turn'd to idler things,
From very restlessness have tried
The loose and dusty strings;
And, catching back some favourite strain,
Ran with it o'er the chords again.

But Memory is not a Muse,
O Wordsworth! - though 'tis said
They all descend from her, and use
To haunt her fountain-head:
That other men should work for me
In the rich mines of Poesie,

Pleases me better than the toil,
Of smoothing under hardened hand,
With attic emery and oil,
The shining point for Wisdom's sand;
Like those thou temperest 'mid the rills
Descending from thy native hills.

Without his governance, in vain
Manhood is strong, and youth is bold.
If oftentimes the o'er-piled strain
Clogs in the furnace, and grows cold,
Beneath his pinions deep and frore,
And swells, and melts, and flows no more,

That is because the heat beneath,
Pants in its cavern poorly fed.
Life springs not from the couch of Death,
Nor Muse nor Grace can raise the dead;
Unturn'd then let the mass remain,
Intractable to sun or rain.

A marsh, where only flat leaves lie,
And showing but the broken sky,
Too surely is the sweetest lay
That wins the heart and wastes the day;
Where youthful Fancy pouts alone,
And lets not Wisdom touch her zone.
He who would build his fame up high,
The rule and plummet must apply,
Nor say - I'll do what I have plann'd,
Before he try if loam or sand
Be still remaining in the place
Delv'd for each polish'd pillar's base.
With skilful eye and fit device,
Thou raisest every edifice:
Whether in sheltered vale it stand,
Or overlook the Dardan strand,
Amid those cypresses that mourn
Laodamia's love forlorn.

We both have run o'er half the space
Bounded for mortal's earthly race;
We both have crossed life's fervid line,
And other stars before us shine.
May they be bright and prosperous
As those that have been stars for us!
Our course by Milton's light was sped,
And Shakespeare shining overhead:
Chatting on deck was Dryden too,
The Bacon of the rhyming crew;
None ever crost our mystic sea,
More richly stored with thought than he;
Tho' never tender nor sublime
He struggles with and conquers Time.
To learn my lore on Chaucer's knee,
I've left much prouder company.
Thee, gentle Spenser fondly led;
But me he mostly sent to bed.

I wish them every joy above
That highly blessed spirits prove,
Save one - and that too shall be theirs,
But after many rolling years,
When 'mid their light, thy light appears.

Walter Savage Landor in The Athenaeum 1834, p. 88.

2.) "Sonnet to Wordsworth"

Wordsworth, I envy thee, that from the strife
Far distant, and the turmoil of mankind,
Musing in solitude, thou keep'st thy mind
Most spotless, leading an unblemish'd life.
What have the bards of other realms and years
Fabled of innocence or golden age,
But, graven on the tablet of thy page,
And of thy life, in majesty appears?
What marvel that the men of cities, they,
Whose fate or choice compels them to endure
The sight of things unholy and impure,
Feel not the moonlight softness of thy lay?

But thou hast fought and conquer'd, and decay
Flies far from thee, whose great reward is sure!

"Δ" in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine Feb., 1821, p. 542.

c) Memorial Poems Written for Wordsworth Day, 1896

1.) "The Sonnet Prefatory at the unveiling of the Memorial Fountain in the Public Park, to the Memory of William and Dorothy ---, April 7, 1896."

Well met in glad commemorative throng,
Of this cool fountain-water as we drink
We bind our gratitude by crystal link
To thee, the fountain head of Cumbrian song;
To thee, whose music still shall flow, as long
As men on man and human life may think,
Or hopes and fears into our bosom sink
From nature's overflowing, pure and strong.

But, W---, here, on this thy natal day,
Uplifted high o'er Derwent's double stream,
Our hearts remember that diviner flood,
The light that flowed through all thy childhood's
dream,
The inspiration of thy later way,
The unfailing spring of tender sisterhood.

Hardwicke Drummond Rawnsley in A Reminiscence of Wordsworth Day Cockermonth April 7, 1896, ed. H.D. Rawnsley, Cockermonth: Brash Bros., 1896.

2.) "To W---"

O singer, who with heav'n-taught eye and ear
And heart all-loving, could'st new beauty shed
On all things beautiful, and singing, wed
High thoughts with sun-crown'd hill and glimmering
mere,
Making the dear scene by thy spell more dear,
And teaching dull hearts in the world outspread
To trace new gleamings of the love o'erhead,
And see all things transfigur'd far and near.
Reconstructor of the God-blest land!
Voicing each hill and dell and stream and wood
With sweetest love for those who understand,
We'll guard thy well-lov'd haunts from spoiler rude
And bless thee who hast taught us to descry
The spirit pulsing in all earth and sky.

W.W.W. [William Walsham How, Bishop of Wakefield] in Ibid., March 30th, 1896, p. 46.

d) Poem Written to Celebrate the Acquisition of Wordsworth's Birthplace in Cockermouth as a Memorial.

"W-- W-- To His Most Honoured Memory"

"So was it when my life began ..."

Come! spirit of an olden day,
Thy first sweet home doth welcome thee,
Beside the broad, old, linden-way,
Now safeguard of thy memory;
This sacred pile wherein thou heard
The soothing strains which lulled thy baby-woes,
(Ah! yes, perchance she sang as sweet as ev'ning
bird)
Whilst on her breast thou drifted to repose.

This memory of thee:
Not till sweet Derwent's course is laid
In arid dust, shall it depart;
The sterling work of genius
Knows not rent nor rust,
Yet throbs the heart of feeling
Through the glorious page;
Thy name, a star which glows
From age to age;
Come! spirit, in thine own dear place reside,
Come! Wordsworth, evermore abide.

Derwent Pickering in The West Cumberland Times June 3,
1939.

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