CHAPTER 17

Lyrical Ballads, and After

Wordsworth and Coleridge

William Wordsworth (1770–1850) grew up in the Lake District, and it had a profound influence on him and his poetry. He went to Hawkshead Grammar School and St John's College, Cambridge, and after leaving university he travelled to France, where the Revolution had begun. He was converted to the revolutionary cause, and in his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, he recalled the hopes of a new world that the future seemed to promise: 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!'

He fell in love with a young French woman, Annette Vallon, and their daughter, Caroline, was born in 1792. But, short of money, he had to return to Britain in 1793, and the political situation prevented him re-joining Annette and Caroline. They never lived together as a family, and in 1802 he married a childhood friend Mary Hutchinson.

In 1795 he met Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), a brilliant but unstable young man, also Cambridge-educated, and in 1798 they published, anonymously, *Lyrical Ballads, With a Few Other Poems*. It changed the course of English poetry.

All but four of the twenty poems in it were by Wordsworth. He also wrote a Preface for the second edition in which he defines poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', and sets out the aims of his new poetry. It will use 'the real language of men', and will avoid the 'poetic diction' common in the eighteenth century.

He takes as his subjects the poor, the old and the outcast. 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' is about an old woman who has to steal firewood to survive the winter; 'Her Eyes Are Wild', about a vagrant woman suckling her child:

> Suck, little babe, oh suck again,
> It cools my blood, it cools my brain,
> Thy lips I feel them, baby, they
> Draw from my heart the pain away.

A beggar in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' sits among 'wild unpeopled hills' eating, and his 'palsied hands' scatter crumbs while the 'small mountain birds' surround him, waiting warily for their 'destined meal'. In 'The Idiot Boy' a poor countrywoman, Betty Foy, is the mother of a disabled son who gets lost and spends a night in the open air. When she finds him he speaks wonderingly of the owls and the moon, without realising what they were: 'The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo, / And the sun did shine so cold!' No one had written poems about such people before.

Also new in *Lyrical Ballads* are poems about children and how adults fail to understand them. In 'Anecdote for Fathers', a boy resists adult logic, and in 'We Are Seven', a small girl, whose brother has died, insists that he still counts as one of the family. Wordsworth's belief in the superiority of childhood is expressed most challengingly in the 'Immortality Ode' (1802) where he remembers his own early years:

> There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,
> The earth, and every common sight
> To me did seem,

Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.

But as he grew up the 'visionary gleam' faded and this, the poem explains, is because our souls have existed elsewhere before our birth, and we remember it:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting,
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar.
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home.
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison house begin to close
Upon the growing boy . . .

Wordsworth's sympathy with the poor in *Lyrical Ballads* reflects his experiences in France. He recalls in *The Prelude* how a revolutionary friend pointed to an emaciated girl they met on a walk and declared:

'Tis against *that*
That we are fighting.

In the 'Residence in London' book of *The Prelude*, he remembers seeing a poor man with a sick child in his arms, who:

Bending over it,
As if he were afraid both of the sun,
And of the air which he had come to seek,
Eyed the poor babe with love unutterable.

The griefs of the poor continued to haunt him, and inspired some of his greatest poems. 'The Ruined Cottage' is about a woman

who has lost her husband in the wars and hopes, for years, for his return. 'Michael', included in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, tells of a shepherd whose son goes off to seek his fortune in the city. Before he leaves he puts in place the first stone of a sheepfold that Michael continues to build during his absence. But the boy is corrupted by city life and never returns. Years later the country-folk remember how Michael would still go up to work at the sheepfold: 'And 'tis believed by all / That many and many a day he thither went, / And never lifted up a single stone.'

'Lines Written in Early Spring', included in *Lyrical Ballads*, expresses Wordsworth's belief that nature is conscious: ''Tis my faith that every flower / Enjoys the air it breathes.'

Only one poem in the volume draws on his power as a nature poet, but it is one of his greatest: 'Tintern Abbey', written, he records, on 13 July 1798 when he was on a walking tour with his sister Dorothy. In it he recalls how, when he was a child, nature was 'all in all' to him:

> I cannot paint,
> What then I was. The sounding cataract
> Haunted me like a passion . . .

But now the time of 'thoughtless youth' has passed and, he says, he can hear in nature 'the still, sad music of humanity':

> And I have felt
> A passion that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thought, a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
> A motion and a spirit that impels
> All living things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.

With this awareness, he recognises:

> In nature and the language of the sense
> The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
> The guide, the guardian of my heart and soul,
> Of all my moral being.

The belief that nature is a moral educator is stated with breath-taking simplicity in another *Lyrical Ballads* poem, 'The Tables Turned':

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

A famous passage from *The Prelude* gives an instance of nature acting as a moral guardian. One summer evening, young Wordsworth takes a boat without its owner's permission, and as he rows:

> A huge peak, black and huge,
> As if with voluntary power instinct,
> Upreared its head.

It seems to stride after him and, trembling, he returns the boat to where he found it. Even when not guilt-ridden, the boy Wordsworth in *The Prelude* is aware of nature as a living presence:

> I heard among the solitary hills
> Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
> Of indistinguishable motion, steps
> Almost as silent as the turf they trod.

The belief in nature as an educator is one idea that lies behind the Lucy poems, which Wordsworth wrote in the winter of 1798

when he was living in Germany with his sister Dorothy. She was very close to him, and some of his poems, for example the famous 'Daffodils' ('I wandered lonely as a cloud'), are based on passages in her journals. He may have been thinking of Dorothy and her sensitivity to nature when he wrote, of Lucy:

> The stars of midnight shall be dear
> To her, and she shall lean her ear
> In many a secret place,
> Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
> And beauty born of murmuring sound
> Shall pass into her face.

But Dorothy outlived Wordsworth, whereas the imaginary Lucy dies, and becomes part of nature:

> 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.

Together Wordsworth and Coleridge evolved a new kind of blank verse, more like everyday speech than the blank verse of Shakespeare or Milton. Wordsworth uses it in 'Tintern Abbey' and *The Prelude* (which was provisionally titled 'Poem to Coleridge'). Coleridge, who may have been its originator, uses it in his 'conversation poems' such as 'This Lime-tree Bower, My Prison' (written when he had to stay at home, having spilt boiling milk on his foot), and 'Frost at Midnight', which is addressed to his little son, whom he imagines as a future nature-lover:

> Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
> Whether the summer clothe the general earth
> With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
> Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
> Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch

Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall,
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet moon.

It would be hard to tell, if you did not know, that that was not written by Wordsworth.

But Coleridge's greatest poems lie far outside Wordsworth's scope. 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is one of the best-known poems in the language, and having an albatross round your neck has become almost proverbial. The poem appeared in *Lyrical Ballads*, but Wordsworth nearly cut it from the second edition, and its Gothic-horror goings-on (still more spookily intrusive in Coleridge's unfinished 'Christabel') jar with the rest of the volume.

On the other hand, the simplicity of its language, as in 'As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean', or 'Water, water everywhere, / Nor any drop to drink', fits Wordsworth's demands for the new poetry. The poem's moral climax accords, too, with his reverence for nature. The mariner watches the water-snakes – 'Blue, glossy green and velvet black' – swimming in the ship's shadow, and: 'A spring of love gushed from my heart, / And I blessed them unaware'. Immediately the albatross drops from his neck and sinks 'Like lead into the sea'.

'Kubla Khan', Coleridge's other masterpiece, would be selected by many as the greatest English poem, partly on the grounds that, though it makes grammatical sense, attempts to paraphrase it look ridiculous. Coleridge once said that it would be as possible to push out a stone from the pyramids with the bare hand as to alter one word in Shakespeare or Milton, at any rate in their best passages, without making them say something different and something worse than they had done. That applies to 'Kubla Khan'.

As is well known, Coleridge had been reading in a travel book about the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan, and the poem was the result of an opium dream, which he had started to write down when he was interrupted by 'a person on business from Porlock' (a

nearby village). All that can be said with certainty about the unfinished poem's meaning is that it links creativity with violence, danger and bliss, and that danger and bliss predominate at the end:

> Could I revive within me
> Her symphony and song,
> To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
> That with music loud and long,
> I would build that dome in air,
> That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!
> And all who heard should see them there,
> And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
> His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
> Weave a circle round him thrice,
> And close your eyes with holy dread,
> For he on honey-dew hath fed,
> And drunk the milk of paradise.