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DOWN THE DUDDON: WORDSWORTH & HIS LITERARY PILGRIMS

Christopher Donaldson

Abstract: Wordsworth's later poetry, though traditionally despised, has recently aroused significant scholarly interest. From biographies to critical appreciations, several studies have highlighted the historical importance of the verse Wordsworth produced after the period of his "golden prime" (c. 1798-1808). The present article contributes to this larger project of reevaluation by engaging with Wordsworth's precedent-setting 1820 collection *The River Duddon*. Combining close readings of this collection with detailed assessments of its publication and reception history, the article explores both how *The River Duddon* secured Wordsworth's reputation as "the great poet of the Lakes" and how this reputation was perpetuated by those readers who sought to experience the world behind his words. In doing so, the article contends that more than *The Excursion*, or even *The Prelude*, *The River Duddon* constitutes the defining work of Wordsworth's later career.

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In April 1820 Longman & Co. added a new title to their list of recent publications: “The River Duddon, a Series of Sonnets; Vaudracour and Julia, with Other Poems. By Wm. Wordsworth.”¹ Printed in octavo, and priced at 8s in cloth or 12s bound, the book was the third volume of Wordsworth’s verse to appear during the previous twelve months. Its predecessors, *Peter Bell* and *The Waggoner*, had been utter failures: the former was parodied; the latter sold poorly; and both brought their author no small share of scorn in the periodical press. The condemnation of these two titles in *The Monthly Review* captures something of the general outcry they provoked: “Can Englishmen write, and Englishmen read, such drivel,—such dawdling, impotent drivel,—as this!”² With the publication of *The River Duddon*, however, all of this began to change. By the autumn of 1820, the *Monthly* had adopted a different tone: “In serious truth, we view the major portion of the present volume as a practical recantation ... Mr. Wordsworth ... has here proved himself to be endowed with very considerable powers” (*CH*, 789). The other leading broadsheet reviews pronounced similar verdicts. The *Literary Gazette*, for instance, went out of its way to assure its readers that *The River Duddon* was “almost entirely unstained” by the “puerilities” of Wordsworth’s previous works (*CH*, 751-52). *The Eclectic Review* went one step further, and recommended that the volume “should be accepted as an ample atonement for his last offence[s] ... From this time forth, therefore, it ought to be held a breach of courtesy and kindness, to say one more word of the Waggoner or of Peter Bell” (*CH*, 776). The poet who had once suffered critical chastisement was now met with words of conciliation. A new epoch in Wordsworth’s career had begun.

For a man who had faced (in his words) “unremitting hostility” from his critics for well over two decades, plaudits of this kind should have come as a welcome

vindication.³ But Wordsworth, ever scornful of periodicals, had long-since turned a deaf ear to the popular press. Years later he is said to have claimed that *The River Duddon* had been “more warmly received” than his other verse publications,⁴ but nothing in Wordsworth’s notebooks or letters suggests that the reviews of the volume ever came to his attention. Be that as it may, by the summer of 1820 confirmations of the book’s success began to reach him through other channels. Wordsworth had published *The River Duddon* chiefly in order to expedite the production of his four-volume *Miscellaneous Poems*; and once this landmark edition of his poetical works was complete, he and his wife Mary set off for a long-overdue holiday on the Continent. Upon arriving at Lausanne, the couple received word from home that an unexpected visitor, one Mr. Irving, had recently called at Rydal Mount to pay homage to Wordsworth on his “pilgrimage to the ‘River Duddon’” (*CH*, 1059). Critical accolades were one thing, but this was an affirmation of an altogether different order. As early as 1794, the *Gentleman’s Magazine* had recommended Wordsworth’s first book of poetry as a travelling companion for Lakeland tourists. By 1802, early devotees such as Thomas De Quincey were setting off to the Lake District with copies of *Lyrical Ballads* in their pockets. But this is the first record we have of a complete stranger calling at Wordsworth’s home while on pilgrimage to visit the sites depicted in his poems. More surprising still, however, was the fact that Mr. Irving was not the only enthusiast who had knocked at Wordsworth’s door that summer. In the next letter that came from Rydal, Mary’s sister Sara Hutchinson reported that “Lots of People” had been calling to see William, and others had been caught “peep[ing] in at the windows.”⁵ Literary fame, the “late though lasting consequence” Wordsworth had predicted a decade earlier, had arrived at last. Soon upwards of “twenty and thirty people” would be descending upon Rydal Mount each day to venerate the poet’s

home and view the scenes that had inspired his verses.⁶

Irksome as the seasonal onslaught of visitors would later become, in the summer of 1820 Wordsworth received the news of Mr. Irving's pilgrimage as an encouraging sign. "It gave me pleasure," he later wrote, "to hear that any Persons of sensibility have visited the Duddon."⁷ This pleasure, we can assume, was chiefly derived from a sense of validation. As a poet Wordsworth had endeavored for well over two decades, in spite of the effrontery of his critics, to reform his readers' literary tastes and to enrich their appreciation of his native Lakeland landscape. Six years before the publication of *The River Duddon*, he had publicly portrayed his retirement "to his native Mountains" as a crucial step in the formation of his poetic identity. Elsewhere he had described the Lakes as the source of his life's great inspiration. "No where," he declared in one of his finest early poems,

can be found—

The one sensation that is here; 'tis here,
Here as it found its way into my heart
In childhood, here as it abides by day,
By night, here only; or in choice minds
That take it with them hence, where'er they go. (155-60)⁸

That readers were now coming to seek out this "sensation" for themselves affirmed that Wordsworth had not laboured in vain. His vision of his native region, the "never-failing principle of [his] joy | And purest passion" (*Prelude*, II, 255-56), had begun to make a powerful impression on the public. But that those readers were choosing to follow his footsteps along the seldom-trod banks of the Duddon meant something

altogether more profound: it meant that they had selected to use his verses as their guide.

In order to appreciate this point one must recall that before the appearance of *The River Duddon* few tourists had ever ventured into the secluded Duddon valley. Lying as it does in the south-western corner of Cumbria, far from the central market town of Keswick, the Duddon remained a *terra incognita* long after the Lake District had become a fashionable holiday destination. Neither Thomas Gray, nor William Gilpin, nor even the intrepid “rambler” Joseph Budworth chose to visit the Duddon; nor, moreover, was the river featured among the viewpoints described in Thomas West’s bestselling *Guide to the Lakes* or on Peter Crosthwaite’s popular souvenir maps. As early as 1793, Wordsworth had informed his readers that, though “very rarely visited,” the Duddon valley contained “some of the most romantic scenery of these mountains.”⁹ In an essay published nearly twenty years later, he restated this point when he listed the Duddon among the “unfrequented paths” worth bringing “to the notice of the Traveller of taste and feeling.”¹⁰ But it was not until 1819 that tours of the Duddon began to appear in print. The first guidebook to chart a route through the valley was compiled by William Green, a local draughtsman and surveyor who was, not inconsequently, also a friend of the Wordsworth family. Plotting a course up the river from its estuary near Broughton to Seathwaite Chapel, and thence over the Walna Scar road to Coniston, Green’s guide outlined a path that is still popular among fellwalkers today. But while it is clear that Green was the first to open the Duddon to tourists, it is equally clear that Wordsworth’s book was what enticed them to pay a visit. From James Thorne’s *Rambles by Rivers* to W. G. Collingwood’s *The Lake Counties*, nearly every account of the Duddon valley published between 1820 and 1920 references Wordsworth in some way. Those travellers who, like Ellen Ricketts,

were lucky enough “to trace the course of the Duddon” in Wordsworth’s company, made a point of rejoicing at their good fortune: “could ever people have been more happy than we were to have visited these interesting scenes under the guidance of him who had immortalized them?”¹¹

Given the notoriety that the book achieved throughout the nineteenth century, it is not too much to say that *The River Duddon* was the publication that first established Wordsworth’s reputation as the pre-eminent poet of the Lake District. Although the volume was cobbled together from a selection of fugitive pieces (some of which had lain in manuscript for nearly twenty years), it nevertheless introduced a wholly new way of understanding Wordsworth’s poetry. As the accounts of literary tourists such as Mr. Irving and Ms. Ricketts confirm, from the year 1820 onward it became increasingly fashionable to read Wordsworth not just for the sake of the moral principles that his verse contained, but also for the special insights it offered about his local landscape. Eventually Wordsworth’s admirers would go so far as to assert that, in fact, his achievement as a poet “could not be properly appreciated without some knowledge of the Lake Country.”¹² Reading the landscape through the poetry quickly became common practice. Modern readers have, of course, long-since grown accustomed to this way of thinking about Wordsworth (an entire tourist industry, complete with package holidays, tea rooms, and gift shops, has sprung up on account of it); in 1820, however, it was a distinct change from the way his poems had been read before.

Received wisdom tells us that popular associations linking Wordsworth’s poetry with the Lake District “emerged very rapidly, after the publication of the 1802 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*”; but this is a misleading generalization.¹³ Wordsworth, it is true, had been branded as a “Lake Poet” following the publication of *The Excursion* in

1814—and had, earlier still, been labelled a member of “a *sect* of poets” that “haunted ... about the Lakes of Cumberland” (*CH*, 153, 185).¹⁴ But in spite of its obvious implications, the term “Lake Poet” was coined less as a regional epithet than as an expression of contempt. Although this soubriquet was also applied to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey, it was primarily used to reproach what many perceived to be the provincialism of Wordsworth’s artistic vision and the inadequacy of his poetry to respond to the complexity of the human condition. In later years, as Norman Nicholson explains, “Lake Poet” became a kind of “vague proprietary title, a trademark, by which certain writers attain[ed] the rank of local worthies,” but it never really had anything to do with the Lakes.¹⁵ Lord Byron’s withering attack on Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey in the suppressed “Dedication” to *Don Juan* makes this point painstakingly clear:

You—Gentlemen! by dint of long seclusion
 From better company, have kept your own
 At Keswick, and, through still continued fusion
 Of one another’s minds, at last have grown
 To deem, as a most logical conclusion,
 That Poesy has wreaths for you alone:
 There is a narrowness in such a notion,
 Which makes me wish you’d change your lakes for ocean. (33-40)¹⁶

The reference to Keswick notwithstanding, the charge that these verses bring against Wordsworth and his fellow “Lakers” has less to do with their fondness for Lake District than with the “narrow” outlook that, as Byron asserts, prevented them from

writing better poetry. In voicing this objection Byron was, of course, following the same tack as Francis Jeffrey, who famously led the frontal assault against Wordsworth in the periodical press. From his station at the helm of *The Edinburgh Review*, Jeffrey assailed Wordsworth time and again with barrages of wit, sarcasm, and censure that remain almost as famous today as the poems they affronted. But given the strictures of critics like Byron and Jeffrey, we might rightly wonder what it was about *The River Duddon* that made so many of their contemporaries begin to see things differently. Why did so many readers, from the year 1820 onward, come to regard Wordsworth not simply as a “Lake Poet,” but, in the words of *Blackwood’s Magazine*, as ‘the great poet of the Lakes’ (CH, 757)?

A definitive answer to this question can, I propose, only be pursued once we recognize that *The River Duddon* was the first publication in which Wordsworth explicitly encouraged his readers to view him as the local poet of the Lake country. Wordsworth’s earlier volumes had, of course, included a number of poems tied to the landmarks and traditions of Cumberland and Westmorland, and some of his longer verse narratives (including *The Excursion*, *The Waggoner*, and *Peter Bell*) had even described journeys through the Lake District. But, almost without exception, the themes of these poems were at best loosely connected with the landscapes they evoked. *The Excursion*, for example, may have depicted a three-days trek from the Langdale Pikes to Grasmere, but readers hardly needed to know the location of the places mentioned in the poem to appreciate the spiritual lesson it conveys. While such poems called attention to their Lakeland setting, they did little to clarify what, if anything, that setting had to do with the message Wordsworth wished them to impart. In *The River Duddon*, by contrast, the relationship between Wordsworth’s verse and his vision of the Lake District comes boldly to the fore. From the sonnets to the River

Duddon, to poems about Mount Helvellyn and Kirkstone Pass, to the “Topographical Description of the Country of the Lakes” with which the volume concludes, the contents of *The River Duddon* repeatedly affirm Wordsworth’s identity not simply as a “Lake Poet” but (in Stephen Gill’s words) as the “poet, celebrant, and interpreter of a particular, blessed region.”¹⁷

Elsewhere I have argued that *The River Duddon* was intended to serve as an assemblage of “miscellaneous pieces,” and, furthermore, that Wordsworth viewed the book less as a discrete collection than as a prerequisite to the publication of his complete poetical works.¹⁸ Nevertheless, one can hardly help but notice that, when taken together, the different evocations of the Lake District interspersed throughout the volume imbue *The River Duddon* with a discernible coherence. Foremost among these evocations are, of course, the sonnets that begin the book and the “Topographical Description” that ends it; but of equal importance is the volume’s dedicatory poem “To the Rev. Dr. W__.” Composed at Rydal Mount over Christmastide 1819, this poem reads, as its title suggests, as a verse epistle to the poet’s youngest brother, the Rev. Dr. Christopher Wordsworth (then rector of St. Mary’s, Lambeth). Considered on its own, “To the Rev. Dr. W__” can best be described as a holiday greeting that draws upon the celebration of Christ’s nativity in order to convey sentiments of fraternal affection. When viewed as part of *The River Duddon*, however, it becomes a manifesto for the vision of the Lake District that resurfaces throughout the volume. Like the verses that commemorate touring the Duddon, ascending Helvellyn, and crossing Kirkstone Pass, “To the Rev. Dr. W__” culminates in a powerful declaration of Wordsworth’s attachment to the landscape and customs of his native region.¹⁹

The poem is set on a cold Christmas Eve at Rydal as a parish choir makes its

rounds by moonlight. Listening from his threshold, Wordsworth follows the sound of “the music played | In honour of each household name” (15-16) as the minstrels pass from door to door throughout the vale.²⁰ The tableau thus evoked calls to mind all the familiar sights and sounds of the rural Christmastide celebration:

The Minstrels played their Christmas tune
To-night beneath my cottage eaves;
While smitten by the lofty moon,
Th’ encircling Laurels, thick with leaves,
Gave back a rich and dazzling sheen,
That overpowered their natural green.

Through hill and valley every breeze
Had sunk to rest with folded wings;
Keen was the air, but could not freeze
Nor check the music of the strings;
So stout and hardy were the band
That scrap’d the chords with strenuous hand. (1-12)

Laurels illuminated by moonlight amid the darkness of the night; music ringing through silence despite the keenness of the air; cottage eaves and rustic strings: each of these tropes converges to create a scene rich with symbolic association. As children, Wordsworth and his brother had witnessed these festivities together, first with their parents at Cockermouth and later at their Uncle Cookson’s house in Penrith. But Christopher, who left the Lakes for Cambridge in 1792, had long since

embarked upon an ecclesiastical career in the south of England, where he would reside for the remainder of his life. Acknowledging that this distance has not diminished his sense of devotion, Wordsworth reaches out to his brother with words that speak both of longing and of joy:

O Brother! I revere the choice
That took thee from thy native hills;
And it is given thee to rejoice;
Though public care full often tills
(Heaven only witness of the toil)
A barren and ungrateful soil.

Yet, would that Thou, with me and mine,
Hadst heard this never-failing rite;
And seen on other faces shine
A true revival of the light
Which Nature, and these rustic Powers,
In simple childhood, spread through ours! (19-30)

These verses affirm the unity of the source to which, despite their separation, both Wordsworth and his brother trace their origin. At such moments this poem becomes more than simply a celebration of time-honoured traditions; it becomes a context for establishing continuities through tradition with cherished memories of the past.

Years earlier, in a series of dedicatory verses addressed to his brother George, Wordsworth's erstwhile friend and collaborator Coleridge had drawn upon similar

sentiments in order to repair strained familial ties.²¹ More will be said about Wordsworth's debts to Coleridge below; at present, however, it suffices to observe that in "To the Rev. Dr. W___" he follows his fellow poet's example, appealing to fraternal love as a metaphor for the indissoluble bonds that connect him and his family to their native soil. The Christmas theme of the poem is particularly significant in this regard. For it is in commemorating the festival of the Nativity that Wordsworth urges his brother to reflect upon "The ground where we were born and rear'd!"

Hail, ancient Manners! sure defence,
Where they survive, of wholesome laws;
Remnants of love whose modest sense
Thus into narrow room withdraws;
Hail, Usages of pristine mould,
And ye that guard them, Mountains old!

Bear with me, Brother! quench the thought
That slights this passion, or condemns;
If thee fond Fancy ever brought
From the proud margin of the Thames,
And Lambeth's venerable towers,
To humbler streams, and greener bowers.

Yes, they can make, who fail to find,
Short leisure even in busiest days;
Moments, to cast a look behind,

And profit by those kindly rays
That through the clouds do sometimes steal,
And all the far-off past reveal.

Hence, while the imperial City's din
Beats frequent on thy satiate ear,
A pleased attention I may win
To agitations less severe,
That neither overwhelm nor cloy,
But fill the hollow vale with joy! (54-77)

These lines speak, once again, of the power of cherished traditions to bridge the gap between the present and the past. Envisioning his brother's stately residence along "the proud margin of the Thames" at Lambeth, Wordsworth reaffirms the shared beliefs that connect them to the "humbler streams" of their Lakeland childhood. This combination of city and country scenes, emphasizing as it does the waterways that unite Wordsworth to his brother and that brother to his birthplace, underscores the way in which "To the Rev. Dr. W__" complements *The River Duddon* as a whole. For in this poem Wordsworth emerges not simply as the poet of a "particular, blessed region," but as a poet whose verses tap into the communal values that region instils within its people. At this level "To the Rev. Dr. W__" is not, as one scholar has asserted, simply an overt "attempt to redefine the nation along the lines of the local,"²² but instead an affirmation of the importance of honouring local ties as a source of what Wordsworth elsewhere called "life and food / For future years." The primary message of the poem is ethical, not political, and it speaks fundamentally of

the poet's love for the "Mountains" and "Manners" of his native land.

As a poem that validates Wordsworth's attachment to his native landscape, "To the Rev. Dr. W__" helps us begin to understand why *The River Duddon* was so influential in shaping his identity as the local poet of the Lakes. At first glance, however, the way this poem relates to the rest of the volume may seem unclear. For while these dedicatory stanzas appear among the miscellaneous poems collected in *The River Duddon*, the poem's full title, "To the Rev. Dr. W__. | (With the Sonnets to the River Duddon and Other Poems in this Collection)," would seem to suggest that it ought to follow the general dedication to the Duddon sonnet series: "To the Rev. | Dr. Christopher Wordsworth, D.D. | &c. &c. | *These Sonnets*, | Called forth by One of the Most Beautiful Streams | Of His Native Country, | Are Respectfully Inscribed, | By | His Affectionate Brother, | *William Wordsworth*." Not insignificantly, when Longman & Co. incorporated the contents of *The River Duddon* in Wordsworth's *Miscellaneous Poems* in July 1820, "To the Rev. Dr. W__" was permanently moved to the front of the Duddon sonnet series. This coupling of the poem with the sonnets to the Duddon foregrounds a thematic link that the readers of *The River Duddon* might have easily spotted on their own. "To the Rev. Dr. W__," with its celebration of native bonds, stands as a perfect counterpart to a lyric sequence that openly proclaims its ambition to sing "of a native Stream" (Sonnet I, 10)

Recognizing the tie that binds Wordsworth's verse epistle to the Duddon sonnets helps us understand why *The River Duddon* inspired so many readers to perceive a direct connection between his poetry and the Lake District. For whereas "To the Rev. Dr. W__" conveys Wordsworth's vision of his native region, the Duddon sonnets provide the reader with the opportunity to participate in that vision by accompanying the poet on a tour through one of that region's most secluded river

valleys. In a way that calls to mind the topographical progress poems of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century, the Duddon sonnets harness the forward-flowing momentum of the lyric sequence to carry the reader on this south-westerly journey, beginning at the Duddon's source on the moss-flanked slopes of Wrynose Pass and ending at its estuary near the small market town of Broughton-in-Furness. The note that prefaces the sonnets maps out the landscape traversed by the series as a whole:

The River Duddon rises upon Wrynose [F]ell, on the confines of Westmorland, Cumberland, and Lancashire; and, serving as a boundary to the two latter counties, for the space of about twenty-five miles, enters the Irish sea, between the isle of Walney and the lordship of Millum [sic].

In charting the course of the Duddon from its spring to its mouth, this brief survey sketches out the itinerary pursued throughout the entire lyric sequence. Establishing this itinerary in the reader's mind is imperative to the effect that the Duddon sonnets were intended to achieve. As Norman Nicholson has astutely observed, these sonnets, when taken together, form a kind of lyrical "guidebook." Each sonnet moves in succession, marking a different spot along the Duddon and leaving its "verses gummed to [the river's] rocks like lichen."²³ Over two-thirds of the sonnets in the series direct the reader's attention to specific landmarks along the course of the river. From Wrynose Pass, to Cockley Beck, to Hardknott "Castle," to Birks Brig, to Wallowbarrow Crag, to Seathwaite Chapel, to Tarn Beck, to Dunnerdale, to Ulpha Kirk, to Swinside stone circle, and finally down to the Duddon sands, the lyric sequence guides the reader downstream by segmenting the journey into a series of successive viewpoints.

There is a tradition at work here that Wordsworth's contemporaries would not have failed to recognize. By 1820, Thomas West's highly influential *Guide to the Lakes* (then in its tenth edition) had conducted nearly three generations of Lakeland tourists through the region by leading them around a progression of picturesquely situated "viewing stations." Some of these stations were natural promontories; others, such as Claife Station near Windermere, had long-since become the sites of man-made platforms and installations; but, regardless of their size or scale, they epitomized the vogue for the picturesque which had dominated Lakeland tourism for nearly half a century. Now, it is a well-known fact that Wordsworth rejected West's aesthetics, and that he elsewhere spoke out against the picturesque as "a strong infection of the age" (*Prelude*, XII, 113). Nevertheless, in staging a tour down the Duddon around a succession of notable views, the sonnet series confirms that Wordsworth had learned a thing or two from his predecessor's method.

At the same time, however, in guiding the reader down the entire length of a river, instead of highlighting only a few of its most spectacular vistas, Wordsworth's sonnets present an evolving vision of a locality that defies its reduction into a set of picturesque scenes. (Indeed, when R. S. Chattock agreed to illustrate a special edition of the Duddon sonnets in 1884, he was frustrated to find that "the subjects which appealed to the poet were not, in every case, suitable for pictorial treatment."²⁴) Unlike West's *Guide*, moreover, Wordsworth's sonnets do much more than situate the viewer in the landscape. They do not simply tell the reader where one should stand and at what one should look; but instead provide us with a means of following in the poet's footsteps and watching as he brings the fells to life with his insights and observations. Repeatedly throughout the sonnet series the sight of some particular object gives way to an anecdote or reminiscence that adds an unexpected depth to the

description. The thirteenth sonnet, for example, begins by positioning the reader on the Pen, a rocky hilltop overlooking Dunnerdale, in order to survey the terrain:

Hail to the fields—with Dwellings sprinkled o'er,
 And one small Hamlet, under a green hill,
 Cluster'd with barn and byer, and spouting mill!
 A glance suffices,—should we wish for more,
 Gay June would scorn us[.] (Sonnet XIII, 1-5)

As this sonnet progresses, however, the summer-time view suddenly shifts and our imaginative gaze settles instead on a winter scene by the fireside at Newfield Inn, a public house in the “small Hamlet” of Seathwaite:

when bleak winds roar
 Through the stiff lance-like shoots of pollard ash,
 Dread swell of sound! loud as the gusts that lash
 The matted forests of Ontario's shore
 By wasteful steel unsmitten, then would I
 Turn into port,—and, reckless of the gale,
 Reckless of angry Duddon sweeping by,
 While the warm hearth exalts the mantling ale,
 Laugh with the generous household heartily,
 At all the merry pranks of Donnerdale [sic]! (Sonnet XIII, 5-14)

What one finds in this sonnet is, therefore, not just a juxtaposition of perspectives, but

an oscillation between different seasons and sensations, and, even more dramatically, between locations, as Wordsworth invokes a vision of the wind-swept Canadian wilderness. Certainly, this is not the technique of a guide to the picturesque, but of a poet who speaks as much to the eye as to the imagination.

Whether in depictions of the rustic cottage in Sonnet V, the “Stepping-Stones” in Sonnets IX and X, the “Faëry Chasm” in Sonnet XI, the “Resting-Place” in Sonnets XXIV and XXV, or the Quaker cemetery in Sonnet XXVIII, Wordsworth continually varies the focus and intensity of his observations in order to animate the locations to which he conducts the reader. As hinted above, this aspect of the Duddon sonnets bears a strong resemblance to the topographical poetry of James Thomson, John Dyer, and those other eighteenth-century masters who perfected the art of depicting landscapes in their verse. But whereas in Thomson and Dyer the organization of images and details gives one the sense that the poet is merely composing an elaborate verbal picture, in the Duddon sonnets the reader is constantly aware that Wordsworth is describing actual locations. As John Taylor Coleridge (the poet’s nephew) wrote in his review of the sonnet series, “we not only see the wood the rock or the river as they really are, but we see them exactly as they would be at that time of the day, in that season of the year, and in that spot in which we are supposed to be placed” (*CH*, 805).

The potency of this mimetic effect is, of course, partly aided by the specific landmarks and place-names invoked throughout the sonnet series. Chiefly, however, it is a consequence of the way that Wordsworth alternates his point of view as he guides the reader along the natural course of the river. Each sonnet modulates our experience of the landscape by varying the scope of detail: at one moment we are looking at a distant grove, and the next a few flowers occupy our gaze. This is precisely what one finds in Sonnet VI, for example, where Wordsworth depicts the meadows that flank

the Duddon just south of Cockley Beck:

Ere yet our course was graced with social trees
It lacked not old remains of hawthorn bowers,
Where small birds warbled to their paramours;
And, earlier still, was heard the hum of bees;
I saw them ply their harmless robberies,
And caught the fragrance which the sundry flowers,
Fed by the stream with soft perpetual showers,
Plenteously yielded to the vagrant breeze.
There bloomed the strawberry of the wilderness;
The trembling eye-bright showed her sapphire blue,
The thyme her purple like the blush of even;
And, if the breath of some to no caress
Invited, forth they peeped so fair to view,
All kind alike seemed favourites of Heaven. (Sonnet VI, 1-14)

From the general view of the “hawthorn bowers” to the enumeration of the wildflowers, this sonnet reveals the intricacy of detail that can be found within a single scene. But what is particularly intriguing is that Wordsworth’s descriptive technique is not purely pictorial. Appeals to the senses of sound (“hum,” “warble”), smell (“fragrance”), and touch (“soft,” “caress”) combine with visual cues and further nuance our experience. The scene thus evoked is much more than a picturesque capriccio; but instead, as J. T. Coleridge observes, “makes us feel that [Wordsworth] is describing some real spot” (*CH*, 805). Unlike the figures that populate the

landscapes of so many eighteenth-century poets, the principal figures in this sonnet (the trees, birds, bees, and flowers) are not merely part of the scenery. Indeed, they seem to possess a life of their own. The wild strawberry, the eye-bright, and the thyme, may suggest examples of meekness and humility as they “tremble,” “blush,” and “bloom” beneath the gaze of “Heaven”; but they nevertheless remain meadow flowers. The symbolic power of the poet’s vision enhances our perception, but it does not distort or detract from the natural reality of the scene.

This fidelity to nature, though attested throughout *The River Duddon*, finds its most consummate expression in Wordsworth’s decision to allow the course of a river to govern the design of his lyric sequence. The organic relationship thus developed between the sonnet series and its subject encourages the sense of a continuous journey that carries the reader, at the poet’s side, downstream along a single route. Each sonnet within the Duddon series is a focal point within this journey; at the same time, however, each contributes to the image of the river that emerges from reading the sequence as a single poem (and it is clear that this is how Wordsworth intended the sonnets to be read).²⁵ Rather than being imposed by the poet, the images and details follow naturally, in the order that they appear along the riverbank. Though simple, this aspect of the poem’s organization greatly enhances the reader’s experience. For even when Wordsworth pauses to reflect on some scene that does not otherwise seem to refer to any specific place, the progression staged by the sequence enables us to recognize its location. The twenty-sixth sonnet, which recalls Wordsworth’s boyhood explorations of the Duddon and its tributaries, offers a wonderful example of this orientating effect:

Return, Content! for fondly I pursued,

Even when a child, the Streams—unheard, unseen;
 Through tangled woods, impending rocks between;
 Or, free as air, with flying inquest viewed
 The sullen reservoirs whence their bold brood,
 Pure as the morning, fretful, boisterous, keen,
 Green as the salt-sea billows, white and green,
 Poured down the hills, a choral multitude!
 Nor have I tracked their course for scanty gains,
 They taught me random cares and truant joys,
 That shield from mischief and preserve from stains
 Vague minds, while men are growing out of boys;
 Maturer Fancy owes to their rough noise.
 Impetuous thoughts that brook not servile reins. (Sonnet XXVI, 1-14)

Within the context of the sonnet series this commemoration of Wordsworth's youthful rambles along the "streams" of his native mountains becomes an affirmation of his deep-rooted affection for the Duddon. Words evocative of movement ("pursuit," "flight," "pour," and "track") capture the energy and excitement of the poet's earliest encounters with the scenery of the Lakes, and, in doing so, hint at the biographical subtext of the poem. Wordsworth, it is true, was born at Cockermouth, a market town on coastal plain of Cumberland. However, shortly after his mother's death in 1778, he was sent away to grammar school in Hawkshead. Though now in Cumbria, Hawkshead then lay within the Lonsdale Hundred, a peninsular strip of northern Lancashire bordered by Windermere in the east and the Duddon in the west; and it was here, as Sonnet XXVI intimates, that Wordsworth first realized his life's

vocation. When his long, autobiographical poem *The Prelude* appeared in 1850 Wordsworth's readers learned at length of how, as a boy, his poetic faculties awoke as he wandered

By rocks and pools shut out from every star,
All the green summer, to forlorn cascades
Among the windings hid of mountain brooks. (*Prelude*, I, 488-90)

Of this larger vision, Sonnet XXVI offers an enticing glimpse—alluding to the Duddon as part of the landscape that nourished the growth of the poet's mind. The masterpiece of thirty years later, to use Ruth Rendell's fine phrase, "casts its shadow before it."²⁶ As part of the Duddon series, moreover, this sonnet attains an added significance that even the childhood recollections of *The Prelude* do not possess: for, in attesting to depth of Wordsworth's knowledge of his region's native streams, this sonnet, when read as part of the sequence, also confirms why the reader is to trust him as a guide.

When this sonnet is considered on its own the scenery it calls to mind would seem to comprise little more than a few generalized details. The "impending rocks," "tangled woods," and "sullen reservoirs" sketched out in the octave may serve as counterparts to Wordsworth's meditation; but, for all that, the distinctive features of the landscape appear but dimly through a haze of reminiscence and reflection. When viewed alongside the other sonnets, however, the setting evoked in these verses comes into sharper focus. The progression of the series positions this sonnet within a "Nook" along the banks of the Duddon just below the ruins of Ulpha "Old Hall."²⁷ Sonnet XXIV, which is entitled "The Resting-Place," provides the reader with a

concise depiction of the scene:

This Nook, with woodbine hung and straggling weed,
 Tempting as ever a pilgrim chose,
 Half grot, half arbour, proffers to enclose
 Body and mind, from molestation freed[.] (Sonnet XXIV, 5-8)

Although, as these lines suggest, this “Resting-Place” is as much a *locus amoenus* as it is an actual grotto, it nonetheless helps to situate Sonnet XXVI in a precise location. In terms of the poetry itself, this gesture may seem inconsequential; however, in enabling the reader to follow Wordsworth from point to point, it reminds us that each sonnet is meant to serve as a staging post in the itinerary mapped out by the sequence. Inasmuch as each sonnet occupies a place on the page and a place within the series, each is understood to occupy a place along the margin of the river.

The correspondence thus developed between subject, theme, and form is the crowning achievement of the Duddon series as well as its most significant innovation. Decades earlier, as David Fairer has shown, Thomas Warton had inspired a number of his protégés, including William Bowles, to compose sonnets celebrating the brooks and streams of their childhood haunts.²⁸ None of these poets, however, had used a sonnet sequence to guide their reader along the course of a river. Wordsworth had encountered Warton’s poetry as a boy at Hawkshead Grammar School, and had eagerly read Bowles’s *Fourteen Sonnets* shortly after it was published in 1789. In framing a series of sonnets to his own “native Stream” as an itinerary poem, he therefore must have known that he was engaging with and advancing a popular eighteenth-century idiom. Curiously, however, in the “Postscript” affixed to the

Duddon sonnets it is not to Warton or Bowles that Wordsworth traces his poetic lineage. Instead he claims that, in following a river from spring to estuary in verse, he was “trespassing on a ground pre-occupied” by Coleridge, who, as early as 1797, had toyed with the idea of “writing a rural poem, to be entitled ‘The Brook’,” about Holford beck in Somerset.²⁹ Now, it is clear that Coleridge was drawn to the idea of writing riparian verses by reading the sonnets of Bowles and Warton; however, in his “Postscript,” Wordsworth instead suggests that he and Coleridge were principally inspired to poeticize their local streams by Robert Burns’s verse epistle “To W[illie] S[imso]n, Ochiltree, May—1785.”

This choice was hardly incidental. For, of all of Burns’s poems, none dwells more openly, or at greater length, on the importance of the poet’s local affiliations than the epistle to Simson. It is here, after all, that Burns observes how other rivers in Scotland and Europe have been commemorated in poetry, and exhorts his friend and fellow bard to join him in “sing[ing] auld COILA’S plains an’ fells,” “banks an’ braes,” and “dens an’ dells” (55-57) to his native Ayrshire and the nation:

Ramsay an’ famous Ferguson

Gied Forth an’ Tay a list aboon;

Yarrow an’ Tweed, to monie a tune,

Owre Scotland rings,

While Irwin, Lugar, Aire an’ Doon,

Naebody sings.

Th’ Illisus, Tiber, Thames an’ Seine,

Glide sweet in monie a tunefu’ line;

But *Willie* set your fit to mine,
An' cock your crest,
We'll gar our streams an' burnies shine
Up wi' the best. (43-54)³⁰

It is clear that Wordsworth admired Burns's poetry, and that he regarded the epistle to Simson as an important creative resource.³¹ (Indeed, one almost senses that he took the line "*Willie* set your fit to mine" as a personal invitation.) As early as 1797, ten years after he first encountered Burns's *Poems*, Wordsworth had snatched a phrase from this epistle in a draft of *The Ruined Cottage*; as late as 1844, he returned to it again in the first of his letters against the expansion of the Kendal and Windermere Railway; and, as if in order to justify his decision to guide his readers along the Duddon, in the "Postscript" to the sonnets, Wordsworth invoked four lines of Burns's poem, claiming that Coleridge had planned to use them as a "motto" for *The Brook*:

The Muse nae Poet ever fand her,
Till by himsel' he learned to wander,
Adown some trotting burn's meander,
AND NA' THINK LANG.

In the context of the epistle to Simson, these lines emphatically link the inspirational power of local rivers with, what Nigel Leask calls, Burns's "poetic self-identification with his native region."³² Though all such conjecture must be tentative, it seems fairly certain that, in quoting these verses, Wordsworth was urging readers to regard the

Duddon sonnets as his attempt to follow his Scottish predecessor's example.

While this brief tribute to Burns's genius aligns *The River Duddon* with an established literary pedigree, it does not altogether cancel out the other lines of influence that intersect within the volume. For, in choosing both to compose his poem to the Duddon as a sonnet series and to present it as a response to one of Coleridge's early aspirations, Wordsworth was also tacitly inviting a reading of the sequence in terms of the local river poems popularized by Warton and his followers. To the student of literary history, these overt and implicit expressions of poetic inheritance exponentially increase the interest of reading *The River Duddon*; but, for all that, they do nothing to diminish the singularity of Wordsworth's achievement in the volume. For although it is clear that Warton, Coleridge, Burns, and Bowles each provided Wordsworth with a model for expressing his attachment to his native region, in *The River Duddon* he superseded them all in creating a book of poetry that validated his credibility not only as a local poet, but also as a local guide.

The fundamental unity of these two aspects of Wordsworth's poetic identity is reaffirmed throughout *The River Duddon*; it comes to the foreground in the book's title poem, in the odes to Helvellyn and Kirkstone Pass, and even in occasional effusions such as "Song for the Spinning Wheel" (a poem inspired by "a belief prevalent among the pastoral vales of Westmorland"). Nowhere, however, does it stand out more prominently than in the prose works included in the volume. Chiefly these comprise the notes appended to the Duddon sonnets and the "Topographical Description of the Country of the Lakes"—the essay that, not inconsequently, would later become Wordsworth's bestselling *Guide through the District of the Lakes*. Although presented as addenda to the poems collected in *The River Duddon*, these two texts play much more than an ancillary role within the volume. For, in each

Wordsworth demonstrates not only his competency as a prose writer, but also, and more significantly, his authority as guide to the fells and vales of his native region.

The lengthy biographical “Memoir” of the Rev. Robert Walker (a former curate of Seathwaite Chapel), which appears in the commentary on Sonnet XVII, is particularly notable for the way it presents Walker’s “wonderful” life as exemplary of the virtues of his rural congregation. In the Duddon sonnets, Wordsworth had alluded to Walker as “a Gospel Teacher,”

Whose good works formed an endless retinue;
Such Priest as Chaucer sang in fervent lays;
Such as the heaven-taught skill of Herbert drew;
And tender Goldsmith crown’d with deathless praise! (Sonnet XVIII, 11-14)

Elsewhere, he had praised the curate as a “lowly, great, good Man,” “A Labourer, with moral virtue girt,” and “With spiritual graces, like a glory, crowned” (*Excursion*, VII, 351, 338-9). In the “Memoir” included in *The River Duddon*, Wordsworth filled in these preliminary sketches of Walker’s character with over twenty pages of notes, letters, and anecdotes attesting to the devotion with which this humble clergyman performed “the duties of his pastoral office.” In particular, it was Walker’s contentment with his lowly curacy, despite “the frequent offer of much better benefices,” that inspired Wordsworth’s fascination. “[I]n this extraordinary man,” the poet concludes, “things in their nature adverse were reconciled”:

[H]is conversation was remarkable, not only for being chaste and pure, but for the degree in which it was fervent and eloquent; his written style was correct,

simple, and animated. Nor did his affections suffer more than his intellect; he was tenderly alive to all the duties of his pastoral office: the poor and needy ‘he never sent empty away,’—the stranger was fed and refreshed in passing that unfrequented vale,—the sick were visited; and the feelings of humanity found further exercise among the distresses and embarrassments in the worldly estate of his neighbours, with which his talents for business made him acquainted; and the disinterestedness, impartiality, and uprightness which he maintained in the management of all affairs confided to him, were virtues seldom separated in his own conscience from religious obligations.

To the modern reader, such an extensive treatment of an obscure country parson may seem an unnecessary digression. To many of Wordsworth’s contemporaries, however, the “Memoir” appeared in a different light. For Victorian Lakeland guides such as Harriet Martineau, Alexander Craig Gibson, and Elizabeth Lynn Linton, Wordsworth’s account of Walker’s “life and labours” made Seathwaite Chapel the chief attraction of the Duddon valley tour.³³ “Whether the tourist has time to trace the Duddon to its source or not,” advised one mid-nineteenth century guidebook, “he ought not to omit visiting the vale of Seathwaite ... and the remains of the celebrated Robert Walker.”³⁴ In portraying Walker as the embodiment of true pastoral spirituality, Wordsworth, like Chaucer, Herbert, and Goldsmith before him, had become more than a poet; he had become the moral historian of his community.

Wordsworth had published both prose and verse on issues pertaining to Lake District politics in local periodicals as part of his campaign on behalf of William and Henry Lowther during the General Elections of 1818 and ’20. *The River Duddon* was, however, the first of his publications to feature prose accounts of the Lakeland

landscape and its people. Ten years earlier, an embryo version of the “Topographical Description” had appeared anonymously as the introduction to *Select Views in Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Lancashire*, a book of landscape sketches by the Rev. Joseph Wilkinson. Although Wordsworth thought little of Wilkinson’s artistic abilities, and considered his decision to publish an expensive folio edition of his drawings “not superabundant in good sense,” he had condescended to introduce the amateur draftsman’s collection because he “wished . . . to give a model of the manner in which topographical description ought to be executed.”³⁵ Now, in *The River Duddon*, he was republishing this little-known essay, “with emendations and additions,” not only from a desire that it be more widely read, but also “from a consciousness of its having been written in the same spirit which dictated several of the poems” included in the volume, “and from a belief that it will tend materially to illustrate them.”

As this declaration suggests, the “Topographical Description” is no ordinary guide to the Lakes, but the work of a poet whose words do as much to instruct the eye as to enliven the imagination. The essay may include precise descriptions of the topography, history, and geography of the Lake District, and it may end with directions and information “to promote the enjoyment of the Tourist”; yet, at the same time, there are few pages on which one fails to spot veins of poetry in the bedrock of the prose. Indeed, throughout the “Topographical Description” Wordsworth distinguishes himself not just as a local whose half-century of residence in the Lakes has attuned him to things that other guides have neglected, but also as a poet who, in Ernest de Sélincourt’s words, “continually illumines his subject with gleams of light that have a rarer source.”³⁶ The famous opening passage of the essay, which positions the reader on a cloud in order to limn the “wheel” shape of the central Lakeland vales,

is too familiar to require quotation here; but it is only the first of many such flights of fancy one finds within this work, where Wordsworth conjures up visions of mountain ridges whose “forms and colours are perpetually changed by the clouds and vapours which float round them”; of weathered cottages that seem rise “by instinct of their own out of the native rock”; of waters so “pure and crystalline” that “a person resting quietly in a boat ... could almost have imagined that [he] was suspended in an element as pure as air.” Rather than simply presenting cartographic or pictorial representations, descriptions such as these follow “in the same spirit” as the Duddon sonnet series in encouraging the reader to recognize Wordsworth’s intimate knowledge of a landscape that refuses to conform to a single static expression of itself.

Such appeals to the sensuous imagination clearly resemble what we find in the Duddon sonnets, but they are also of interest, as Wordsworth suggests, for the way they help “to illustrate” the other Lake District poems collected in *The River Duddon*. The kaleidoscopic effect of “clouds and vapours” mentioned in the essay is, for example, linked by a note to the Jacob’s Ladder-like vision depicted in the “Ode, Composed upon an Evening of Extraordinary Splendour and Beauty”:

Yon hazy ridges to their eyes
Present a glorious scale,
Climbing suffused with sunny air,
To stop—no record hath told where!
And tempting fancy to ascend,
And with immortal Spirits blend! (43-48)

To this ethereal apparition the “Topographical Description” ascribes a material cause, as Wordsworth explains the “magical” influence of haze illuminated at twilight above the Lakeland fells: “I have seen six or seven ridges rising above each other,” he writes “all created in a moment by the vapours upon the side of a mountain, which, in its ordinary appearance, showed not a projecting point to furnish even a hint for such an operation.” Rather than diminishing the power of the poetic image, however, such testimony invests the poetry with the added significance of being the record of an actual occurrence. Like the “Memoir” of Robert Walker, it reminds the reader that though at times Wordsworth chooses to throw “a glimmer of the transcendental” over his landscapes, those landscapes are nonetheless true delineations of actual people, places, and events.³⁷

As far as the quality of the verse is concerned, the “Ode, Composed upon an Evening of Extraordinary Splendour and Beauty” is, by far, the most magnificent poem in *The River Duddon*. The kind of atmospheric phenomena to which it refers, however, play an even more crucial role in the “Mists that distort and magnify” the poet’s vision as he conducts the reader along the mountain road in the “The Pass of Kirkstone”—another poem cross-referenced with the “Topographical Description”:

Within the mind strong fancies work,
 A deep delight the bosom thrills,
 Oft as *I pass* along the fork
 Of these fraternal hills:
 Where, save the rugged road, *we find*
 No appanage of human kind;
 Nor hint of man, if stone or rock

Seem not his handy-work to mock
By something cognizably shaped;
Mockery—or model—roughly hewn,
And left as if by earthquake strewn,
Or from the Flood escaped:—
Altars for Druid service fit;
(But where no fire was ever lit
Unless the glow-worm to the skies
Thence offer nightly sacrifice;)
Wrinkled Egyptian monument;
Green moss-grown tower; or hoary tent;
Tents of a camp that never shall be raised;
On which four thousand years have gazed! (1-20; my emphasis)

To the extent that Wordsworth's poetry seeks to capture the sensation of a moment in time and to convey that sensation directly to the reader, his verse often attains, to an unusual degree, the power of placing us at his side. It is just so in this ode, as the poet invites us to accompany him on a walk along the "rugged road" of the mountain pass. The juxtaposition of the pronouns *I* and *we* (italicized above) underpins this effect. It is, one senses, as though Wordsworth has held out a hand to his reader and offered to conduct us through this "desolate Domain" (l. 77). As we proceed, Wordsworth reveals that the fanciful "mockeries" of pyramids, altars, tents and towers encountered along the way are mere illusions created by the "potent mists" that "veil the sky" (l. 37). Gradually, however, these mysterious forms recede, until, as the haze clears, we glimpse the "greenness" of the cultivated valley below:

Though habitation none appear,
 The greenness tells, man must be there;
 The shelter—that the perspective
 Is of the clime in which we live[.] (65-68)

What readers of *The Prelude* would later discover in the descriptions of crossing the Alps and Snowdon, they encounter here as Wordsworth invites us to see the journey over Kirkstone Pass as a privileged poetic experience; and, as if to emphasize this point, he concludes by reminding us of what we might have lost had we not accompanied him:

Who comes not hither shall ne'er know
 The beauty of the world below;
 Nor can he guess how lightly leaps
 The brook adown the rocky steeps. (73-76)

These four verses emphasize the compact that Wordsworth establishes with his reader throughout the poem and suggests that, in following him, we part ways with those who do not possess his special connection with the region. The faint echo of Burns's verse, "Adown some trottin burn's meander," we hear as the ode draws to its close reaffirms this impression, reminding us that we have not crossed the Pass alone, but in the company of a native guide.

"To be a native," Ronald Blythe reminds us, "once meant to be a born thrall," and one can think of numerous writers whose enthrallment by their native landscape

has proven integral to their creative vision.³⁸ This gift of a local view, or what Blythe calls an “inherited perspective,” though perhaps more cherished in poetry today, was no less precious among the English poets of the past. William Cowper and George Crabbe had it in eighteenth century, as John Clare, Thomas Hardy, and William Barnes would later in the nineteenth. It is Wordsworth who stands between these two generations, overshadowing the first and, in a certain sense, paving the way for the second; and it is in *The River Duddon* that Wordsworth’s own inherited perspective is most conspicuously displayed. This volume, with its curious mixture of topographical verse and prose, was the first that explicitly invited Wordsworth’s audience to engage with the region that had inspired his vocation. Moreover, as we have seen above, it was the first to mobilize a distinctively localized approach to interpreting his verse.

Mr. Irving’s unprecedented “pilgrimage to the ‘River Duddon’” in the summer of 1820 has already been mentioned; but this seemingly anomalous votary was, as Stephen Gill puts it, in fact “the bell-wether to what became a considerable flock of pilgrims [over] the next thirty years.”³⁹ Although some later travellers, such as Harriet Martineau, would later complain of the changes that the increased foot traffic brought to the landscape, for most Victorian literary tourists Wordsworth’s secluded river valley seems to have retained its rustic charm:

[T]hough the way be somewhat rough and the people unpolished, the traveller who is willing to be pleased will find accommodation, civility, and plenty; and in these days it should be anything but an objection to a genuine lover of rural sights and sounds that the place and the people are so little changed by the march of modern refinement.⁴⁰

These are the words of James Thorne, who was commissioned in 1842 to write a travel feature on the River Duddon sonnets for Charles Knight's *Penny Magazine*, a socially progressive weekly designed to promote polite learning among the urban middle and working classes. Suiting the didactic mission of Knight's publication, Thorne states that his article on the Duddon was written to "impart a little information to the admirer of [Wordsworth's] poetry, perhaps even to lead some of our readers who may be about to travel in the lake district to vary the usual route by devoting two or three days to exploring a stream so beautifully described by our great philosophical poet."⁴¹ But while Thorne's account of the Duddon is, therefore, intriguing as a social document of its time, it is of particular interest for the kind of reading practices it promoted. Thorne follows the course of Wordsworth's sonnets precisely, wending his way from Wrynose Pass through to Broughton-in-Furness, and pausing periodically to point out various landmarks along the way. Thus, when describing the source of Duddon on Wrynose, he is careful to warn us that, "unless care be taken, the real source may be overlooked and a wrong spot selected":

[T]he traveller must almost directly turn out of the road, leaving it on his left, and he will soon come to the source of the Duddon. The water oozes up through a bed of moss ... From this spot a slender thread of water finds its way down a narrow channel; it is, however, soon joined by one and another little steamlet, and begins very quickly to toss along its stony bed in that seemingly joyous mood so characteristic of mountain-streams.⁴²

An original woodcut, one of the six Thorne prepared for the article, accompanies this description, but is, in truth, more illustrative than instructive (Figure 1). Indeed, much

like the sketches that R. S. Chattock later produced for the Fine Art Society's edition of the Duddon sonnets, one senses that Thorne's woodcuts were primarily intended as aids to the imagination.

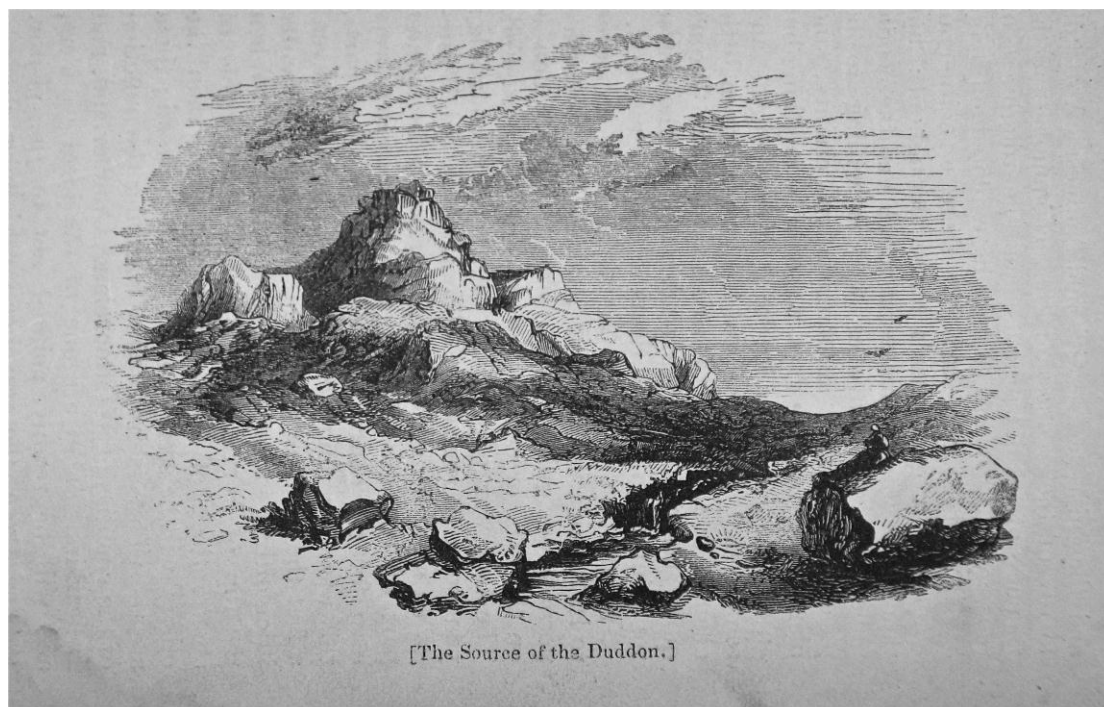


Figure 1. James Thorne's sketch of the "Source of the Duddon" on Wrynose Fell. From *Rambles by Rivers*, 11. Courtesy of the Literary & Philosophical Society, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK.

Although Thorne was the first of Wordsworth's Victorian readers to produce such a detailed account of his pilgrimage to the Duddon, his was by no means the last or even the most comprehensive. That distinction goes to Herbert Rix, a future assistant secretary to the Royal Society, who set out to improve on Thorne's essay in the early 1880s by preparing his own study of the "Localities of the Duddon." While, broadly speaking, there is little in Rix's essay that directly contradicts Thorne, the former does offer the occasional clarification or correction. Having followed Thorne's

directions to the source of the Duddon, for example, Rix explains that, “Poetically speaking,”

I should choose a different beck as the infant Duddon. As you go from the Fell Foot to Cockley Beck, turn sharply to the right ... and you will come, at the distance of 200 yards, to a deep cleft, draped on either side with bracken and parsley-fern, and overarched by two mountain ashes which spring from the rock on either side ... Just above this grotto the stream divides. The branch on the right hand, as you go towards the source ... the left-hand branch is that which the poet is more likely to have followed when he sought ‘the birthplace’ of the Duddon. It is somewhat the larger of the two, and decidedly the more picturesque.⁴³

Similarly, in his note on the “Stepping-Stones” mentioned in Sonnets IX and X, Rix contrasts Thorne’s opinions with those of Martineau in order to decide which of “the three principal sets of stepping-stones across the Duddon” Wordsworth had in mind: those upstream near Cockley Beck, those below Birks Brig, or those further downstream opposite Seathwaite? Ruling out the second set as too “little known” to be of interest, Rix proceeds to evaluate the claims of his predecessors, who had disagreed about whether the first or third set inspired Wordsworth’s sonnets:

James Thorne has fixed upon the upper stones ... Miss Martineau, on the contrary, ... appears to regard the stones opposite Seathwaite as *the* stones; and ... there is something to be said for each of these views. The upper stones fit in with the order of the Sonnets, coming after the Sonnet about Cockley

Beck, and before the Sonnets about the Faëry Chasm, Seathwaite Chapel, and Ulpha Kirk. But the lower steps answer better to [Wordsworth's] description of the scene.... Then, again, the upper stones are on the high-road; anybody driving up the valley must pass close to them, and Wordsworth must have seen them again and again in his visits to this region, while the lower stones have to be looked for and are approached by a narrow footpath which leads off the road and crosses two considerable fields before the Duddon is reached. But on the other hand the very beauty of the lower stones, once seen, would fix them in the poet's mind for ever.⁴⁴

After a good deal more of this sort of rhetorical toing and froing, Rix finally arrives at a conclusion by way of a creative compromise:

Perhaps, taking all things into consideration, the most probable view is that Sonnets IX. and X. were originally inspired by the beauty of the lower stones, but when the Duddon Sonnets, written at various times, came subsequently to be strung together, the place given to these two Sonnets was either accidentally or of set purpose determined by the position of the upper stones.⁴⁵

Such laborious deliberation over the precise setting of a particular poem may seem tedious, even absurd, but it does show us how far some readers were willing to go to discover the world behind Wordsworth's words. To read Wordsworth's poetry *in situ* was, for many, to commune with the poet's spirit; and, as the writings of early Wordsworthians such as Aubrey de Vere suggest, the desire to engage in such acts of poetic communion intensified all the more in the years after Wordsworth's death.

While the Duddon is not listed among the Wordsworthian “spots” commemorated in Matthew Arnold’s “The Youth of Nature,” as De Vere later avowed in his sonnet “To Wordsworth, on Visiting the Duddon,” the river valley was also a site where the spirit of the poet still lingered:

So long as linnets chant low madrigals
Near that brown nook the labourer whistling tills,
Or the late-reddening apple forms and falls
’Mid brakes whose heart the autumnal redbreast thrills,
So long, last Poet of the great old race,
Shall thy broad song through England’s bosom roll. (5-10)⁴⁶

Although De Vere was one of the only Victorians to celebrate his visit to the Duddon in published verse, the sentiments expressed in this sonnet were shared by many of his contemporaries. Before the end of century several other enthusiasts, including Charles Edwards, Frederick Malleon, and H. D. Rawnsley, had authored accounts of their pilgrimages to the Duddon, each affectionately musing on the river’s Wordsworthian associations. No longer a “rarely visited” spot in the south-western corner of Lakes, the Duddon had become, in the words of one Victorian commentator, “a vale destined through future ages to hold a proud rank amongst the thousand be-rhymed and be-sonneted localities of ancient and modern poets.”⁴⁷

Fascinating as they are, today such declarations matter not because they enrich our understanding of Wordsworth’s poetry, but because they help us trace a pattern within his broader nineteenth-century reception. For, when considered collectively, these various engagements with the setting of the Duddon sonnets alert us to a

growing tendency among Wordsworth's readership to use his works as a framework for experiencing the Lakeland landscape. I have already outlined the emergence of these sorts of readerly practices above. What I want to emphasize here, in conclusion, is that the kind of localized reading encouraged by *The River Duddon* was gradually applied to all of Wordsworth's Lake District poems: from *The Waggoner* and *An Evening Walk* to "The Wishing Gate" and *The Excursion*. Indeed, by the mid 1840s, Lakeland tourists could purchase works such as Charles Mackay's *The Scenery and Poetry of the English Lakes* and Black's *Picturesque Guide to the English Lakes*, both of which were devoted to guiding the tourist to the sites that had either inspired or been consecrated by Wordsworth's verse.⁴⁸ A region once renowned solely for its scenery was now equally prized for its literary associations; and, increasingly, it was Wordsworth's poetry that dominated the terrain. By the dawning of the Victorian era his works and the Lake District had coalesced so completely as to become practically synonymous: to mention one was, much as it is today, almost invariably to invoke the other.

Notes

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- ¹ “Monthly List of New Publications,” *The British Critic, and Quarterly Theological Review* 13 (1820): 447.
- ² Robert Woof, ed. *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage, Volume 1: 1793-1820* (London: Routledge, 2001), 688. Hereafter abbreviated *CH* and cited parenthetically by page number.
- ³ William Wordsworth, *Poems by William Wordsworth, Including Lyrical Ballads* (London: Longman & Co., 1815), 1: 367.
- ⁴ A. R. MacEwan, ed. *The Life and Letters of Joseph Cairns, D.D., LL.D.* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1898), 315.
- ⁵ Kathleen Coburn, ed. *Letters of Sara Hutchinson from 1800–1835* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1954), 201.
- ⁶ Edward Dowden, ed. *The Correspondence of Henry Taylor* (London: Longman & Co., 1888), 94.
- ⁷ Ernest de Selincourt, ed. *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Later Years, Part 1: 1821-1828*, rev. Alan G. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 486.
- ⁸ Beth Darlington, ed. *Home at Grasmere: Part First, Book First, of The Recluse, by William Wordsworth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 46.
- ⁹ William Wordsworth, *An Evening Walk. An Epistle; in Verse. Addressed to a Young Lady, from the Lakes of the North of England* (London: J. Johnson, 1793), 155.
- ¹⁰ W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, eds. *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 2: 261.
- ¹¹ Ernest de Selincourt, ed. *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Later Years, Part 3: 1835-1839*, rev. Alan G. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 764.

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- ¹² William Knight, ed. *Wordsworthiana: A Selections from Papers Read to the Wordsworth Society* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1889), xix.
- ¹³ Fiona Stafford, *Local Attachments: The Province of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 65.
- ¹⁴ It is a common misconception that the expression “Lake Poet” dates back to the early issues of *The Edinburgh Review*; the expression is, however, not attested in print until 1814. See Peter A. Cook, “Chronology of the ‘Lake School’ Argument: Some Revisions,” *The Review of English Studies* 28, no. 110 (1977): 175-81.
- ¹⁵ Norman Nicholson, *The Lakers: The Adventures of the First Tourists* (London: Robert Hale Ltd., 1955), 113.
- ¹⁶ Jerome McGann, ed. *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-93), 5: 4. See also Stafford, *Local Attachments*, 65-78.
- ¹⁷ Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 334. Hereafter *WWL*.
- ¹⁸ Christopher Donaldson, “Wordsworth’s ‘To the Rev. Dr. W___.’,” *Notes and Queries* 54, no. 4 (2011): 542-6.
- ¹⁹ My reading of this poem, and the Duddon volume in general, is indebted to Stephen Gill’s excellent essay “Wordsworth and the River Duddon,” *Essays in Criticism* 57, no. 1 (2007): 22-41.
- ²⁰ William Wordsworth, *The River Duddon, A Series of Sonnets: Vaudracour and Julia: And Other Poems. To which is Annexed a Topographical Description of the Lakes in the North of England* (London: Longman & Co., 1820), 114. Unless indicated, all further quotations from Wordsworth refer to this volume.
- ²¹ See J. C. C. Mays, ed. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 16.1: 326-8.

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- ²² James M. Garrett, *Wordsworth and the Writing of the Nation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 10.
- ²³ Norman Nicholson, "To the River Duddon," in *Five Rivers* (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), 16-17.
- ²⁴ R. S. Chattock, *The River Duddon: A Series of Sonnets by William Wordsworth with Ten Etchings* (London: Fine Arts Society, 1884), [1].
- ²⁵ In his notes to the Duddon series, Wordsworth explicitly states that the sonnets "together may be considered as a Poem" (Wordsworth, *The River Duddon*, 43).
- ²⁶ Ruth Rendell, introduction to *Barchester Towers*, by Anthony Trollope (London: Trollope Society, 1995), xii.
- ²⁷ See Herbert Rix, "Notes on the Localities of the Duddon Sonnets," *Transactions of the Wordsworth Society* 5 (1883): 61-78.
- ²⁸ David Fairer, *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790-1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 108-13.
- ²⁹ S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), 1: 195-6.
- ³⁰ Robert Burns, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Kilmarnock: John Wilson, 1786), 210-11.
- ³¹ See, especially, Stephen Gill's discussion of Wordsworth's engagement with this poem in "Wordsworth and the River Duddon," 24, and *Wordsworth's Revisitings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 170-71.
- ³² Nigel Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 94.
- ³³ Harriet Martineau, *A Complete Guide to the English Lakes* (Windermere: J. Garnett, 1855), 108.

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- ³⁴ *Sylvan's Pictorial Handbook to the English Lakes* (London: John Johnstone, 1847), 142-43.
- ³⁵ Ernest de Selincourt, ed. *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Middle Years, Part 1: 1806-1811*, rev. Mary Moorman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 404.
- ³⁶ Ernest de Sélincourt, introduction to *Wordsworth's Guide to the Lakes, Fifth Edition (1835)* (London: Henry Frowde, 1906), ix.
- ³⁷ Nicholson, *The Lakers*, 183.
- ³⁸ Ronald Blythe, "An Inherited Perspective," in *From the Headlands* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), 2.
- ³⁹ Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life*, 348.
- ⁴⁰ James Thorne, *Rambles by Rivers* (London: Charles Knight & Co., 1844), 12. Thorne's tour of the Duddon first appeared as three articles in Knight's *Penny Magazine* 7 (1843): 236-8, 268-70, 316-18.
- ⁴¹ Thorne, *Rambles by Rivers*, 9-10.
- ⁴² Thorne, *Rambles by Rivers*, 13.
- ⁴³ Rix, "Localities of the Duddon Sonnets," 62.
- ⁴⁴ Rix, "Localities of the Duddon Sonnets," 65-66.
- ⁴⁵ Rix, "Localities of the Duddon Sonnets," 66.
- ⁴⁶ Aubrey de Vere, *The Sisters, Inisfail, and Other Poems* (London: Longman & Co., 1861), 105.
- ⁴⁷ A. C. Gibson, *The Old Man; or, Ravings and Ramblings Round Conistone* (London: Whittaker & Co., 1849), 35.
- ⁴⁸ See, especially, Saeko Yoshikawa, "Wordsworth in the Guides," in *Grasmere 2010: Selected Papers from the 40th Anniversary Wordsworth Summer Conference*,

ed. Richard Grivil (Penrith: Humanities E-books, 2010), 101-14.