

## CHAPTER 6

# An Anxiety of No Influence: Walter Pater on William Wordsworth

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**WORDSWORTH'S INFLUENCE** on the nineteenth century was massive. Yet it had largely dispersed by the century's end and, as Linda Dowling has recently underlined, it was Walter Pater who initiated the change, for he was the first to make writing a truly composed artifice rather than directly trusting the language of the heart.<sup>1</sup> More personally, if for Wordsworth poetry was the "spontaneous overflow of natural feelings," then one can recall Thomas Hardy's description of Pater's manner, on meeting him, as "of one carrying weighty ideas without spilling them."<sup>2</sup> So one wonders why there is, as I think there is, a slight but real subtext of Wordsworth running invisibly through Pater's work. It surfaced notably of course in the article on Wordsworth of 1874, but also in the three explicit namings of Wordsworth that Pater places, in isolated prominence, right at the start of perhaps his three most important works, *Renaissance*, *Marius the Epicurean*, and the essay "Style." Pater's historical moment was to write, as it were, going away from Wordsworth until the *fin-de-siècle* left the poet out of sight; and this seems symbolized by the markers to Wordsworth at the beginnings of the three works.

To illustrate, here first is a passage from the essay on the poet: "[h]is words are themselves thought and feeling; not eloquent, or musical words merely, but that sort of creative language which carries the reality of what it depicts, directly, to the consciousness."<sup>3</sup> That first phrase, "his words are themselves thought and feeling," is, I suggest, remarkable. It is as though Pater is surprised by his own remark as he makes it. He should be, for the Paterian belief (ancestor if I have this right of the deconstructionist belief) is that words, not minds, are already the only encapsulations of civilization's several hoarded meanings, which the writer then chooses from and deploys with studied purpose. But with this remark Pater himself departs from that practice and enters Wordsworth's own mode of simple existential language. It uses no one-to-one, word-for-thing method of the kind

which Pater will himself later recommend in the essay "Style"; it is an emptied-out definition. But furthermore in so putting it, Pater himself enters a line of Victorian critics who have made such one-phrase judgments of Wordsworth, all of which underline, and with approval, the simple and even poetically negative quality of Wordsworth's poetry. Matthew Arnold put it of Wordsworth that "he has no style." Much earlier Coleridge had called this style "matter-of-fact" and then in his own "conversation poems" followed it; and John Stuart Mill, acknowledging a great personal debt to Wordsworth's poetry, called him "the poet of unpoetical natures." Harriet Martineau put the paradox most fully. She wrote that "with all their truth and all their charm, few of Wordsworth's pieces are poems," yet "he taught us to say what we had to say in a way not only the more rational but the more beautiful."<sup>4</sup> I think Pater's is the best of these remarks, emphasizing, as it does, not the negation but the indissolubility in Wordsworth of "words" and "thought and feeling" as one and the same thing.

Pater appears to have first read Wordsworth when he was himself trying to write poetry, at school and as an undergraduate at Oxford. His first critical comment on Wordsworth of any length followed when he was twenty-six and published the essay on Coleridge in 1865. The assessment is straightforward. Pater sees Wordsworth there as stable, completely attuned to nature, and possessing a philosophy of universe and man quite free from the "doubts and uncertainties" which bore down Coleridge himself. Wordsworth "already vibrates with that blithe impulse which carried him to final happiness and self-possession"; he had "a joyful and penetrative conviction of the existence of certain latent affinities between nature and the human mind," and had as well a "flawless temperament, his fine mountain atmosphere of mind, that calm, sabbatic, mystic wellbeing which De Quincey, a little cynically, connected with worldly (that is to say pecuniary) good fortune."<sup>5</sup> This seems hardly recognizable as the Wordsworth who, in his own words, had "his unruly times, / His times when he is neither sick nor well," said of poets that they come in the end to "despondency and madness," and of them that "[a]s high as we have mounted in delight / In our dejection do we sink as low." Pater is of course concentrating on Coleridge here, but one senses too that the Wordsworthian wise equilibrium has sufficiently impressed him that there is not yet anything to say about it.

In 1868 came Pater's review of William Morris's poetry in the *Westminster Review*, the substance of which became the essay "Aesthetic Poetry," in *Appreciations* in 1889. The essay names Wordsworth only once, but he seems to hover elsewhere. First, that the essay is touched in a couple of places with echoes of the 1798 *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* of Wordsworth. William Morris's poem "The Earthly Paradise" evinces "the great primary passions under broad daylight. . . . the simple elementary passions anger, desire, regret, pity and fear," and so on. Pater will quietly return to Wordsworth's preface on several future occasions. More intriguing though is the brief passage referring to Wordsworth. Morris's poem has "a strange power in dealing with morning and the things of morning. . . . There are hints at a language common to birds and beasts and men . . . and this simplicity at first hand is a strange contrast to the sought-out simplicity of

Wordsworth."<sup>6</sup> Noticeable here is the double occurrence of the word "strange," (it occurs only twice more elsewhere in the essay) and, although it refers to Morris, it comes just where Wordsworth is the point of comparison. The word is of course not uncommon in Pater, but it stands out from his other characteristic adjectives scrupulous, exquisite, graceful, fugitive and precise. "Strange," unlike the others, is knowingly imprecise, suggesting rather an uncertainty as to what the adjective should be. It will figure strongly in the essay on Wordsworth itself, and seems to be a first marker here for a complexity and depth in Wordsworth that Pater sensed from an early age but really did not finally fathom.

The word appears again in that oddly irrelevant paragraph on Wordsworth right at the start of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* in 1873. That luxuriating, even-paced, gentle book almost seems to say that the beautiful works Pater examines, and their creators, exist perhaps in a remote dream, a silent lunar museum of Pater's own making; and so, before proceeding, it is as though he turns and faces the robust mountain and lake writer briefly for a moment outside, before going back into his museum and shutting the door. And this first example of an early Wordsworth marker enables Pater to summarize his impressed puzzlement briefly but squarely and for the first time:

Take, for instance, the writings of Wordsworth. . . . Scattered up and down [them], sometimes fusing and transforming entire compositions . . . sometimes, as if at random, depositing a fine crystal here or there, in a matter it does not wholly search through or transmute, we trace the action of his unique, incommunicable faculty, that strange, mystical sense of a life in natural things, and of man's life as a part of nature, drawing a strength and colour and character from local influences, from the hills and streams, and from natural sights and sounds. Well! that is the virtue, the active principle, in Wordsworth's poetry.<sup>7</sup>

From his own very different standpoint, of reaching always for the last finished touch (one of the book's returning concerns and words), Pater is finding space to acknowledge, generously but perhaps also under silent pressure, the existence of another poetry; one where it is not merely no failing, but of the essence, to treat matter which the poet "does not wholly search through and transmute." The faculty is strange and incommunicable, even to the subtly refining Paterian mind, and Pater will next turn to an examination of it, in the essay on Wordsworth of the very next year, 1874.

In *The Renaissance* Wordsworth is used to illustrate Pater's own critical questions: what does the work mean for *me*? What are its peculiar qualities? In the Wordsworth essay these questions are repeated. But this time they are preceded by an attempt to grapple with the now pressing question of why one is drawn to the perplexing Wordsworth at all, and why that effect is present. The answer is curious. To "those who, coming across him in

youth, can bear him at all" Wordsworth's poetry cultivates in his readers "a habit of reading between the lines," for Wordsworth "meets us with the promise that he has much, and something very peculiar, to give us, if we will follow a certain difficult way; and seems to have the secret of a special and privileged state of mind." This way is like "some initiation, a *disciplina arcana* by submitting to which [readers] become able constantly to distinguish in art, feeling, manners, that which is organic, animated, expressive, from that which is only conventional, derivative, inexpressive."<sup>8</sup>

It is curious that Pater should see the simple Wordsworth, of the "real language of men," as the leader of some esoteric cult, difficult to comprehend and get into, especially since Pater again seems to write with Wordsworth's 1798 *Preface* beside him: "It is for [their] direct expression of passion, that [Wordsworth] values [the lowly people's] humble words. . . . He constantly endeavours to bring his language near to the real language of men . . . and what he values most is the almost elementary expression of elementary feelings."<sup>9</sup> One can certainly applaud in passing the way the earlier paragraph was prophetic of many tendencies in Wordsworth criticism. F. W. Bateson also said of Wordsworth that "the poetry is *between* the words," Geoffrey Hartman took up the line of the *via negativa* and the American poet Louis Simpson is only one of many who said he could not read Wordsworth before middle age.<sup>10</sup> But what has to be called Pater's confusion, at one level, is borne out further in this essay by his still seeing a content, stable Wordsworth, one whose life fell into "broad, untroubled, perhaps somewhat monotonous spaces" hardly true surely of the first thirty years, and at least some of the rest. And Pater goes on, unpromisingly, by characterizing his subject with adjectives more Paterian than Wordsworthian: "delicate," "precise" and "finely scrupulous" and even picking out "precious morsels" from the whole, much to Mrs. Oliphant's rage and ire. Pater improbably offers us too a Wordsworth more apt as a poet of the south-east than the Lake District: "[T]he English lake country has, of course, its grandeurs. But the peculiar function of Wordsworth's genius . . . would have found its true test had he become the poet of Surrey, say! and the prophet of its life."<sup>11</sup> Something similar had been said in the essay on Coleridge, yet one look at Dorothy Wordsworth's journals suggest where the poet got his detailed observations of leaves, "mouldering" or otherwise. Mrs. Mark Pattison was only the first of those who have noted Pater's propensity to see in the work of others, qualities already in his own talent and nature.

Of course, Pater does not leave it there. In the second half of the essay he writes, sensitively and early in Wordsworth criticism, about the relations between nature, humble life and (in Wordsworth's phrase) "the philosophic mind": he sees clearly how Wordsworth viewed nature as tranquilizing, how that itself dignifies humble life, how unity of man and nature can be taken literally on a scale of being, and how too this can emerge, without loss of dignity, in pity for lowly people and their sufferings, always a matter of real feeling for Pater himself. I don't share the view of Michael Levey, in his excellent biography, that Pater merely chose the "eminently safe" topic of Wordsworth in

the aftermath of the fiasco of *The Renaissance*.<sup>12</sup> Yet although Pater intriguingly encourages the habit of "reading between the lines" (a view not inconsistent, as I will suggest, with "the words themselves being thought and feeling"), he does reach somewhere in this essay a definite, if quiet, stopping-point.

For in this section of the essay we can almost see Pater standing back from going into the heart of this poetry, which he otherwise had seemed almost compulsively to want to acknowledge. Pater's style, and way of thought in writing perhaps, is horizontal; the precarious, lingering sentences so laid end to end that if they were all put together it would stretch one might say from Rome to Canterbury and on around London to Brasenose. He disposes and distributes his thoughts and phrases as though to occupy a level surface. Wordsworth's cast is vertical; up to the high mountains and the "huge peak" which "strode after me"; down into the valley, the bottomless lake, the "mind's abyss" and, clearly as the psychoanalytic approach later came to see, the profoundly suppressed, and then disturbingly revealed, subconscious. When Wordsworth says, "Oh mystery of man, from what a depth / Proceed thy honours!",<sup>13</sup> if "honours" there corresponds to Pater's "civilization," then Wordsworth imputes it to a noncivilized source.

This is best symbolized in Wordsworth by what Pater's essay never touches on in so many poems the sudden, unnatural death and the sad survivor. In "We Are Seven" children have died and their little sister plays by the grave. In "The Thorn" a tormented mother sits by a small mound containing the body of her newborn child. In "The Brothers" a rural clergyman tells of how a villager fell off a mountain ledge to his death, not knowing that the person to whom he is telling this very story is the deceased man's long absent brother. In Book XI of *The Prelude* a young girl wanders by the gibbet of a hanged murderer, and in Book V the retrieved body of a drowned man shoots "bolt upright" out of the lake, "his ghastly face a spectre shape / of terror even." The grimly vertical quality of these last three deaths only emphasizes the underground location of the buried below ground, like repressed guilts the survivor cannot acknowledge, later to thrust up generally across the poetry in Wordsworth's frequent melancholic moods and self-confessed depressive self-examination.

Only once in his essay does Pater come near to looking down into this abyss. This is when he is describing at some length the pathos Wordsworth sees in humble rural life:

The girl who rung her father's knell; the unborn infant feeling about its mother's heart; the instinctive touches of children; the sorrows of the wild creatures, even their homesickness, their strange yearnings; the tales of passionate regret that hang by a ruined farm-building, a heap of stones, a deserted sheepfold . . . those whom men have wronged their pathetic wanness; the sailor "who, in his heart, was half a shepherd on the stormy seas;" the wild woman teaching her child to pray for her betrayer; incidents

like the making of the shepherd's staff, or that of the young boy laying the first stone of the sheepfold; all the pathetic episodes of their humble existence, their longing, their wonder at fortune, their poor pathetic pleasures.<sup>14</sup>

That is a long list. And yet nowhere in it are there more than two actual deaths even hinted at, and neither is in any way outside death's natural course.

Pater of course had his own preoccupations with death. It is a Keatsian threat however to "beauty that must die" and, both more barbaric and sicklier than Wordsworth's, it must have citadels built against it. Wordsworth by contrast feels drawn to that death's violent nature for something inherent in it for himself. So what does Pater do about this difference? *He blanks it out*; once again that word "strange" is the clear marker, five or six times in the few pages immediately following the long passage just cited, where ostensibly he is trying to consider the nature of Wordsworthian speculation itself: "A sort of biblical depth and solemnity hangs over this strange, new, passionate, pastoral world, of which [Wordsworth] first raised the image." Wordsworth "comes, from point to point, into strange contact with thoughts which have visited . . . far more venturesome, perhaps errant, spirits." He enlarges "so strangely the bounds of [that region's] humble churchyards." And, with a perception which will finally appear extended into a general theory in the "Postscript" to *Appreciations* nearly fifteen years later, Pater writes that "those who take up these poems after an interval of months, or years perhaps, may be surprised at finding how well old favourites wear, how their strange, inventive turns of diction or thought still send through them the old feeling of surprise."<sup>15</sup>

In short, in missing how Wordsworth is disturbed into this writing from below and within, and hence never seems remotely comparable to Pater's own mode of elongated, silky prose, Pater stops short at a border he himself declares Wordsworth to have crossed: "Wordsworth . . . seems at times to have passed the borders of a world of strange speculations, inconsistent enough, had he cared to note such inconsistencies."<sup>16</sup> And this stopping-short, at seeing what is in fact the source of Wordsworth's massive nineteenth-century influence, and its Victorian melancholy, is associated with Pater's (and surely Newman's and Hopkins's) crossing of a different border, into one or other version of ecclesiasticism with its sumptuous use of the artifactual rather than the natural in expression of its beliefs. One recalls chapter XXII of *Marius* "The Minor Peace Of The Church." Meanwhile Pater himself is left with the one thing he is interested in, namely, Wordsworth's style. The rest of the essay is concerned with that; Pater identifies words with thought and feeling in the poet, and he shows his own clear understanding, if not of Wordsworth's mind, then certainly of how Wordsworth's art and mind were related.

But although he does not cross the Wordsworthian border into strangeness, Pater it seems was sufficiently impressed to take over one project, the examination of his own childhood.

This culminates in *Marius*, but begins most markedly in the group of *Imaginary Portraits* of 1878, written not so long after the Wordsworth essay. In all these there is a fully Wordsworthian attempt at a remembrance of things past. But Pater's purpose is not self-knowledge for its own sake, but now finally to find and cultivate his style. As he says in *Marius*, a "true understanding of oneself is ever the first condition of genuine style."<sup>17</sup> And this emphasis on style is Pater's true mark, his kind of literary health. But the difference between Pater's and Wordsworth's search has a notable feature. With Pater, as he moves backward in time, there is always a "blockage" at the artifact. Pater can't or won't get beyond or below the artifact to its origins, as Wordsworth always did. There is no "mind's abyss"; rather, in *Marius* he speaks of the "house of thought," a metaphor of structure.

The project develops accordingly. In "The Child in the House" (1878) the most treasured evokers of exquisite memory are the ready-made objects in the attic: "glass beads, empty scent bottles still sweet, thrum of coloured silks." Even non-objects are written as objects: "the angle at which the sun in the morning fell on the pillow." In "Emerald Uthwart" the broader canvas of the (still artifactual) Canterbury Cathedral and school are preceded by that ubiquitously Paterian piece of nature already made, already artifact, the walled garden. Most interesting of all is the unfinished "imaginary portrait" called "The English Poet," not published in Pater's lifetime and appearing for the first time in the *Fortnightly Review* as late as 1931. A young child born in France of an English mother who however then dies, is sent to be reared by relatives in the Cumberland mountains in the north of England. The child finds the landscape wholly alien, and when on growing up he returns south to France, it is like a release: "The smooth winds from the sea, their balm and salt . . . the sand dunes grown richly about with wild marigold and yellow horned poppies." All this is firmly contrasted with "the too-clinging humours of our English climate, which is also, in part, a matter of inheritance." Yet Wordsworth and the 1798 *Preface* are still ambivalently hovering. In compensation for disliking the lake scenery the boy discovers reading and language, developing his bent "among people to whom a great English poet attributed a certain natural superiority in the use of words." A number of writers are mentioned in the work, but Wordsworth is the only one alluded to first without name this time, and then in terms of his beliefs rather than his achievement. Indeed the absence of name makes the story's title ambiguous, for the young boy grows up to be a poet himself. But there is an even more intriguing feature. For the story has begun with the young woman, the boy's mother, who has discovered a gold coin in the soil on the smallholding where she and her French husband live. The coin has on it the head of a handsome young man, and one day such a man happens to pass the farm and smile and talk to the young mother before he leaves. The coin here is the blockage, both to nature itself (the soil in which it is found) and perhaps also, although less certainly, to whatever deep psychoanalytical secret, sexual or otherwise, the story may contain. By placing that coin in the soil, Pater is able to deflect himself away from that soil to the very different terrain of the lake district which he then complicating the picture further quietly rejects too; but not its poet, the unnamed Wordsworth, who in the lake district had found no

blockage, only the unboundedness of the immensity, the water, the "universe entire."

In *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) and the essay "Style" (1888), Pater is out on his own territory with confidence and on a large scale. We are now well into the last part of the century, and the strong Victorian-Arnoldian bond between language and true morality, literature and high culture, has given way. Yet both these works still have the small reference to Wordsworth as *The Renaissance* had in 1873. *Marius*, still discernibly autobiographical, moves gradually away from nature, through small domesticities and their household gods to the *beata urbs* and the Catholic church, and finally to grace, the last word in the book, and one whose liturgical opposition to "nature" can be read as an intentional emphasis. Yet at the start on page two to be exact again we find the echo of the 1798 *Preface*: "The old-fashioned, partly puritanical awe, the power of which Wordsworth noted and valued so highly in a northern peasantry, had its counterpart in the feeling of the Roman lad, as he passed the spot, 'touched of heaven,' where the lightning had struck dead an aged labourer in the field."<sup>18</sup>

In the essay "Style" it is again Wordsworth, and again right near the start, who is given an accolade of large implication not then, however, made the main force of the essay itself: "A century after Dryden, amid very different intellectual needs . . . the range of the poetic force in literature was effectively enlarged by Wordsworth."<sup>19</sup> But the essay's main drift of course is now on style's scrupulous making: "minute attention" to the "particles" in each word; each syllable's "precise value"; the "punctilious observance" of the medium itself, and the "words [one] would select in the making of a dictionary"; the pictorial and sculptural analogies for the process; and the scholar and scholarly conscience. Surely Wordsworth's heaving parabolic periods, his most unPaterian repetitions and his most indefinite vocabulary of immensity, eternity, something, thing, time and the rest, could never have been the result of the fastidious process Pater seems now to be requiring of writing. To put it briefly, one suspects Pater is being defensive in this rather convoluted essay, and his declared aims are a tacit answer to hovering charges of corrupting aestheticism or amorality. There is comparable defensiveness in *Marius*, of whom we recall that "though the manner of his work was changed formally from poetry to prose, he remained, and must always be, of the poetic temper." In "Style" the suggestion is that "imaginative prose, it may be thought, [is] the special art of the modern world." Hence the curious need to claim Wordsworth too as one who wrote "with the tact of a scholar"; hence too, yet again, the brief but clear echoes of Wordsworth's 1798 *Preface*.<sup>20</sup>

Broadly Pater recognized in Wordsworth his own singlemindedness, solitary situation and search for happiness's habitation. Possibly the mid-Victorians overpraised the essay on Wordsworth while missing its main import. Pater never really confronted the deep disturbance in Wordsworth's writing; rather he always stuck at the 1798 *Preface*'s concern with "real language of men" and, in one brilliant phrase of his own, captured its significance. And, by recognizing with a remarkable honesty the authenticity of

Wordsworth's achievement, even if not its full nature, he was able to see that his own more Platonic project for self-knowledge could gain from a search back into his own childhood. Unlike Wordsworth he did not go more deeply into any "intimations"; he fixed on the gold coin in the soil, not the soil itself. And finally, I think revealingly, Pater only half-glimpsed one real resultant difference in their two ways of writing. While he himself worked so hard to choose every word for those long sentences (and "choice," as of select best specimens, is a favourite Pater adjective), Wordsworth could so often make poetry out of the very failure of such choosing:

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 lonely eminence,  
The woman, and her garments vexed and tossed  
By the strong wind.<sup>21</sup>

By writing of failure, Wordsworth succeeds. To Pater this was always, one feels, a "strange" way of doing things, but it seems he could never stop respecting it, even while continuing his own painstaking search for the very different success which was to redirect literature for the last third of the century.