



Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation, 1787-1842

By Richard Gravil

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Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation, the most comprehensive critical study of the poet since the 1960s, presents the poet as balladist, sonneteer, minstrel, elegist, prophet of nature, and national bard. The book argues that Wordsworth's uniquely various oeuvre is unified by his sense of bardic vocation. Like Walt Whitman or the bards of Cumbria, Wordsworth sees himself as 'the people's remembrancer'. Like them, he sings of nature and endurance, laments the fallen, and fosters national independence and liberty. His task is to reconcile in one society 'the living and the dead' and to nurture both 'the people' and 'the kind'.

Part 1 is a comprehensive account of Wordsworth's early interest and later researches into antiquarian matters and includes readings of The Vale of Esthwaite, An Evening Walk, Yew-Trees and the pagan sonnets that introduce Ecclesiastical sonnets. Part Two considers the Salisbury Plain poems, The Ruined Cottage, Lyrical Ballads and the enlightenment ideas about nature underlying The Poem upon the Wye. Part Three explores elegiac Wordsworth in the Lucy poems, his creation of archetypal heroes (Michael, the Discharged Soldier, the Leech-Gatherer) to people the Cumbrian landscape, and Wordsworth's reconfiguration of manliness in such poems as Brougham Castle, Hart-Leap Well and The White Doe of Rylstone. Part 4 examines The Excursion, the political sonnets, The Convention of Cintra, the Waterloo poems, and the 1842 publication of The Borderers and Guilt and Sorrow.

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'this erudite exposition, profligate with its ideas ... succeeds as few others have done in apprehending Wordsworth's career holistically, incorporating all its diversities and apparent inconsistencies into a unified vision. It justifies fully the notion proposed by Hughes and Heaney that he was England's last national poet.'

— Duncan Wu, *Review of English Studies*

'A remarkable account of Wordsworth's long writing life, with something fresh and often provocative to say about its many extraordinary poetic achievements,

both famous and forgotten. It is difficult to imagine a better expicator of this most complex of modern poets: Gravil is scholarly and humane, sharp-eyed and good-humoured.' —Seamus Perry, Balliol College, Oxford

'This outstandingly original book reveals in fascinating detail how William Wordsworth—prophet of nature, remembrancer of his kind—attuned his poetry to the bardic voices of the ancient world. Embracing the full diversity of Wordsworth's career.... the Wordsworth that emerges is freshly situated in his own cultural milieu and times, and speaks to us with renewed vitality.'

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—Damian Walford Davies, *Romanticism*

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