Gregory Leadbetter
reads
William Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes*
(Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2016)
Edited by Richard Matlak

WRITING ABOUT WORDSWORTH IN 1802, COLERIDGE observes 'that some where or other there is a radical Difference in our theoretical opinions respecting Poetry—/ this I shall endeavor to go to the Bottom of—and acting the arbitrator between the old School & the New School hope to lay down some plain, & perspicuous, tho' not superficial, Canons of Criticism respecting Poetry' (CL II 830).[1] He was addressing Southey, who—like Wordsworth, and Coleridge himself—had been connected in literary circles with the 'New School' of poetry to which he refers. The nascent sense of a 'radical Difference' between the two poets is often noticed; much less so is Coleridge's wish to intervene in the contemporary debate between Wordsworth—or what Wordsworth represented—and the 'old School', as characterised by the burgeoning critical reaction to his poetry, and for whom Dryden and Pope remained pre-eminent exemplars in poetic taste. Coleridge had quickly recognised that, fundamentally, this was a debate about art versus artlessness, or art versus nature—and Coleridge, needless to say, wanted to preserve the claims and virtues of both. This, in simple terms, is what animated the criticism that kindled and flourished in his notebooks and letters, his lectures on literature (especially lecture 13 of his series on European Literature in 1818, the notes for which were eventually printed, with variations, in 1836 as 'On Poesy or Art'), and of course *Biographia Literaria*. It constituted both a defence of Wordsworth (and himself) and at the same time a genuine attempt to distinguish where and on what grounds of principle the poetry in question (and hence poetry in general) succeeded or failed. The debate—in one form or another—is still endlessly fertile.

It may be hard for readers today to believe that for Francis Jeffrey, one of Wordsworth's most prominent detractors, the publication of *Poems, in Two Volumes* in 1807 'now brought the question, as to the merit of his new school of poetry, to a very fair and decisive issue'—and the review-critics condemned the result almost to a man. An exasperated James Montgomery fumed that a 'more rash and injudicious speculation on the weakness or the depravity of the public taste has seldom been made'—and this of volumes that included 'Louisa', 'To H.C., six Years old', 'Resolution and Independence', a flush of fine sonnets, 'The solitary Reaper', 'I wandered lonely as a Cloud', 'A Complaint', 'Elegiac Stanzas', and the great 'Ode', among many other favourites now recognised as characteristic of Wordsworth at his finest.

In this useful new teaching edition from Broadview, Richard Matlak has presented the poems in the order they were first published, with

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straightforward notes where queries might arise for new readers or reminders as to fact might be useful. A clear and judicious introduction, written in Matlak's approachable style, is structured around the various contexts that conditioned or fed the making of the poems and their immediate reception, headed 'Love, Money, Marriage, Dorothy', 'Politics and History', 'Influence and Poetic Dialogue', 'Family Tragedy' and 'Contemporary Taste and Critical Backlash'. A valuable selection of related materials are gathered under these headings in five appendices, including extracts from various poems (such as Coleridge's 'Dejection', as published in the *Morning Post* on 4 October 1802, with which many of Wordsworth's lyrics are in some way in dialogue), manuscript facsimiles, Dorothy's journals, De Quincey's recollections, British anti-Napoleonic verse, contemporary paintings, and extracts from the critical onslaught that welcomed the publication of *Poems, in Two Volumes*. Worth particular mention are photographs of the 1:40 scale model of the *Earl of Abergavenny*, the East Indiaman which sank in 1805 with the loss of its captain, the poet's brother John Wordsworth, and 245 others: the model was purchased by Matlak for his institution, where it is housed in the Dinand Library of the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. A concise bibliography points students towards the extensive critical and historical commentary on the poems and their contexts with which they might broaden and deepen their reading.

In 1807, Wordsworth told Margaret Beaumont that despite all the criticism the volumes had received, he possessed a 'calm confidence that these Poems will live'—indeed, an 'invincible confidence that my writings (and among them these little Poems) will co-operate with the benign tendencies in human nature and society, wherever found; and that they will, in their degree, be efficacious in making men wiser, better, and happier'. It's a bold claim, of the kind that few poets in any age have made, but the poems have found a place in our culture that Wordsworth's early reviewers could never have countenanced. In presenting readers with the *Poems, in Two Volumes* as they were collected in 1807, Matlak's fine edition allows the poems to speak not just singly, but together—in their original daring and abundance of form—of 'the primal sympathy / Which having been must ever be'.