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William Wordsworth, Walking and Writing (part of the journal section entitled 'Creative Engagement with the Natural World')

John Strachan

Wordsworthian poetry is a poetry of movement, and William Wordsworth, who begins his most well-known poem 'I wandered lonely as a cloud', is a poet much preoccupied with wandering, especially on foot. This paper addresses the significance of walking in Wordsworth's life and work. Wordsworth walked as he composed, composed as he walked. The poet's sister Dorothy, for instance, writes to Mrs Clarkson in February 1804 thus: 'My dear friend, William has been walking and is now writing down the verses he composed in his walk...'. I'm not sure which particular verses Wordsworth wrote on this walk, but the fact of their *al fresco* composition is by no means unusual. Composing verse and walking went together for Wordsworth. The mere circumstances of poems' composition, however, do not make them important and I want to argue here that walking was of great thematological significance in the poet's work. This talk examines some of the key issues raised by walking in Wordsworth's work, issues to do with creativity and composition, solitude and sociability, politics and philosophy.

This paper examines not only the poet's walking, but also his writing. Writing and composing verse were often not the same thing for Wordsworth. Often he wrote post-composition, writing down what he had previously composed in his head, or reciting verses while Dorothy or Mary Wordsworth wrote them down. Writing, for Wordsworth, was also associated with effort, short-sightedness and headaches, with pain of the eyes and joints. Writing apologetically to De Quincey in March 1804, he declares that 'I have a derangement which makes writing painful to me, and indeed almost prevents me from holding correspondence with anybody'. But the act of composition *al fresco*, on the other hand, was associated with rather more agreeable feelings. Walking, says De Quincey, was 'a mode of exertion which, to Wordsworth, stood in the stead of alcohol and all other stimulants ... to which, indeed, he was indebted for a life of unclouded happiness, and we for much of what is most excellent in his writings'.

We are indebted to walking, says the Opium Eater, for much of Wordsworth's most 'excellent' works. Walking and composing in simultaneity – the poet was well known for it during his lifetime. The poet would frequently compose walking alone, mumbling to himself, or humming rhythmically. We have all seen modern equivalents of Wordsworth, muttering into their telephones as they go. How Wordsworth would have loved the iPhone, especially with its speech facility, and especially now that cellular phone coverage extends even to the Rydal and Grasmere areas. One can imagine the poet wandering the lakes, humming to himself, and then delivering himself of a new-born ode or a national sonnet directly into his phone which Dorothy or Mary Wordsworth could later transcribe without testing the poet's fingers, eyes or nerves into a fair copy for his publishers.

Poets need to clutch at whatever means they can to bring forth creative work, but there was something obsessive about Wordsworth's walking. In a 1791 letter to Jane Pollard, Dorothy writes about William's visit to the rectory in Fornsett St Peter in Norfolk:

We used to walk every morning about two hours; and every evening we went into the garden, at four, and used to pace backwards and forwards until six. Unless you have acclimatised yourself to that kind of walking you will have no idea it can be ... most delightful.

In the previous year, the poet had walked from Cambridge to France in 'the time ... when the whole nation was mad with joy in consequence of the revolution'. In a letter from Switzerland to Dorothy or September 1790, he declares that: 'We have been so inured to walking, that we have become almost insensible to fatigue. We have several times performed a journey ... over the most mountainous parts of Switzerland without any more weariness as if we had been walking an hour in ... Cambridge'. It is almost as if Revolutionary zeal acted as a stimulant to Wordsworth's walking prowess. As Kimiyo Ogawa argues in her paper on 'Radical Walking', walking is close aligned with radicalism in Wordsworth and Coleridge, and in the peripatetic vision of their friend John Thelwall. Romantic-era walking is a political trope, and a creative trope. Descriptions of strangers encountered on the public highway are charged with an ideological significance. Getting out and about means you meet other people: people from outside your class or race or gender or age group.

Wordsworth's walking informs the context, themes and settings of some of his most remarkable poetry, much of which has titles charged with peripatetic resonance from 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' to *The Excursion* to the 'Lines Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey. On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye on a Tour'. There are also a number of poems which begin with an appreciation of walking, and what it is to be outdoors. Wordsworth's narrative poem, 'Resolution and Independence' (1802), for instance, describes walking in the new dawn's morning:

All things that love the sun are out of doors;  
The sky rejoices in the morning's birth;  
The grass is bright with rain-drops; - on the moors  
The hare is running races in her mirth;  
And with her feet she from the plashy earth  
Raises a mist, that, glittering in the sun,  
Runs with her all the way, wherever she doth run. (8-14)

The charming image of the mirthful hare, her feet raising a watery trail as she runs, inspires the poet to a similar joyfulness:

I was a Traveller then upon the moor,  
I saw the hare that raced about with joy;  
I heard the woods and distant waters roar;

Or heard them not, as happy as a boy:

The pleasant season did my heart employ. (15-19)

'[H]appy as a boy'; to Wordsworth, who believed that 'the child is father of the man', this state of boyishness is something singular, a form of pleasure which is ordered differently to adult forms of feeling with none of the negative connotations one might associate with some comparisons between an adult and a child, such as the charge that someone is 'childish' or 'puerile'; 'boyishness' in this context is a splendid state, and walking brings us to it. Here we walk to happiness and to a heightened state of awareness.

It is also significant that though the poet is surrounded by the life symbolized by the hare, he is alone in human terms. Finding the still centre of yourself is at the centre of many spiritual and philosophical systems, both Western and Eastern, and wandering on one's own is at the heart of the experience of the Romantic period of European philosophy, poetry and arts, from Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1776-78) to Caspar David Friedrich's titanic 'Wanderer above the Sea of Fog' (1818), or indeed, Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' (1804), that most famous of Romantic-era poems, which begins and ends in meditation on solitude.

Wordsworth's focus in 'Daffodils' and 'Resolution and Independence' is on happy solitude – being alone enlivens his mind and fires his imagination. At the same time, thinking about self is often linked to thinking about others. In 'Tintern Abbey' he says that in contemplating nature and his own imagination he is 'hearing always' what he called 'the still, sad music of humanity'. And where does he do this? Abroad, out and about, walking with his sister. Wordsworth has been called a solipsist, as self-obsessed or narrow-minded. But his thought ultimately deals with the music of humanity, and his 'lonely' song joins a mightier chorus. In Wordsworth, understanding ourselves helps us to empathise with and to understand others. And that is often best done outside, walking.

So, in conclusion, let me return to writing in the sense of composing and committing to manuscript, the expression of thoughts or ideas in written words. Putting pen to paper is not something Wordsworth always enjoyed, and it might be tempting to conclude with a theoretical flourish about the oral and the written, or invoke Derrida's account of phonocentrism in *Of Grammatology* (1967). But I will resist the temptation to weave poststructuralist elaborations around simple physiological facts of sore joints and poor eyesight. In the end, both weak-eyed Wordsworth and, indeed, blind-eyed Milton, articulate the 'expression of thoughts or ideas in written words'. Let me end by giving Wordsworth the last word, in a passage of 'Tintern Abbey' about his beloved sister, walking:

Therefore let the moon

Shine on thee in thus solitary walk;

And let her misty mountains be free

To blow against thee; and in after years,

When these wild ecstasies shall be matured

Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind  
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,  
Thy memory be as a dwelling place  
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh then!  
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,  
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts  
Or tender joy wilt though remember me,  
And these my exhortions! (135-47)