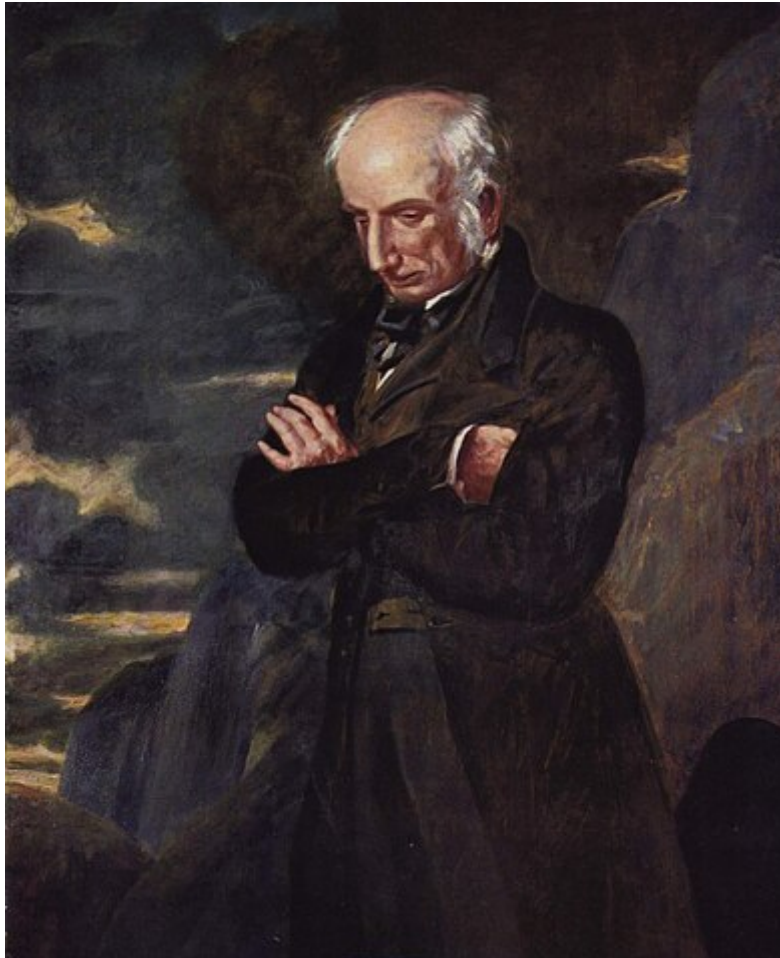


This Old Man, That Old Man: Wordsworth Revises Wordsworth



1) This Old Man (1798)

When Wordsworth published this poem in the ground-breaking first volume of *Lyrical Ballads*¹ (1798) it had a long title and told a story.

Old Man Travelling;
ANIMAL TRANQUILLITY AND DECAY,
A SKETCH

The little hedge-row birds,
 That peck along the road, regard him not.
 He travels on, and in his face, his step,
 His gait, is one expression; every limb,
 His look and bending figure, all bespeak
 A man who does not move with pain, but moves
 With thought - He is insensibly subdued
 To settled quiet: he is one by whom
 All effort seems forgotten, one to whom
 Long patience has such mild composure given,
 That patience now doth seem a thing, of which
 He hath no need. He is by nature led
 To peace so perfect, that the young behold
 With envy, what the old man hardly feels.
 - I asked him whither he was bound, and what
 The object of his journey; he replied
 ?Sir! I am going many miles to take
 ?A last leave of my son, a mariner,
 ?Who from a sea-fight has been brought to Falmouth,
 ?And there is dying in an hospital.?

Wordsworth's persona contemplates the disturbing serenity of this traveller, who moves with mild composure, but aged difficulty along the edges of a road in Somerset, where Wordsworth was renting a house at the time. The first part of the poem is a curious confrontation between the old man's determination and the (presumably) young observer's sense that in his stately, effortless, un-patient (as opposed to impatient) progress he is watching one of the driving forces of the universe, the 'peace' which unfolds at the limits of endurance, and makes the end of life so much quieter than life's hot-headed, eventful beginning, soon to be chronicled in the 1799 *Prelude*.

But the poem also solidly recognises that this is a tragedy in real time. That word 'hardly' in l. 14 may mean the young man doesn't think the old man 'feels' very much; but it also hints he may be taking things 'hard'. If the old man's son has been injured in a sea-fight, that means he has been giving his all for his country in the early phases of the Revolutionary War. Did he help to win at the Glorious First of June, 1794? or at some other successful skirmish, for the Royal Navy was invariably successful at this time? Is this then the response of a grateful nation? expecting a man of pensionable age to walk a good hundred miles, or more, from the Quantocks to Cornwall, with no clear prospect of finding his boy alive when he gets there? The Navy was not an enviable career at this time. Shipboard conditions, especially in battle, were appalling. The Navy consisted of few volunteers and innumerable pressed men in wartime, and resentment broke out in major mutinies at Spithead and The Nore the year before this poem was written. Wordsworth may no longer have espoused William Godwin's ideals of philosophic anarchism, as he had during the French Revolution. He wrote now more as patriot than radical. But the poem in 1798 includes an element of government critique and political protest, and the reviewers were quick to pick this up. Charles Burney, Frances Burney's father, thought 'the termination seems pointed against the war.'

Whether the son is dying of injury or disease, or disease induced by injury (and all three could be terrible prospects with primitive painkillers, e.g. rum), Wordsworth progressively reduced his part in quick-following revisions in 1800 and 1802. First he is folded into the old man's indirect speech, then Wordsworth deliberately signifies that his condition may not be critical, not 'dying' now, just 'lying.' But the most drastic changes were yet to come:

2) That Old Man (1815)

*Animal Tranquillity and Decay,
A Sketch*

The little hedge-row birds,
That peck along the road, regard him not.
He travels on, and in his face, his step,
His gait, is one expression; every limb,
His look and bending figure, all bespeak
A man who does not move with pain, but moves
With thought - He is insensibly subdued
To settled quiet: he is one by whom
All effort seems forgotten, one to whom
Long patience has such mild composure given, 10
That patience now doth seem a thing, of which
He hath no need. He is by nature led
To peace so perfect, that the young behold
With envy, what the old man hardly feels.

In 1815 Wordsworth pared the poem down to its metaphysical roots. Now the old man has no speaking-part, nor does it seem to matter, any longer, whether he is capable of speaking. The fact is the birds make as much noise, pecking along the road, as does his trudging. The poem slides into eerie silence as if muted. The speaker closes in not on the old man's voice but on the spectacle of his suffering, into which he seems ominously to disappear. He is becoming a revelation of it, perhaps, sliding out of pain and into infinity, as Wordsworth had suggested in some lines originally written for his play, *The Borderers* (written 1795-6) but shifted to a later poem, *The White Doe of Rylstone* (written 1808) in 1837:

Action is transitory ? a step, a blow,
The motion of a muscle? this way or that?
'Tis done, and in the after-vacancy
We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed:

Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,
And shares the nature of infinity.

Action belongs to time, suffering goes on and on, and feeds into eternity (Wordsworth, once again, can't make up his mind whether the verb in the last line should be 'shares' or 'has?'). The 'settled quiet' of the old man is a preparation for his soon-to-be-altered state. No more 'this way or that?', but a steady melding with what Orwell called that terrible thing, a natural death, 'something slow, smelly and painful.' This is writing about the 'human condition' all right. But one reason I've never liked that phrase is if we're not careful it keeps individuals at a distance. Is that what Wordsworth is doing here, becoming a spectator *ab extra*, feeling for, but never with, his characters, as Coleridge put it in *Table-Talk*? Is his conspicuous concern bothering the 'aged, aged man?', as in Lewis Carroll's parody of *Lyrical Ballads*, 'The White Knight's Song'? Or, since no-one can die in the first person in literature, is Wordsworth giving us the next best thing: faltering steps down the long tunnel to the bright light (or whatever metaphor you prefer) where you no longer hear the birds singing or even pecking. You can't see 'extinction's alp' as Larkin puts it in

his poem on terminal care, 'The Old Fools', when every effort goes into watching your frail steps up the 'rising ground' of its slopes. He was to deal with the strangely automatic serenity, what Christopher Ricks has called the thing-like humanity of extreme old age, in another great poem, 'The Leech Gatherer'.

It should also be noted that by 1815 Wordsworth's politics have moved decisively to the right, and the Tory government at this time (Corn Laws, suspension of Habeas Corpus, Peterloo) did not like to be reminded of particular abuses, such as under-funding of the Navy twenty years ago.

So should we prefer 'Animal Tranquillity and Decay', a poem suggesting we are programmed, in the end, to go gentle into that good night; or should it be 'Old Man Travelling', where the subject of the poem is viewed in close-up as well as a long-shot, and expending his last steps, like Tennyson's Ulysses, in final heroic purpose? I've asked students to decide, after close study of these poems, and the result of their aggregated vote is intriguingly close. Some think case-studies add awkward footnotes to poetry, and are better marginalised in this instance; others that Wordsworth, as in 1815 the poem makes its bee-line for the borderlands of Beckett's seventh age of man, cruelly drowns that admonishing sound-track he speaks of in 'Tintern Abbey', 'the still, sad music of humanity.'

But you don't have to decide. Wordsworth, who liked to ensure that we have both readings if engagement between them was fruitful, has ensured we can read both poems. And so, more courageously, has Christopher Ricks. As Wordsworth can't choose between versions of this poem, neither does he, in editing the most recent *Oxford Book of English Verse* (1999). On pp. 341-42 he prints both 1798 and 1815 texts.

Works Cited

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