

democratic change. In 1813 a government sinecure, the position of stamp distributor (that is, revenue collector) for Westmorland, was bestowed on him—evidence of his recognition as a national poet and of the alteration in the general perception of his politics. Gradually, Wordsworth's residences, as he moved into and more comfortable quarters, became standard stops for sightseers from the Lakes. By 1843 he was poet laureate of Great Britain. He died in 1850 at the age of eighty. Only then did his executors publish his masterpiece, *The Prelude*, or *of a Poet's Mind*, the autobiographical poem that he had written in two parts in 1805, and then continued to revise almost to the end of his long life.

Most of Wordsworth's greatest poetry had been written by 1807, when he published *Poems, in Two Volumes*. After *The Excursion* (1814) and the first edition of his poems (1815), although he continued to write prolifically and to make revisions for additional collected editions, his powers appeared to decline. The causes of that decline have been much debated. One seems to be the very nature of his writing. Wordsworth is above all the poet of remembrance—also the reinterpretation—of things past. He frequently presents poetry as the outgrowth of occasions on which objects or events in the present trigger a sudden renewal of feelings that he has experienced in youth, often when realizing their import. In his prose portrait of Wordsworth for *The Spectator* (1850) Age William Hazlitt noticed this: for Wordsworth, he observed, there "is no more insignificant that it has not in some mood or other found the way into his heart, and that does not awaken the memory of other years." But the memory of early emotional experience is not an inexhaustible resource for poetry, as Wordsworth recognized almost from the start of his career. In book 11 of *The Prelude* he already seems to be entertaining a premonition of future loss, in the lines that describe the recurrence of "spots of time" from his memories of childhood

The days gone by
Come back upon me from the dawn almost
Of life: the hiding places of my power
Seem open; I approach and then they close.
I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,
May scarcely see at all.

The simple (maybe even prosy) lines, on the perplexities of memory, on the way that the self poses for the self, and on the sorrows and losses brought by the passage of time, announce an imminent imaginative failure. At the same time, contrarily, they suggest the reason Hazlitt in the same essay would declare Wordsworth's pre-eminence among that of the living poets: "he has communicated interest and dignity to the primal movements of the heart of man."

FROM LYRICAL BALLADS

Goody Blake and Harry Gill

A True Story

Oh! what's the matter? what's the matter?
What is't that ails young Harry Gill?
That evermore his teeth they chatter,
Chatter, chatter, chatter still.
Of waistcoats Harry has no lack,

Good duffle grey, and flannel fine;
He has a blanket on his back,
And coats enough to smother nine.

In March, December, and in July,
Tis all the same with Harry Gill;

The neighbours tell, and tell you truly,
His teeth they chatter, chatter still.

At night, at morning, and at noon,
Tis all the same with Harry Gill;

Beneath the sun, beneath the moon,
His teeth they chatter, chatter still.

Young Harry was a lusty drover,
And who so stout of limb as he?

His cheeks were red as ruddy clover,
His voice was like the voice of three.

Auld Goody Blake was old and poor,
Ill fed she was, and thinly clad;

And any man who pass'd her door,
Might see how poor a hut she had,

All day she spun in her poor dwelling,
And then her three hours' work at night!

Alas! 'twas hardly worth the telling,
It would not pay for candle-light.

—This woman dwelt in Dorsetshire,
Her hut was on a cold hill-side,

And in that country coals are dear,
For they come far by wind and tide.

By the same fire to boil their pottage,
Two poor old dames, as I have known,

Will often live in one small cottage,
But she, poor woman, dwelt alone.

'Twas well enough when summer came,
The long, warm, lightsome summer-day,

Then at her door the *canty* dame
Would sit, as any linnet gay.

But when the ice our streams did fether,
Oh! then how her old bones would shake!

You would have said, if you had met her,
'Twas a hard time for Goody Blake.

Her evenings then were dull and dead;
Sad case it was, as you may think,

For very cold to go to bed,
And then for cold not sleep a wink.

Oh joy for her! when e'er in winter
The winds at night had made a rout,