

Evolution of a Poet

Reading & Interpreting Wordsworth's Manuscripts

Liam Myers • 160273096 • English Literature BA Hons
email l.myers@newcastle.ac.uk • supervisor Prof Michael Rossington



Aims

To examine and document the changing representation of religious faith and spirituality in three of the many manuscript (MS) versions of the autobiographical poem *The Prelude* by William Wordsworth (1770-1850).

Methodology

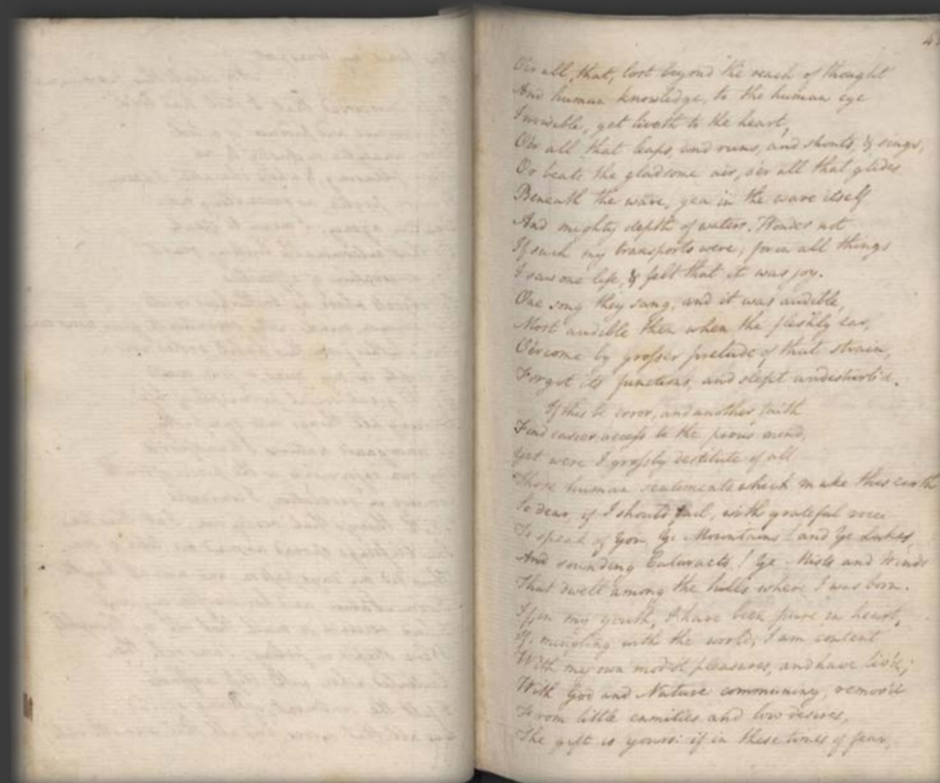
The richest passages from the MS of the 13-book version of *The Prelude* (DCMS 52) were selected and formed the basis of the comparison. Consulting the originals and facsimiles of MSS in *The Cornell Wordsworth* print edition and the online database *Romanticism: Life, Literature and Landscape*, the passages selected were compared primarily with the corresponding versions in the 1839 MS (DCMS 145), and also with the earlier 1799 MS (DCMS 22). One week was spent studying the original MSS in the Jerwood Centre, Grasmere--located next to Dove Cottage, Wordsworth's home from 1799 to 1808.

Results

Fifteen of the many changes in the representation of religion and spiritualism were recorded. These include **thirteen** additions and/or revisions to both explicit and **implicit** discussions of religion in the poem, and two instances of text being crossed out. Only **one** passage records no significant changes.

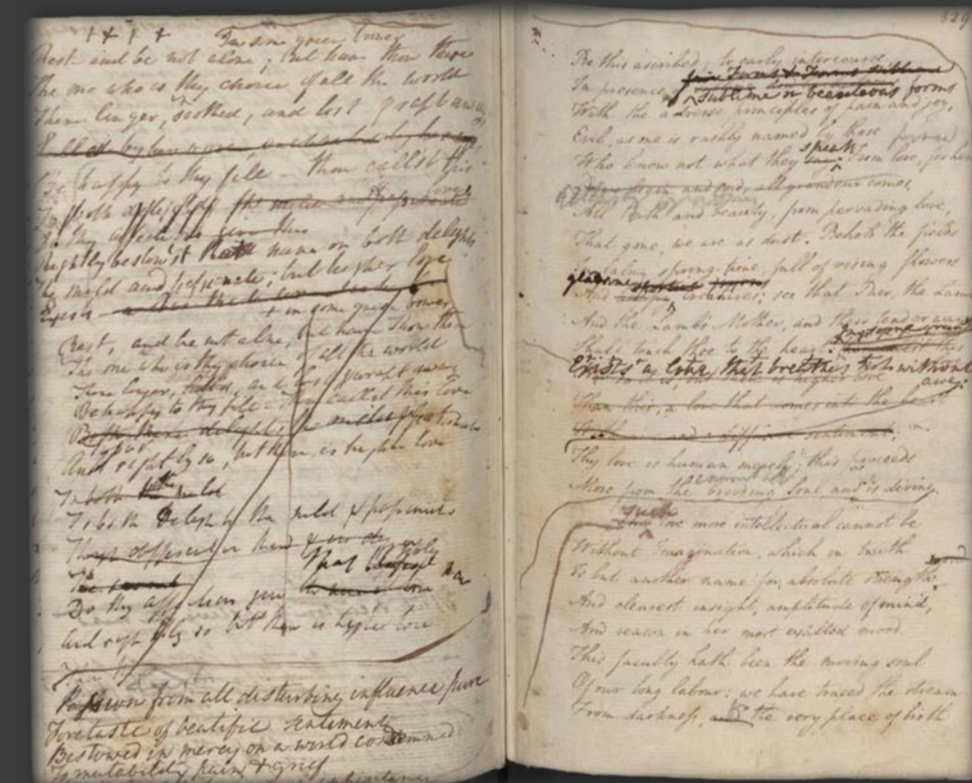
Wordsworth's Religion?

Many attempts have been made to glean accurately Wordsworth's religious beliefs. Bold claims range from overt pantheism to the religion of the Quakers. In actuality, for most of his life the poet never explicates his precise religiosity, preferring instead to seek God in his conception of nature or 'the imagination'. This seems to change in the poet's final years, however, when he settles on a characteristically individual interpretation of institutionalised Christianity.



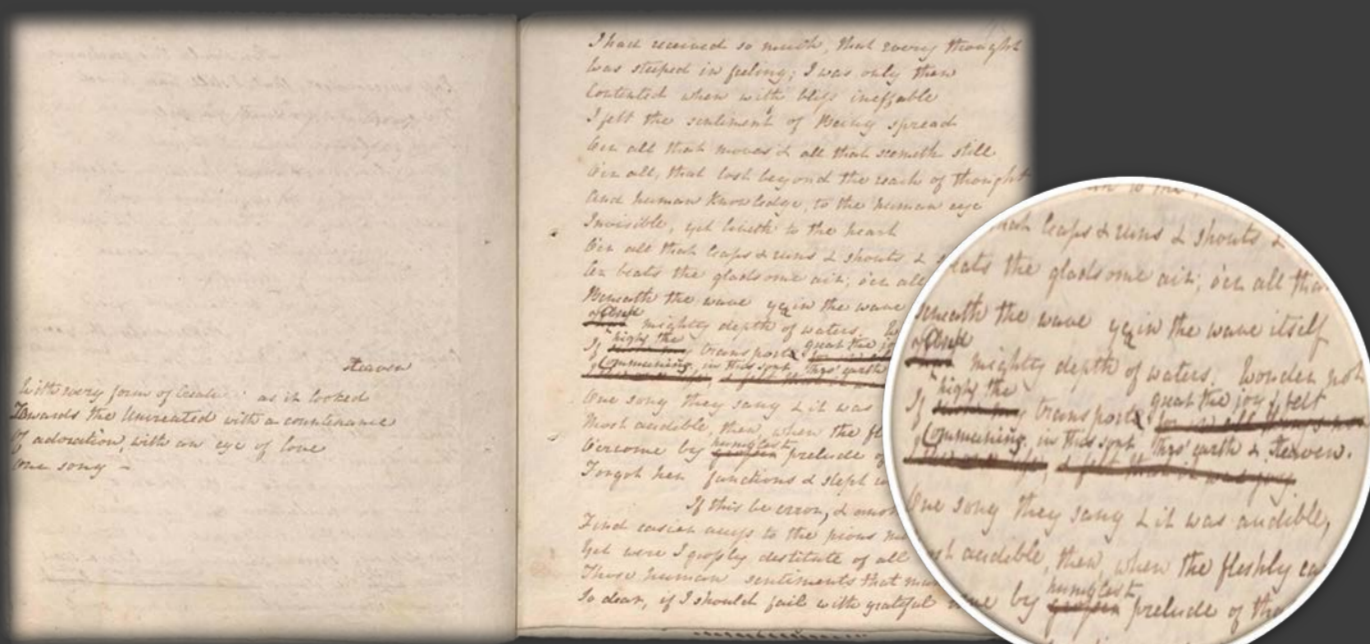
Shown here is a digital facsimile of the 13-book version of *The Prelude* 1805 (DCMS 52). This is a fair copy of the poem made by Wordsworth's sister Dorothy. It will later be revised by the poet. One passage, changes to which are recorded below, finds Wordsworth attempting to describe an as-then unexplained joy: 'for in all things / I saw one life, & felt that it was joy' (f. 43^r).

Although it may seem unusual to us today, Wordsworth would often revise a poem by speaking it aloud while his sister or wife Mary acted as an amanuensis. Dorothy (1771-1855) records in her diary how her brother would even revise outside, and 'while he is so engaged he seldom knows how the time slips away, or hardly whether it is rain or fair' (D. W. to Lady Beaumont, May 1804).

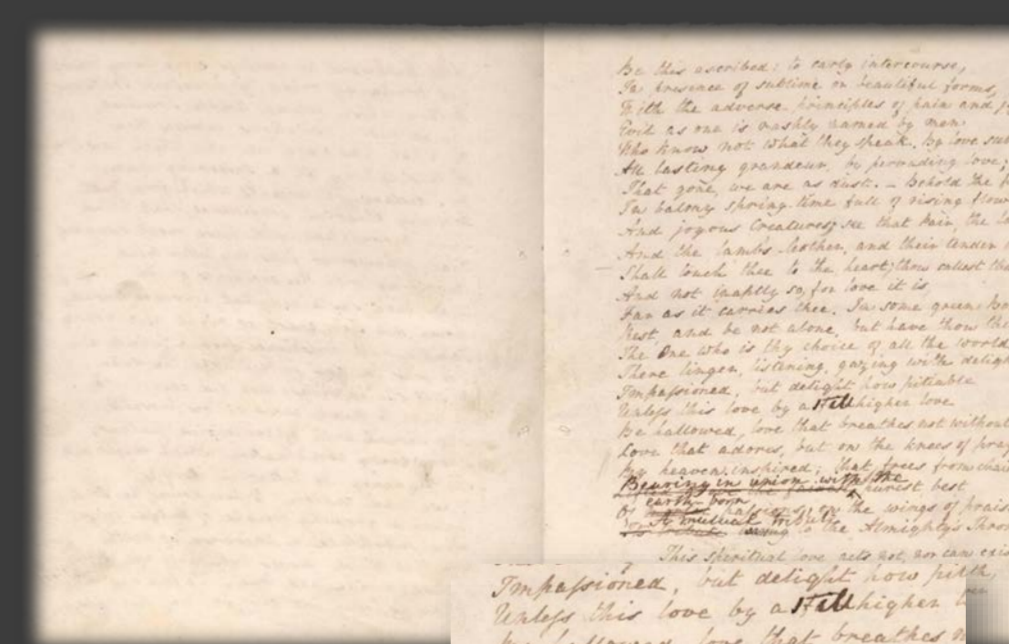


Here is another leaf from the 1805 MS (DCMS 52). In this later part of the poem is evidence of one of the most significant of the changes Wordsworth makes to his work. The passage that begins: 'Thou call'st this love / And so it is; but there is higher love / Than this, a love that comes into the heart / With awe and a diffusive sentiment; / Thy love is human merely; this proceeds / More from the brooding Soul, and is divine' is altered radically (f. 329^r).

Pictured here is the later 1839 MS (DCMS 145). The same part of the poem now reads 'great the joy I felt / Communing in this sort thro' earth & Heaven / With every form of Creature as it looked / Towards the Uncreated / Of adoration, with an eye of love' (ff. 44^v-45^r).

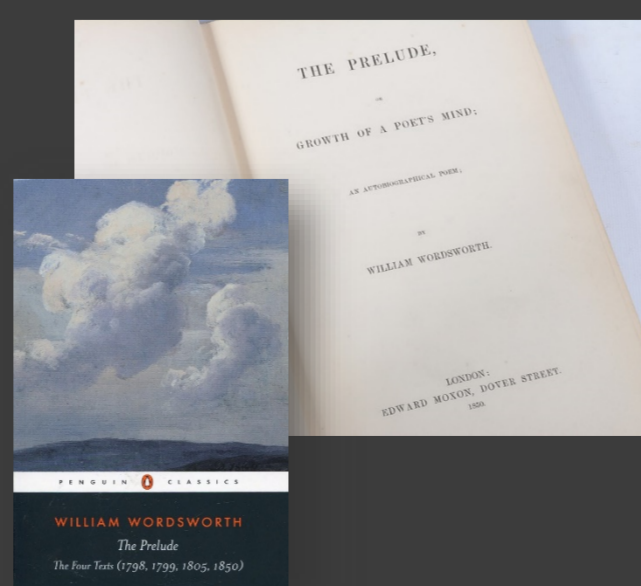


Note the added references to communion and heaven, and the newfound pious tone. The importance of such a change cannot be understated. Rather than obscure mysticism the passage now connotes an almost Christian orthodox and Romantic reverence of nature.



It is clear that while Wordsworth's conception of love is always as a spiritual force, in his final years he had come to see this as dependent upon a Christian understanding of, and attitude towards, faith.

By the time the 1839 MS (DCMS 145) was composed an additional fourteenth book had been added, to which the above passage, in revised form, is moved. This passage now reads: 'Unless this love by a still higher love/ Be hallowed, love that breathes not without awe; / Love that adores, but on the knees of prayer / By heaven inspired; that frees from chains the soul [...]' (f. 23^r).



The Prelude was first published in 1850 after the poet's death and its title was not Wordsworth's own but that of his widow and executors. It was known amongst his inner circle as 'The Poem to Coleridge' as it is addressed to his friend the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834).