



Wordsworth's "Thanksgiving ode": An unpublished postscript

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poem concludes with religious reflections, a bit of heraldic and lapidary lore, and blessings on Thomas' descendants.

With such a well-known public character, we cannot expect to find here many new facts contributing to his biography. From the superscription it is clear that the date of his birth was then set at 1622 rather than 1623, as more recent accounts will have it. One nice new tidbit adds to our lore

about that ever-ready anagrammatist, the first John Wilson, who greeted young Thomas Danforth when he first assumed high office with the perfect anagram: 'Handsom for that.'

On the whole, this elegy is one of Danforth's best; it is of some literary merit, a good example of the later Puritan elegiac tradition, and a precious document of the New England way of life.

HAROLD S. JANTZ

Wordsworth's *Thanksgiving Ode*: An Unpublished Postscript

ENGLISHMEN celebrated 18 January 1816 as a day of general rejoicing for the final defeat of Napoleon, and Wordsworth commemorated the occasion in his *Thanksgiving Ode*, published some three months later.¹ Unfortunately, the *Ode* is a somewhat labored occasional piece. There is in it more of what its author called 'rational patriotism' and 'sound philosophy' than of true poetic fire. It does not seem to have enjoyed a wide contemporary popularity, and it has not worn well.

Wordsworth cast his poem in the form of an irregular ode. As he explained his choice to Southey,

It is a dramatised ejaculation; and this,

if anything can, must excuse the irregular frame of the metre. In respect to a stanza for a grand subject designed to be treated comprehensively, there are great objections. If the stanza be short, it will scarcely allow of fervour and impetuosity, unless so short that the sense is run perpetually from one stanza to another, as in Horace's *alcaics*; and if it be long, it will be as apt to generate diffuseness as to check it.²

In its first edition, the stanzas or movements of the *Ode* were indicated simply by spacing and indentation. This practice led to a printer's error which was a source of some vexation to Wordsworth, and of which he complained in the hitherto-unpublished postscript of a letter to John Scott:

¹ The *Ode* was sent to the printer about 18 March 1816, the date of its prefatory advertisement, for in a letter of April 9 to R. P. Gillies, Wordsworth speaks of having sent it 'three weeks ago'; see *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Sélincourt (1937), II, 729. The published correspondence also indicates that the book finally appeared between May 3 (De Sélincourt, II, 740) and May 26 (De Sélincourt, II, 745). The Harvard copy of the *Thanksgiving Ode* contains a four-page publishers' advertisement dated April, 1816, possibly indicative of a publication date early in May.

² De Sélincourt, *op. cit.*, II, 717.

I ordered my publication to be sent to Haydon. Pray correct in your copy an error which entirely destroys the effect of one movement of the first Ode —

'Sully the limpid stream of thankfulness.
— What robe can gratitude employ [']

So it ought to stand; but the stupid Printer, (why I cannot conceive) has broken the paragraph into two. . . .'

The verses quoted are lines 132 and 133 of the *Ode*, appearing on page 10 of the first edition. There the second line of the pair is set apart from the preceding line both by lead and by indentation. With the five lines immediately following, it receives the same typographic treatment as a complete movement.

The error certainly does destroy the effect of the passage, but Wordsworth apparently took no steps to correct it in the first edition. (Two years earlier, the omission of two lines from *The Excursion* had been corrected by the insertion of a cancel leaf.)⁴ He had plenty of opportunity to do so,

for many copies of the first edition remained to be bound up with *Peter Bell*, *The Waggoner*, and *The River Duddon* and issued in 1820 as a supplementary volume to the *Poems* of 1815.⁵ No cancel or other variant has been recorded in this volume. The copy in the Houghton Library agrees in every respect with the earlier separate issue.

But in the 1820 edition of his poetical works Wordsworth at last corrected the error, and steps were taken to see that it should not be repeated.⁶ There and in all succeeding editions the passage reads as the author intended, and the movements are numbered consecutively so that their arrangement is completely unambiguous. Wordsworth's postscript to Scott thus illuminates an apparent revision in form of the *Thanksgiving Ode*, and may also explain why its divisions were numbered in the second and subsequent editions.

WILLIAM H. BOND

⁴ This fragmentary letter survives in a slip consisting of the autograph signature and postscript only, evidently cut from a longer letter. It is now in the Houghton Library. Enough of the address remains on the verso to identify the addressee. The fragment is undated, but most probably it was written in May, 1816. It may actually be a part of one of the two published letters from Wordsworth to Scott in that month (De Sélinecourt, *op. cit.*, II, 740 and 746); the editor is not specific as to the extent of his quotations, but both apparently lack signatures.

⁵ See George F. Whicher, 'Notes on a Wordsworth Collection,' *The Colophon*, N.S., II (1937), 373-375. The error in *The Excursion* is admittedly much more serious than that in the *Ode*.

⁶ Thomas J. Wise, *Two Lake Poets* (1927), p. 21.

⁷ *The Miscellaneous Poems of William Wordsworth* (1820), III, 273-298. The passage in question is on p. 287.

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