

'My dearest Sir,' cried Mistress Swan  
 'You've got at once into the middle,'  
 And little Bess in accents sweeter  
 Cried 'O deal Sir, but who is Peter?'  
 Said Harry 'Tis a downright riddle.'  
 The Squire said 'Sure as Paradise  
 Was lost to us by Adam's sinning  
 We are all wandering in a wood,  
 And therefore, Sir, I wish you would  
 Begin at the beginning.'<sup>1</sup>

It is almost as if Wordsworth were involved in the dramatic situation for its own sake; but in strategic terms he presumably wished to attract the reader with his clowning before the narrative proper begins. Was something of the kind perhaps true of the facetious ballad stanzas that survive in the *Christabel* Notebook?

<sup>1</sup> *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt, 5 vols, Oxford, 1940-9, ii, p. 339, *apparatus criticus*.

## R. E. Exam

The third-year boy, baffled by questions about God,  
 Held a tiny plastic skull for luck,  
 Starting young, hoping he was right;  
 Later, thinking what on earth to say,  
 He cuddled it. So they kept each other warm.

Once, in days further off from wishing,  
 It might have been St Christopher, whose back  
 Bore him to his master's good report,  
 Or a vernicle sewn upon his cap  
 To pardon all his errors with her charm.  
 But now it was his age's latest joke,  
 Sick as he was in his schoolroom flight  
 From knowledge. So he took possession  
 Of the favour to which he too must come;  
 And as I watched him struggling with the word,  
 And though I knew that time was on his side,  
 I saw the plaything blacken in his grip,  
 And death winking in his bright and early eye.

JULIAN ENNIS