

New Light on "The Excursion"

ALAN G. HILL

A fresh approach to *The Excursion* is long overdue if Wordsworth is to take his rightful place among the sages of the early Victorian period. But the obstacles in the way of this are great. There is little general agreement as to what, if anything, Wordsworth was trying to achieve in this vast, even sprawling, structure, and it has never attracted the steady critical attention that would have made it more accessible now. Apart from the tragic tale of Margaret in Book I, which in the form of *The Ruined Cottage* was written much earlier, the poem is largely ignored except as evidence of Wordsworth's poetic decline. Jeffrey's notorious verdict — "This will never do!" — has re-echoed in one form or another down the years.

The poem really deserves a better fate altogether. As one of the great reassertions of traditional values and beliefs against the sceptical spirit of the Enlightenment, it is a work no student of the nineteenth century can afford to neglect. But a more favourable estimate is impossible while the whole *raison d'être* of the design remains problematic.

Wordsworth's own remarks about *The Excursion* (particularly in the *Preface* of 1814) and its relation to the unfinished *Recluse* reveal little about his intentions in organizing the poem as he did. A few influences are fairly clear: the dialogues of Plato, and possibly those of George Berkeley as well, the didactic and contemplative poetry of the eighteenth century, and finally travelogues like John Thelwall's miscellany *The Peripatetic* (1793). But none of the sources and analogues discussed by Judson Stanley Lyon (*The Excursion, A Study*, New Haven, 1950, pp. 29-

60) really account for the peculiar *temper* of the poem and the apparently inconclusive ending which Wordsworth gives to the debate between Solitary, Wanderer and Pastor. Did he reject Coleridge's advice that he should expound "a vital Christianity" only to flounder in uncertainty, at heart unconvinced himself and merely dramatising an internal debate which he could not resolve, "three persons in one poet," as Hazlitt complained? Curiously enough, it is just those who emphasise Wordsworth's growing conformism and orthodoxy in those years when *The Excursion* was taking shape, who also call in doubt the tentative nature of his conclusion.

The problem may perhaps best be tackled indirectly by considering the procedure of a much earlier dialogue, the *Octavius* of the second or third century writer Minucius Felix. For he, like Wordsworth, was feeling his way into the minds of his contemporaries, trying to direct their thoughts into new channels, but building on existing beliefs and attitudes rather than repudiating them. Affinities between Wordsworth's "conversational" poem and the first Christian dialogue in Latin suggest that the two works are linked, but up till now there has been no direct evidence to connect them. I am very grateful to Professor Chester C. Shaver of Oberlin College, Ohio, for allowing me to refer to Wordsworth's *Library Book* of 1829 in the Houghton Library at Harvard before the publication of his own comprehensive catalogue of Wordsworth's books, and so for the first time to establish the poet's familiarity with the *Octavius*.

Wordsworth apparently owed his knowledge of Minucius Felix, like so much else, to Coleridge, who refers to the *Octavius* as early as 1797 (*Notebooks*, ed. K. Coburn, i. 313). He probably introduced Wordsworth to the work as soon as they became intimate during the Alfoxden period. Later on his copy followed him to Keswick and after his breach with the Wordsworths and final departure from the Lakes, the book must have remained behind in the

Wordsworth household; for it was listed among Wordsworth's books at Rydal Mount in 1829, with the direction that (along with other volumes belonging to Coleridge) it was to be returned to his son Derwent, at that time a clergyman in Cornwall. This must have been done some time before Wordsworth's death and the break-up of his library, since the *Octavius* is not recorded in the Rydal Mount Sale Catalogue of 1859 (printed in the *Transactions of the Wordsworth Society*, 1882-7). The book thus survived, and eventually found its way a few years ago to the Coleridge Collection at Victoria College, Toronto, where by courtesy of the Library authorities I was recently privileged to examine it.

Coleridge's *Octavius*, in the handsome edition of Jacob Ouzel, or Oiselius (1631-1686), the Dutch humanist and Professor of Public Law at Groningen, was published at Leyden in 1652. This was just over a century after the work had been rediscovered following its disappearance in the Middle Ages. The volume included a cognate work of quite a different spirit, the *De Errore Profanarum Religionum* of Julius Firmicus Maternus, which had also been rediscovered in the Renaissance. Taken together, the two writers imply strikingly different attitudes towards the pagan Roman religion and Christianity, the first emphasising the common ground between them, the second their mutual antagonism. To Wordsworth, setting out in *The Excursion* to bridge the gap between his readers' experience and sympathies *as men* and the higher truths of philosophy and religion, the whole volume offered an object-lesson in strategy that would not fail to impress him, given his own cast of mind.

Questions about the author and dating of the *Octavius*, and its affinities with Tertullian and Cyprian, have been actively pursued since the time of Harnack, and need not delay us here. But something needs to be said about the design and temper of the work, which are very relevant to the present inquiry. The *Octavius* has always appealed to

those who, like Coleridge and (later) von Hugel, feel that the Christian character is most lastingly established by a gradual preparation in which the sympathies are enlarged and prejudice removed before revealed truth is reached. This was essentially Wordsworth's own view too, in his letter to Francis Wrangham of 5 June, 1808:

I will allow you that Religion is the eye of the Soul, but if we would have successful Soul-oculists, not merely that organ, but the general anatomy and constitution of the intellectual frame must be studied: farther, the powers of that eye are affected by the general state of the system. My meaning is, that piety and religion will be best understood by him who takes the most *comprehensive* view of the human mind, and that for the most part, they will strengthen with the general strength of the mind; and that this is best promoted by a due mixture of direct and indirect nourishment and discipline.

This point of view is really inimical to the Evangelical frame of mind which stresses the unique experience of conversion, arising from encounter with revealed truth; and Wordsworth's aversion to Evangelical methods is well known. The *Octavius* might be taken at first sight as an attempt to establish Christianity on rationalist and eclectic lines without appeal to Revelation, as if it somehow foreshadowed the methods of Strauss and Renan. But this is to misunderstand the whole drift and purpose of the work just where it comes closest to *The Excursion*.

The occasion of the *Octavius*, it will be recalled, is a trip or excursion by three lawyer friends from Rome to Ostia while the courts are in vacation. This popular resort offers them fresh air for their deliberations — the seashore setting is delightfully described — but as the port of Rome and meeting-place of faiths, it is also an appropriate venue for an excursion of the mind as well. For the speakers in the dialogue are casting about for the truth and seeing how far their arguments will take them, just as the boys pictured on the beach playing "ducks and drakes" are seeing how far they can skim their pebbles over the placid surface of the sea.

The author, as impartial arbiter, presides over the de-

bate between Caecilius, the sceptical pagan traditionalist, and Octavius, champion of Christianity. This strategy ensures that justice is done to both sides and that Caecilius, the loser, who may be said to represent the uncommitted Roman intelligentsia, is not humiliated though his conversion is a foregone conclusion. For while demonstrating the superiority of Christianity, Minucius Felix contrives to suggest the common ground it shares with the higher philosophy of paganism. He tries to bring about an accommodation between the two, reserving his scorn for the ridiculous and degrading fables of popular mythology. Unlike Tertullian, he is anxious to turn as much as possible from the past to Christian use. Christianity, he seems to say, is the perfect development of time-honoured truths descending through Plato to Cicero and Seneca, and presents no threat to Roman civilization and social order. The living stream of faith had only to be diverted into a wider and deeper channel.

This bridge-building operation is elegantly accomplished through the dialogue form. Octavius answers Caecilius's arguments one by one: he raises no fresh issues or problems which cannot at once be dealt with, and though he ends with an eloquent tribute to the Christian character, he says nothing about the higher mysteries of Christianity. He confines himself to establishing the unity of God, the resurrection of the body (not, however, from Christ's example but from types and analogies in the world of nature), and future rewards and punishments. The basic groundwork of belief, the indispensable first stage for lasting conversion, has been laid, and Caecilius's progress to the next stage, that of revealed truth, is assumed rather than described. The ending, which would be inconclusive in a philosophical treatise, is perfectly appropriate to a conversation piece where the development of ideas must be subordinated to dramatic form and cogency.

Now if Wordsworth was thoroughly familiar with the *Octavius* and felt a certain kinship of spirit with its author,

it seems more than likely that he determined to give a similar shape to his own "conversational" poem, though in the end this was somewhat concealed by the illustrative tales and descriptive pieces which he groups around his central arguments. He reflects the same tentative strategy as Minucius Felix, mediating between different points of view and seeking common ground between his speakers by an appeal to general human experience. The Wanderer asserts a few general truths that are independent of Revelation: Providence, human immortality, and an active communion between Man and God through the "active principle" in Nature. Wordsworth then introduces another speaker, the Pastor, to illustrate the further development of these truths in the Christian Church, though the Solitary is not asked to grapple with them at this level. The poet thus embodies in the structure of his dialogue the two stages of initiation (what he calls at ix. 616 the "degrees and steps" furnished by God) which Minucius Felix implies. Wordsworth himself, the "I" figure, joins in occasionally and tries to keep his own position distinct from the others, though his sympathies would seem to lie most with the Wanderer, whose Wordsworthian credentials are set out in Book I. Wordsworth's spokesmen may seem dogmatic in tone, but (contrary to what is often implied) there is strictly speaking very little dogma in the poem. At the end, the Solitary is nowhere near ready for the revealed religion of the Pastor, though he has gone some way with the Wanderer in the direction of "renovation" (ix. 785). The further consequences of this were left over to the sequel which was never written, though the Fenwick Note of 1843 to *The Excursion* suggests that the Solitary was finally to be won back to Christian faith and hope by observing a religious ceremony in his native region of Scotland, which recalled his early childhood to him.

The Solitary's cynicism, grounded in the tragedies of his married life and the disappointments of the French Revolution, and nourished on Voltaire's flippancies, has induced a

spiritual torpor which cannot be corrected by intellectual argument alone. Errors of the "calculating understanding" have indeed contributed to his present impasse. A subtler strategy could appeal to different sides of his (and human) nature, in particular his sense of the majesty and power of the natural scene and the demands of common humanity: what Wordsworth in his letter to Catherine Clarkson of December 1814 called the "innumerable analogies and types of infinity" and "the countless awakenings to noble aspiration" in the Bible of the Universe: "the commonplace truths," as he later pointed out to Coleridge, that lurk "inoperative and undervalued" in men's minds.

If only he knew it, the Solitary already half possesses the means for working his own rehabilitation. He first appears comforting a bereaved child (ii. 503-11) and mourning the loss of the aged pensioner who has shared his life in the lonely valley far removed from the haunts of men. He it is who describes the twin peaks overhanging the vale and the "mute agents" stirring there which shape "A language not welcome to sick hearts" (ii, 716). To him, too, is granted the vision of the cloud city, "the revealed abode/Of spirits in beatitude" (ii. 827ff.), immediately after the discovery of the dying pensioner on the fells. He even seems to understand the spiritual aspirations of hermits and monks, and "The life where hope and memory are as one" (iii. 400). To these imaginative sympathies the Wanderer addresses himself, developing significances in the Solitary's own experience which he may not be aware of himself. Later on, in the *The Churchyard Among the Mountains*, the Pastor adds his "solid facts" and "plain pictures" from the moral histories of his humble parishioners, and the dead join forces with the living. Wordsworth's design is stretched to the utmost limits by the mass of evidence he adduces from the whole "stream of tendency" in nature and human history to suggest that on balance faith is preferable to despondency, and it does almost swamp his dialogue structure. But the long view is necessary. What

may seem a matter of doubt to the "calculating understanding", is a source of hope to the visionary "excursive" power of the mind (iv. 1263), which takes the most comprehensive view of things. The Solitary is no more a man of straw than Caecilius. His arguments are respected: indeed some of them are very telling, his criticisms of the "smooth and solemnized complacencies" of organised religion, for example (v. 376). His life needs to be redirected into deeper channels, but the process is not to be hurried. When he mentions the Evangelical doctrine of the Redeemer (iv. 1098-9), he is gently led back to the "Authentic tidings of invisible things" that emanate from the Bible of the universe (iv. 1144).

The climax of *The Excursion*, in which several previous *motifs* fall into a meaningful relationship, is the Wanderer's assertion at the beginning of Book IX of "An active Principle" immanent in the phenomena of Nature and in the mind of Man. The whole passage offers striking resemblances to the *Lines composed . . . above Tintern Abbey* and was in fact written at much the same time. Both passages exemplify Wordsworth's conviction, set out in the important letter to Catherine Clarkson already referred to, that the argument from design — Paley's analogy of the watchmaker and the watch — was an inadequate and misleading way of speaking about God's relationship with the world. Further on in the same letter he puts forward a more active analogy (suggested by his small son) for God's mode of operation, the movement of the wind. Now it so happens that Minucius Felix was also preoccupied with this problem. In the course of his exposition to Caecilius, as if to emphasise the common ground between them, Octavius sets out the argument from design, borrowing largely from Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* and Seneca; but later on when characterising the *Christian* belief he substitutes a much more active and immanent concept of God's role, which strikingly anticipates the famous lines in *Tintern Abbey*. After mentioning in passing the analogy of the wind, Minu-

cius Felix writes (*Octavius* 32. 7-9; English translation following):

. . . unde enim deus longe est, cum omnia caelestia terrenaque et quae extra istam orbis provinciam sunt deo plena sint? Ubique non tantum nobis proximus, sed infusus est. In solem adeo rursus intende: caelo adfixus, sed terris omnibus sparsus est; pariter praesens ubique interest et miscetur omnibus, nusquam eius claritudo violatur. Quanto magis deus auctor omnium ac speculator omnium, a quo nullum potest esse secretum, tenebris interest, interest cogitationibus nostris, quasi alteris tenebris! Non tantum sub illo agimus, sed et cum illo, ut prope dixerim, vivimus.

For how can God be far away, when everything in the sky and on earth and everything outside the realm of this world are full of God? He is not just close to us everywhere; he is actually infused in us. Consider the sun once again. It is set in the heavens, but its rays are scattered all over the earth. It is present everywhere at the same time, and it has part in and mixes with all things; yet nowhere is its brightness spoiled. God is the originator of everything, he examines everything and from him nothing can be kept secret; how much more, then, is he present in the darkness and present in our thoughts, in that other darkness, as it were. Not only are all our actions under his scrutiny, but all our life, I could almost say, is spent with him.¹

However we may choose to interpret Wordsworth's "sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused", the *Octavius* must surely now be included along with *Aeneid* vi. 726-7 (which it perhaps echoes) as a possible source or influence on these lines.

There remains to be considered the other work included in Coleridge's *Octavius*, the *De Errone Profanarum Religionum*, and this need not delay us long. If the first work was congenial to Wordsworth, the second would be entirely antipathetic and would only have the effect of confirming his preference. Firmicus' treatise belongs to a later period, the middle of the fourth century, when Christianity was in a far more favourable position in the Roman Empire in relation to paganism, following the conversion of Constantine. Firmicus, a writer on astrology and recent convert to Christianity, has no time for compromise on the 'common ground' of belief, nor does he make it easier for pot-

ential converts to feel at home in Christianity by allowing their instinctive beliefs, suitably modified, to flow on in the new channels. The climax of the work is a violent denunciation of paganism, even in its higher form of Neo-Platonism, and an impassioned appeal to Constantine's successors to extirpate it root and branch. The *De Errone* may be indispensable to the student of ancient religions, but its intolerant persecuting temper is unpleasant to contemplate and a terrible portent of what was to come when Christianity gained the upper hand and turned against its opponents the weapons from which it had itself suffered for so long. Wordsworth's feeling for the pre-Christian religions, it will be recalled, was quite different: this feeling shows both in Book IV of *The Excursion* and in the *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, where his ecumenical temper and hatred of persecution are most apparent.

This necessarily brief discussion of *The Excursion* in relation to Minucius Felix suggests that Wordsworth embarked on the poem with a much clearer design and purpose than he is usually credited with; that the overall structure by no means reflects Wordsworth's ultimate "bafflement"; and that charges (from James Montgomery and John Wilson among others) that his treatment of Christianity is incomplete are misplaced. His own understanding of the proper relationship between poetry and religion was set out in the *Essay Supplementary to the Preface of 1815* and later on in his letter to Henry Alford of 21 February 1840, and is perfectly consistent with the interpretation of the poem offered here:

I was particularly pleased with your distinction between religion in poetry and versified religion. For my own part, I have been averse to frequent mention of the mysteries of Christian faith; not from a want of a due sense of their momentous nature, but the contrary. I felt it far too deeply to venture on handling the subject as familiarly as many scruple not to do Besides general reasons for diffidence in treating subjects of Holy Writ, I have some especial ones. I might err in points of faith

Whether Wordsworth was entirely successful in achieving what he set out to do is of course another question altogether: one which could only be settled by a very full re-appraisal of characters, dramatic development and style, the progression and interrelation of the central ideas, and — it must be added — by a more extensive investigation of pre-eighteenth-century influences on Wordsworth, which have been curiously neglected. But at least the emergence of this new source, the *Octavius*, opens up the possibility now of a fresh and (I believe) more fruitful approach to the poem.

NOTES

¹This translation of Minucius Felix' lines is by Professor John C. Yardley of the University of Calgary.