

WORDSWORTH'S 1802 'PREFACE' TO THE *LYRICAL BALLADS* AND 1

CORINTHIANS 15:53

William Wordsworth's remarks in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* about the use of science in poetry have long served as a reference point in discussions about the relations of literature and science.¹ While some have seen them as continuing the hostility to science implicit in the phrase 'we murder to dissect' (from 'The Tables Turned'),² others have interpreted them as expressing optimism about the compatibility of science and the humanities;³ others still have taken them to be fundamentally ambivalent.⁴ Despite the attention paid to the passage, no critics or scholars have remarked on a biblical echo in one crucial sentence. It occurs in one of the passages added to the Preface in 1802:

If the time should ever come when what is now called Science, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.⁵

The sentence hinges on a metaphor of flesh and spirit, in which science is too spiritual to be useful for poets until it is incarnated and familiar. In this context, the phrase 'put on' recalls Corinthians in the King James version: 'For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality' (1 Corinthians 15:53). However, the echo inverts the binary contrasts of material and spiritual, corruptible and incorruptible, to be found in Corinthians. St Paul,

addressing the question of how the dead are raised up, and ‘with what body’ they come (1 Corinthians 15: 35), makes a contrast between a ‘natural body’ and a ‘spiritual body’ (1 Corinthians 15: 44); in putting on ‘incorruption’, resurrected humans are replacing their natural bodies with spiritual ones. In the Preface, abstract conceptions put on flesh and blood.

The paragraph in which the phrase occurs is particularly rich in Biblical echoes: three of the four that Michael Mason notes in his annotated text of the Preface occur in it. The phrase ‘rock of defence’ echoes Psalms 31:2; ‘upholder and preserver’ recalls the phrasing of the Psalms more generally (Mason notes Psalms 145:15); and ‘first and last’ recalls Revelations 1:11.⁶ The other recognized biblical echo in the Preface occurs in the previous paragraph. There, Wordsworth claims that ‘the grand elementary principle of pleasure’ is that by which man ‘knows, and feels, and lives, and moves’; the phrase echoes Acts 17:28, where St Paul states that in God ‘we live, and move, and have our being’.⁷

That Wordsworth knew the passage in Corinthians can hardly be in doubt. In *Concerning the Convention of Cintra* (1809), as his editors have noted, he quotes explicitly from 1 Corinthians 15:53. That in the same essay he also echoes a phrase, ‘evil communications’, from 1 Corinthians 15: 33, suggests that the chapter was very well known to him.⁸ One reason why the chapter had impressed itself so deeply on Wordsworth is suggested by *The Excursion*, where, in the context of a funeral, the speaker’s friend refers directly to ‘that most awful scripture which declares | We shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed!’ (II, 577-8), meaning 1 Corinthians 15: 51.⁹ A long passage (1 Corinthians 20-58) was, and is, prescribed in *The Book of Common Prayer* in ‘Order for the Burial of the Dead’. By 1802 Wordsworth would have heard it many times in the most

emotionally intense circumstances. Another phrase from the 'Order for the Burial of the Dead' is echoed, as Edward Wilson has noted, in Wordsworth's 'Elegiac Stanzas' (written 1806, published 1807), and W. J. B. Owen has noted the relevance of the rite of baptism for a passage in Book IV of *The Prelude* (IV.340-5).¹⁰ As well as being familiar with the *Book of Common Prayer* from church services, Wordsworth had access to a copy that was bound in with the Wordsworth family Bible, and it is likely that he possessed his own copy while a schoolboy at Hawkshead.¹¹

Given that Wordsworth was so steeped in the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, we cannot be certain whether he intended to allude to the passage from Corinthians, though the phrase 'as it were' and the conceptual opposition of spirit and flesh make it more probable; nor can the identification of the echo resolve the ambiguities of the passage.

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¹ John Davidson, *The Theatrocrat: A Tragic Play of Church and Stage* (London, 1905), 48; Aldous Huxley, 'Subject-Matter of Poetry', *On the Margin* (London, 1923), 28; Edwin Muir, 'Contemporary Poetry', *Calendar of Modern Letters*, ii (January 1926), 322-31; Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Science and Culture', *The Raucle Tongue: Hitherto Uncollected Prose*, ed. Angus Calder, Glen Murray, and Alan Riach, 3 vols (Manchester, 1997), II, 480; G. S. Rousseau, 'Literature and Science: The State of the Field', *Isis*, lxxix (1978), 583-591.

² Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth, a Biography*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1957), I, 582-3.

³ Roger Sharrock, 'The Chemist and the Poet: Sir Humphry Davy and the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, xvii (1962), 71-2; Alan G. Hill, 'Wordsworth, Comenius, and the Meaning of Education', *RES*, xxvi (1975), 310; Leo Marx, 'Reflections on the Neo-Romantic Critique of Science', *Daedalus*, cvii (1978), 63; Russell Rutter, 'Poetry, Imagination, and Technical Writing', *College English*, xlvii (1985), 709.

⁴ Theresa M. Kelley, 'Spirit and Geometric Form: The Stone and the Shell in Wordsworth's Arab Dream', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, xxii (1982), 580; Jhoanna Infante, 'Atrophy and Development in Charles Darwin's Physiological Aesthetics', *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, xli (2008), 12.

⁵ William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane W. Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford, 1974), I, 141.

⁶ Michael Mason, ed., *Lyrical Ballads* (London, 1992), 77.

⁷ Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (London, 1966), 58.

⁸ Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, I, 227-8, and I, 226.

⁹ Deeanne Westbrook, *Wordsworth's Biblical Ghosts* (Basingstoke, 2001), 165; Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1940-49), V, 62. Edwin Stein has found further allusions to verses from 1 Cor. 15 in *The Excursion* V. 332-47, 'On the Power of Sound', and 'Personal Talk': Stein, *Wordsworth's Art of Allusion* (University Park, 1988), 160, 183.

¹⁰ Edward Wilson, 'An Echo of St Paul and Words of Consolation in Wordsworth's "Elegiac Stanzas"', *RES*, xliii (1992), 75-80; W. J. B. Owen, 'Understanding *The Prelude*', *Wordsworth Circle*, xxii (1992), 100-09.

¹¹ Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1770-1799* (Cambridge, 1993), 17-18.