Cerulean Duddon and its Tributaries

Peter Bell: A Tale in Verse and four sonnets of 1819 is a concentration in a restricted geological area and a concentration in poetic scope. The collection of poems next published, in 1820, is a wider ranging excursion with branching forays. The River Duddon, a series of Sonnets, Vaudracour and Julia and other poems to which is annexed a topographical description of the country of the Lakes in the North of England was a much more substantial volume than Peter Bell. Although the title suggests a location in the main in the ‘Country of the Lakes’, the poems following the sonnet series are stimulated by the wider literary realms of Romanticism. My reading of this volume, however, is that the core of the volume is about journeying, first through a loco-descriptive series of sonnets about a little-known valley in the Lake District, then a supporting periphery of two major prose accounts, one a substantial Guide to the Lake District and the other a memoir of a Lakeland personage. The other poems in the volume reflect on this central mirror of location which in turn reflects on them; that is, the collection is to be read as a whole rather than as a collection of individual poems. The volume is inevitably more complicated to address than Peter Bell. Although there are individual poems which, as yet, I cannot argue persuasively as part of a pattern or intended series, I have no hesitation in identifying a planned structure to the volume. First in the collection is the Duddon Sonnet Series, a continuous poem of travel, then the two prose works separated by a second subset of poems which is linked with the Duddon Series and with the longer prose work, ‘A Topographical Description’. In this chapter I intend to proceed in the order indicated in Wordsworth’s own title.

A preliminary word on the way in which the collection was prepared for publication by Longmans is necessary. The correspondence of the Wordsworth family gives an account of a season
of rapid original composition as well as of a time of rewriting and reordering of material already written. The majority of the River Duddon sonnets themselves were newly composed\textsuperscript{1} in 1818. Mary Wordsworth writing to her sister Sara on 1 December 1818 notes: ‘William is asleep from sheer exhaustion – he has worked so long – he has written 21 sonnets (including 2 old ones) on the River Duddon – they all together compose one poem’ (W. P., III, p. 506). There are other indications that the series was planned to be read as a unified work. In December of 1819, presumably after the arrangements had begun with the publisher, a dedication to Wordsworth’s brother, Christopher Wordsworth, was written. This dedication should be seen not as an introduction to the sonnet sequence, but as a companion poem to the whole volume, for the dedication’s subtitle is ‘With the sonnets to the River Duddon, and other poems in their collection’.

The prose passages were written at different times. The shorter, but in the context of a volume of poetry still a lengthy passage of annotation, is a memoir of a simple village priest, The Reverend ‘Wonderful’ Walker. Wordsworth had this character in mind in 1813 when he created the figure of the village priest in The Excursion. In the sonnet series, the poem on Walker’s parish, Seathwaite (XVIII), is the occasion for the detailed account of his exemplary life. The biographical material actually grows out of a six-paragraph account of the Roman remains near Hardknott Pass added to by a lengthy extract from Green’s Guide to the Lakes which Wordsworth had also consulted in producing his own Guide. Walker is described through straightforward narrative and also through the device of letters of real (or imaginary?) visitors to the remote house in which he lived.

The second and longest prose work, ‘The Topographical Description’, ends the whole volume. It was not written originally for this purpose, but produced in 1810 to accompany a series of prints of Lake District scenes by Joseph Wilkinson. In 1820 the purpose was explicit. ‘The Description’ is introduced by an explanation that it was attached to the volume: ‘From a consciousness of its having been written in the same spirit which dictated several of the poems and from a belief that it will tend materially to alter them.’ This last phrase, ‘to alter them’, is a striking remark in the poet’s interpretation of how a reader receives a set of poems in the context of other poems in proximity.

The other poems in the volume are of varying dates of publication, but the majority were written between 1816 and 1819. The