

A Conversation with Leslie Norris

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I¹

JP: How do you see Wordsworth's influence on your work?

LN: Well, other people see it very markedly, but I don't know that it's more, really, than the general fact that Romantic poets were heavily influential on the Welsh writers in English and in Welsh, as a matter of fact; and I do see it rather like that. I think the obvious correspondence of *feeling* between the Lake District and Wales and Wordsworth's great awareness of Wales, as a matter of fact, probably mean that that *kind* of feeling influenced us greatly. I'm not so sure that his poetry influenced me very much, but it may have influenced my attitude to poetry. I wouldn't have thought so. There might be specific poems that you could find, but I'm not so sure about that either, since our experiences are completely different, you know.

¹This interview occurred on May 14, 1998, via telephone.

JP: Yes, well, I saw similarity in characterization and not just in the poetry but in your short stories, also in the juxtaposition of the pain of life and the beauty of the land and of nature, and the enigma of those two things.

LN: I think that's probably true, but I wouldn't have thought that was necessarily Wordsworthian. I would think almost any of the short stories—H. E. Bates, for example, in his early work—would show more Wordsworthian experience. It probably comes through, you know.

JP: It's very mixed.

LN: Yes, and secondary, and Wordsworth was an awful prose writer anyway.

JP: Yes, I know.

LN: So, I'm not so sure about that. I think that any influence in the short stories would probably be American influence, really, Saroyan, particularly, very un-Wordsworthian. I'm not so sure about it. I think most of my generation were educated largely in the Romantic poets. One can see it clearly in Gwyn Jones, for example, who is a generation older than I am. I think we saw nature as the required milieu for poetry. I didn't really know, for example, that Wordsworth was the poet of nature. I thought everybody was. So he has a huge influence on nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry.

JP: So his influence is in the background and not necessarily so direct.

LN: I think so. I know Jim Davies has found one or two [of my] poems which he thinks of as [a] re-writing of Wordsworth's poems, but I didn't agree with that.

JP: It's too diffused.

LN: Yes.

JP: Now the other thing I was going to ask is about your autobiographical poem, "Selves." I've been trying to trace down all the bits of it.

LN: Well, there are any number of bits and pieces because I make them do their work twice. Because they are coming at me out of order, I'm not quite sure which way they're going. There is a poem in the *New Welsh Review*, called "His Grandfather's Indentures," which is more recent. The poem is coming along, bit by bit. There's another poem about my maternal grandfather; I think it's called "Old Men," and it's been broadcast in England, too.²

II³

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Dear Jim,

I have been thinking over your question about what influence Wordsworth may have had on my work and offer now some unarranged comments about this.

²"Old Men," originally recited by Norris for a radio program, broadcast by BBC, is published in this issue for the first time. BBC archivists have been unable to locate a date for the reading, unfortunately, though it definitely aired prior to 1992.

³A few days after their brief telephone conversation, Norris wrote Prothero on May 19, 1998 in order to clarify ideas expressed in the earlier interview. Retained in Norris's letter are his British spellings and punctuation, but minor factual errors have been corrected.

1. At school our anthology was the well-known *Mount Helicon* [1992], heavily flavoured with Romantic poems (nothing earlier than W, and Coleridge, in fact) so that my young idea of poetry was obviously based on this experience. For School Certificate, my texts were Shelley and Keats. Keats was my favourite poet for years when I was young, and I still think him much better than W.

2. But there is an affinity, or perhaps a considerable similarity of experience and temperament, which I can recognise. Both Wordsworth and I are hill boys, brought up in very similar environments of open mountains, lakes, rivers. Both, for different reasons, see the natural world as the moral, perhaps even “religious” landscape, and the industrial world as one in which men walk at their peril, both temporal and eternal. (I moved from the natural world through slum dwellings and the fallen ruins of the steelworks, in opposition, every day.) Both have used nature as a symbol of eternity, or accepted anyway the Platonic idea that it stands as God’s promise and vision of eternity although in my case this is not as strong a premise as it is say in Vaughan and Vernon Watkins. (Wordsworth recognised the resemblance between the Welsh and Lake District landscapes. Staying with his friend Robert Jones for significant periods in North Wales, he knew Wales well. Although when young he naturally preferred the Lake District, he later changed his mind.) It is my boyhood preference for the natural world which means that Keats has not influenced me, since he did not share such a preference. And it is because Edward Thomas sees the world in much the same way as I that has caused his work to be recognisable in mine.

3. Given these circumstances and the fact that we are both convinced democrats, it follows that we use “incidents and situations from common life” [Wordsworth 414]—and therefore incidents which are likely to happen repeatedly—in our verse (and stories). But note that I do not use “a selection of language really used by men” [414], although I attempt to write as clearly as is possible. But I go with Coleridge here, believing that the whole range of language must be available to the poet.

4. “Similar incidents” certainly exist. James A Davies has stated that my “A February Morning” is a rewriting of Wordsworth’s “[To a]

Highland Girl". Certainly when I wrote my piece I was not thinking of W's, although I dare say I must have read it. Mine is a very early poem. I could have included it in my *Poems*, 194[6]. Both poems are the results of actual experiences. I think someone told W, and he used the incident in his poem. In my case I was going home to Merthyr on leave from the RAF. I caught train at Abergavenny, which should have taken me to Dowlais Top Station (and even then I would have had to walk quite a way to my house). It was the last train, very late, and at Rhymney there were only three passengers, all young, all from Merthyr. The driver, who lived in Rhymney, simply got off and abandoned us. We walked through the night and heard a woman singing, I think from a gipsy encampment that was an almost permanent settlement some distance from the road over the common. I think the incidents were alike, but not the poems. Again, a fairly recent poem, "Old Men" is very like W's "Michael", if only in the way that W uses stones and I use bricks to symbolise a covenant between an old man and a young, in my case a child. I think you could with advantage look for other parallels . . . "Drummer Evans" say, and "Resolution and Independence", my story "Sliding" and the skating incidents in "The Prelude" [1850]. In some ways many of the stories contain, particularly in the descriptive passages, pieces which wouldn't look too odd in "The Prelude". Again, W's use of "spots of time" is something I have done since childhood [*Prelude* 325].

5. My current poem is deliberately Wordsworthian in that it is an attempt to resurrect those spots of time when something of great importance happened to me, something which made me realise who I was, who I had become, something which defined and enlarged my life at the time the "common incident" happened. So the poem, which I used to call "Selves" but do no longer, is a sequence of lyrics so closely related one to the other as to be a long poem. It is, then, like "The Prelude", but also different in that there is no moralising, no philosophising. . . . I am also free to vary the form, believing that my voice is strong enough to unify the individual poems.

I hope this is of some use to you. Don't hesitate to write me if something needs elucidating. I'm including a list of the pieces of Selves, at least where I think you can find them.

All good wishes,
Leslie Norris

This list is haphazard, and I no longer keep careful records. You may have to search for some of this stuff. I'm enclosing a copy of "Old Men", which has been published and broadcast (by the BBC) O, but I have no idea when or where.

Borders . . . in Collected Poems

In Cefn Cemetery . . . in CP.

Bridal Veil Falls . . . in CP

His Grandfather's Debentures [i.e., "Indentures"] . . . in *The New Welsh Review*, some time last year, with a review of CP, by James A. Davies. Enclosed.

A Grain of Sand . . . in CP

Owen Sullivan and the Horse . . . CP

Old Men . . . enclosed

Peaches . . . CP

His Father Singing . . . CP

The Night Before the Game . . . CP

Spitfire . . . CP

Bringing in the Selves . . . CP

In the City . . . CP

A Round Table . . . CP

Journeying to Ithaca . . . CP.

(These are the only 'finished' pieces of SELVES that I am prepared to let you have. I've found a copy of ". . . Debentures", so you needn't go searching. Let me know if you received these. I wrote your address hurriedly and it now seems unlikely!)

L.N.

III⁴

JP: The particular direction I want to go is this: I think the thing that comes out of Wordsworth that is in the late nineteenth century and especially into the twentieth century [is that] you get writers following the school of Joyce and Lawrence that dominate the literary scene. And Wordsworth goes another direction. In fact, writers like these probably found it fashionable to bash Wordsworth. All of them are looking at what might be called the problem of human suffering, and Wordsworth looks at this problem and comes away with a positive answer; he finds a balance, whereas the writers of the twentieth century view this same problem in a much darker way. Often, they view the world in a nihilistic, or at least an existentialistic way. What I see in your work is that, with Wordsworth, you find a balance between the existence of the pain and the joy of living. You steer clear of nihilism. Am I anywhere near the mark?

LN: I think you are. I think that I have a curious attitude towards Wordsworth. My field of expertise and my academic area—I have the paper to be an academic—[is Romantic]. I have become a teacher of the Romantic period, largely because I think I hold an innate sympathy for those writers, and I don't believe the Romantic theories. When I was in high school, I had a very good English teacher. But I was very heavily influenced, directly, by the Romantic writers. They were near enough to still write, if you like, nature poetry. And there was no modern work in it.⁵ But, on the other hand, there wasn't a great deal of Wordsworth *per se*.

JP: Are you thinking of *Mount Helicon*?

LN: The *Mount Helicon* anthology. That's what we grew up on. And I can remember, too, a boy in our class mentioning Eliot, of whom I had never heard, and I doubt teacher had, honestly. He mentioned

⁴This interview occurred in Provo, UT, on June 29, 1999.

⁵By "it" Norris means *Mount Helicon*.

The Waste Land (1922), and I was taken aback by that and read it as a Romantic document. I think I might have been fifteen. And I still read it as a Romantic document. My mindset is that way. But I have been astonished sometimes by the way in which Jim Davies, for example, will see me as a Wordsworthian poet, seeing some of my work as a rewriting of Wordsworth.

JP: Might it be more accurate to say that you're on the same wavelength?

LN: I think so. I come to Wordsworth with enormous admiration and terror, frankly, because he lacks humor, so much, that I'm kind of saying, "That's a marvelous poem, but. . . ." Always, I feel that I see in him a certain arrogance and a certain assuredness, and that's a problem to me. But you're quite right about the balance. One of my beliefs is in any piece of work [there is] a tension that holds balance. What I really, flawlessly admire is Keats. Every time I teach Keats, I am more and more astonished by what the young man did. I see more clearly in him, where I also see it in Shakespeare just as much, that [there are in] every piece of work quite clearly complete opposites. You can read "To Autumn" at once as a golden vision of the fall or a terrifying, empty illustration of the dead year. Autumn herself, the abundant autumn, is first of all deserted by her husband, the sun. All her grace is taken away from her so that not even what is left by the gleaners is there. She's lolling about, and then all that's left is a few drops of cider coming out of the press. Then the birds sing in the last stanza and vanish. There's nothing, not a single seed left for spring. "Where are the songs of spring?" (219), he says. Where are they? They're nowhere. Nothing left. This is a vision of the dead world, without any hope at all. That is the kind of limits of vision that I attempt to use. I like to contain the whole, something, the whole world between this boundary and that dark boundary. That is to me the total end of Romantic writing, in that he or she knows the impossible task that the writer takes up is to create a perfect world. It's to create, if you like, for himself or his readers or whoever else comes along the statement that perfection is possible

in a world, that eternity exists in the vision, but also that complete cessation of the world exists. This is nothing new and perhaps the clearest example would be Blake, *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and [*Songs of*] *Experience* (1794), *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), that the opposite worlds are what one hopes to include. It's in everything he'd do, even the smallest example, say "The Chimney-Sweeper" from *Songs of Experience*. He writes, "A little black thing among the snow" (148). So we have a little child dehumanized, like a spider. And the opposition is of this black dot cringing there in the white snow. Everything is like that with him. So that's how I see the force of the opposing worlds.

JP: Sometimes, I think that the postmodern worldview is so very bleak that it scares off the common reader from reading what is regarded as serious literature. It seems that if that is to change, literature is going to have come to find this Romantic balance of opposites we're talking about.

LN: Well, the trouble is, at the present time that people have accepted certain theories about writing. It's very tempting to follow these abstract ideas. And, of course, what we do is move further and further away from the literature itself. We are constructing great structures of ideas, and I believe the theory is no longer called "literary theory." It's become a discipline of its own. I do agree that we are moving away from simple, direct reading. I'm more innocent and old-fashioned than that. I still think that the great miracle is [that] men and women, in their mortal flesh, can make these things. That is the great miracle. That is the great mystery. At the end, there's no way, however much the psychoanalysts tell us otherwise, they can explain how it is that a human being can make these things. As long as that mystery exists, then literature will continue. There is a great divide between people who read and people who study. I do feel the tide is turning somewhat back to a more humane attitude towards literature. As I write myself, I feel that the piece of writing itself is the major work, and the person who comes to discuss it is dependent on that work.

JP: I like that you aim for total clarity in your writing. You don't hide very far away, and that was true of Wordsworth, to a degree.

LN: Yes, I think that while some of his stanzas for the *Lyrical Ballads* (1789) can be said to be simplistic, his vocabularies were not strong enough to carry what he had to say. That was part of his belief. But Coleridge was very well aware all the time that poems ought to use every strength of all the language. Wordsworth, once the second volume of the *Lyrical Ballads* was over and done with and its effect, soon abandoned that kind of simplistic language of everyman, of the common man. He didn't want to say things that common men would say. He wanted to say things about eternity, the next world, the world before this one and so on, which is not common at all. So we get the enormous linguistic strengths of his great poems, which Coleridge was very well aware was necessary. But on the other hand, Wordsworth never lost clarity. You can't misunderstand him. So when I think of the unity of poetry, he is the great example. It isn't nearly that what he has to say is extraordinary; it isn't nearly that his manipulation of blank verse is incredible. It *sounds* like the man is speaking. It is also [that] the sounds the poetry makes reinforce the meaning. I'm thinking of those lines [in *The Prelude*] in which the boy is skating, where the line goes along and he digs his skates in. The line reads, "stopped short" at the end of the line (22).⁶ One can feel the skates dig in, and the great gap of breath before you go skating on in the next line. The muscular content of the verse, the body content of the verse is unique, I think. There are always exceptions such as the great sonnets [of Shakespeare], "Devouring time, blunt thou the lion's paw" ([*Sonnet* 19] 1752) or "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments" ([*Sonnet* 116] 1770). The text is astonishingly apt and relevant. Wordsworth came from nowhere to do those things. "An Evening Walk" doesn't give any hint of it.

⁶The phrase, "stopped short" actually begins, rather than ends, a line in Book I of *The Prelude*, but this hardly detracts from Norris's point here.

JP: Well, he was reading a lot of Shakespeare and Milton. He'd heard others do it.

LN: Yes. They were the great exemplars of the Romantics. He tended to have thrown away the immediate predecessors, Pope and Dryden. That kind of smoothness, of clockwork perfection meant that society was smug, confident, and prosperous, whereas these boys grew up in an England in which the whole face of England was changed; agriculture, dress, everything was changed. So they didn't have to write like Pope and Dryden. That would be ridiculous. The only people who would do it were people like Crabbe. It didn't work. They had to find contemporary ways of saying things. This was a time when it was fashionable to be mad—the pressures on the community were so heavy—or you became a recluse. The old style didn't have the poetic technique to deal with the personal tragedies around them. The individual was being threatened all the time. I suppose that's one of the reasons why Wordsworth is so hugely important. He does reflect the response to the changing world, the birth of the modern world. The idea of souls being sent on to this world from the eternal world was very popular in those days.

JP: The idea behind the "Immortality" ode.

LN: When he was a student in Oxford, Shelley believed it. The "best philosopher" is Wordsworth's term for the baby ("Ode" 209). Shelley didn't have too much common sense, really, I suppose. He and a friend stopped a girl on a bridge in Oxford. She was carrying a baby. Shelley said, "Madam, will your baby not tell us about his previous world?" And she said, "Sir, he's a baby and cannot speak." And he said, "That's just it, you see. These babies know everything. They won't say anything." Wordsworth was a great figure but also a figure of fun.

JP: It makes me think of the meeting that Wordsworth had with Keats [when] Wordsworth came off as arrogant.

LN: Yes, and he told a joke, and no one laughed because it wasn't very funny. Well, he was a great guy and never received his due, and he was a tough guy. He was determined to be a poet and refused to be anything else. That takes a lot of courage—and he got sinecures and people left him a lot of money. [That] was not just luck. It was recognizing his determination and admiring him for it. Dylan Thomas was also determined. But it was a different world.

John Ormond was a friend of Dylan's and admired him greatly, and his own work was probably more influenced by Dylan than anybody else I know. But he later on wrote a very stark, clear, and often funny verse. He tells of the time when he met Dylan and friends in some pub in London, and they were playing—what do you call it in America? Charades—and the subject was to be famous books. Dylan and friends rolled up the carpet in the barroom and rushed it out into the street. They couldn't guess what it was. The barman was going mad. They said, "We give in! We give in!" Dylan and friends told them it was the "brothers carry mats off."

JP: That was typical, I suppose.

LN: Dylan tended to be literal and literary. Dylan would tell tales of a time when they met in the Mumbles.⁷ They had a favorite pub in The Mumbles. I can't remember which one it was, but I know exactly where it is. They went in for a pre-lunch drink. It was a nice summer's day. There was only one gentleman in there next to the bar. Dylan at that time was a reporter on the *Swansea Argos*. This little old man came up and said, "Mr. Thomas, how are you, Mr. Thomas?" And he said, "I'm very well, thanks." And the old man said, "It's my birthday today, Mr. Thomas." "Is that so. How old are you?" "I'm seventy-four today." "Good lord," Dylan said, "Seventy-four. Would you have thought he was seventy-four, Glyn?"⁸ And

⁷A seaside village located in a county of Swansea, The Mumbles has long been a favorite Welsh retreat.

⁸Older than both Thomas and Norris, Glyn James (1905–95) promoted Anglo-Saxon literature by writing in a number of genres.

Glyn said, "I wouldn't." The old man said, "How old do you think I am, Mr. Thomas?" Dylan answered, "Seventy-eight." That was one of his cruel jokes.

You said my work reminded you of Dylan's. In what ways?

JP: In the choice of language, the heavy reliance on verbs to drive the poem, the economy of words. The words do a lot of work.

LN: I have this exercise I give to my students. I make them take out every word in all their sentences except the nouns and verbs. And I ask, "What has it lost by taking these words out?" Maybe there will be an adjective which has no use. Sometimes, I ask them to tell me what colors they see when I say a word. And I'll say, "a rose." Everybody says, "a red rose." I say, "that's good. So whenever you use a rose in your poem, you never say 'a red rose.' Unless it is like Burns's 'O, my luvie is like a red, red rose' (137). There he's talking about love, not a rose. But if you want to say 'a yellow rose,' we'll all accept it, because there's no hint of yellow in 'a rose.'" So I do that. I think that's fine and just. That was something I learned from the kids in school.

JP: You know the thing I like best about Dylan's poetry is that it pushes language. I'm thinking of several places in "Fern Hill," lines like "all the sun long" and "all the moon long" (1816). He uses the word in a way that's grammatically impossible, but you can see the image, and so he gets away with it.

LN: This is very interesting, this, because about the time he was writing these things, he had no other language but English. And Vernon Watkins was a French scholar and a German scholar. Just at this time he was reading Rimbaud. Vernon translated Rimbaud. Rimbaud's theory was the systematic derangement of the senses, so that the qualities of one sense would be transposed to another. So Dylan's idea would be "the man in the wind, and the west moon" ("And" 68). So you see that it's pure Rimbaud. So "all the moon long" is exactly the same thing. Dylan took so much from Watkins

that has never been acknowledged. And if you look at the letters of about this time, he calls himself, “the Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Street.” And he’d never heard of Rimbaud until he ran into Vernon. Vernon told him about Yeats, too. Yeats was Vernon’s downfall, I guess. I mean, he never grew out of imitating Yeats.

JP: I seem to always hear of Vernon Watkins not as a writer but as someone who influenced other writers.

LN: He translated some great stuff, and he wrote several great poems. But they are formed on Yeats, and he was a mystic, too. His great Taliesin poems⁹ or his “Music of Colours” sequence are extraordinary. He had a unique voice. But if you look at stuff like Dylan’s *18 Poems* (1934), where the rhythms are like soldiers marching along, they are very strong but completely insensitive. When the *Twenty-Five Poems* (1936) came out, although it was a mixed book—some were very early—the subtlety of the new poems was astonishing. That’s because Vernon had taught him to use his ears.

JP: I noticed that in reading through the *Collected Poems* (1952). The early material wasn’t all that good, but as you read on, they got better and better.

LN: It’s interesting how some of his language has become widespread. We now call all baseball players “the boys of summer” (“I” 1). It was used by one of *The New Yorker* writers in an account of the early baseball camps. Nobody knows they took that line from Dylan. I think the difference between us, Dylan and [me], is not merely in quality, because he’s a very exciting writer. I think it is clarity. My work is much simpler.

JP: Yes.

⁹Watkins wrote a number of focused on the ancient—some say mythical—Welsh poet Taliesin whose idea that all poetry had existed since time began inspired Watkins’s own work; Watkins’s *Collected Poems* appeared in 1986.

LN: My work is much more direct. Linguistically, there's nothing like as daring in my work. But I think my material is more daring. But then I've had much more time to do it, and still I have the utmost admiration for some of the poems. I no longer read him. I might teach one or two of his poems for the rhyme schemes, since true rhymes are no longer needed. They're needed for poets like Dylan who wanted to keep his explosive language material in bounds. He might use just the vowels in the word to rhyme, not the consonants at all. I might have learned that from him, but I learned it from Blake, too. He learned it from Blake, actually, as well. And I think I'm nothing like as good a formal craftsman as he is. I do invent forms, like in my poem "Water" for example. That's an invented form. In my poem about the bull, the last line is "The far fields fill with his children, his soft daughters" ("Beautiful" 218). That has all sorts of secrets in it. "The Far Field" is the title of the last book of the poet, Theodore Roethke, the poet in residence that died in Seattle. I taught in Seattle because of him, actually. I sometimes put in little quotations from the Welsh. In "Autumn Elegy," the poem about people my age who were killed in World War II, "hard / War destroyed them" (97) is a line that comes from the Llywarch Hen poems, translated.¹⁰ All kinds of things like that I stick in. Or in my poem about the bull in the last lines I used a perfect *cynghanedd*.¹¹ It works well enough. And they can be totally acceptable as lines without anybody seeing that. I make my poems apparently easy and smooth, but they contain all kinds of different things, which are challenges to me, making tenseness within the poems. So in those ways, I think I'm quite unlike Thomas.

JP: One thinks that if he had lived longer, he might have done more.

¹⁰The life and adventures of sixth-century Welsh prince Llywarch Hen served as the subject of a poetic saga, probably written in the ninth century, of which only a small portion survives (see Ford).

¹¹The line with the alliteration and consonance characteristic of *cynghanedd*, reads "The far fields fill with his children, his soft daughters" (218).

LN: Those last poems are very interesting. Apparently, his notes for the libretto he was writing for Stravinsky were very interesting.

JP: He never finished that, I suppose.

LN: He was going to write a kind of sound script for Stravinsky, and he made some notes. I have never seen them, and I suppose *Under Milk Wood* (1954) was a remarkable piece of work and not at all what you might expect from Thomas. Thomas is a traditional Welsh writer in that serious stuff had to be written in verse. Funny stuff or unimportant stuff had to be written in prose. That's what Taliesin and all those guys did. So we get in some of his early work and those radio talks some very funny stuff indeed and much more orthodox in style. There was plenty of chance for him to do things like that. Then again, you have to remember the influence of Dickens on him, which, as far as I know, Dickens never touched me.

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