

TWO

Wordsworth's "Prelude" and the Crisis-Autobiography

They are as a creation in my heart;
I look into past time as prophets look
Into futurity....

— Wordsworth, MS Fragment

Are the true Heroic Poems of these times to be written with the *ink of Science*? Were a correct philosophic Biography of a Man (meaning by philosophic *all* that the name can include) the only method of celebrating him? The true History ... the true Epic Poem?—I partly begin to surmise so.

Thomas Carlyle, *Two Notebooks*

What is left to say when one has come to the end of writing about one's life? Some kind of development, I suppose, should be expected to emerge, but I am very doubtful of such things, for I cannot bring life into a neat pattern. If there is a development in my life—and that seems an idle supposition—then it has been brought about more by things outside than by any conscious intention of my own.

— Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography*

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TWO

HAVING announced in the *Prospectus* to *The Recluse* his high argument, Wordsworth goes on to pray to the "prophetic Spirit" that

if with this

I mix more lowly matter; with the thing
Contemplated, describe the Mind and Man
Contemplating; and who, and what he was-
The transitory Being that beheld
This Vision; when and where, and how he lived;-
Be not this labour useless.

In this way Wordsworth designated and justified the personal narrative which makes up the part of *The Recluse* he called *Home at Grasmere*, as well as the entire poem that his wife later named *The Prelude*. Wordsworth described the latter work as a "tributary" and also "as a sort of portico to the Recluse, part of the same building." ¹ The time taken to compose *The Prelude* straddled the writing of the *Prospectus*, and the completed work was conceived as an integral part of the overall structure whose "design and scope" Wordsworth specified in that poetic manifesto. "The Poem on the growth of your own mind," as Coleridge recalled the plan in 1815, "was as the ground-plat and the Roots, out of which the Recluse was to have sprung up as the Tree"—two distinct works, but forming "one compleat Whole." ² The role of *The Prelude*, as Wordsworth himself describes his grand design, is to recount the circumstances and mental growth of a "transitory Being," culminating in his achievement of a "Vision" and in

the recognition that his mission is to impart the vision in the public and enduring form of an unprecedented kind of poem:

Possessions have I that are solely mine,
Something within which yet is shared by none ...
I would impart it, I would spread it wide,
Immortal in the world which is to come. ³

1. THE IDEA OF "THE PRELUDE"

In this era of constant and drastic experimentation with literary materials and forms, it is easy to overlook the radical novelty of *The Prelude* when it was completed in 1805. The poem amply justified Wordsworth's claim to have demonstrated original genius, which he defined as "the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe" of which the "infallible sign is the widening the sphere of human sensibility." ⁴

The Prelude is a fully developed poetic equivalent of two portentous innovations in prose fiction, of which the earliest examples had appeared in Germany only a decade or so before Wordsworth began writing his poem: the *Bildungsroman* (Wordsworth called *The Prelude* a poem on "the growth of my own mind" ⁵) and the *Künstlerroman* (Wordsworth also spoke of it as "a poem on my own poetical education," and it far surpassed all German examples in the detail with which his "history," as he said, was specifically "of a *Poet's* mind"). ⁶ The whole poem is written as a sustained address to Coleridge—"I speak bare truth/ As if alone to thee in private talk" (X, 372- 3); Coleridge, however, is an auditor in *absentia*, and the solitary author often supplements this form with an interior monologue, or else carries on an extended colloquy with the landscape in which the interlocutors are "my mind" and "the speaking face of earth and heaven" (V, 11-12). The construction of *The Prelude* is radically achronological, starting not at the beginning, but at the end—during Wordsworth's walk to "the Vale that I had chosen" (I, 100), which telescopes the circumstances of two or more occasions but refers primarily

to his walk to the Vale of Grasmere, that "hermitage" (I, 115) where he has taken up residence at that stage of his life with which the poem concludes.⁷ During this walk an outer breeze, "the sweet breath of Heaven," evokes within the poet "a corresponding mild creative breeze," a prophetic *spiritus* or inspiration which assures him of his poetic mission and, though it is fitful, eventually leads to his undertaking *The Prelude* itself; in the course of the poem, at times of imaginative dryness, the revivifying wind recurs in the role of a poetic leitmotif.⁸

Wordsworth does not tell his life as a simple narrative in past time but as the present remembrance of things past, in which forms and sensations "throw back our life" (I, 660-1) and evoke the former self which coexists with the altered present self in a multiple awareness that Wordsworth calls "two consciousnesses." There is a wide "vacancy" between the I now and the I then,

Which yet have such self-presence in my mind
That, sometimes, when I think of them, I seem
Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
And of some other Being.

(II, 27-33)

The poet is aware of the near impossibility of disengaging "the naked recollection of that time" from the intrusions of "aftermeditation" (III, 644-8). In a fine and subtle figure for the interdiffusion of the two consciousnesses, he describes himself as one bending from a drifting boat on a still water, perplexed to distinguish actual objects at the bottom of the lake from surface reflections of the envioning scene, from the tricks and refractions of the water currents, and from his own intrusive but inescapable image (that is, his present awareness).⁹ Thus "incumbent o'er the surface of past time" the poet, seeking the elements of continuity between his two disparate selves, conducts a persistent exploration of the nature and significance of memory, of his power to sustain freshness of sensation and his "first creative sensibility" against the deadening effect of habit and analysis, and of manifestations of the enduring and the eternal within the realm of change and time.¹⁰ Only inter

mittently does the narrative order coincide with the order of actual occurrence. Instead Wordsworth proceeds by sometimes bewildering ellipses, fusions, and as he says, "motions retrograde" in time (IX, 8).

Scholars have long been aware that it is perilous to rely on the factual validity of *The Prelude*, and in consequence Wordsworth has been charged with intellectual uncertainty, artistic ineptitude, bad memory, or even bad faith. The poem has suffered because we know so much about the process of its composition between 1798 and 1805—its evolution from a constituent part to a "tail-piece" to a "portico" of *The Recluse*, and Wordsworth's late decision to add to the beginning and end of the poem the excluded middle: his experiences in London and in France. ¹¹ A work is to be judged, however, as a finished and free-standing product; and in *The Prelude* as it emerged after six years of working and reworking, the major alterations and dislocations of the events of Wordsworth's life are imposed deliberately, in order that the design inherent in that life, which has become apparent only to his mature awareness, may stand revealed as a principle which was invisibly operative from the beginning. A supervising idea, in other words, controls Wordsworth's account and shapes it into a structure in which the protagonist is put forward as one who has been elected to play a special role in a providential plot. As Wordsworth said in the opening passage, which represents him after he has reached maturity: in response to the quickening outer breeze

to the open fields I told

A prophecy: poetic numbers came
Spontaneously, and cloth'd in priestly robe
My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem,
For holy services.

(I, 59-63)

Hence in this history of a poet's mind the poet is indeed the "transitory Being," William Wordsworth, but he is also the exemplary poet-prophet who has been singled out, in a time "of hopes o'erthrown ... of dereliction and dismay," to bring mankind tidings of comfort and joy; as Wordsworth put it in one version of the *Prospectus*,

that my verse may live and be

Even as a light hung up in heaven to cheer

Mankind in times to come. ¹²

The spaciousness of his chosen form allows Wordsworth to introduce some of the clutter and contingency of ordinary experience. In accordance with his controlling idea, however, he selects for extended treatment only those of his actions and experiences which are significant for his evolution toward an inherent end, ¹³ and organizes his life around an event which he regards as the spiritual crisis not of himself only, but of his generation: that shattering of the fierce loyalties and inordinate hopes for mankind which the liberal English—and European—intellectuals had invested in the French Revolution.

Not in my single self alone I found,
But in the minds of all ingenuous Youth,
Change and subversion from this hour.

(X, 232-4)

The Prelude, correspondingly, is ordered in three stages. There is a process of mental development which, although at times suspended, remains a continuum; ¹⁴ this process is violently broken by a crisis of apathy and despair; but the mind then recovers an integrity which, despite admitted losses, is represented as a level higher than the initial unity, in that the mature mind possesses powers, together with an added range, depth, and sensitivity of awareness, which are the products of the critical experiences it has undergone. The discovery of this fact resolves a central problem which has been implicit throughout *The Prelude*—the problem of how to justify the human experience of pain and loss and suffering; he is now able to recognize that his life is "in the end/ All gratulant if rightly understood" (XIII, 384-5).

The narrative is punctuated with recurrent illuminations, or "spots of time," and is climaxed by two major revelations. The first of these is Wordsworth's discovery of precisely what he has been born to be and to do. At Cambridge he had reached a stage of life, "an eminence," in which he had felt that he was "a chosen Son" (III, 82 ff., 169), and on a walk home from a

dance during a summer dawn he had experienced an illumination that he should be, "else sinning greatly,/ A dedicated Spirit" (IV, 343-4); but for what chosen, or to what dedicated, had not been specified. Now, however, the recovery from the crisis of despair after his commitment to the French Revolution comprises the insight that his destiny is not one of engagement with what is blazoned "with the pompous names/ Of power and action" in "the stir/ And tumult of the world," but one of withdrawal from the world of action so that he may meditate in solitude: his role in life requires not involvement, but detachment. ¹⁵ And that role is to be one of the "Poets, even as Prophets," each of whom is endowed with the power "to perceive/ Something unseen before," and so to write a new kind of poetry in a new poetic style. "Of these, said I, shall be my Song; of these .../ Will I record the praises": the ordinary world of lowly, suffering men and of commonplace or trivial things transformed into "a new world ... fit/ To be transmitted," of dignity, love, and heroic grandeur (XII, 220- 379). Wordsworth's crisis, then, involved what we now call a crisis of identity, which was resolved in the discovery of "my office upon earth" (X, 921). And since the specification of this office entails the definition, in the twelfth book, of the particular innovations in poetic subjects, style, and values toward which his life had been implicitly oriented, *The Prelude* is a poem which incorporates the discovery of its own *ars poetica*.

His second revelation he achieves on a mountain top. The occasion is the ascent of Mount Snowdon, which Wordsworth, in accordance with his controlling idea, excerpts from its chronological position in his life in 1791, before the crucial experience of France, and describes in the concluding book of *The Prelude*. ¹⁶ As he breaks through the cover of clouds the light of the moon "upon the turf/ Fell like a flash," and he sees the total scene as "the perfect image of a mighty Mind" in its free and continuously creative reciprocation with its milieu, "Willing to work and to be wrought upon" and so to "create/ A like existence" (XIII, 36-119). What has been revealed to Wordsworth in this symbolic landscape is the grand locus of *The Recluse* which he announced in the *Prospectus*, "The Mind of Man—/ My haunt, and the main region of my

song," as well as the "high argument" of that poem, the union between the mind and the external world and the resulting "creation ... which they with blended might/ Accomplish." The event which Wordsworth selects for the climactic revelation in *The Prelude*, then, is precisely the moment of the achievement of "this Vision" by "the transitory Being" whose life he had, in the *Prospectus*, undertaken to describe as an integral part of *The Recluse*.

In the course of *The Prelude* Wordsworth repeatedly drops the clue that his work has been designed to round back to its point of departure. "Not with these began/ Our Song, and not with these our Song must end," he had cried after the crisis of France, invoking the "breezes and soft airs" that had blown in the "glad preamble" to his poem (XI, i ff. and VII, i ff.). As he nears the end of the song, he says that his self-discovery constitutes a religious conclusion ("The rapture of the Hallelujah sent/ From all that breathes and is") which is at the same time, as he had planned from the outset, an artistic beginning:

And now, O Friend; this history is brought
To its appointed close: the discipline
And consummation of the Poet's mind.

... we have reach'd

The time (which was our object from the first)
When we may, not presumptuously, I hope,
Suppose my powers so far confirmed, and such
My knowledge, as to make me capable
Of building up a work that should endure.

(XIII, 261-78)

That work, of course, is *The Recluse*, for which *The Prelude* was designed to serve as "portico ... part of the same building." *The Prelude*, then, is an involuted poem which is about its own genesis—a prelude to itself. Its structural end is its own beginning; and its temporal beginning, as I have pointed out, is Wordsworth's entrance upon the stage of his life at which it ends. The conclusion goes on to specify the circular shape of the whole. Wordsworth there asks Coleridge to "Call back to mind/ The mood in which this Poem was begun." At that time,

I rose

As if on wings, and saw beneath me stretch'd
Vast prospect of the world which I had been
And was; and hence this Song, which like a lark
I have protracted....

(XIII, 370-81)

This song, describing the prospect of his life which had been made visible to him at the opening of *The Prelude*, is *The Prelude* whose composition he is even now concluding. [17](#)

2. PROUST'S GOTHIC CHURCH

Such features of Wordsworth's poem bring to mind the subject matter, aim, and structural experiments in the chief enterprise of some of our best modern writers. This is the "creative autobiography"—the more-or-less fictional work of art about the development of the artist himself, which is preoccupied with memory, time, and the relations of what is passing to what is eternal; is punctuated by illuminated moments, or "epiphanies"; turns on a crisis which involves the question of the meaning of the author's life and the purpose of his sufferings; is resolved by the author's discovery of his literary identity and vocation and the attendant need to give up worldly involvement for artistic detachment; and includes its own poetic, and sometimes the circumstances of its own genesis. Above all *The Prelude* points toward one of the most influential literary achievements of the present century, *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

Like Wordsworth's poem, Proust's great novel opens with a preamble at a time of his life when the narrator, falling asleep, has already experienced the events he is about to unfold. The narrative proper then begins with memories of the author's childhood at Combray, of which the central scene is Marcel waiting for his mother to come upstairs after the family had entertained M. Swann for dinner. It then makes a quick leap in time to a moment of illumination in the author's middle life—the tasting of the *madeleine* dipped in tea—from which unfolds the whole "vast structure of recollection." All of his

past is rendered not by direct narration, but as the emergence of his past self and experiences within the context of his drastically altered present self and consciousness; and the narrator, moving bewilderingly back and forth through time, is persistently concerned with the nature of voluntary and involuntary memory, the importance of the seemingly trivial or banal perception, the attempt to establish a single identity from his multiplex consciousness, the "anaesthetic" quality of the intellect and of habit (so needful for life, but so deadly to freshness of perception and the truth of recollection), and above all, with time and the possibility of breaking free of time. The narrative is woven together by recurrent motifs and is lit by repeated illuminations; and it ends, after a profound mental and physical crisis, with the event to which all the huge work has been pointing—the event of its own beginning.

Irrecoverably ill, exhausted, despairing of the validity of his life and of art itself, the narrator attends the reception of the Princess de Guermantes. But "sometimes at the moment when everything seems lost the monition occurs which is capable of saving us." ¹⁸ In a sequence of illuminations, involving events from the past involuntarily called forth by present impressions, he experiences a "felicity," "a state of ecstasy," which is in effect a conversion to the religion of art. In his ultimate revelation the narrator learns the significance of his earlier partial illuminations, and is finally able to answer the questions raised but left unanswered by the initial illumination when he had tasted the *madeleine*: "This potent joy.... Whence did it come? What did it mean?" ¹⁹ In such a recovery of former experience he not only has the power to live and enjoy the essence of things "entirely outside of time," but also to create a new world, an eternal world of art, out of the "resurrection" of his fugitive time-bound past. Only now is he able to recognize that an implicit design had been silently governing his seemingly haphazard and wasted past, so that "all my life up to that day could have been ... summed up under this title: 'A vocation.'" ²⁰ This vocation is to be an aesthetic evangelist for the age, announcing his discovery of a theory of art within the work which exemplifies the theory. "The true paradises are the paradises we have lost." Nevertheless art is "the genuine

Last Judgment," ²¹ for by extricating essence from time, it is able to recover the past in a new creation—an aesthetic world which is a regained paradise, because it is purged from impurity and is "extra-temporal," out of time. At the close of *The Prelude* Wordsworth had called on Coleridge to join him in making for men "a work ... of their redemption" (XIII, 439-41). Marcel's vocation is also a work of redemption; not the redemption of men, however, but of time.

In the course of his final, cumulative revelation, the author also discovers that all the sorrows and sufferings of life, for the artist who "has finally achieved his true vocation," are ultimately for the artistic best, and end in aesthetic joy. "Happiness alone is beneficial for the body, but it is grief which develops the powers of the mind." "In the end, sorrow kills," but "the instant sorrows are turned into ideas ... the transformation itself releases joy." The inescapable cost of creation is suffering, of which creativity is the priceless reward, and the artist must die to involvement with the world in order to be reborn to the detachment of the artist.

My illness, in forcing me, like a stern spiritual adviser, to die to this world, had done me a service, for except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. ²²

But "it was time to begin." "I must at once set myself to this work. It was high time." One of Proust's favorite analogues for his work, like that of Wordsworth for *The Recluse*, was architectural—the intricate structure and disposition of stresses of "une église," a "grande Cathédrale." ²³ At the end of his elaborately ordered narrative Marcel is haunted by the book *François le Champi* that his mother had read to him as a child, and he hears still reverberating, "shrill, sharp, and inexhaustible," the "iron tinkling of the little bell which told me that at last M. Swann had gone and Mama was about to come upstairs" ²⁴—memories of the central scene in his childhood at Combray with which, immediately after the poem, Marcel had begun his novelistic quest for time lost. A further refinement confirms the rondure of the whole. The initial word of

the proem itself had been *longtemps*, repeating the *temps perdu* in the title and echoed by *temps* in each of the two sentences following. So in the coda: "In the long last sentence of the book," as Edmund Wilson has said, "the word 'Time' begins to sound, and it closes the symphony as it began it" ²⁵ in the concluding phrase, "dans le Temps."

Such similarities in works otherwise so unlike— Wordsworth after all is the heir of Milton and of the moral severity of English Puritanism, while Proust, although he took a lively interest in the Wordsworthians George Eliot and John Ruskin, manifests the influence of Symbolism, the Decadence, and *l'art pour l'art*—such similarities are the less surprising when we realize that these works are cognate, and that their ultimate source (as the densely religious vocabulary of both writers indicates) is not secular, but theological. This source is the fifteen- hundred-year-old tradition of religious confessional writings, and within the tradition the first and greatest example, and one of the most influential of all books, in Catholic as in Protestant Europe, was the *Confessions* of St. Augustine.

3. THE ART OF AUGUSTINE'S "CONFESSIONS"

Augustine's work, written at the close of the fourth century, is on the one side a culmination of the classical mode of giving an account and justification of one's life. But it converts the classical procedure of putting oneself forward as the representative of a cultural ideal, performing overt deeds on a public stage, into a circumstantial narrative of the private events of the individual mind. ²⁶ It is thus the first sustained history of an inner life and deserves, as much as any book for which the claim has been made, to be called the first modern work. It is modern, however, precisely because it is thoroughly Christian. Augustine expanded in great and fine detail the tendency (already evident, as we have seen, in the New Testament) to individualize and internalize the pattern of Biblical history; in so doing, he imposed on the flux of experience, the randomness of events, and the fugitive phenomena of memory the

enduring plot-form and the standard concepts and imagery of that unique and characteristic genre of Christian Europe, the spiritual autobiography.

The book, like its many successors, is not the presentation of an individual life for its inherent interest, but is written from a special point of view and for a given purpose. The whole is an extended "confession" addressed to God, who overhears the meditation that the author conducts in solitude, but renders in the rhetorical mode of colloquies with himself, with God, and with the natural creation. One of Augustine's aims is to know himself better and so to strengthen his private will; but he also sees himself in a public role as one of God's chosen sons whose life has been transformed, and upon whom has been imposed the mission to bring good tidings to other Christian wayfarers:

I confess not only before You ... but also in the ears of the believing sons of men, companions of my joy and sharers of my mortality, my fellow citizens, fellow pilgrims.... These are Your servants, my brethren, whom You have chosen that they should be Your sons, my masters whom You have commanded me to serve. [27](#)

The *Confessions* begins in the present time, with a meditation and prayer by the mature writer on the relations of God to His creation and to His creature, man, before it proceeds to the narrative proper, which opens with events in the author's infancy, and even with speculations about his prenatal condition. There are two distinct selves in the book—"what I once was" and "what I now am"—and between these two identities lies the crucial occasion when Augustine's "past sins" were "forgiven and covered up, giving me joy in You, changing my life by faith and Your sacrament" (X.iii). Throughout the book Augustine evokes his life explicitly as the present recollection of the past, in which Augustine as he was is co-present with Augustine as he is:

All this I do inside me, in the huge court of my memory.... And in my memory too I meet myself—I recall myself, what I have done, when and where and in what state of mind I was

when I did it... And upon them all I can meditate as if they were present. [28](#)

Looking back after the outcome, the regenerate Augustine is able to discern the silent workings of God's providential plan from the beginning of what at the time had seemed the random contingencies of his unregenerate life. In defining these hidden workings he adumbrates the concept of what we now call unconscious motivation, by internalizing the distinction, common in the Christian view of history, between the secondary causes which are available to human observation and the omnipresent but invisible First Cause. You "were then acting in me by the hidden secret of Your Providence" (V.vi); there is a difference between "Your action upon me" and "my reason" for my actions (V.viii); "You brought it about through me, and without my being aware of it" (VI.vii), for "there is something of man that the very spirit of man that is in him does not know" (X.v). Augustine uses God's latterly discovered plan as a controlling idea, to give retrospective form to the raw data of his remembered experience. (The discrepancy between Augustine's account of the crucial events of his inner life in his *Confessions* and what he had written at the time of those events has occasioned a debate about the "truth" of Augustine's autobiography exactly parallel to the debate about the factual validity of Wordsworth's *Prelude*. [29](#)) All is ordered around the great scene of his conversion in the garden at Milan. Before this he had been torn by the conflict of "my two wills, one old, one new, one carnal, one spiritual" (VIII.v), compelling him simultaneously to the goods of this sensible world and to the good beyond sense and the world. In the garden he undergoes the anguish of the annihilation of that old self and the travail of the birth of the new, "dying unto death and living unto life"—an account which has shaped the experience of innumerable men since Augustine's time, yet (as Augustine's own comments indicate) was itself modeled, even in detail, upon conventions which had been established in a sequence of works from Paul's account of his conversion through Athanasius' *Life of St. Anthony*. [30](#)

Throughout the *Confessions* the haunt and main region of

his narrative is not outer events and actions but what Augustine calls the "inner life" of "the interior part." From the multitude of the *res gestae et visae* of his past, therefore, he selects, orders, and dwells upon only those few which are heavy with spiritual significance, as indices of a stage in his toilsome journey from attachment to the things of this world toward detachment and the transference of his allegiance to a transcendental kingdom. His youthful *acte gratuit* in stealing some pears, for example (we recall Wordsworth's youthful theft of a rowboat), reveals to him his participation in the theft of an apple from Eden (II.iv-x). And in a seemingly fortuitous meeting with a drunken and happy beggar at a time of "utter misery" he now recognizes that "You acted to bring home to me the realization of my misery" (VI.vi). So Wordsworth in *The Prelude* comes at a critical time upon a blind beggar, upon whom he stares "as if admonish'd from another world" (VII, 621-2). "As if admonish'd"—Wordsworth's experience is an as-if providentialism, a translated grace. And in another of his poems shaped in retrospect from an actual experience, Wordsworth in deepest dejection comes suddenly upon an old leech-gatherer who, in a manner of speaking, saves him.

Augustine's own experiences, together with the course of general human history, pose what is for him the central problem, "*Unde malum?*" "Whence then is evil since God who is good made all things good?" (VII.v). The question is answered by his discovery that evil issues in a greater good, in his own life as in the history of mankind. By his intense self-scrutiny Augustine achieved an astonishing subtlety in discriminating the variety and nuance of man's "affections and the movements of his heart" (IV.xiv), of the complex interaction between what the altering mind brings to its perceptions and what is given to it in perception, of the difficulty of separating the pure fact in memory from the intrusive presence of the self that remembers, and of the slow and obscure growth of convictions and values which burst suddenly into awareness in the quantum leap of a moment of insight; in these passages Augustine established the spiritual vocabulary for all later self-analyses and treatments of self-formation and the dis

covery of one's identity. Augustine also opened out, in the mode of a philosophy of lived experience, the topics which have since engaged the close study of professional philosophers up to that fervent admirer of the *Confessions*, Ludwig Wittgenstein. ³¹ These topics have also become the preoccupation of writers of secular *confessions*, from Rousseau and Wordsworth through Proust and Joyce. They include the question of "the vast recesses, the hidden and unsearchable caverns, of memory," that "inward place, which yet is no place" (X.viii- ix). Most prominent and persistent is the problem "What is time?". Augustine's attempt to solve the problem entails the distinction between the "three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, a present of things future" (XI.xx), as well as analyses of the difference between subjective time and the time measured by the movements of external bodies, of the relation of time and change to what is eternal and immutable (XI.xiii ff.), and of the significance of recurrent moments of illumination *in ictu trepidantis aspectus*, "in the thrust of a trembling glance" (VII.xvii), which occur in time and pass away, yet serve as portents of the ultimate escape from time into eternity.

In the induction to the *Confessions* Augustine had meditated on the relations of the Creator to the creation and of the timeless to that which exists in time. In the final book he rounds back to the genesis of all things, in a review of the significance of the creation at the beginning of time, and goes on to the uncreation of all things at the apocalyptic end of time—the word begins to toll as we approach the conclusion:

For this gloriously beautiful order of things that are very good will pass away when it has achieved its end: it will have its morning and its evening. But the seventh day is without evening....

But You, Lord, are ever in action and ever at rest. You do not see in time nor move in time nor rest in time. Yet You make the things we see in time, and You make both time while time is and rest when time is no more. ³²

4. THE TRANSACTIONS OF MIND AND NATURE

Under the similarities between the *Confessions* and *The Prelude* there lies, of course, a profound disparity. To get at the crux of this difference I shall put side by side passages from each work which have a common vocabulary and a related subject. The passage in Augustine represents him in a colloquy with the "heaven and earth"; it reminds us that to conduct a conversation with the landscape is by no means a Romantic innovation, and that Wordsworth's "speaking face of earth and heaven" is a lineal descendant of the ancient Christian concept of the *liber naturae*, whose symbols bespeak the attributes and intentions of its author. [33](#)

And what is this God? I asked the earth and it answered: "I am not He"; and all things that are in the earth made the same confession. I asked the sea and the deeps and the creeping things, and they answered: "We are not your God; seek higher." ... I asked the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, and they answered: "Neither are we God whom you seek." And I said to all the things that throng about the gateways of the senses: "Tell me of my God, since you are not He. Tell me something of Him." And they cried out in a great voice: "He made us." My question was my gazing upon them, and their answer was their beauty. And I turned to myself and said: "And you, who are you?" And I answered: "A man." Now clearly there is a body and a soul in me, one exterior, one interior. From which of these two should I have enquired of my God? ... The inner man knows these things through the ministry of the outer man: I the inner man knew them, I, I the soul, through the senses of the body.

(X.vi)

This is what Wordsworth wrote, in describing an "eminence" that his life had reached during his residence at Cambridge University:

For hither I had come with holy powers
And faculties, whether to work or feel:

To apprehend all passions and all moods
Which time, and place, and season do impress
Upon the visible universe, and work
Like changes there by force of my own mind.

... All

That I beheld respired with inward meaning.
Thus much for the one Presence, and the Life
Of the great whole; suffice it here to add
That whatsoe'er of Terror or of Love,
Or Beauty, Nature's daily face put on
From transitory passion, unto this
I was as wakeful, even, as waters are
To the sky's motion...
I had a world about me; 'twas my own,
I made it; for it only liv'd to me,
And to the God who look'd into my mind.

... Of Genius, Power,

Creation and Divinity itself
I have been speaking, for my theme has been
What pass'd within me...
O Heavens! how awful is the might of Souls,
And what they do within themselves, while yet
The yoke of earth is new to them...
Points have we all of us within our souls,
Where all stand single; this I feel, and make
Breathings for incommunicable powers.

... there's not a man

That lives who hath not had his godlike hours,
And knows not what majestic sway we have,
As natural beings in the strength of nature.

(III, 83-194)

The passage in Augustine has three points of reference, which serve as the premises and prime functional terms throughout the *Confessions*: God, the natural creation, and man—or more precisely, since man's body and senses are a part of nature, the human soul. Of the three, God (figured here as speaking through His creation) retains all initiative, as the first, efficient, and final cause of nature and soul. In Wordsworth's passage God has not quite dropped out, but He is mentioned only after the fact, and given nothing to do except

to be spectator of a completed action—"for it only liv'd to me,/ And to the God who look'd into my mind." But if God has become a nonparticipant, it is with this peculiar result: His traditional attributes and functions (the "holy powers," "Creation," and "Divinity") survive, to be inherited (together with the appropriate sentiments of wonder and awe) by the two remaining components of Augustine's triad, nature and the human "soul," or "mind."

My concern is not with the valid autobiographical question: "What was Wordsworth's creed—pantheist, panentheist, Christian?" in the sense of "What propositions about God would Wordsworth have been prepared to assert outside the poem?" ³⁴ With respect to the conceptual scheme of *The Prelude*, the relevant question is: "What role does God play within the poem itself?" To answer this question it is not enough to list the passages in which reference is made to God; for the essential matter is, "What does God do in the poem?" And to this the answer is patently, "Nothing of consequence." In *The Prelude* of 1805 (and this fact is only thinly overlaid with pious phrases in Wordsworth's later revisions and additions) ³⁵ God is at intervals ceremoniously alluded to, but remains an adventitious and nonoperative factor; if all allusions to deity were struck out of *The Prelude*, there would be no substantive change in its subject matter or development. God is the purely formal remainder of His former self, because His traditional offices have for all practical purposes been preempted by the other two elements of the triad—in Wordsworth's phrase in the passage I quoted, by men "as natural beings in the strength of nature." Whatever his beliefs—and it seems likely that Wordsworth did not greatly trouble himself about the question of orthodoxy until incited to do so by Coleridge's alarm and the remonstrances of friends and reviewers—the interesting thing is that Wordsworth described the process of his spiritual development within a system of reference which has only two generative and operative terms: mind and nature. As Hazlitt, with his usual acumen, observed even of Wordsworth's later and much more traditional *Excursion* (1814): "It is as if there were nothing but himself and the universe." ³⁶

In this manner of proceeding *The Prelude* participates in

the large movement of Romantic philosophy. ³⁷ In its central tradition Christian thought had posited three primary elements: God, nature, and the soul; with God of course utterly prepotent, as the creator and controller of the two others and as the end, the telos, of all natural process and human endeavor. The tendency in innovative Romantic thought (manifested in proportion as the thinker is or is not a Christian theist) is greatly to diminish, and at the extreme to eliminate, the role of God, leaving as the prime agencies man and the world, mind and nature, the ego and the non-ego, the self and the not-self, spirit and the other, or (in the favorite antithesis of post-Kantian philosophers) subject and object. Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, for example, begin with an undifferentiated principle which at once manifests itself in the dual mode of subject and object, whose interactions (in and through individual human selves) bring into being the phenomenal world and constitute all individual experience, as well as all the history of mankind. The notable fact, however, is that this metaphysical process does not delete but simply assimilates the traditional powers and actions of God, as well as the over- all pattern of Christian history; now, however, subject and object, in their long interworking, are adequate to account for the whole story, from the metaphysical equivalent of the creation, through the fall and redemption, to the apocalyptic consummation at the end of the providential plot. As Hegel, who of all his contemporaries was most clearly aware of his procedure, put the matter: "Philosophy is thus identical with religion, but the distinction is that it is so in a peculiar manner, distinct from the manner of looking at things which is commonly called religion as such." ³⁸ This retention of traditional Christian concepts and the traditional Christian plot, but demythologized, conceptualized, and with all-controlling Providence converted into a "logic" or dialectic that controls all the interactions of subject and object, gives its distinctive character and design to what we call "Romantic philosophy." In this grandiose enterprise, however, it is the subject, mind, or spirit which is primary and takes over the initiative and the functions which had once been the prerogatives of deity; that is why we can justifiably call Romantic

philosophy, in its diverse forms, by the generic term "Idealism."

We shall have occasion in the next two chapters to look more closely at the typical plot-form of post-Kantian philosophical systems. Now notice how this metaphysics of subject-object interaction parallels the exemplary lyric form which Wordsworth, following the instance of Coleridge's *Frost at Midnight*, established in *Tintern Abbey*: an individual confronts a natural scene and makes it abide his question, and the interchange between his mind and nature constitutes the entire poem, which usually poses and resolves a spiritual crisis. ³⁹ *The Prelude*, too, begins with the poet alone in an open prospect, responding in spirit to the attributes and alterations of the landscape, and it proceeds by recurrent passages in which the mind is made aware of a new stage in its growth by coming to a new accounting with the natural scene. In the intervening sections *The Prelude* represents the people, actions, and events of Wordsworth's quotidian life; otherwise it would not be an autobiography (even a spiritual autobiography) but something more like Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*—a work which manages the feat of epitomizing the cultural history of the maturing spirit entirely in terms of the diverse separations, conflicts, and incremental reconciliations of subject and object. We find in *The Prelude*, then, although with parsimony in number and detail, the account of people other than the poet himself, including his mother and father, various playmates, "my old Dame, so motherly and good," old beggars, and Beaupuis the revolutionary, as well as descriptions of Wordsworth's literal actions and experiences at Hawkeshead and in Cambridge, London, and France.

By a triumph of invention, however, Wordsworth supplements his literal story of a real life in this variegated world with the correlative account of the growth of the poet's mind as a direct transaction between that mind and nature. In many passages, for example, nature is endowed with the attributes and powers of a mother, father, nurse, teacher, lover, as well as a deity (or deities) who seek out, incite, guide, and discipline the individual whom "Nature" had selected to "frame/ A favor'd Being, from his earliest dawn/ Of infancy" (I, 363-5).

(That in the earliest version of this passage it was not "Nature," but first "genii," then "spirits," which performed this role indicates that Wordsworth's locutions about the "soul" and "spirit," or "spirits," of nature are not meant to assert a creed, but to constitute a poetic manner of speaking, or serious conceit. ⁴⁰) Wordsworth manages, in passages that alternate with the literal exposition, to assimilate even the recalcitrant materials of the later books of *The Prelude* to the nature and agency of landscape. In London, for example, still "the Spirit of Nature was upon me," and the place

Was throng'd with impregnations, like those wilds
In which my early feelings had been nurs'd,
And naked valleys, full of caverns, rocks,
And audible seclusions.

(VII, 735; VIII, 791-4)

In the section of *The Prelude* devoted to "Books," the greatest of these works of man are similarly naturalized, to the reader who "with living Nature hath been intimate," for their power over him springs

From the great Nature that exists in works
Of mighty Poets. Visionary Power
Attends upon the motions of the winds
Embodied in the mystery of words.

(V, 612-21)

The account of his heightening response to the existence of men outside himself, and of his growing identification with them, is entitled "Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind," and its central episode is the sudden appearance of the shepherd as "a Power/ Or Genius, under Nature, under God,/ Presiding," with his form "glorified" and "like an aerial Cross" —an epiphany which Wordsworth analyzes as an epiphenomenon of the mist and the setting sun (VIII, 393-410). The poet's deepening experience of human suffering and mortality is systematically translated into an altering relationship between his eye and its object: the natural scene articulates and reflects back the inchoate sentiments which are brought to it by

the apperceptive mind, so that the correlate of his coming to look upon men "with another eye" is his coming to perceive natural objects as suffused by a different light and shade. He felt

A dawning, even as of another sense,
A human-heartedness about my love
For objects hitherto the gladsome air
Of my own private being, and no more ...
A new-born feeling. It spread far and wide;
The trees, the mountains shared it, and the brooks....
Whatever shadings of mortality
Had fallen upon these objects heretofore
Were different in kind; not tender: strong,
Deep, gloomy were they and severe; the scatterings
Of Childhood. [41](#)

And in the series of revelations with which *The Prelude* draws to a close, we remember, the first is of a landscape seen as the mind of man, the main region of his song, and the last is of the secondary region of his song, the life which he himself had lived, seen as a landscape.

On the recurrent level of narration in which mind and nature must suffice to generate the plot of *The Prelude*, a heavy requisition is placed on nature, but a still heavier one is placed on mind, which in Wordsworth, as in the German Idealists, is the prior and preeminent power. For it is not nature but "the Mind of Man" which is "the main region of my song"; and in the passage in which Wordsworth speaks of "Power,/ Creation and Divinity itself," he speaks "not of outward things," but of "what pass'd within me" and of "my youthful mind." [42](#) In the final analysis the view that informs *The Prelude* is not naturalism, but humanism, in which man is "of all visible natures crown .../ As, more than anything we know instinct/ With Godhead" (VIII, 634-9); and if Wordsworth develops in *The Prelude* what Harold Bloom calls a "myth of Nature," this is incorporated within a higher and more comprehensive myth of mind.

5. THE THEODICY OF THE PRIVATE LIFE

In the *Prospectus* to *The Recluse* and its associated poems Wordsworth announced his intent "to weigh/ The good and evil of our mortal state." This was his version of Milton's undertaking to "justify the ways of God to men." Wordsworth's argument, like Milton's, is a theodicy which locates the justification for human suffering in the restoration of a lost paradise. In Milton's view, this event will not occur "till one greater Man/ Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat." Wordsworth's paradise, however, can be achieved simply by a union of man's mind with nature, and so is a present paradise in this world, capable of being described "by words/ Which speak of nothing more than what we are"—without recourse, that is, either to an intervenient deity or to a heavenly kingdom to redress any imbalance between the good and evil of our mortal state.

In Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the autobiographical preliminary to *The Recluse*, the ultimate goodness governing the course of his life is brought into question by his suffering and crisis of spirit, then is established by the outcome of his experience, which is represented as prototypical for the men to whom he addresses himself. Wordsworth's assumption, like that of all writers of theodicies, whether of universal scope or of the private life, is that if life is to be worth living there cannot be a blank unreason or mere contingency at the heart of things; there must be meaning (in the sense of a good and intelligible purpose) in the occurrence of both physical and moral evils. The Christian theodicy of the private life, in the long lineage of Augustine's *Confessions*, transfers the locus of the primary concern with evil from the providential history of mankind to the providential history of the individual self, and justifies the experience of wrongdoing, suffering, and loss as a necessary means toward the greater good of personal redemption. But Wordsworth's is a secular theodicy—a theodicy without an operative *theos*—which retains the form of the ancient reason

ing, but translates controlling Providence into an immanent teleology, makes the process coterminous with our life in this world, and justifies suffering as the necessary means toward the end of a greater good which is nothing other than the stage of achieved maturity:

Ah me! that all

The terrors, all the early miseries
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes, that all
The thoughts and feelings which have been infus'd
Into my mind, should ever have made up
The calm existence that is mine when I
Am worthy of myself! Praise to the end!
Thanks likewise for the means!

(I, 355-62)

In other words, the Wordsworthian theodicy of the private life (if we want to coin a term, we can call it a "biodicy"), belongs to the distinctive Romantic genre of the *Bildungsgeschichte*, which translates the painful process of Christian conversion and redemption into a painful process of self-formation, crisis, and self-recognition, which culminates in a stage of self-coherence, self-awareness, and assured power that is its own reward.

On the one level Wordsworth tells this story in terms of his literal experiences of terror, pain, error, and misery, climaxed by his crisis of doubt and despair after the failure of the French Revolution; and he justifies these experiences (as he says in a revision of the passage just quoted) as "bearing a part,/ And that a needful part" in making him a man, in making him a poet, and in making him exactly the kind of man and poet he was. But throughout *The Prelude* there is a double story being told—a story of Wordsworth's life in the world and a correlative story of his life in nature. And on this second narrative level Wordsworth incorporates the problem of suffering within his overarching myth of the interaction between mind and nature, in which fostering nature conducts the mind through successive stages of growth, while speaking nature defines and communicates to the mind that degree of self-knowledge which its stage of cumulative experience has prepared it to receive.

6. THE THEODICY OF THE LANDSCAPE

No sooner does Wordsworth begin the story of his life as a child engaged in the ordinary activities of bathing, basking in the sun, and running through the fields and woods, than he turns to the correlative presentation of his soul in direct engagement with nature, as it is formed by contrary influences of the external scene:

Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up
Foster'd alike by beauty and by fear.

(I, 305-6)

Throughout the earlier books of *The Prelude* Wordsworth repeatedly represents his mind as developing by a sustained interchange with "these two attributes," the "sister horns that constitute [nature's] strength," whose "twofold influence ... of peace and excitation" instills in the mind a union of "emotion" and "calmness," of "energy" and "happy stillness." ⁴³ Of one type are the gentle and "fearless" aspects of nature—the calm and ordered prospect, small-scale objects, "quiet Heavens," "tranquil scenes," "gentle breezes," "a garden with its walks and banks of flowers," all of which manifest "love" and "tenderness," act by effecting "pleasure and repeated happiness," and move the mind "by feelings of delight." But "Nature ... when she would frame/ A favor'd Being" alternates her "gentlest visitation" with "severer interventions, ministry/ More palpable." Of this opposite type are the awe-inspiring and terrifying aspects of nature—vast scenes of wildness and majesty, the "awful" and the "grand," elements "in tumult," "the midnight storm," "the roaring ocean and waste wilderness," which act on the mind by "terror" and by "pain and fear" and manifest not nature's "love" but her punitive actions: her "impressive discipline of fear." ⁴⁴

In this natural polarity of "beauteous forms or grand," or of "forms sublime or fair," ⁴⁵ as Samuel Monk pointed out

more than three decades ago, Wordsworth adapted the two primary categories—that of the beautiful and that of the sublime—into which earlier eighteenth-century theorists had apportioned the aesthetic qualities of the natural scene. ⁴⁶ By and large the beautiful is small in scale, orderly, and tranquil, effects pleasure in the observer, and is associated with love; while the sublime is vast (hence suggestive of infinity), wild, tumultuous, and awful, is associated with pain, and evokes ambivalent feelings of terror and admiration. But behind this familiar eighteenth-century aesthetic dichotomy lay centuries of speculation about the natural world—speculation whose concerns were not aesthetic but theological and moral, and which in fact constituted a systematic theodicy of the landscape. For on the Pauline ground that "the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen," the problem had early arisen, how to justify the goodness of an omnipotent Creator who has brought into being an earth which, in many of its aspects, is not beautiful and beneficent, but wild, waste, ugly, perilous, and terrifying?

This is precisely the question put to God by Dorigen in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale* when, her husband away on a distant voyage, she looks with terror from the brink of a cliff upon the sea and its "grisly feendly rokkes blake,"

That semen rather a foul confusion
Of werk than any fair creacion
Of swich a parfit wys God and a stable,
Why han ye wroght this werk unresonable? ...
I woot wel clerkes wol seyn as hem leste,
By argumentz, that al is for the beste-

But having thus displaced the burden of theodicy from human evil and suffering, with its backdrop of Eden, Calvary, and the New Jerusalem, to the ugly and terrifying aspects of what should be the best of all possible physical worlds, Dorigen helplessly resigns all disputation on the matter "to clerkes," while her friends, to distract her from the "disconfort" of the wild sea, escort her to conventional places of ordered and agreeable beauty:

They leden hire by ryveres and by welles,
And eek in othere places delitables.

(lines 856-99)

The "clerkes" proposed a variety of answers to this question, but a standard one was that a perfect, wise God had originally created a perfectly smooth, orderly, useful, and beautiful world. Mountains and other wild, waste places were the product not of divine benevolence but of human depravity, for they had been wreaked by the wrath of a just God at the original fall of man in Eden, or alternatively (in some commentators, additionally), they had been effected by the devastating flood with which He punished the all-but-universal corruption of mankind at the time of Noah. Henry Vaughan expressed the common opinion in his poem *Corruption*; when Adam sinned

He drew the Curse upon the world, and Crackt
The whole frame with his fall.

Mountains, therefore, and other vast, chaotic and frightful aspects of nature, as Marjorie Nicolson has said, were looked upon as "symbols of human sin" and of the consequent wrath of a justly punitive God. [47](#)

A late and circumstantial document in this tradition was Thomas Burnet's *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, of which the first Latin version was published in 1681-89. On the one side, this immensely popular book fostered the development of "physico-theology," which undertook to demonstrate the existence and attributes of God, and especially the justice of His ways to men in the creation, entirely by reasoning from the phenomena of nature; on the other side, it served as an influential model for translating theological and moral concepts into an aesthetics of landscape. Burnet was often compared to Milton (Coleridge described *The Sacred Theory* as "a grand Miltonic Romance" [48](#)), and not merely because of the baroque magnificence of his style. As Burnet's subtitle to the expanded version in English describes his subject, it is "an Account of the Original of the Earth, and of all the General Changes

which it hath already undergone, or is to undergo, till the Consummation of all Things." The span of his work, then, from creation to apocalypse, coincides with that of the plot of *Paradise Lost*; and although Burnet tells the story primarily in terms of changes in the physical universe which were effected by natural law, or "second Causes," these causes operate in preestablished harmony with what he calls the "first Cause" that is, with the underlying purpose and providence of Milton's God. ⁴⁹

According to Burnet the perfect God had originally brought into being a perfectly beautiful world; and this, by Burnet's Palladian standards of beauty, was a world "smooth, regular, and uniform; without Mountains, and without a Sea" (I, 72). Earliest mankind dwelt in perfect innocence and ease in an unchanging springtime, in a region of the flawless world which was even more perfect than the rest. This region was the paradise which is described in Genesis and is also dimly remembered in pagan myths of "Elysian Fields, Fortunate Islands, Gardens of *Hesperides*, *Alcinous*, etc."—a passage Wordsworth may well have recalled when he wrote in the *Prospectus* of "Paradise, and groves Elysian, Fortunate Fields...." ⁵⁰ The providential cause of the destruction of this perfect world was God's wrathful judgment on "the Wickedness and Degeneracy of Men" at the time of Noah, when "the Abyss was open'd" and "the Frame of the Earth broke and fell down into the *great Abyss*"; the resulting flood and cataclysm transformed all nature into its present state, "wherein it must continue till the Redemption and Restitution of all Things." The world we now inhabit therefore is only the wreck of paradise, with some remains indeed of its original beauty, yet overall "the Image or Picture of a great Ruin ... the true Aspect of a World lying in its Rubbish" (I, 130, 90, 223, 148).

Toward the ruinous parts of the present world Burnet exhibits the complex attitudes which helped form the new aesthetics of the following century. For he finds positive values in those aspects of the landscape which are vast, misproportioned, terrifying, and by traditional aesthetic standards, ugly; but these values are both aesthetic and quasi-theological, for

in them the speaking face of earth declares the infinity, the power, and the wrath of a just deity.

As to the present Form of the Earth, we call all Nature to Witness for us; the Rocks and the Mountains, the Hills and the Valleys, the deep and wide Sea, and the Caverns of the Ground: Let these speak, and tell their Origin: How the Body of the Earth came to be thus torn and mangled?
(II, 331-2)

Yet these same phenomena, "the greatest Objects of Nature," the "boundless Regions where Stars inhabit ... the wide Sea and the Mountains of the Earth," seem to him "the most pleasing to behold."

There is something august and stately in the Air of these things, that inspires the Mind with great Thoughts and Passions; we do naturally, upon such Occasions, think of God and his Greatness: And whatsoever hath but the Shadow and Appearance of INFINITE, as all Things have that are too big for our Comprehension, they fill and over-bear the Mind with their Excess, and cast it into a pleasing kind of Stupor and Admiration.

And yet these Mountains ... are nothing but great Ruins; but such as shew a certain Magnificence in Nature.

(I, 188-9)

Inherent in precisely those ruined elements of landscape which manifest the terrifying wrath of God are the highest aesthetic values, because they also express God's infinite power, and so evoke from Burnet attitudes and emotions which men had earlier felt for almighty God Himself.

Burnet's distinction between the beautiful and the "great" aspects of nature was developed by later theorists (with the help of a term imported from Longinus' treatise on the elevated style) into the distinction between the beautiful and the "sublime." Even in later naturalistic treatments of these categories, we recognize a consonance with the earlier theological context, in which the beautiful elements in nature are the enduring expression of God's loving benevolence, while the vast and disordered in nature express his infinity, power, and

wrath, and so evoke a paradoxical union of delight and terror, pleasure and awe. Edmund Burke, for example, in his greatly influential *Philosophical Enquiry into ... the Sublime and Beautiful*, bases the sense of beauty on the passion of love and associates it with pleasure, while "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible ... is a source of the *sublime*." ⁵¹ The sublime also has its source in the associated qualities of "power," "vastness," "infinity," and "magnificence," and its characteristic effects on the beholder are the traditional ones aroused by the conception of the infinite power of a stern but just God: "terror," "astonishment," "awe," "admiration," and "reverence." ⁵²

William Wordsworth, who in his writings showed an early and continuing interest in the antithetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime, ⁵³ thus inherited a long tradition of finding moral and theological meanings in the aesthetic qualities of the landscape, as well as of conducting an inquiry into cosmic goodness and justice by reference to the contrary attributes of the natural world. From such hints he constructed his account of an individual mind in its developing capacity to respond to and interpret "whatso'er of Terror or of Love,/ Or Beauty, Nature's daily face put on" (III, 132-3)—an achievement which in its subtlety and insight had no precedent either in the physico-theology, the aesthetics, or the psychology of his day.

We can most clearly follow Wordsworth's procedure in the biography of the Pedlar which he interpolated into the 1798 version of his greatest narrative poem, *The Ruined Cottage*. Wordsworth told Isabella Fenwick that he represented in the Pedlar "chiefly an *idea* of what I fancied my own character might have become in his circumstances," ⁵⁴ and he later transferred a number of passages from this description into *The Prelude*. The biography of the Pedlar, then, is the first sketch of what I have called the controlling "idea" of *The Prelude*, and in it Wordsworth, in some 250 packed lines, describes the growth of the Pedlar's mind from early childhood, through a spiritual crisis (experienced "before his twentieth year was pass'd," in which "his mind became disturbed"

and he turned "in vain .../ To science for a cure" in order "to mitigate the fever of his heart") to the time in which he discovered his role in life and "assumed/ This lowly occupation." But though his outer occupation was that of a pedlar, he had also been born to be a mute inglorious poet, for

he was a chosen son

To him was given an ear which deeply felt
The voice of Nature in the obscure wind
The sounding mountain and the running stream.

... In all shapes

He found a secret and mysterious soul,
A fragrance and a spirit of strange meaning. [55](#)

The compactness of this biography allows Wordsworth to sustain the narrative mode of the transaction between mind and nature in a way not possible in the extended autobiography of *The Prelude*. In early childhood the Pedlar's mind had been fostered by his solitary experiences with the terror, power, and grandeur of the natural sublime:

So the foundations of his mind were laid
In such communion, not from terror free.
While yet a child, and long before his time
He had perceived the presence and the power
Of greatness, and deep feelings had impressed
Great objects on his mind.

(lines 77-82)

Though even at this time, in the "fixed and steady lineaments" of the face of the landscape, he had "traced an ebbing and a flowing mind," he had not yet been ready for a later stage of nature's teaching, "the lesson deep of love" enciphered in the gentle aspects of the outer scene.

In his heart

Love was not yet, nor the pure joy of love,
By sound diffused, or by the breathing air,
Or by the silent looks of happy things.

The passage to that stage at which he learns to decipher the lesson of love in nature is precisely fixed in time: it occurred

"ere his ninth summer," when having for the first time been sent out alone to tend his father's sheep, he beheld the beauty of a mountain dawn.

He looked,

The ocean and the earth beneath him lay
In gladness and deep joy. The clouds were touched
And in their silent faces did he read
Unutterable love....
His mind was a thanksgiving to the power
That made him. It was blessedness and love.

(lines 106-41)

Such were the experiences which fostered the development of his mature mind which, "in a just equipoise of love," had the psychic strength to participate with human wretchedness—"He could afford to suffer/ With those whom he saw suffer." [56](#)

In a revealing passage Wordsworth says that the boy "had learned to read/ His bible" while at school, before he came to discover the same meanings written more distinctly and impressively in the *verba visibilia*, the symbolic language of the landscape:

But in the mountains did he *feel* his faith
There did he see the writing—All things there
Looked immortality, revolving life,
And greatness still revolving, infinite;
... nor did he *believe*—he saw.

(lines 54-6, 146-55)

But it would appear that the Pedlar learned to transfer the divine attributes from the *Book of Scripture* to the *Book of Nature* with some help from the physico-theology of Burnet's *Sacred Theory*; for one of the revelations he found encoded in a scene of bleak sublimity was that of the cosmic vengeance which had loosed the mountain-making deluge in the age of Noah—in

some peak

Familiar with forgotten years, which shews,
Inscribed, as with the silence of the thought,

Upon its bleak and visionary sides,
The history of many a winter storm,
Or of the day of vengeance, when the sea
Rose like a giant from his sleep, and smote
The hills, and when the firmament of heaven
Rained darkness which the race of men beheld
Yea all the men that lived and had no hope. ⁵⁷

In *The Prelude* (which also contains echoes of Burnet's *Sacred Theory*, ⁵⁸ as well as of various eighteenth-century treatises on the aesthetics of landscape), after Wordsworth moves from the rural milieu of his boyhood into the variegated life of Cambridge, London, and France, he represents himself as coming to terms with his experience in periodic accountings with the natural scene. The mind finds in the scene what it has become ready to find, and what it finds is its own aspect. As Wordsworth put it, "from thyself it is that thou must give,/ Else never canst receive" (XI, 333-4). And what the mind at such moments brings to nature is the hitherto inchoate product of its experience of men and the world since it had last come to an understanding with nature.

A central instance of this recurrent tactic constitutes a notable passage in Book VI of *The Prelude*. There Wordsworth describes his first pedestrian trip through France in the summer of 1790, when he participated joyously in that festival period of the Revolution. On his way through the Alps from France to Italy he crosses the Simplon Pass and descends into the narrow and gloomy ravine of the Gondo, there to read, inscribed in the physical properties of the scene, a revelation about man and nature and human life.

Burnet had long before incorporated in *The Sacred Theory* reminiscences of his trip across the "great Ruins" of the Alps, ⁵⁹ and the description of Alpine sublimity had become a standard *topos* among eighteenth-century connoisseurs of pleasing horror, including John Dennis, Shaftesbury, Addison, and Thomas Gray, who had vied in representing prospects where, as Gray said, "not a precipice, not a torrent, not a cliff, but is pregnant with religion and poetry." ⁶⁰ Wordsworth's description of the ravine below Simplon thus epitomizes

a century of commentary on the religion and poetry in the sublime Alpine landscape, brought together by a poet of genius and endowed with an ominous life:

The immeasurable height.

Of woods decaying, never to be decay'd,
The stationary blasts of water-falls,
And everywhere along the hollow rent
Winds thwarting winds, bewilder'd and forlorn,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that mutter'd close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream...

The grimness of the lesson this scene bespeaks is made even more emphatic in a manuscript addition which suggests Burnet's view that mountains and rocks are the ruins left by the wrathful destruction of the pristine world, and also indicates the implicit relevance of the prospect to the violent contingencies of human life:

And ever as we halted, or crept on,
Huge fragments of primaeval mountain spread
In powerless ruin, blocks as huge aloft
Impending, nor permitted yet to fall,
The sacred Death-cross, monument forlorn
Though frequent of the perish'd Traveller....

Integral to Wordsworth's description of terrifying sublimity, however, is a contrary aspect of the scene: the light and serenity of beauty, exhibited in "the clear blue sky" and in "the unfetter'd clouds, and region of the Heavens." And this *coincidentia oppositorum* suddenly expresses a revelation which Wordsworth equates with the showing forth of the contraries of God in the Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation itself. There the Lamb of the gospel of love had manifested Himself as the terrifying deity of the *dies irae*, while men cried "to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us and hide us ... from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come"; but the opening and closing chapters had insistently reiterated that the

God of wrath and destruction is one and coeternal with the God who manifests his love in the creation at the beginning and in the redemption at the end of time: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending"; "Fear not; I am the first and the last"; "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last." ⁶¹ In Wordsworth's version:

Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first and last, and midst, and without end.

(VI, 551-72)

In consonance with Wordsworth's two-term frame of reference, the Scriptural Apocalypse is assimilated to an apocalypse of nature; its written characters are natural objects, which are read as types and symbols of permanence in change; and its antithetic qualities of sublimity and beauty are seen as simultaneous expressions on the face of heaven and earth, declaring an unrealized truth which the chiaroscuro of the scene articulates for the prepared mind—a truth about the darkness and the light, the terror and the peace, the ineluctable contraries that make up our human existence.

This recognition, however, is not the end but only a midstage in the evolution of the poet's mind. Book IX, which will begin the fateful record of his second visit to France and its aftermath, opens with a statement of Wordsworth's human reluctance to face the crisis of maturity, as he winds and doubles back like a river which fears the way "that leads direct to the devouring sea"; the passage ominously echoes Milton's invocation to his ninth book, which narrates the fall of man and his expulsion from paradise into "a world of woe,/ Sin and her shadow Death, and Misery." ⁶² After the failure of the limitless initial promise of the French Revolution, the growing divisions and conflicts in a world gone mad are reflected in Wordsworth's inner divisions and conflicts, until the integrity of his spiritual development is shattered in what seems incipient madness. He suffers from Kafka-esque nightmares, pleading

Before unjust Tribunals, with a voice
Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense
Of treachery and desertion in the place
The holiest I knew of, my own soul.

(X, 378-81)

He makes a desperate attempt to reestablish on abstract premises, and by logical analysis and reasoning, what had originally been his spontaneous confidence in life and his hope for man, but the attempt leads only to utter perplexity about "right and wrong, the ground/ Of moral obligation," until he breaks down completely. In the context of our discussion it is significant that Wordsworth describes his crisis as involving, explicitly, his despair about a solution to the problem of the good and evil of our moral state:

I lost

All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,
Sick, wearied out with contrarities,
Yielded up moral questions in despair.
This was the crisis of that strong disease,
This the soul's last and lowest ebb. [63](#)

The account of the dark night of his soul—"I was benighted heart and mind" (XII, 21)—is at once correlated, in Wordsworth's double narrative, with an account of the paralysis of the earlier reciprocative relation between his mind and nature. For his heart "had been turn'd aside/ From nature by external accidents" (X, 886-7), and the habit of "logic and minute analysis," infecting even his perceptions, replaced the attitude of total receptiveness to all that nature had to give—"I never thought of judging, with the gift of all this glory filled and satisfied"—by an attitude in which the mind sat "in judgment" on nature,

disliking here, and there,

Liking, by rules of mimic art transferr'd
To things above all art.

(XI, 126-55)

That is, he evaluated the scene according to the fixed and formal aesthetic categories of the picturesque which had been abstracted from the principles of composition in the art of

landscape painting. ⁶⁴ And in place of the earlier freedom in its negotiations with nature, his mind, thus weakened, became a slave to "the eye .../ The most despotic of our senses," which rejoiced "to lay the inner faculties asleep" (XI, 171-99). The poet had succumbed to the "sleep/ Of death" from which, in the *Prospectus* (60-61), he undertook to "arouse the sensual" by his evangel of the creative power of the liberated mind.

Wordsworth's eleventh book, which begins the systematic account of his "Imagination ... Restored," opens with another extended parallel to *Paradise Lost*, this time echoing Milton's relief, in his invocation to the third book, at escaping the realms of hell, "though long detain'd/ In that obscure sojourn." In Wordsworth's version:

Long time hath Man's unhappiness and guilt
Detain'd us; with what dismal sights beset
For the outward view, and inwardly oppress'd ...
And lastly, utter loss of hope itself,
And things to hope for. Not with these began
Our Song, and not with these our Song must end:
Ye motions of delight, that through the fields
Stir gently, breezes and soft airs that breathe
The breath of Paradise, and find your way
To the recesses of the soul!

Thus having traversed his personal hell, he turns to the correspondent breeze which had blown in the glad preamble of his song—now specified as "the breath of Paradise" that finds its way "to the recesses of the soul"—to assist him in restoring the paradise within. ⁶⁵ Wordsworth narrates the process of this recovery by his customary alternation between the details of his outer life (the influence of Dorothy, of Coleridge, and of the "uncouth Vagrants" and "lowly men" with whom he talked in his solitary wanderings) and his private intercourse with "Nature's Self, by human love/ Assisted," which ultimately brings his mind back to what it had earlier been, but on the level now of deepened awareness, wider breadth, and firm stability. Nature's self

Conducted me again to open day,
Revived the feelings of my earlier life,

Gave me that strength and knowledge full of peace,
Enlarged, and never more to be disturb'd.

In a manuscript version of this passage Wordsworth remarks that in saying this much he feared "to encroach upon a theme/ Reserv'd to close my Song." ⁶⁶ This ultimate resolution of his crisis is reserved for the concluding book of *The Prelude*, and follows from the climactic revelation on Mount Snowdon in which, in a sudden burst of natural illumination, the poet sees the landscape as "the perfect image of a mighty Mind." Like the ravine below Simplon Pass, the prospect unites the contraries of tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—the terrifying dark chasm, "a deep and gloomy breathing-place through which/ Mounted the roar of waters," while overhead the moon "naked in the Heavens ... look'd down upon this shew/ In single glory." Above all, the give and take of influence between the moon and the mist-shrouded scene shows forth the radical power of human minds to confront nature in a creative and life-giving interchange, "Willing to work and to be wrought upon," so that "in a world of life they live." From this power, Wordsworth says, follows "sovereignty within and peace at will," "truth in moral judgments and delight/ That fails not in the external universe," as opposed to the tendency, from which he has finally freed himself, of "habit to enslave the mind ... by laws of vulgar sense," and so to

substitute a universe of death,
The falsest of all worlds, in place of that
Which is divine and true.

(XIII, 39-143)

That is, his mind has escaped back to "a world of life" from its experiential equivalent of the hell which Milton had described (in the phrase Wordsworth here dramatically echoes) as "a Universe of death, which God by curse/ Created evil, for evil only good/ Where all life dies, death lives" (*Paradise Lost*, II, 622-4).

There immediately follows the first part of Wordsworth's resolution of his long dialectic of good and evil:

To fear and love,

To love as first and chief, for there fear ends,
Be this ascribed; to early intercourse,
In presence of sublime and lovely Forms,
With the adverse principles of pain and joy,
Evil as one is rashly named by those
Who know not what they say. From love, for here
Do we begin and end, all grandeur comes,
All truth and beauty, from pervading love,
That gone, we are as dust.

And this love is a "higher love," a "love more intellectual" than maternal and sexual love, which are "human merely," for this "proceeds/ More from the brooding Soul, and is divine" (XIII, 143-65). Patently Wordsworth's statement is in the traditional idiom of Christian theodicy, and is exactly equivalent in its place and function to Adam's climactic statement in the last book of Milton's epic when, upon hearing Michael foretell Christ's birth, death, resurrection, and return to an earth which then "shall all be Paradise," he acknowledges the justice of the ways of God to men:

O goodness infinite, goodness immense!
That all this good of evil shall produce,
And evil turn to good; more wonderful
Than that which by creation first brought forth
Light out of darkness! Full of doubt I stand,
Whether I should repent me now of sin
By me done and occasion'd, or rejoice
Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring,
To God more glory, more good will to Men
From God, and over wrath grace shall abound.

(XII, 469-78)

In the passage in *The Prelude* of 1805, however, there is no mention of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, or Second Coming, nor even of a deity. The recognition Wordsworth describes is the end product of a sustained intercourse between mind and nature, and in defining it he collects and resolves the contrary qualities of the natural scene—aesthetic, moral, and quasi-theological—with which he has been weaving the complex design

of his theodicy since his opening statement that he grew up fostered alike by beauty and by fear. On the one side is the "sublime" and its near-synonym, "grandeur"; and on the other the "lovely Forms" of nature (the identification is sharpened in the later revision of line 146, "In presence of sublime or *beautiful* forms"). With the sublime are aligned "fear" and "pain," hence what is mistakenly supposed to be "evil"; with the beautiful are aligned the "adverse principles," which are "joy" and "love." And whereas in the poet's earlier revelation in the Alpine ravine he had envisioned the contraries of peace and fear to be equal as well as coeternal attributes of the "first and last, and midst, and without end," he now has progressed to the higher realization that love is "first and chief, for there fear ends," and therefore is the last as well as the first ("from love .../ Do we begin and end"), so that in this final accounting not only the beautiful but the sublime turns out to issue from love: "From love ... all grandeur comes,/ All truth and beauty." Such is Wordsworth's naturalistic equivalent, in a theodicy transacted between mind and nature, of the Miltonic doctrine that God's love not only subsumes and justifies, but necessitates the pain and fear imposed on man by God's wrath—a paradox put by Dante with a starkness beyond Milton when he inscribed over the eternal gates of his ghastly hell that primal love had made it:

Fecemi la divina potestate

La somma sapienza e'l primo amore. [67](#)

Not all readers of *The Prelude* attend to its conclusion with the care they devote to the earlier sections, and to some of those who do it has seemed that Wordsworth's shift from pain and evil to love and good has been managed by logical sleight of hand. A main undertaking in the later parts of the poem, John Jones has said, is to marshal "into consequential argument 'the history of a poet's mind,' " and the "optimism ... of the late *Prelude* is a determined end towards which the poem must be manipulated, like the plot of a bad play." [68](#) But Wordsworth does not undertake to prove that good subsumes ill by consequential argument; in fact, he has told us that it

was the attempt to apply "formal proof" to moral matters that precipitated the breakdown in which he "yielded up moral questions in despair." What Wordsworth attempts is to represent a mode of experience, in which the recovery from his spiritual crisis yields the vision of a nature transformed, and in which, conversely, what he now sees in nature is correlative with a radical change in himself. ⁶⁹ "His attainment of intellectual love," Francis Christensen has said, is "a kind of secular conversion" marking "the poet's entrance into his maturity" and involving (as Wordsworth goes on to describe in some detail) "the taming of the daring, the turbulent, the violent, the wilful in his nature." ⁷⁰ That is, it involves the taming of the equivalent in Wordsworth's inner nature to the sublime aspects of external nature; for his own "soul," as he puts it, had been framed at birth to be "a rock with torrents roaring" (XIII, 221-32). It is possible to read the slackened power of these passages as a sign that Wordsworth feels less than the total assurance to which he aspires, and it is also possible to infer, from our knowledge of his later fate as a poet, that he has given up too much for too little. The conclusion of Wordsworth's theodicy, however, is not an extemporized argument, but is grounded in the beginning. And if this conclusion exhibits "optimism," it is of a kind which, far from denying the reality of pain, terror, and suffering, insists not only that they are humanly inevitable but that they are indispensable conditions for developing the calm, the insight, and the power that is ours when, as Wordsworth put it, we are worthy of ourselves.

In *The Prelude*, then, the justification of seeming evil turns on a crisis and inner transformation, parallel to Augustine's agony and conversion in the garden at Milan. An important difference is that in Augustine's account, although his spiritual preparation has been long, the conversion is instant and absolute, an accession of grace which takes place at a precise point in time, "*punctum ipsum temporis*," and effects at a stroke the destruction of the old creature and the birth of the new. In Wordsworth's secular account of the "growth" of his mind, the process is one of gradual recovery which takes three books to tell in full; and for the Christian paradigm of right-angled change into something radically new he substitutes a pattern

(the typical Romantic pattern, we shall see in the next chapter) in which development consists of a gradual curve back to an earlier stage, but on a higher level incorporating that which has intervened. "Behold me then," Wordsworth says, "Once more in Nature's presence, thus restored," although now "with memory left of what had been escaped" (XI, 393-6). But if in the overall accounting, by Wordsworth's calculation, the gain outweighs the loss, he does not deny that growth is change, and change entails loss. Nature, he says, "I seem'd to love as much as heretofore," and yet this passion

Had suffer'd change; how could there fail to be
Some change, if merely hence, that years of life
Were going on, and with them loss or gain
Inevitable, sure alternative.

(XI, 36-41)

There remains a second stage in Wordsworth's elaborate resolution, in the concluding book of *The Prelude*, of the problem of human suffering. Having recognized the general truth that love is first and last, he turns to the evaluation of the particular life that he has lived. Typically, as we have seen, he transforms that life into a landscape over which he soars in metaphoric flight; and from this high perspective he is able to discern that all its parts are centered in love, and that all its earthly sorrows are ultimately for the best:

Call back to mind

The mood in which this Poem was begun,
O Friend! the termination of my course
Is nearer now, much nearer; yet even then
In that distraction and intense desire
I said unto the life which I had lived,
Where art thou? Hear I not a voice from thee
Which 'tis reproach to hear? Anon I rose
As if on wings, and saw beneath me stretch'd
Vast prospect of the world which I had been
And was; and hence this Song, which like a lark
I have protracted, in the unwearied Heavens
Singing, and often with more plaintive voice
Attemper'd to the sorrows of the earth;

Yet centring all in love, and in the end
All gratulant if rightly understood. ⁷¹

This was, he says, the vision given him at the beginning of the poem, although what he now assays is his life as represented in his just-completed song, the work of art which is *The Prelude* itself. If we turn back to the poem's beginning, we find in its fifteenth line the first prominent instance of Wordsworth's carefully chosen and allocated allusions to *Paradise Lost*— a very striking instance, because in his opening he echoes the closing lines of Milton's epic, when Adam and Eve, between sadness and expectancy, leave paradise to take up their journey in this world of all of us:

The World was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
Through *Eden* took their solitary way.

"The earth is all before me," Wordsworth too says; but his mood is joyously confident, and he entrusts his guidance not to Providence but to nature:

The earth is all before me: with a heart
Joyous, nor scar'd at its own liberty,
I look about, and should the guide I chuse
Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
I cannot miss my way

(I, 15-19)

Critics who have noted this parallel interpret it to signify that *The Prelude* as a whole is a kind of sequel to *Paradise Lost*; "as if," Elizabeth Sewall has said, "Wordsworth meant to dovetail his epic directly into the very place where the Miltonic epic ends." ⁷² This, I think, is a mistake (although an easy one to make) for it overlooks the fact that, though the preamble comes first in the structural order of the *Prelude*, it inaugurates the stage of the narrator's life which comes last in its temporal order. It is not, then, *The Prelude* which Wordsworth meant to dovetail into the place in Milton's poem at which man, having lost paradise, sets out on his pilgrimage to recover it again,

but the narrative which follows *The Prelude*; namely, the opening book of *The Recluse* proper, *Home at Grasmere*, in which the poet takes up the place of rest he has selected at the end of the preamble, when "I made a choice/ Of one sweet Vale whither my steps should turn" (I, 81-2).

On his first glimpse of this happy valley when, as a "roving schoolboy," he had overlooked it from the verge of a "steep barrier," it had appeared as a "paradise before him" (*Home at Grasmere*, lines 1-14), and now that he has returned to this "dear Vale,/ Beloved Grasmere," he describes it in terms which repeatedly echo Milton's description of Eden in *Paradise Lost* (e.g., lines 126 ff.). By "surpassing grace," however, his is an Eden happier far than Adam's original paradise, because it possesses an attribute which "among the bowers/ Of blissful Eden ... was neither given,/ Nor could be given": it is a felicity that incorporates the memory of what it was to have lacked it (lines 103-9). Above all, his is a higher paradise than Milton's because it is inhabited by man as he is, exhibiting the mixed state "of solid good/ and real evil"; that is, it possesses the solid advantage of reality over "all golden fancies of the golden Age," whether located "before all time" or in some distant future "ere time expire" (lines 405-6, 625-32). The point that Wordsworth repeatedly makes in *Home at Grasmere* is his personal experience of a truth which, in the *Prospectus* concluding that poem, he announces as the argument for all *The Recluse*: that in our life in this actual world, with its ineradicable evil and suffering, lies the possibility, and the only possibility, of achieving a paradise which serves him, as it did Milton, to justify the evil of our mortal state.

At the conclusion of *The Prelude* itself, in justifying the sorrows which had fostered the growth of his mind as "in the end all gratulant," Wordsworth has completed his private "history" of "the discipline/ And consummation of the Poet's mind." But this poet, as he had said in the opening preamble, is a poet-prophet, "singled out, as it might seem,/ For holy services." He has, that is, a public role; and at the close Wordsworth calls upon his fellow poet Coleridge, to whom the whole account has been addressed, to serve with him in a recreant age

as, quite explicitly, an evangelist of a new redemption. Though "this Age fall back to old idolatry," we shall be to men

joint-labourers in a work

(Should Providence such grace to us vouchsafe)
Of their redemption, surely yet to come.
Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak
A lasting inspiration....

But the prophet of nature at once proceeds to a coda which is a *gloria in excelsis* not to nature but to the mind of man. We will

Instruct them how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this Frame of things ...
In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of substance and of fabric more divine.

(XIII, 431-52)

Thus he announces the end of his long preparation for writing his masterpiece. But in describing that preparation Wordsworth, no less than Proust, has achieved the masterpiece itself.

7. THE REDEMPTIVE IMAGINATION

I have reserved for separate consideration a crucial element in Wordsworth's theodicy of the mind in nature. During the revelation which precipitates the resolution of the argument, when in the prospect from Mount Snowdon the mind discovers itself in its highest workings, the poet discerns "a fracture in the vapour . . . through which/ Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams/ Innumerable."

In that breach

Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,
That dark deep thoroughfare had Nature lodg'd
The Soul, the Imagination of the whole.

And in the passage which follows, justifying fear, pain, and seeming evil as stemming from pervading love, he goes on to say that this love can neither exist nor triumph over evil except through the imagination as its complement and intermediary. "This love more intellectual cannot be/ Without Imagination" (or, more clearly by later revision, "This spiritual Love acts not nor can exist/ Without Imagination"),

which, in truth,

Is but another name for absolute strength
And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
And reason in her most exalted mood.

Abruptly, Wordsworth now discloses that in his account of the transactions of mind and nature, the protagonist had in fact been this power of his mind, so that what he has all along been narrating is the story of the birth, growth, disappearance, and resurrection of imagination. He represents this faculty in the metaphor of a stream, which flows intermittently above and under ground:

This faculty hath been the moving soul
Of our long labour: we have traced the stream
From darkness, and the very place of birth
In its blind cavern, whence is faintly heard
The sound of waters; follow'd it to light
And open day, accompanied its course
Among the ways of Nature, afterwards
Lost sight of it, bewilder'd and engulf'd,
Then given it greeting, as it rose once more
With strength ...
And lastly, from its progress have we drawn
The feeling of life endless, the great thought
By which we live, Infinity and God. ⁷³

The crisis narrated in *The Prelude*, then, has been a crisis of imagination. "This History," as Wordsworth says, "hath chiefly told/ Of intellectual power, from stage to stage/ Advancing,"

And of imagination teaching truth
Until that natural graciousness of mind

Gave way to over-pressure of the times
And their disastrous issues.

(XI, 42-8)

Hence Wordsworth entitled the central Books XI and XII, on his crisis and recovery, "Imagination, How Impaired and Restored." Now, in the last book, he concludes his natural theodicy by describing imagination and intellectual love as two-in-one, distinct yet undivided entities:

Imagination having been our theme,
So also hath that intellectual love,
For they are each in each, and cannot stand
Dividually.—Here must thou be, O Man!
Strength to thyself; no Helper hast thou here....

(XIII, 185-9)

If my explication of Wordsworth on imagination has been complicated, that is in part because—whether from the difficulty of what he had to say or from prudence in the way he chose to say it—Wordsworth's own account has been uncommonly abstruse. The immediate context, however, together with the over-all pattern in *The Prelude* of insistent and coherent parallels with crucial passages in *Paradise Lost*, makes its tenor clear enough. The faculty of imagination is born, then goes underground, but only to rise "once more/ With strength"; it is distinct from, yet "each in each" with, the intellectual love which is "the first and chief" and in which "we begin and end"; and it is also the indispensable mediator by which love manifests that it abounds over pain and apparent evil, by saving the poet from "a universe of death" and opening the way to an earthly paradise. It is apparent, then, that in Wordsworth's sustained myth of mind in its interchange with nature, the imagination plays a role equivalent to that of the Redeemer in Milton's providential plot. For in Milton's theodicy it is the birth, death, and return of the risen Christ to save mankind and to restore a lost paradise which serves to demonstrate the "goodness infinite .../ That all this good of evil shall produce,/ And evil turn to good."

I do not mean to propose a strict correlation but only an

overall functional parallel between Milton's sacred story of mankind and Wordsworth's secular account of the growth of an individual mind; nor can we be certain that Wordsworth deliberately assigned to imagination the Redeemer's role in his asserted enterprise, as one of the "Prophets of Nature," to write a poetic work "Of [men's] redemption, surely yet to come." Yet as late as 1812, after he had adopted some Christian tenets, Wordsworth remarked to Henry Crabb Robinson that "he could not feel with the Unitarians in any way. Their religion allows no room for imagination, and satisfies none of the cravings of the soul. 'I can feel more sympathy with the orthodox believer who needs a Redeemer.' " But then he added, "I have no need of a Redeemer"—a declaration which so startled the usually liberal-minded Robinson that he veiled it in the decent obscurity of his private shorthand. ⁷⁴ At any rate, the high argument of *The Prelude* of 1805 had no need for an external Redeemer, because in that poem the function had been vested in a power of the unaided mind of man. As Wordsworth goes on to say, with extraordinary emphasis and iteration:

Here must thou be, O Man!
Strength to thyself; no Helper hast thou here;
Here keepest thou thy individual state:
No other can divide with thee this work,
No secondary hand can intervene
To fashion this ability; 'tis thine,
The prime and vital principle is thine
In the recesses of thy nature, far
From any reach of outward fellowship,
Else 'tis not thine at all.

(XIII, 188-97)

In this aspect Wordsworth's *Prelude* participates, however guardedly, in a major intellectual tendency of his age, and of ours. In the seventeenth century the radical spiritualist Gerrard Winstanley had looked forward to the "latter dayes" when such outer fictions as "the Lamb held forth at a distance to be our Mediatour, should all cease"; for "Christ within the heart ... delivers mankind from bondage; *And besides him there is no Saviour.*" ⁷⁵ William Blake, who placed his faith in the redemptive power of man's divine creativity, characteristically

put a concept, implicit in *The Prelude*, in the startling form of an express identification: "Imagination ... is the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus, blessed for ever." ⁷⁶ In Germany, Novalis, speaking of art, declared that "in his works and in his acts and failures to act," man "proclaims himself and his evangel of nature. He is the Messiah of nature." ⁷⁷ Goethe looked upon his works of imagination as a mode of redemption not of nature, but of himself; in writing *Götz von Berlichingen* and *Clavigo*, he said, "I carried on the poetic confession which I had already begun, so that by this self-tormenting penance I might become worthy of an inner absolution." ⁷⁸ "The tragedy," declared a later heir of Romantic thought, Friedrich Nietzsche, "is that we cannot believe the dogmas of religion and metaphysics" yet continue to "need the highest kind of means of salvation and consolation"; and by a drastic exercise of the principle of parsimony, he canceled the role of nature as well as God, leaving only one agent to play out the ancient spiritual plot:

Just take one step farther; love yourself through Grace; then you are no longer in need of your God, and the whole drama of fall and redemption is acted out in yourself. ⁷⁹

Modern poetry, Wallace Stevens said, is "the poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice." It turns out that nothing less will suffice than the crucial experience for which earlier poets had relied on an intervenient deity: "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption." Stevens draws a conclusion which is formally equivalent to that of Blake: "We say God and the imagination are one." His claim for the efficacy of that imagination, however, is a good deal more modest than Blake's: "How high that highest candle lights the dark." ⁸⁰ W. B. Yeats saw all of modern literature moving along the path laid out by Nietzsche:

The individual soul, the betrayal of the unconceived at birth, are among her principal themes, it must go further still; that soul must become its own betrayer, its own deliverer, the one activity, the mirror turn lamp. ⁸¹

Some of Yeats's own poems exhibit the sufficiency of the individual soul to act out the whole drama of fall and redemption, until "all hatred driven hence,/ The soul recovers radical innocence." In Yeats's chief poem of autonomous grace, Wordsworth's two terms have been reduced to one, so that the colloquy is no longer between mind and nature but between antithetic aspects of the single mind: "A Dialogue of Self and Soul." Deaf to the soul's summons to reject life for beatitude, Yeats's Self reviews his life of error and suffering, in a passage comparable to Wordsworth's visionary flight over his remembered life near the close of *The Prelude*:

I am content to follow to its source,
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest. [82](#)

Yeats sees his life and the world he looks upon as all gratulant, although not by a Wordsworthian but by a Nietzschean act of heroic self-forgiveness and self-redemption.

8. THE NEW MYTHUS: WORDSWORTH, KEATS, AND CARLYLE

Both the genre of *The Prelude* and its representative character were more obvious to some discerning Victorian readers than to many readers of our own time. The Reverend F. D. Maurice wrote to Charles Kingsley in 1851:

I am sure that you are right, Wordsworth's *Prelude* seems to me the dying utterance of the half century we have just passed through, the expression—the English expression at least—of all that self-building process in which, according to their different schemes and principles, Byron, Goethe, Wordsworth, the Evangelicals (Protestant and Romanist), were all engaged, which their novels, poems, experiences, prayers, were setting

forth, in which God, under whatever name, or in whatever aspect, He presented Himself to them, was still the agent only in fitting them to be world-wise, men of genius, artists, saints. [83](#)

Since *The Prelude* had been published only the year before, Maurice makes the natural error of putting it at the end rather than at the beginning of the tendency he describes (and deprecates), but he is right about the currency of the Christian confession converted into the form of a *Bildungsgeschichte* which, whether ostensibly religious or openly secular, long or short, in verse or in prose, points toward a culmination which is comprehended within life itself. The major lyric innovation of the Romantic period, for example, the extended poems of description and meditation, are in fact fragments of reshaped autobiography, in which the poet confronts a particular scene at a significant stage of his life, in a colloquy that specifies the present, evokes the past, and anticipates the future, and thereby defines and evaluates what it means to have suffered and to grow older. In some of these poems the confrontation occurs at a time of spiritual crisis which is called "dejection" (the *acedia*, *deiectio*, or spiritual aridity of the Christian experts of the interior life); and the ancient struggle for the blessedness of reconciliation with an alienated God becomes the attempt to recover in maturity an earlier stage of integrity with oneself and the outer world, in a mode of consciousness for which the standard name is "joy."

We shall later observe how pervasive, in longer works of philosophy, fiction, drama, and narrative poetry, was the Romantic theme of the justification of evil and suffering, represented in the plot-form of a circuitous yet progressive self-education, self-discovery, and the discovery of vocation, in a life which terminates in this world. Now, in the context of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, I want to glance at two other English instances of the crisis-autobiography represented in a fictional form, Keats's *Fall of Hyperion* and Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*; for the disparities among these three works, written over a period of more than three decades, throw into bold relief the attributes, both in concept and design, which are their common possession.

Keats did not have access to *The Prelude*, but he studied carefully *Tintern Abbey* and the *Intimations Ode*, as well as Wordsworth's program in the *Prospectus* published with *The Excursion*, and the long and superficially Christianized debate on "Despondency" and "Despondency Corrected" in *The Excursion* itself. By that leap of insight familiar to the readers of his letters, Keats recognized that Wordsworth's persisting concern was to justify the experience of loss and suffering in terms of a purpose that is immanent in the mind's growth into maturity. He also recognized that Wordsworth had deliberately elected to take up this problem where Milton had left it off.

"The Burden of the Mystery" Keats called the problem of the justification of suffering, in a phrase taken from *Tintern Abbey*; and in a letter of May 1818, he undertook to explore the problem as a secular theodicy of the individual life as it moves through successive stages of experience and insight. In his version of the great trope of life as a journey, he posits "a large Mansion of Many Apartments" in which we move from "the infant or thoughtless Chamber" to "the Chamber of Maiden-Thought"; but then, by a sharpened vision into the human heart and by "convincing ones nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak," we arrive at a stage of darkness, when "we see not the ballance of good and evil." "To this point was Wordsworth come . . . when he wrote 'Tintern Abbey.'" But even in going so far "I must think Wordsworth is deeper than Milton" because he has profited from the general "advance of intellect"; and this advance, Keats makes clear, is the movement from Christian supernaturalism to agnostic humanism. For Milton's "hintings at good and evil in the *Paradise Lost*" were grounded still on the "remaining Dogmas and superstitions" which survived the Protestant Reformation; thus "he did not think into the human heart, as Wordsworth has done." [84](#)

In a letter he wrote a year later, Keats sketched his own scheme for validating suffering as a necessary discipline toward a greater good. His metaphor now is of the world as "the vale of Soul-making," in which the function of suffering is to subject the native human "intelligence or Mind" to the knowledge and stresses (the phrasing is strikingly modern) which gradually

form its "identity." "Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul?"—in the sense that intelligences are merely unformed and unindividuated egos: "are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself." Such a theodicy of the individual life on earth, as opposed to the Christian view of the world as a place "from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven," Keats says, is "a faint sketch of a system of Salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity." ⁸⁵ In this way Keats, like the contemporary German philosophers and poets whom he had not read, explicitly translated the theological system of salvation into a secular system of progressive education.

In estimating where Wordsworth stood relative to Milton in exploring "those dark Passages," Keats had promised that "if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them." ⁸⁶ Just this is what he undertook to do in the poem *Hyperion*, some five or six months after writing the first of his two remarkable letters; it is apparent that as Wordsworth had set out to emulate and pass beyond Milton in his intention "to weigh/ The good and evil of our mortal state," so Keats set out to emulate and pass beyond Milton and the "deeper" Wordsworth as well, in gauging what he called "the ballance of good and evil."

Hyperion is a Miltonic epic, but it embodies its inquiry into the rationale of evil in a Greco-Roman myth, substituting for Milton's "loss of Eden" its pagan analogue, the loss of the Saturnian Golden Age. As it opens "Saturn is fallen" (I, 234), the god who had exercised his "influence benign" in "all those acts which Deity supreme/ Doth ease its heart of love in"; so that now "the days of peace and slumberous calm are fled" (I, 108-12; II, 335). Again and again Saturn asks the question, Why? Who? How? What justification can there be in the course of things for the destruction of the easy felicity of the Golden Age, through the overthrow of its blameless deities?—and he answers despairingly that he cannot "find reason why ye should be thus:/ No, no-where can unriddle" (I, 112 ff., 227 ff.; II, 128 ff.). Oceanus proffers a solution which is in accord with pagan Stoicism: "we fall by course of Nature's law" that "first in beauty should be first in might," and this truth must simply

be faced and accepted, for "to bear all naked truths ... all calm,/ That is the top of sovereignty" (II, 181-229). This answer, however, though not invalid, is insufficient, and the narrative moves toward the revelation that suffering, even when undeserved, is explicable not merely by a natural law, but by a moral principle as well. Saturn and his fellow Titans had ruled in high and unfeeling simplicity, "solemn, undisturb'd/ Unruffled, like high Gods" (I, 330-1); and though they now suffer humanlike passion and anguish, it is without human understanding, in the absence of what Keats, in his letter on the "Mansion of Many Apartments," had called "the human heart." Thea can only press her hand

upon that aching spot

Where beats the human heart, as if just there,
Though an immortal, she felt cruel pain.

(I, 42-4)

As soon as Apollo makes his delayed appearance he reveals why he deserves his preeminence over Hyperion, for though he too lives "in aching ignorance," he feels "curs'd and thwarted" by his ignorance and is avid and active in his desire for knowledge. Suddenly he reads in the face of Mnemosyne, goddess of memory—who is to be mother of the muses and so of all the arts—the history of the undeserved defeat of the Titans, and discovers the knowledge he seeks. This knowledge is the knowledge of good and evil, in a sudden expansion of consciousness to the recognition that all process entails loss, and that there can be no creative progress except through the painful destruction, however unmerited, of the preceding stage:

Knowledge enormous makes a God of me.
Names, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions,
Majesties, sovran voices, agonies,
Creations and destroyings, all at once
Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,
And deify me....

(III, 91-118)

Apollo becomes truly a god (and so, by the grim justice of the immanent rationale of things, unintentionally effects the over

throw of the innocent Hyperion) only by willingly assuming humanity and its burden of the mystery that through loss and suffering alone can we rise from simple and ignorant innocence to the higher identity of a more inclusive, complex, and integral awareness. As the fragment breaks off Apollo experiences the application of this principle to himself, in the ordeal of dying to the stage of ignorance in order to be born to the stage of mature knowledge, like one who should "with fierce convulse/ Die into life." And since Apollo is "the Father of all verse" (III, 13), he is reborn not only as god of the sun, successor to Hyperion, but also as the god of tragic poetry, the high genre which, in this very poem, displaces the simple pastoralism of the Golden Age.

Between dropping this work in April of 1819 and taking it up again late that summer, Keats had clarified his "system of Salvation" in his second letter, on the Vale of Soul-making. *The Fall of Hyperion* transfers the locus in which the burden of the mystery is unriddled from the ordeal of the growing mind of the god of poetry to the ordeal of the growing mind of the poet himself, as he moves through stages of experience to the discovery of his poetic identity and status. Keats does this by assimilating his Miltonic epic to the form of an earlier theodicy, Dante's dream-vision, *The Divine Comedy*, which had reconciled evil and suffering with God's justice not in a third-person narrative, but in an allegorical account of the narrator's own progress through hell and purgatory to heaven. In a creative application of the medieval convention, Keats begins *The Fall of Hyperion* with a long Induction in which he presents himself, the narrator, as the sentient center of the poem, who is transformed by experiencing a vision within the double dream that he narrates. The initial dream is that of a garden in which the poet eats and drinks of a feast which "seem'd refuse of a meal/ By angel tasted or our Mother Eve" (I, 29-30), falls asleep, and awakens into a second dream in which the garden has vanished, and has been replaced by an ancient sanctuary, within which a flight of stairs leads up to the altar of Moneta (who incorporates and replaces Mnemosyne, the Titaness of the earlier poem). The narrator goes on to justify his loss of Eden as in some sense a fortunate fall, but he

translates the theodicy of his private life into the form of a pagan mystery-ritual of death, rebirth, and salvation by means of an initiation into *gnosis*, a secret knowledge.

As he approaches, then touches, the lowest stair, the poet feels "what 'tis to die and live again before/ Thy fated hour." The colloquy with Moneta that follows serves to epitomize and to project in dramatic form an extended process of self-formation, self-analysis, and self-discovery in the poet's inner life. Moneta's evolving challenges, in the form of charges against his deficiencies, and the responses he makes to these charges, recapitulate the progressive stages of his development and manifest his expanding awareness of what it is to be a poet instead of a dreamer, then to be a poet who feels "the giant agony of the world," and then one who, instead of simply venoming all his days, aspires to be "a sage;/ A humanist, Physician to all men." Thus tested, he wins to the stage at which he is able to endure, "without stay or prop/ But my own weak mortality," the vision that Moneta finally grants him of the fallen and innocently suffering Titans (I, 145-210; 388-9). By demonstrating his readiness and capacity to endure the burden of the tragic knowledge that human growth and creativity entail correspondent loss and suffering, the narrator has established his identity as a poet and defined the kind of poet that he is, and so earned the power, though remaining a mortal man (line 304), "to see as a God sees"; that is, with compassion, yet with aesthetic distance. By that fact he has also earned the right to essay his epic poem of tragic suffering. [87](#)

The Induction to *The Fall of Hyperion* is much closer to Wordsworth's achievement than Keats could know, for it is a *Prelude* in miniature which sets forth, immediately preparatory to his major poetic undertaking, the discipline and consummation of the poet's mind. It represents these events not as autobiography, but in the fiction of a *rite de passage*. In Keats's condensed and ritual form, however, as in Wordsworth's expanded and realistic account, the growth of the poet's mind turns on a crisis in which he achieves and recognizes his poetic identity and mission; incorporates the justification of pain as indispensable to his coming of age both as a man and as a poet of suffering humanity; involves the clarification to him of

his own poetics and of the great poet's high office as sage, humanist, and physician to all men; and issues in the genesis of the epic poem that the poet envisions and goes on, at the end, to narrate. And while there is more than one compelling reason why Keats gave up this latter enterprise, it is a probable conjecture that, just as Wordsworth found that he had absorbed into the *Prelude* to *The Recluse*—his account of "the transitory Being that beheld/ This Vision"—the material which was to have been the vital center of *The Recluse* itself, so Keats, in setting forth the growth of the poet's own mind by way of Induction to his epic, found that he had expended his material for the central element of the epic proper: the growth to tragic understanding of Apollo, the father of all verse.

Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* recounted the "self-building process" of one of the spirits F. D. Maurice ironically denominated "men of genius," as distinguished from "artists." It is much more fictional than Wordsworth's *Prelude*, but also much closer to their common theological prototypes, in the abundant genre of spiritual histories in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as in the exemplary *Confessions* of Augustine himself. ⁸⁸ Carlyle set out, very explicitly, to salvage the primary forms of Christian experience in a world which had to make do without the traditional Creator and Redeemer. "The Mythus of the Christian Religion looks not in the eighteenth century as it did in the eighth," so that he must undertake, in an iron age, "to embody the divine Spirit of that Religion in a new Mythus, in a new vehicle and vesture, that our Souls, otherwise too like perishing, may live." This new mythus, whose "one Bible" is that which is "felt in my own heart," ⁸⁹ is a mythus without a creed, and aims at a salvation which is the stage of mature consciousness: the achievement of the secure spiritual stance toward oneself and the universe that Carlyle calls "the Everlasting Yea."

Sartor is also a radical experiment in artistic form; but unlike *The Prelude*, whose innovations are unobtrusive and easily overlooked, it is so blatantly eccentric that it is readily misestimated as a freak in the history of prose narrative. In

literary genealogy it is a cross between Augustine's *Confessions* and that progenitor of all anti-novels, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*; for it is a serious parody of the spiritual autobiography which plays with and undercuts the conventions it nonetheless accepts. Augustine's two selves, and Wordsworth's "two consciousnesses," are split by Carlyle into separate literary personae. One is Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, German author of an enigmatic work on *Die Kleider, ihr Werden und Wirken*; the other is his British editor and biographer, who knows the outcome of the life from the outset, but must, in honest bewilderment, struggle to interpret the book and to construct a coherent total biography from the only available data, the almost illegible autobiographical scribbles which Teufelsdröckh had penned at various stages and had left, in chronological confusion, in "Six considerable PAPER-BAGS, carefully sealed, and marked successively, in gilt China-ink, with the symbols of the Six southern Zodiacal Signs" (pp. 77-9). *Sartor* had no close equivalent until such serio-perverse manipulations of the self-reflexive work of fiction as André Gide's *The Counterfeiters*, which (in Harry Levin's succinct description) is "the diary of a novelist who is writing a novel about a novelist who is keeping a diary about the novel he is writing."⁹⁰ A more recent and pre-eminently complex exponent of the genre is Vladimir Nabokov. *Pale Fire*, for example, is the bizarre revelation of his own life by a demented editor who ostensibly recounts the life of a poet in the process of editing the poet's autobiographic poem; it is a work in which everything is done with mirrors and an indefinite regress of mutually reflective and fantastically distorting mirrors.

The devices of the double authorship, the work-within-the-work, and the paper bags provide Carlyle with the literary excuse to violate calendar time in the life of Teufelsdröckh by leaps and returns which seem random but in fact bring out its immanent and evolving design. Through the shifting perspectives, the temporal oscillations, and the tenebrous rhetoric, we make out a familiar Romantic metaphysic and life history.⁹¹ An I confronts the not-I: "You are alone with the Universe, and silently commune with it, as one mysterious Presence with

another" (p. [53](#)). In this subject-object transaction the mind is primary and prepotent, and is sometimes represented as the sole ground of experience; "our ME," as Teufelsdröckh says, "the only reality: and Nature, with its thousandfold production and destruction, but the reflex of our own inward Force" (p. [55](#)). Despite its subsidiary status, however, nature is described as "thousand-voiced," a "God-written Apocalypse" which "speaks" to the prepared spirit by means of "symbols."⁹² Existence begins in the stage of "Happy Childhood" for which "Kind Nature ... a bountiful mother" has provided "a soft swathing of Love and infinite Hope" in a "fair Life-garden" (pp. [90](#) -1). From this Eden the protagonist is expelled by the perfidy of his beloved Blumine; and this experience is followed by the erosion of all his inherited certainties, as a consequence of succumbing to the analytic procedure and skeptical rationalism of eighteenth-century thought. Having lost all traditional supports, the mind moves into the "Everlasting No" of what Carlyle calls its "Fever-crisis" (p. [157](#)), taking a spiritual beating whose savagery has rarely been equaled in the long history of Christian soul-crises. "Falling, falling, towards the Abyss" (p. [146](#)), the protagonist "turns pilgrim" and carries out an "extraordinary world-pilgrimage" (pp. [146](#) -7, [152](#)), which is the outer correlate of an agonized inner journey and quest. The first stage of this journey is through a spiritual hell, a "Gehenna ... within," which correspondently transforms the outer universe, "God's fair living world," into "a pallid, vacant Hades and extinct Pandemonium" (pp. [148](#), [114](#)). In such a lifeless world, as in a "Golgotha, and Mill of Death," he "walked solitary; and (except as it was my own heart, not another's, that I kept devouring) savage also, as the tiger in his jungle" (p. [164](#)). Like his late-Romantic contemporary, Kierkegaard, Teufelsdröckh experiences the *Angst* of existence—"I lived in a continual, indefinite, pining fear ... apprehensive of I knew not what ... as if the Heavens and the Earth were but boundless jaws of a devouring monster" (p. [166](#))—as well as spiritual nausea, "the fordone soul drowning slowly in quagmires of Disgust!" (p. [164](#)).

The "turning-point of the battle" (p. [185](#)) occurs without forewarning, in a sudden breakthrough in the "dirty little *Rue Saint-Thomas de l'Enfer*," when the thought of defiance "rushed like a stream of fire over my whole soul; and I shook base Fear away from me forever." "It is from this hour that I incline to date my Spiritual New-birth"—a crisis and recovery which he equates with dying to youth to be reborn to early maturity: "Perhaps I directly thereupon began to be a Man" (pp. [166](#)-8, [185](#)). After a series of "Temptations in the Wilderness," the process culminates in a spiritual event of self-destruction and re-creation, described in explicit analogy to the Biblical Apocalypse. In a deep and healing sleep the "Annihilation of Self" was finally accomplished, and "I awoke to a new Heaven and a new Earth." But this new earth is simply the old earth redeemed by the mind of man, whom Carlyle, following Novalis, calls "the 'Messias of Nature' " (pp. [186](#), [220](#)). Like other writers in the tradition of the Augustinian confession, Carlyle has throughout been occupied with the relation of time to eternity; now he is able to discern that eternity lies all about us, if we but succeed in piercing through the perceptual illusions, or cognitive "Thought-forms," of "Space and Time" (pp. [260](#)-6).

These events raise the problem of what is "at present called Origin of Evil," an ever-recurring question which each age must resolve anew, "for it is man's nature to change his Dialect from century to century; he cannot help it though he would." Carlyle's solution is very much in the dialect of his own age, for it transfers the problem of theodicy to the private life, and justifies sorrow and suffering as the necessary conditions for achieving the wisdom, resignation, and power of insight which are the attributes of maturity. But where Wordsworth's justification of the discipline of suffering had its roots in Christian Stoicism, Carlyle's is a secular version of the ancient recourse to the Passion of Christ as paradigm. To Carlyle the wisdom of maturity is based on the recognition of the sacredness of suffering and "Divine Depth of Sorrow," and also on the renunciation of "pleasure" and the "Love of Happiness" in order instead to "find Blessedness" through a salutary and self-validating "Worship of Sorrow."

To the "*Worship of Sorrow*" ascribe what origin and genesis thou pleasest, *has* not that Worship originated, and been generated; is it not *here*? Feel it in thy heart, and then say whether it is of God!

(pp. [189](#)-94)

Despite his reversion to the Augustinian conversion in an instant of time, Carlyle sees the overall history of his protagonist in accordance with the Romantic model of stages of growth to maturity. We have "followed Teufelsdröckh through the various successive states and stages of Growth ... into a certain clearer state of what he himself seems to consider as Conversion," in which his "spiritual majority ... commences" (pp. 198-9). And this spiritual majority, we are told, had to be achieved "before his apostolic work ... could begin." His crisis thus turns out to have been a crisis of identity, resolved in the discovery that there had been a hidden design shaping his life toward the vocation of "Authorship as his divine calling." "Awake arise! Speak forth what is in thee," in an "Art" which is also a "Priesthood"; for it is an art used, as the editor says near the end, to marshal the "Happy few! little band of Friends" to join with him in the "highest work of Palingenesis," of which the aim is nothing less than the "Newbirth of Society" (pp. [185](#), 198- [200](#), [268](#)-70).

All this while the editor has been more and more assuming the ideas and accent of his author. The book closes with the ironic hint that its two personae, the unruly protagonist and his dogged biographer, may in fact be one, and that this one may even now be in London, laboring at his apostolic work of man's spiritual redemption. In "these dark times" of the Paris revolution of 1830, Teufelsdröckh has disappeared from his haunt in the coffee-house *Zur Grünen Gans* in the town of Weissnichtwo, leaving as his last cryptic words "*Es geht an* (It is beginning)"—that is, the French Revolutionary song, *Ça ira*. He is "again to all appearance lost in space!" but

our own private conjecture, now amounting almost to certainty, is that, safe-moored in some stillest obscurity, not to lie always still, Teufelsdröckh is actually London!

(pp. [292](#)-7)

Carlyle wrote his remarkable book in 1830-31, twenty-five years after *The Prelude* was completed, but twenty years before it was published. In dwelling on the parallels between these two works, we must not forget how wide is the division between the Romantic poet-seer and the Victorian prophet. As an indication of their difference, we might note that Wordsworth's evangel centers in a visionary quietism—"the calm mood of holy indolence/ A most wise passiveness"—but that Carlyle's issues in a strenuous economic activism: "Up and work!" "Produce! Produce!" ⁹³

9. WORDSWORTH AS EVANGELIST

Admirers of Wordsworth who hold the modern view of poetry as poetry and not another thing go counter to his claim in the *Prospectus* to sing "of blessed consolations in distress," in the prayer that his verse may "cheer/ Mankind in times to come." ⁹⁴ But for the most sensitive critics in the generation or so after Wordsworth's death, it was precisely his extraordinary success in bringing consolation to a "time of dereliction and dismay" that gave him a status below only Shakespeare and Milton. Matthew Arnold asked in *Memorial Verses*,

Where will Europe's latter hour
Again find Wordsworth's healing power?

Leslie Stephen held that "Wordsworth is the only poet who will bear reading in times of distress," and that his persistent concern with the possibility of transmuting sorrow into strength is "the single topic which ... can really be called consolatory." What he does, said John Morley, "is to assuage, to reconcile, to fortify . . . to give us quietness." ⁹⁵ More than this: Wordsworth in the *Prospectus* had undertaken to "arouse the sensual from their sleep/ Of death" (echoing Psalm 13, in which awakening from "the sleep of death" is paralleled to "salvation"); and *The Prelude* begins with the claim that he is "singled out, as it might seem,/ For holy services" and ends with the behest to Coleridge to carry on with him, as a prophet

of nature and of the mind of man, the work of men's "redemption, surely yet to come." It is interesting to inquire: to what extent did Wordsworth succeed as an evangelist of nature and mind?

Wordsworth's first recorded success was with Coleridge himself, on whom he called to be the Virgil of his pilgrimage through his inner life:

A Traveller I am,

And all my Tale is of myself...

... And Thou, O honor'd Friend!

Who in my thoughts art ever at my side,

Uphold, as heretofore, my fainting steps. ⁹⁶

But it was Coleridge who faltered—in fact, he had begun to falter even before Wordsworth asked him to uphold his fainting steps. And when in January 1807 Coleridge, sunk in spiritual torpor, first heard the poet read his *Prelude* through, he recorded the event in the ode *To William Wordsworth*, a remarkable summary of that "more than historic, that prophetic lay" as it appeared to one who had played an important part in its genesis. Coleridge called it an "Orphic song" (line 45), and given Coleridge's interest in the Orphic mysteries and his precision in language, Professor Stallknecht may be right in taking the phrase to imply that the poet has been revived from spiritual death by his own song. ⁹⁷ As Coleridge listened, at any rate, it effected in him an unmistakable, if temporary, passage from the sleep of death back to life:

Ah! as I listened with a heart forlorn,

The pulses of my being beat anew:

And even as Life returns upon the drowned,

Life's joy rekindling roused a throng of pains-

Keen pangs of Love, awakening as a babe

Turbulent, with an outcry in the heart.

And when the reading was over, "I found myself in prayer."

John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* is an austerely secular account of his intellectual development—the autobiography of a steam engine, Carlyle called it. Yet its fifth chapter, "A

Crisis in My Mental History. One Stage Onward," shows that even a steam engine can break down. The title of the chapter also indicates that Mill, like Carlyle himself, adapted the Augustinian crisis-pattern to the contemporary design of life as ascending stages of self-formation. Mill compared the sudden and total apathy and anomie into which he fell at the age of twenty to the state "in which converts to Methodism usually are, when smitten by their first 'conviction of sin.' ... I seemed to have nothing left to live for"; and he illustrated his condition by lines from Coleridge's crisis-poem, *Dejection: An Ode*: "A grief without a pang, void, dark and drear." The first relief from his "dry heavy dejection" came with the reading of a scene from Marmontel's *Memoires*—significantly, for a son dominated by an autocratic father, the scene in which young Marmontel, his father newly dead, gives his family to feel, as Mill says, that he "would supply the place of all that they had lost." But even more decisive for his recovery was his introduction to Wordsworth's collective *Poems* of 1815. These were "a medicine," says Mill, "for my state of mind," because they represented the interchange between nature and mind; or in Mill's associationist terms, because "they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought colored by feeling, under the excitement of beauty." Especially important was the *Intimations Ode*, in which Mill recognized the design of crisis, loss, and compensatory gain attendant upon the growth from youth into maturity. In the *Ode*

I found that he too had had similar experience to mine; that he also had felt that the first freshness of youthful enjoyment of life was not lasting; but that he had sought for compensation, and found it, in the way in which he was now teaching me to find it. The result was that I gradually, but completely, emerged from my habitual depression, and was never again subject to it. [98](#)

Wordsworth's poetry also played a role in the genre of Victorian confessions of despair and recovery, of conversion and deconversion. *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* is the semi-fictional account of his own life by William Hale White, one of the numerous men of the age who broke free from

evangelicalism by a reverse form of the conversion experience which was central to evangelical piety. The book, like Mill's *Autobiography*, was written before *The Prelude* was published, and the immediate agency for White's experience was an encounter with Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*. These poems hardly seem radical to us, but only because Wordsworth's revolutionary program for poetry has been so thoroughly successful. On William Cullen Bryant, for example, *Lyrical Ballads* had something of the effect Wordsworth intended, to arouse the reader from the sleep of death and reveal a new heaven and earth. "I shall never forget," wrote Richard Henry Dana in 1833, "with what feeling my friend Bryant, some years ago, described to me the effect produced upon him [when still young] by his meeting for the first time with Wordsworth's Ballads.... He said, that upon opening Wordsworth, a thousand springs seemed to gush up at once in his heart, and the face of nature, of a sudden, to change into a strange freshness and life." ⁹⁹ On William Hale White the effect of these poems was a conversion from the Christianity of his childhood, in an experience which he defined by reference to the prototype of all conversions to Christianity: "It conveyed to me no new doctrine, and yet the change it wrought in me could only be compared with that which is said to have been wrought on Paul himself by the Divine apparition" on the road to Damascus. In Wordsworth, White said, "God is nowhere formally deposed"; yet the deity in a personal form has faded away, leaving his attributes to be assimilated by nature, which is then confronted by a mind with an appropriately altered attitude:

Instead of an object of worship which was altogether artificial, remote... God was brought from that heaven of the books, and dwelt on the downs in the far-away distances, and in every cloud-shadow which wandered across the valley. Wordsworth unconsciously did for me what every religious reformer has done,—he re-created my Supreme Divinity. ¹⁰⁰

Wordsworth, as we know, declared that all his poems relate to the high argument he set forth in the *Prospectus*. Which of Wordsworth's writings has in fact served his prophetic enterprise has varied with the temper and needs of the individual

reader, as well as with the works available to him. When John Stuart Mill "looked into the Excursion" he "found little in it." [101](#) But when William James fell into a spiritual crisis, it was "the immortal Wordsworth's *Excursion*" [102](#) which helped rescue him. The symptoms of his soul sickness, which began in the autumn of 1869, are familiar to us—"a disgust for life," the loss of all feeling of conviction, the ebbing of the will to carry on, and a weariness with the burden of the mystery which tempts him to yield up moral questions in despair. "Today I about touched bottom, and perceive plainly that I must face the choice with open eyes: shall I *frankly* throw the moral business overboard, as one unsuited to my innate aptitudes, or shall I follow it and it alone...?" "Can one with full knowledge and sincerely ever bring one's self so to sympathize with the total process of the universe as heartily to assent to the evil that seems inherent in its details?" By March of 1873, however, the father was able to report to Henry James his brother's spiritual rebirth:

He came in here the other afternoon when I was sitting alone, and ... exclaimed "Dear me! What a difference there is between me now and me last spring this time.... It is the difference between death and life." ... I ventured to ask what specially in his opinion had promoted the change. He said several things: the reading of Renouvier (specially his vindication of the freedom of the will) and Wordsworth, whom he has been feeding upon now for a good while. [103](#)

That the power of Wordsworth's evangel has not in our time been exhausted is shown by an autobiography published in the 1950s, Bede Griffiths' *The Golden String*. "One of the decisive events of my life," the author tells us in his Prologue, occurred on an evening of his last term at school, when the chorus of birds, the sight of hawthorns in full bloom, the soar and song of a lark struck him with a surprise as great as though he "had been brought suddenly among the trees of the Garden of Paradise." "It was as though I had begun to see and smell and hear for the first time. The world appeared to me as Wordsworth describes it with 'the glory and the freshness of

a dream,' " and nature "began to wear a kind of sacramental character for me."

As time went on this kind of worship of nature began to take the place of any other religion... I had begun to read the romantic poets, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, and I found in them the record of an experience like my own. They became my teachers and my guides, and I gradually gave up my adherence to any form of Christianity. [104](#)

Among these Romantic "prophets" of a "new religion," he later makes clear, Wordsworth was *facile princeps*. "The religion of Wordsworth, as I found it expressed in the '*Prelude*' and in the '*Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey*' had a deeper meaning for me than anything else I had ever known, because it came nearer to my own experience." Later in his development, however, came a time when "the splendour of St. Augustine's *Confessions* broke upon me" and "penetrated into the depths of my soul."

It is only now after thirty years that the full meaning of that which was revealed to me that day at school has become clear to me. That mysterious Presence which I felt in all the forms of nature has gradually disclosed itself as the infinite and eternal Being, of whose beauty all the forms of nature are but a passing reflection... I know now the meaning of St. Augustine's words, "O thou Beauty, so ancient and so new, too late have I loved thee, too late have I loved thee." ... I had sought him in the solitude of nature and in the labour of my mind, but I found him in the society of his Church and in the Spirit of Charity. And all this came to me not so much as a discovery but as a recognition. [105](#)

All process, Romantic thinkers believed, moves forward and also rounds back. Wordsworth's absorption of the personal God into a sacramental nature in communion with an apotheosized faculty of mind, which had resolved his own crisis and assisted other men to resolve theirs, and which had converted Mill from Benthamism and William Hale White from Augustinianism, now helped put Bede Griffiths on the way back to

the prototype of the mind's religious colloquy with nature. You will recall the passage in which Augustine addressed himself to the speaking face of earth and heaven:

And I said to all the things that throng about the gateways of the senses: "Tell me of my God, since you are not He." ... And they cried out in a great voice: "He made us." My question was my gazing upon them, and their answer was their beauty.