

JONATHAN WORDSWORTH

*William Wordsworth, The Prelude*

*The Prelude* was written in four major stages, or versions, over a seven-year period, 1798–1805, but not published till after Wordsworth's death in 1850. It is the great epic of human consciousness, measuring Wordsworth's own position against the aspirations of Milton and the thinking of Coleridge. Milton saw his Christian epic, *Paradise Lost*, as replacing Homer and Virgil. Wordsworth noted the progression and, in an extraordinary passage of 1805, Book III, confidently added himself to the list. It is not that he regards his work as post-Christian, but that he has taken for his theme the human mind, a subject truly modern, without earlier parallel:

Of genius, power,  
Creation and divinity itself  
I have been speaking, for my theme has been  
What passed within me! Not of outward things  
Done visibly for other minds—words, signs,  
Symbols, or actions—but of my own heart  
Have I been speaking, and my youthful mind.  
(1805: III. 171–6)<sup>1</sup>

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Coleridge, in whose terms Wordsworth was ‘at least a semi-atheist’, must have found these lines disquieting. They have a bravura which exceeds his most outspoken Unitarian assertions, and hardly square with the Trinitarian orthodoxy he was by now trying to accept. Yet they are clearly related to his own claims for the grandeur of the human imagination. Wordsworth’s tones are almost contemptuous as he speaks of his predecessors, who have written the old-fashioned epic of action, battle, ‘outward things / Done visibly for other minds’. He himself has looked inward, and found ‘genius, power, / Creation and divinity itself’. There could hardly be a grander assertion, but it is not the egotism that it might seem. Wordsworth is strongly aware of his own individuality—‘Points have we all of us within our souls / Where all stand single’ (ibid., ll. 186–7)—yet rests his claim for the new epic on a godlike capacity that we are assumed to have in common: ‘there’s not a man / That lives who hath not had his godlike hours’ (ibid., ll. 191–2).

Wordsworth is writing in January 1804, a week or two before completing *Ode, Intimation of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*. *The Prelude* has been in abeyance for two years; he takes it up now, aware that it is going to be a longer poem—than he had predicted, and announces as his theme ‘the might of souls, / And what they do within themselves while yet / The yoke of earth is new to chem’ (ibid., ll. 178–80). ‘This’, he tells us, ‘is in truth heroic argument / And genuine prowess’ (ibid., ll. 182–3). Both halves of the sentence come as a surprise. The words are an allusion, however, and we are expected to notice the source. Faced with describing the Fall of Man in *Paradise Lost* Book IX, Milton had compared his task to those of Homer and Virgil:

sad task, yet argument

Not less but more heroic than the wrath  
Of stern Achilles on his foe, pursued  
Thrice fugitive about Troy wall; or rage  
Of Turnus for Lavinia, disespoused ...

(13–17)

Prowess, shown in turn, by the *Iliad*, singing the deeds of Grecian heroes; by its sophisticated Latin counterpart, the *Aeneid*, telling of the founding of Rome and Roman values; and by Milton’s seventeenth-century English adaptation of pagan form to Christian purposes, will be shown by Wordsworth himself in a revelation of the godlike nature of man—the ‘majestic sway we have / As beings in the strength of nature’ (1805: III. 193–4). Though quietly introduced, this is one of *The Prelude*’s major rethinkings of the Coleridgean higher imagination. For both poets,

imagination is the godlike faculty unique in man's nature. Coleridge would not dissent from the view that it gives to man 'majestic sway' over the natural world. But the thought that it does so 'in the strength of nature' is essentially Wordsworthian. In exercising his 'sway' over nature, man demonstrates a power belonging to nature herself, of which he, man, is part.

Wordsworth's confidence in what he is doing is all the more astonishing if one looks back to the origins of *The Prelude*. The first brief version of October 1798, *Was It For This (WIFT)*, begins fluently but tentatively. Wordsworth is thinking his way through a problem:

Was it for this  
 That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved  
 To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song,  
 And from his alder shades and rocky falls,  
 And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice  
 To intertwine my dreams? For this didst thou,  
 O Derwent, travelling over the green plains  
 Near my sweet birth-place, didst thou, beauteous stream,  
 Give ceaseless music to the night and day,  
 Which with its steady cadence tempering  
 Our human waywardness, composed my thoughts  
 To more than infant softness, giving me  
 Amid the fretful tenements of man  
 A knowledge, a dim earnest, of the calm  
 That nature breathes among her woodland haunts?  
 Was it for this ...  
 (*WIFT*, 1–16)

In the manuscript the poem starts not only in mid-line, but with a small 'w'. It is a very unobtrusive beginning—almost, it seems, accidental. Wordsworth doesn't know that he has embarked on a major poem. Yet his thoughts fall instinctively into blank verse. Coleridge and Milton are present already, looking over his shoulder: Coleridge in the quotation from *Frost at Midnight*, 'my sweet birth-place', at line eight; Milton in the urgent, rhetorical questioning—'Was it for this ... For this didst thou / O Derwent ... Was it for this ... ?' The pattern had been used by others, Pope and Thomson among them, but it takes us more importantly to *Samson Agonistes*. 'For this', Manoah asks his blinded and imprisoned son,

did the angel twice descend? For this  
 Ordained thy nurture holy, as of a plant

Select and sacred?  
(361–3)

Wordsworth, it seems, as he begins what turns out to be *The Prelude*, thinks of himself as having been singled out, and as failing. The task on which he should have been at work was *The Recluse*, the great philosophical poem that Coleridge had six months earlier persuaded him it was his duty to write. Looking back to his ‘nurture’ among the Cumbrian mountains, he felt reproached. With such a childhood to prepare him, surely he should have been able to get on? But as the reproaches prompt his memory, new and more productive questions are raised. What is the nature of these early experiences? How do they contribute to adult strength, consciousness, creativity? Moving on to ask, and answer, these questions, Wordsworth comes upon what is the great theme of *The Prelude* in all its stages and versions: education.

*Was It For This* is immensely important, showing us how quickly, and how inevitably, the theme of education is established. In 150 lines—just six paragraphs—Wordsworth creates a new idiom. In place of the public poetry and grand affirmations of *Tintern Abbey* (written only three months before), we hear the voice of *The Prelude*. *Tintern Abbey* is the seminal poem of the Romantic age, quoted, touched upon, imitated, again and again; yet it is a sequel to Coleridge’s *Frost at Midnight*, and offers in its affirmations a version of Coleridge’s early Unitarian faith. *Was It For This* is Wordsworth with no sources but the memory, imagination and speculative power of his own mind. At once we are offered ‘spots of time’ (isolated memories, made vivid by the imagination that is itself, in part, the subject of the poetry):

Oh, when I have hung  
Above the raven’s nest, have hung alone  
By half-inch fissures in the slippery rock  
But ill sustained, and almost (as it seemed)  
Suspended by the wind which blew amain ...  
(*WIFT*, 37–11)

and at once we are offered the ruminative voice, that takes a larger, longer view, thinking things through as we listen. The forces that govern human education

love to interweave  
The passions that build up our human soul  
Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,



*Was It For This* did not simply grow into the 1799 *Prelude*. Wordsworth rethought his poem. Soon after Christmas 1798 he defined for himself a link between childhood imaginative experience and adult creativity:

There are in our existence spots of time  
 That with distinct preeminence retain  
 A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed  
 By trivial occupations and the round  
 Of ordinary intercourse, our minds—  
 Especially the imaginative power—  
 Are nourished and invisibly repaired  
 (1799: I.288–94)

The key to this, and to the three ‘spots’ that cluster round Wordsworth’s definition, appears in a link-passage that is, for no obvious reason, left out of the 1805 and 1850 versions of *The Prelude*. ‘I might advert’, Wordsworth writes, ‘To numerous accidents in flood or field’:

tragic facts

Of rural history that impressed my mind  
 With images to which in following years  
 Far other feelings were attached—with forms  
 That yet exist with independent life,  
 And, like their archetypes, know no decay.  
 (Ibid., 279–87)

What is being described is an associative process within the mind that relies on Hartley’s *Observations on Man* (reissued 1791), and ultimately on Locke, but which is peculiarly Wordsworthian in its application. Response to tragic occurrences in the region, traditional or recent, has the effect of ‘impressing’ (imprinting, stamping) images upon the mind—images of places where the occurrences took place, or where the poet heard of them. Over the years these images are visited, and revisited, within the mind, becoming the focus of new imaginative feelings, such as the child could not have had.

It is the process that is described in *The Pedlar* of spring 1798:

In such communion, not from terror free...  
 He had perceived the presence and the power  
 Of greatness, and deep feelings had impressed  
 Great objects on his mind with portraiture  
 And colour so distinct that on his mind

They lay like substances, and almost seemed  
To haunt the bodily sense.

(30–4)

It is the process that leads on Wordsworth's first visit to Tintern Abbey to his storing-up of the 'forms of beauty' that later have such influence on his mind. And it is the process that underlies the imagery of association in *Was It For This*. More especially, it explains Wordsworth's reference to the 'characters' (handwriting) of 'danger and desire', which, 'impressed' through 'the agency of boyish sports' onto the Cumbrian landscape, have power to make

The surface of the universal earth  
With meanings of delight, of hope and fear,  
Work like a sea.

(*WIFT*, 69–75)

The new emphasis present in Wordsworth's 1799 link-passage is upon continuity and permanence: the 'forms' (images) stamped upon the mind *yet* (still, at the time of writing) exist, with their independent life, achieving within the mind a permanence comparable to that of their 'archetypes' (the landscapes, natural forms, from which they derive). With this as our introduction to the 'spots of time' definition, it is clear that we should expect the 'spots' to be not just memories where time stands still, but images, pictures in the mind, imprinted as the result of more than usually important emotional experience.

The final 'spot' of 1799 Part I shows the process at work. First we see the child, 'feverish, and tired, and restless', waiting on the hill above his school at Hawkshead for horses that will take him and his brothers home for the Christmas holidays. Then we cut to his father's sudden death:

Ere I to school returned  
That dreary time, ere I had been ten days  
A dweller in my father's house, he died,  
And I and my two brothers (orphans then)  
Followed his body to the grave. The event,  
With all the sorrow which it brought, appeared  
A chastisement; and when I called to mind  
That day so lately passed, when from the crag  
I looked in such anxiety of hope,  
With trite reflections of morality,  
Yet with the deepest passion, I bowed low

To God who thus corrected my desires.  
(1799: I.349–60)

Revisiting the Hawkshead landscape in his remorseful mind, the child attaches to it ‘far other feelings’ than the hope with which it had so recently been associated. But Wordsworth is not merely writing about an episode in his past, he is telling us of its importance for the present. The details of the landscape become ‘spectacles and sounds’ to which he consciously returns to ‘drink as at a fountain’. ‘And I do not doubt’, he concludes impressively,

That in this later time, when storm and rain  
Beat on my roof at midnight, or by day  
When I am in the woods, unknown to me  
The workings of my spirit thence are brought.  
(Ibid., 368–74)

The Hawkshead landscape—associated first with ‘anxiety of hope’, next with guilty thoughts that the child is responsible for his fathers death—changes, over the 15-year period before the poetry is written, into a source of strength, support for the workings of the adult poet’s spirit. This time Wordsworth is no more able than we are to say what has taken place. These are experiences of the mind,

Which, be they what they may,  
Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,  
Are yet the master light of all our seeing.  
(*Intimations*, 153–5)

1799 Part I has it in common with *Was It For This* that it deals primarily in terms of an education through the sublime. At a secondary stage, however, Wordsworth inserts the skating episode (lines 150–98) and the ‘home amusements’ section (lines 198–233), designed to show that his boyhood was not always lonely and subject to fear and guilt. And in Part II he takes his account of childhood through into adolescence, consciously offering beauty as a sequel to the sublime:

But ere the fall  
Of night, when in our pinnace we returned  
Over the dusky lake, and to the beach  
Of some small island steered our course, with one,  
The minstrel of our troop, and left him there,  
And rowed off gently while he blew his flute



Alone upon the rock, oh, then the calm  
 And dead still water lay upon my mind  
 Even with a weight of pleasure, and the sky,  
 Never before so beautiful, sank down  
 Into my heart and held me like a dream.

(1799: II.204–14)

In Part II, as in Part I, we are offered vivid personal memories, intensified within the mind because they are associated with particular landscapes. Halfway through the part, however, Wordsworth becomes aware that he has unfinished business. Having dropped from his text the *Was It For This* sequence on the eternal spirit, he has left himself with no answer to the question, what does enable us to ‘fit our new existence / To existing things?’ What are the origins of the imaginative power seen so vividly in his remembered early experience? The ‘spots of time’ told of memories by which the mind, ‘especially the imaginative power’, is nourished and made fruitful by its own self-generated power; but where did the power come from? Wordsworth’s thoughts took him once again to Coleridge and to Milton—to Coleridge, to whom ‘The unity of all [had] been revealed’ (1799: II.256), and to Milton, who had in *Paradise Lost* offered the Christian myth of origins that no longer seemed sufficient.

No less than Milton, Wordsworth felt it to be his task to ‘trace / The progress of our being’ (1799: II.268–9), but he did so, not from the Garden of Eden, but from an infant at the breast:

blest the babe  
 Nursed in his mother’s arms, the babe who sleeps  
 Upon his mother’s breast, who when his soul  
 Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul  
 Does gather passion from his mother’s eye.

‘Such feelings’, Wordsworth continues,

pass into his torpid life  
 Like an awakening breeze, and hence his mind,  
 Even in the first trial of its powers,  
 Is prompt and watchful ...

(1799: II.269–77)

Clearly, he has *Was It For This* in his thoughts. ‘Oh bounteous power’, he had written, addressing the eternal spirit,

In childhood, in rememberable days,  
 How often did thy love renew for me  
 Those naked feelings which when thou wouldst form  
 A living thing thou sendest like a breeze  
 Into its infant being.  
 (*WIFT*, 109–14)

In each case the ‘awakening breeze’ of life is associated with love, but the Platonic eternal spirit gives place in the 1799 *Prelude* to the tenderness of a human mother. Along the child’s ‘infant veins are interfused’, not the pantheist ‘something far more deeply interfused’ of *Tintern Abbey*, but

The gravitation and the filial bond  
 Of nature that connect him to the world.  
 (1799: II.292–4)

As in *Was It For This* Wordsworth is concerned with ‘those first-born affinities which fit / Our new existence to existing things’, but now it is the gravitational pull of nature (personalized in the mother’s love) that makes the infant part of the world in which he lives.

The mother’s effect upon her child, it has to be said, is extraordinary. He becomes not merely ‘prompt and watchful’, capable (as we should expect) of the associative process of storing up images, but also ‘powerful in all sentiments of grief, / Of exultation, fear, and joy’ (1799: II.300–1). Two things are happening at once within the poetry: we are to see the child both as the credible human infant, and, symbolically, as the poet in embryo—one whose mind,

Even as an agent of the one great mind,  
 Creates, creator and receiver both ...  
 (*Ibid.*, 302–3)

In the terms that Coleridge will later use in *Biographia Literaria*, the child is, from his earliest days, a fully imaginative being. Capable at once of creation and perception, he exercises the full powers of the primary imagination. At the day-to-day level he orders experience, builds the parts of his universe into a whole; as ‘an agent of the one great mind’, he performs the higher imaginative act that is ‘a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the Infinite I AM’ (God’s eternal creative assertion of self, that brings into existence the other). As he grows, the child will develop—through the beautiful influence of his mother, through the more often

sublime influence of nature—but already his imaginative capacity has been established.

That the two-part *Prelude* should end in a farewell to Coleridge is doubly appropriate. In the first place, Coleridge had decided in early December 1799, when Wordsworth was writing, to pursue his career as a journalist in London, leaving William and Dorothy to establish themselves in their new Lake District home at Dove Cottage, Grasmere. In the second, Wordsworth's poem had been from the outset addressed to his friend. The quotation from *Frost at Midnight* in Part I, line eight (originally *WIFT*, 9) had signalled this fact, and now, in rounding off Part II, Wordsworth alludes again to the same poem: 'Thou, my friend, wast reared / In the great city, mid far other scenes' (1799: II.496–7). Throughout Wordsworth's life *The Prelude* was to be known as 'The Poem' to Coleridge; until the later revisions, each successive version is in some new way importantly bound up with him and his thinking. Each, it should be said, is also more strongly Miltonic than the last.

An effort was made in December 1801 to extend the 1799 poem into a third part, taking the study of Wordsworth's education up to his Cambridge days. After 167 lines, however (mostly old material, drawn from *The Pedlar*), the attempt broke down. It took the impetus of Coleridge's imminent departure for the Mediterranean in early 1804 to get Wordsworth restarted. On 4 January Coleridge records in his notebook a reading of 'the second part of (William's) divine self-biography' in 'the highest and outermost of Grasmere' (Easedale, perhaps?). Ten days later he leaves for London. Wordsworth falls to work, and by early March has at least nearly completed a *Prelude* in five books for Coleridge to take with him on his voyage. Then suddenly, around the tenth of the month, he takes it apart, and begins work on a still longer, and radically different, version. All texts of *The Prelude* (even the first edition) have their problems. *Was It For This*, however, is in the poet's hand, the 1799 and 1805 *Preludes* exist in duplicate fair-copies; the five-book poem has to be reconstructed from drafts and imperfect manuscripts. For all this, it is a poem of great importance. Broadly speaking, it consists of the first three books of the 1805 text, followed by a fourth containing the bulk of the material in 1805's Parts IV and V, and a fifth made up of the 'spots of time' sequence (revised and augmented as in 1805 Part XI), plus the Climbing of Snowdon (finally 1805: XIII.1–65). As always, education is Wordsworth's theme. Imagination, built up through childhood and adolescence among the mountains, is impaired by exposure at Cambridge to sophistication and artificiality. Through the workings of the 'spots of time', however, it is restored ('nourished and invisibly repaired'), and the poem shows it at its new adult height in the epiphany on Snowdon. With its Miltonic paradise-lost-

and-regained structure, it is (or was, or would have been) a highly impressive work. Why, then, did Wordsworth dismember it? Not so much, probably, because he was dissatisfied, as because, like Penelope, he dared not finish his task. Coleridge had agreed that *The Prelude* should form part of *The Recluse*, but the central philosophical section still had to be written. An attempt to write it in *Home at Grasmere* (spring 1801) had merely shown how great was the problem. Wordsworth had no system to offer. Only Coleridge could supply such a thing, and he now (March 1804) was leaving for Malta, perhaps in fact dying. Hearing on the 29th that he has been dangerously ill, Wordsworth writes: 'I would gladly have given 3 fourths of my possessions for your letter on *The Recluse* ... I cannot say what a load it would be to me, should I survive you, and you die without this memorial left behind.'

No notes on *The Recluse* were forthcoming (at one point Coleridge claimed that they had been written, and sent off, but unfortunately burnt when his messenger died of the plague). In their absence, Wordsworth reworked his material, sent Coleridge 1805 Books, I–V to take abroad, put Snowdon and the 'spots of time' on one side for future use, and embarked on Book VI. With the subject of his undergraduate travels through France in 1790, he introduced into his poem revolutionary politics. It is fairly certain that after completing Book VI in late March, he went on to write IX and the first half of X, carrying his readers up to the death of Robespierre. In the autumn of 1804 he added VIII (retrospect of childhood) and VII (London as Underworld), before completing X (politics and alienation in post-Revolutionary London). After a pause marking the death of Wordsworth's brother, John, in February 1805, the poem was brought to a conclusion with three brief final books: XI (incorporating the 'spots of time', set aside from the five-book *Prelude*), XII (producing the poet's definition of 'the ennobling interchange / Of action from within and from without', lines 376–7) and XIII, with its climactic ascent of Snowdon.

*The Prelude* emerges as a poem not merely of different versions, but of essentially different structures. Though it is in a sense autobiography, it nowhere attempts to tell the story of Wordsworth's life. Even the 1799 version, where the division into childhood and adolescence appears straightforward, in fact disregards chronology. Of the major 'spots of time', the first takes place when the child is nine, the second when he is five, the third when he is thirteen. By the same token, in the 1805 version the Climbing of Snowdon should chronologically have been placed between Wordsworth's two visits to France, but is reserved to form a conclusion. Book VII (including London experiences of 1793–5) is placed for overall effect, as a descent into hell after the sublime of the Alps, and followed in VIII by a retrospect of childhood.

Four great similes show Wordsworth's awareness of the complexity of his structures. 'Who that shall point as with a wand', he demands in 1799 Part II, 'and say / "This portion of the river of my mind / Came from yon fountain?"' (lines 247–9). In 1805 Book V we see him 'Incumbent o'er the surface of past time', attempting from his boat to distinguish on the bottom of a lake 'The shadow from the substance' (lines 247–64). 'As oftentimes a river', Wordsworth writes at the opening of Book IX,

Turns and will measure back his course—far back,  
Towards the very regions which he crossed  
In his first outset—so have we long time  
Made motions retrograde ...  
(1–9)

And in Book XIII we have, in the last of these water-images of *The Prelude*, a tracing of the stream of imagination which is in effect a synopsis of the poem itself:

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; followed it to light  
And open day, accompanied its course  
Among the ways of nature, afterwards  
Lost sight of it bewildered and engulfed,  
Then given it greeting as it rose once more  
With strength, reflecting in its solemn breast  
The works of man and face of human life...  
(172–81)

Wordsworth is structuring his poem, telling us what to see and how to read.

Finally, the unity of *The Prelude* depends upon our sense of the mind that is at its centre, the consciousness of the adult poet looking into the deep that is his own identity, examining the emotions of the child whose mind is, and is not, his own. The Climbing of Snowdon is the ultimate achievement, and revelation, of this mind. Ascending the mountain by night, the poet emerges into the moonlight above the clouds: 'on the shore / I found myself of a huge sea of mist, / Which meek and silent rested at my feet' (1805: XIII.42–4). For the last time in the poem the beautiful gives way to the sublime, as Wordsworth singles out from his moonscape the strange chasm at its centre:

And from the shore  
 At distance not the third part of a mile  
 Was a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapour,  
 A deep and gloomy breathing-place through which  
 Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams  
 Innumerable, roaring with one voice!  
 (Ibid., 54–9)

In this ‘dark deep thoroughfare’, we are told, has ‘nature lodged / The soul, the imagination, of the whole’ (Ibid., 64–5). It is a strange, impressive claim, leading us to wonder at what seems to be Wordsworth’s anticipation of modern concepts of the unconscious. The poetry needs no explication, but a year after composing the narrative of the ascent Wordsworth was prompted to add a gloss:

A meditation rose in me that night  
 Upon the lonely mountain when the scene  
 Had passed away, and it appeared to me  
 The perfect image of a mighty mind,  
 Of one that feeds upon infinity,  
 That is exalted by an underpresence,  
 The sense of God, or whatsoever is dim  
 Or vast in its own being.  
 (Ibid., 66–73)

The landscape as a whole has become a mind ‘that feeds upon infinity’, but the infinity upon which it feeds comes from within, welling up through the ‘deep and gloomy breathing-place’ as ‘the roar of waters, torrents, streams / Innumerable’. The streams, we have noticed, roar ‘with one voice’, achieving unity, wholeness. And Wordsworth has dignified them already in his reference to ‘the soul, the imagination’ that is ‘lodged’ in the cloud-rift. But nothing has led us to expect that he would gloss the ‘underpresence’ in terms of such grandeur, and such clarity. In words that show just how far he is prepared to go beyond Milton, beyond Coleridge, he tells us that it doesn’t matter whether the highest achievement of the human imagination is a perception of God. It is equally important if it is a sense of that which is ‘dim / Or vast in [our] own being’. Either way, it is the ennobling interchange / Of action from within and from without’ that is his theme.

## NOTES

1. All quotations from *The Prelude* are from the texts in *The Prelude; The Four Texts* (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850), ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1995.
2. Rollins, I, 184.

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