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Wordsworth and *The Recluse*

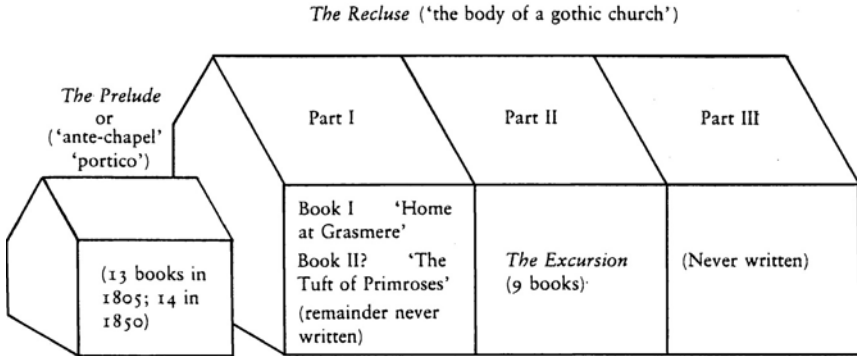
For more than half his long life, from 1798 until he was nearly seventy, Wordsworth was writing – or thinking about writing – an immense epic poem, to be called *The Recluse*, which he intended to be his magnum opus. References to *The Recluse* occur throughout his correspondence and appear, increasingly, in modern textual, critical, and biographical writings about the poet. But since no poem with that title appears anywhere among his published works (except for a reference to it in the preface to *The Excursion*), many readers conclude that *The Recluse* does not exist, or that they, or the poet, are labouring under some kind of misconception. These suppositions are at once correct and incorrect, and both suppositions are useful.

It is true that Wordsworth never completed *The Recluse*. But he did finish, and publish, one part of it: *The Excursion* (1814), which was to be the narrative, ‘Human Life’ part of its projected three-part sequence, ‘on Man, on Nature, and on Human Life’. Book I of Part I also exists in manuscript: the popular *Home at Grasmere*, first published posthumously in 1888, and many times since. ‘The Tuft of Primroses’ (1808), a long manuscript poem first published in 1949, is another instalment of *The Recluse*, conjecturally a second book of Part I. But no Part III exists, and if it was to be ‘on Nature’, while Part I was ‘on Man’, remains a mystery, not least because *The Recluse*’s three thematic terms interweave so closely throughout its extant parts – as indeed they do throughout Wordsworth’s entire oeuvre.

But what about *The Prelude*? Surely this *is* Wordsworth’s masterpiece, and very much a modern epic, with its emphasis on the growing self-consciousness of its hero, more central to its story than all the mighty places and events through which he passes: London, the Alps, and the French Revolution. Called simply ‘the poem on the growth of my own mind’ when he was writing it, is *The Prelude* part of *The Recluse*? Or is it a different poem altogether? Published posthumously, *The Prelude*’s printed title suggests a *prelusive* or preparatory relationship to something else, not clearly specified

in the note accompanying its 1850 publication and, since this note is almost never reprinted, even this vague relationship was quickly lost sight of.

Approximate plan and chronology of *The Recluse*



1797–99	The First Drafts: ‘The Ruined Cottage’, ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’, ‘The Discharged Veteran’, and ‘A Night-Piece’	1,300 lines
1798–99	The Two-Part <i>Prelude</i>	1,000 lines
1800	The Beginning of ‘Home at Grasmere’	500 lines
1800–02	‘Prospectus’ to <i>The Recluse</i>	100 lines
1803–05	Main Composition of <i>The Prelude</i>	8,000 lines
1806	Completion of ‘Home at Grasmere’	400 lines
1808	‘The Tuft of Primroses’, ‘To the Clouds’, and ‘St Paul’s’	700 lines
1809–12	<i>The Excursion</i> , Books II–IV	3,200 lines
1812–14	<i>The Excursion</i> , Books V–IX	4,700 lines

NOTE Line totals are very approximate, and some dates are almost equally so. ‘The Ruined Cottage’ became Book I (‘The Wander’) of *The Excursion*; ‘The Discharged Veteran’ concludes Book IV of *The Prelude*; the two-part *Prelude* forms the bulk of Books I and II of the finished *Prelude*; the placement of ‘The Tuft of Primroses’ is conjectural.

The Prelude also preoccupied Wordsworth throughout his creative life, even more than *The Recluse*, so it is easy to suppose that it supplanted the other, larger project. In fact, Wordsworth’s own idea of *The Prelude*’s relation to *The Recluse* changed as the decades passed, making a single definitive statement of their relationship impossible. Paradoxically, it was *The Recluse*, which does not wholly exist, that was always conceived, from first to last, as a definite poem, whereas *The Prelude*, which certainly does exist, only

gradually emerged in the poet's mind as a separate work of art. At first, in 1798–9, his *Prelude*-writings seemed only a 'distraction' from *The Recluse*, especially to Coleridge, who was more responsible than Wordsworth for the conception of *The Recluse* as an all-encompassing philosophic poem, and who declared himself in a letter of 12 October 1799 unable to 'hear patiently' of Wordsworth's autobiographical writing as other than 'the tail-piece of "The Recluse!"'. Still later, as years passed without *The Recluse* emerging from its hiding-place (and as both Wordsworth and Coleridge recognized what a unique poem *The Prelude* was), *The Prelude*, his unintended masterpiece, was promoted forward, in the preface to *The Excursion*, to the position of a 'portico' or 'ante-chapel' to the intended masterwork. And there it may well rest, its *prelusive* quality always beckoning suggestively toward the mysterious *reclusive* nature of its shadowy twin, or Other.

All this is fairly clear, two hundred years after the fact, but it has taken the better part of those two centuries for generations of scholars to get the facts straight, and some of our findings still seem to be, disappointingly, non-events. Nonetheless, it is clear that *The Recluse* is something far greater, both qualitatively and quantitatively, than merely an unfinished poem. Several parts of it exist, and can profitably be read and studied, both in themselves and their relations to each other, as well as to many other parts of Wordsworth's oeuvre.

Wordsworth hinted at these relationships when, in his 1814 preface to *The Excursion*, he likened *The Recluse*'s three-part structure to 'the body of a gothic church', with his poem on 'the growth of my own mind' as its 'ante-chapel', and all his minor pieces (that is, the remainder of his poems) 'when they shall be properly arranged, will be found by the attentive Reader to have such connection with the main Work as may give them claim to be likened to the little cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses, ordinarily included in those edifices'. This provocative suggestion remains only a hint, however, to even the most 'attentive' reader, since the very next year (1815), when Wordsworth published the first of many complete editions of his work, he arranged them not architecturally but organically, according to the life-stages, mental faculties, emotional states, and occasional events of a single individual: Poems of Childhood and Old Age, Poems of the Fancy and the Imagination, Memorials of Tours, Elegiac pieces, 'Evening Voluntaries', and the like. Hence the controlling image of his entire oeuvre shifted, very much as the titles of his intended masterworks did, from that of a clearly defined, quasi-religious monument or edifice, to that of an on-going, private, secular process of life. The difference between the two is impossible to chart exactly, but a *feeling* for it can be very useful in appreciating the tensions throughout

Wordsworth's works between those very comprehensive terms, Man, Nature, and Human Life.

All these poetic relationships are not unique to Wordsworth, however. The idea of an epic poem as the capstone of a poetic career goes back to classical antiquity, with Virgil as its great exemplar. The young poet moves upward through lyrics and other short pieces (epigrams) to more extended narrative genres (satires, *georgics*, etc.), through the various levels of impassioned odes to preparatory epics or *epyllions* (of which *The Prelude* is, technically, an example), ending with a foundational epic of his civilization. This conception of the epic, rhetorically based on the ancient models of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and consciously exemplified by the *Aeneid*, was transformed in the English Renaissance by *Paradise Lost*, as a modern (that is, Christian) subsumption of all previous mythologies. It was further re-evaluated in the Romantic era, in Coleridge's high estimation of *The Recluse* as 'the first great modern philosophic poem', by which he meant, very pointedly, that Wordsworth's achievement should outstrip Milton's, the last great *religious* poem in the language.

Here we see the Romantic transformation of the traditional epic ideal at work, in its move toward 'philosophy' and away from religion and mythology, and all the company of gods and goddesses and other supernatural machinery those older models brought with them. But what 'philosophy'? The answer to this question further clarifies what *The Recluse* was intended to be, and what it failed to be, a dilemma very much at the heart of its relation to *The Prelude*. Given its intended themes, Man, Nature, and Human Life (or Society), *The Recluse* seems to have all the makings of a systematically philosophical poem: only 'God' is omitted, and that, with reference to its modernity *vis-à-vis* tradition, is very much the point.

For Wordsworth was trying to modernize the epic tradition as he inherited it from Milton, a relationship of inheritance he took very personally (with Coleridge's encouragement), and of which he alone, of all the eighteenth century's turgid imitators of Milton, may be said to have proved himself worthy. But he only gradually came to recognize that his modern 'philosophy' lay not in the 'views' on Man, Nature, and Human Life that *The Recluse* promised, but in the attention to himself which he inserted into it as a self-protective coda: 'and if with this / I blend more lowly matter . . . describe the mind and man / Contemplating, and who and what he was . . . and when and where and how he lived, / . . . / Be not this labour useless'. (1034–41). This, of course, sounds very much like *The Prelude*: not merely autobiographical, but also philosophical in its modern emphasis upon the unavoidable presence of the consciousness of the philosopher (or the scientist) in any truth-bearing statement or observation whatsoever.

Wordsworth was not alone in becoming philosophical by getting personal. For the next context in which we can understand *The Recluse* is that of other Romantic epic poems. Here, one need only remember that Whitman's 'Song of Myself' is the creative germ seeding his greater, unending poetic project, *Leaves of Grass*, to make the point. *Leaves of Grass* is about everything – views of Man, Nature, and Human Life in abundance – but it is, always and everywhere, about Walt Whitman. And it is moot whether *Leaves of Grass* is a finished poem in a traditional, or even 'organic', sense: it ended only when its creator died.

Elsewhere in England and European culture, we can easily find other examples of the same phenomenon: works of epic ambition that remain unfinished because of their unresolved tensions with their author's own story of self-creation . . . which in turn is inexorably caught up with his epic ambitions. Byron's *Don Juan* comes immediately to mind, and is nicely illustrative, since Byron and Wordsworth are so often understood as 'opposite' Romantic types. But in the tension between Byron's feckless young anti-hero, Don Juan, charming as he is, and his jaded, 'philosophic' narrator ('And often to myself I say, "Alas"'), we have a version of the tension between Wordsworth's philosophic views and the more 'lowly matter' of himself.

And so the roll continues, between the grandly impersonal and the lowly personal, with the frequent added interest, in these Romantic epics, of fragmentation: Keats's *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (the only really finished example), Blake's *Milton* and *Jerusalem* (a relationship similar to that of *The Prelude* and *The Recluse*, but completed only at tremendous costs to readerly patience), the two parts of Goethe's *Faust*, widely separated in time and terms of composition, and others too numerous to mention.

One final context for grasping the 'Recluse-concept' is personal in a less philosophical sense, and applies to many writers besides Wordsworth. This is simply the pressure to achieve something famously noteworthy, as in the example of The Great American Novel. Although often destructive, such a burden often has productive side effects, and so it did for Wordsworth. While his friends were worrying about his failure to get on with *The Recluse*, he was often getting quite a lot done, in the way of other 'temporary' or 'preliminary' work: finishing poems started earlier (*Peter Bell*), or writing poems that seemed easier than, and certainly provided welcome distraction from, the heavy responsibility of *The Recluse*. In this sense, *The Recluse* was like a long-term 'debt' contracted deep in the background of Wordsworth's creative economy: it was to underwrite everything else he did, but though its continuing incompleteness became more and more of an embarrassment, it

nonetheless provided an impressive backdrop on which much of the rest of his work could be, as it were, sketched.

So far, I have been defining *The Recluse* extrinsically, with reference to other similar epic projects, and explaining its creative function in Wordsworth's compositional economy. But, taking up its paradoxical status as 'continually incomplete', we can look at some extant parts of the *Recluse*, and see how this same idea informs much of the intrinsic interest they have, as poems, more than as failed philosophy.

Wordsworth's first mention of *The Recluse* comes in two letters sent from Alfoxden in Somerset in early March, 1798. One to his old friend James Losh: 'I have written 1300 lines of a poem in which I contrive to convey most of the knowledge of which I am possessed. My object is to give pictures of Nature, man, and Society' (WL i 212). Another was to a new friend, James Tobin: '[I have been] tolerably industrious within the last few weeks. I have written 1300 lines of a poem which I hope to make of considerable utility; its title will be *The Recluse or views of Nature, Man, and Society*' (WL i 214). The title may have been suggested by John Thelwall, the fiery radical orator who had visited Wordsworth and Coleridge the previous summer, since Thelwall refers to himself as 'the new Recluse' in his autobiographical preface to his *Poems* of 1801, signalling his intention to remove himself from politics and devote himself to meditation.¹ Images of recluses and hermits were newly attractive in the late 1790s, as many writers opted for expressions of pastoral retreat to escape the repressive climate against free expression that Pitt's clamp-down on sedition at home had cast over the land. Or the title may have come to Wordsworth's mind from memories of more fashionable versions of retreat, in Charlotte Smith's novel *Ethelinde, or The Recluse of the Lake* (1790), which Wordsworth knew, and which features the adventures of a party of stylish London gentry in a fictitious Grasmere Abbey. In any case, by the time he announced it to the public, in his preface to *The Excursion*, he had made the title his own: 'It may be proper to state whence the poem . . . derives its Title of THE RECLUSE. Several years ago . . . the Author retired to his native mountains, with the hope of being able to construct a literary Work that might live . . . a philosophical Poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society; and to be entitled, The Recluse; as having for its principal subject the sensations and opinions of a poet living in retirement.' In this sense, the Wordsworth that we know, from his own self-creation, as the poet of the English Lake District, is *The Recluse*.

To be the Bard of *The Recluse* was the most comprehensive of Wordsworth's self-creations. The Poet of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and 'the chosen Son' of *The Prelude* are versions of the same identity, only slightly

less grand and heroic. In his descriptions of each of these incarnations, he uses hyperbolic language to express the existential divinity of this Poet figure and his proposed accomplishments.

To Tobin and Losh, in 1798, he was still relatively restrained: the poem will 'convey most of the knowledge of which I am possessed... I know not anything which will not come within the scope of my plan' (*WL* i 212, 214). But in the verse 'Prospectus' to *The Recluse*, composed two years later – but only published in 1814, in the preface to *The Excursion* – his ambition goes far beyond the 'considerable utility' he claimed for his poem in early 1798: 'I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink / Deep – and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds / To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil... /... Jehovah – with his thunder, and the choir / Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones – / I pass them unalarmed' ('Prospectus', 28–35). In such biblical, Miltonic language Wordsworth projects his best image of himself: a poet-prophet-philosopher, whose words will speak to people everywhere about everything: Nature, Society, and individual consciousness. The dimensions of this figure are godlike, and if Milton's more traditional epic theme – the 'ways of God to men' – seems left out of these expressions, it is because the divine role has been taken up by the poet himself: 'Not Chaos, not / The darkest pit of lowest Erebus... can breed such fear and awe / As fall upon us often when we look / Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man – / My haunt, and the main region of my song.' These dimensions are so large that they could hardly be filled by any single human being, and Wordsworth explicitly invoked his need for 'a greater Muse' than Milton's to aid him. If we recoil, as many readers do, from Wordsworth's egotism elsewhere in his work, we should keep in mind that the projected form of his ego-image, in and as *The Recluse*, was much larger than anything he published in his lifetime.

Coleridge was very much present at the birth of this poet-figure, partly as midwife, partly as parent. Even more than the *Lyrical Ballads*, *The Recluse* was 'half the child of [his] own brain', as he described it in a letter of 29 July 1802. He did not have even Wordsworth's comparative hesitations when he wrote Cottle the day after Wordsworth wrote to Tobin to announce the same blessed event: '– The Giant Wordsworth – God love him!... he has written near 1200 lines of a blank verse, superior, I hesitate not to aver, to any thing in our language which in any way resembles it. [It is]... likely to benefit mankind much more than any thing, Wordsworth has yet written' (*STCL* i 391). For the next seven years, Coleridge's references to *The Recluse* never fall below the level of these superlatives.

Wordsworth also took ideas from Coleridge's own epic plans, for *The Brook*, an epic of similar magnitude which he had been dreaming about for several years. 'I sought for a subject, that should give equal room and

freedom for description, incident, and impassioned *reflections on men, nature, and society...*' (BL i 195–6). Most immediately, the idea may have come to mind when they were working very closely together from January to March of 1798, expanding and finishing 'The Ancient Mariner' and *The Ruined Cottage*. Although Coleridge's poem appeared in *Lyrical Ballads* later that year, *The Ruined Cottage* did not see light of day until 1814, when it appeared, much revised, as Book I ('The Wanderer') of *The Excursion*.

Wordsworth's difficulty in bringing *The Ruined Cottage* to a successful conclusion may well have led him, or Coleridge, to baptize it for the *Recluse*-project. Like 'The Ancient Mariner', *The Ruined Cottage* centres on an isolated figure, Margaret, a weaver's widow, who suffers the loss of her husband, her children, her livelihood, and finally her life, in a derelict structure (her cottage) in the midst of a wide surrounding natural expanse. But unlike Coleridge's poem, which could depend on both ballad and Gothic conventions to assure readers' interest, Wordsworth's poem is at once unremittingly naturalistic in detail and severely elevated in its Miltonic blank-verse diction, a combination certain to confuse contemporary readers, since the former would lead them to expect comedy or satire, while the latter prepared them for tragedy or epic heroism. What they would have found, instead, was a very uncomfortable contemporary social problem – the displacement of the rural poor by the ruinous economic consequences of Pitt's unpopular war against republican France – expressed in the context of an obscure faith in apparently indifferent natural processes as they work to promote human moral and imaginative growth. Thus both in its theme and in this unique compositional 'strategy' – that is, complete a difficult poem by incorporating it into a still larger and more difficult poem to be written later – *The Ruined Cottage* is characteristic of *The Recluse* at every point in its half-century of insubstantial existence.

In March of 1798, *The Recluse* consisted of the newly expanded *Ruined Cottage*, plus two or three other poems, which together add up to the 1300 lines Wordsworth spoke of to Tobin and Losh. The first of the others was 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', another narrative of unrelieved suffering, drafted the previous year, but now expanded with contemporary political commentary (against parish workhouses). The second was Wordsworth's description a figure very similar to Margaret and the Cumberland beggar: the Discharged Soldier he ran into near Hawkshead in 1788. This was not published until it appeared posthumously in *The Prelude* of 1850. These three narratives of suffering were originally independent poems of nearly unrelieved bleakness, but he now began to incorporate lines of explanation into them, to achieve a larger perspective of reconciliation. This effort is what made them parts of the now-christened *Recluse*: 'views of nature, man, and society', giving

‘authentic comment’ to the sounds of ‘humanity in fields and groves / Pip[ing] solitary anguish’ (‘Prospectus’, 76–7).

A fourth poem, rounding out the 1300 lines, was probably ‘A Night-Piece’, not published until Wordsworth’s first collected edition in 1815. It fits the others as a prologue or coda, sketching a visionary perspective onto the landscapes through which the other three narratives move. On its open road – the inevitable Wordsworthian *mis-en-scène* – we see the naked moon, ‘the glory of the heavens,’ not an old beggar, a sick veteran, or a weaver’s abandoned wife. Wordsworth’s task in *The Recluse* was to link, somehow, that sense of natural glory to those suffering human beings.

Hence the first *Recluse* poems set human suffering down in very contemporary British landscapes, to suggest how, *in this context*, ‘Human Life’ might be understood, or properly cared for. They try to make sense out of suffering, but are far from ‘the still, sad music of humanity’ which Wordsworth had convinced himself by July of 1798 he could hear, at Tintern Abbey. They do not preach a doctrine of acceptance, their goal is more limited: simply to keep the observer (all Wordsworth-surrogates) from being overcome by despair at what he sees, and cannot help. This sense-making comfort comes in the ‘image of tranquillity’ the Pedlar saw in some wet weeds and spear-grass around Margaret’s ruined cottage, which made him think that ‘all the grief / The passing shews of being leave behind, / Appeared an idle dream that could not live / Where meditation was’ (MS D 521–4; RC p. 75). It comes also in the Discharged Soldier’s ‘ghastly’ trust that God will always provide a Good Samaritan on any road. In ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’, Wordsworth’s more provocative message is that it is better to let such old beggars die ‘in the eye of Nature’, on their usual rounds in neighbourhoods that know them, than make them captives in the ‘HOUSE, misnamed of INDUSTRY’. Whether this life and death in nature is better than the work-house is hard to say, both as social policy and as poetic statement, and ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’ has seemed to many readers a betrayal of the poor to the doctrines of Wordsworth’s new religion of nature.

Considered in terms of rhetoric, however, the three *Recluse* narratives of 1798 do not come to bad ends. Rather, their conclusions are unsatisfying in the sense of philosophic conviction or political persuasion. They raise more questions than they answer. But few philosophic systems or political programmes can answer such questions satisfactorily, for they raise the problem of undeserved human suffering, which is to say, the problem of evil. This is the problem that Romanticism is always accused of slighting, and sometimes did ignore. But Wordsworth’s high Romantic argument always forced him to confront this question, for it is the question that challenged his great faith in the powers of the creative human imagination. It surfaced daily in

Wordsworth's and Coleridge's conversations at this time: human suffering and, as its simultaneous companion, the question of their own guilt or remorse for it, in pulling back from their political commitments and more overtly political writings.

Facing these questions comprehensively was the task of *The Recluse* throughout its volatile existence. Wordsworth's determination to answer them led inexorably to repeated imaginative crises which kept the poem forever unfinished: but the challenge, faced so confidently in early 1798, always returned to haunt him, forbidding him from ever putting it aside. This paradoxical relation between inspiration and dejection explains better than almost any other set of Romantic texts the uncanny connection between the power of Romantic imagination and its tendency to produce magnificent fragments at least as often as it produces satisfying aesthetic wholes. The typical Romantic Ode to Dejection does not arise from cynical *weltschmerz* [literally 'world-sorrow']; it is rather the underside of all Romanticism's Odes to Joy, from Schiller to Wordsworth to Thoreau.

Given the logic of this double-bind, clear in two hundred years of hindsight but barely emerging into the light of day in the first week of March 1798, it is not surprising to learn that Wordsworth's announcements to Tobin and Losh are the last we hear of *The Recluse* at this time. Though he said all his eloquence would be devoted to it for the next year and a half, in fact nothing more of it was written for almost exactly that period of time: until he and his sister Dorothy were, after their misadventures in Germany, settled together again in a new home, at Grasmere, at the beginning of 1800.

There, with devoted friends and family around him, Wordsworth turned again to *The Recluse*. It now became the poetical justification of his career, as he recast it literally in terms of his move to Grasmere. *Home at Grasmere* is set up to show that he had reached the destination his whole life had been pointing toward. He had everything he wanted, within reason, and no more excuses. It was time to realize his genius as he defined it: the poem's manuscript sub-title is 'Book First, Part First of *The Recluse*'. But it took years to complete just one book of a poem that might have had thirty such books; Wordsworth did not finish *Home at Grasmere* until 1806, after he had completed his first full version of *The Prelude* in thirteen books.

He composed about 600 lines of the poem in 1800 before its insuperable contradictions forced him to break off composition.² These lines constitute a Romantic Ode to Joy in one of the highest keys ever attempted. No small part of Wordsworth's achievement was avoiding the incoherence such odes often fall into, like the youthful effusions of Shelley or Keats. His Ode to Joy launches itself over the brink of its own ecstasy into the depths of its dialectical contrary, the Ode to Dejection. Unlike the conventional pastoral poet,

The poem follows his and Dorothy's December walk through Wensleydale to Grasmere and the apparent confirmation of their hopes with the coming of spring and the birds' riotous pleasure in it, reflecting their own inner satisfaction. The poem works toward identification with its very moment(s) of composition, toward saying, 'here am I, writing this poem'. If all its linguistic peculiarities were compressed into a single sentence, they would collapse all tenses into one: 'Once upon a time I am living happily ever after.' It bursts into – and eventually through – its own moments of inspiration. Every aspect of it strives toward self-identification: it is full of images of reflection and circularity, tautological arguments, and redundant syntax.

It comes as no surprise that this dizzying, surreal absurdism could not be long sustained, and that the denomination of the first wild days of March 1800, as a unique imaginative entity – new century, new career, new revolutionary agenda – should falter in the face of real time. But it seems to come as an untoward shock to Wordsworth, and he registered the shock waves in the poem. At the very height of his '*O altitudo!*' Wordsworth looks down, sees poverty, death, and evil, and plunges to the ground, not to resume the poem for over five years. Just when he seems to be parsing his poem off the page of the landscape, he reads something he doesn't like:

But two are missing – two, a lonely pair
Of milk-white Swans. Ah, why are they not here?
These above all, ah, why are they not here
To share in this day's pleasure? (322–5)

The repetitions, the reiterated gasp, the insistent questioning – all the poem's self-reflective characteristics implode in upon it. And the reason is presented as nakedly as the ecstasy: he and Dorothy have identified themselves with these two swans to an extraordinary extent: 'to us / They were more dear than may be well believed'. But we can believe it, when we see what their disappearance does to the poem. For William and Dorothy had drastically over-invested themselves in their symbolic identification with the swans: '... their state so much resembled ours; ... They strangers, and we strangers; they a pair, / And we a solitary pair like them' (338–41). The poem's extreme symbolism rebounds onto its narrator: 'Shall we behold them yet another year ... And neither pair be broken?' (348–50). Wordsworth has pitched his claims for the special qualities of Grasmere so high that this ridiculous literalism threatens to spoil it. He goes immediately on the defensive: the bulk of the remaining lines composed in 1800 show him back-peddalling furiously to restore the damage he has done. But it was no good; he ultimately backs himself into a corner, out of the poem, and breaks off.

The extremes to which he goes to explain the swans' absence are the best guarantee of the sincerity of the joy which preceded his discovery of it. His first conjecture is that they may have been shot by the local 'dalesmen'. This was a likely reason. In her journal for 17 October 1800 Dorothy refers to 'the swan hunt,' an organized destruction of the decorative species introduced at Windermere twenty years earlier, very unpopular with the local residents because they were so noisy and aggressive. But this common-sense explanation leads Wordsworth into an even worse crisis in his poem: lack of moral confidence in Grasmere's natives. He apologizes both to the place and to his poem for even 'harbouring this thought': 'Recall, my song, the ungenerous thought; forgive, / Thrice favoured Region, the conjecture harsh.'⁴

Evidence of human frailty has introduced a complication into the argument which soon became insuperable, forcing him to break off composition. Other human beings have come on the scene, and *The Recluse's* difficult social theme ('Human Life') disrupts the Man–Nature bonding Wordsworth loved to celebrate. Contrary to sentimental views of Wordsworth's happy return 'home' to Grasmere (he had never lived there till then), the poem of that title challenges and indeed destroys the sentimental view, showing Wordsworth's clear awareness that his greatness as a poet could never be built on Grasmere, the Lake District, or even all of Nature. No earthly place was big enough for his godlike conception of imagination. What he learned in the moments of composition in Grasmere in 1800 confirmed what he had already intuited in his delayed vision of 'Imagination!' in the Simplon Pass in 1790: the inadequacy of a literal faith in natural transcendence.

He desperately insists that Grasmere's dalesmen were not swearing, wrathful, selfish, envious people who shoot swans. They may have been poor, hungry, and ill-clothed, but 'extreme penury is here unknown... they who want are not too great a weight / For those who can relieve' (440–8). But this special pleading contradicts the plentiful evidence of local poverty in Dorothy's journal, and the poem's sequential composition breaks off at the interesting words, 'so here there is...' (457). The implied simile is intended to point a moral drawn from the geographic form of the valley: 'as these lofty barriers break the force / Of winds – this deep vale as it doth in part / Conceal us from the storm – so here there is...' But nothing follows; there is no moral counter-force, equivalent to nature's mighty forms, that will protect him from society's ills and his poetic responsibility to combat them. Human passion destroys the texture of natural beauty.

Facing this impasse, Wordsworth could write only a brief coda, which in fact became the moral guarantee, in a variety of forms, of all his subsequent failed efforts on *The Recluse*. Falling back into the rhetorical habit of

swerving from unstable argument to assertive personality that he had developed in 'Tintern Abbey' ('If this be but a vain belief – yet, oh!'), he projected an image of the one spiritual community he could vouch for, and one that could actually complete his interrupted simile, except that it radically reduces the extent of his claims:

And if this
Were not, we have enough within ourselves,
Enough to fill the present day with joy
And overspread the future years with hope –
Our beautiful and quiet home, enriched
Already with a Stranger whom we love
Deeply, a Stranger of our Father's house,
A never-resting Pilgrim of the Sea,
Who finds at last an hour to his content
Beneath our roof; and others whom we love
Will seek us also, Sisters of our hearts,
And one, like them, a Brother of our hearts,
Philosopher and Poet, in whose sight
These mountains will rejoice with open joy.
Such is our wealth: O Vale of Peace, we are
And must be, with God's will, a happy band!
(859–74)

The unstable social dimension of his vision, exposed by the pair of missing swans, is supplied by an image of an extended family: William, Dorothy, and John Wordsworth, Mary and Sara Hutchinson, and Coleridge. This was as far as Wordsworth's social vision could extend with confidence in 1800. He set the poem aside till 1806, when he tried to generalize Grasmere's meaning in a series of tales of stoic villagers and their clever animals intended to prove 'that solitude is not where these things are'. But in the 1800 portions of *Home at Grasmere*, the identification of the master-poem with the master's life came too quickly. Having cast himself and Dorothy as the Adam and Eve of a new Eden, the strain of saving the world *from this place* proved to be too much.

Though he could not bring his *plot* to a satisfactory denouement, he did manage to leap to a conclusion: the great 'Prospectus' of *The Recluse* that he published with *The Excursion* in 1814.⁵ These lines conclude *Home at Grasmere* by projecting a vision of what *could be*, to fulfil the promises made by the poem. All conclusions of any segment of *The Recluse* follow this same forward-looking pattern of deferred gratification: the difficulties of composing the current poem will be solved in the great poem yet to come. The strategy is effective to a degree, but it is also fatal, because it pays out

more promissory notes to be honoured, at ever-higher rates of interest, as Wordsworth is forced to claim still more for his epic.

The 'Prospectus' begins, 'On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life', the same phrase Wordsworth used to announce *The Recluse* to Tobin and Losh in 1798. It establishes a balance between individual integrity (Man) and social responsibility (Human Life) in the world-as-given (Nature), that constitutes at once the glory and the stumbling block of Wordsworth's democratic imagination. In this vision, the individual genius is the inspirer, not the leader, of the people, singing 'Of the individual mind that keeps its own / Inviolable retirement, and consists / With being limitless the one great Life - ' (968-71). But invocations are supposed to begin, not end, poems, and Wordsworth clearly intends that his epic-to-come will surpass Milton's:

Fit audience find though few – thus prayed the Bard,
Holist of Men. Urania, I shall need
Thy guidance, or a greater Muse, if such
Descend to earth or dwell in highest heaven!

(973-6)

He justifies this out-stripping of Milton (from the invocation to Book VII of *Paradise Lost*) on the grounds that the heaven and hell of the new epic are higher and deeper than his predecessor's:

Not Chaos, not
The darkest pit of lowest Erebus, ...
... can breed such fear and awe
As fall upon us often when we look
Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man –
My haunt, and the main region of my song.

(980-90)

Wordsworth's egotism has been a stumbling block in the road of his reputation from the beginning, but it is a measure of his stature as a culture hero to reflect that millions of people now make their inner consciousness of themselves the psychic bedrock of reality, as he does here. In this sense, Wordsworth is not an egotist but a realist.

Having staked out his 'main region', Wordsworth proceeded to elaborate its two adjacent territories, Nature and Society. Natural beauty is presented as a combination of the Promised Land, the Elysian Fields, and Paradise all rolled into one:

Beauty, whose living home is the green earth,

...

Pitches her tents before me when I move,
An hourly Neighbour. Paradise and groves

The Recluse

Elysian, fortunate islands, fields like those of old
In the deep ocean – wherefore should they be
A History, or but a dream, when minds
Once wedded to this outward frame of things
In love, find these the growth of common day?

(991–1001)

But Human Life, or Society, is presented far more negatively, in powerful images of an implacably self-consuming – or even self-satisfying – appetite in man’s inhumanity to man:

I oft
Must turn elsewhere, and travel near the tribes
And fellowships of men, see ill sights
Of passions ravenous from each other’s rage,
Must hear humanity in fields and groves
Pipe solitary anguish, or must hang
Brooding over the fierce *confederate* storm
Of Sorrow, *barricadoed evermore*
Within the walls of cities – may these sounds
Have their authentic comment, that even these
Hearing, I be not heartless or forlorn!

(1015–25; italics added)

Wordsworth constantly tried, and constantly failed, to integrate a vision of imaginatively redeemed society into *The Recluse*’s epic mission. This is what halted his progress on *Home at Grasmere*, and it continued to do so in each of his efforts to move *The Recluse* forward. His determination not to neglect ‘Human Life’ spelled the doom of *The Recluse*, but it also gives it its fitful glory, guaranteeing that though it could not be finished, it could never be abandoned. Almost from the beginning, it has been the criticism of Wordsworth’s egotism and his ‘nature worship’ that they lead him, in Matthew Arnold’s phrase, to turn his eyes ‘from half of human fate’.⁶ But the manuscripts of his master-project, largely unpublished until recent times, show that he was determined to turn his vision *toward* ‘the tribes and fellowships of men’, to give them ‘authentic comment’. He failed, not only because of the superhuman difficulty of the task, but also because of his tendency to represent general human experience in the terms of his own painful experiences. Thus the splendid egotism of his goal was undercut by the selfish egotism of his evidence.

He ended the ‘Prospectus’ with a fourth topic, that appears as an after-thought: himself, William Wordsworth. This shift soon led to his replacing *The Recluse* as his epic subject with a new and better one, the story of his own self-creation, *The Prelude*.

And if with this
 I blend 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,
 With all his little realities of life –
 Be not this labour useless. (1034–41)

However, this was not a ‘labour’ that in 1800 he could quite conceive of as useful. He had followed Coleridge’s orders and got back to work on *The Recluse*, which as Stephen Gill wonderfully says was rapidly becoming ‘Coleridge’s dream and Wordsworth’s secret’.⁷ He had produced a mythopoeic vision of Grasmere Vale as the Garden of Eden and discovered that, like its original, it could not stand the sight of sin or evil. There was no serpent, but a new original sin, in the evidence that men could wantonly destroy Nature’s beauty.

The ‘Prospectus’ lines leap over these difficulties by insisting that he will produce an integrated vision of Man, Nature, and Society not only in Grasmere (population 250), but throughout ‘the human soul of the wide earth’. It is often easier to propose solutions for the troubles of the whole world than for one’s own family and neighbourhood, but to smile at the extravagance of Wordsworth’s solutions in the ‘Prospectus’ is to miss the point. Wordsworth’s concern was whether he was being extravagant *enough*, whether his poetry would adequately reflect the goal he saw before him. As his great American disciple, Henry David Thoreau, said, ‘It is a ridiculous demand which England and America make, that you shall speak so that they can understand you... I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be *extra-vagant* enough... I desire to speak somewhere *without* bounds; like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments...’⁸ Thoreau here echoes Wordsworth’s claims for the poet of democracy (‘a man speaking to men’), and his meditation on Walden Pond – which he called his ‘lake country’ – is so close in spirit and imagery to *Home at Grasmere* one might think he had read it, even though the publication of *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854) preceded the posthumous publication of *Home at Grasmere* (1888) by over thirty years.

Every episode in *The Recluse*’s fitful existence follows a pattern like these from 1798 and 1800: energetic beginnings, followed by gradual awareness of conceptual difficulties, and finally fragmentation, compromise, and further postponement. But each collection of texts makes for interesting reading, if we can refuse the easy gesture of simply pointing out a great poet’s repeated failures. In 1808, Wordsworth tried again, in ‘The Tuft of Primroses’, an amazing conception belied by its innocuous title. He tried to connect the

coming of spring in Grasmere (again) with the rise and fall of all of institutional Christianity, and to suggest, as in *Home at Grasmere*, that a new imaginative dispensation for western civilization was at hand in his own poetry – a claim at once too public and too private to be persuasive.

Persuasion is very much the issue in the next, longest, and most successful of his efforts on *The Recluse*, the five difficult years he spent composing *The Excursion*. It is easy to criticize *The Excursion*; indeed, some criticisms have become almost more famous than the poem itself, from Francis Jeffrey's lead-sentence, 'This will never do', in *The Edinburgh Review*, to Byron's dismissal of it in *Don Juan* as 'a drowsy, frowsy poem called *The Excursion*, Writ in a manner that is my aversion'. But only readers who have bent themselves to the challenge of reading it all can complain, for their complaints will inevitably combine dissatisfaction with Wordsworth's achievement and admiration for his conception. The poem's conception was exactly right for its times, as the imminent defeat of Napoleon promised an end to a generation of revolutionary promise and reactionary disillusion. This conception had, presciently, been part of *The Recluse*'s mission from a very early stage, when Coleridge told Wordsworth around 10 September 1799, 'I wish you would write a poem, addressed to those, who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness, disguising the same under the soft titles of domestic attachment and contempt for visionary *philosophes*' (STCL i 527).

Hence, Wordsworth sets forth, as a test case for his times, a man (The Solitary) who had thrown himself into sympathy for the ideals of the French Revolution as enthusiastically as the young Wordsworth, only to recoil into cynicism and quietism as the Revolution (and its enemies) turned sour and opportunistic. He has lost his religious faith as well, and, for good (dramatic) measure, his wife and family, and retreated into rural retirement. This hard case, a sort of anti-recluse, is to be rescued from his *weltschmerz* by the ministrations of a wise old pedlar (The Wanderer), whose seasonal rounds through the countryside have transformed him into a natural philosopher – aided by accidents of birth and early education that are clearly derived from Wordsworth's own life, since he incorporated early drafts about the Pedlar's childhood into the first two books of *The Prelude*. Their conversational debate is heard by two companions, The Poet, who runs into The Wanderer in Book I, and is escorted by him to meet The Solitary, and The Pastor, at whose parsonage they arrive in Book VI. (In the meantime, they have accelerated unaccountably from a West Country landscape to Langdale in the Lake District.) Each of these characters represents transformative roles, or

challenges, Wordsworth imagined for himself as the Bard of *The Recluse*, part of its audience, and the saviour, it is hardly too much to say, of his country. (In 1845, he made additions that turn the poem's message in a much more Christian direction, in reaction to criticisms of its 'pagan' atheism. In Wordsworth's early Victorian milieu, a religious reaction against revolutionary excess had become dogmatic.)

But, after nine books and nine thousand lines of heavily slanted editorializing (two books are titled 'Despondency' and 'Despondency Corrected'), *The Solitary*, though shaken, remains unconvinced. There is a kind of perverse integrity in Wordsworth's failing to come to a conclusion after carrying on at such length: the poem is so undramatic as narrative (they walk here, they walk there, they walk everywhere), that many modern readers fail to notice – and more simply don't care – that Wordsworth's own nature philosophy has fallen short in its appointed task. But, in the context of the other *Recluse* fragments, we can recognize this lack of resolution as, if not exactly the 'point' of the poem, then at least its motive – and the freely offered point of entry that would provoke contemporary readers to decide for themselves where they would come down in the very same debate that was about to re-open in England after 1814–15: human possibility vs social stability.

Such irresolution is not the hallmark of *The Recluse* alone; it is present in Wordsworth's greatest works, from 'Tintern Abbey' onwards, where the challenge of his theme ('Nature never did betray the heart that loved her') emerges into the very texture of his verse ('If this be but a vain belief'), in ways that have led some of the most important critics of our time, such as Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman, to see in Wordsworth's romanticism the beginnings of literary modernism. But in *The Recluse*, Wordsworth set himself up to deliver authoritative answers to questions that some of his contemporaries and near-contemporaries were better equipped than he to deliver, using (or modifying) traditional philosophical categories, from Hegel and Coleridge to Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill. What he did instead, or found himself doing, was to reiterate the process by which he came to find himself in that uncomfortable position of authority, in the 'poem on the growth of my own mind', that became, instead of his 'views on Man, on Nature, and on Human Life', his great philosophic poem.

NOTES

- 1 Nicholas Roe, *Coleridge and Wordsworth: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 235.
- 2 Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and 'The Recluse'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 370 n10. The two textual authorities on the composition of the manuscript, Beth Darlington and Jonathan Wordsworth, differ in the amount of

composition assigned to 1800 or to 1806, though they agree that most significant work on the poem is assignable to these two years. I follow Darlington in accepting that the poem's final form was not achieved until the latter date; however, it may well be, as Jonathan Wordsworth argues, that most of its *composition* dates from 1800, albeit in fragmentary, unsequential order.

- 3 All line references are to MS B, unless otherwise indicated, in Darlington's edition. This is an earlier version than MS D, which is printed in *PW* v 313–39.
- 4 These two lines are from MS D (lines 269–70).
- 5 M. H. Abrams persuasively uses the 'Prospectus' as a plan to chart not only most of Wordsworth's work but also many of the main currents of European Romanticism, in *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (W. W. Norton and Co., 1971).
- 6 *Stanzas in Memory of the Author of 'Obermann'*, lines 53–4.
- 7 Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 190.
- 8 'Conclusion', *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*.