ON WORDSWORTH'S *Prelude*

BY HERBERT LINDENBERGER

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Herbert Lindenberger has taught English and Comparative Literature
at the University of California, Riverside, since 1954.
He completed his undergraduate work at Antioch College,
his graduate work at the University of Washington,
and has traveled and studied abroad
while gathering material for the present study.

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CHAPTER FIVE

TIME-CONSCIOUSNESS (1)

He contracted a habit of exaggerating the importance of every-day incidents and situations.

Review of *The Prelude* in *The Examiner*, July 27, 1850.

. . . Need I dread from thee
Harsh judgments, if I am so loth to quit
Those recollected hours that have the charm
Of visionary things, and lovely forms
And sweet sensations that throw back our life
And almost make our Infancy itself
A visible scene, on which the sun is shining?

I, 657-663

1. FROM SENTIMENT TO VISION

FROM our mid-twentieth century vantage-point we can view *The Prelude* as an ancestor to those "time-books" which Wyndham Lewis, in attacking the artistic premises of Joyce, Proust, and Gertrude Stein, once disparaged for their "obsession with the temporal scale," their "sick anxiety directed to questions of time and place."[1] For it is Wordsworth's unique experience with time (the word itself was one of his ten most frequently used, as it was not, for instance, with Shakespeare, Milton or Pope) which has not only determined the form of the poem, but has endowed it with that peculiar intensity which distinguishes it at once from such a late eighteenth-century disquisition on time as Samuel Rogers' once-celebrated *Pleasures of Memo-*

[1] *Time and Western Man* (London, 1927), p. 24.

ry (1792). When Rogers, whom time treated so gently that his life-span (1763-1855) overlapped even Wordsworth's, tries to cope with the workings of memory, he can approach them only from the outside:

> As the stern grandeur of a Gothic tower
> Awes us less deeply in its morning-hour,
> Than when the shades of Time serenely fall
> On every broken arch and ivied wall;
> The tender images we love to trace,
> Steal from each year a melancholy grace!
> And as the sparks of social love expand,
> As the heart opens in a foreign land;
> And, with a brother's warmth, a brother's smile,
> The stranger greets each native of his isle;
> So scenes of life, when present and confest,
> Stamp but their bolder features on the breast;
> Yet not an image, when remotely viewed,
> However trivial, and however rude,
> But wins the heart, and wakes the social sigh,
> With every claim of close affinity![2]

For Rogers, rooted in the preconceptions of the later eighteenth century, the pleasure of memory consists of little more than sentimental reflection: past and present meet with "a brother's warmth, a brother's smile," the images of the past "win the heart . . . wake the social sigh." Rogers does not venture beyond the confines of eighteenth-century associationism—nor, for that matter, does the Wordsworth of *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*. When we look at the introductory "analysis" which Rogers provided for his poem—"when ideas have any relation whatever, they are attractive to each other in the mind; and the perception of any object naturally leads to the idea of another, which was connected with it either in time or place, or

2 *Poetical Works*, p. 27.

which can be compared or contrasted with it"[3]—its intellectual milieu seems essentially the same as that of Hartley's system, which had defined memory as "that faculty by which traces of sensations and ideas recur, or are recalled, in the same order and proportion, accurately or nearly, as they were once presented."[4] *The Pleasures of Memory*, one might say, is essentially Hartley sentimentalized by Rogers; and the contrast with Wordsworth is sharp and decisive:

> And think ye not with radiance more divine
> From these remembrances, and from the power
> They left behind? So feeling comes in aid
> Of feeling, and diversity of strength
> Attends us, if but once we have been strong.
> Oh! mystery of Man, from what a depth
> Proceed thy honours! I am lost, but see
> In simple childhood something of the base
> On which thy greatness stands, but this I feel,
> That from thyself it is that thou must give,
> Else never canst receive. (XI, 324-334)

The contemplation of the past, which in Rogers, in the eighteenth century, and in Wordsworth's apprentice work functioned chiefly as an occasion for pleasurable sensations, in *The Prelude* partakes of the nature of revelation. The associative process still determines Wordsworth's way of organizing his memories: one incident recalls another, but it also suggests its ultimate meaning. At innumerable spots throughout *The Prelude* the retelling of some seemingly trivial incident of childhood becomes the occasion for major poetic statement: "Oh! mystery of Man, from what a depth / Proceed thy honours" follows directly the narration of a childhood excursion to a spot where a murderer had been executed long before. If the recording of memo-

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
[4] *Observations on Man* (London, 1834), p. 235.

ries in Rogers and in the early Wordsworth is largely a pretext for observation and description, in *The Prelude* it is a means toward positive assertion, indeed, toward an explicit statement of values. If earlier memory poems are centered within the human realm (in Rogers, as we remember, the past serves principally to "win the heart, and wake the social sigh"),[5] *The Prelude* concerns itself with individual memories only to the extent that they lead into "deeper" explorations—explorations into the nature of time itself and into the mysterious sources of life and power. The difference defines emphatically what separates the eighteenth from the nineteenth century.

2. MEMOIRS AND MEMORY

The difference between the modern "time-book" and a conventional memoir about one's past is strikingly evident when we compare *The Prelude* with the brief "Autobiographical Memoranda" which Wordsworth dictated a few years before his death. The "Memoranda" consist largely of vital statistics:

"I was born at Cockermouth, in Cumberland, on April 7th, 1770, the second son of John Wordsworth, attorney-at-law, as lawyers of this class were then called, and law-agent to Sir James Lowther, afterwards Earl of Lonsdale. My mother was Anne, only daughter of William Cookson, mercer, of Penrith, and of Dorothy, born Crackanthorp, of the ancient family of that name, who from the times of Edward the Third had lived in Newbiggen Hall, Westmoreland. . . .

"The time of my infancy and early boyhood was passed partly at Cockermouth, and partly with my mother's par-

[5] Georges Poulet, in "Timelessness and Romanticism," indicates one passage from *The Pleasures of Memory* which anticipates a characteristic Romantic attitude toward memory (pp. 15-16). But he also (as does Rogers in his notes to the poem) indicates the source for Rogers' momentary transcendentalizing—John Locke.

ents at Penrith, where my mother, in the year 1778, died of a decline, brought on by a cold, the consequence of being put, at a friend's house in London, in what used to be called 'a best bedroom'. . . .

". . . I wrote, while yet a schoolboy, a long poem running upon my own adventures, and the scenery of the country in which I was brought up. The only part of that poem which has been preserved is the conclusion of it, which stands at the beginning of my collected Poems.

"In the month of October, 1787, I was sent to St. John's College, Cambridge, of which my uncle, Dr. Cookson, had been a fellow. . . .

"My Italian master was named Isola, and had been well acquainted with Gray the poet. As I took to these studies with much interest, he was proud of the progress I made. Under his correction I translated the Vision of Mirza, and two or three other papers of the Spectator, into Italian . . . ."[6]

The dozen or so pages in which Wordsworth reviews his early life in the "Memoranda" deal almost exclusively with events of a publicly verifiable nature: genealogy, matriculation date, the solid matter of names and places. Not that all the material is of a "public" nature: the friend's "best bedroom" which played so decisive a role in the family tragedy is distinctly a private affair, yet the fact that this role could be demonstrated in a courtroom, if need be, gives it a more obviously legitimate place in the memoir than a discussion of the psychological effects which we know Mrs. Wordsworth's death to have had on the family. These effects are dismissed with the lines, "My father never recovered his usual cheerfulness of mind after the loss, and died when I was in my fourteenth year, a schoolboy, just returned from Hawkshead, whither I had been sent with

[6] In Christopher Wordsworth, *Memoirs of William Wordsworth* (London, 1851), I, 6-14 *passim.*

my elder brother Richard, in my ninth year." But even this brief description of his father, to the extent that it suggests the cause of his death, retains the same solidity that his mother's cold and the friend's best bedroom had for us: private history defined by means of publicly observable phenomena.

Or one might compare Wordsworth's entrance to Cambridge as it appears in the "Memoranda" with the corresponding passage in *The Prelude*. In the former, confining himself to a single sentence, he offers concrete facts: the date (down to month and year) plus the family's connection with the college through Dr. Cookson; *The Prelude* leaves out all such details (to the disappointment of the poem's early reviewers, who thought an autobiography should offer more "information"),[7] and presents instead several pages of sights, sounds, and inward reflection. Nor do the references to his literary career in the "Memoranda" give us anything beyond outward circumstances. The fragment of his early long poem ("Dear native regions . . .") "stands at the beginning of my collected Poems," and Coleridge started the "Ancient Mariner," Wordsworth tells us, "in order to defray his part of the expense" of a tour of Devonshire. A first literary effort is thus defined in terms of its place in a table of contents, a major poem by a friend in terms not of larger meanings, nor even of literary sources, but of the economic need that occasioned the poem.

The "Memoranda" follow a thoroughly conventional method; their modern equivalent would be a sketch contributed to *Who's Who*. They are emphatically not confession but public record, the intimations not of a poet or visionary but of a public man. Their method is essentially that of the traditional memoir; Gibbon's *Autobiography*,

[7] See my article "The Reception of *The Prelude*," BNYPL, LXIV (1960), esp. pp. 200, 202, 205.

perhaps the finest earlier literary embodiment of the method in English, demonstrates how an artistically successful self-portrait can be built out of such materials, without the aid of introspective exploration. One might object, of course, that *The Prelude* is not to be taken as autobiography at all, that, to quote the subtitle tacked on by the poet's widow, its subject is properly "the growth of a poet's mind." But throughout his life Wordsworth (and his intimates as well) referred to it as "the poem on my own life," though he occasionally placed the phrase "on the growth of my own mind" in apposition. The task he set out to accomplish had no ready-made method at hand. He was less interested in revealing the "facts" of his past experience than in rendering poetically the impact and feeling of this experience. In the "Memoranda" Wordsworth needed only to assume conventional stances: what mattered about his Italian teacher was not the impact of his teaching upon a developing mind, but the fact that he had once known the poet Gray.

But it is not only in its attempt to explore the larger meanings of personal experience that *The Prelude* differs from the conventional memoir. Beyond that, it attempts to render this experience as a continuous process of growth and development, and to the degree that it seeks such a pattern it is inextricably bound up with the problem of time. The memoir is concerned with time chiefly in a mechanical sense: events follow one another because the calendar says they do. In *The Prelude* experiences are made to follow one another with a more inward inevitability; the calendar and, indeed, all publicly measurable units of time come to seem crudely inadequate within the context that the poem creates.[8]

[8] Roy Pascal's sensitive account of autobiography as a literary genre, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London, 1960), reached me after this manuscript was complete. His evaluation of Wordsworth's achieve-

3. AN EARLIER TIME-BOOK

The method which Wordsworth chose to record the evolution and significance of his experience had but one real precedent—the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, together with his even more obsessively time-conscious posthumous work, the *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, both published together in the early French edition which Wordsworth owned. The extent to which Wordsworth was aware of this precedent will always remain doubtful, for his strange silence on the subject of Rousseau has made it impossible to define the influence of the French writer upon him precisely. One finds Rousseau mentioned but twice throughout his published works: a passing reference to *Emile* in the preface to *The Borderers* in 1797 (PW, I, 345) and a disparaging allusion to the "paradoxical reveries of Rousseau" (CO, 335) in the *Convention of Cintra* pamphlet of 1809. Despite all the labors of modern scholarship, we still know incredibly little about the exact nature of Wordsworth's intellectual development in the years 1795-98, during which time the influence of the *Confessions* and *Emile* would have been at its height; as it is, most of Wordsworth's statements on his intellectual debts date from a time when his political and ideological loyalties must have clouded and, in fact, distorted his memory of those crucial early years.[9]

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ment in *The Prelude* seems to me accurate and just: "Wordsworth is the first autobiographer to realise—and the poetic form of his autobiography is this realisation—that each man constructs out of his world a unique framework of meaningful events, and that the deepest purpose of autobiography is the account of a life as a projection of the real self (we call it personality but it seems to lie deeper than personality) on the world." (p. 45)

[9] The whole problem surrounding the Wordsworth-Rousseau relationship is taken up in some detail by two French comparatists, Henri Roddier, in *J.-J. Rousseau en Angleterre au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, n.d.), pp. 99-104, 169, 175-177, 354, 380, and Jacques Voisine, *J.-J. Rousseau en Angleterre à l'époque romantique* (Paris, 1956), pp. 6, 202-222. Emile

I am concerned here with a single parallel between the two writers—the significance of time and memory in their autobiographical works. For both Rousseau and Wordsworth faced the task of finding a new method to render the process of their spiritual development in verbal terms —a process too complex and subjective for the methods of the conventional memoirist, yet too much contingent on the hard and fast details of everyday life to be treated in the totally inward manner of mystics such as Eckhart or St. John of the Cross. Rousseau, in fact, advertised the uniqueness of his attempt in his celebrated opening: "I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself."[10] But such an enterprise would have proved impossible if Rousseau had not possessed a unique habit of mind: the obsession to recapture past experience. "The great discovery of the eighteenth century is the phenomenon of memory," Georges Poulet tells us in his distinguished study of time in French literature, and "it is the greatness of the eighteenth century to have conceived the prime moment of consciousness as a generating moment and generative not only of other moments *but also of a self which takes shape by and through the means of these very moments.*"[11] Throughout the *Confessions* and *Reveries*, Rousseau makes repeated reference to the workings and significance

Legouis called Rousseau's influence "more powerful, perhaps, than any other to which he was subjected" (*Early Life of William Wordsworth* [London, 1897], p. 57), but English and American scholars, with the exception of George McLean Harper, have almost invariably described Wordsworth's intellectual milieu as though Rousseau had never existed. One suspects that they have taken too literally the dogged provincialism that marked Wordsworth's more talkative years.

10 *Confessions*, tr. Cohen, p. 17.

11 *Studies in Human Time*, pp. 23-24, italics mine.

of the memory process: "Now that I have passed my prime and am declining into old age, I find these memories [of early childhood] reviving as others fade, and stamping themselves on my mind with a charm and vividness of outline that grows from day to day. It is as if, feeling my life escaping from me, I were trying to recapture it at its beginnings. The smallest events of that time please me by the mere fact that they are of that time. I remember places and people and moments in all their detail. . . ."[12]

Thus far, except for the greater intensity of Rousseau's personal involvement, we have not moved very far beyond the sentimental retrospection of a Samuel Rogers. But the memory, because of the double perspective in which it sets the past, becomes a unique instrument in revealing knowledge about the self: "By surrendering myself at the same time to the memory of the impression received and the present feeling, I shall paint a double picture of the state of my soul, namely, at the moment in which the event occurred and at the moment I described it."[13] Yet the memory serves not only to reveal the self more fully than other modes of knowledge, it has also a kind of moral function in that it provides a source of strength to fortify him in his old age: "How I love, from time to time, to come upon the pleasant moments of my youth! They were so sweet! They have been so brief, so rare, and I have enjoyed them at such slight cost! Ah, their mere memory still gives my heart a pure delight, which I need in order to restore my courage and to sustain the tedium of my remaining years."[14]

Finally, the process of memory, through the chain of associations it sets into operation, serves to confound our

12 *Confessions*, p. 31.

13 Manuscript reproduced in the Pléiade edition of the *Confessions* (Paris, 1951), p. 756 (my translation).

14 *Confessions*, tr. Cohen, p. 132.

common-sense conceptions of the nature of time. For instance, on moving to the country after a long stay in Paris, Rousseau was reminded of an idyllic experience that had taken place long before, and this memory, in turn, recalls the various women from different periods of his life and brings them together in a single, powerful moment of time:

". . . I started remembering the dinner at the Château de Toune and my meeting with those two charming girls, at the same season and in country more or less similar to the country I was in at that moment. This memory, which was the sweeter for the innocence associated with it, recalled others of the same kind to me. Soon I saw all around me the persons I had felt emotion for in my youth: Mlle Galley, Mlle de Graffenried, Mlle de Breil, Mme Basile, Mme de Larnage, my pretty music pupils, and even the enticing Giulietta, whom my heart can never forget. I saw myself surrounded by a seraglio of houris, by my old acquaintances a strong desire for whom was no new sensation to me. My blood caught fire, my head turned despite its grey hairs, and there was the grave citizen of Geneva, the austere Jean-Jacques at almost forty-five, suddenly become once more the love-sick swain. The intoxication that seized me, although so sudden and so foolish, was so strong and lasting that it took nothing less than the unforeseen and terrible crisis it brought upon me to cure me of it."[15]

Memory has here become a creative act, fusing together diverse images of the past, substituting a wholly new order of time for the old, creating—by the energy of the emotion it releases—a type of vision which, in turn, alters the subject's present condition. With this last quotation, indeed, we enter that area of the modern sensibility which has been most powerfully symbolized for us through Proust's tasting of the *madeleine*. To summarize, then, one can dis-

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 397.

tinguish at least four ways in which the memory functions for Rousseau: (1) as an end worthy in itself, through the vivid and pleasing quality of early memories; (2) as a way of apprehending knowledge, through its ability to reveal the truth of inward states; (3) as an instrument of grace, through its ability to shed the influence of an idyllic past upon an impoverished present and future; and (4) as a force in the conquest of time, through its ability to fuse together events from diverse periods with imaginative power and thus to reconstitute the conventional order of time.

All these aspects of memory are implicit in *The Prelude*, despite the fundamental differences between the personalities of Rousseau and Wordsworth. On a fairly obvious level, Wordsworth keeps the reader aware always of the "charm of visionary things" which the retrospective process, as he declares in the passage I have attached to this chapter as epigraph, helps to uncover. But Wordsworth's attitude toward time also determined—as this and the following chapter will attempt to show—the fundamental organization of the poem, both in the basic units out of which it is composed and in its larger structure; indeed, Wordsworth's characteristic mode of organization represents something unique in the history of English poetry and, from our present vantage-point, gives *The Prelude* a peculiarly modern tone. More fundamental yet, the obsession with time which underlies the work obviously proceeds from something more than a desire for technical innovation, but is itself rooted in a larger philosophical and moral quest: a quest for the restoration of the powers associated with a lost or fading past. Beyond that, this obsession gives significance to that private order of time—the time of personal experience, revery, intuition—which, for both Rousseau and Wordsworth, serves essentially as

an image of timelessness to confound the pretensions of public, calendar time.

4. THE STRUCTURAL UNIT: "SPOTS OF TIME"

> . . . There's not a man
> That lives who hath not had his godlike hours
> (III, 191-192)

It is characteristic of Wordsworth's retrospective method that the reader always remains aware of two points of time, the bleak, quiet present, in which the poet sits writing to Coleridge and meditating upon the epic task imposed by his ambition to create a poem on "Nature, Man, and Society," and the deep well of the personal past to which he returns again and again so that he

> might fetch
> Invigorating thoughts from former years,
> Might fix the wavering balance of my mind,
> And haply meet reproaches, too, whose power
> May spur me on, in manhood now mature,
> To honorable toil. (I, 648-653)

This past, the quest for which in fact is the substance of *The Prelude*, is not re-created in and for itself, but only within the perspective of the present, through which alone it derives meaning. Wordsworth's method, one might say, is the antithesis of that of the historical novelist, who seeks to immerse his readers so fully in the re-created past that, if he succeeds, they lose sight of any reality outside this past. Wordsworth's past, no matter how vivid and "invigorating" it may be, never aims toward an autonomy of this sort; moreover, through the influence that the past exerts upon the present, and through his much-repeated desire to find nourishment in the past, he constantly en-

gages in a two-way movement, back and forth, between present and past.

The characteristic form which Wordsworth developed to probe into the past is the "spot of time," a term he coined to describe two childhood incidents narrated in Book XI. The "spot of time" is defined in terms of its salutary effects upon him:

> There are in our existence spots of time,
> Which with distinct pre-eminence retain
> A vivifying Virtue, whence . . .
> our minds
> Are nourished and invisibly repair'd. . . .
> (XI, 258-265)

But the "spot of time" can also be viewed as a literary form—one peculiar to *The Prelude* as it is not, for instance, to *The Excursion* or, for that matter, to the contemplative poetry of the preceding century. At its simplest level the "spot" is the record of a concrete past event used to illustrate some more general statements about the past. Take, for example, the passage in which Wordsworth recaptures his moment of self-dedication to poetry:

> The memory of one particular hour
> Doth here rise up against me. In a throng,
> A festal company of Maids and Youths,
> Old Men, and Matrons staid, promiscuous rout,
> A medley of all tempers, I had pass'd
> The night in dancing, gaiety and mirth;
> With din of instruments, and shuffling feet,
> And glancing forms, and tapers glittering,
> And unaim'd prattle flying up and down,
> Spirits upon the stretch, and here and there
> Slight shocks of young love-liking interspers'd,
> That mounted up like joy into the head,

And tingled through the veins. Ere we retired,
The cock had crow'd, the sky was bright with day.
Two miles I had to walk along the fields
Before I reached my home. Magnificent
The morning was, a memorable pomp,
More glorious than I ever had beheld.
The Sea was laughing at a distance; all
The solid Mountains were as bright as clouds,
Grain-tinctured, drench'd in empyrean light;
And, in the meadows and the lower grounds,
Was all the sweetness of a common dawn,
Dews, vapours, and the melody of birds,
And Labourers going forth into the fields.
—Ah! need I say, dear Friend, that to the brim
My heart was full; I made no vows, but vows
Were then made for me; bond unknown to me
Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,
A dedicated Spirit. On I walk'd
In blessedness, which even yet remains.

(IV, 315-345)

On one level, at least, one could view this memory as a sort of anecdote, called forth in the poet's mind by association and framed on each side by general commentary about the course of his life. At bottom, however, the passage strives to accomplish more than it at first pretends, for the anecdote itself must create the transition from the offhanded introductory remark ("The memory of one particular hour / Doth here rise up against me") to the culminating statement ("On I walk'd / In blessedness, which even yet remains"). By the end of the passage, with its celebration of the ability of the past to project its powers into the present, Wordsworth has shifted context from casual reminiscence to religious vision.

In its whole rhetorical development the passage is typi-

cal of innumerable other "spots of time" scattered throughout *The Prelude*. Like the episode about the stolen boat in Book I ("One evening . . . I went alone into a Shepherd's Boat") it starts out by describing a tangible world of more or less ordinary things, in this instance a public celebration that occurs at regular intervals, almost like a ritual, to break the monotony of country routine. But its ritual quality ("a *festal* company") seems strictly secular in nature and only later in the description does the reader even become aware of the emotional effect it has upon Wordsworth ("Slight shocks of young love-liking . . ./ That mounted up like joy into the head / And tingled through the veins"). The passion released here still remains essentially physical, though it points forward to the spiritual vision encompassed in the images of the sea and mountains, above all in the phrase "empyrean light." By the end of the passage everything that passes through the poet's view—fields, birds, laborers going off to their daily routine—all are endowed with a religious aura. The passage progresses, one might say, from "trivial pleasures" to "deeper passions" (both of these phrases are drawn from an introductory passage to this "spot of time"—ll. 305, 310); from a world of transitory things to intimations of a more eternal realm (which includes even the "Labourers going forth," who, in contrast to the dancers, are tied to the recurring cycle of nature); from the language of prose ("the memory of one particular hour") through a landscape appropriate to the short lyric ("and shuffling feet, / And glancing forms, and tapers glittering") to the Miltonic grandeur of the later lines ("Magnificent / The morning was, a memorable pomp"). In time the passage moves from a sense of great distance between Wordsworth's present state and the event he is depicting ("I *had pass'd* / The night in dancing") to a gradual apprehension of the oneness of past and present ("On I walk'd / In blessedness,

which even yet remains"); moreover, what was trivial in the past—the surface gaiety of the dance—still retains its great distance in time, while the visionary experience of that night remains within him to dissolve the boundaries which the conceptualizing mind has created between present and past.

5. EMOTION REFRACTED

"In Wordsworth's most excited mood we have rather the reflexion of the flame than the authentic and derivative fire itself. Its heat and glare pass to us through some less pervious and colder lens."

Thus complained the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1850,[16] in a review of the newly published *Prelude*. The "fire itself," so conspicuously lacking in Wordsworth's poem, was amply to be found in Shelley's work, the reviewer assured his readers. To a mid-Victorian audience, accustomed as it was to a more heightened and direct expression of emotion than Wordsworth was willing to give, *The Prelude* must have seemed a relatively tame poem, too much akin, perhaps, to the contemplative verse of the eighteenth century to thrill the reader with the impassioned sweep he so much admired in *Prometheus Unbound*.

That "less pervious and colder lens" to which the reviewer objects might be described as Wordsworth's habit of approaching the more intense areas of his experience only by first insisting on their great distance in time. One might, in fact, speak of the "spot of time" as a distancing device, a way of portraying emotion by refracting it through experiences far distant from the present. The invariably prosaic openings of the "spots":

> When summer came
> It was the pastime of our afternoons . . .

[16] N.S. XXXIV, p. 460.

> Upon a small
> And rocky Island near, a fragment stood
> (Itself like a sea rock) of what had been
> A Romish Chapel . . .
>
> One Christmas-time,
> The day before the Holidays began . . .
> (II, 55-56; X, 518-521; XI, 345-346)

serve as a sort of lens through which the feelings about to be uncovered may be refracted and brought into open view. It is as though the poet were too reticent to release emotions directly, as though the distancing in time and the casualness of tone could make a deeply personal experience less overtly and embarrassingly personal; in our own age, indeed, the Victorian demand for the "flame itself" seems considerably more antiquated than Wordsworth's attempt to objectify feelings by refraction, a process which has something in common with such modern attempts to impersonalize emotions as we have come to characterize by the terms *persona, mask,* and *objective correlative.* Wordsworth, in fact, is sometimes at pains to separate his past self, which it is the object of the poem to explore, from the present self which speaks directly to the reader:

> So wide appears
> The vacancy between me and those days,
> 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, 28-33)

But if the spot of time in one sense serves to set emotion at an appropriately classical distance, in another sense it works to reawaken and set free long-since-forgotten feelings which, in turn, give new life and energy to the present. Or, to put it another way, the restrained classicism that

characterizes the spot of time as a literary technique is counterbalanced through the claims which the spot of time makes for the meaningfulness of powerful feelings.

The ability of the retrospective process to help give vitality to the present through exploration of the past is at its most conspicuous, perhaps, in that spot of time in Book XI in which the poet describes his childhood visit to the scene where a murderer had once been executed. What is extraordinary about the passage is that Wordsworth does not explore merely a single past event, but that he moves through several separate points of time, each recalling the next by association and each, as it were, gathering up energy from the last. The passage starts out in the same casual way as the other spots of time:

> At a time
> When scarcely (I was then not six years old)
> My hand could hold a bridle, with proud hopes
> I mounted, and we rode towards the hills:
> We were a pair of Horsemen; honest James
> Was with me, my encourager and guide.
> We had not travell'd long, ere some mischance
> Disjoin'd me from my Comrade, and, through fear
> Dismounting, down the rough and stony Moor
> I led my Horse, and stumbling on, at length
> Came to a bottom, where in former times
> A Murderer had been hung in iron chains.
> The Gibbet-mast was moulder'd down, the bones
> And iron case were gone; but on the turf,
> Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought
> Some unknown hand had carved the Murderer's name.
>
> (279-294)

Thus far, we have no reason to expect anything more than straightforward narrative, something on the order of "Michael." The fussy preciseness with which Wordsworth

interjects his age ("I was then not six years old"), the introduction of "honest James" as though he were already quite familiar to the reader, the painstakingness with which each of the poet's movements is recorded—all point to a prime concern with the things of this world. Only in the light of what follows would one look back on these details and speculate on more symbolic meanings: that the journey into the hills and into past time is as much a spiritual as a physical journey; and, moreover, that the story of the execution is weighted with some symbolic meaning (witness the "unknown hand," the "moulder'd" gibbet-mast, the phrase "in former times," whose plural form suggests a vast world of the past and points forward to the "times long past" a few lines later). The underlying significance of the incident becomes more evident in the lines that follow:

> The monumental writing was engraven
> In times long past, and still, from year to year,
> By superstition of the neighborhood,
> The grass is clear'd away; and to this hour
> The letters are all fresh and visible.
> Faltering, and ignorant where I was, at length
> I chanced to espy those characters inscribed
> On the green sod: forthwith I left the spot
> And, reascending the bare Common, saw
> A naked Pool that lay beneath the hills,
> The Beacon on the summit, and more near,
> A Girl who bore a Pitcher on her head
> And seem'd with difficult steps to force her way
> Against the blowing wind. It was, in truth,
> An ordinary sight; but I should need
> Colours and words that are unknown to man
> To paint the visionary dreariness
> Which, while I look'd all round for my lost Guide,

Did at that time invest the naked Pool,
The Beacon on the lonely Eminence,
The Woman, and her garments vex'd and toss'd
By the strong wind. (295-316)

Thus far we are aware of three separate points of time: the present, from which Wordsworth looks back to his childhood and from which, in turn, a new perspective is introduced upon far earlier times. The "monumental" quality of the carved letters; the ritual of clearing away the grass (in citing local superstitions Wordsworth anticipates a device employed by novelists like Hawthorne to hint at deeper meanings which they neither wish to verify nor make too explicit); the ever-lasting "freshness" of the letters (contrasting with the "moulder'd gibbet-mast," as if to indicate the vitality latent in the seemingly dead past) —all, by the very intensity they call forth, prepare the ground (literally even) for the vision that follows. At this point the poet confronts the letters directly and, as though instinctively gathering up the energies latent within the scene, begins a new "journey," upward, to a point from which he can view the three objects—the pool, the beacon, the girl—which form the center of the vision. Yet these objects, awesome as they seem to the poet, are presented on a naturalistic level—an "ordinary sight," as Wordsworth at first puts it—and are not drawn from any recognizable tradition of symbols. If one encountered such images in the work of a conscious symbolist such as Blake or Shelley one would feel impelled to seek out a symbolic meaning for each of them. But in the present context the three images seem less significant for the individual meanings which we can assign to them than for the total effect which they produce. Through the animating medium of the wind they are fused together into a single momentous vision, which in its bleakness and fierceness seems to suggest the precari-

ousness of human endeavor in the face of larger forces (the girl balancing the pitcher on her head is still another of Wordsworth's figures of endurance, like Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage*). Beyond that, the wind, with all the brute power which it symbolizes, sets into motion a new, even more intense movement of thought. As though having gathered something of its power within himself, Wordsworth moves forward once more to the present time in order to contemplate the past vision in still fuller perspective. Once again, in the final lines quoted, the three objects reappear, but the tone with which they are listed is more formal, almost declamatory, as if to indicate the far greater intensity with which they are now charged in his mind.

Thus far the incident is complete as it was first written, probably in 1798. But Wordsworth added still a new perspective in time in 1804, during the later stages of the poem's composition:

> When, in a blessed season
> With those two dear Ones, to my heart so dear,
> When in the blessed time of early love,
> Long afterwards, I roam'd about
> In daily presence of this very scene,
> Upon the naked pool and dreary crags,
> And on the melancholy Beacon, fell
> The spirit of pleasure and youth's golden gleam;
> And think ye not with radiance more divine
> From these remembrances, and from the power
> They left behind? So feeling comes in aid
> Of feeling, and diversity of strength
> Attends us, if but once we have been strong.
> Oh! mystery of Man, from what a depth
> Proceed thy honours! I am lost, but see
> In simple childhood something of the base

On which thy greatness stands, but this I feel,
That from thyself it is that thou must give
Else never canst receive. The days gone by
Come back upon me from the dawn almost
Of life: the hiding-places of my power
Seem open; I approach, and then they close;
I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,
May scarcely see at all, and I would give,
While yet we may, as far as words can give,
A substance and a life to what I feel:
I would enshrine the spirit of the past
For future restoration. (316-343)

In its final development the memory of this dreary scene is refracted through still another memory, this one benign with "the spirit of pleasure and youth's golden gleam." To put it another way, the memory of early love works to transform the "visionary dreariness" of the earlier memory into a more benign, though no less forceful power. If I may take up once more the metaphor with which I started, the energies latent in Wordsworth's memories are like rays of light that pass through a prism and reveal constantly new possibilities of color to the observing eye. But analogies will go only a short way to illuminate a process which remains so largely implicit in the text. Wordsworth himself describes the process with deliberate imprecision: "So feeling comes in aid / Of feeling. . . ." Thus, while reflecting in 1798 upon the meaning of his earliest memories, he cites a particular incident which occurred when he was six; reflection upon this incident, in turn, opens up a more distant and impersonal past, the time of the murderer's execution ("Times long past"); and this memory, in turn, recalls another, much later personal memory, from his eighteenth or nineteenth year. But if this process, on one level, consists of a simple, though non-chronological, line

of mental associations, on another level it takes the form of a mysterious and complex transfer of power, both backward and forward, from one period of time to another: the memory of young love, though recalled by the frightening earlier childhood memory, sets this earlier memory into a new, more benign perspective and thus transforms it, while the combined effect of these memories will project into the future—a future well beyond the time of writing —to comfort the aging poet and, beyond that, through the "substance" and "life" with which they have been endowed in his poetry, to exert their effect upon readers in an even more distant future. And yet the whole process—down to the climactic statement, "Oh! mystery of Man, from what a depth / Proceed thy honours!"—seems to follow so naturally from the incident narrated off-handedly at the beginning that the reader is scarcely aware of the complexity of the thought structure into which he has been led.

In a discussion of another spot of time—the one directly following, of the poet waiting in the storm at Christmas-time for the horses to fetch him home—A. C. Bradley long ago remarked, "Everything here is natural, but everything is apocalyptic. And we happen to know why. Wordsworth is describing the scene in the light of memory."[17] The writer who sets out to recapture the past can thus do two things simultaneously: on the pretext of telling the reader something about himself he can uncover an objective, tangible world and at the same time he can cast a mythical aura about it. He can reveal it in all its concrete fullness and he can use it as a symbol of still another world behind it. He can be both realist and symbolist at once.

One could speculate that Wordsworth's decision to make the recovery of his own past the subject of *The Prelude* forced him to develop that peculiar approach to metaphor

[17] *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, p. 134.

which, in Chapter Three, I described in my discussion of his "images of interaction." Facing the dual task of retelling past events and at the same time convincing the reader of their significance, he developed a way of doing both at once: reality became symbol, concrete detail became abstraction, description became assertion, tenor and vehicle became indistinguishable. What separates *The Prelude* at once from the poems of personal or pseudo-personal reminiscence of the late eighteenth century is the fact that the individual memories and the poet's discursive comments upon them are no longer scattered about, tied to one another only by association, but rather that Wordsworth has worked out a new rhetorical form, a new genre, in fact, to fuse together concrete perception and a statement of its significance, and beyond that to make poetry assert and celebrate at the same time that it describes and analyzes. Earl R. Wasserman, in his recent attempt to define the essential difference between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry, described the task of the romantic poets in the following terms:

"Largely deprived of *topoi* rich in publicly accessible values and cut off from the older conceptions of world-orders, they [the poets of the early nineteenth century] were compelled to cultivate fresh values in the objects of experience and to organize these values into a special structure within the poem so as to avail themselves of the expressive powers of a revivified vocabulary and a new syntactical system. It is, therefore, not merely in the overt statements, often disarmingly simple, but especially in the inner subtleties of their language—in the recurrences and transformations of images, in what superficially might seem only a convenient and otherwise purposeless turn of phrase, for example—that we must seek the articulation of a modern poem's fullest meaning."[18]

[18] *The Subtler Language*, pp. 251-52.

The spot of time, one might say, is that "special structure" which Wordsworth organized out of the objects of his personal experience—a structure, moreover, which articulates its meanings not primarily through traditional figures of speech appealing to an outward frame of reference, but by creating its own rhetoric—for instance, through the use of different intensities of tone at each of the three times the images of the pool, the beacon, and the girl with the pitcher appear—which in turn evolves its own inner frame of reference.

The poetic values represented by the spot of time, rooted as they are in concrete experience, have become so central a part of modern poetic tradition that, despite the obvious differences between the language of modern poetry and Wordsworth's "rhetoric of interaction," we often tend to read *The Prelude* piecemeal for its spots of time. "*The Prelude* is at the center of our experience of Wordsworth; at the center of our experience of *The Prelude* are those 'spots of time' where Wordsworth is endeavoring to express key moments in the history of his imagination"[19]—thus begins a recent psychological interpretation of these passages. To the extent that the spots of time attempt to fragmentize experience or to work toward the evocation of pure states of being—the "trances of thought and mountings of the mind" to which Wordsworth refers at the opening of the poem—they point forward to that conception of what was properly poetic which, in the century after *The Prelude*, was increasingly to claim exclusive domain over the province of poetry. If we have been inclined, perhaps, to lift the spots of time too readily out of their larger context, this is not merely a sign of their special modernity, but also, as I argued in the last chapter, of the fact that we have lost the art of reading long poems.

[19] Jonathan Bishop, "Wordsworth and the 'Spots of Time,'" ELH, XXVI (1959), 45.