

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

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

1. THE IDEA OF "THE PRELUDE"

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

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

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

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

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

(II, 27-33)

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

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

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

to the open fields I told

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

(I, 59-63)

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

that my verse may live and be

Even as a light hung up in heaven to cheer
Mankind in times to come. ¹²

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

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

(X, 232-4)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

... we have reach'd

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

(XIII, 261-78)

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

I rose

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

(XIII, 370-81)

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

2. PROUST'S GOTHIC CHURCH

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

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