CHAPTER 17

Autobiography

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Writing in the introduction to his ground-breaking edition of *The Prelude* in 1926, Ernest de Selincourt argued that Wordsworth's poem is 'the essential living document for the interpretation of Wordsworth's life and poetry'.[1] Although *The Prelude* is today as central to how we read Wordsworth as De Selincourt found it to be in 1926, this is largely a modern development. First completed in 1805, early in the poet's career, the poem was withheld from print until Wordsworth's death in 1850, although revisited in the interval time and again. While the existence of the poem was first publicly disclosed by Wordsworth in his 1814 Preface to *The Excursion* as a 'preparatory' biographical poem on 'the history of the Author's mind' (*Excursion* 38), the text of *The Prelude* was for decades virtually unknown to all but a small circle of his contemporaries, even as his standing as England's first poet was consolidated. Nor, following publication, did the poem begin to claim the critical attention it now commands until well into the twentieth century, starting indeed with the appearance in 1926 of De Selincourt's edition, the first to publish the 1805 version along with the 1850 text.[2]

That the last volume of Proust's monumental *A la recherche du temps perdu* should have appeared the following year may be a coincidence. But comparisons of Wordsworth and Proust, such as Willard Sperry's suggestion that 'Proust re-traveled at a later time the road down which Wordsworth had pioneered',[3] were not long to emerge, and testify to the continuing ascendancy of an ideology of the aesthetic for which the poet's autobiographical or quasi-autobiographical account of the origins and development of his imaginative powers – tested and confirmed in the performance of that account – was an exemplary cultural achievement. But one need only compare Sperry's tribute with Wordsworth's own anxious sense, confided to Beaumont as the 1805 version was approaching completion, that it was 'a thing unprecedented in Literary history that a man should talk so much about himself' and the expression of a 'fault . . . in the first conception' that lay 'too deep' to be

corrected (*EY* 586–7), to recognize that a first task for *The Prelude* would be 'to create the taste by which [it] was to be enjoyed',[4] starting with the poet himself as his own first reader.

The slow and uneven process of reception through which *The Prelude* may be said to have claimed its central share in Wordsworth's legacy is, as has already been indicated, continuous with the peculiar history of the manuscript's origins and development. As is well known, and acknowledged by Wordsworth himself in the Preface to *The Excursion*, as well as in many other places, his initial 'determination', conceived jointly with Coleridge around the time they were also collaborating on *Lyrical Ballads*, was 'to compose a philosophical Poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society; and to be entitled, The Recluse' (*Excursion*, 38). His failure to make headway with that project, amidst a dismal and homesick winter in Germany, where he and Coleridge and Dorothy had travelled in late 1798 following the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, appears to have been the occasion for a series of notebook entries, some continuous and some less so, that take off from the plaintive question,

> Was it for this
> That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved
> To blend his murmurs with my Nurse's song . . .
> (*1799 Prelude* Part 1, lines 1–3)

and go on to include preliminary versions of some of the most well-known passages of what was to become *The Prelude*, such as the Boat-stealing episode of Book 1 and the 'Winander Boy' episode ('There was a boy . . . ') of Book 5. As the Norton editors have observed, 'At first Wordsworth almost certainly did not know that he was undertaking a poem of considerable scope'.[5] To this one may add that, even once that intention had coalesced, the scope of what was being considered, and with it the overall design of the poem, underwent a series of radical revisions. To the entries in the Goslar Notebook of 1798 succeeded the so-called *Two-Part Prelude* of 1799, focused almost entirely on memories from childhood, with the 'Spots of Time' and 'Blessed Babe' passages providing the conceptual linch-pin in the first and second parts, respectively. This was followed in 1804 by a five-book version, the first four books of which extended the narrative through the end of Wordsworth's Cambridge education, thus adding the influence of Education to that of Nature in the history of his development. These were then followed by a fifth book which began with the Ascent of Snowdon and concluded, insofar as can be determined, with the now repositioned Spots of Time. This version was then quickly superseded by

the thirteen-book version of 1805 which decisively expands the historical (as well as biographical) horizons to incorporate Wordsworth's time in London and France in the years immediately following the French Revolution, while still retaining Snowdon as a narrative culmination. The 1805 manuscript was then subject to periodic, sometimes major, revisions, resulting in the fourteen-book version published shortly after Wordsworth's death.

This abbreviated account suggests two things. First of all, although *The Prelude*'s history of 'the growth of a poet's mind' proceeds along roughly chronological lines, the process by which the poem itself grew was highly non-linear, as one manuscript state was fed back into the writing process as past material to be worked over and elaborated. This is of course true of any revision process to a greater or lesser extent, but assumes a special significance in the case of autobiography, where the text's re-collection of itself becomes interwoven with the recollection of pre-textual material. Moreover, the delayed and staggered reception of *The Prelude* may be seen as a further extension of this structural system: the text had to be not simply read but recalled, resummoned from the past – quite literally in the case of the De Selincourt edition – before the conditions for the entry of the reader into its recursive system of transmission could be fully activated.

Secondly, the fact that the writing of *The Prelude* originated in the context of Wordsworth's failure to make headway with *The Recluse*, the envisioned magnum opus whose completion would be 'of sufficient importance to justify me in giving my own history to the world' (*EY* 470), assumes a different aspect in light of this compositional history. Rather than simply a precipitating cause dictating a preliminary retreat to a 'theme / Single, and of determin'd bounds' (*1805 Prelude* Book 1, lines 669–70) before embarking on the ultimate goal of writing *The Recluse*, 'a literary Work that might live' (Excursion 38), that failure appears as the abiding *ground*, early and late, of *The Prelude*'s coming-into-being. Wordsworth's failure to write *The Excursion* is a 'permanent situation' in the formal sense that Kafka used the phrase,[6] and constitutes the generative matrix that displaces the totalizing architectonic of *The Recluse* as the 'gothic church' to which *The Prelude* would be the 'ante-chapel'.[7] *The Prelude* can therefore be conceived as achieving an 'effective finality'. By 'effective finality', I mean, first of all, that the poem was effectively Wordsworth's final work (allowing for its ongoing revision and eventual publication subsequent to *The Excursion*, itself intended as only the second of *The Recluse*'s three parts). But secondly, following teleological understandings of 'finality', I mean that, within the context of a complex system of purposes, its completion was an end unto itself, and thus possessed a kind of 'intrinsic finality', as opposed to the

'extrinsic finality' that would be a function of its subordination to the writing of *The Recluse* as a final goal. Wordsworth's own intimation, early and late, of *The Prelude*'s effective finality is conveyed, furthermore, by the double stipulation which appears in a well-known letter to Richard Sharp of April 1804 that *The Prelude* was only to be published *either* upon completion of *The Recluse or*, failing that, upon the poet's death: 'it seems a frightful deal to say about one's self', Wordsworth remarks of *The Prelude*, 'and of course will never be published, (during my lifetime I mean), till another work has been written and published, of sufficient importance to justify me in giving my own history to the world' (*EY* 470; see also 454).

The effective finality of *The Prelude*, then, is not a contingent and as it were extrinsic event that befell the text. Rather, it is a complex condition of meaning – a way of inhabiting language – that pervades its texture and reserves of signification. To the extent that the continuous assertion and subversion of a more linear model of 'the growth of a poet's mind' is intrinsic to that complexity, we should guard against reading the various individual episodes of *The Prelude* (or, for that matter, signifying units obtaining at smaller scales of organization, such as the sentence or line) either as moments in a teleological development or as more or less discontinuous and self-contained 'spots of time'. They participate in and intimate a more enigmatic mode of totality, that 'dark / Invisible workmanship' by which, Wordsworth writes, 'the mind of man is framed' (*1805 Prelude* Book 1, lines 353–4, 352), even as he writes, in lines immediately following, of his belief

> That Nature, oftentimes, when she would frame
> A favor'd Being, from his earliest dawn
> Of infancy doth open out the clouds,
> As at the touch of lightning . . . (lines 364–7)

Pre-eminent among such openings out of the clouds would be the Ascent of Snowdon with which *The Prelude* concludes, its story of ascent to a position of comprehensive vision seeking to emblematically recapitulate the movement of the poem as a whole. Thus M. H. Abrams describes the passage as 'a metaphor for the climactic stage both of the journey of life and of the imaginative journey which is the poem itself' and readily compares the poet's 'definitive vision' on 'a mountain-top' to that of Moses on Sinai.[8] Writing from a less reverential perspective, Mary Jacobus nonetheless agrees that the ascent itself 'provides a representation of the entire narrative of *The Prelude*'.[9]

However warranted such an understanding of Snowdon's structural significance is (an understanding which Wordsworth evidently shared), it

nonetheless proves to be overdrawn in two related regards. Wordsworth begins the episode by recalling how he

> . . . left Bethkelet's huts at couching-time,
> And westward took my way to see the sun
> Rise from the top of Snowdon. (Book 13, lines 3–5)

It is not hard to discern here the allegorical undercurrent, with its suggestion of a purgatorial ascent to a point of visionary illumination. But the narrative never arrives at this moment or this place. Instead it breaks off with a description of and meditation on the moon-lit land's end scene which spreads before the poet as he emerges from the cloudbank through which he has been climbing – what Wordsworth in early draft material refers to as 'the scene / Which from the *side* of Snowdon I beheld'.[10]

Nor, as I have been emphasizing throughout, did Wordsworth ever come near to completing the vast philosophical and poetic project to which *The Prelude* was meant to lead. That Snowdon tells the story of an interrupted rather than completed ascent prefigures, in retrospect, this more encompassing pattern of incompletion. Or, to put the matter more precisely, the way in which the nocturnal scene beheld from Snowdon's slope *eclipses* the traveller's expectation suggests in turn how the writing of the *The Prelude* both displaces and exceeds the ambition in which it originates to create 'a literary Work that might live'.

The temporal complications that attend the writing, publication and reception of *The Prelude* also complicate any attempt to place this most representative of autobiographies within the context of the emergence of secular autobiography in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, beginning with the posthumous publication of Rousseau's *Confessions* in 1782, as itself a representatively modern genre or mode. De Quincey knew the poem in manuscript, and there is no question that it exerted a deep influence on both *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* and *Suspiria de Profundis*, whose experiments in an autobiographical 'impassioned prose' pursue from the other side of the shield Wordsworth's own effort to bring the language of poetry and the language of prose together, an effort in which *The Prelude*, with its 'prosaic' subject matter, participates. The interaction between the autobiographical cast of William's poetic project and Dorothy Wordsworth's journals also merits attention, particularly if one bears in mind the way in which the discontinuous dailiness of a journal interferes with the ambition of autobiography to compose a continuous, integrated narrative, rather than simply expanding 'the range of "autobiography" to include all writing that inscribes subjectivity'.[11]

The question of the relation of *The Prelude* to its most important immediate precursor, the *Confessions*, is also a vexed one. Although Rousseau's influence on Wordsworth as autobiographer is often taken for granted,[12] there is, as W. J. T. Mitchell acknowledges in an essay arguing for that influence, 'simply no direct evidence that Wordsworth ever read the *Confessions*'.[13] Both internal evidence and Duncan Wu's extensive cataloguing of Wordsworth's reading point rather to the importance of travel narratives as models, these sometimes combining with conversion narratives, as in the case, in particular, of John Newton's 1764 *Authentic Narrative Of Some Remarkable And Interesting Particulars In The Life Of* ********.

More broadly, however, if we recall Wordsworth's stated aim in the Preface to *The Excursion* of 'record[ing], in Verse, the origin and progress of his own powers' (*Excursion* 38), *The Prelude*'s relation to Enlightenment narratives of origins with broad philosophical aims (including Rousseau's Second Discourse) becomes readily apparent. Concomitantly, one appreciates the astuteness of Abrams's observation that 'in general content and overall design' Hegel's 1807 *Phenomenology* is 'notably parallel to Wordsworth's exactly contemporary poem on the growth of his own mind . . . That is, it is the representative autobiography of a spiritual education'[14] – while operating on a world-historical scale rather than at the level of the individual subject. What the history of *The Prelude* shows us, however, is the ongoing activity of that 'dark / Invisible workmanship' which resists subsumption within this system of self-reflexive totalization.

Notes

1. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude; or, Growth of a Poet's Mind*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), xv.
2. Stephen Gill identifies the appearance of the De Selincourt edition as 'the most important moment in the poem's history since the appearance of the first edition in 1850'. *Wordsworth: The Prelude* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 100.
3. Willard Learoyd Sperry, *Wordsworth's Anti-climax* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 137.
4. See Wordsworth's 'Essay Supplementary to the Preface' (*Prose*, III: 80): '. . . every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed'. Wordsworth is not speaking specifically of *The Prelude* but more generally of 'the fortunes and fate of poetical Works'. Here and elsewhere, Wordsworth attributes the idea to Coleridge.
5. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 485–6.