

William Wordsworth's  
**The Prelude**

*Edited and with an introduction by*  
**Harold Bloom**  
*Sterling Professor of the Humanities*  
*Yale University*

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# Introduction

*The Prelude*, completed in 1805, was published after Wordsworth's death in 1850. The title was chosen by the poet's widow; for Wordsworth it was simply "the poem to Coleridge." The 1850 text both suffers and gains by nearly half a century of Wordsworth's revisions, for the poet of the decade 1798–1807 was not the Urizenic bard of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, and the attempts of the older Wordsworth to correct the younger are not always fortunate. The 1850 text shows better craftsmanship, but it also sometimes manifests an orthodox censor at work, straining to correct a private myth into an approach at Anglican dogma. As Wordsworth's modern editor, Ernest de Selincourt, has observed, nothing could be more significant than the change of

I worshipped then among the depths of things  
As my soul bade me . . .  
I felt and nothing else

(XI, 234–8, 1805)

to

Worshipping then among the depths of things  
As piety ordained . . .  
I felt, observed, and pondered

(XII, 184–8, 1850)

In the transition between these two passages, Wordsworth loses his Miltonic heritage, an insistence upon the creative autonomy of the individual soul. With it he loses also an emphasis peculiar to himself, a reliance upon the *felt* experience, as distinguished from received piety or the abstraction that follows experience. In what follows I shall cite the 1850 text, but with reference, where it seems desirable, to the 1805 version.

The poem approximates epic structure, in that its fourteen books

gather to a climax after a historical series of progressively more vital crises and renovations. The first eight books form a single movement, summed up in the title of Book Eight, "Retrospect—Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind." Books Nine, Ten, and Eleven carry this Love of Mankind into its natural consequence, Wordsworth's "Residence in France," and his involvement with the Revolution. Books Twelve and Thirteen deal with the subsequent crisis of Wordsworth's "Imagination, How Impaired and Restored." The "Conclusion," Book Fourteen, is the climax of Wordsworth's imaginative life and takes the reader back, in a full cycle, to the very opening of the poem. The "Conclusion" presents Wordsworth and Coleridge as "Prophets of Nature," joint laborers in the work of man's redemption:

what we have loved,  
Others will love, and we will teach them how;  
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes  
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth  
On which he dwells.

Blake, had he read this, would have approved, though he might have wondered where Wordsworth had accounted for that "thousand times more beautiful." Blake's distrust of Wordsworth's dialectics of Nature is to some extent confirmed by Wordsworth himself. "Natural objects always did and now do weaken, deaden, and obliterate imagination in me," was Blake's comment on Wordsworth's fragment "Influence of Natural Objects" . . . and Wordsworth does fall mute when the external stimulus is too clearly present. Geoffrey Hartman remarks that even in Wordsworth "poetry is not an act of consecration and Nature not an immediate external object to be consecrated." A natural object liberates Wordsworth's imagination only when it both ceases to be purely external and fades out of its object status.

The romantic metaphor of the correspondent breeze has [previously] been discussed. The wind of Beulah, creative and destructive, rises in the opening lines of *The Prelude*. Wordsworth need not call upon this spirit, for it precedes his invocation. It begins as a gentle breeze, and a blessing, half-conscious of the joy it gives to the new Moses who has escaped the Egypt that is London, and new Adam who can say:

The earth is all before me. With a heart  
 Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,  
 I look about; and should the chosen guide  
 Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,  
 I cannot miss my way.

Adam and Eve, scarcely joyous, go out hand in hand as loving children into all that is before them to choose a place of rest, with the Divine Providence as their guide. Wordsworth seeks a place where he will be lulled into the creative repose of epic composition, and he picks his own guide; nor need it be a Mosaic pillar, for he cannot miss his way. Nature, all before him, is generous, and his choice can only be between varying modes of good. *The Prelude* therefore opens without present anxiety: its crises are in the past. Unlike *Paradise Lost* and Blake's *Jerusalem*, *The Prelude* is a song of triumph rather than a song of experience. Wordsworth sings of what Blake called "organized innocence."

When the wind blows upon Wordsworth, he feels within a corresponding breeze, which rapidly becomes:

A tempest, a redundant energy,  
 Vexing its own creation.

Wordsworth's account of this vexing redundancy is that he is:

not used to make  
 A present joy the matter of a song

Although he tries again, aided by Eolian visitations, his harmony disperses in straggling sounds and, lastly, utter silence. What matters is his reaction. There is no despair, no sense of loss, only a quiet confidence based upon the belief that his inspiration is henceforward to be perpetual:

"Be it so;  
 Why think of anything but present good?"

We mistake *The Prelude*, then, if we seek to find a crisis, rather than the history of a crisis, within it. *The Prelude* is not a tragic poem. but an autobiographical myth-making. Dominating *The Prelude* is the natural miracle of memory as an instrumentality by which the

self is saved. Supreme among Wordsworth's inventions is the myth of renovating "spots of time," crucial in the "Intimations" ode and "Tintern Abbey," and the entire basis for the imaginative energy of *The Prelude*.

The story of *The Prelude* is mysterious only in that Wordsworthian Nature is now a mystery to most of us. For Wordsworth, Nature is first of all the sensuous *given*—what is freely offered for our discernment at all times. Like Blake, Wordsworth is preeminently a master of phenomenology, in the sense that he is able to read reality in appearances. Like Abraham, Wordsworth is the patriarch of a Covenant, made in the latter case between phenomenal appearance and the human heart. If the human heart, in its common, everyday condition, will love and trust the phenomenal world, then that world will never betray it. Betrayal here takes some of the force of its meaning from the context of sexuality and marriage. For man to betray Nature is to embrace one of the several modes in which the primacy of Imagination is denied. For Nature to betray man is to cease as a renovating virtue for man when he returns to it. Man turns from that loving embrace of nature which *is* in fact the supreme act of the Imagination, and takes the cruel mistress of discursiveness in her place. Nature turns from man by ceasing to be a Beulah state, and becoming instead a hostile and external object. What Wordsworth never considers is the more sinister manifestation of Nature-as-temptress, Blake's Vala or Keats's Belle Dame. Shelley climaxes his heritage from the Wordsworth tradition in "The Triumph of Life" by introducing Wordsworthian Nature as the deceptive "Shape all light," who tramples the divine sparks of Rousseau's imagination into the dust of death. Wordsworth's symbol of the covenant between man and nature, the rainbow, is employed by Shelley as the emblem that precedes the appearance of the beautiful but destructive Nature figure of "The Triumph of Life."

The inner problem of *The Prelude*, and of all the poetry of Wordsworth's great decade, is that of the autonomy of the poet's creative imagination. Indeed, as we have seen, it is the single most crucial problem of all that is most vital in English Romantic poetry. Even Wordsworth, the prophet of Nature, is uneasy at the prospect of his spirit's continual dependence upon it. He insists, like all prophets in the Hebraic tradition, upon the mutual dependence of the spiritual world and its human champion. The correspondent breeze is necessary because of natural decay; our mortality insists upon being

redeemed by our poetry. To serve Nature in his early years, Wordsworth needed only to be wisely passive. But to sustain himself (and Nature?) in his maturity, an initiative from within is required. And yet if the initiative is too overt, as here at the opening of *The Prelude*, then Nature refuses to be so served, and the mutual creation that is the poem cannot go forward.

Hartman, analyzing this problem, says that "Nature keeps the initiative. The mind at its most free is still part of a deep mood of weathers." Wordsworth's problem is thus a dialectical one, for what he seeks is the proper first term that will yield itself readily to be transcended. The first term is not Poetry, for Nature at *The Prelude's* onset will not have it so. Nor can the first term be Nature, for it will not allow itself to be subsumed even by the naturalizing imagination, at least *not immediately*. Blake has no patience for the Primary Imagination; but the whole of the secret discipline of Wordsworth's art is to wait upon it, confident that it will at last consent to dissolve into a higher mode.

Hartman speaks of the difficult first term of Wordsworth's dialectic as being "neither Nature nor Poetry. It is, rather, Imagination in embryo—muted yet strengthened by Nature's inadequacies." This is certainly the best balance to keep, unless we consent to a more radical review of Wordsworth's doctrine of Nature. Gorky said of Tolstoy's dealings with God that they reminded him of the old proverb "two bears in one den," and one can say the same of Wordsworth's relations with Nature. After a time, there is not quite room for both of them in Wordsworth's poetry if either is to survive full-size, and clearly it is Nature that makes room for Wordsworth. Yet the struggle, while concealed, inhibits Wordsworth and limits his achievement. There are unresolved antagonisms between Poetry and Divinity in Milton, but nothing so prolonged as the hidden conflict between Poetry and Nature in Wordsworth. But for this conflict, Wordsworth might have attempted national epic. Because of it, he was compelled to work in the mode of Rousseau, the long confessional work that might clarify his relation both to Nature and his own poetic calling.

The Nature of *The Prelude* is what Wordsworth was to become, a great teacher. Nature is so strong a teacher that it first must teach itself the lesson of restraint, to convert its immediacy into a presence only lest it overpower its human receiver. Wordsworth desires it as a mediating presence, a motion and a spirit. When it is too powerful,

it threatens to become first, an object of worship, and second, like all such objects, an exhaustible agent of reality, a life that can be drained. Wordsworth knows well the dangers of idolatry, the sinister dialectic of mutual use. He desires only a relationship, a moment-to-moment confrontation of life by life, a dialogue. In this respect he is the direct ancestor of Shelley's vision of Nature.

*The Prelude* tries to distinguish between the *immediate* and the *remembered* external worlds. It is the paradoxical freedom of the Wordsworthian Imagination that it must avoid bondage to the immediate but seek the reign of the remembered world. In Blake the Imagination strives to be totally free of both, externals and memory, and delights only in the final excellence, the imagined land. Blake has no quest; only a struggle against everything within and without himself that is not pure Imagination. But Wordsworth has the quest that Blake's marginalia upon him gave clear warning of, the search for the autonomy of his own imagination. Hartman suggests that Nature's particular grace toward Wordsworth is to unfold *gradually* his own freedom to him, as his quest is largely an unwilling one; he does not want to be free of Nature. This suggestion is a displaced form of the Christian reading of history; for Wordsworth's "Nature" read St. Augustine's "History," as both are varieties of mercy presented as gradualism.

The hidden tragedy running through *The Prelude* is Wordsworth's resistance to his own imaginative emancipation. Wordsworth has clues enough, but usually declines to read them. In the presence of too eloquent a natural image, he is speechless. Nor does he attempt, after "Tintern Abbey," to particularize any local habitations for vision. He diffuses the secret strength of things over the widest possible landscape, in contrast to his disciple Shelley, who stands before Mont Blanc and cries "The power is there." Again, unlike their operations in Shelley and in Blake, the epiphanies in Wordsworth are not really sudden; there are no raptures of prophecy, but rather a slowly mounting intensity of baffled vision until at last the illumination greatly comes.

For Blake, and finally for Shelley, the Imagination's freedom from Nature is a triumph. It makes Wordsworth profoundly uneasy; he does not believe that time and space ought to be abandoned quite so prematurely. For Blake, the matter of common perception, the world of Primary Imagination, is hindrance, not action, but for Wordsworth it is something better than action; it is contemplation,

and to see something clearly is already to have made some sense out of the diffuse and chaotic world of sensation. To mold a few of these clear things into a simpler and still clearer unity is to have made imaginative sense out of sensation. Blake's protest is absolute. He saw both these operations as passive, as a surrender to the living death of a world too small to contain the expansive vision of a more human Man.

The world of *The Prelude* is exquisitely fitted to the individual mind of the young Wordsworth. Even when it works upon him by frustration or fear, it continues to teach the young poet. The passages at the opening of the poem concerning the frustrating of composition have been examined above. Though he puts aside these failures, which are due to the immediacy of his inspiration, he is more troubled by the greater frustration of seemingly finding no subject for sustained epic. Even this vacant musing is redeemed by Nature, for in reproving himself he is carried back into remembrances, and these not only give him his only proper subject but begin the genuine forward movement of his poem. The growth of a poet's mind, as fostered by the goodly universe around him, becomes the inevitable subject as he sustains a gentle self-chastisement:

Was it for this  
That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved  
To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song.

As the Derwent river once flowed along his dreams, now it stirs a flow of memory, carrying the mature poet back into the salvation of things past. The image of the coursing river runs through the entire poem, and provides the analogue for the flowing progress of the long work. Wordsworth speaks of "the river of my mind," and warns that its portions cannot be traced to individual fountains, but rather to the whole flow of the sensuous generosity of external phenomena.

The first two books of the poem show the child as encountering unknown modes of being, the life of Nature which is both one with us and yet dwells apart in its tranquillity. The primordial strength of Wordsworth's mind, its closeness to the myth-makings of early cultures and of children, is revealed in the incident in which an early wrong-doing is followed by hints of natural nemesis:



and when the deed was done  
I heard among the solitary hills  
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds  
Of undistinguishable motion, steps  
Almost as silent as the turf they trod.

We make a mistake if we read this as a projection of the child's conscience upon the external world. That he heard it is warrant enough for its reality. Similarly, when he hangs above the raven's nest, sustained by the grip of finger tips, he hears a strange utterance in the wind, and perceives a motion unlike any ordinary one, in a sky that does not seem a sky of earth. At such a moment he belongs more to the universe of elemental forces, of motions and spirits, than he does to ours.

These early incidents of participation in other modes of being climax in the famous episode of the stolen boat, "an act of stealth and troubled pleasure." There is a muffled sexual element in this boyish escapade. The moon shines on the child as he lustily dips his oars into the silent lake. Suddenly, from behind a craggy steep that had been till then the horizon's bound:

a huge peak, black and huge,  
As if with voluntary power instinct,  
Upreared its head.

The grim shape, with its own purpose and the measured motion of a living thing, comes striding after him. He flees, returns the boat, and for many days is haunted by a sense of "unknown modes of being":

No familiar shapes  
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,  
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;  
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live  
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind  
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

This is a fundamental paganism, so primitive that it cannot yield to any more sophisticated description without distortion. It is like the Titanism of Blake, with its Giant Forms like the Zoas wandering a world substantially our own. Worth particular attention is the momentary withdrawal of the given world of Nature from the boy,

for it hints that familiar natural beauty is a gift, not to be retained by the unnatural.

The theme of reciprocity is introduced in this passage and strengthened by the skating incident, where the giving of one's body to the wind is repaid by being allowed to see, in a sense, the motion of earth in her diurnal round.

Summing up the first book, Wordsworth sees his mind as revived, now that he has found "a theme / Single and of determined bounds." Yet the most vital passage of the second book breaks beyond bounds, and makes clear how ultimately ambitious the theme is:

and I would stand,  
If the night blackened with a coming storm,  
Beneath some rock, listening to notes that are  
The ghostly language of the ancient earth,  
Or make their dim abode in distant winds.  
Thence did I drink the visionary power

Listening to the wind is a mode of primitive augury, but it is not gross prophecy of the future that the boy aspires toward as he hears the primordial language of earth. The exultation involved, Wordsworth goes on to say, is profitable, not because of its content:

but that the soul,  
Remembering how she felt, but what she felt  
Remembering not, retains an obscure sense  
Of possible sublimity, whereto  
With growing faculties she doth aspire,  
With faculties still growing, feeling still  
That whatsoever point they gain, they yet  
Have something to pursue.

No passage in *The Prelude* is more central, and nothing is a better description of Wordsworth's poetry. *What* his soul felt in different encounters with Nature, he will not always remember. *How* it felt is recalled, and this retains that obscure sense of possible sublimity that colors all of the poetry of the Great Decade. As the soul's faculties grow, the soul is in danger of becoming content, of ceasing to aspire, but is saved from such sleep by the sense of possible sublimity. This sublimity, in its origins, has little to do with love or sympathy for others, and has small relation to human suffering. It is a sense of

individual greatness, of a joy and a light yet unknown even in the child's life. *The Prelude*, until the eighth book, devotes itself largely to an inward world deeply affected only by external nature, but with a gradually intensifying sense of others held just in abeyance.

The soul in solitude moves outward by encountering other solitaries. Solitude, Wordsworth writes in Book Four, is most potent when impressed upon the mind with an appropriate human center. Having escorted a wandering old soldier to shelter, Wordsworth entreats him to linger no more on the roads, but instead to ask for the help that his state requires. With a "ghastly mildness" on his face the vagrant turns back the reproof:

"My trust is in the god of Heaven,  
And in the eye of him who passes me!"

From this first lesson in human reciprocity, Wordsworth's narrative flows inward again, but this time to make clear the imaginative relation between Nature and literature (Book Five), which centers on a dream of apocalypse and survival. Sitting by the seaside, reading *Don Quixote*, he begins to muse on poetry and mathematics as being the ultimate apprehenders of reality, and having the "high privilege of lasting life." He falls asleep, and dreams. Around him is a boundless, sandy, wild plain, and distress and fear afflict him, till a Bedouin appears upon a dromedary. He bears a lance, and carries a stone beneath one arm, and holds a shell of surpassing brightness in the opposite hand. The Arab tells him that the stone is "Euclid's Elements" and the shell "is something of more worth," poetry. When Wordsworth puts the shell to his ear, as commanded, he hears:

A loud prophetic blast of harmony;  
An Ode, in passion uttered, which foretold  
Destruction to the children of the earth  
By deluge, now at hand.

The Arab's mission is to bury "these two books," stone and shell, against the day when the flood shall recede. The poet attempts to join him in this enterprise, but he hurries off. Wordsworth follows, baffled because the Arab now looks like Don Quixote, then an Arab again, and then "of these was neither, and was both at once." The waters of the deep gather upon them, but in the aspect of "a bed of glittering light." Wordsworth wakes in terror, to view the sea before him and the book at his side.

The dream is beautifully suggestive, and invites the kind of symbol-building that W. H. Auden performs with it in his lively exercise in Romantic iconography, *The Enchafed Flood*. Unlike the use of water symbolism in most of Wordsworth, the deluge here threatens both Imagination and abstract reason, and the semi-Quixote flees the waters of judgment that Wordsworth, like the prophet Amos, elsewhere welcomes. Wordsworth puts Imagination at the water line in the marvelous passage about the children sporting on the shore which provides the "Intimations" ode with its liberating epiphany. The seashell participates in both the land of reasoning and the sea of apocalypse, of primal unity, which makes it an ideal type of the poetic Imagination. Though the Arab says that the shell is of more worth than the stone, the passage clearly sets high value on geometric as well as instinctual truth. Yet the stone as a symbol for mathematical reason is very close to Blake's Urizenic symbolism; the Ulro is associated with slabs of stone. Wallace Stevens's use of "the Rock" as symbol is closer to Wordsworth in spirit. The Rock, like the stone, is the gray particular of man's life, which poetry must cause to flower.

One can either pursue an investigation of the dream properties in this incident, which is endless, or else turn to Wordsworth's own reading of it, which takes us closer again to the design of *The Prelude*. The most important point is how close Wordsworth comes to identifying himself with the Arab Quixote. He fancies him a living man, "crazed by love and feeling, and internal thought protracted among endless solitudes." This is a fate that Wordsworth feared for himself, had his sensibility taken too strong control of his reason. For the Arab's mission, though the poet calls it mad, "that maniac's fond anxiety," is very like Wordsworth's own in *The Prelude*. Both desire to save Imagination from the abyss of desert and ocean, man's solitary isolation from and utter absorption into Nature. But the Arab is quixotic; he pursues a quest that is hopeless, for the deluge will cover all. Wordsworth hopes that his own quest will bring the healing waters down, as he pursues his slow, flowing course toward his present freedom.

The first of the major breakthroughs of the Imagination in *The Prelude* comes soon after this dream. The poet, in Book Six, describes a summer expedition to the Alps. He desires to cross the Alps for reasons obscure even to himself. It may be a desire to emancipate his maturing Imagination from Nature by overcoming the greatest

natural barrier he can encounter. He draws an explicit parallel between his Alpine expedition and the onset of the French Revolution:

But Nature then was sovereign in my mind,  
 And mighty forms, seizing a youthful fancy,  
 Had given a charter to irregular hopes.  
 In any age of uneventful calm  
 Among the nations, surely would my heart  
 Have been possessed by similar desire;  
 But Europe at that time was thrilled with joy,  
 France standing on the top of golden hours,  
 And human nature seeming born again.

The rebirth of human nature heralds Wordsworth's own "irregular hope." He does not seem conscious altogether of the personal revolution he seeks to effect for his own imagination. He speaks of it as "an underthirst," which is "seldom utterly allayed," and causes a sadness different in kind from any other. To illustrate it, he cites the incident of his actual crossing of the Alps. He misses his path, and frustrates his "hopes that pointed to the clouds," for a peasant informs him that he has crossed the Alps without even being aware of the supposed achievement. This moment of baffled aspiration is suddenly seen as the agent of a transfiguration:

Imagination—here the Power so called  
 Through sad incompetence of human speech,  
 That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss  
 Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,  
 At once, some lonely traveller.

The mind's thwarted expectation makes it a shapeless abyss; the Imagination *rises from it*, and is self-begotten, like the sudden vapor, "unfathered," that enwraps the lonely traveler. Yet the Imagination remains ours, even if at the time of crisis it seems alien to us:

I was lost;  
 Halted without an effort to break through;  
 But to my conscious soul I now can say—  
 "I recognise thy glory"

The vertigo resulting from the gap between expectation and fulfillment halts Wordsworth at the moment of his disappointment, and leaves him without the will to transcend his frustration. But *now*,

in recollection, he recognizes the glory of the soul's triumphant faculty of expectation:

in such strength  
 Of usurpation, when the light of sense  
 Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed  
 The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,  
 There harbours; whether we be young or old,  
 Our destiny, our being's heart and home,  
 Is with infinitude, and only there;  
 With hope it is, hope that can never die,  
 Effort, and expectation, and desire,  
 And something evermore about to be.

Even here, in a passage bordering the realm of the mystical, the poet's emphasis is naturalistic. Imagination usurps the place of the baffled mind, and the light of sense momentarily goes out: that is, the object world is not perceived. *But*, and this proviso is the poet's, the flash of greater illumination that suddenly reveals the invisible world is itself due to the flickering light of sense. Nature is overcome by Nature, and the senses are transcended by a natural teaching. The transcendence is the vital element in this passage, for in the Imagination's strength to achieve transcendence is the abode and harbor of human greatness. "More! More! is the cry of a mistaken Soul. Less than All cannot satisfy Man," is Blake's parallel statement. Wordsworth stresses infinitude because he defines the imaginative as that which is conversant with or turns upon infinity. In a letter to the poet Landor (January 21, 1824) he defines an imaginative passage as one in which "things are lost in each other, and limits vanish, and aspirations are raised." To the earlier statement in *The Prelude* celebrating "an obscure sense of possible sublimity" (II, 317-8), we can add this passage's sense of "something evermore about to be." Such a sense constitutes for the soul its "banners militant," under which it seeks no trophies or spoils, no self-gratification, for it is:

blest in thoughts  
 That are their own perfection and reward,  
 Strong in herself and in beatitude  
 That hides her, like the mighty flood of Nile  
 Poured from his fount of Abyssinian clouds  
 To fertilise the whole Egyptian plain.

This is a tribute to the autonomy of the creative soul, and to its ultimate value as well. The soul in creation rises out of the unfathered vapor just as the flood of the Nile rises from its cloud-shrouded heights. The waters of creation pour down and fertilize the mind's abyss, giving to it something of the soul's strength of effort, expectation, and desire.

Directly after this revelation, Wordsworth is free to trace the "characters of the great Apocalypse." As he travels through a narrow chasm in the mountains, Nature reveals to him the unity between its constant outer appearances and the ultimate forms of eternity:

The immeasurable height  
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,  
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,  
And in the narrow rent at every turn  
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,  
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,  
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,  
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side  
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight  
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,  
The unfettered clouds and region of the Heavens,  
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—  
Were all like workings of one mind, the features  
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;  
Characters of the great Apocalypse,  
The types and symbols of Eternity,  
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

So much is brought together so magnificently in this that we can read it as a summary of what the poet has to say about the final relation between phenomena and the invisible world. The woods are constantly in process of decay, but the process will never cease; it will continue into Apocalypse. The waterfalls descend, and yet give the appearance of being stationed where they are, not to be moved. The winds are antithetical, balancing one another in the narrow chasm. Thwarted, bewildered, forlorn; they are humanized by this description. Torrents, rocks, crags participate in this speaking with tongues, and the raving stream takes on attributes of human disorder. Above, the unbound Heavens contrast their peace to this torment, their light to this darkness. The above and the below are like the workings of

one unified mind, and are seen as features of the same face, blossoms upon one tree, either and both together. For the human and the natural are alike characters of the great unveiling of reality, equal types and symbols of the everlasting. The power that moves Man is the power that impels Nature, and Man and Nature, taken together, are the true form, not to be transcended even by a last judgment. This intimation of survival is given to Wordsworth under Nature's guidance, but the point of revelation is more human than natural. What the poet describes here is not Nature but the force for which he lacks a name, and which is at one with that "something far more deeply interfused" celebrated in "Tintern Abbey."

After this height in Book Six, the poem descends into the abyss of residence in London in Book Seven.

Imagination rises for Wordsworth in solitude, and yet "Tintern Abbey" puts a very high value upon "the still, sad music of humanity," a love of men that depends upon societies. F. A. Pottle remarks of Wordsworth in this context that though the poet "had the best of intentions, he could never handle close-packed, present, human crowds in the mode of imagination. If he were to grasp the life of a great city imaginatively, it had to be at night or early in the morning, while the streets were deserted; or at least in bad weather, when few people were abroad." As Wordsworth goes along the overflowing street, he is oppressed by a sense that the face of everyone he passes is a mystery to him. Suddenly he is smitten with the view:

Of a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,  
 Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest  
 Wearing a written paper, to explain  
 His story, whence he came, and who he was.  
 Caught by the spectacle my mind turned round  
 As with the might of waters

The huge fermenting mass of humankind does not set the poet's imagination in motion, but the sight of one solitary man among them does. Wordsworth says that the pathetic label the beggar wears is an apt type of the utmost we can know, either of the universe or of ourselves, but this is not the imaginative meaning of the Beggar's sudden manifestation. Like the old Leech Gatherer of "Resolution and Independence," he causes the mind to assume the condition of the moving waters of Apocalypse, to receive a hint of the final communion between Man and Nature. The Leech Gatherer does this



merely by being what he is, a reduced but still human form thoroughly at peace in a landscape reduced to naked desolation, but still natural. The blind Beggar's landscape is the noise of the crowd around him. He sits "with upright face"; the detail suggests the inner uprightness, the endurance of the outwardly bent Leech Gatherer. Amid the shock for eyes and ears of what surrounds him, his label affords a silent vision of human separateness, of the mystery of individual being.

From this bleak image, the poet retires with joy in Book Eight, which both heralds his return to Nature and chronicles the course of the first half of the poem, the stages by which love of Nature has led to love for Man. The figure linking the first love to the second is the shepherd, endowed by the boy Wordsworth with mythical powers and incarnating the virtues of Natural Man, an Adam who needs no dying into life, no second birth. The shepherd affects his own domain by intensifying its own characteristics:

I felt his presence in his own domain,  
As of a lord and master, or a power,  
Or genius, under Nature, under God,  
Presiding; and severest solitude  
Had more commanding looks when he was there.

This figure gives Wordsworth the support he needs for his "trust in what we *may* become." The shepherd, like Michael, like even the Old Cumberland Beggar, is a figure of capable imagination, strong in the tie that binds him to the earth.

Natural love for Man leads Wordsworth where it led the French followers of the prophet Rousseau, to Revolution in the name of the Natural Man. His particular friend in that cause, Michel Beaupuy (or Beaupuis, as Wordsworth spells it, Book Nine, line 419), fighting for the Revolution as a high officer, says to him on encountering a hunger-bitten girl, "'Tis against *that* that we are fighting." As simply, Wordsworth says of him: "Man he loved as man."

The 1850 *Prelude* omits the tragic story of Wordsworth's love affair with Annette Vallon, told under the disguise of the names Vaudracour and Julia in the 1805 *Prelude*. It is not likely that Wordsworth excluded the affair for aesthetic reasons, though much of it makes rather painful reading. Yet parts of it have a rich, almost passionate tone of excited recollection, and all of it, even as disguised, is crucial for the growth of this poet's soul, little as he seems to have

thought so. Nowhere else in his poetry does Wordsworth say of himself, viewing a woman and not Nature, that:

his present mind  
Was under fascination; he beheld  
A vision, and he lov'd the thing he saw.

Nor does one want to surrender the charm of the prophet of Nature accomplishing a stolen interview at night "with a ladder's help."

Wordsworth was separated from Annette by the war between England and France. In the poem, Vaudracour and Julia are parted by parental opposition. The effects of the parting in life were largely hidden. Wordsworth the man made a happy marriage; Wordsworth the poet did not do as well. Julia goes off to a convent, and Vaudracour goes mad. Either in *The Prelude* or out of it, by presence or by absence, the story is a gap in the poem. Memory curbed was dangerous for Wordsworth; memory falsified was an imaginative fatality.

From the veiled account of his crisis in passion Wordsworth passes, in Books Ten and Eleven, to the crisis in his ideological life, the supreme test of his moral nature. When England went to war against the France of the Revolution, Wordsworth experienced the profound shock of having to exult "when Englishmen by thousands were o'erthrown," and the dark sense:

Death-like, of treacherous desertion, felt  
In the last place of refuge—my own soul.

The profounder shock of the Terror and of France's career as an external aggressor followed. Wordsworth was adrift, his faith in the Revolution betrayed, and he sought to replace that faith by abstract speculation, and a blind trust in the supreme efficacy of the analytical faculty. He fell, by his own account, into the Ulro of the mechanists and materialists, a rationalism utterly alien to his characteristic modes of thinking and feeling:

now believing,  
Now disbelieving; endlessly perplexed  
With impulse, motive, right and wrong, the ground  
Of obligation, what the rule and whence  
The sanction; till, demanding formal *proof*,

And seeking it in every thing, I lost  
 All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,  
 Sick, wearied out with contrarieties,  
 Yielded up moral questions in despair.

Love of Nature had led to love of Man, love of Man to revolutionary hope for Man, and the thwarting of that hope to this unnatural abyss. From these depths the poet's sister was to rescue him, maintaining "a saving intercourse with my true self," as he prays her to do in "Tintern Abbey." In an extraordinary outburst of love for Coleridge, to whom the poem is addressed, the poet invokes a parallel salvation for his friend, to restore him "to health and joy and pure contentedness." He then proceeds, in Books Twelve and Thirteen, to tell of the final stages of his crisis of dejection, the impairment of his Imagination and Taste, and their eventual restoration.

"A bigot to the new idolatry," he:

Zealously laboured to cut off my heart  
 From all the sources of her former strength

The final mark of his fall is to begin to scan the visible universe with the same analytical view he has applied to the moral world. In the aesthetic contemplation pictured in "Tintern Abbey," we see into the life of things because the eye has learned a wise passivity. It has been made quiet by the power of harmony, and the deep power of joy. Bereft of these powers, the poet in his crisis yields to the tyranny of the eye:

I speak in recollection of a time  
 When the bodily eye, in every stage of life  
 The most despotic of our senses, gained  
 Such strength in *me* as often held my mind  
 In absolute dominion.

This fear of visual appearance is at one with Wordsworth's worship of the outward world, though it presents itself as paradox. For the visual surfaces of natural reality are mutable, and Wordsworth desperately quests for a natural reality that can never pass away. That reality, for him, lies just within natural appearance, and the eye made generously passive by nature's generosity is able to trace the lineaments of that final reality, and indeed "half create" it, as "Tintern



To paint the visionary dreariness  
 Which, while I looked all round for my lost guide,  
 Invested moorland waste and naked pool,  
 The beacon crowning the lone eminence,  
 The female and her garments vexed and tossed  
 By the strong wind.

The boy's fear of the fresh characters in the turf, and of the moldered gibbet mast, is "natural," as we would say, in these circumstances. But the "visionary dreariness" is a more complex sensation. The common is bare, the pool naked beneath the hills, as open to the eye of heaven as is the pool by which Wordsworth will encounter the Leech Gatherer in "Resolution and Independence," a poem built around a "spot of time." The girl bearing the pitcher struggles against the wind, as winds thwarted winds in the apocalyptic passage in Book Six. Everything that the boy beholds, waste moorland and naked pool, the solitary beacon on the lone eminence, the girl and her garments buffeted by the wind, is similarly dreary, but the nudity and vulnerability of these phenomena, their receptivity to the unchecked power of Nature, unite them in a unified imaginative vision. They blend into one another and into the power to which they offer themselves.

The boy finds no consolation in the scene of visionary dreariness at the time he views it, but he retains it in his memory. Later he returns to the same scene, in the happy hours of early love, his beloved at his side. Upon the scene there falls the gleam of Imagination, with radiance more sublime for the *power* these remembrances had left behind:

So feeling comes in aid  
 Of feeling, and diversity of strength  
 Attends us, if but once we have been strong.

The soul, remembering *how* it felt, but what it felt remembering not; has retained the power of a sense of possible sublimity. Imagination, working through memory, appropriates the visionary power and purges the dreariness originally attached to it in this instance. The power is therefore an intimation of the indestructible, for it has survived both initial natural dreariness and the passage of time.

The power is indestructible, but can the poet retain it? We hear again the desperate forebodings of loss:

The days gone by  
 Return upon me almost from the dawn  
 Of life: the hiding-places of man's power  
 Open; I would approach them, but they close.  
 I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,  
 May scarcely see at all

The function of the spots of time is to enshrine the spirit of the Past for future restoration. They are meant to be memorials in a lively sense, giving substance and life to what the poet can still feel. That they become memorials in the sepulchral sense also is a sadly unintentional irony.

The poet gives a second example of a spot of time, more complex than the first. Away from home with his brothers, he goes forth into the fields, impatient to see the led palfreys that will bear him back to his father's house. He goes to the summit of a crag overlooking both roads on which the palfreys can come:

'twas a day  
 Tempestuous, dark, and wild, and on the grass  
 I sat half-sheltered by a naked wall;  
 Upon my right hand couched a single sheep,  
 Upon my left a blasted hawthorn stood

With these companions he watches, as the mist gives intermittent prospect of the plain beneath. Just after this episode, his father dies, and he thinks back to his vigil, with its anxiety of hope:

And afterwards, the wind and sleety rain,  
 And all the business of the elements,  
 The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,  
 And the bleak music from that old stone wall,  
 The noise of wood and water, and the mist  
 That on the line of each of those two roads  
 Advanced in such indisputable shapes;  
 All these were kindred spectacles and sounds  
 To which I oft repaired, and thence would drink,  
 As at a fountain

What does he drink there? We recognize first in this episode the characteristic quality of the nakedness of the natural scene. The boy is only half sheltered by the naked wall. Beside him, seeking this

exposed shelter from the wind, is a single sheep, and on the other side a hawthorn, blasted by the elements. The mist rises all about, blending the landscape into a unity. What can be drunk from this fountain of vulnerable natural identity is, as before, the consciousness of immutable existence, of a life in Nature and in Man which cannot die. This one life within us and abroad must bear the weather, however tempestuous, dark, and wild, but it will not be destroyed if it holds itself open to the elements in loving trust.

Thus "moderated" and "composed" by the spots of time, his faith in Nature restored, the poet is able to say in triumph:

I found  
Once more in Man an object of delight,  
Of pure imagination, and of love

He is prepared now for his poem's apocalyptic conclusion, the ascent of Mount Snowdon and the vision vouchsafed him there, in Book Fourteen. The poem's structure comes to rest on a point of epiphany, located on a mountain top and associated with the moon and all the mutable world below it, but also with the immutable world above. Girt round by the mist of rising Imagination, the poet looks up to see the Moon hung naked in the azure firmament. The mist stretches in solid vapors, a still ocean as far as the eye can see. In the midst of this ocean, a rift appears, and through the gap:

Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams  
Innumerable, roaring with one voice!  
Heard over earth and sea, and, in that hour,  
For so it seemed, felt by the starry heavens.

The mist, which has for so long figured as an emblem of Imagination in Wordsworth's poetry, now moves to an identity with the emblem of apocalypse, the gathering waters of judgment. The voice of mighty waters makes its strength felt past the point of epiphany, and momentarily influences even the starry heavens. Of this vision the poet says:

it appeared to me the type  
Of a majestic intellect, its acts  
And its possessions, what it has and craves,  
What in itself it is, and would become.  
There I beheld the emblem of a mind

That feeds upon infinity, that broods  
 Over the dark abyss, intent to hear  
 Its voices issuing forth to silent light  
 In one continuous stream; a mind sustained  
 By recognitions of transcendent power

The whole scene before him is the "type of a majestic intellect," while the moon is the emblem of a mind brooding over the dark abyss. The moon, governing all that is mutable beneath it, feeds upon the infinity of the larger vision to gain an intimation of what is beyond mutability. The moon is like the poet's aroused consciousness, looking up to the indestructible heavens and down at the sea of mist which intimates both the impermanence of the world as we know it (the hint is that it will be flooded again) and its final endurance, after the judgment of the waters. Caught at what Eliot calls "the still point of the turning world," Wordsworth attains to an apprehension of the relation between his moonlike consciousness and the majestic intellect, which now feels the human mind's reciprocal force but which transcends both the human and the natural. What Wordsworth is giving us here is his vision of God, akin to Dante's tremendous vision at the close of the *Paradiso*, except that the mode of this manifestation is still extraordinarily naturalistic. Though not Nature but the power that moves her is revealed, the power's showing forth is not miracle but rather intensification of natural process and visual appearance. Later, in *The Excursion*, Wordsworth will not trust the powers of poetry enough to make so autonomous a statement, to see so human a vision. Here, as he gathers *The Prelude's* many currents together, he shows a confidence both in his art and in his personal myth of natural salvation. In this confidence he has created a major poem that refreshes life, that is, as Wallace Stevens wrote:

An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.  
 The poem, through candor, brings back a power again  
 That gives a candid kind to everything.