

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

(1799, II, 361-71)

What other major poet can one *now* take seriously when he talks about the development of individual consciousness? There are times when Wordsworth fails to convince, or when he is blatantly writing for propagandist purposes, but in his greatest work—*The Ruined Cottage*, for instance, and *The Prelude* in all its forms—he shows an insight into the workings of the mind that is not to be found elsewhere in English poetry. In Keats's phrase, he thinks into the human heart. It is surely no bad thing to do.

M. H. ABRAMS

The Design of *The Prelude*:
Wordsworth's Long Journey Home†

In the "Prospectus" to his intended masterwork, *The Recluse*, Wordsworth announces that his "high argument" will be the capacity of the mind of man, "When wedded to this goodly universe / In love and holy passion," to transform the world into a paradise which will be "A simple produce of the common day."¹ He goes on to pray to the "prophetic Spirit" that

if with this
I mix more lowly matter; with the thing
Contemplated, describe the Mind and Man
Contemplating; and who, and what he was—
The transitory Being that beheld
This Vision; when and where, and how he lived;—
Be not this labour useless.

In this way Wordsworth designated and justified the personal narrative which makes up the opening book of *The Recluse* he called *Home at Grasmere*, as well as the entire poem that his wife later

† From M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971). This essay incorporates a revised version of chapter 2, section 1, and chapter 5, section 2.

1. Wordsworth excerpted the verse passage that he called "a kind of Prospectus of the design and scope" of *The Recluse* from the conclusion to *Home at Grasmere* and printed it in his Preface to *The Excursion* (1814).

named *The Prelude*. Wordsworth described the latter work as a "tributary" and also "as a sort of portico to the Recluse, part of the same building."² The time taken to compose *The Prelude* straddled the writing of the Prospectus, and the completed *Prelude* was conceived as an integral part of the overall structure whose "design and scope" Wordsworth specified in that poetic manifesto. "The Poem on the growth of your own mind," as Coleridge recalled the plan in 1815, "was as the ground-plat and the Roots, out of which the Recluse was to have sprung up as the Tree"—two distinct works, but forming "one compleat Whole."³ The role of *The Prelude*, as Wordsworth himself describes his grand design, is to recount the mental growth of a "transitory Being," culminating in his achievement of a "Vision," and in the recognition that his mission is to impart the circumstances and results of that vision in the enduring form of an unprecedented 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.⁴

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."⁵

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") and the *Künstlerroman*⁶ (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

2. To De Quincey, March 6, 1804, *Letters: The Early Years* (2nd ed.; Oxford, 1967), p. 454; to Beaumont, June 3, 1805, *ibid.*, p. 594.

3. To Wordsworth, May 30, 1815, *Collected Letters* (Oxford, 1956-59) [Griggs], IV, 573.

4. *Home at Grasmere*, lines 686-91, pre-

ceding the Prospectus.

5. "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface of 1815."

6. *Bildungsroman*: a novel about the protagonist's development from infancy to maturity. *Künstlerroman*: a novel about the development of an artist.

Poet's mind").⁷ The whole poem is written as a sustained address to Coleridge—"I speak bare truth / As if alone to thee in private talk" (X, 372-73); 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 drastically 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.⁸ 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 vocation 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.⁹

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, 660-61) 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 "after-meditation" (III, 644-48). In a fine and subtle figure for the interdiffusion of the two consciousnesses (IV, 247-64), 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

7. *Letters: The Early Years*, p. 518; Isabella Fenwick note to "There Was a Boy"; and *The Prelude*, XIII, 408. (All references are to *The Prelude* of 1805, unless indicated by the date 1850.) [Quotations are drawn from *Oxford "Prelude" —Editors.*]

8. For convincing evidence that the chief prototype of the walk described in the "preamble" to *The Prelude* was Wordsworth's walk to Grasmere, see John

Finch, "Wordsworth's Two-Handed Engine," *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970). But Wordsworth probably telescoped events from several walks in real life, to make the "preamble" to *The Prelude* a typological change of venue, signifying a new stage in his spiritual history.

9. E.g., VII, 1-56; XI, 1-12.

Poet's mind").⁷ The whole poem is written as a sustained address to Coleridge—"I speak bare truth / As if alone to thee in private talk" (X, 372-73); 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 drastically 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.⁸ 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 vocation 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.⁹

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, 660-61) 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 "after-meditation" (III, 644-48). In a fine and subtle figure for the interdiffusion of the two consciousnesses (IV, 247-64), 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

7. *Letters: The Early Years*, p. 518; Isabella Fenwick note to "There Was a Boy"; and *The Prelude*, XIII, 408. (All references are to *The Prelude* of 1805, unless indicated by the date 1850.) [Quotations are drawn from *Oxford "Prelude"*—Editors.]

8. For convincing evidence that the chief prototype of the walk described in the "preamble" to *The Prelude* was Wordsworth's walk to Grasmere, see John

Finch, "Wordsworth's Two-Handed Engine," *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970). But Wordsworth probably telescoped events from several walks in real life, to make the "preamble" to *The Prelude* a typological change of venue, signifying a new stage in his spiritual history.

9. E.g., VII, 1-56; XI, 1-12.

reflections of the surrounding scene, from the tricks and refractions of the water currents, and from his own intrusive but inescapable mirror image (that is, his present awareness). 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. Only intermittently 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 uncertainty, 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, in 1804, to add to the beginning and end of the poem the excluded middle: his experiences in London and in France. A work is to be judged, however, as a finished and free-standing product; and in *The Prelude* as it emerged after some seven 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" (II, 448-57), 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.

The spaciousness of his chosen form allows Wordsworth to introduce some of the clutter and contingency of ordinary life. In accordance with his controlling idea, however, he selects for extended treatment only those experiences which are significant for his evolution toward an inherent end, 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, 232-34)

The Prelude, correspondingly, is ordered in three stages. There is a process of unified mental development which, although at times suspended, remains a continuum; this process is shattered 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 humanity, 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, 384-85).

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, 343-44); 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.¹ 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*.²

His second revelation he achieves on a mountaintop. 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*. 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 reciprocity 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 cried after the crisis of France, invoking the "breezes and soft airs"³ that had blown in the "glad preamble" to his poem and, by evoking an inner "creative breeze," had then

1. *The Prelude*, XII, 44-76, 112-16. Cf. *Home at Grasmere*, lines 664-752.

2. Poetic art.

3. XI, 1 ff. and VII, 1 ff.

tional journey. The poem in fact opens, as Elizabeth Sewell has said, "with the poet in a prospect of wide landscape and open sky," on a literal walk which serves as "the great over-all poetic figure or trope of a journey which he is about to undertake."⁵ In the course of this episode the aimless wanderer becomes "as a Pilgrim resolute" who takes "the road that pointed toward the chosen Vale," and at the end of the first book the road translates itself into the metaphorical way of his life's pilgrimage:

Forthwith shall be brought down
Through later years the story of my life.
The road lies plain before me. . . .

(1850; I, 91-93, 638-40)

The Prelude is replete with "the Wanderers of the Earth" (XII, 156), and after the period of childhood, its chief episodes are Wordsworth's own wanderings through the English countryside, the Alps, Italy, France, and Wales—literal journeys through actual places which modulate easily into symbolic landscapes traversed by a metaphorical wayfarer. This organizing figure works in two dimensions. In one of these, *The Prelude* represents the life which the poet narrates as a self-educative journey, "from stage to stage / Advancing," in which his early development had been "progress on the self-same path," the crisis following the French Revolution had been "a stride at once / Into another region," and the terminus is his achievement of maturity in "the discipline / And consummation of the Poet's mind."⁶ In the second application, the poet repeatedly figures his own imaginative enterprise, the act of conceiving and composing *The Prelude* itself, as a perilous quest through the uncharted regions of his own mind.

At times the vehicle for this latter poetic journey is a voyage at sea, connoting the wanderings of Odysseus in his search for home:

What avail'd,
When Spells forbade the Voyager to land,
The fragrance which did ever and anon
Give notice of the Shore? . . .
My business was upon the barren sea,
My errand was to sail to other coasts.

(XI, 48-56; see I, 35-38)

Elsewhere Wordsworth's implied parallel is to Dante, who "Nell mezzo del cammin di nostra vita"⁷ had been granted a visionary journey, with a relay of guides, through hell and the earthly paradise to heaven:

5. *The Orphic Voice: Poetry and Natural History* (New Haven, 1960), pp. 338-39.
6. *The Prelude*, XI, 43-44; X, 239-42; XIII, 270-71.

7. "In the middle of the journey of our life"; the line occurs in the opening passage of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

A Traveller I am,
And all my Tale is of myself; even so,
So be it, if the pure in heart delight
To follow me; and Thou, O honor'd Friend!
Who in my thoughts art ever at my side,
Uphold, as heretofore, my fainting steps.
(III, 196-201)

At the beginning of the ninth book, "as a traveller, who has gained the brow / Of some aerial Down" and "is tempted to review / The region left behind him," Wordsworth turns back to his earlier youth, before he moves reluctantly on into the discordant "argument" that begins with his residence in France—"Oh, how much unlike the past!" (1850: IX, 1-22). The eleventh book, narrating the process of Wordsworth's recovery, opens in a parallel to Milton's description of his epic journey back from hell to the realms of light (XI, 1-7; see *Paradise Lost*, III, 13-20). And through all these regions the imagined presence of Coleridge serves both as auditor and guide, heartening the exhausted poet in his pilgrimage and quest:

Thou wilt not languish here, O Friend, for whom
I travel in these dim uncertain ways
Thou wilt assist me as a Pilgrim gone
In quest of highest truth.

(XI, 390-93)

The last book of *The Prelude*, in symmetry with its first book, opens with a literal walk which translates itself into a metaphor for the climactic stage both of the journey of life and of the imaginative journey which is the poem itself. This time, however, the walk is not a movement along an open plain but the ascent of a mountain, the traditional place for definitive visions since Moses had climbed Mount Sinai. As in Hegel's contemporary *Phenomenology*⁸ the spirit, at the climax of its educational journey, recognizes itself in its other, so Wordsworth's mind, confronting nature, discovers itself in its own perfected powers:

A meditation rose in me that night
Upon the lonely Mountain . . .
and it appear'd to me
The perfect image of a mighty Mind.

In the earliest stage of its development Wordsworth's "Babe, / Nurs'd in his Mother's arms" had not only acquired "The gravitation and the filial bond . . . that connect him with the world," but had also, as "inmate of this *active* universe," established the beginnings of the reciprocative power by which

8. *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807) man philosopher, G.W.F. Hegel.
was the first important book by the Ger-

his mind . . .
 Creates, creator and receiver both,
 Working but in alliance with the works
 Which it beholds.—Such, verily, is the first
 Poetic spirit of our human life.

(II, 265-76)

On Mount Snowdon, in an evident parallel and complement to this early passage, his mind recognizes, in that image of itself "which Nature thus / Thrusts forth upon the senses," the same power, which has now developed into "the fulness of its strength." As mist and moonlight transform the natural scene, so higher minds by a similiar "Power"

can send abroad
 Like transformation, for themselves create
 A like existence; and, whene'er it is
 Created for them, catch it by an instinct . . .
 Willing to work and to be wrought upon

by the works which they behold. An essential alteration, however, is that the mature poetic mind, whose infant perception had been a state of undifferentiated consciousness, has acquired self-consciousness, and is able to sustain the sense of its own identity as an individuation-in-unison with the objects it perceives. In Wordsworth's terse rendering,

hence the highest bliss
 That can be known is theirs, the consciousness
 Of whom they are habitually infused
 Through every image, and through every thought,
 And all impressions.

(XIII, 84-111)

I have remarked that *The Prelude* has a circular organization. This circularity of its form, we now see, is correlative with the circularity of its subject matter. In the opening passage of *The Prelude* the narrator is confirmed in his vocation as a poet-prophet and, in response to an impulse from the autumnal wood, chooses as his goal "a known Vale, whither my feet should turn," in the assurance "of some work of glory there forthwith to be begun." "Keen as a Truant or a Fugitive, / But as a Pilgrim resolute," and also (in a complementary pedestrian metaphor) "like a home-bound labourer," he then pursued his way until a three days' walk "brought me to my hermitage" (1850; I, 71-80, 90-107). At the end of *The Prelude* Wordsworth, having taken up his "permanent abode" (XIII, 338) in this hermitage, calls "back to mind" the occasion of its beginning. But *The Prelude* has a complex function, for it is designed not only as a poem in itself, but also as a "portico"

to *The Recluse*. The spiritual journey thus circles back at its conclusion to the literal journey with which it had originated; but this beginning at once turns over into the opening book of Wordsworth's "work of glory," *The Recluse* proper, which describes his way of life in the chosen vale.⁹ Only now does he identify the aspect of the vale which had all along made it the goal of his tortuous literal, spiritual, and poetic journey. That goal, as in all the ancient genre of the circuitous pilgrimage of life, is home—*Home at Grasmere*.

The initial passage of *Home at Grasmere* makes it clear that the place to which the poet has returned is not his literal home but one which, on his first overview of the "Vale below" when he had chanced across it as "a roving School-boy," he had recognized to be his spiritual home. "Perfect was the Spot . . . stirring to the Spirit"; and he had immediately felt that "here / Must be his Home, this Valley be his World." Throughout his youth the vale had lingered in memory, "shedding upon joy / A brighter joy," and now the home of his imagining has become his actual home (the word reverberates through the opening passage):

And now 'tis mine, perchance for life, dear Vale;
Beloved Grasmere (let the Wandering Streams
Take up, the cloud-capt hills repeat, the Name),
One of thy lowly Dwellings is my Home.

(1-59)

The place in which, "on Nature's invitation" (line 71), Wordsworth's literal and metaphoric wanderings have terminated is identified, after the venerable formula of the Christian quest, as a home which is also a recovered paradise. In his Pisgah-sight¹ of it as a schoolboy he had looked upon it as a "paradise before him" (line 14); and it remains, after he takes up his abode in it, an "earthly counterpart" of heaven (line 642), which he describes in terms echoing Milton's description of the Garden of Eden, and in which Wordsworth and Dorothy, "A solitary pair" (line 255) are somewhat incongruously the Adam and Eve. The journey to this ultimate stage has taken him through "the realities of life so cold," but this had been a fortunate fall into experience, for "the cost" of what he has lost from the earlier stage of his life is greatly outweighed by "what I keep, have gain'd / Shall gain," so that

in my day of Childhood I was less
The mind of Nature, less, take all in all,
Whatever may be lost, than I am now.

9. As de Selincourt points out (*Wordsworth's Political Works* [Oxford Wordsworth], V. 365), the opening book of *The Recluse* "is in fact a continuation of his poetical autobiography from the place where *The Prelude* leaves off." This

place, as we have seen, is also the place from which *The Prelude* has set out.

1. Pisgah was the mountain from the top of which Moses was granted a view of the promised land; Deuteronomy 34:1-4.

For him, man's ancient dream of felicity has been brought down from a transcendent heaven and located in this very world—

the distant thought
Is fetch'd out of the heaven in which it was.
The unappropriated bliss hath found
An owner, and that owner I am he.
The Lord of this enjoyment is on Earth
And in my breast.²

Here he dwells, therefore, as a second Adam—more fortunate, indeed, than his predecessor, for he knows what it is to have lacked the Eden he now possesses:

The boon is absolute; surpassing grace
To me hath been vouchsafed; among the bowers
Of blissful Eden this was neither given,
Nor could be given, possession of the good
Which had been sighed for, ancient thought fulfilled
And dear Imaginations realized
Up to their highest measure, yea and more.³

As in comparable passages in Hölderlin and Novalis⁴ (in Blake the parallel is more with Beulah than with the New Jerusalem⁵), all the natural scene becomes alive, human, and feminine, and encloses the poet in an embrace of love:

Embrace me then, ye Hills, and close me in. . . .
But I would call thee beautiful, for mild
And soft, and gay, and beautiful thou art,
Dear Valley, having in thy face a smile
Though peaceful, full of gladness.

(lines 110–17)

And when the solitary pair had first entered this valley together in the winter season, its elements had addressed them as fellow beings:

“What would ye,” said the shower,
“Wild Wanderers, whither through my dark domain?”
The sunbeam said, “be happy.” When this Vale
We entered, bright and solemn was the sky

2. Lines 60 ff., MS. variant, *Poetical Works* [*Oxford Wordsworth*], V, 315–16.

3. Lines 103–9. As late as in a poem of 1811 Wordsworth parallels his “Departure from the Vale of Grasmere” to that of a tenant of “Elysian plains” or of “celestial Paradise,” whom it might please to absent himself from felicity long enough to take a round trip to a lower realm: “O pleasant transit, Grasmere! to resign / Such happy fields, abodes so calm as thine. * * * / Ne'er can the way be

irksome or forlorn / That winds into itself for sweet return” (*Poetical Works* [*Oxford Wordsworth*], III, 64).

4. J.C.F. Hölderlin (1770–1843) and Novalis, pseudonym of Friedrich Leopold, Freiherr von Hardenberg (1772–1801), German romantic poets.

5. Blake's “Beulah” is the peaceable, pastoral “State” of the human condition. The New Jerusalem is the city that descends from heaven as the Bride of the Lamb, Revelation 21:2.

That faced us with a passionate welcoming,
And led us to our threshold

—a threshold which in an earlier version of the text had been that of “a home / Within a home, which was to be” (lines 168–73).

The poet’s spiritual home, however, is inescapably a paradise of this earth, for man in Grasmere Vale differs “but little from the Man elsewhere,” exhibiting the vices of “selfishness, and envy, and revenge, . . . / Flattery and double-dealing, strife and wrong” (lines 347–57). But, he asks, is there not a strain of poetry that shall be “the acknowledged voice of life,” and so speak “of solid good / And real evil” in a complex harmony that is of a higher order than the simple pastoral fantasy—

More grateful, more harmonious than the breath
The idle breath of softest pipe attuned
To pastoral fancies?

(lines 401–9)

For this poetry of real life he dismisses the escapist poetry of wish-fulfillment, “all Arcadian dreams / All golden fancies of the golden Age” engendered by man’s “wish to part / With all remembrance of a jarring world” (lines 625–32). Confident of “an internal brightness,” he is finally ready to assume “his office” as a mature artist, and to announce his poetic manifesto: In this “peaceful Vale . . . / A Voice shall speak, and what will be the Theme?” (lines 664–76, 751–53).

Home at Grasmere concludes with the answer to this question, in the verse passage that Wordsworth later excerpted to serve as the “Prospectus of the design and scope” of *The Recluse* and its “preparatory poem,” *The Prelude*. This statement, we now recognize, in fact epitomizes, and proclaims as valid for other men, what the poet himself has learned during the arduous journey of his life that has now terminated in the earthly paradise of Grasmere Vale. Its scope, he tells us, will encompass the poetic narrative of that life itself, in the account of “the transitory Being” who had beheld the “Vision” which constitutes his poetic credential, and which it is his unique mission to impart. This vision is of “the Mind of Man,” through which he will undertake a journey that must ascend higher than Milton’s heaven and sink deeper than Milton’s hell. Of this audacious poetic enterprise it will be the “high argument” that the human mind is capable of recreating the world of ordinary experience; and this new world, despite the inescapability of human evil and anguish—no less prevalent in the solitude of “fields and groves” than when “barricadoed . . . / Within the walls of cities”—is the equivalent in actual experience of the “mere fiction” of “groves Elysian, Fortunate Fields,” and constitutes a sufficient paradise to

which we have immediate access. Here we return to Wordsworth's central metaphor for an imaginative apocalypse that will restore paradise, derived from the marriage of the Lamb and the New Jerusalem that inaugurates "a new heaven and a new earth" in the biblical Apocalypse, but adapted to his own naturalistic premises of mind and its interaction with nature. Only let a man succeed in restoring his integrity, by consummating a marital union between his mind and "the external World" which, to the sensual in their "sleep of Death," has become a severed and alien reality, and he shall find "Paradise, and groves Elysian . . . / A simple produce of the common day." Precisely this, of course, is the subject, plot, and implicit argument of the story that Wordsworth has just finished telling in *The Prelude* and in its continuation, *Home at Grasmere*.

GEOFFREY H. HARTMAN

A Poet's Progress: Wordsworth and the *Via Naturaliter Negativa*†

The exact role that Nature played in Wordsworth's experience has not been defined beyond controversy. A number of readers have felt that his poetry honors and even worships Nature; and in this they have the support of Blake, a man so sensitive to any trace of "Natural Religion" that he blamed some verses of Wordsworth's for a bowel complaint which almost killed him.¹ Scholarship, luckily, tempers the affections, and the majority of scholarly readers have emphasized the poet's progression from Nature Worship or even Pantheism to a highly qualified form of natural religion, with increasing awareness of the "ennobling interchange" between mind and Nature and a late yielding of primacy to the activity of the mind or the idealizing power of Imagination. A very small group, finally—represented by occasional insights rather than by a sustained position—has pointed to the deeply paradoxical or problematic character of Wordsworth's dealings with Nature and suggested that what he calls Imagination may be *intrinsically* opposed to images culled or developed from Nature.² This last and rarest position seems to me quite close to the truth, yet I do not feel it conflicts totally with the more traditional readings, which stress the

† From *Modern Philology*, LIX (1962), pages 214–24. Several of the original footnotes have been shortened. The Latin phrase means "the naturally negative way."

1. See *Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lamb, etc., being Selections from the Re-*

mains of Henry Crabb Robinson, ed. E. J. Morley (Manchester, 1932), pp. 5 and 15.

2. See, for example, Paul de Man, "Structure intentionnelle de l'Image romantique," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, no. 51 (1960), pp. 1–17.