

Thematic Analysis of "The Prelude"

Wordsworth's spiritual epic, *The Prelude*, is a poetic contemplation of the process of creation itself and the growth of an individual mind. It is a chronicle specifically of Wordsworth's own growth, and in doing this Wordsworth becomes the first modern poet and the beginning of an aesthetic revolution.

The autobiographical poem was composed over the course of a lifetime; Wordsworth knew from as early as 1804 that *The Prelude* should not be published while he was living. He asserted that it was "unprecedented in literary history that a man should talk so much about himself," and perhaps he was loathe to face the critical reception, as battered and abused as he had been by critics for most of his life.

The Prelude has a very complicated textual history that must be sorted out here first. Wordsworth worked on this poem for more than forty years. His first drafts date back to 1798, and the last large-scale revision ended in 1839. Seventeen major *Prelude* manuscripts survive in the Wordsworth Library at Grasmere. There are two principal drafts of the poem, the 1805 *Prelude* and the 1850 *Prelude*; someone who refers to *The Prelude* is citing one or the other of these two. However, a third version, the two-part *Prelude* of 1799, contains many treasures of its own and is studied for evidence of progression and change in the mind of Wordsworth even though it is not a primary text. The manuscripts of 1799 and 1805 both indicate that Wordsworth considered his work complete, but he continued to make revisions for another thirty-four years, creating the 1850 *Prelude*. He had originally thought of the poem as an end piece, and then as a preparatory poem for an epic philosophical work called *The Recluse*, which he never completed; thus, Wordsworth never gave *The Prelude* a title. His wife, Mary, supplied the title after his death.

At the age of twenty-eight, Wordsworth began writing the two-part 1799 *Prelude* while he was touring Germany with his sister, Dorothy, and his close friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Wordsworth and Coleridge had planned to write a great philosophical poem called *The Recluse* together, but it was not materializing. With *The Recluse* languishing, Wordsworth searched his past for reasons, and 1799 *Prelude* is the result. Part I is a reminiscence of childhood and

an exploration of its formative powers. Part II is an account of his adolescence. The poem concludes in a valediction to Coleridge, who is present implicitly throughout the work.

Wordsworth decided to extend the poem and created the thirteen-book 1805 *Prelude*, considered now to be his greatest achievement and his best *Prelude*, but it was not always considered so. This poem takes Wordsworth through his years at Cambridge, his experiences in France and the French Revolution, his involvement with the philosopher Godwin, his spiritual breakdown in the spring of 1796, and his recovery through the experience of nature. It was during the writing of this 1805 *Prelude* that Wordsworth decided that the poem should not be published if it was not placed in its intended context, *The Recluse*, of which only fragments were completed.

The 1850 *Prelude*, published just ten weeks after his death, represents three major revisions and several minor ones. In this last version, Wordsworth refined the more ecstatic parts and suppressed the poem's radical statements about the supremacy of the human mind and its union with Nature. The 1805 and the 1850 versions are not radically different, however, so it is easy to speak about the latter two versions simultaneously. Many scholars believe that Wordsworth damaged the 1805 *Prelude* in his attempt to improve and polish it. Wordsworth's political views and poetic vision changed slowly, but radically, over the course of his lifetime. The young Wordsworth and the old Wordsworth are often discussed as two different artists—the younger being far more vital and significant. The young Wordsworth was a revolutionary, semi-atheist, and humanist. The old Wordsworth was a conservative, defender of Church and State, though certainly still a humanist. It is not debatable, however, that his genius manifested itself within a single decade in late youth: 1798 to 1808.

What he wrote before and after this decade would have given him a place in literary history, but certainly not the one he wanted and won, the one next to Milton. Throughout his life, Wordsworth was driven by the desire to match and surmount his literary predecessor, John Milton, and in particular Milton's epic, *Paradise Lost*. *The Prelude* is Wordsworth's answer to *Paradise Lost*.

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth sets up a cycle of development, crisis, and recovery. This recovery moves him to a state of existence higher than the initial one—there is an added sense of awe, a heightened

awareness. This new sensitivity gives meaning to human existence where there was none before, where there was only suffering and loss. The central philosophical question of *The Prelude* is answered—how to understand human existence in the quagmire of decline and destruction we see everywhere around us.

Throughout the poem are “spots of time,” as Wordsworth called them. These were intense, revelatory, almost hallucinogenic moments that descended on him occasionally, in natural surroundings, bringing him closer to nature, helping him comprehend it and define his own relationship to it.

The poem is climaxed by two revelations. At Cambridge, he achieves an inward knowledge that he is a kind of chosen one, and on a walk home from a dance during a summer dawn he experiences a “spot of time”:

Ah, need I say, dear friend, that to the brim
My heart was full? I made no vows, but vows
Were then made for me: bond unknown to me
Was given, that I should be—else sinning greatly—
A dedicated spirit. On I walked
In blessedness, which even yet remains. (Book 4, lines 333–339)

This was the first revelation. His futile commitment to the French Revolution comprises a part of his subsequent despair, but it also gives him the insight that he was not going to be a “spirit” of deeds.

Above all
Did Nature bring again this wiser mood,
More deeply reestablished in my soul,
Which, seeing little worthy or sublime
In what we blazon with the pompous names
Of power and action, early tutored me
To look with feelings of fraternal love
Upon those unassuming things that hold
A silent station in this beauteous world. (Book 12, lines 38–47)

His role would necessitate a seclusion, a withdrawal, a solitary lifestyle that would allow him the detachment he needed to meditate. His role was to extend the meaning of poetry and bring nature to those who cannot see it:

Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak
A lasting inspiration, sanctified
By reason and by truth; what we have loved
Others will love, and we may teach them how: (Book 13, lines 446–449)

Wordsworth's despair sprang also from his search for identity, which was resolved in the discovery of his purpose. The twelfth book of *The Prelude* articulates his ideas for the revolution of poetry that he wanted to bring about, particularly with regards to subjects, style, and values. *The Prelude* incorporates the discovery of its own self, its own reason for being. It articulates the achievement of "Vision."

The second revelation is described in the concluding book of *The Prelude*. It is achieved on top of Mount Snowdown, an experience Wordsworth had in 1791, before his adventures in France, but is placed achronologically at the end of the poem. Wordsworth breaks through cloud cover and sees a scene of immense beauty. Then, later that night:

A meditation rose in me that night
Upon the lonely mountain when the scene
Had passed away, and it appeared to me
The perfect image of the mighty mind,
Of one that feeds upon infinity,
That is exalted by an under-presence (Book 13, lines 67–72)

Wordsworth decided to "create/ A like existence." What has been revealed to Wordsworth in this landscape is the focus of the planned poem, *The Recluse*—the mind of Man, the union between the mind and the external world.

The whole poem is achronological, beginning at the end, when he has chosen to take up residence at Grasmere. He does not tell the story as if it were set in the past, but in the present as he looks backward at the events of his life as well as the small moments of spontaneity, the sensations, the fleeting emotions and impressions that filled his childhood and his formative years. He speaks of a former self and the altered present self as two beings rather than the progression of one. In this Wordsworth achieves a mixed and manifold awareness that he calls two consciousnesses. The idea of memory weaves itself through much of Wordsworth's poetry, but memory takes on a new and more profound meaning as he discovers that its nature is more complicated than a mere record of past events:

Which yet have such self-practice in the mind
That sometimes when I think of them I seem
Two consciousnesses—conscious of myself
And of some other being. (Book 2, lines 30–33)

His aim was to capture the freshness of first sensation before it was duntrodden by routine.

But Wordsworth's vision of an earthly paradise faded over the course of his lifetime. He could not maintain his closeness to nature and his awe of the mind of man. He became didactic in many of his later poems, his humanism turning into overt lessons or lectures given to those who did not have empathy for the common man. He worried often that his muse had left him in his later years:

Oh, yet a few short years of useful life,
And all will be complete—thy race run,
Thy monument of glory will be raised.
Then, though too weak to tread the ways of truth,
This age fall back to old idolatry.
Though men return to servitude as fast
As the tide ebbs, to ignominy and shame
By nations sink together, we shall still
Find solace in the knowledge which we have (Book 13, lines 432–440)

NOTE: All quotes from "The Prelude" are from the 1805 "Prelude" as it appears in *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979)

Critical Views on "The Prelude"

A. C. BRADLEY ON THE ORIGINALITY OF WORDSWORTH

[A. C. Bradley, Professor of Poetry at Oxford, wrote *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) and *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1909).]

There have been greater poets than Wordsworth, but none more original. He saw new things, or he saw things in a new way. Naturally, this would have availed us little if his new things had been private fancies, or if his new perception had been superficial. But that was not so. If it had been, Wordsworth might have won acceptance more quickly, but he would not have gained his lasting hold on poetic minds. As it is, those in whom he creates the taste by which he is relished, those who learn to love him (and in each generation they are not a few), never let him go. Their love for him is of the kind that he himself celebrated, a settled passion, perhaps "slow to begin," but "never ending," and twined around the roots of their being. And the reason is that they find his way of seeing the world, his poetic experience, what Arnold meant by his "criticism of life," to be something deep, and therefore something that will hold. It continues to bring them joy, peace, strength, exaltation. It does not thin out or break beneath them as they grow older and wiser; nor does it fail them, much less repel them, in sadness or even in their sorest need. And yet—to return to our starting-point—it continues to strike them as original, and something more. It is not like Shakespeare's myriad-mindedness; it is, for good or evil or both, peculiar. They can remember, perhaps, the day when first they saw a cloud somewhat as Wordsworth saw it, or first really understood what made him write this poem or that; his unique way of seeing and feeling, though now familiar and beloved, still brings them not only peace, strength, exaltation, but a "shock of mild surprise"; and his paradoxes, long known by heart and found full of truth, still remain paradoxes.

If this is so, the road into Wordsworth's mind must be through his strangeness and his paradoxes, and not round them. I do not mean that they are everywhere in his poetry. Much of it, not to speak of occasional platitudes, is beautiful without being peculiar or difficult;

and some of this may be as valuable as that which is audacious or strange. But unless we get hold of that, we remain outside Wordsworth's centre; and, if we have not a most unusual affinity to him, we cannot get hold of that unless we realise its strangeness, and refuse to blunt the sharpness of its edge. Consider, for example, two or three of his statements; the statements of a poet, no doubt, and not of a philosopher, but still evidently statements expressing, intimating, or symbolizing, what for him was the most vital truth. He said that the meanest flower that blows could give him thoughts that often lie too deep for tears. He said, in a poem not less solemn, that Nature was the soul of all his moral being; and also that she can so influence us that nothing will be able to disturb our faith that all that we behold is full of blessings. After making his Wanderer tell the heart-rending tale of Margaret, he makes him say that the beauty and tranquillity of her ruined cottage had once so affected him

That what we feel of sorrow and despair
From ruin and from change, and all the grief
The passing shows of Being leave behind,
Appeared an idle dream, that could not live
Where meditation was.

[*The Excursion*, I, 949-53]

—A. C. Bradley, "Wordsworth," in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan and Company, 1950): pp. 13-14.



LIONEL TRILLING ON THE SENTIMENT OF BEING

[Lionel Trilling is University Professor at Columbia. His critical writings include *Matthew Arnold* (1939), *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), *The Opposing Self* (1955), and *Beyond Culture: Essays on Learning and Literature* (1965).]

In *The Prelude*, in Book Two, Wordsworth speaks of a particular emotion which he calls "the sentiment of Being." The "sentiment" has been described in this way: "There is, in sanest hours, a consciousness, a thought that rises, independent, lifted out from all else, calm, like the stars, shining eternal. This is the thought of identity—yours for you, whoever you are, as mine for me. Miracle of miracles,

beyond statement, most spiritual and vaguest of earth's dreams, yet hardest basic fact, and only entrance to all facts." This, of course, is not Wordsworth, it is Walt Whitman, but I quote Whitman's statement in exposition of Wordsworth's "sentiment of Being" because it is in some respects rather more boldly explicit, although not necessarily better, than anything that Wordsworth himself wrote about the sentiment, and because Whitman goes on to speak of his "hardest basic fact" as a political fact, as the basis, and the criterion, of democracy.

Through all his poetic life Wordsworth was preoccupied by the idea, by the sentiment, by the problem, of being. All experience, all emotions lead to it. He was haunted by the mysterious fact that he existed. He could discover in himself different intensities and qualities of being—"Tintern Abbey" is the attempt to distinguish these intensities and qualities. Being is sometimes animal; sometimes it is an "appetite and a passion"; sometimes it is almost a suspension of the movement of the breath and blood. The *Lyrical Ballads* have many intentions, but one of the chief of them is the investigation of the problems of being. "We are Seven," which is always under the imputation of bathos, is established in its true nature when we read it as an ontological poem; its subject is the question, What does it mean when we say a person is? "The Idiot Boy," which I believe to be a great and not a foolish poem, is a kind of comic assertion of the actuality—and, indeed, the peculiar intensity—of being in a person who is outside the range of anything but our merely mechanical understanding. Johnny on the little horse, flourishing his branch of holly under the moon, is a creature of rapture, who, if he is not quite "human," is certainly elemental, magical, perhaps a little divine—"It was Johnny, Johnny everywhere." As much as anyone, and more than many—more than most—he is, and feels that he is.

From even the little I have said, it will be seen that as soon as the "sentiment of Being" is named, or represented, there arises a question of its degree of actuality or of its survival. "The glad animal movements" of the boy, the "appetite" and the "passion" of the young man's response to Nature easily confirm the sense of being. So do those experiences which are represented as a "sleep" or "slumber," when the bodily senses are in abeyance. But as the man grows older the stimuli to the experience of the sentiment of being grow fewer or grow less intense—it is this fact rather than any question of poetic creation (such as troubled Coleridge) that makes the matter of the "Immortality Ode." Wordsworth, as it were, puts the awareness of

being to the test in situations where its presence may perhaps most easily be questioned—in very old people. Other kinds of people also serve for the test, such as idiots, the insane, children, the dead, but I emphasize the very old because Wordsworth gave particular attention to them, and because we can all be aware from our own experience what a strain very old people put upon our powers of attributing to them personal being, “identity.” Wordsworth’s usual way is to represent the old man as being below the human condition, apparently scarcely able to communicate, and then suddenly, startlingly, in what we have learned to call an “epiphany,” to show forth the intensity of his human existence. The old man in “Animal Tranquillity and Decay” is described as being so old and so nearly inanimate that the birds regard him as little as if he were a stone or a tree; for this, indeed, he is admired, and the poem says that his unfelt peace is so perfect that it is envied by the very young. He is questioned about his destination on the road—

I asked him whither he was bound, and what
The object of his journey; he replied,
“Sir! I am going many miles to take
A last leave of my son, a mariner,
Who from a sea-fight has been brought to Falmouth,
And there is dying in a hospital.”

The revelation of the actuality of his being, of his humanness, quite dazzles us.

—Lionel Trilling, “Wordsworth and the Iron Time,” in *Wordsworth: Centenary Studies Presented at Cornell and Princeton Universities* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951): pp. 57–58.



GEOFFREY H. HARTMAN ON THE ROMANCE OF NATURE

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Nature, for Wordsworth, is not an “object” but a presence and a power; a motion and a spirit; not something to be worshiped and

consumed, but always a guide leading beyond itself. This guidance starts in earliest childhood. The boy of *Prelude I* is fostered alike by beauty and by fear. Through beauty, nature often makes the boy feel at home, for, as in the Great Ode, his soul is alien to this world. But through fear, nature reminds the boy from where he came, and prepares him, having lost heaven, also to lose nature. The boy of *Prelude I*, who does not yet know he must suffer this loss as well, is warned by nature itself of the solitude to come.

I have suggested elsewhere how the fine skating scene of the first book, though painted for its own sake, to capture the animal spirits of children spurred by a clear and frosty night, moves from vivid images of immediate life to an absolute calm which foreshadows a deeper and more hidden life. The Negative Way is a gradual one, and the child is weaned by a premonitory game of hide-and-seek in which nature changes its shape from familiar to unfamiliar, or even fails the child. There is a great fear, either in Wordsworth or in nature, of traumatic breaks: *Natura non facit saltus*.

If the child is led by nature to a more deeply meditated understanding of nature, the mature singer who composes *The Prelude* begins with that understanding or even beyond it—with the spontaneously creative spirit. Wordsworth plunges into *media res*, where the *res* is Poetry, or Nature only insofar as it has guided him to a height whence he must find his own way. But Book VI, with which we are immediately concerned, records what is chronologically an intermediate period, in which the first term is neither Nature nor Poetry. It is Imagination in embryo: the mind muted yet also strengthened by the external world's opacities. Though imagination is with Wordsworth in the journey of 1790, nature seems particularly elusive. He goes out to a nature which seems to hide as in the crossing of the Alps.

The first part of this episode is told to illustrate a curious melancholy related to the "presence" of imagination and the "absence" of nature. Like the young Apollo in Keats's *Hyperion*, Wordsworth is strangely dissatisfied with the riches before him, and compelled to seek some other region:

Where is power?
Whose hand, whose essence, what divinity
Makes this alarum in the elements,
While I here idle listen on the shores
In fearless yet in aching ignorance?

To this soft or "luxurious" sadness, a more masculine kind is added, which results from a "stern mood" or "underthirst of vigor"; and it is in order to throw light on this further melancholy that Wordsworth tells the incident of his crossing of the Alps.

—Geoffrey H. Hartman, "The Romance of Nature and the Negative Way," in *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787–1814* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1954): pp. 40–41.



JONATHAN WORDSWORTH ON THE TWO-PART *PRELUDE* OF 1799

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The two-part *Prelude* in fact offers in a simpler and more concentrated form much of what one thinks of as best in the thirteen-Book poem. It does not constitute an alternative to 1805, but in so far as Wordsworth's vision of childhood is the inspiration and sustaining force of all versions of *The Prelude*, 1799 has outstanding claims. Lacking, of course, are the experiences of Wordsworth's young manhood, the moment of consecration in Book VI (with the famous lines upon imagination and the Simplon Pass), and the climactic Ascent of Snowdon from Book XIII, but almost all the childhood "spots of time" are to be found, and found in their original sequence. The presence of the additional "spots" give the poetry extraordinary power—the fact that in Part I after the woodcock-snaring, birds-nesting, boat-stealing, and skating episodes of Book I, there are the Drowned Man, the woman with her garments vexed and tossed, and the Waiting for the Horses, still to come. But even more important is the effect of returning Wordsworth's famous definition to its original place.

As it stands in Book XI of 1805, the assertion "There are in our existence spots of time . . .", though of course highly impressive, is removed a very long way from the poetry of Book I with which it had originally been connected, and has to take a structural weight that it cannot easily bear. In 1799, by contrast, it is at the centre of Wordsworth's thinking—a support alike for his faith in the value of primal experience, and for the further definition of Part II as he goes on to explore more fully the role of imagination. In its early form the passage is brief and to the point, half the length of the more pompous later version:

There are in our existence spots of time
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed
By trivial occupations and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds—
Especially the imaginative power—
Are nourished and invisibly repaired;
Such moments chiefly seem to have their date
In our first childhood.

—Jonathan Wordsworth, "The Growth of a Poet's Mind," in *The Cornell Library Journal* 11 (Spring 1970): pp. 7–8.



M. H. ABRAMS ON *THE PRELUDE* AND *THE RECLUSE*

[M. H. Abrams, the renowned scholar of romanticism, is Professor of English at Cornell. His writings on the romantic period include *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953) and *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971).]

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" 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.

The poet is aware of the near impossibility of disengaging "the naked recollection of that time" from the intrusions of "after-meditation." In a fine and subtle figure for the interdiffusion of the two consciousnesses, he describes himself as one bending from a drifting boat on a still water, perplexed to distinguish actual objects at the bottom of the lake from surface reflections of the environing scene, from the tricks and refractions of the water currents, and from his own intrusive but inescapable image (that is, his present awareness). 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, fusion, and as he says, "motions retrograde" in time.

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

Wordsworth said in the opening passage, which represents him after he has reached maturity: in response to the quickening outer breeze

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

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

that my verse may live and be
Even as a light hung up in heaven to cheer
Mankind in times to come.

—M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1971): pp. 158–159.



RICHARD ONORATO ON NATURE AND "THE PRELUDE"

[Richard Onorato is the author of *The Character of a Poet: Wordsworth in The Prelude*.]

He remembers, too, that the pure pleasure of childish play seemed to absorb the beauty of the surroundings; and he says explicitly that in this way Nature "Peopled my mind with beauteous forms or grand / And made me love them . . ." just as the ambience of the mother's love had once suffused the natural objects of the world for the infant with light, love, and wonder. (Notice, too, that "peopled" figuratively preserves in the beauteous forms of Nature a very human association.) And Wordsworth himself surmises that Nature's way of doing this for the child is a further development of the mother-infant relationship:

those first-born affinities that fit
our new existence to existing things,
And, in our dawn of being, constitute
The bond of union betwixt life and joy.

The “ghostly language of the ancient earth” heard in solitude in the windy darkness is a projection into Nature of a preconscious sense of a lost relationship, of the dialogue that the infant had with the mother’s heart. Nature metaphorically “speaking” to him in solitude, wind, and darkness makes him want to speak that “visionary” language which he tells us later is poetry. To speak of visionary things is to use the imagination to evoke, and perhaps subsequently recognize, lost objects of love and wonder, to reveal in special utterance their ghostly or shadowy existence in the mind, called elsewhere “those phantoms of conceit,” “the many feelings that oppressed my heart.”

Here, too, we should notice how “heart” is associated with the mother and death. “Mute dialogues with my mother’s *heart*” calls to mind: “the heart / And hinge of all our learning and our loves . . .” and “our being’s heart and home is with infinitude. . . .” A revision made by Wordsworth in the Poetry passage from Book V suggests further that it is a knowledge of what has been lost in death that poetry might uncover and present (“as objects recognized in flashes”) when the poet’s ability to speak in a visionary way matches his sense of being spoken to. When he changes “the motions of the winds” to “the motions of the *viewless* winds,” I think that he is also preconsciously recalling Claudio’s speech from *Measure for Measure*, which supplies the context of the imagination attempting to deal with the fear of death as an incomprehensible journey:

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible war motion to become
A kneaded clod, and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprison’d in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world . . .

Death and darkness are associated with the “*ghostly* language of the ancient earth” and with the “*viewless* winds” of poetry. But illuminating light and glory are also associated with poetry. We remember from Book II that the “one belov’d Presence,” which so closely resembles the “Presence” in Nature of “Tintern Abbey,” is one that “*irradiates* and exalts . . . all objects through all intercourse of sense”; and this, I think, suggests why poetry is also said to have a “light

divine” which suffuses objects and presents them “in flashes,” whereas there is a darkness inherent in language.

—Richard J. Onorato, *The Character of the Poet: William Wordsworth in “The Prelude”* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971): pp. 114–115.



THOMAS WEISKEL ON WORDSWORTH AND IMAGINATION

[The late Thomas Weiskel taught English at Yale. His *The Romantic Sublime* was published posthumously.]

Wordsworth was not a symbolic poet and not a descriptive poet either, if indeed a poet can be descriptive. His landscapes hover on the edge of revelation without revealing anything, and so the very moment of hovering, of glimpsed entry into the beyond, when “the light of sense / Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed / The invisible world,” usurps the missing climax of symbolic revelation. In the Snowdon version, for example, the salient elements of that magnificent scene—the suspended moon, the sea of hoary mist, the blue chasm in the vapor—refuse to harden into symbolic equation with the imagination or anything else, as Geoffrey Hartman has observed. And this is so despite the fact the Wordsworth is there working explicitly with notions of analogy, type, and emblem. So too with that spot of time when the young boy, having lost his way while riding near Penrith, sees a naked pool, the beacon on the summit, and the girl with a pitcher forcing her way against the wind—salient images which are less than symbols and all the more powerful for that. Or the schoolboy in his mountain lookout, waiting to be fetched home for a holiday that turned into a funeral, who later finds himself returning to certain “kindred spectacles and sounds”—

... 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

—thence to drink as at a fountain. Many instances of such salience could be adduced, but this feature of Wordsworth's landscapes is widely appreciated and is here evoked only to suggest the scope of the moment we wish to isolate. If the images so projected into the field of Wordsworth's past were to lose their opacity and become the transparent signifiers of an invisible world, the soul would "remember" what she felt and have nothing to pursue. The conversation, propelled as it is by the baffled misconstruction of the signifier, would be over; Wordsworth would understand himself. Indeed, as the poem goes on Wordsworth is less and less disposed to interrogate the images that rise upon him. The gestures of self-inquisition become the mere feinting of a mind learning how knowledge is opposed to efficacious power.

Visionary power is associated with the transcendence of the image and in particular with the "power in sound"; yet it depends upon a resistance within that transcendence of sight for sound. In the Wordsworthian moment two events appear to coalesce: the withdrawal or the occultation of the image and the epiphany of the character or signifier proper. A form or image may be installed in either the imaginative or symbolic domains. There is a world of difference between the two, but the differentiation can never be found within the image itself. If an image is symbolic, that fact is signaled by what we loosely call "context"—its inscription in an order or language whose structure is prior to its meaning (signifieds) and so determines it. On the other hand, an image (fantasy or perception) may fall short of the symbolic, in which case it remains opaque and meaningless in itself. Earlier we spoke of remembrance as a confrontation with a signifier, but strictly speaking, an image becomes a signifier only when it is recognized as such, and this may involve imputing an intentionality to the image. (A homely example: a child responds to pictures or the type in a book only as colors and shapes until the magical moment when he discerns that they are representations; it is the displaced recapitulation of this moment that is in question here.) There is implicit in the passage from imagination to symbol a confrontation with symbolicity—the very fact of structure in its priority and independent of its actual organization. Hence the signifier may be misconstrued in two possible ways. It may be simply misread, or—and this is in point with Wordsworth—there may be a resistance or a barrier to its recognition as a signifier, a resistance to

reading itself as opposed to seeing. I think the resistance may be identified with what Wordsworth calls imagination.

—Thomas Weiskel, "Wordsworth and the Defile of the Word," in *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Trancendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976): pp. 100–101.



KENNETH R. JOHNSTON ON "HOME AT GRASMERE" IN 1800

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The identification of William Wordsworth with the English Lake District is so elemental a fact of literary history that one easily forgets there was a time when the fact had to be created in competition with other available options. Despite the fine biographical and poetical inevitability of the Wordsworths' move to Grasmere, the principals in the case were by no means sure of destiny's direction. In their correspondence of 1798–99, the question of where to settle (closely linked to questions of what to do) is indeed preeminent; but by far the most important variable was how to remain close to Coleridge. Grasmere and the Lakes entered into the decision belatedly, as an entertaining diversion. Once their dissatisfaction with Germany had set in (December 1798), Dorothy wrote to Coleridge that they should all explore together "every nook of that romantic country" the following summer, "wherever we finally settle." Coleridge, during the whole year, held out for the south as being better for Wordsworth because it was nearer the intellectual company he felt Wordsworth needed more than books. In July he reported with disappointment that Wordsworth "renounces Alfoxden altogether," but William and Dorothy's letters indicate no clear alternative except for "William's wish to be near a good library, and if possible in a pleasant country."

These domestic decisions are important poetically as well as biographically because they help to explain the peculiarly aggressive vehemence of Wordsworth's joy in the portions of "Home at Gras-

mere" written in the spring of 1800 as a fresh start on *The Recluse*. There is undoubtedly creative psychological significance in the curious fact that almost all major segments of *The Recluse* were undertaken when the Wordsworths had just completed, or were just beginning to contemplate, a move to a new home—and, moreover, that this occurred with each of the residences they occupied from Alfoxden on. That this is more than mere coincidence is strongly suggested by one of the poet's few post-1815 efforts to work on his masterpiece, "Composed When a Probability Existed of Our Being Obligated to Quit Rydal Mount as a Residence," 1826, a meditation of over two hundred lines in which *The Recluse's* frequent discrepancy between grand themes and small occasions is especially marked. In 1800, the Wordsworths were not returning home to Grasmere but going to Grasmere as if it were home, a situation "conducive to a self-conscious awareness of himself as an observer," not to the recapture of an "indigenous" childhood. Their seven-month stay with the Hutchinson family at Sockburn had shown them brothers and sisters reunited as a happy, independent family of adults, a potent image because of their own painful childhood memories of being scattered abroad after the death of their father in 1783. They had also been living for four years in what seemed to their elder relations a state of semivagabondage and were very eager to stop it. The question of Wordsworth's career—indeed, of his profession—was crucial in deciding where to go from the temporary hospitality of the Hutchinson farm. Careers were not to be made in Grasmere; not the least of Wordsworth's imaginative achievements was his establishment of a national literary reputation from so remote a provincial spot. Cowper and Collins and others may have suggested models, but they were gentlemanly recluses on church, university, or family sinecures, and in any case they did not plan to save the world with their poetry. The November walking tour was not the summer vacation jaunt Dorothy had proposed but an effort to interest Coleridge on the North; yet it also had the effect of allowing Wordsworth to see the Lakes with newly approving eyes—Coleridge's. His letter back to Dorothy at Sockburn concentrates on Coleridge's responses—"Coleridge enchanted with Grasmere and Rydal"—and Coleridge's enthusiasm catalyzes his own: "Coleridge was much struck with Grasmere and its neighbourhood and I have much to say to you, you will think my plan a mad one, but I have thought of building a house by the Lake side . . ." Barely a month before the

great move “home” to Grasmere, the idea struck its proposer “mad,” as it surely must have seemed to his relatives and to received ideas of how and where a not-so-young man of uncertain promise would establish his independence in the world. Nor was the author of “The Mad Mother,” “Incipient Madness,” and other lyrics of the psychopathology of everyday life likely to use the word with sophisticated frivolity.

William and Dorothy’s return in December of 1799 was full of wonder and loving observation. They were returning, brother and sister, aged twenty-nine and twenty-seven, to the general neighborhood of their childhood, reentering after long absence a childhood dream. The reestablishment of their feelings for this landscape was inextricably tied up with the re-formation of their family.

—Kenneth R. Johnston, “‘Home at Grasmere’ in 1800” in *Wordsworth and The Recluse* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984): pp. 173–175.

