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THE AUBURN SYNDROME: CHANGE AND LOSS IN "THE DESERTED VILLAGE" AND WORDSWORTH'S GRASMERE

BY LAURENCE GOLDSTEIN

Several years before Thomas Love Peacock confronted the perfectibilian Mr. Forster with the degenerationist Mr. Escot, in *Headlong Hall*, William Wordsworth addressed his "Letter to Mathetes" to the question of "the assumed inferiority of the present age in moral dignity and intellectual power to those which have preceded it."¹ This was a subject that Wordsworth, no less than Shelley (the original of Mr. Forster) chose to analyze optimistically. He begins by condemning as specious the opposition of a modern period "half a century at most" to "the whole of recorded time" before it. By so construing history "we imagine obstacles to exist out of ourselves to retard our progress" and a despair results which makes progress more difficult. Wordsworth claims that progress in the species is not direct like a Roman road but "may be justly compared to that of a river, which, both in its smaller reaches and larger turnings, is frequently forced back towards its fountains by objects which cannot otherwise be eluded or overcome." What seems to be regression is actually a gathering of energy from an original source which "contributes as effectually to further [the river] in its course, as when it moves forward uninterrupted in a line . . ." (p. 90).

It is this metaphor (not logic) which leads Wordsworth to another complaint in his correspondent's letter: the difficulty of knowing and following Truth in these degenerate times. Wordsworth responds by employing another circular metaphor. The youth, Mathetes, must be "remanded to nature" if he would escape corruption by the world. "He cannot recall past time," Wordsworth continues, "he cannot begin his journey afresh . . . the sacred light of childhood is and must be for him no more than

¹ *Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. William Knight (London, 1896), I, 86. All references in my text are to this edition.

a remembrance.” But his return to sources of powerful feeling “will bring reformation and timely support; and the two powers of reason and nature, thus reciprocally teacher and taught, may advance together in a track to which there is no limit” (p. 96). We recognize in this circular movement of mind the characteristic rhythm of Wordsworth’s sensibility. It governs the structure of poems like “Tintern Abbey” and *The Prelude*; it forms the philosophy of time embodied in those poems. And we know that behind his rhetoric lies the paradigm of Wordsworth’s own life, described in *The Prelude*. Fallen from the Paradise of the Lakes into “that vague, heartless chace / Of trivial pleasures” (*Prelude* IV.304-5)² like Mathetes, he was “remanded” to Grasmere and in his original home rediscovered the true self that made him a poet.

For Wordsworth (in 1809) this cyclical rhythm comprises “the economy of providence” (p. 89) which prevents man from despair by keeping the Golden Age within reach. A man’s days are linked each to each in natural piety. By reflection or by involuntary stimulus the adult can travel back to his sources of power, the “spots of time” that created in him amplitude of soul. My intention in this essay is not to review these familiar concepts but propose a biographical context for their presence in the poetry of 1800-1810. I will argue that the revisitation of Grasmere in 1799, after a ten years absence, profoundly affected Wordsworth’s sensibility in two ways: 1) it gave him absolute confidence in a new philosophy of landscape, and thereby suggested the poetic theme he had been seeking for a long poem; 2) by so doing it left him vulnerable to external “obstacles” which radically altered his philosophy of Nature.

But if we interpret the biographical data as unique to Wordsworth we isolate him from an elegiac tradition that anticipated the curve of his psychological and poetic development. Wordsworth copied into his private notebook a poem, “Yardley Oak,” in which William Cowper lamented that “Change is the diet on which all subsist / Created changeable, and change at last / Destroys them. . . .” Even to begin living, Cowper maintains, is to begin dying; the energy of change is in one direction only:

² *The Prelude: Text of 1805*, ed. de Selincourt (London, 1960). The biographical approach of this essay makes the earlier *Prelude* a more useful instrument in measuring Wordsworth’s sensibility.

Nature's threads

Fine passing thought, ev'n in her coarsest works
Delight in agitation, yet sustain
The force that agitates, not unimpair'd
But, worn by frequent impulse, to the cause
Of their best tone their dissolution owe.

It suits Wordsworth's own philosophy of organic connections that his artistic rise and decline, his best and worst of times, should be attributed to the same cause. It is more than suitable. If we examine an eighteenth-century work which analyzes the sense of change and loss we can assess both the counter-movement of Wordsworth within a formative tradition, and also his lapse into the despairing formula of his early readings. The eighteenth-century work which provides the clearest basis for comparison with the syndrome I shall describe is Oliver Goldsmith's revisitation poem, *The Deserted Village*. In this work the circular journey of the speaker (whom I shall refer to as Goldsmith) is thwarted by social change, by obstacles which recur at the end of Wordsworth's great decade.³

I

Goldsmith's sympathetic interest in the lives of rural Englishmen, apparent in *The Vicar of Wakefield*, moved him to compose a poem on the subject of depopulation. Complaints about the increase of luxury found in "The Traveller"—how "the bonds of wealth and law" (351) will produce in England "one sink of level avarice" (359)—have led some critics to read Goldsmith's later poem as a further exercise in social protest. Ricardo Quintana, for example, writes in a study of "The Deserted Village": "Were we to think of the entire poem as in effect an oration against the injustice of enclosure we should not be far out."⁴ Certainly the contemporary problem of enclosure is the focus of the poem, but if we turn from Goldsmith's essay on the

³ Arthur Friedman reviews the external evidence for a biographical interpretation in his introduction to the poem in Goldsmith's *Collected Works* (Oxford, 1966), IV, 273 ff. Another important factor in accepting the narrative voice as Goldsmith's, rather than a detached persona's, is the "internal evidence" of tone and manner that Wordsworth describes in his essay, "Upon Epitaphs" (*Prose Works*, II, 154) as a criterion of sincerity linking sentiment to author.

⁴ *Oliver Goldsmith* (New York, 1967), p. 135.

same subject, "The Revolution in Low Life," to his poem we recognize immediately that the introduction of a personal dimension has affected Goldsmith's view of his subject.⁵ The shift in place from the "little village, distant about fifty miles from town [London]" to Goldsmith's childhood home, here called Auburn, is precisely what fixes our interest on the speaker and his unique reaction to a historical problem.

The first eighty lines of the poem are a catalog of changes in the "seats of my youth" (6), the usurpation of a familiar landscape by "trade's unfeeling train" (63). The elegiac tone commands authority by the use of universal, one might almost say stock, images of ruin, and by comparisons of past and present. The dislocation in time is rendered by spatial and physical contrasts: the gamboling children vs. the "hollow-sounding bittern" (44); the cultivated farm vs. the "shapeless ruin" (47) of sunken bowers and long grass; the glassy brook now choked with sedges and weeds. Goldsmith prepares us for his personal response by moving the images of contrast closer to his own condition. Finally, the narrator includes himself: "Remembrance wakes with all her busy train,/ Swells at my breast, and turns the past to pain" (82-83). Goldsmith here borrows a phrase from his own early oratorio, "The Captivity," in which the Jewish population, dispossessed of their homeland during the Babylonian captivity, lament their dislocation:

O memory thou fond deceiver
Still importunate and vain
To former joys recurring ever
And turning all the past to pain. . . .⁶

The expression of such sentiment is an eighteenth-century commonplace, an almost reflexive nostalgia shared by the poets Wordsworth admired. The syndrome by which a pleasurable memory of youth or childhood instantly produces sadness and despair generally has as its appropriate landscape a desolate place like Goldsmith's Auburn, a ruin, a graveyard, a decaying tree, or even a skull. Robert Blair's unjustly famous poem, "The Grave," relates the syndrome in its simplest form:

⁵ *Collected Works*, III, 195.

⁶ *Collected Works*, IV, 216.

Oh, then the longest summer's day
Seemed too, too much in haste; still the full heart
Had not imparted half; 'twas happiness
Too exquisite to last! Of joys departed,
Not to return, how painful the remembrance! (106-10)

William Cowper's poems, even those written in his teens, are full of regret and melancholy remembrance. The unfinished "Yardley Oak," already quoted, is the most complex study of the time-theme in eighteenth-century English poetry until Wordsworth.⁷ As in all poems of the mode, Cowper's desire to flee "the wild uproar of this busy world" ("R. S. S.") carries with it overtones of a death wish, a yearning for that restful Paradise promised man in which "time shall be no more" ("Retirement"). When childhood joys are seen as a foretype of the Divine refuge, nostalgia becomes a lacerating form of religious meditation.

A refinement in Goldsmith's case is his understanding that a continuity of self depends not upon memory but continuity of place. The mortal traveller moves in a wide circle, gathering experience, to retire in his birthplace and pass on his wisdom to others of the community. A letter in *Citizen of the World* affirms:

There is something so seducing in that spot in which we first had existence, that nothing but it can please; whatever vicissitudes we experience in life, however we toil, or wheresoever we wander, our fatigued wishes still recur to home for tranquility, we long to die in that spot which gave us birth, and in that pleasing expectation opiate every calamity.⁸

The corresponding passage in "The Deserted Village" is that which follows the line quoted above on the pain of remembrance:

In all my wanderings round this world of care,
In all my griefs—and God has given my share—
I still had hopes my latest hours to crown,
Amidst these humble bowers to lay me down;
To husband out life's taper at the close,
And keep the flame from wasting by repose.
I still had hopes, for pride attends us still,
Amidst the swains to show my book-learned skill,

⁷ Simpler expressions can be found in poems like "The Poplar Field," "Stanzas, Dec. 21, 1787," "Inscription for a Stone," the many poems to Delia, and in sections of *The Task* (particularly the opening two hundred lines).

⁸ *Collected Works*, II, 405.

Around my fire an evening group to draw,
 And tell of all I felt and all I saw;
 And, as a hare, whom hounds and horns pursue,
 Pants to the place from whence at first she flew,
 I still had hopes, my long vexations past,
 Here to return—and die at home at last. (83-96)

Goldsmith does not rely on memory to unite past and present; in fact, in *Citizen of the World* he affirms that “we lose more than we gain by remembrance.”⁹ In both “The Traveller” and “The Deserted Village” he recommends physical return, a *revisitation*, to native landscape and settlement there to heal the breach between the two lives of childhood and old age. In the latter poem the community figures he praises—the village preacher and the teacher—are those who maintain the integrity of self by spanning generations in a single place *and* by communicating the kind of spiritual knowledge that makes their lives meaningful.

Another significant anticipation of Wordsworth is Goldsmith’s lengthy discussion of the city’s baneful influence on rural life. Though a defender of mercantilism and the principle of luxury in his early journalistic career, Goldsmith recognized on his later excursions in the countryside the wasteful effects of urban hegemony. The diversity of the city, its constant transformation and receptivity to the influence of wealth, took on a demonic cast when viewed from the country. Goldsmith’s tone becomes bitter; this is no quiet Virgilian praise of retreat:

As some fair female unadorned and plain,
 Secure to please while youth confirms her reign,
 Slights every borrowed charm that dress supplies,
 Nor shares with art the triumph of her eyes;
 But when those charms are passed, for charms are frail,
 When time advances and when lovers fail,
 She then shines forth, solicitous to bless,
 In all the glaring impotence of dress:
 Thus fares the land, by luxury betrayed,
 In nature’s simplest charms at first arrayed;
 But verging to decline, its splendours rise,
 Its vistas strike, its palaces surprise;
 While scourged by famine from the smiling land,
 The mournful peasant leads his humble band;
 And while he sinks, without one arm to save,
 The country blooms—a garden and a grave. (287-302)

⁹ *Collected Works*, II, 187.

In this passage the city usurps the country, the place of change extends itself by means of wealth and vanity to the place of continuity. The country had as its life-giving virtues typical customs and local scenes so regularly present that no remembered event could die out; past and present were simultaneous in the sense of general experience Goldsmith describes in the opening lines of the poem. But the physical alteration of a human community to a lifeless estate stands as a *memento mori*, a reminder how ineluctably change in landscape is linked to the process of degeneration and extinction in the human community. Images of reversal, notable in all poetry of this genre, operate in this passage for similar effects: splendor is decline, beauty is decay, the garden is a grave. Donald Davie has pointed out how Goldsmith describes Nature and the village by images of fragility—especially the blooming of fruits and flowers—and we can see how this reversal of conventional associations of rural life (robust, invigorating) serves the theme of degeneration in time on both personal and historical levels.¹⁰

In the passage quoted above, for example, the land is compared to an aging woman. Comparisons of earth and woman are of course a poetic commonplace, and generally center on fertility and reproductive qualities as a basis for analogy. Goldsmith inverts this convention, however, insisting on the contrary implications of the metaphor: that woman's life is linear, historical, ended by death. In Goldsmith's new context, the land is "betrayed" by the seducer, luxury; for the land, unproductive luxury is equivalent to death. The earth is dislocated into human history, it dies into time.¹¹

Finally, we should note that "The Deserted Village" ends with a witty address to poetry which laments that verse is "unfit, in these degenerate times of shame, / To catch the heart or strike for honest fame" (409-10). The poem in this sense becomes monumental, like a tombstone, the embodiment of a historical self. Poetry has none of the power that Romantic poets will claim for it; it offers no religious comfort, no rebirth, no marriage of man's desire to external nature. Rather it is the verbal expression of

¹⁰ Donald Davie, ed., *The Late Augustans* (London, 1958), p. 118.

¹¹ Twenty three lines further along the image reappears, for "the poor houseless shivering female" (326) who has left the land to seek her fortune in the city is again betrayed by luxury.

the wound other poets must heal. At the end of Proust's great novel, to cite a modern contrast, the narrator can look at the decayed Gilberte Swann and proclaim that only the *memory* of the youthful Gilberte is real to him, not the ruin he perceives. By the act of composition he will recreate her in the landscape of Combray, and by doing so demonstrate how the imagination triumphs over time. In this poem Goldsmith faces physical ruin and accepts the irreversible dislocation of his past and present experience. The poem is evidence of failure, an index of loss. Those who follow have the duty to "redress the rigours of the inclement clime" (422).

II

It is Wordsworth's response to such a challenge that marks the inception of his greatest poetic work. After the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, and even before then, Wordsworth felt a "paramount impulse not to be withstood" (*Prelude* I.242) to compose a long poem. As he confesses in the opening paragraphs of *The Prelude* he had no idea of what subject his great project (tentatively called *The Recluse*) was to consist. *The Recluse*, in fact, was Coleridge's conception and (it was understood by both poets) would be largely dependent on Coleridge's notes. These notes were not then, or ever, forthcoming. In the first few hundred lines of Book I of *The Prelude*, which are commonly dated 1798-99, Wordsworth berates himself for the prudence, circumspection, infinite delay and humility that "doth lock my functions up in blank reserve" (I.248). He confesses his inability to write a long poem on either a historical or philosophical subject, having no "perfect confidence" (I.173) in either area, and laments his frustration in searching for a sympathetic theme.

Following the composition of the introductory passages, William and Dorothy established residence at Grasmere, a small vale in the Lake District. Grasmere was one of the principal scenes of Wordsworth's childhood raptures, beginning in his ninth year, while attending school in nearby Hawkshead.¹² With warnings by

¹² Wordsworth has little nostalgia for the years spent in Cockermonth and Penrith before coming to the Lake District. As Mary Moorman writes, "Accustomed as we are to think of the childhood of William Wordsworth as unusually happy, thanks to his own celebration of his Hawkshead school-days in *The Prelude*, the unhappiness of

poets like Goldsmith probably in mind,¹³ Wordsworth had definite fears about returning:

“ Beloved Vale!” I said, “ when I shall con
Those many records of my childish years,
Remembrance of myself and of my peers
Will press me down: to think of what is gone
Will be an awful thought, if life have one.”

In fact the return had the effect of validating the high value Wordsworth had given to remembrance and revisitation in poems like “ Tintern Abbey.” The sonnet concludes:

But, when into the Vale I came, no fears
Distressed me; from mine eyes escaped no tears;
Deep thought, or dread remembrance, had I none.
By doubts and thousand petty fancies crost
I stood, of simple shame the blushing Thrall;
So narrow seemed the brooks, the fields so small!
A Juggler’s balls old Time about him tossed;
I looked, I stared, I smiled, I laughed; and all
The weight of sadness was in wonder lost.¹⁴

They found Grasmere secure from the ravages of the City, still nursing the natural forms Wordsworth had known and loved in childhood, those he had endued with his own vitality and thereby bound to him as emblems of his younger self. To overlook this act of revisitation, as many critics do, and talk only of “ Wordsworth’s *conceptual* landscape ” and its “ certain steady features, and certain recognizable places to which he constantly returns ” is to exaggerate the role of memory and consciousness in Words-

his Penrith experiences tends to be forgotten or glossed over ” (*William Wordsworth: The Early Years 1770-1803* [Oxford, 1957], pp. 19-20).

¹³ A substantial account of Goldsmith’s influence on the young Wordsworth is contained in Abbie Potts’ *Wordsworth’s Prelude* (New York, 1966). The chapter, “ Loiterer and Pedestrian Traveller,” concentrates on borrowings from “ The Traveller ” by the apprentice author of *Descriptive Sketches*, but mentions also the adoption of phrases and characters from “ The Deserted Village ” in other early works of Wordsworth. Potts does not pursue Goldsmith’s example beyond this stage of Wordsworth’s career.

In September of 1829, on his Irish tour, Wordsworth “ passed through Auburn, Goldsmith’s famous village, where are the Ruins of a Hawthorn said to be planted by him ” (*The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth 1821-1830* [Oxford, 1939], p. 413).

¹⁴ *The Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford, 1944), III, 2. All references in my text are to this edition.

worth's art beyond the poet's own insistence.¹⁵ Wordsworth is actually living in the landscape he evokes in poems composed after 1800 and receiving daily inspiration from it, as his "true self" (*Prelude*, X.916) required to maintain its creative energy. The vale in this sense is

A termination, and a last retreat,
A Centre, come from whereso'er you will,
A Whole, without dependance or defect,
Made for itself; and happy in itself,
Perfect Contentment, Unity entire.¹⁶

The vale exists outside the force of history which, in Goldsmith's poem, fragments the self by the irreversibility of change. To celebrate his return, Wordsworth composed in the following Spring a long blank verse encomium to Grasmere, titled "Home at Grasmere." It was further identified by Wordsworth, in manuscript, as "The Recluse. Part First. Book First." As Ernest de Selincourt suggests, "It is clear that in its initial stages Wordsworth regarded his spiritual autobiography [*The Prelude*] as an integral part of *The Recluse*, and not as a separate poem preparatory to it. . . . It seems likely that until the early months of 1800, when 'Home at Grasmere' was written to form the introductory book of his great poem, the history of his early life was not viewed as an independent work."¹⁷ I would argue, and use "Home at Grasmere" for support, that it was revisitation of his childhood locale that shocked him into a full recognition of the one theme upon which he could write with "perfect confidence": the circular odyssey of the poetic soul back to the natural sources of its energy. In surveying and cataloging the eternal forms of nature in this poem Wordsworth substantiates his vision of "Unity entire" with minute particulars; that spectre of abstract philosophy, *The Recluse*, is put aside, postponed until the personal epic of the poet's spiritual journey could be completed.

The circular pattern which returns the protagonist of a long poem or fiction to his homeland is, of course, an enduring structural device of all narrative art. M. H. Abrams, in *Natural Super-*

¹⁵ Christopher Salvesen, *The Landscape of Memory* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1965), p. 141. Italics added.

¹⁶ *Poetical Works*, V, 318. De Selincourt notes a cancelled alternative last line: "A symbol of Eternity and Heaven."

¹⁷ *Text of 1805*, p. x.

naturalism, identifies the “ circuitous journey ” as an omnipresent concern of the major Romantic authors, representing as it does “ the search of the sundered soul for its unitary source.”¹⁸ By linking the cyclical theme to metaphors of marriage, Abrams locates the affirmative center of Romantic philosophy, in Wordsworth preeminently, and specifically in *The Prelude* and “ Home at Grasmere.” A more skeptical view of “ the illusion of return ” is Walter Ong’s description:

If the flow of life and of consciousness can be thrown into some sort of cyclic representation, one gains assurance because a circle is a symbol of control; it is the closed system at optimum. The openness of history, its unpredictability, and the related openness of the ego and the human consciousness can be pulled in, turned back on itself, encompassed. The circle is the simplest form of encompassing. Cyclic views stand for the desire to have reality closed in and in this fashion under control.¹⁹

The one return trip most coveted by Goldsmith, we noted earlier, was to a childhood home, a continuity between stages of life that itself brings harmony and wholeness. Wordsworth intensifies the feeling by lending it a mythic dimension. In his verse Grasmere is often referred to as Eden or Paradise; Wordsworth, having bent the course of history back to its beginning, becomes a new Adam. In a rare burst of hyperbolic wit Wordsworth insists, in “ Home at Grasmere,” that the vale is not only Edenic, it is better than Eden, because Adam and Eve in the Garden could not rediscover their paradise; they had never longed for it, as William and Dorothy had done. The presence of Dorothy at Grasmere was an essential aspect of Wordsworth’s successful revisitation, because she participated in his natural education as a child, and was also responsible for his restoration to Nature following his lapse into the flux of historical events in France. Wordsworth can therefore pay tribute to Dorothy as in essence a perfect Female counterpart to his Male, a completion of the whole life represented by the vale.

The structure of “ Home at Grasmere ” is a series of images which suggest how the vale becomes an emblem of one creative mind, its physical properties extensions of the poetic intelligence that perceives them. The images of activity and rest are associ-

¹⁸ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York, 1971), p. 223.

¹⁹ *In the Human Grain* (New York, 1967), p. 87.

ated with recurring or unchanging phenomena; there is no significant object in the poem which Wordsworth would not have met with in his childhood. By evoking these perennial images of continuity, as Goldsmith could not, Wordsworth preserves a unified self experienced as landscape. Furthermore, the purposive manner in which Wordsworth compares the vale to heaven, to the sky and stars, underscores his insistence that this "World" (45) embodies the cosmic unity that is the poet's dream. Images of reflection which link heaven and earth into one being, generalized descriptions of "warm woods, and sunny hills, and fresh green fields" (127) which contrast to the closely observed forest scenes in the 1805 *Prelude*, the dream imagery that clouds over distinctions—all these suggest a world removed from time and change, a fairyland in which the poet plays Prospero to hold all the fearful categories of human life in momentary check.

We notice, then, that Wordsworth has not answered the challenge of Goldsmith's poem on its own terms, for Goldsmith would have been as pleased to find his homeland as he left it. Wordsworth congratulates himself for having found a refuge "From crowded streets remote, / Far from the living and dead wilderness / Of the thronged World . . ." (612-14). But it takes only the most superficial sense of historical inevitability to recognize the dangers in the grandiose claims made for "A Whole without dependence or defect." Grasmere, no less than Auburn, did not live without dependence and it is only a dreamer's paradise that does. Wordsworth can celebrate, in 1802, "the store / Of indistinguishable sympathies" that bind his brother, John, to Grasmere and the Lakes, but John's death by drowning in 1805 forced upon Wordsworth, as Napoleonic threats of invasion did earlier, the need for a spiritual retreat less susceptible to worldly violation.²⁰ In 1807 Wordsworth had "Great Pan himself" speak comforting words in a sonnet, "Composed by the Side of Grasmere Lake":

"Be thankful, thou; for, if unholy deeds
Ravage the world, tranquillity is here!"²¹

But by that time his first enthusiasm had been shaken, as the "abyss" that yawns in the opening of the sonnet suggests. In sec-

²⁰ *Poetical Works*, II, 122.

²¹ *Poetical Works*, III, 127.

tion III we will notice more shades creep across the protective home of the poet's soul.

We ought to recognize first that Wordsworth is aware of the dangers of repose; no less than Blake's *Thel* he has isolated himself from the world of generation and runs the risk of stultification. The poet watches the aquatic fowl fly in circles above the lake, an emblem of that activity characteristic of a vigorous mind, but in what way can he give creative vent to his own active intelligence? If "Home at Grasmere" is a prelude to *The Prelude* we can see in this question the beginning of the spiritual quest that ends in Grasmere itself. Wordsworth communicates his misgivings to Nature, who responds:

"Be mild and cleave to gentle things,
Thy glory and thy happiness be there.
Nor fear, though thou confide in me, a want
Of aspirations that *have* been, of foes
To wrestle with, and victory to complete,
Bounds to be leapt, darkness to be explored,
All that inflamed thy infant heart, the love,
The longing, the contempt, the undaunted quest,
All shall survive—though changed their office, all
Shall live,—it is not in their power to die." (735-44)

The undaunted quest will continue as part of Nature's education, the wrestling shall survive. In what way? Wordsworth supplies the answer immediately and thoroughly: the medium of verse will be the element he must wrestle with, and that struggle itself will represent the onward flow of creative life which, he told Mathetes, would inevitably follow a return to sources of spiritual power. In the last lines of "Home at Grasmere" he clearly rejects a military or political life and the possibilities of a traditional epic. His song will be continuous with his adopted landscape and preach of continuity. The way to *The Prelude* was clear; Wordsworth asked only time to compose. The poem thus embodies not only the didactic and memorial functions of Goldsmith's plea, but itself contributes to the vitality of Grasmere as a protected plot of holy ground. On this secure base Wordsworth began the series of recollections with "perfect confidence."

III

The Prelude, then, was made possible because of Wordsworth's physical return to an unaltered Paradise, secure from the vicis-

situdes of change. The poet's investment of faith in natural landscape exceeds that of any major writer of his period, perhaps of any period. The example of Goldsmith was behind him; Wordsworth must have appreciated his danger in an age when the growth of population and industry threatened the equanimity of every country village. Wordsworth had removed into what Blake calls the Circle of Destiny, had chosen to depend on physical objects as analogies to a spiritual state and so, in Blake's myth, was destined to lapse backward in the circle from the Beulah of Grasmere to the Ulro or hell of spiritual dispossession. This movement has been chronicled by Wordsworth in a later poem, "The Tuft of Primroses."

"The Tuft of Primroses" was completed in 1808, and describes feelings about events which date from 1805. Though not linked to *The Recluse* by title, de Selincourt suggests it might have been Book II had *The Recluse* ever been finished. "The Tuft of Primroses" contains the passage on the Grand Chartreuse, the largest single addition to *The Prelude* after 1805. It also contains passages which were reworked and inserted into *The Excursion*. Related as it is to those longer philosophical poems, "The Tuft of Primroses" emerges as the *locus classicus* of Wordsworth's decline; it articulates as no other single work does the collapse of those special conditions he needed to compose great poetry.

From about the year 1805 the vale of Grasmere began to undergo physical change. Writing in that year, Wordsworth describes one example:

Woe to poor Grasmere for ever and ever! A wretched Creature, wretched in name and Nature, of the name of *Crump*, goaded on by his still more wretched Wife . . . this same Wretch has at last begun to put his long impending threats in execution; and when you next enter the sweet paradise of Grasmere you will see staring you in the face upon that beautiful ridge that elbows out into the vale . . . a temple of abomination, in which are to be enshrined Mr. and Mrs. Crump. Seriously this is a great vexation to us, as this House will stare you in the face from every part of the Vale, and entirely destroy its character of simplicity and seclusion.²²

In November of the same year Wordsworth once again raised "lamentations for the fate of Grasmere" in a letter:

²² *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth 1787-1805* (Oxford, 1967), p. 534.

. . . alas poor Grasmere! The first object which now presents itself after you have clomb the hill from Rydale is Mr. Crump's newly-erected large mansion. . . . Then a farm-house opposite to ours, on the other side of the Lake, has been taken by a dashing man from Manchester who, no doubt, will make a *fine place* of it, and, as he has taken the Island too, will probably erect a pavilion upon it, or, it may be, an Obelisk. This is not all. A very beautiful little Estate has been purchased in the more retired part of the Vale, and the first thing the Gentleman has done preparatory to building his house, has been to make a *sunk Fence* which you overlook on every side from the rocks, thickets, and green sloping hills! Add to all that Sir Michael Fleming has been getting his woods appraised, and after Christmas the Ax is to be lifted against them, and not one tree left, so the whole eastern side of the Lake will be entirely naked, even to the very edge of the water!—but what could we expect better from Sir Michael? who has been building a long high wall under the grand woods behind his house which cuts the hill in two by a straight line; and to make his doings visible to all men, he has whitewashed it, as white as snow. One who could do this wants a sense which others have. To him there is no “*Spirit in the Wood.*”²³

As the nearby industrial cities became wealthier and uglier the popularity of country houses and Ornamental Gardening increased. Grasmere, inevitably, became one object of these fashions. To counteract such intrusion Wordsworth wrote (in 1810) *A Guide through the District of the Lakes*, in which he cautioned against the usurpation of natural landscape by urban luxury. In the *Guide* he quotes approvingly Thomas Gray's description of eighteenth-century Grasmere: “Not a single red tile, no flaring gentleman's house or garden wall, breaks in upon the repose of this little unsuspected paradise; but all is peace, rusticity, and happy poverty, in its neatest and most becoming attire.” Commenting on this passage, Wordsworth remarks:

What is here so justly said of Grasmere applied almost equally to all its sister Vales. It was well for the undisturbed pleasures of the Poet that he had no forebodings of the change which was soon to take place; and it might have been hoped that these words, indicating how much the charm of what *was*, depended upon what was *not*, would of themselves have preserved the ancient franchises of this and other kindred mountain retirements from trespass; or (shall I dare to say?) would have secured scenes so consecrated from profanation.²⁴

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 638. “*Spirit in the Wood*” is from Wordsworth's own poem, “Nutting.”

²⁴ *Prose Works*, II, p. 64. Wordsworth's letter on the “Kendal and Windermere Railway” at the end of the volume repeats the same charges.

The immediate stimulus for “The Tuft of Primroses,” however, is probably to be found in the loss of neighbors (by death) and ever-green groves that William and Dorothy returned to in July of 1807 after a disappointing reunion with Coleridge in Coleorton.²⁵ The possible loss of Sara Hutchinson, Wordsworth’s sister-in-law, ill at the time, may also have prompted composition.

The first verse paragraph of “The Tuft of Primroses” is quintessential Wordsworth, and reminds us immediately of the opening of *The Prelude*. The primrose is hailed and praised in its solitude and majesty. The fragility of the primrose, reminiscent of Goldsmith’s imagery, later becomes an emblem of the entire vale and by extension Wordsworth’s poetic soul. From this point the poem turns from celebration of preservation to lamentation over loss, as *The Prelude* descends into doubt and misgiving after its uplifting first paragraph. In this poem, however, there is no cyclical return. “Farewell,” the poet suddenly bids the flower, and we feel the poem diverted to a sequence of thoughts possibly unanticipated by Wordsworth when he began it. Remembering the popular choice of trees as *memento mori* in the eighteenth century, we have a shock of recognition at passages like the following:

Alas, how much
 Since I beheld and loved thee first, how much
 Is gone, though thou be left. I would not speak
 Of best friends dead, or other deep heart-loss
 Bewail’d with weeping, but by River sides
 And in broad fields how many gentle loves,
 How many mute memorials pass’d away.
 Stately herself, though of a lowly kind
 That little Flower remains and has survived
 The lofty band of Firs that overtopp’d
 Their antient neighbour the old Steeple Tower,
 That consecrated File which had so oft
 Swung in the blast, mingling their solemn strain
 Of music. . . .

.
 Ah what a welcome! when from absence long
 Returning, on the centre of the Vale
 I look’d a first glad look, and saw them not!
 Was it a dream? th’ aerial grove, no more
 Right in the centre of the lovely Vale
 Suspended like a stationary cloud,

²⁵ See the letter from Dorothy Wordsworth of July 19, 1807 in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth 1806-1811* (Oxford, 1937), pp. 135-39.

Inviolable for nobler purposes,
 These individual precincts, to protect
 Here, if here only, from despoil and wrong
 All growth of nature and all frame of Art
 By, and in which the blissful pleasures live.
 Have not th' incumbent Mountains looks of awe
 In which their mandate may be read, the streams
 A Voice that pleads, beseeches, and implores?
 In vain: the deafness of the world is here
 Even here, and all too many of the haunts
 Which Fancy most delights in, and the best
 And dearest resting-places of the heart
 Vanish beneath an unrelenting doom. (249-63)

The “extreme fear and hatred of rapid change,” according to Wordsworth’s biographer, Mary Moorman, “are constant features in his conversation and writing in the post-war years.”²⁶ Wordsworth feared the ascension to sudden political power of the masses, whose appetite for vengeance against landlords he had witnessed in France. This fear had a concrete application to his own domestic situation, for Wordsworth feared the extension of urban slums or urban idleness and unemployment into his own vale. When the railroads in the 1840’s threatened to construct a line through Kendal to Lowwood on Windermere, Wordsworth actively (and successfully) propagandized against the proposal. Wordsworth’s sonnet on the Railway was one of the last poems he wrote on any public matter; it records in by now familiar terms his fears that the landscape would be overrun by man-made forces:

Is then no nook of English ground secure
 From rash assault? Schemes of retirement sown
 In youth, and ’mid the busy world kept pure
 As when their earliest flowers of hope were blown,
 Must perish;—how can they this blight endure?
 And must he too the ruthless change bemoan
 Who scorns a false utilitarian lure
 ’Mid his paternal fields at random thrown?
 Baffle the threat, bright Scene, from Orrest-head
 Given to the pausing traveller’s rapturous glance:
 Plead for thy peace, thou beautiful romance
 Of nature; and, if human hearts be dead,
 Speak, passing winds; ye torrents, with your strong
 And constant voice, protest against the wrong.²⁷

²⁶ *William Wordsworth: The Later Years 1803-1850* (Oxford, 1965), p. 209.

²⁷ *Poetical Works*, III, 61.

Critics of Wordsworth have looked in many places for the sources of his political conservatism, particularly at his accumulation of property in Cumberland and his friendship with Lord Lonsdale, but from this vantage we can estimate how strongly his fear of change is based on his identification of self with landscape, and landscape with nation. Though Wordsworth rebuked Mathetes for misgivings about the destiny of the modern world, his own doubts increased in the later part of his life, and contribute to the analysis of nineteenth-century English society we associate with Hazlitt's *Spirit of the Age*, Southey's *Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*, and Carlyle's *Past and Present*.

In *Natural Supernaturalism*, M. H. Abrams remarks on "Wordsworth's assumption . . . that if life is to be worth living there cannot be a blank unreason or mere contingency at the heart of things; there must be meaning (in the sense of a good and intelligible purpose) in the occurrence of both physical and moral evils." The evils of change and loss, Abrams demonstrates, are surmounted in *The Prelude* by Wordsworth's "recognition that all process entails loss, and that there can be no creative progress except through the painful destruction, however unmerited, of the preceding stage." The threatened destruction of Grasmere, in my opinion, cannot be incorporated into this dialectic of good and evil because Grasmere is itself the symbolic alpha and omega of Wordsworth's circuitous journey: it is the unitary source and end of the poet's pilgrimage. Natural supernaturalism is neither cancelled nor mocked by threats to Grasmere; Wordsworth would never have retracted the central beliefs of his visionary poetry. But Grasmere *is* an outpost of spiritual progress, a test case of Wordsworth's belief that, in Abrams' words, "in our life in this actual world, with its ineradicable evil and suffering, lies the possibility and the only possibility of achieving a paradise which serves [Wordsworth], as it did Milton, to justify the evil of our mortal state."²⁸ Suffering, or any deep distress, does fit into Wordsworth's scheme of salvation by humanizing the soul and taming its love of mastery. But if Grasmere, like Milton's Eden, falls to the enemy what strategy in the secular world can defend any landscape against annihilation? Here there is no intervening Christ, only the embattled poet of Nature who must by tract

²⁸ *Natural Supernaturalism*, pp. 95, 126, 116.

and sonnet “redress the rigours of the inclement clime.” At issue is the survival of an originating Power, a Centre, a Home, without whose existence the poetic imagination would itself “vanish beneath an unrelenting doom.”

Geoffrey Hartman has called Wordsworth “the most isolated figure among the great English poets” and referred to Wordsworth’s fears about “the death of nature” as a source of his embittered last decades.²⁹ Hartman believes that Wordsworth’s “sense of mission” was so strong that his own approaching death enforced on him the associated death of all that he had not called to life by his verse. But surely the order of attitudes is the opposite; it is the despoiling of his natural home that stimulates a growing fear of his own death. With the embodiment of his past in danger of dismemberment Wordsworth began to brood about the mortality of his own self. Each fear nourished the other till Wordsworth felt compelled to find some faith that would protect both himself and Nature from extinction. His later poetry is the record of that new faith, but it is no longer a poetry of the *whole* self of *The Prelude*; his home is no longer “in the very world which is the world / Of all of us, the place in which, in the end / We find our happiness or not at all” (X.726-28). His home is still heaven, but heaven was no longer Grasmere. Neither “The Tuft of Primroses” nor the post-1805 books of *The Excursion* reinvigorated the marriage of poetic spirit and physical landscape. In the latter poem the Pastor, standing among graves, praises the same Providence that sustained the eighteenth-century poets as they hung, in adult life, between the Paradise of childhood and the Paradise after death. *The Excursion* ends by memorializing a divorcement. As did Coleridge’s “Dejection; An Ode.” As did “The Deserted Village.”

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²⁹ *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven, 1964), p. 338.