

the
FORMS OF
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre

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Philosophical Autobiography

from them. Rousseau's autobiography does not so much refer to the life he lived elsewhere as record the life he lived in the act of composing it—the only life he could count on to overcome time and achieve the immortality he sought.

Having begun his autobiography with the idea of telling the truth about himself, Rousseau came to regard the book as a way of finding out that truth and then as a way of living truthfully, imaginatively, in the flickering light of that ineffable bliss which he had always considered his true destiny but from which time and experience had exiled him. Although *The Confessions* retain the biographical content of historical autobiography, and although Rousseau attempts sporadically to maintain a stable perspective on the moving past, his belief that his past experiences have divorced him from true being and his conviction that passionate, imaginative action is truer than calm, rational judgment deny the fundamental premises of the historical form and foreshadow the eventual abandonment of both biographical data and a comprehending narrator by autobiographers in the poetic mode. Rousseau's shift, in mid-passage, from historical explanation to philosophical inquiry is itself foreshadowed, far back, in the movement from part one to part two of Augustine's *Confessions*. And like that movement, Rousseau's points far ahead, to those modern writers who turned from life to find themselves in autobiography.

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Franklin and Rousseau may be thought of as standing at a point where the evolutionary line described by Augustinian autobiography divides in two, one branch maintaining the direction set by Franklin's secular redaction of Augustine's historical form, the other striking off with Rousseau in the formal direction of Augustine's meditations and final prayer, toward what Carlyle would call "philosophico-

poetic" autobiography. For those autobiographers who followed Franklin, the historical form would continue to explain the relation of an individual life to the shared beliefs of its stipulated audience, selecting events from the writer's own past life and arranging them in retrospect into a narrative pattern which simultaneously illustrates the writer's opinions and shows how he came to hold them. For those who followed Rousseau, however, autobiography was to serve a very different purpose. Instead of defining themselves exoterically, in relation to the consensual values of their audience—seeking complete being, as it were, through consanguinity—these philosophico-poetic autobiographers would pursue the opposite course and attempt to discover within themselves an absolute, spiritual ground for the erection of a true society—a "fixed point of sound humanity" as Wordsworth calls it.* Speaking more and more in those esoteric, fictive metaphors that Hawthorne called "the talk of secluded man with his own mind and heart," rather than in "the style of a man of society," Rousseau's followers would shun the foregone conclusions of retrospectively selected and arranged self-biography to prospect for the self through the organic formulations of philosophic inquiry and poetic expression.

Rousseau set out in his *Confessions* to explain himself and came in time to realize that he had lost the only self capable of explanation. Wordsworth began where Rousseau left off: beached alongside the Natural stream that flows in a vital tide from infinitude to infinitude, stranded somewhere between his original and ultimate home, and, unable either to rest where he is or to regain his proper course, "Unprofitably travelling toward the grave" (I, 267) in Augustine's country of death. Having been carried from home

* *The Prelude* (1850), ed. Carlos Baker (New York, 1954), VIII, 455. Subsequent references to this edition appear in parentheses in the text.

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by the Natural flow of energy, passion, and ambition that governed his youth, and then deposited on this listless shore, he perceives a deep fissure between his past and present selves: the thoughtlessly active boy and the torpidly reflective man. In this intolerable situation, he considers it profitable to recall Nature's earliest dealings with him, to move ahead, as Bunyan did, by going back over the path he has traveled as a "sojourner on earth" (VI, 49). If he can return in memory to "fetch / Invigorating thoughts from former years" (I, 620-21), when Nature was still present to him, and then imaginatively re-create his life without allowing that energy to flag along the way, he can propel himself autobiographically through his present state of self-division to self-knowledge and the mature accomplishments, both spiritual and poetic, which depend upon that knowledge and for which he feels himself divinely ordained.

The Prelude is thus philosophical from the outset. Like the meditative Augustine of Books X through XII of the *Confessions*, Wordsworth forgoes explanation to "make rigorous inquisition" through himself (I, 147) in search of some ultimate wisdom, a universal truth that can inform the long philosophical poem to which his autobiography is a necessary prelude. No more able than Augustine was to "hold the mind and fix it firm" upon eternity, he, too, seeks to conquer time through time, to "rescue from decay the old / By timely interference" (I, 116-17), to ripen "dawn into steady morning" (I, 127). Like Augustine's meditations, Wordsworth's autobiography aims not to report what the writer's life has done but to do something the life has not done: convey him through inquisitive action to self-knowledge. Accordingly, Wordsworth employs Augustine's prospective method, allowing one subject to dictate the next, moving naturally from recollection to reflection to

affective reaction to spontaneous expostulation and on to the next recollection, finding his way by going there. And, as in Augustine's case, the sole object of this autobiographical action is the attainment of rest, that union of the knower and the known which makes further movement unnecessary.

For Wordsworth, this reposeful condition amounts to a reconciliation of the vitally extravagant youth he once was with the torpidly restless adult he now is, a union of his passionate and reflective selves in a state of vital rest. Stated this way, Wordsworth's task is nothing less than to solve the implicit but unacknowledged problem of all those historical autobiographies that, departing from Augustine's model, had placed the narrator farther along the time-line of the protagonist's life rather than on a fixed point above it: how may the knowing and acting selves, dispersed in time, be brought together? Unable, and in any case disinclined, to swim back up the stream of history to Augustine's divinely revealed, eternal ground, Franklin and Rousseau had tried, in their separate ways, to reconcile these two personae on their own temporal ground: Franklin by turning the impulsive protagonist into the reasonable narrator, Rousseau by turning the reasonable narrator into the impulsive protagonist. But neither Franklin's Reason—being a product, rather than the governing form, of experience and hence merely a stage of ongoing experience—nor Rousseau's feeling—which is generated by experience and is itself a motion—will provide that ecstatic condition of ultimate self-possession and knowledge which Augustine had made the goal of autobiography. Moreover, in order to subordinate the protagonist to the narrator, Franklin had to deny the uniqueness of his own life; while Rousseau, in sinking the narrator in the protagonist, had to deny the representativeness of his. Neither strategy, in sum, could fulfill the

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aims of Augustinian autobiography: the reconciliation of protagonist and narrator, of unique experience and comprehensive knowledge, of true being and true consanguinity, of temporal action and eternal form.

Only a vantage-point like Augustine's could meet those strenuous demands, and the various avenues to that privileged eminence were all closed off. In this respect, Wordsworth's autobiographical problem is also the Romantic problem of knowledge. Augustine, Dante, and Bunyan had all derived self-knowledge, in some degree, from a prior, revealed knowledge of universal truths. Franklin and Rousseau had to take exactly the opposite course and derive universal truths from self-knowledge, elevating individual Reason and individual feeling to the status of eternal principles. For them and for Wordsworth, as for every other heir of the Enlightenment, all knowledge had to begin with individual experience.

But, where the Enlightenment regarded experience primarily as a source of information to be accumulated, analyzed, and arranged until it finally produced a comprehensive picture of reality, the Romantics considered this presumptuous erection of data a tower of Babel, destined to produce only confusion. The quantity of data multiplied faster than the reason could gather and arrange it. Each new discovery seemed not only to reveal the existence of hitherto unsuspected worlds of fact but to discredit the very concepts that had led to the discovery. With each effort to exhaust its content and to encompass it rationally, reality seemed to expand and change its shape, necessitating a correlative shift in the point from which it could be comprehended.

In order to acknowledge this perception of an ever-expanding, ever-changing reality without either succumbing to utter relativism or withdrawing into some fancied realm of "medieval" or "oriental" absolutism, the

Romantics sought to locate the center of reality—the point where all things have their true, eternal being, where nothing is lost and everything can be truly known—in a place that was at once sufficiently mobile to keep pace with the changing shape of reality and sufficiently stable to provide some assurance that a principle of continuity and purpose underlies all change. Augustine had located this point in the unmoving God who is the source and rectifying form of all movement. Dante identified it with Beatrice, who sits in the center with eternal Love even as she moves on the justified circumference of temporal desire. Bunyan placed the center in Christ, who sits at God's right hand and moves the sinner's heart toward redemption. Franklin located it Reason, which changing experience reveals to be the unchanging pattern of individual and collective history. And Rousseau had located it in Nature, the universal principle that manifests itself in the sub-rational stream of individual feeling. In every case, the center had anchored change to permanence, but in each successive case the abiding center of mutability had shifted farther along the radius that Augustine drew between God and the human heart, until that center came to rest deep within dark cavern of the individual psyche. Located there, it could be presumed to radiate, and hence to concentrate, whatever experiences might swirl about it, but it could be approached only through that unceasing swirl. For Rousseau, eternal Nature is indistinguishable from the temporal flow of his own passions.

These conditions—the need to locate the fixed personal center that lends pattern and value to unstable reality, and the necessity of approaching that center through one's own moving experiences—stipulate autobiography as the prime instrument of Romantic knowledge, and movement as its method. After considering several possible topics for his

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poem, Wordsworth settles upon that of his own youth and upbringing. The subject recommends itself on several counts. It tacitly acknowledges his present uncertainty about those permanent truths which a grander topic would require, and it offers an avenue to that internal point where such truths reside. That is, autobiography is not simply an alternative to a work "Of ampler and more varied argument / Where," he says, "I might be discomfited and lost" (II, 644-45). It is a means—the only one available—of fixing "the wavering balance" of his mind (I, 622) upon the enduring truths that underlie his experience and, hence, of occupying the eternal point from which an ampler argument may be conducted. Since he stands presently in doubt, furthermore, he must move to wisdom, and autobiography—"a theme / Single and of determined bounds" (I, 640-41)—identifies his proper direction. To sit at home with the truth may be the greatest bliss, but that state is "vouchsafed, / Alas! to few in this untoward world." For those who find themselves adrift in doubt, happiness comes only from "wandering . . . step by step . . . to wisdom" (XIII, 120-33). "The road lies plain before" him (I, 640), and he must become a traveler among the days of his youth, "A Traveller . . . / Whose only tale is of himself" (V, 198-99).

Since movement is unavoidable, Wordsworth must be sure to choose a mode of conveyance that, like Augustine's faithful action and Rousseau's feeling action, is consonant with the truth it aims to apprehend. For Wordsworth, as for all the Romantics, the cognitive vehicle most capable of carrying the questing soul to truth is poetry. In his mind, poetry is associated with both divinity and the knowledge of it. (The poetic imagination is a higher power, creative, Godlike, equivalent to moral power and divinity.) It speaks in a "living voice" that tells us "what is truth (VI, 112-14).

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It reveals "our being's heart and home" in infinitude, and it puts the soul in possession of that blessed estate (VI, 592-616). (Perfect poetry is also associated with true being.) Just as our "immortal spirit grows / Like harmony in music" through the natural experiences which are the cause and adequate symbol of that growth, the soul may grow through the correlative objects of words to a state in which its "discordant elements" cohere in poetic harmony (I, 340-44). If the youthful self is passionate and the adult self is reflective, true poetry spans these poles; and when the soul is in possession of itself, "poetic numbers" come "to clothe in priestly robe / A renovated spirit" (I, 51-53).

Poetry is also akin to Nature. Those who have been conversant with "living nature" in their youth receive

Knowledge and increase of enduring joy
From the great Nature that exists in works
Of mighty Poets. [VII, 587, 593-95]

Accordingly, Wordsworth hopes that his poem,

Proceeding from a source of untaught things,
Creative and enduring, may become
A power like one of Nature's. [XIII, 310-12]

And since true being consists in the adjustment of self to Nature, whose "sister horns" are emotion and calmness, and whose gifts are the energy one needs to seek truth and the stillness of mind one needs to receive it, poetry is the divinely regulated action through which the discordant soul may achieve Natural harmony. By imitating the inscrutable workmanship of Nature, the poem can both move, as it must, and also achieve a final form of truth that will justify, redeem, its necessary movement.

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The cognitive aim of *The Prelude* and its attendant method of inquiry are based on a set of closely related assumptions, which need to be made clear. First of all, Wordsworth assumes that although life is a temporal process, this "earthly progress" (II, 233) takes place within a larger, enduring frame of things called Nature, which precedes and directs his life and can be discerned through his life. Second, just as the justification for the processes of Nature and of life lies in their unchanging forms, the ultimate justification for the poetic process that imitates those of Nature and life resides in its end, that final form which, like theirs, is "marked out by Heaven" (II, 753). Third, since the point toward which poetry and life move when they are Natural is eternally designated, it exists apart from, unconditioned by, the processes that embody and reveal it. Consequently, once discovered, it can become a basis of future conduct, an authority for ampler argument in future poems. And finally, because the truth toward which all Natural process tends is divinely appointed, it will be reassuring, consoling, redemptive, harmonious, healing, and joyful, like Nature itself.

While Wordsworth sets his autobiography the task of discovering the true form of his life by projecting an unbroken line from its Natural beginning, through the cultural experiences that now divide past from present, and on ahead to reveal his divinely appointed destination, his assumption that the origin, course, and destination of this poetic movement will be Natural blocks his passage through the very experiences that have caused his problem in the first place. Determined from the outset to trace the flow of Nature's stream from his youth to the present, he tends to treat sympathetically those youthful foibles which seen Natural and to disparage or dismiss as insignificant those which seem in retrospect to foreshadow his present state of cultural ex-

ile. Unlike "the vulgar works of man," Nature's works are "enduring" (I, 408-09), and the soul that seeks immortality must shun the former to intertwine itself with the latter. Natural things nurture the "creative sensibility" (II, 360); cultural scenes thwart it. Just as true poetry is Natural, Natural subjects come fully formed for poetry, while cultural subjects are anti-poetic and must be smoothed by art. Because cultural things are equally worthless, any one will serve to represent the rest. But each Natural thing has a particular value as a cause and symbol of some stage in the soul's growth in grace.

Because the poetic that is Wordsworth's self-correcting instrument of inquiry, and the idea of true being that is the stipulated end of the inquiry, are both modeled on Nature, which is also the scene and condition of his boyhood, the poem cannot negotiate the necessary passage through that cultural barrier which divides the vital past from the torpid present. As long as the protagonist moves among Natural scenes, propelled and guided by the healing, elevating power of Nature, the poem moves purposively, melodiously, and can be allowed to take its own way. But when the young man leaves home, for Cambridge, London, or France, sensation assaults and stuns his powers of reflection. The purposive, eloquent flow of the poetic stream loses itself in marshlands, breaks up in rapids, or whirls like a maelstrom, and Wordsworth must direct its course back into the easier terrain of his past, or linger in some more placid bye-canal outside the mainstream, or rise, "as if on wings" to a level of generalization above the turbulence of anti-poetic details. "Loth to quit / Those recollected hours that have the charm / Of visionary things" (I, 630-32), his song attempts to move naturally through the cultural barrier, to see "the parts / As parts but with a feeling of the whole" (VII, 735-36), diffusing

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Through meagre lines and colors, and the press
Of self-destroying, transitory things,
Composure and ennobling Harmony. [VII, 769-71]

Often, when the recusant details of agitated social life refuse to take a poetic shape, he tries ruralizing them. Although Cambridge puts the imagination to sleep, it is a "garden of great intellects" (III, 267). The events of the French Revolution overtax his powers of poetic assimilation, but when he was young the fife of war was "A black-bird's whistle in a budding grove" (VI, 760). And, while "There is no end" to the catalogue of lying sights and sounds of London, he regards them all summarily, as he would "daisies swarming through the fields of June" (VII, 583, 593). This tactic will not serve, however. Although Nature sustains him in the "City's turbulent world" (VII, 71), it will not carry him through, for society lacks the "substantial centre" by which Nature controls the thoughts it incites to motion (VIII, 430-32). Consequently, when the agitated cultural scene threatens to overwhelm him, he must break off and return to his rural solitude.

There, instead of ruralizing culture, he looks for rural counterparts of the problems that beset him in society. Still searching for that unbroken line that will lead him from "Love of Nature" to "Love of Man," he describes three situations in which the boundary between Nature and culture is somewhat indistinct: a social gathering of country folk at a fair, an alliance between Nature and Art in Gehol's gardens, and a mixture of Arcadian ideality and tragic reality in the life of an English shepherd. In all three cases, however, the brief sojourn in the middle-ground between Nature and culture leads him back to Nature rather than ahead in the direction his autobiography means to take. The people at the fair he treats very condescendingly, loving them mainly

because they are powerless to change the direction of history. Gehol's gardens simply remind him how much he prefers the primitive Nature of his boyhood, and the shepherd's "vice and folly, wretchedness and fear" fail to sustain his imaginative interest (VIII, 291-92).

No better prepared and even less inclined now than previously to deal with anti-poetic society, Wordsworth sets out again to tackle the problem of London—to treat seriously, he says, the subject he only toyed with before. But he no sooner takes the matter up than he drops it. The narrator knows that London, not Nature, is the "Fount of my country's destiny" (VIII, 593) and hence his own. He knows that he must make sense of his life at Cambridge and that England's declaration of war upon France has opened a gulf between past and present that must be bridged. Nostalgic though he is, furthermore, he knows that the Natural vitality and passion for which he longs is the very energy that drove him out of Nature, attracted him to London, and set him up for disappointment by fostering revolutionary sympathies in him. At those crucial points where the poem seems most determined to pick out the thread that runs through his life, the narrator can even suggest that the experiences themselves, and not their transcendent Natural form, are "the ties / That bind the perishable hours of life / Each to the other" (VII, 461-63), and that the shapes which experiences lend to the soul are fatal, ineluctable. Still, whenever thronging sensation begins to produce fragmented catalogues instead of the harmonious verse that reconciles emotion with steady thought, he must cry, "Enough" (VII, 219), stop his serial rendition of the protagonist's experiences, and insist that his Naturally formed soul somehow managed to resist the imprint of social vice and folly.

Wordsworth's unwillingness, on the one hand, to aban-

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don the youthful poetic soul that is his only source of virtue, and his inability, on the other hand, to convey that virtue intact through the dismembering experiences of his middle period send him back again and again to recover in imagination that youthful condition, which comes increasingly to seem not simply the vital counterpart to his present contemplativeness but something complete in itself, not an early stage in the evolution of his present self but a blessed state of innocent wholeness prior to, and separate from, the train of altering experiences that have led him to his present fallen estate. Much as he may desire to linger in that lost time, however, his chosen poetic method will not let him. Like Nature and the evolving soul, the poem is a stream whose feeding source is the creative imagination. "With intricate delay," it can turn and return,

Even as a river—partly (it might seem)
Yielding to old remembrances, and swayed
In part by fear to shape a way direct,
That would engulf him soon in the ravenous sea—
Turns, and will measure back his course, far back,
Seeking the very regions which he crossed
In his first outset. [IX, 1-8]

But even though it turns back, each turn occurs farther downstream, closer to the "ravenous sea." With each turn, it becomes a different river, and with each return the revisited regions assume a different guise.

"Like one who rows, / Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point / With an unswerving line" (I, 367-69), Wordsworth has attempted to regulate his forward movement by keeping his eye fixed upon a receding landmark behind him. In moving ahead, however, he has lost sight of his navigational point upon "The horizon's utmost boundary" (I, 371), and in turning back to relocate it, he has wandered

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from his true course and lost track of his chosen destination. After a great deal of such meandering, he finds himself in an uncertain place, unable to retrace the course that brought him here or to go ahead with any hope of reaching his original goal. To this difficult autobiographical problem, Wordsworth alternately offers and withdraws a number of mutually incompatible solutions. His life has a principle of continuity, a form and a purpose, he suggests, but it cannot be known. "We see but darkly / Even when we look behind us" (III, 482-83), and who can say that the most regrettable experiences have had no beneficial effects? Nature's movement in the soul "lies far hidden from the reach of words" (III, 188), and even forgotten experience "still works, though hidden from all search / Among the depths of time" (V, 196-97). In one such despairing moment, he calls a "written paper" that a blind beggar wears "to explain / His story, whence he came, and who he was," an "apt type / . . . of the utmost we can know, / Both of ourselves and of the universe" (VII, 641-46).

Since the object of the poem is healing self-knowledge, however, the narrator tends more often to deny the difficulties of knowing himself than to doubt the possibility of doing so. Having failed several times in Book Eight to discover some common, Natural ground beneath his rural and urban experiences, he simultaneously acknowledges the waywardness of his procedure and dismisses the very problems that his wandering reflect:

Nor shall we not be tending towards that point
Of sound humanity to which our Tale
Leads, though by sinuous ways, if here I show
How Fancy, in a season when she wove
Those slender cords, to guide the unconscious Boy
For the Man's sake, could feed at Nature's call
Some pensive musings which might well besee
Maturer years. [VII, 451-58]

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The recollection that follows, moreover, images the separation of man and boy, rather than their spiritual identity, for it depicts the dying man standing at the unknown close of his "mortal course" and looking back across a dark valley, which "Is no where touched by one memorial gleam," to the "dear mountain-tops where first he rose" (VII, 469-75). This telling image is itself dismissed with the words, "Enough of humble arguments" (VII, 476), and there follows a quick recapitulation of the poet's life prior to his removal to London: his innocent boyhood, his departure from home, his time at Cambridge. Here again, the narrator interrupts his account, which seems to be making no more progress than heretofore, and simply asserts that, while "It might be told" how his Natural upbringing conducted him to truth, showed him what is good, and taught him to "love / The end of life, and everything we know," there is no need to "speak of things common to all" (VIII, 518-29). Little wonder that the renewed poetic assault on London which follows this inadequate preparation succeeds no better than his previous attempts. After another hundred lines fail to turn up something Natural in the City, he simply drops the matter, first with an assertion that London, like Nature, revealed to him "the unity of man, / One spirit over ignorance and vice / Predominant in good and evil hearts" (VIII, 668-70), and then with a suggestion that, far from having taught him anything, life in the City merely failed to overpower the soul he brought full-formed from Nature.

When the narrator is not suggesting that the problem is insoluble or that there is no problem to be solved, he is apt to profess that there was indeed a problem but that he has solved it. Instead of standing imaginatively on the youthful side of the gulf that divides past from present and trying to project the poem across it, the narrator takes up a retrospective station on the near side, as if he has in fact managed to

traverse the dark vale, and explains how he did it. Although troubles have detained the poem, he says in the opening lines of Book Twelve, "Not with these began / Our song, and not with these our song must end" (XII, 7-8). Once again, he reviews his fall from Nature into the thrall of "the bodily eye" (VIII, 128). But this time he assumes the posture, not of the groping protagonist who could find no sign of Nature in the cultural maelstrom, but of an all-seeing narrator who knows, as the converted Augustine did, that "We of our own accord fell" from our originally blessed estate and that "our home, which is [God's] eternity, does not fall down when we are away from it." "O Soul of Nature," Wordsworth's narrator says, "how feeble have I been / When thou wert in thy strength!" (XII, 93, 105-06). He could, he insists, "gladly" explain how Nature thwarted the tyranny of sense (XII, 131), but he finds it enough to say that "the degradation . . . was transient."

I shook the habit off
Entirely and for ever, and again
In Nature's presence stood, as now I stand,
A sensitive being, a *creative* soul. [XII, 194, 200, 204-07]

Having jumped, as it were, to the conclusion he could not arrive at by way of his poetic movement, he must deny that his autobiography was meant initially to discover something yet unfound and represent it as a "history . . . brought / To its appointed close," the point "(our guiding object from the first)" where his "knowledge" is sufficient, he says, "to make me capable / Of building up a Work that shall endure" (XIV, 302-11). The feeling remains that "much hath been omitted" (XIV, 312), that in following "this intricate and difficult path," he has failed to explain either how a soul formed from Natural experience managed to resist the malformations of cultural experience or, if it did

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not, how those cultural experiences fostered instead of thwarting his creative soul. Indeed, if his original object was to reconcile the passionate and reflective halves of himself, he admits that the goal has not been attained, for the mind, he says, "Learns from such timely exercise to keep / In wholesome separation the two natures, / The one that feels, the other that observes" (XIV, 344-47). Furthermore, even as he nears what he calls "the termination of my course," he cannot rest entirely content with his conclusion. In the "distraction and intense desire" of his original mood, he "said unto the life which I had lived, Where art thou?" And he now catches a note of reproach in the imagined response of his reader. To quiet this accusing voice, he again maintains that he has in fact arrived at a comprehensive view of his life:

Anon I rose
As if on wings, and saw beneath me stretched
Vast prospect of the world which I had been
And was.

Precisely what he sees from this ecstatic coign of vantage, we are not told—only that the poem, like the life, is "All gratulant, if rightly understood" (XIV, 379-87).

Different as they are, each of these proffered responses to the problem—that there is no solution, that there is no problem, that the problem has been solved—arises from Wordsworth's original assumption that the ultimate justification of both his life and his poem depends upon their achieving some final, comprehensible form, "a frame of things" akin to Nature, "Which, mid revolution in the hopes / And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged" (XIV, 451-52). There is suggested at various moments in *The Prelude*, however, a solution to the autobiographical problem which does not require prospective action to cul-

minate in static comprehension and which thus reveals the inherent tendency of philosophical self-inquiry (already evident in Augustine's and Rousseau's confessions) to turn away from its stated goal of historical self-comprehension toward poetic self-realization. That solution is to find within the autobiographical action itself, rather than in its ultimate form, isolated, epiphanic moments when the temporally dispersed elements of passion and reflection, of movement and fixity, of protagonist and narrator, are reconciled in symbolic equipoise. Wordsworth offers, or rather considers, this rather surprising solution quite late in the poem. "There are in our existence," he says in Book Twelve,

spots of time,
That with distinct pre-eminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence . . . our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired.

[XII, 208-15]

Although these "spots of time" occur amidst the concerted temporal flow of Nature, life, evolving soul, and poetic action, they exist apart from prior and next things, with a radiance and wholeness of their own. Although they are cast up by the narrative movement of action and reflection, their value lies almost entirely in themselves, in their delicate lyric adjustment of sensation and thought, experience and meaning, rather than in their contribution to the overall form of the poem. In these isolated, purely poetic instants, Wordsworth manages to glimpse and preserve that beatific state of true being that his narrative has been seeking all along.

It would be a mistake, however, to see these isolated lyric moments themselves as having been his "object from the first." Once they have been defined, to be sure, they

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can be found scattered throughout the earlier Books— passages in which “all / The terrors, pains, and early miseries, / Regrets, vexations, lassitudes interfused / Within my mind,” as the narrator says, “have borne . . . / . . . a needful part in making up / the calm existence that is mine when I / Am worthy of myself!” (I, 344–50); moments when

such a holy calm
Would overspread my soul, that bodily eyes
Were utterly forgotten, and what I saw
Appeared like something in myself, a dream
A prospect in the mind. [II, 348–52]

But these earlier passages were set down to exemplify the protagonist’s original kinship with Nature and thus to lay a solid foundation for the evolution of his soul to complete being in the present. It is only now, when the narrative movement shows no sign of reaching its divinely appointed end, that they begin to seem ends in themselves—limited, purely aesthetic mitigations of the temporal condition that philosophical inquiry has failed to overcome. Satisfying as these lyric spots of time may be to the twentieth-century reader, who has learned to expect from poetry something less than absolute knowledge, they clearly did not provide for Wordsworth a conclusion in which he could rest content. For he never stops insisting, in the face of all contrary evidence and of his own persistent doubts, that the narrative has in fact achieved its justifying form, its divinely appointed close, and that

from its progress we have drawn
Faith in life endless, the sustaining thought
Of human Being, Eternity, and God. [XIV, 204–06]

Confessions of an English Opium Eater

To say that *The Prelude* fails to do autobiographically what Wordsworth wanted it to do and what he maintains it has done, is not to say, by any means, that it fails as a poem. The passages which re-enact the boy's Natural experience provide ample evidence that the man has indeed managed to retain or recover the poetic powers he attributes, rightly or wrongly, to the circumstances of his rearing. The point is that Wordsworth could fully realize those powers only by re-experiencing imaginatively the situations to which he ascribed them. He sought to fetch invigorating thoughts from the recollection of his early life, not for their own sake, but to run them poetically through his entire life to the present, where, validated by the life they had redeemed, they could provide a firm basis for some ampler argument. *The Prelude*, in other words, was intended to be a means to something beyond itself—a prelude to something else. Instead, it became a prelude to itself, and it did so in a very special, peculiarly Romantic sense. Augustine's story of his conversion is a prelude to itself: it recounts the genesis of the person who narrates it. Wordsworth's autobiography leads back into itself rather than on to something else because he never could complete it. The self he set out to discover philosophically, he ended up realizing poetically; it could not be abstracted from the words which are its cause and adequate symbol. What was to have been a prelude to his life's work, a work that would "endure" because its truth was timeless, became his life's work, one whose truth is inseparable from its enduring poetic action. /

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In Book Eleven of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth tacitly acknowledges the failure of his autobiography to account as