II. SYNOPSIS: THE VIA NATURALITER NEGATIVA

I do not know the man so bold
He dare in lonely place
That awful stranger Consciousness
Deliberately face—

—EMILY DICKINSON

Beguiled … to the very heart of loss.

—ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA IV. 12.29

Many readers have felt that Wordsworth's poetry honors and even worships nature. In this they have the support of Blake, a man so sensitive to any trace of "Natural Religion" that he is said to have blamed some verses of Wordsworth's for a bowel complaint which almost killed him.[1] Scholarship, luckily, tempers the affections, and the majority of readers have emphasized the poet's progression from nature worship or even pantheism to a highly qualified form of natural religion, with increasing awareness of the "ennobling interchange" between mind and nature and a late yielding of primacy to the activity of the mind or the idealizing power of imagination. A very small group, finally, has pointed to the deeply paradoxical character of Wordsworth's dealings with nature and suggested that what he calls imagination may be *intrinsically* opposed to nature.[2] This last and rarest position seems to me closest to the truth, yet I do not feel it conflicts totally with more traditional readings stressing the poet's adherence to nature. It can be shown, via several important episodes of *The Prelude,* that Wordsworth thought nature itself led him beyond nature; and, since this movement of transcendence, related to what mystics have called the negative way, is inherent in life and achieved without violent or ascetic discipline, one can think of it as the progress of a soul which is *naturaliter*

negativa.

1.

The Prelude opens with a success immediately followed by a failure. Released from the "vast city" and anticipating a new freedom, the poet pours out a rush of fifty lines: "poetic numbers came / Spontaneously to clothe in priestly robe / A renovated spirit" (1.51–53).[3] Here is the consecration, the promise of poetry as a sacrament, a gift efficacious beyond the moment. Why should a chance inspiration assume such significance? The reason is that Wordsworth was not used to make "A present joy the matter of a song"; yet here, apparently, is evidence that he may soon become self-creative, or need no more than a "gentle breeze" (the untraditional muse of the epic's opening) to produce a tempest of poetry. "Matins and vespers of harmonious verse!" is the hope held out to him, and having punctually performed matins the poet is content to slacken, to be gradually calmed by the clear autumn afternoon.

He meditates beneath a tree on a great poetic work soon to be begun. The sun sets, and city smoke is "ruralised" by distance. He starts to continue his journey, but now it is clearly time for vespers:

> It was a splendid evening, and my soul
> Once more made trial of her strength, nor lacked
> Aeolian visitations. (1.94–96)

An outside splendor challenges the creative mind. Is the poet strong enough to answer it spontaneously, as if he needed only a suggestion, the first chord?

> but the harp
> Was soon defrauded, and the banded host
> Of harmony dispersed in straggling sounds,
> And lastly utter silence! "Be it so;
> Why think of any thing but present good?" (1.96–100)

Wordsworth once again sees present good, like present joy, strangely opposed to the quickening of verse. The poetic outburst which he had considered a religious thing ("punctual service high … holy services") is now disdained as profane and *servile:*

So, like a home-bound labourer I pursued
My way beneath the mellowing sun, that shed
Mild influence; nor left in me one wish
Again to bend the Sabbath of that time
To a servile yoke. (1.101–05)

His reversal of mood is surprisingly complete. One who, at the impassioned outset of his reflections, had been so sure of the freely creative, autonomous nature of his poetic soul that famous passages on the emancipated spirit—from *Paradise Lost* and Exodus[4]—swell the current of his verse, while he thinks to possess total freedom of choice,

now free,
Free as a bird to settle where I will (1.8–9)

that same person now writes of himself, with a slight echo of Gray's *Elegy:*

So, like a home-bound labourer I pursued
My way.

The meaning of the reversal is not immediately clear. It does not deject the poet; it endows him, on the contrary, with a Chaucerian kind of cheer and leisure:

What need of many words?
A pleasant loitering journey, through three days
Continued, brought me to my hermitage.
I spare to tell of what ensued, the life
In common things—the endless store of things. (1.105–09)

The form of the reversal is that of a return to nature, at least to its rhythm. For the moment no haste remains, no tempest, no impatience of spirit. It is the mood of the hawthorn shade, of a portion of Wordsworth's Cambridge days, when he laughed with Chaucer and heard him, while birds sang, tell tales of love (III.278–81).

In the exultant first lines of *The Prelude,* Wordsworth had foreseen the spirit's power to become self-creative. Though fostered by nature it eventually outgrows its dependence, sings and storms at will (1.33–38). The poet's

anticipation of autonomy is probably less a matter of pride than of necessity: he will steal the initiative from nature so as to freely serve or sustain the natural world should its hold on the affections slacken. His poetic power, though admittedly in nature's gift, must perpetuate, like consecration, vital if transitory feelings. Without poetry the supreme moment is nothing.

> Dear Liberty! Yet what would it avail
> But for a gift that consecrates the joy? (1.31–32)

But he is taught that the desire for immediate consecrations is a wrong form of worship. The world demands a devotion less external and willful, a wise passiveness which the creative will may profane. The tempest "vexing its own creation" is replaced by a "mellowing sun, that shed / Mild influence." Nature keeps the initiative. The mind at its most free is still part of a deep mood of weathers.

Wordsworth's failure to consecrate, through verse, the splendid evening is only the last event in this reversal. It begins with the poet placing (so to say) the cart before the horse, Poetry before Nature: "To the open fields I told / A prophecy: poetic numbers came …" (1.50 ff.). He never, of course, forgets the double agency of inward and outward which informs every act of poetry. So his heart's frost is said to be broken by both outer and inner winds (1.38 ff.).[5] Such reciprocity is at the heart of all his poems. Yet he continually anticipates a movement of transcendence: Nature proposes but the Poet disposes. Just as the breeze engendered in the mind a self-quickening tempest, so poetry, the voice from that tempest, re-echoing in the mind whence it came, seems to increase there its perfection (1.55 ff.). The origin of the whole moves farther from its starting point in the external world. A *personal* agent replaces that of nature: "I paced on … down I sate … slackening my thoughts by choice" (1.60 ff.). There is a world of difference between this subtle bravado and the ascendancy of *impersonal* constructions in the final episode: "Be it so; / Why think of any thing but … What need of many words? … I pursued / My way … A pleasant loitering journey … brought me to my hermitage."

This change, admittedly, is almost too fine for common language. Syntax becomes a major device but not a consistent one. In the 1850 text, while the poet muses in the green, shady place, certain neoclassical patterns, such as the noble passive combined with synecdoche, create an atmosphere in which personal and impersonal, active and passive, blend strongly:

Many were the thoughts
Encouraged and dismissed, till choice was made
Of a known Vale, whither my feet should turn. (1.70–72)

Devices still more subtle come into play. In the passage immediately preceding, Wordsworth describes the quiet autumn afternoon:

a day
With silver clouds, and sunshine on the grass,
And in the sheltered and the sheltering grove
A perfect stillness. (1.67–70)

"Sheltered and sheltering"—typical Wordsworthian verbosity? The redundance, however, does suggest that whatever is happening here happens in more than one place; compare "silver clouds, and sunshine on the grass." The locus doubles, redoubles: that twofold agency which seems to center on the poet is active all around to the same incremental effect. The grove, sheltered, shelters in turn, and makes "A perfect stillness." The poet, in a sense, is only a single focus to something universally active. He muses on this intensifying stillness, and within him rises a picture, gazing on which with *growing* love "a higher power / Than Fancy" enters to affirm his musings. The reciprocal and incremental movement, mentioned explicitly in 1.31 ff., occurs this time quite unself-consciously, clearly within the setting and through the general influences of Nature.

No wonder, then, that the city, which the poet still strove to shake off in the first lines, appears now not only distant but also "ruralised," taking on the colors of nature, as inclosed by it as the poet's own thought. The last act of the reversal is the episode of the splendid sunset. Wordsworth not only cannot, he *need* not steal the initiative from nature. Her locus is universal, not individual; she acts by expedients deeper than will or thought. Wordsworth's failure intensifies his sense of a principle of generosity in nature. That initial cry of faith, "I cannot miss my way" (1.18), becomes true, but not because of his own power. The song loses its way.

Wordsworth's first experience is symptomatic of his creative difficulties. One impulse vexes the creative spirit into self-dependence, the other exhibits nature as that spirit's highest object. The poet is driven at the same time from and toward the external world. No sooner has he begun to enjoy his Chaucerian leisure than restiveness breaks in. The "pilgrim," despite "the life / In common things—the endless store of things," cannot rest content with his hermitage's

sabbath. Higher hopes, “airy phantasies,” clamor for life (1.114 ff.). The poet’s account of his creative difficulties (1.146–269) documents in full his vacillation between a natural and a more than natural theme, between a Romantic tale and one of “natural heroes,” or “a tale from my own heart” and “some philosophic song”—but he adds, swinging back to the more humble, “Of Truth that cherishes our daily life.” Is this indeterminacy the end at which nature aims, this curious and never fully clarified restlessness the ultimate confession of his poetry?

It would be hard, in that case, to think of *The Prelude* as describing the “growth of a poet’s mind”; for what the first part of Book I records is, primarily, Wordsworth’s failure to be a visionary or epic poet in the tradition of Spenser and Milton. No poem of epic length or ambition ever started like his. The epic poet begins confidently by stating his subject, boasts a little about the valor of his attempt, and calls on the Muse to help him. Yet Wordsworth’s confident opening is deceptive. He starts indeed with a rush of verses which are in fact a kind of self-quotation, because his subject is poetry or the mind which has separated from nature and here celebrates its coming-of-age by generously returning to it. After this one moment of confidence, all is problematic. The song loses its way, the proud opening is followed by an experience of aphasia, and Wordsworth begins the story of the growth of his mind to prove, at least to himself, that nature had intended him to be a poet. Was it for this, he asks, for this timidity or indecision, that nature spent all her care (1.269 ff.)? Did not nature, by a process of both accommodation and weaning, foster the spirit’s autonomy from childhood on? Yet when the spirit tries to seize the initiative, to quicken of itself like Ezekiel’s chariot, either nature humbles it or Wordsworth humbles himself before her. “Thus my days,” says Wordsworth sadly, “are past / In contradiction; with no skill to part / Vague longing, haply bred by want of power, / From paramount impulse not to be withstood, / A timorous capacity from prudence, / From circumspection, infinite delay” (1.237–42).

Wordsworth never achieved his philosophic song. *Prelude* and *Excursion* are no more than “ante-chapels” to the “gothic church” of his unfinished work. An unresolved opposition between Imagination and Nature prevents him from becoming a visionary poet. It is a paradox, though not an unfruitful one, that he should scrupulously record nature’s workmanship, which prepares the soul for its independence from sense-experience, yet refrain to use that independence out of respect of nature. His greatest verse *still takes its origin* in the memory of given experiences to which he is often pedantically faithful. He adheres, apparently against nature, to natural fact.

2.

There are many who feel that Wordsworth could have been as great a poet as Milton but for this return to nature, this shrinking from visionary subjects. Is Wordsworth afraid of his own imagination? Now we have, in *The Prelude*, an exceptional incident in which the poet comes, as it were, face to face with his imagination. This incident has many points in common with the opening event of *The Prelude;* it also, for example, tells the story of a failure of the mind vis-à-vis the external world. I refer to the poet's crossing of the Alps, in which his adventurous spirit is again rebuffed by nature, though by its strong absence rather than presence. His mind, desperately and unself-knowingly in search of a nature adequate to deep childhood impressions, finds instead *itself,* and has to acknowledge that nature is no longer its proper subject or home. Despite this recognition, Wordsworth continues to bend back the energy of his mind and of his poem to nature, but not before we have learned the secret behind his fidelity.

Having finished his third year of studies at Cambridge, Wordsworth goes on a walking tour of France and Switzerland. It is the summer of 1790, the French Revolution has achieved its greatest success and acts as a subtle, though, in the following books, increasingly human background to his concern with nature. Setting out to cross the Alps by way of the Simplon Pass, he and a friend are separated from their companions and try to ascend by themselves. After climbing some time and not overtaking anyone, they meet a peasant who tells them they must return to their starting point and follow a stream down instead of further ascending, i.e. they had already, and without knowing it, crossed the Alps. Disappointed, "For still we had hopes that pointed to the clouds," they start downward beset by a "melancholy slackening," which, however, is soon dislodged (VI.557–91,616 ff.).

This naive event stands, however, within a larger, interdependent series of happenings: an unexpected revelation comes almost immediately (624–40), and the sequence is preceded by a parallel disappointment with the natural world followed by a compensatory vision (523 ff.). In addition to this pattern of blankness and revelation, of the soulless image and the sudden renewed immediacy of nature, we find a strange instance of the past flowing into the present. Wordsworth, after telling the story of his disappointment, is suddenly, in the very moment of composition, overpowered by a feeling of glory to which he gives expression in rapturous, almost self-obscuring lines (VI.592 ff.). Not until the moment of composition, some fourteen years after the event,[6] does the real reason behind his upward climb and subsequent melancholy slackening strike

home; and it strikes so hard that he gives to the power in him, revealed by the extinction of the immediate external motive (his desire to cross the Alps) and by the abyss of intervening years, the explicit name Imagination:

> Imagination—here the Power so called
> Through sad incompetence of human speech,
> That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss
> Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
> At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost;
> Halted without an effort to break through;
> But to my conscious soul I now can say—
> "I recognise thy glory." (VI.592–99)

Thus Wordsworth's failure vis-à-vis nature (or its failure vis-à-vis him) is doubly redeemed. After descending, and passing through a gloomy strait (621 ff.), he encounters a magnificent view. And crossing, one might say, the gloomy gulf of time, his disappointment becomes retrospectively a prophetic instance of that blindness to the external world which is the tragic, pervasive, and necessary condition of the mature poet. His failure of 1790 taught him gently what now (1804) literally *blinds* him: the independence of imagination from nature.

I cannot miss my way, the poet exults in the opening verses of *The Prelude.* And he cannot, as long as he respects the guidance of nature, which leads him along a gradual via negativa to make his soul more than "a mere pensioner / On outward forms" (VI.737 f.). It is not easy, however, to "follow Nature." The path, in fact, becomes so circuitous that a poet follows least when he thinks he follows most. For he must cross a strait where the external image is lost yet suddenly revived with more than original immediacy. Thus a gentle breeze, in the first book, calls forth a tempest of verse, but a splendid evening wanes into silence. A magnificent hope, in the sixth book, dies for lack of sensuous food, but fourteen years later the simple memory of failure calls up that hope in a magnificent tempest of verse. When the external stimulus is too clearly present the poet falls mute and corroborates Blake's strongest objection: "Natural Objects always did and now do weaken, deaden, and obliterate Imagination in Me."[7] The poet is forced to discover the autonomy of his imagination, its independence from present joy, from strong outward stimuli—but this discovery, which means a passing of the initiative from nature to imagination, is brought on gradually, mercifully.

Wordsworth does not sustain the encounter with Imagination. His direct cry is broken off, replaced by an impersonal construction—"here the Power." It is not Imagination but his "conscious soul" he addresses directly in the lines that follow. What, in any case, is the soul to do with its extreme recognition? It has glimpsed the height of its freedom. At the end of his apostrophe to Imagination, Wordsworth repeats the idea that the soul is halted by its discovery, as a traveler by a sudden bank of mist. But the simile this time suggests not only a divorce from but also (proleptically) a return to nature on the part of the soul,

> Strong in herself and in beatitude
> That hides her, like the mighty flood of Nile
> Poured from his fount of Abyssinian clouds
> To fertilise the whole Egyptian plain. (VI.613–16)

3.

It follows that 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 (425–63), 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.[8] 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 *medias 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 on 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' *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?[9]

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 the Alps.

The stern mood to which Wordsworth refers can only be his premonition of spiritual autonomy, of an independence from sense-experience foreshadowed by nature since earliest childhood. It is the 'underground' form of imagination, and *Prelude* II.315 ff. describes it as "an obscure sense / Of possible sublimity," for which the soul, remembering *how* it felt in exalted moments, but no longer *what* it felt, continually strives to find a new content. The element of obscurity, related to nature's self-concealment, is necessary to the soul's capacity for growth, for it vexes the latter toward self-dependence. Childhood pastures become viewless; the soul cannot easily find the source from which it used to drink the visionary power; and while dim memories of a passionate commerce with external things drive it more than ever to the world, this world makes itself more than ever inscrutable.[10] The travelers' separation from their guides, then that of the road from the stream (VI.568), and finally their trouble with the peasant's words that have to be "translated," express subtly the soul's desire for a *beyond.* Yet only when poet, brook, and road are once again "fellow-travellers" (VI.622), and Wordsworth holds to Nature, does that reveal—a Proteus in the grasp of the hero—its prophecy.

This prophecy was originally the second part of the adventure, the delayed vision which compensates for his disappointment (the “Characters of the great Apocalypse,” VI.617–40). In its original sequence, therefore, the episode has only two parts: the first term or moment of natural immediacy is omitted, and we go straight to the second term, the inscrutability of an external image, which leads via the gloomy strait to its renewal. Yet, as if this pattern demanded a substitute third term, Wordsworth’s tribute to “Imagination” severs the original temporal sequence, and forestalls nature’s renewal of the bodily eye with ecstatic praise of the inner eye.

The apocalypse of the gloomy strait loses by this the character of a *terminal* experience. Nature is again surpassed, for the poet’s imagination is called forth, at the time of writing, by the barely scrutable, not by the splendid emotion; by the disappointment, not the fulfillment. This (momentary) displacement of emphasis is the more effective in that the style of VI.617 ff., and the very characters of the apocalypse, suggest that the hiding places of power cannot be localized in nature.[11] Though the apostrophe to Imagination—the special insight that comes to Wordsworth in 1804—is a real peripety, reversing a meaning already established, it is not unprepared. But it takes the poet many years to realize that nature’s “end” is to lead to something “without end,” to teach the travelers to transcend nature.

The three parts of this episode, therefore, can help us understand the mind’s growth toward independence of immediate external stimuli. The measure of that independence is Imagination, and carries with it a precarious self-consciousness. We see that the mind must pass through a stage where it experiences Imagination as a power separate from Nature, that the poet must come to think and feel as if by his own choice, or from the structure of his mind.[12]

VI-a (557–91) shows the young poet still dependent on the immediacy of the external world. Imagination frustrates that dependence secretly, yet its blindness toward nature is accompanied by a blindness toward itself. It is only a “mute Influence of the soul, / An Element of nature’s inner self” (1805, VIII.512–13).

VI-b (592–616) gives an example of thought or feeling that came from the poet’s mind without immediate external excitement. There remains, of course, the memory of VI-a (the disappointment), but this is an internal feeling, not an external image. The poet recognizes at last that the power he has looked for in the outside world is really within and frustrating his search. A shock of recognition then feeds the very blindness toward the external world which helped to produce that shock.

In VI-c (617–40) the landscape is again an immediate external object of

experience. The mind cannot separate in it what it desires to know and what it actually knows. It is a moment of revelation, in which the poet sees not as in a glass, darkly, but face to face. VI-c clarifies, therefore, certain details of VI-a and *seems* to actualize figurative details of VI-b.* The matter-of-fact interplay of quick and lingering movement, of up-and-down perplexities in the ascent (VI.567 ff.), reappears in larger letters; while the interchanges of light and darkness, of cloud and cloudlessness, of rising like a vapor from the abyss and pouring like a flood from heaven have entered the landscape bodily. The gloomy strait also participates in this actualization. It is revealed as the secret middle term which leads from the barely scrutable presence of nature to its resurrected image. The travelers who move freely with or against the terrain, hurrying upward, pacing downward, perplexed at crossings, are now led narrowly by the pass as if it were their rediscovered guide.

4.

The Prelude, as history of a poet's mind, foresees the time when the "Characters of the great Apocalypse" will be intuited without the medium of nature. The time approaches even as the poet writes, and occasionally cuts across his narrative, the imagination rising up, as in Book VI, "Before the eye and progress of my Song" (version of 1805). This phrase, at once conventional and exact, suggests that imagination waylaid the poet on his mental journey. The "eye" of his song, trained on a temporal sequence with the vision in the strait as its final term, is suddenly obscured. He is momentarily forced to deny nature that magnificence it had shown in the gloomy strait, and to attribute the glory to imagination, whose interposition in the very moment of writing proves it to be a power more independent than nature of time and place, and so a better type "Of first, and last, and midst, and without end" (VI.640).

We know that VI-b records something that happened during composition, and which enters the poem as a new biographical event. Wordsworth has just described his disappointment (VI-a) and turns in anticipation to nature's compensatory finale (VI-c). He is about to respect the original temporal sequence, "the eye and progress" of his song. But as he looks forward, in the moment of composition, from blankness toward revelation, a new insight cuts him off from the latter. The original disappointment is seen not as a test, or as a prelude to magnificence, but as a revelation in itself. It suddenly reveals a power —imagination—that could not be satisfied by anything in nature, however sublime. The song's progress comes to a halt because the poet is led beyond nature. Unless he can respect the natural (which includes the temporal) order, his

song, at least as narrative, must cease. Here Imagination, not Nature (as in I.96 ff.), defeats Poetry.

This conclusion may be verified by comparing the versions of 1805 and 1850. The latter replaces “Before the eye and progress of my Song” with a more direct metaphorical transposition. Imagination is said to rise from the mind’s abyss “Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps, / At once, some lonely traveller.” The (literal) traveler of 1790 becomes the (mental) traveler at the moment of composition. And though one Shakespearean doublet has disappeared,* another implicitly takes its place: does not imagination rise from “the dark backward and abysm of time” *(The Tempest*, I.2.50)? The result, in any case, is a disorientation of time added to that of way; an apocalyptic moment in which past and future overtake the present; and the poet, cut off from nature by imagination, is, in an absolute sense, lonely.

The last stage in the poet’s “progress” has been reached. The travelers of VI-a had already left behind their native land, the public rejoicing of France, rivers, hills, and spires; they have separated from their guides, and finally from the unbridged mountain stream. Now, in 1804, imagination separates the poet from all else: human companionship, the immediate scene, the remembered scene. The end of the via negativa is near. There is no more “eye and progress”; the invisible progress of VI-a (Wordsworth crossing the Alps unknowingly) has revealed itself as a progress independent of visible ends,[13] or engendered by the desire for an “invisible world”—the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Wordsworth descants on the Pauline definition of faith:

> in such strength
> Of usurpation, when the light of sense
> Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
> The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
> There harbours; whether we be young or old,
> Our destiny, our being’s heart and home,
> Is with infinitude, and only there;
> With hope it is, hope that can never die,
> Effort, and expectation, and desire,
> And something evermore about to be. (VI.599–608)

Any further possibility of progress for the poet would be that of song itself, of poetry no longer subordinate to the mimetic function, the experience faithfully

traced to this height. The poet is a traveler insofar as he must respect nature's past guidance and retrace his route. He did come, after all, to an important instance of bodily vision. The way is the song. But the song often strives to become the way. And when this happens, when the song seems to capture the initiative, in such supreme moments of poetry as VI-b or even VI-c, the way is lost. Nature in VI-c shows "Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn," as if they too had lost their way. The apocalypse in the gloomy strait depicts a self-thwarting march and counter-march of elements, a divine mockery of the concept of the Single Way.

But in VI-c, nature still stands over and against the poet; he is still the observer, the eighteenth-century gentleman admiring a new manifestation of the sublime, even if the lo! or mark! is suppressed. He moves haltingly but he moves; and the style of the passage emphasizes continuities. Yet with the imagination athwart there is no movement, no looking before and after. The song itself must be the way, though that of a blinded man, who admits, "I was lost." Imagination, as it shrouds the poet's eye, also shrouds the eye of his song, whose tenor is nature guiding and fostering the power of song.

It is not, therefore, till 1804 that Wordsworth discovers the identity of his hidden guide. VI-c was probably composed in 1799, and it implies that Wordsworth, at that time, still thought nature his guide. But now he sees that it was imagination moving him by means of nature, just as Beatrice guided Dante by means of Virgil. It is not nature as such but nature indistinguishably blended with imagination that compels the poet along his Negative Way. Yet, if VI-b prophesies against the world of sense-experience, Wordsworth's affection and point of view remain unchanged. Though his discovery shakes the foundation of his poem, he returns after a cloudburst of verses to the pedestrian attitude of 1790, when the external world and not imagination seemed to be his guide ("Our journey we renewed, / Led by the stream," etc.).[14] Moreover, with the exception of VI-b, imagination does not move the poet directly, but always through the agency of nature. The childhood "Visitings of imaginative power" depicted in Books I and XII also appeared in the guise or disguise of nature. Wordsworth's journey as a poet can only continue with eyes, but the imagination experienced as a power distinct from nature opens his eyes by putting them out. Wordsworth, therefore, does not adhere to nature because of natural fact, but despite it and because of human and poetic fact. Imagination is indeed an *awe-full* power.

5.

"And men go about to wonder at the heights of the mountains, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolution of the stars, but themselves they consider not." Petrarch, opening on the top of Mt. Ventoux his copy of Augustine's *Confessions*, and falling by chance on this passage, is brought back forcefully to self-consciousness: "I closed the book, angry with myself that I should still be admiring earthly things, who might long ago have learned from even the pagan philosophers that nothing is wonderful but the soul, which, when great itself, finds nothing great outside itself."[15]

Wordsworth's experience, like Petrarch's or Augustine's, is a conversion: a turning about of the mind as from one belief to its opposite, and a turning *ad se ipsum*. It is linked to the birth of a sharper self-awareness, and accompanied by apocalyptic feelings. By "apocalyptic" I mean that there is an inner necessity to cast out nature, to extirpate everything apparently external to salvation, everything that might stand between the naked self and God, whatever risk in this to the self.

It is often the "secret top" of a mountain which turns the man about. Mountains, according to the general testimony of the imagination, are fallen heroes: they have giants in or below them. Atlas stares mutely out of Mt. Atlas. The Titans groan under Mt. Aetna. "What can have more the Figure and Mien of a Ruin," asks Burnet, for whom the hills are noble relics of the Flood, "than Crags, and Rocks, and Cliffs?"[16] An old world, a former self, is passed over; a new consciousness is born. Wordsworth's mountains also tell of the passing of an order—their own order, for nature there prophesies its doom. An eternal witness amid eternal decay, it reveals the "Characters of the great Apocalypse." The poet's earliest sketch of Mt. Blanc condenses in one couplet this monitory and prophetic role:

> Six thousand years amid his lonely bounds
> The voice of Ruin, day and night, resounds.[17]

Many years later, after a further visit to the Alps, ancient myth joins personal intuition to give the idea its most explicit form:

> Where mortal never breathed I dare to sit
> Among the interior Alps, gigantic crew,
> Who triumphed o'er diluvian power!—and yet
> What are they but a wreck and residue,

> Whose only business is to perish?—true
> To which sad course, these wrinkled Sons of Time
> Labour their proper greatness to subdue;
> Speaking of death alone, beneath a clime
> Where life and rapture flow in plenitude sublime.[18]

It is as if the mountains exhibited, on a monster-scale, the Christian virtue of self-abnegation. Yet all concepts of transcendence imply some such necessity. The revolutionary or apocalyptic mind sees a future so different from the past that the transition must involve violence. The Titans, in Keats' *Hyperion*, are weighed down by the mystery as well as the fact of change. In Christian eschatology the new heaven and earth are separated from our familiar world by a second Deluge: the flood of fire and terror described in the Book of Revelation. There is a necessary violation of nature or of a previous state of being. Yet Wordsworth keeps his faith in the possibility of an unviolent passage from childhood to maturity or even from nature to eternity. He converts nature into a paraclete, *the* paraclete. Perhaps he remembers that though according to Paul "we shall be changed," and in a twinkling, a rape of time, there is the counter-balancing promise that "All shall survive."[19] The divine hiatus, the revolutionary severance of new from old, is never total: the previous order, as if nothing could die absolutely, remains latent, waiting to return.

Wordsworth's explicit subject, however, is not cosmic or societal except in implication. His subject is the growth of the mind, and the question of apocalypse arises therefore in a limited though specific way. The special nature of his theme, his focus on the individual mind, is already a sign of a "general and gregarious advance" in human self-consciousness. Keats says that Wordsworth thinks into the human heart more than Milton does, not because he is the greater poet, but because he is a great poet coming at a later time.[20]

On the matter of apocalypse, there was a bridge between Milton and Wordsworth via the theological concept of the Light of Nature. Wordsworth never refers specifically to it, but we need a joining concept from the area linking nature and personal consciousness. Although I am not primarily concerned with drawing a parallel between the two poets, it might clarify Wordsworth's non-apocalyptic view of how the mind grows. He always, of course, looks at growth from within, and this provides a rather rigid limit to comparison. Wordsworth is still part of the experience he narrates, as many subtle and some startling changes of consciousness reveal; while Milton has

divided his subject in advance, and is truly *spectator ab extra*, except where the desire to subsume Classical myth allows his imagination an autonomous vigor. But some episodes are directly comparable, and I propose to bring together Adam's personal story of how he woke to his first thoughts, and beyond them to God *(Paradise Lost,* VIII.253 ff.), and the account, already partially covered, of how nature during the Alpine journey woke in the young poet the sense of his own, separate consciousness. In both episodes the human mind is led from nature to beyond nature.[21]

Milton divides the growth of Adam's mind into clear and easily separated phases. The most significant of these is what is attained by the light of nature and what by supernatural illumination. Adam's apostrophe to the sun,

> Thou Sun, said I, fair Light,
> And thou enlight'n'd Earth, so fresh and gay,
> Ye Hills and Dales, ye Rivers, Woods, and Plains
> And ye that live and move, fair Creatures, tell,
> Tell, if ye saw, how came I thus, how here?
> Not of myself; by some great Maker then,
> In goodness and in power preeminent … [22]

shows him instinctively seeking knowledge, recognizing ascending order and reciprocity, recognizing also that there are creatures participating like himself in life and movement. By the light coming from nature and by the light of nature in him he then deduces the existence of an invisible Maker:

> For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world
> are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made,
> even his eternal power and Godhead.[23]

So far, and no farther, does natural light extend. There is a Maker, he is preeminently good and powerful. Man, without further illumination, thirsts for knowledge and is unrequited:

> While thus I call'd, and stray'd I knew not whither,
> From where I first drew Air, and first beheld
> This happy Light, when answer none return'd,
> On a green shady Bank profuse of Flow'rs

> Pensive I sat me down; there gentle sleep
> First found me.[24]

In that sleep, which separates Adam clearly yet gently from his previous state, God dream-walks him to Eden, and natural light begins to be complemented by supernatural revelation.

But if Milton distinguishes categorically between natural and supernatural, he still allows the former a generous domain. That is why a comparison between him and Wordsworth is fruitful. His respect for the mind's natural powers anticipates that of Wordsworth. Supernatural guidance enters as late as possible, and even then is not inevitably overpowering. It cooperates with natural light in a most gentle way, though it must indeed occasionally extinguish that light, as before Eve's birth, when the *tardemah*, the deep sleep of Genesis 2:21, falls on Adam (a somewhat ominous occurrence which foreshadows the first wounding of man and the later wounding of creation by the Fall). Even the *tardemah,* however, is not presented by Milton as total loss of sight, for the "Cell of Fancy," the internal sight, survives, and Adam is allowed to see the operation that must at once complete and deplete him.

In fact, each internal as well as external "generation" of Adam is preceded by a merciful sleep allowing the natural being to persist or even strengthen during influx of divine power. There is first the "soundest sleep" from which he wakes into being. He is bathed in a balmy sweat, the birth-dew of existence. That nature willingly cooperates in his birth is shown by the grotesque image of a Sun feeding on the amniotic or generative moisture.[25] This image is, of course, a conceit on evaporation; but the natural view and the visionary exploitation of it coexist and suggest from the outset the more general coexistence (in the unfallen world at least) of natural and supernatural. Instead of waking, moreover, to revelation and in Eden, Adam's reason is allowed to unfold more gradually. Only at its limit, thirsting for what it cannot find, does it call on God, "call'd by thee I come thy Guide." The supernatural does not intervene before the natural is perfected, and responds rather than intervenes.

When it finally appears it is superbly gentle, a "soft oppression." For the sleep by which it comes has its own charitable, paracletic function. Before Adam is allowed to see Eden in actual sight, as before he is allowed to look at Eve, both are anticipated in dream, because the reality is too great to bear without the adumbration of a dream, or because Adam's spirit must be gently raised toward the truth that is to meet him. By these repeated dream-awakenings divine light kindles rather than darkens the natural light in man.

But for a further sleep, and awakening into the darkness of the Fall, Adam's eyes might have been permanently tempered to the divine. Within the limits of sacred story, and the explicit framework of natural and supernatural, Milton approaches Wordsworth's view of a mind led from stage to transcendent stage by a similar monitory gentleness. No rape of the mind is necessary; no wounding of nature or of a previous mode of being. Milton's delicacy, in this matter, is absolute. When Raphael, divine historian, has finished his relation of the first things, Adam is impelled to tell of his own beginning: grateful, excited into reciprocity, desiring to converse longer with the Angel, "now hear mee relate / My story." The response of his mind to the Angel has by contagion some of the charm and energy of the Angel's own—Adam is already "ascending winged."

But Wordsworth cannot, like Milton, go back to a fixed beginning, to prehistory. "How shall I seek the origin?" he asks, knowing that the beginning is already the middle (and muddle) of things. Though deprived of both first term and last, of *arche* and *eschaton*, he still undertakes to trace the history of his mind. To what end? To justify the faith he has in the possibility of his renovation through daily and natural means, or to settle that wavering faith. Nature restored him unapocalyptically in the past; it surely can do so again. The restoration he talks of is identical with being renewed as a poet: it is not dryness of heart that plagues him, but the fear that nature is not enough, that his imagination is essentially apocalyptic and must violate the middle world of common things and loves.

The Alpine journey, as we have seen, contains three distinct reversals. The structure of each is that a disappointment is followed by a compensation. The imagination does not find, and strays like Adam, and is then seemingly completed. Two of the reversals, though having in them an element of surprise, are not violent; and the third, which is violent, and supplants nature as the poet's muse, still somehow returns to nature. For nature remains in Wordsworth's view the best and gentlest guide in the development surpassing her. It is part of the poet's strength that he faithfully records an experience he did not at the time of writing and still does not control. The greatest event of his journey is not VI-c (the "Characters of the great Apocalypse"), or the parallel bewilderment of time and way near Gravedona (VI.688–726), but the spectral figure of Imagination cutting him off, fulfilling Nature's prophecy, and revealing the end of his Negative Way.

Besides these reversals there is the tempo of the whole journey. This is often neglected for the striking events that detach themselves only partially from it. Wordsworth generally avoids making his epiphanies into epocha: into decisive

turns of personal fate or history. A mythic structure would allow him to do that; Milton even overuses his “firsts” when it comes to a psychological matter: “Then Satan first knew pain” (cf. “there gentle sleep / First found me”). Though Wordsworth must pattern his story and life, he is as apologetic about this as Raphael is for having to relate divine matters in terms intelligible to human sense—whenever possible he assumes a mazy motion which makes *The Prelude* a difficult poem to follow.

The reason for Wordsworth’s avoidance of epochal structure is complex and linked probably to his avoidance of myth. For though he is compelled to seek beginnings, the unfolding causes of things, nature itself resists this kind of exactness, as if it diminished her generosities, her power to make anything a new beginning. To excerpt the various epiphanies from Wordsworth’s narrative is, in any case, to neglect the pull of the underlying verse that refuses them too great a distinctity of self. Much of the drama, as I now hope to show, is played out on a quietly continuing level; the ordinary events swelling into and absorbing the special insights; the peripeties threatening but finally sustaining the light of nature.

The young travelers of Book VI instinctively associate nature with freedom. They believe it has the strength to waken or reawaken man. By glorious chance their destination is a land where human nature seemed born again on account of revolution (339 ff.). Man is again as open as nature itself:

> once, and more than once,
> Unhoused beneath the evening star we saw
> Dances of liberty, and, in late hours
> Of darkness, dances in the open air
> Deftly prolonged. (369–73)

They are not sidetracked, however, by these public rejoicings. “We held our way” (350), “We glided forward with the flowing stream” (377), “We sailed along” (385), “We pursued our journey” (416)—various clichés and fillers abundant in the topographical literature of the eighteenth century, including Wordsworth’s own earlier work, recover life and literal significance. Nature is their principal guide and even the energy which bears them on:

> Swift Rhone! thou wert the *wings* on which we cut
> A winding passage with majestic ease
> Between thy lofty rocks. (378–80)

Along this southerly route marked out by nature, they are caught up in a crowd of delegates returning home from the "great spousals"* in Paris. Though Wordsworth and his friend are also "emancipated" (387), they remain among them like "a lonely pair of strangers" (384). We glimpse here the encounter of two different types of human freedom. The encounter always keeps below the level of allegory: it is accidental and unpredictable as all incidents in *The Prelude*. It has, nevertheless, the force of providence peering through chance, or idea through matter-of-fact.

The first type is the revolutionary. Wordsworth and he are traveling along the same road and have much in common. Both delight in freedom and believe man may be regenerated by human or natural power. Their eye is on this world: the "great spousals" are a political fact, just as the marriage of heaven and earth, which first emboldened Wordsworth to think he could be a poet (IV.323–38; VI.42–57), is a daily fact. But there are also important differences. The revolutionaries are journeying home, merry and sociable: they receive the poet and his friend as Abraham of old the angels (394 ff.). This world is their home, they have no other. The poet and his friend, on the other hand, are lonely men, "strangers" or "angels" whose freedom has connotation of exile. They are obscurely looking for another home: this-worldly perhaps, yet more awe-full, more sublime than what they have seen.

In this respect they do not resemble revolutionaries but pilgrims. The pilgrim is the second type of human freedom. He travels through this world as a free man, pushing toward the place nearest heaven. He has no home properly speaking, no company, only an obscure burden which drives him from one spot to another. Although there is a "home" toward which he strives, the way is important and becomes an essential worship. Wordsworth shares his homelessness, his solitude, his respect for the way. He has already compared himself to a pilgrim in Book I. His travels here are also a "pilgrimage" (763); the Alpine region is a "temple" (741); he aspires, guided by nature, to reach "the point marked out by Heaven" (753). His use of religious terms seems very sparse, a kind of poetic seasoning. Yet when the lonely traveler, many years removed from the young adventurer of 1790, obtains a sudden glimpse of the soul's home, he bursts into that descant on the Pauline definition of faith:

> our being's heart and home,
> Is with infinitude, and only there;
> With hope it is, hope that can never die. (604–06)

Wordsworth cannot be identified with either of these mutually exclusive types. He holds a precarious middle position as a new, emergent type, not unknown by the end of the eighteenth century, but as unstable as the Bedouin-Quixote figure ("Of these was neither, and was both at once") of which he dreams in *Prelude* V. This radically ambivalent type takes many forms, appearing as Cain, Ahasuerus, Childe Harold, or simply poet-errant. In Book VI he is no more than "wanderer," "traveller." Yet we recognize him by the fact that fugitive and pilgrim, pursuer and pursued are unified in his person.

The Chartreuse, the first significant stop in the Alpine journey, will act as catalyst to divide clearly pilgrim from revolutionary, and to show that Wordsworth is both and neither, that he typifies a new vision, or perhaps by-pass, of the relation between natural and supernatural. Pursuing nature, the poet is actually pursued by nature beyond it. But it seems, for a moment, as if he might be swept along by the revolutionaries: he travels their road and occasionally becomes one of them. This foreshadows *Prelude* IX to XI, where Wordsworth is almost swept away. Yet nature with its intimations of a more private peace and a less ostensive freedom gradually separates the two strangers from the "merry crowd" (386), "blithe host" (387), "bees … gaudy and gay as bees" (391), "proud company" (394), "boisterous crew" (413):

> The monastery bells
> Made a sweet jingling in our youthful ears;
> The rapid river flowing without noise,
> And each uprising or receding spire
> Spake with a sense of peace, at intervals
> Touching the heart amid the boisterous crew
> By whom we were encompassed. Taking leave
> Of this glad throng, foot-travellers side by side,
> Measuring our steps in quiet, we pursued
> Our journey. (408–17)

And, as Wordsworth approaches the Chartreuse, the revolutionaries change proleptically into "riotous men" (425) who expel its religious community and desecrate the spirit of the place. Wordsworth, "by conflicting passions pressed," adopts two voices to argue for the preservation of the Chartreuse without condemning revolutionary zeal.[26]

His view of the monastery is, however, quite unambiguous. He sees it as a

stronghold of nature's paracletic function rather than as a Catholic institution. The conquest of nature is here aided by an impulse from nature herself. The monastery's sublime natural setting *bodies forth* the ghostliness of things. But it also *clothes* it, mediating between the "bodily eye" and the "blank abyss" (470), between man's power of vision and his utter nakedness before the apocalyptic vision.[27] There is paradox here, but not ambiguity.

After the Chartreuse a new landscape begins. The positive and privative aspects of nature intermingle more obviously. Every step of the travelers attends on swift interchanges:

> Abroad, how cheeringly the sunshine lay
> Upon the open lawns! Vallombre's groves
> Entering, we fed the soul with darkness; thence
> Issued, and with uplifted eyes beheld,
> In different quarters of the bending sky,
> The cross of Jesus stand erect, as if
> Hands of angelic powers had fixed it there,
> Memorial reverenced by a thousand storms;
> Yet then, from the undiscriminating sweep
> And rage of one State-whirlwind, insecure. (479–88)

The travelers' pace seems to speed up; the earth changes its images and forms as fast as clouds are changed in heaven (492); and the uphill-downhill motion which culminates in VI-a to VI-c becomes prominent. The friends not only wing or sail along but are birds of prey, a ship on the stretch (498). We feel something of their joy in movement, in variety, and hardly suspect that nature is eluding their expectations. Then she clearly fails them for the first time just before their blind crossing of the Alps.

The failure is quickly redeemed, but it has come and prepares for VI.592 ff. The very day they look with bounding heart on an "aboriginal vale" they also see Mt. Blanc and grieve:

> To have a soulless image on the eye
> That had usurped upon a living thought
> That never more could be. (526–28)

When Wordsworth discovers that the mind has no home except with

… something evermore about to be (VI-b, 608)

he sounds the depth of the disparity between Nature and Imagination.

VI-b, of course, is the peripety of a traveler many years advanced. His actual progress, to judge by the two epiphanies or compensations given by nature, the first for the blank of Mt. Blanc, the second for his blind crossing of the Alps, is as propaedeutic as Adam's dreams. The first, the poet's sight of the valley of Chamonix (VI.528–40), still serves to reconcile imagination and nature: it carefully veils the naked vision of transcendent forces. Man is still the measure of this view. The streams of ice are balanced by five rivers broad and vast; small birds and leafy trees flourish in the same atmosphere as soaring eagle; yellow sheaf and haycock, reaper and maiden, live easily among the wilder forces of nature. Winter sports like a lion, but one well-tamed. In the second, as if penultimate view (VI-c), the balance breaks. Now the "dumb cataracts" (530) find voice, become "stationary blasts" (626); there is no well-tamed descent but torrents shooting from the clear blue sky; no warbling but muttering and ravings; no broad, spacious living but winds thwarting winds in the narrow rent; no leisurely, seasonal occupation but giddy interchanges of opposite powers. All this is still "food" (the metaphor occurs in line 723 at the end of another fantastic bewilderment, a vacillation from "fairest, softest, happiest influence" to a night ensnared by witchcraft), but one is no longer certain whence it comes or what in man it feeds. An impassioned envoi to the book finally cautions us not to think the poet a passive recipient here or anywhere in *The Prelude:*

> Not rich one moment to be poor for ever;
> Not prostrate, overborne, as if the mind
> Herself were nothing, a mere pensioner
> On outward forms. (735–38)

To be more emphatic, the poet then returns to an image found in the opening episode of his poem: that of the external breeze waking an internal tempest, an acceleration which propels the travelers along, as if nature were discovering to them their own powers. Their mind is being raised to nature as at least equal in dignity to it:

> whate'er
> I saw, or heard, or felt, was but a stream
> That flowed into a kindred stream; a gale,

Confederate with the current of the soul,
To speed my voyage. (742–46)

It is clear that in 1790 Wordsworth's soul was already making a "trial of its strength," with poetic numbers as the "banded host" and nature as the objective to be gained. Only in 1804 does Wordsworth realize he mistook his objective. The soul, in VI-b, is its own objective. It is so sure of its home *away from* nature that it has no need to snatch a "trophy of the sun."[28] But Wordsworth, in truth, is never able to look complacently at the sun. He can never say with Petrarch that "nothing is wonderful but the soul, which, when great itself, finds nothing great outside itself." Even the verse of his decline, however placid in sentiment, is a trial of strength: the failing endeavor to meet with his own light the light once emanating from nature.

6.

The ascent of Snowdon, a great moment in poetry, stands in a place of honor: Wordsworth chooses it as his coda episode for *The Prelude.* Not only is it, as poetry, a true "mounting of the mind"; it is also a culminating evidence that imagination and the light of nature are one. The certainty that there is an imagination in nature analogous to that in man opened to him a "new world." The incident is a difficult one to interpret, not only for us, but for the poet himself; yet he insists that though nature on Snowdon points to imagination, and even thrusts the vision of it on him, what he sees is still a Power like nature's (XIII.312, XIV.86 ff.). This time his recognition of imagination *sub specie naturae* does not (as in VI-b) give a mortal shock to nature. The episode is Wordsworth's most astonishing avoidance of apocalypse.

We must not forget, however, that the peripety described in VI-b followed all others studied in this chapter, if we can trust the extant manuscripts. It is the last of a series of evaded recognitions, a magnificent yet inexorable after-birth. From late January to April 1804, Wordsworth was intensely engaged in work on *The Prelude;* and, under that pressure of composition, came once, and only once, face to face with his imagination. Comparing the mountain experience of Book VI with that of Book XIV, we obtain a clear picture of a mind finally forced to meet and to recognize its inherently apocalyptic vigor.

The experience again falls into three parts. The travelers ascend and are soon surrounded by mist (XIV-a, 11–39). There follows the vision proper (XIV-b, 39–62), and a meditation arising immediately after it (XIV-c, 63 ff.). The first part,

as in the ascent of the Alps, is akin to inscrutability, while the second, a moment of strong bodily sight, could be compared to the “Characters of the great Apocalypse” (VI-c), delayed by the tribute to imagination. This tribute is itself comparable to the last section, a moment of insight which understands the external events as revealing expressly (i.e. in open sight) a power similar to the human imagination. The sequence of events in *Prelude* XIV might therefore be an unscrambling of the order of events in VI: inscrutability, followed by the immediacy of an external image, then by the interpretation (immediate here, delayed in VI) of that image as the resemblance of an inner power.

But since VI-b is *hors de série* we cannot properly talk of unscrambling: the sequence of XIV existed before that of VI was complete. It is here that we meet a problem peculiar to *The Prelude.* In most poems we need only respect the structural sequence, according to which XIV does indeed come after VI. But in a poem also autobiography, and in which the act of composition may itself produce a further biographical event, two other sequences may have to be kept in mind. They are the biographical and the compositional order of events.

The Crossing of the Alps, for example, may be read in three ways, all essential to meaning:

structurally	**VI**	**a**	**b**	**c**
biographically	**VI**	**a**	**c**	**b**
compositionally	**VI**	**c**	**a**	**b**

The ascent of Snowdon, on the other hand, seems to have been composed in sequence, and is not interrupted by an insight incorporated as a new event, so that the three patterns coincide. But if we take VI (abc) and XIV (abc) together, a new problem of ordering arises.

The biographical and compositional contiguity of the two ascents is masked by their final (structural) place in the poem. Both describe mountain trips perhaps not more than a year apart; and it is therefore significant that from the biographical point of view the clearest difference between them is that in XIV full understanding comes immediately after the event, and nonviolently, while in VI the final illumination takes fourteen years to be born, and then comes abruptly. But this fact is, in turn, modified by our knowledge of the compositional sequence, which suggests that the birth of VI-b was induced by the poet’s prior composition of or reflection on XIV, which is mediately present when VI-ab comes to be written, just as VI-c (composed in 1799) may have been in the poet’s mind when XIV was written. The single event has a life in memory

that cannot be isolated to point or meaning of origin.

We begin by looking at the biographical sequence:

1. VI-ac	1790	
2. XIV-abc	1791	(1793)[29]
3. VI-b	1804	

This ordering does not prove to be particularly significant. The first two experiences are rather similar in form, and could be made even more symmetrical by equating XIV-c with the last lines of VI-c (636 ff.), for both are interpretative moments closely joined to the sight they interpret. In VI-c there is a slight formal gap between sight and interpretation, but the latter is linked to the former as part of the same breath, the exhaling as it were; in XIV-c the gap is both temporal and formal, but also not large or abrupt. What really distinguishes the two episodes from each other is the sudden arrival of VI-b: the nearest to that reversal is, in XIV, the “flash” which heralds the vision and leads from XIV-a to XIV-b. The compositional sequence will prove to be more interesting:

1. VI-c	1799	
2. XIV-abc	1804:	February-March
3. VI-ab	1804;	April

This suggests a progressive mounting of the mind toward self-consciousness. In VI-c the style avoids conveying the feeling of abrupt illumination. XIV-b, the visionary part of the ascent of Snowdon, strikes more suddenly—like a flash—yet remains a physical illumination fused with the immediate landscape. Then VI-a, starting as matter-of-factly as XIV, is broken across by an abrupt

illumination which cannot blend with the remembered landscape, and must finally create its own. It usurps the poet and for the first time shows Imagination as a power radically separate from Nature. Thus:

1. VI-c	circumvents abrupt illumination; interpretative moment dissociable from vision yet grammatically and temporally linked
2. XIV-ab	abrupt illumination fused with landscape vision and to that extent still subdued;
XIV-c	interpretative moment formally and temporally separate but time gap minimal
3. VI-ab	abrupt illumination not fused with landscape, obscuring it even; the interpretative moment constructing its own landscape for the illumination to blend with

The compositional sequence confirms Wordsworth's tendency to avoid an apocalyptic self-consciousness. It confirms also that VI (abc) and XIV (abc) are two rival highpoints of *The Prelude.* In one, imagination breaks through to obscure the light of nature; in the other, the poet sees imagination directly via the light of nature. The meaning of Snowdon is not changed in the retelling by a sudden, reflexive consciousness.

This consciousness occurs, however, in a displaced form: it merges with the very structure of the episode. We glimpse VI-b flickering as a middle-term, and when it finally leaps out it is the product not only of the Alps but also of Snowdon. Yet writing of Snowdon Wordsworth still escapes the speech-blindness which ensues on coming face to face with a power that disowns nature. He never sees more than the back of the imagination, as Moses saw the back of God. The main attributes that define imagination *figuratively* in VI-b are still a *literal* part of the landscape.

The Snowdon travelers, for example, mount directly into the mist, as if already in imagination's landscape. The mist does not appear suddenly and as from an abyss to halt them; yet later they are shown to have climbed not only a mountain but also an abyss similar to that from which imagination springs. At least something springs also from it. Just as the mountain is seen to be an abyss, the silent mist, which had covered the sky and now lies at their feet, discloses the

upward roar of torrent voices. This reversal of perspectives or natures is anticipated by Wordsworth's description of the climb as also a descent into the mind, and vice-versa. The almost emblematic

> With forehead bent
> Earthward, as if in opposition set
> Against an enemy, I panted up
> With eager pace, and no less eager thoughts … (XIV.28–31)

hints at this up-and-down. As they climb higher, or sink deeper into thought, each person becomes a "lonely traveller"; and the "unearthing" of the hedgehog, which emphasizes by contrast the persistent coil of silence and concentration, prefigures casually the later twofold unearthing: the flash of the moon still hiding a second revelation, the upward "flash" of sound. It is as if the poet, in passing through the mist, had passed his own imagination unawares: not only because the voices from below are like imagination unveiling as the power he has blindly crossed, but also because the first revelation proves to be incomplete, which suggests that instead of apocalypse there is only developing and self-displacing vision.

Thus reflection, in Wordsworth, becomes reflexive. It is not passive recall but a precarious mental journey. If the poet's descent into the "deep backward and abysm of time" appears here like a few dream-like moments, it is because imagination, independent of time, nihilates the latter, and does not yet impose itself as the more awesome burden. In a sense it nihilates even itself, for it enters the picture only as an infinitely shifty middle-term. The energy which is imagination does not substantialize as a single specter, an awful power rising from the mind's abyss. It blends with the semblance of a realm, a landscape of the colors of nature through which the poet moves as in a wakeful dream. He moves toward a self-recognition, which will halt the traveler, erase the landscape, break the dream. But though he comes as close to this point as in the scene to the "fixed, abysmal, gloomy breathing-place," the fixating shock of self-consciousness is avoided.

The escape from fixity, in the vision, is extended beyond the doubling of the central recognition to inform even the properties of things and the relationship between thing and symbol. The mist is like a sea yet also "solid" like the mountains; it seems to mimic other elements. The poet says the mist "hung" low; yet later it is the moon that "hung naked" in the firmament. Such displacement also interferes with the stabilizing of thing as symbol. We have seen that we

cannot fully associate the mist with imagination even by calling in VI-b. It is the sudden light of the moon and the voices rising from below the mist which really startle the traveler. Yet Wordsworth is also unable to make a sharp "symbolic" identification of the imagination with moon or sounding abyss.[30] Neither of these *is* the imagination, which cannot be localized in mind or nature or any part of nature. The difficulty of identification is apparent when we ask where or what in the vision the imagination may be? Snowdon, as even the syntax occasionally suggests,[31] does not project the image of an agent but at most the image of an action. Wordsworth tries to define this action when he says that the imagination imparts to one life the functions of another: shifts, creates, "trafficking with immeasurable thoughts."

When a poet approaches the ineffable, a critic is inclined to fall back on the nearest steadying commonplace. It would suffice to say that the imagination and the sense of infinity are related, if the vision itself were not minutely particular. Some of its strangely effective shifts, transfers, and "mutations" (XIV.94) have been detailed. Wordsworth's greatest poetry is such a web of transfers, which are not showy or patently metaphorical and are rarely felt as unusual turns of speech. Even at climactic points—

> the sick sight
> And giddy prospect of the raving stream,

—we must try to take the 'merely' transferred epithets as literally as possible. They indicate, in the presence of other signs, a dizzy openness of relation between the human mind and nature. Such to-and-fros ("traffickings") between inner and outer, literal and figurative, or present and past, often span entire episodes and even cross them. The relation of the mist of XIV to that of VI-b and to the inscrutability of nature in VI-a is an example of a cross-episode transfer. For a sustained series of intra-episode transfers we could return to Wordsworth's account of the Simplon Pass (curiously enough a "crossing" on the thematic level), where many qualities migrate from the external scene of VI-a to VI-b, then reappear in the landscape of VI-c.*

It is impossible to determine whether these transfers show the poet's imagination participating in or striving to break with nature. The to-and-fro they depict is still a fluctuation and bounded by some cyclical or dialectical pattern. But could we feel more strongly that nature is open to man and man to nature? Here there is no one beginning or one end but an infinite capacity for sight, insight, regeneration. We have already pointed out how the apocalypse of 1790

loses the character of a terminal experience. The poet is suddenly renewed from an unexpected and casual source. The Simplon Pass and Snowdon bring a twofold revelation that could have been sevenfold as in John the Divine. But they differ from traditional apocalypses by being purely natural and by not inevitably associating rebirth and violent purgation. The Book of Revelation that is Nature sees life dying into eternal life with or without those apocalyptic labors. Even in a vision Wordsworth does not limit the ways of God.

7.

At the beginning of *The Prelude* a poet returns to nature, yet the poem he writes is about the difficulties of that return. He cannot always sustain his quest to link what makes a poet, the energy of imagination, to the energy of nature. In its purity the imagination is "unfathered"—a self-begotten, potentially apocalyptic force. But poetry, like the world, can only house an imagination which is a borderer, which will not disdain earthly things. Whatever the imagination's source, its end as poetry is the nature all recognize, and still a nature that leads beyond itself.

Snowdon is a magic mountain. It is a place of enchantment and danger as Spenser and many Romantics have pictured. Everything that happens on this mountain is deceptive because everything leads beyond (though not away from) itself. It is easy to overlook the fact that Wordsworth sets out to see the dawn and encounters a rising-up of the powers in darkness. "Night unto night showeth knowledge."

Reduced to its simplest structure the experience of the poet on Snowdon shows a doubling of the idea of the inscrutable breaking into revelation. Mist into flash of light, mist into stream of sound—the same element bears two surprises. The Inscrutable, one might say, brings forth Immediacy (the isolate moon) which seeks out—is sustained by—the Inscrutable breaking into Immediacy (the real behind the misty ocean, the evidence of the voices in XIV-b).

This is the perfect instance of the ternary pattern we have found in the chief incidents of Books I, VI, and XIV. It provides a clear case where immediacy acts as a medium, which is as good a description of poetry's effect as any. Poetry leads from pleasure to pleasure; and, enjoying each as it engages the mind, we are surprised by the next. This is what Coleridge may have meant when he renewed an old dictum and said that a poem has both pleasure and truth in it, but that the pleasures of the way are as important as the truth of the destination.[32]

Nature and Poetry matter only as they quicken regeneration. The most enthralling impression should still be a middle-term, a thoroughfare to a new birth of power and liberty. The vision reacts on the man, leads his senses beyond themselves, from moon to sounding abyss and finally back to his own creative powers. But the clearest sign of a truly creative, self-renewing mind is to build up greatest things from least suggestions. As at the beginning of *The Prelude*, anything may guide, even a "trackless field." Wordsworth's rhapsodic opening, muted too soon, does not express faith in nature but rather in the quickening relation of imagination to nature. Nature, however, is real and important enough. Spreading light and life in subtle, not catastrophic ways, it has brought the poet to his present faith that self-renewal is possible without a violence of apocalypse.

"Visionary power," Wordsworth writes at one point, "Attends the motions of the viewless winds, / Embodied in the mystery of words" (V.595–97). The contrast of visionary and viewless is like that of greatest things built up from smallest. Only in this respect is Poetry a second Nature. It learns from nature the "wondrous influence of power gently used" (XII.15). We start with something viewless or inscrutable like the source of the Nile, still given in Wordsworth's day either a natural or supernatural explanation.[33] When Wordsworth comes face to face with his own creative power, with imagination rising "like an unfathered vapour," i.e. hiding its natural source, he glimpses the supernatural fountains of his genius. But in the lines that follow, the hiding that bespeaks mystery and apocalypse opens once more into nature. The imagination hides itself by overflowing as poetry, and is compared to the Nile which overflows its banks and the Egyptian plain. Wordsworth the traveler now alludes to the natural explanation for the rise of the Nile. The energy of imagination enters into a natural cycle though apart from it; while the lines describing his soul as

> Strong in herself and in beatitude
> That hides her, like the mighty flood of Nile
> Poured from her fount of Abyssinian clouds
> To fertilise the whole Egyptian plain … (VI.613–16)

renew the connection between the waters above and the waters below,[34] between heaven and earth.

Toward this marriage of heaven and earth the poet proceeds despite apocalypse. He is the matchmaker, his song the spousal verse. His dedication to poetry is a dedication to this myth become sense. An awful power rises from the mind's abyss, disowning nature; another descends fertile from Abyssinian

clouds. He seeks his earthly paradise not “beyond the Indian mount” but in the real Abyssinia[35]—any mountain-valley where poetry is made.