

RICHARD J. ONORATO

# The Character of the Poet

*Wordsworth in "The Prelude"*



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# THE CHARACTER OF THE POET

Wordsworth in *The Prelude*



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THE CHARACTER  
OF THE POET

Wordsworth in *The Prelude*

BY RICHARD J. ONORATO

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*For Jeanne Adrienne*



## PREFACE

To employ psychoanalytic concepts in discussing the "character" of a poet in an autobiographical poem invites criticism and requires explanation. It is my intention to consider the recollection and representation of character in two ways: character in the sense of *a* character, the character created by an imaginative construction based on memory, and character in the sense of the characteristics of oneself revealed through verbal behavior. Perhaps with the importance of neither would a reader disagree were it not the case that psychoanalytic considerations raise questions of unconscious intentions, repression and defenses, and elaborations of artifice that are said to conceal in one way and reveal in others. However discreetly managed the argument may be, it *is* being implied that a truth is latent in the text and that a reality, or a constellation of suggestions about realities, is to be recovered in the interpretation. Moreover, there is in all such interpretation that rests on theoretical assumptions generated from an attempt to be "scientific" an inherent reductiveness, which to some will always seem to be merely reductive and to others an appropriate way to question complexities freshly in the light of a few statable principles. I would go further and say outrightly that there is something inherently circular about interpretations that work back and forth between hypotheses about human experience and personal records of experience; but, while the circularity is a real limit on any claim of truth, the intention to make such a claim may be, and here is, the least important aspect of the undertaking.

My treatment of the Wordsworth revealed in his poetry begins in observations of unusual metaphors that recur and of recurrent experiences that are sometimes literal and sometimes figurative; it questions elusive and fugitive states of feeling and the peculiarities of image, diction, and tone



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of voice in which they are expressed. If I seem to discover obsessive concerns and suggest unconscious intentions, I would be obliged to call them thematic concerns and suggest ambiguities and obscurities of expression were it not the case that certain psychoanalytic assumptions seem appropriate and point to another way of ordering the observations. Here I should say, then, that my own predisposition to assume the importance of the traumatic loss of a mother at age eight (and father at thirteen) leads to close readings of many intricately related passages and, while seeking the significance of that trauma in and to the poet's characterization of himself and his growth, seeks to confirm the appropriateness of making that assumption. For some, perhaps Wordsworth's insistence on the rare "privilege" of his early freedom in nature—a freedom that dates from his mother's death—will be suggestion enough as to why one might question the attributes of nature and his pursuits of it in solitude; for others, I am sure, no amount of rendering plausible this line of interpretation will make much difference.

If I had approached Wordsworth through the kind of intuitive psychologizing that offers no account of itself but is implicit in many literary studies, this book would be heavy with arguments against others whose intuitions differed. My personal sense of obligation is strong to many fine scholars and critics for facts, insights, and general observations about the poet and the period; the Bibliography will suggest the range of such indebtedness. But in attempting an explicitly psychological interpretation of Wordsworth's long autobiographical poem, I have generally resisted the temptation to register specific disagreements with other interpretations of Wordsworth; the Appendix deals briefly with a few modern and cognate theories of Wordsworth's personality, from which I would distinguish my own. Of course, anyone who wishes will have his say about the appropriateness of applying psychoanalytic con-

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cepts to poets and poetry at all, but I have not sought to anticipate and contest that kind of criticism.

A word about the degree of explanation attempted here is also in order. I often found myself about to digress on some psychoanalytic point, but desisted rather than strain the patience of a reader willing to follow a basically psychoanalytic argument but more interested in Wordsworth than in the disputable speculations and formulations within psychoanalysis today. At other times I came near over-explaining some basic psychoanalytic point, and I hope desisted rather than patronize or bore the kind of informed reader I hope to have. I have also tried to avoid writing for the kind of reader more interested in psychoanalysis than in Wordsworth or poetry, and to resist explaining the basic relevance of the kind of psychology being applied merely for the sake of the kind of reader not likely to be interested in this book to begin with. In short, I have tried to keep in mind the kind of colleague and student with whom I have had some success while thinking out and writing the argument: those to whom psychological assumptions are not new or strange or unnerving, but who require the continuous and explicit attempt to render plausible the sense in which one uses them.

My indebtedness is of many kinds. For extended discussions of poetry or psychology or both, I am grateful to Drs. Stanley Walzer, Joan J. Zilbach, Stanley Cheren, and Stanley Palombo, and to Professors Allen Grossman and Aileen Ward. To David D. Perkins, in whose seminar at Harvard I sketched out the argument that was to be first a thesis and then a book, my gratitude is of long standing, as much for discussion and disagreement at the time as for advice and encouragement in the longer work. To Reuben A. Brower I am profoundly grateful for patience, frankness, and insight in reading a largely psychological analysis of a poet on whom he too has written and whom he understands in a different way. An enormous debt is mine to

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Lionel Trilling in whose wise and friendly counsel I have continued to see what a teacher can be. With him, I first read Wordsworth and learned, perhaps more recklessly than he would wish, to value Freud.

I would like to acknowledge specially a few other debts: to the late Andrew Chiappe, who by precept and example fostered in all his students the fascination with things difficult, I owe the sense of wonder I associate with poetry; to John R. Northam, my tutor at Cambridge, I owe what command of prose I have to contain that sense of wonder; to Professor Stephen K. Orgel, with whom I first discussed the ideas in this book many years ago, I am indebted through the years for many friendly offices more memorable; and to Erik D. Wensberg, who cannot read a manuscript without a pencil in his hand, and yet can be persuaded to read a friend's manuscript, I have more debts than I could acknowledge adequately.

I would like to thank Brandeis University for funds to prepare this manuscript and Mrs. Richard P. Taub and my wife, Jeanne A. Onorato, for preparing, typing, correcting, and proofreading. Since they both knew that Wordsworth was notorious for spoiling with scribbled corrections all the fair copies of his manuscript prepared lovingly by his wife, relatives, and friends, they were indulgently forbearing in remaining good-humored at all hours, despite revisions.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge my oldest indebtedness in my first book to those from whom I had my first book.

R.J.O.

*Eastham, Mass.*

1970

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# THE CHARACTER OF THE POET

Wordsworth in *The Prelude*



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## CHAPTER I

### THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

#### 1. "Wordsworth"

Anyone who has ever talked of Wordsworth's poetry has known the feeling that the subject of Wordsworth himself, his mind and character, would soon come to the fore. From his earliest ballads and lyrics to his most solemn odes and elegies, from his earliest meditative poems to the long autobiographical epic, one finds oneself commenting parenthetically on and attending with increasing care to the "Wordsworth" of Wordsworth's poetry. To proceed at all is first to yield to that necessity.

But any appraisal of Wordsworth's achievement in *The Prelude*, of his success at describing poetically the growth of his mind, must begin with a discussion of texts. Perhaps only scholars cherish alternative versions of a major work and a profusion of variant manuscripts, for collation is a labor of love. Yet "characters," too, at times thrive on discrepancies in texts: they live, or seem to have lived, other lives. *The Prelude* exists in eighteen partial or complete manuscripts and two distinct versions.<sup>1</sup> The 1850 version, a poem of 7,886 lines in fourteen books, was published posthumously and was for a long time "Wordsworth." In 1926, Ernest de Selincourt published the 1805-06 version of

<sup>1</sup> The various manuscripts of *The Prelude* are listed by Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire as: A, B, C, D, E, Alfoxden Notebook, JJ, Christabel Notebook, 18a, RV, U, V, J, W, M, X, Y, Z. They are described in the Introduction, under 1. Manuscripts, pp. xix-xxvii, in *The Prelude; or Growth of a Poet's Mind* by William Wordsworth, ed. E. de Selincourt, 2nd edn., rev. Helen Darbishire. [For full bibliographical data for works cited in the footnotes, see the Bibliography, pp. 421-427.]



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*The Prelude* (8,479 lines), preserving its original thirteen-book form and adding in the *apparatus criticus* almost all of the MS variants. He gave to the scholarly world another "Wordsworth."<sup>2</sup> The critical reader, reading both versions, attending to poetic design and interpreting the poet's intentions, may find that differences of style, of sequence, nuance, and context lead to more basic questions about this autobiographical poem—about the poet creating and the character created.

I shall concern myself principally with the 1805-06 version, for reasons which I trust shall become obvious. But the problems in discussing a poetic autobiography—those we pose to ourselves from our own suppositions of what one might be—are immediately compounded by many inconsistent, less precise, and less manageable problems of context for this poetic autobiography. It would be difficult enough to hit upon a simple and consistent approach to the first version, which in its seven years of composition show signs of a mind changing *while* accounting for its first thirty-five years of life and growth; but it would prove impossible to discuss a single "Wordsworth," without inventing one, who will answer adequately to the eighteen manuscripts and the two versions. The second version is the result of revisions over a forty-five-year period by a man who remained attached to the earlier period of his life while changing radically from the person he had been.

This oft-mentioned "change" in Wordsworth often forces an overly simple and double sense of the poet—the "real Wordsworth" and the "later Wordsworth," the Wordsworth of the Great Decade and the Wordsworth of the years of decline—as if, against Wordsworth's insistence about human life, the child had not been father of the man. The older

<sup>2</sup> All references to *The Prelude* are made to the edition cited in n. 1 above. All extended quotations are followed by book and line reference (e.g. II, 592-600) to the 1805-06 version or have the 1850 version indicated (e.g. II, 592-600: 1850 version). Lines quoted within the body of the text, however often, are followed by a footnote reference.

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Wordsworth is made to seem an unfortunate betrayal or reversal of the younger Wordsworth, rather than one quite possible development. Inevitably, the popular preference for the younger and greater Wordsworth makes for presuppositions in reading his poetry; and it is these presuppositions about what he was in his youth and what he "really" meant about himself in *The Prelude* that I wish to question.

We would all probably welcome some kind of simplification here, if only for the purposes of discussion and for the sake of having a whole and manageable poetic autobiography to study; but it is naive to suppose that we can have this by disregarding the many circumstantial peculiarities of the poem's composition and compilation. Since *The Prelude* is our only great example of poetic autobiography in English, it might be well to regard its many peculiarities, not as accidents which prevented a more ideal execution, but as significant to the very nature of the attempt. The generally sound scholarly practice of accepting as the definitive text the last corrected copy cannot be observed here if we are at all curious about the circumstantial nature of Wordsworth's attempt.

It seems strange that on the one hand there is the usual and often inordinate reaction to Wordsworth's preoccupation with himself, his self-elaborating egoism, and on the other hand a wish that he had been able to leave a more whole and poetically satisfying account of himself, implying the ability to have been even more perfectly preoccupied. If we are interested in poetic autobiography, the vicissitudes of such a preoccupation with the self, the poet's dissatisfactions with the project and with himself, his inability to finish with satisfaction, or even to finish, become of compelling rather than marginal interest. *The Prelude* is all we have as a record of a very complex intention, and we tend to ignore the nature of the complexity. When *The Prelude* has not simply been mined for its richest passages of Wordsworthian poetry, it has served mostly as a repository of quotations about Wordsworth himself for those who

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retell his story by alternately quoting and paraphrasing him. What I propose in a critical reading of the poem is to open another avenue of inquiry: there is the nature of the attempt to be considered.

In a poetic autobiographical account of the growth of a poet's mind, it would be useful to emphasize the inventive sense along with the recollective sense of the I-speaking character, and remember that the poet is creating a character, is "characterizing" himself, by using both Memory and Imagination. The selective recollection and the evaluation of facts are employed to exemplify what the poet "imagines" himself to have been and asserts that he is; for him, the remembered facts and their imagined and asserted significance are inseparable. He is accounting for the "Growth of a Poet's Mind." The selection, evaluation, and belief in exemplary experiences are simultaneous; they animate the poetry with metaphor, with a causal sense of what "growth" is and what becoming a poet is. Since the poet's skill at making poetry is being used to account for the making of himself in the character of poet, what we ordinarily associate with the imaginative invention of a character in literature is being used as the sustained activity of self-invention. By finding poetic connections between the facts of growth and the causation and development of imaginative powers, the poet invents himself as poet. Wordsworth's mind can account for becoming the poet only by accounting to itself for becoming Wordsworth. It follows, then, that the ability to write poetry is crucial to any sense that that mind has of being what it claims—to be not only a poet, but Wordsworth. When one compares the heightened self-consciousness of such a claim (and of such activity) with the random, mostly prosaic, and often inarticulate sense that people have of having become themselves, one should say at the outset that if Wordsworth is perhaps compelled to remember and imagine his growth, most people are, in some sense of the word, compelled not to. One

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should allow that it does not "just" happen that the poet does and most people do not.

First we should look at how *The Prelude* came to occupy so prominent a position in Wordsworth's life. The important poem was to have been *The Recluse*, a life work, "a philosophical poem, containing views of Man, Nature and Society, and to be entitled *The Recluse* as having for its principal subject the sensations and opinions of a poet living in retirement."<sup>3</sup> As preparation for this task and as a "prelude" to it, Wordsworth began a poem referred to always as "the poem on my/his life." It was entitled *The Prelude; or, Growth of a Poet's Mind* by his wife when it was published posthumously in 1850. The poem was to be a "review of his own mind to examine how far Nature and Education had qualified him" for the writing of a poem like *The Recluse*. The "poem on his life" was an unusual literary venture, and Wordsworth himself felt this. At no point in its composition did he consider publishing the poem in his lifetime; it was to be published only after the success of *The Recluse* had justified it. The Advertisement used for the first edition of *The Prelude* in 1850 was actually written in 1814, when *The Recluse* was still a cherished hope, though as early as 1814 *The Recluse* was no longer spoken of by Wordsworth with conviction. He refers to a long poem in three parts, of which only the second part, *The Excursion*, was executed. "The first book of the first part of *The Recluse* still remains in manuscript," the Advertisement tells us, "and the third part was only planned."

When *The Prelude* was published in 1850, Wordsworth was, in Keats's phrase, "among the English poets"; the body of his work and his considerable reputation were justification enough for its publication. Yet in all Wordsworthian criticism, the subject of his egoism is a considerable one. In allowing Wordsworth credit for the modesty of not plan-

<sup>3</sup> *The Prelude*, Advertisement for edition of 1850, p. 509. The two quotations immediately following are from the same page.

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ning to publish the long autobiographical poem until after the success of the really great poem had justified it, one is aware nevertheless of the vastness of the ambition: the review of the mind undertaken as a lengthy preparation for a subsequent great performance makes certain unmistakable assumptions about personal greatness, only partially dispelled by the diffidence of this poet about his pretensions to being that much idealized being, The Poet. We shall have occasions to examine carefully the relationship between the two roles—the poet writing about The Poet, the troubled and self-scrutinizing self accounting for the idealized self—but here I should like to observe another aspect of egoism prior to any attempt at evaluation.

The “long poem on his life” Wordsworth wrote to Coleridge, who believed him already qualified to write *The Recluse*, was originally to have been five books long and to culminate in the account of his dedication to poetry in a “memorable dawn” above Hawkeshead.<sup>4</sup> Despite Coleridge’s encouraging insistence that the inventory of poetic capital should be brief and that the larger investment in the major work be made forthwith, *The Prelude* continued to grow. With an inner necessity that Wordsworth felt, a compelling urgency, it was gradually extended to include an account of the years after his Dawn Dedication to poetry in college. He wrote then of his residency in France, of the French Revolution and its disastrous effect on him, of his understanding of the impairment of his poetic spirit by circumstance and of its restoration by Nature and filial love. One can guess, if not readily understand, why there was to be a poem called *The Recluse*; by 1798, Wordsworth, then age twenty-eight, was a “poet living in retirement.” There was the expectation that what he would write would proceed naturally through the years of his maturity from an acceptance of himself, self-evaluated and self-affirmed.

For the next eight years, evasively but compulsively, he

<sup>4</sup> See *The Prelude*, Introduction, p. 1.

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dwelt upon the subject of how he came to be this "Recluse." As *The Prelude* delayed and then displaced the projected greater work by the difficult but steady fascination that it exerted over the mind of its creator, the permanent concern emerged—that of growth, as it has been called, or of identity, as it might be called. I shall argue, as modern psychologists do, that if growth through all the stages of one's life continues, necessarily the concern with growth changes, so that the word does not apply in the same sense to the early, middle, and late parts.<sup>5</sup> How exactly this statement applies to an interpretation of *The Prelude* I shall attempt to show, but "egoism" is what one must call the ego's lifetime concern with itself. It is crucial, however, that one put aside the fussy and embarrassed sense of the word if examples of explicit and detailed self-concern and self-observation are to be studied, since one hopes to learn from examples what one cannot learn from reticence.

In 1806, when Wordsworth finished the first draft of *The Prelude*, he was depressed. His peroration is an example of the rising tone of assertion of the last few books of the poem. Having assessed the tawdry facts of human life in the experience of history, Wordsworth sings out to Coleridge an ending that has assurances of poetic beginnings. He sounds like the Recluse promising in his retirement to turn his gaze outwards and to speak from visionary heights to the busy world of men. In posture, the statement is Miltonic.<sup>6</sup> He says:

<sup>5</sup> It will be plain to the reader who knows the work of Freud how generally my interpretations depend upon his theories. Footnotes throughout, kept to a minimum, suggest relevant passages and sometimes whole texts. Here I call attention to the work of Erik H. Erikson, who writes of growth in "The Problems of Ego Identity" and in *Childhood and Society*.

<sup>6</sup> The "visionary" view of history reminds the reader of Milton's influence on Wordsworth. Cf. *Paradise Lost*, xi and xii. Since I refer in Chap. III to both Milton and Lucretius, I should mention here the resemblance to Lucretius's view of man struggling, as observed by the Poet whose mind is well-fortified and elevated by Truth. Cf. *De Rerum Natura*, II, 1-28. With the epic form in mind, it is likely that Wordsworth was also mindful of Vergil; cf. *Aeneid*, vi.

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Oh, yet a few short years of useful life,  
And all will be complete, thy race be run,  
Thy monument of glory will be raised.  
Then, though, too weak to tread the ways of truth,  
This Age fall back to old idolatry,  
Though men return to servitude as fast  
As the tide ebbs, to ignominy and shame  
By Nations sink together, we shall still  
Find solace in the knowledge which we have,  
Bless'd with true happiness if we may be  
United helpers forward of a day  
Of firmer trust, joint-labourers in a work  
(Should Providence such grace to us vouchsafe)  
Of their redemption, surely yet to come.  
Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak  
A lasting inspiration, sanctified  
By reason and by truth; what we have loved,  
Others will love; and we may teach them how;  
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes  
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth  
On which he dwells, above this Frame of things  
(Which, 'mid all revolutions in the hopes  
And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)  
In beauty exalted, as it is itself  
Of substance and of fabric more divine.

(XIII, 428-452)

Poetry is to have a salutary effect on a few now, and perhaps on all later. One thinks inevitably of Milton's anticipated audience for *Paradise Lost* ("fit audience . . . though few")<sup>7</sup> when his hopes for man's spiritual estate in a Christian commonwealth that would transform history had failed, leaving in their stead hopes for the redemption of the virtuous minority. One finds Wordsworth here half expecting only "ignominy and shame" in history, but speaking nevertheless of "redemption, surely yet to come," a curiously

<sup>7</sup> *Paradise Lost*, VII, 31.

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divided expectation. Despite, then, the personal confusion he felt whenever he tried to take people and their treacherous wills into account, Wordsworth *wanted* to speak of the redemptive work that could be done for them by poets who would speak to them of their spiritual lives.

*The Recluse*, as Coleridge conceived of it and discussed it with Wordsworth, was to be a philosophical poem about redemption for man in history.<sup>8</sup> But Wordsworth, I think, is only gesturing here toward the long poem already overdue. The philosophical poem about redemption is promised despite the conflict that has delayed it. If one were to suggest, even prematurely, that that conflict is greater and deeper than the tone of assertion in this passage, it would perhaps be clearer that Wordsworth was oppressed by the thought of attempting to extend the poet's role metaphorically to that of redeemer. His personal habit of observing himself and of accounting for himself to himself had other than ideal meanings; it served psychic needs that could not be put aside for a more difficult, even selfless, role. But it should not seem surprising that Wordsworth needed his pose of belief in this role for the poet, though he felt oppressed by the thought of it, in order to cover his abiding concern with a self animated by its unconscious doubts. It would be useful to observe right away, then, that there is a relationship between the tone of assertion and the animating doubts, because it suggests that the very strength of insistence is a denial of the exclusive self-consciousness that has preceded it. As for finishing *The Prelude*, merely *seeming* to have finished what compulsion could never allow to be finished while life lasted must necessarily depress him. To accept as finished the account of growth may confirm one's manhood, but it does so by exposing one to one's mortality. To make the claim that Wordsworth's true greatness resides elsewhere than in his own explicit expectations of himself, we must examine a variety of motives and executions, and

<sup>8</sup> See Coleridge, *Table Talk*, July 21, 1832, quoted by de Selincourt, *The Prelude*, p. xxxviii.



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convince ourselves, perhaps, of their real stature and worth. He expected ambitiously to turn a meditation on the present into great poetry; his great poetry, however, is predominantly retrospective.

In stating that *The Prelude* of 1805-06 was revised through the years and emerged as *The Prelude* in 1850, I am calling attention to a psychological fact of some importance: that the poem, after its first depressing completion, was never allowed to remain complete as an account of growth written at a certain time. It is less easy to evaluate that fact. In 1806, Wordsworth wrote De Quincey that the poem had a "dead weight about it" and that it came "so far below what I had seemed capable of executing."<sup>9</sup> As both Dorothy's and Wordsworth's letters testify, Wordsworth was always a fitful writer, one who composed in his head while walking outdoors or who scribbled in an almost illegible handwriting. He found the physical act of writing painful, enervating, depressing. In 1804, he apologized to De Quincey: "I have a strange kind of derangement . . . which makes writing painfull to me, and indeed almost prevents me from holding correspondence with anybody: and this (I mean to say the unpleasant feelings which I have connected with the act of holding a pen) has been the chief cause of my long silence."<sup>10</sup> More than the physical act of writing is involved, since it is inseparable from what one is writing; and it is a particularly unfortunate "derangement" for a writer.

If one observes Wordsworth's awareness of himself as a writer and as a poet—that he at times expressed dread of it, castigates himself as an idler, and laments his habits of evasion—one might suspect the derangement as symptomatic. Coleridge objected to Wordsworth's chronic hypochondria, which in the form of somatic ailments interrupted his work and made him at times too ill with pains

<sup>9</sup> *The Early Letters of William Wordsworth and Dorothy Wordsworth* (hereafter *Letters*), ed. E. de Selincourt, #497.

<sup>10</sup> *Letters*, #368.

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in his side, headaches, eye and stomach trouble to compose at all. The explanations of himself Wordsworth offers seem too simple—that this, for instance, was why he could not become a lawyer like his older brother and their father before them; or that, in point of neglected correspondence, it was the physical act of writing that prevented him from writing, rather than the writing-of-what and the writing-to-whom. In addition to the letters that he would hesitate to write because they were simply tedious, there were the others—the kind, as to De Quincey, that had to be written to someone who regarded him as *the* Poet, who innocently expected something self-definitive from him, and who was therefore threatening. Wordsworth dreaded giving accounts of how his work was going, how the Poet was or what he thought of things, all subjects that tended to run too much together and to cause too much conflict. He was always struggling with the acceptance and the articulation of himself simultaneously, which is what *The Prelude* attempts in poetic form. *The Prelude* is also, unmistakably, a long letter to Coleridge, the friend (it is said often) who believed in him and who would never judge him harshly. It was, in the same sense, difficult to write.

One is always aware of a conscience supervising the task in *The Prelude*, if only that of an ideal of a Poet whose growth he hopes his autobiography exemplifies. Fairly ritualized and restrained self-criticism for not working at the poem was probably a welcome relief from, and a compromise with, greater fears of not doing it well enough, or unconscious fears of doing it too well. For if the desire to be a writer and the pain of writing are related in significant—that is, causal—ways, then doing it “well” would entail one kind of conflict about being the Poet, and not doing it “well enough” another. There is a psychic danger in excellence that we shall have occasion to observe; but the more obvious danger is in failure, in not being the Poet, and perhaps then of not being Wordsworth. Since being a poet was sufficiently different from being what most men be-

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come, the failure of Wordsworth's aspiration to superiority would surely result in the conviction of inferiority. It may seem strange, but the sense of powers withheld, used reluctantly, is an inner, if unprofitable, reassurance; whereas an achieved failure is unmistakably definitive. The aspiration to be a certain kind of poet (not a ballad writer but a major philosophical poet) was arrested by self-scrutiny: *The Prelude* came between the poet and his "great" work and extended itself until it became the expression of a dominant intention to get hold of oneself.

The psychological fact, however, can be put more precisely: the first version of the poem was subjected to revisions of various kinds. Awkward phrasing was often corrected and the sense made clearer. More appropriate images and metaphors were added; and often they were made to emerge from a specific passage as further developments or refinements, in the spirit of the original statement. Sometimes, stylistically, the opposite occurred, as when heavy latinisms replace the vital diction of the earlier version or when "poetical" metaphors decorate it.<sup>11</sup> Beyond this, we must wonder what Wordsworth may have intended by revision. Though dissatisfied by what he felt to be *The Prelude's* "heavy weight," he did not recast the poem or try again. The modern editors of *The Prelude* describe the ideal text in this way:

"The ideal text of *The Prelude*, which the lover of Wordsworth may construct for himself from the material here presented to him, would follow no single manuscript. It would retain from the earliest version such familiar details as have any autobiographical significance. Of purely stylistic changes from that text, it would accept those only which Wordsworth might have made (and some he would certainly have made) had he prepared the poem for the press in his greatest period, changes designed to remove crudities

<sup>11</sup> For an interesting discussion of this point, see Donald Davie, *Articulate Energy*, pp. 106-116.

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of expression, and to develop or clarify his original meaning: but it would reject those later excrescences of a manner less pure, at times even meretricious, which are out of key with the spirit in which the poem was first conceived and executed. Most firmly would it reject all modifications of his original thought and attitude towards his theme."<sup>12</sup>

With this wish for a variant text consistent with Wordsworth's original thought and attitude one can only concur and feel gratitude to the editors for presenting us with the material from which it may be imagined. But in the statement that follows there is a blandness of curiosity that I take to be a typically scholarly attitude; it makes of radical change nothing particularly interesting while finding it remarkable:

"To the student of the poet's mind the first version of *The Prelude* is chiefly valuable because it presents us with the history of his spiritual growth as he saw it when his powers were still at their height, and when he was writing those poems on which his greatness rests most securely. No man is the same at seventy years of age as he was at thirty-five, and Wordsworth, perhaps, changed more than most of us; for though, like others, he descended into the vale of years, he descended from more glorious heights."<sup>13</sup>

One becomes impatient with the limits so imposed on discussion and turns to literary criticism for enlightenment. But criticism, for the most part distrustful of any competence not strictly literary, has not ventured far to relate the problems of poetic autobiography psychologically to those of personality, though there has been no lack of explanations of Wordsworth's growth, change, and decline.

It is true that the attitudes of the man of seventy emerged so quickly after thirty-five that one hardly bothers to distinguish the man of forty, fifty, or sixty; and so it is that there are the two Wordsworths, young and old. It is both

<sup>12</sup> *The Prelude*, p. lxiii.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. lxiii-lxiv.

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true and meaningful that the older Wordsworth was in so many ways different from, and even antithetical to, the younger Wordsworth. Revising his story with politically conservative and Christian scruples, he sometimes seems to be his own earliest and dullest critic, unsure of the ardor, belief, and assertion of his younger self.<sup>14</sup> Yet in fact, the revisions of *The Prelude*, while indicative of profound basic change in the poet, are not extensive and are not all of them that severe. The differences between the younger and the older man are greater in letters and anecdotes, greater between early and late poems, than between the two versions of *The Prelude*. For a young radical grown conservative, for a pantheist and "semi-atheist"<sup>15</sup> grown pious and orthodox Anglican, Wordsworth allowed *The Prelude* to remain very suggestive and revealing of his younger self while taking on the supervisory and judgmental presence of his older self. If he was unable to leave the poem alone and go on to be the philosophical poet promised by it, he was also unable to recast what he had done and devote himself wholly to it as his "life work." But despite his unwillingness or his inability to persist with the work that had disappointed his expectations, *The Prelude* has become for us his principal work. It seems to contain a psychic truth by which he had been possessed and of which he was not quite in possession. The delays in composing and compiling the first version of *The Prelude*, the depression felt at its completion, the subsequent fussing with the poem, and the failure to write *The Recluse* all reveal the complexity of character that calls for a reconsideration of the younger Wordsworth rather than a dismissive caricature of the older Wordsworth. "The child is father of the man";<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, vii, 512-543. This apostrophe to Burke in the 1850 version should be read carefully as the clearest example of the intrusion of the older Wordsworth in the revision.

<sup>15</sup> ". . . at least a semi-atheist." Coleridge said this in 1796. It is quoted by David Perkins, *The Quest for Permanence*, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> All references to Wordsworth's other poems will cite *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (hereafter *Poetical Works*), ed. T. Hutchinson, rev. E. de Selincourt. "My heart leaps up . . .," p. 62.

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perhaps we should be reading *The Prelude* differently, allowing, as the inversion in the rubric suggests, more attention to the child.

### 2. Recurrent Metaphors and The Memory of Growth

Even the metaphor of growth is not itself clear and set for this poet who is remembering and imagining himself as a character exemplifying a kind of growth; generally a sense of significant change in time is rendered continuously, but variously. There is plainly the plant-likeness of growth, the feeling of rootedness in a natural place, for which "budding" and "blossoming" convey the metaphorical senses of growing, changing, maturing; and there is "transplanting," the metaphorical extension that means moving to live in another valley. That growth is also rendered as a journey in *The Prelude* is immediately recognizable to the reader who recalls that Wordsworth even uses the metaphor as a simple piece of structural artifice a few times, referring to himself as a traveller dallying along the road of the tale that he is telling of his growth. But the careful reader will have noticed that there are other and subtler uses of the journey-metaphor throughout.

Life is a journey; but in the sense that it is simply autobiographical time, it is a journey from childhood to manhood, implying the biological journey from birth to death. In the sense that a poet's growth is a growth to consciousness of himself and his function, it is a journey from the self-less and unself-conscious condition of birth to the special selfhood of a poet, from the thoughtless condition of general sensations to that of specific sensations and thoughts, and from irrecoverable states of feeling to those spiritual regions beyond thought of which poets sometimes write. In the sense that it is in some way a spiritual journey, it is a journey to an awareness of soul beyond self, of timelessness beyond time, of infinitude beyond the immediate footpath or highway of life. That most of Wordsworth's significant realizations about life and about yearnings that are great

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and insatiable take place while he is actually or figuratively a traveller must have struck the reader, as perhaps the simple literary metaphorical extensions of that sense of journey may have. Thus, life is a quest, an adventure, a pilgrimage, in which one is seeker, hero, or wayfarer.

The epic sense of journey, derived by Wordsworth from Milton, has its most precise analogue in *The Odyssey*: that a man realizes the complexity of his experience in art adequate to tell of it. In *The Odyssey*, the artist and the hero merge momentarily as Homer has Odysseus, that most fabulous of voyagers, tell his own tale at length. In *The Prelude*, experiences are not only reworked poetically in the exact sense in which Wordsworth meant "emotion recollected in tranquility,"<sup>17</sup> but they often serve as the basis for very complicated metaphorical representations of yearnings that are familiar and recurrent in the journey of life through its stages of growth and change. What is consciously selected as memorable experience is preconsciously selected to support what may be imagined on the basis of it. There is a metaphorical consistency which is structural in *The Prelude* and which provides the reader with significant connections between types of incident in their widest possible meanings, even when the meanings seem "mystical," as some say, or simply impenetrable, as others think. The critical attempt here to find those meanings is based on a belief encouraged by observation that Wordsworth was trying to characterize what he felt he could only in part explain. He did so with an imaginative fidelity of feeling which made for a coherency of representation, though the accompanying semblance of explanation certainly lacks that coherency.

When, for instance, Wordsworth speaks of the "visionary power" that he "drinks" while listening to "the ghostly language of the ancient earth," he has been describing his youthful predilection for walking at night in storm and

<sup>17</sup> "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, second edition, 1800," *Poetical Works*, p. 734. (Quoted at length, below, p. 93.)

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wind and pausing to stand in solitude. When he goes on to say that the soul,

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

(II, 335-341)

he is writing of a state of being, the sense of which fuses growth and pursuit. Faculties shared by self and soul seem to take over from each other: what he is accounts for his being here, having this experience; what more he will be will be revealed or imagined in a spiritual journey that can be characterized only by the use of intensely felt metaphor. New points will be gained; the pursuit will go on.

At another point (Book VI), while writing of the experience of being overwhelmed by his Imagination—his conscious self now figured as “the lonely Traveller” in the mountainous terrain of his own mind, and Imagination as an “awful power” that rises from “the mind’s abyss”—he says that he becomes conscious of his soul’s glory when he seeks “the invisible world.” When, with a flash that reveals the invisible world, “the light of sense goes out,” he realizes

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.  
Under such banners militant, the soul  
Seeks for no trophies, struggles for no spoils  
That may attest her prowess, blest in thoughts  
That are their own perfection and reward,



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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, 604-616: 1850 version)

Here, one either attempts to analyze the complexity of metaphorical characterization or passes over it as an example of romantic afflatus, a kind of inspired but impenetrable rant. But it all could be made plainer by observing what is obvious in what is strange: the simple similarity between these two passages. The soul, which had been described as pursuing something in and through its growing faculties, here is undergoing a growth to consciousness of more of *itself*. In pursuing his being's destiny the poet is forced beyond ordinary self-consciousness towards something to be realized, "something evermore about to be." Our being, he says, sees into "the invisible world" when the ordinary consciousness is overwhelmed by Imagination, which comes from within and from an other-than-conscious source.

Too many related passages come to mind at once to be adduced here in an orderly way; but I should like to suggest how an associational method in criticism would be appropriate, since it resembles the associative mode of feeling and thought, of recollected experience and poetic construct, that Wordsworth himself held. To say, for instance, that these passages require a tracing out of such significantly recurring characterizations as those of wind, language, solitude, growth, power, journey, inside-and-outside, visible-and-invisible, etc., is to say that this autobiographical "character" is associated in the poet's memory with certain kinds of incidents that exemplify the emerging life-style of the Poet; and that the incidents, poetically rendered, have *become* psychologically associated in the poet's imagination with certain recurrent images and metaphors. Then we are saying that the fusion of the character created and the poet

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creating him is to be understood by understanding the significance of recurrent metaphors and the associational nature of metaphor itself. Metaphor always associates the present subject or incident figuratively with another one; and Wordsworth's recurrent metaphors add a further characterization of each memory by coming back to the reader's mind and bringing their associated contexts with them. The consistency of metaphor in *The Prelude*, which I find to be amazing, may be hidden in part by its density and complexity; but I think it is more significantly obscured by an obstructive emotional reaction we have to egoism. When someone else's "egoism" is too explicitly requiring of us the kind of attention we pay willingly in literature only to characters who have been projected from their creators rather than fused with them, we become inattentive to subtleties.

Without attempting now the reasoned critical construct I shall attempt presently, let me suggest by way of example how associated passages might be considered. For instance, when speaking of the "holy calm" that sometimes overspread his soul when he was alone in Nature, Wordsworth says, "I forgot/ That I had bodily eyes, and what I saw/ Appeared like something in myself, a dream,/ A prospect in my mind."<sup>18</sup> If one wonders why calm is "holy" and what "holy" means, one can trace through other contexts the recurrent religious metaphors applied to such states, and see what they have in common. Why something outside—a landscape, for instance—should appear as something inside may be traced too; and so may "dream" and "prospect in my mind" as recurrent characterizations of simple incidents. One of the Fenwick notes supplies this: "I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality. At

<sup>18</sup> *The Prelude*, II, 368-371.

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that time I was afraid of such processes."<sup>19</sup> Abysses, like the one of the mind, the deep, other-than-conscious source from which Imagination rises, have a suggestive meaning of realities inside one that are greater and more urgent than objects externally present to the senses. They are in some further suggestive way associated with the whole "invisible world" that Wordsworth seeks when "the light of sense goes out," or when with "growing faculties of sense," the soul aspires to attain the sublimity it has often felt as an "obscure sense."

The second passage quoted above, placed in its context in Book vi, shows that Wordsworth has been recollecting the profound feeling of disappointment in the past following upon his realization that he had "*crossed the alps*" without crossing a summit. There was no higher point to attain, though the aspiration to climb upwards was boundless. It is at *this* point that the recollection of himself as a traveller in the mountains becomes the figurative basis of a further metaphorical journey in the mountainous terrain of his own mind, in which the conscious self is the traveller going a further journey towards an "invisible world" within. A realization of the meaning of past experience, exacted by the writing of poetry, also comes at this point: that actual physical activity in this world as the poet has known it cannot satisfy the obscure aspiration towards something sublime that causes it; that such activity is a poor and disappointing approximation of ideal activity, which goes through but beyond the senses.

Strange, it may seem in its context, that eternity and infinitude ("our being's heart and home") are represented as both outside and distant, and inside and near, but consistent nevertheless. These lines in MS RV, written around 1800 but subsequently cancelled, perhaps convey more

<sup>19</sup> Fenwick note on the "Immortality Ode." See *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth* (hereafter *Prose Works*), ed. A. Grosart, vol. III, p. 194.

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vividly the sense of an infinitude at once within and beyond:

By such communion I was early taught  
That what we see of forms and images  
Which float along our minds and what we feel  
Of active, or recognizable thought  
Prospectiveness, intelligence or will  
Not only is not worthy to be deemed  
Our being, to be prized as what we are  
But is the very littleness of life.  
Such consciousnesses seemed but accidents,  
Relapses from the one interior life  
Which is in all things, from that unity  
In which all beings live with God, are lost  
In God and nature, in one mighty whole  
As undistinguishable as the cloudless east  
At noon is from the cloudless west when all  
The hemisphere is one cerulean blue.

(MS RV, 1-16)

And again:

—In which all beings live with God, themselves  
Are God, existing in one mighty whole . . .

(MS 2 of "Peter Bell")

But how we are to understand this, in what sense it was meant at the time and why Wordsworth may have felt this and then cancelled it, are questions that are worth pursuing to determine how Wordsworth stands revealed in such statements.

The observation that the younger Wordsworth had the feeling of great powers within him, fostered by Nature and creative like that of the God of creation's, would be best supplemented through other associations. How does Wordsworth say he felt godly, and when does he say he feels or felt that way?

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So was it with me in my solitude;  
So often among multitudes of men.  
Unknown, unthought of, yet I was most rich,  
I had a world about me; 'twas my own,  
I made it.

(III, 139-143)

What the significant part of each of these experiences has in common with the others, we observe, is solitude; and solitude, at its simplest a physical circumstance, has an observable history of inner meanings for the poet. In solitude, the poet has acquired the habit of attempting to locate himself in his own special reality; his sense of self and his sense of reality undergo changes; and he is led on, imaginatively tempted and challenged in his ability to characterize and assess those changes poetically.

Of Genius, Power,  
Creation and Divinity itself  
I have been speaking, for my theme has been  
What pass'd within me,

(III, 171-174)

he says, at one point, even more explicitly; and the account he attempts to give in poetry of what "pass'd within" him (though "in the main/ It lies far hidden from the reach of words") is to him "heroic argument."<sup>20</sup> "Points have we all of us within our souls/ Where all stand single," he says;<sup>21</sup> and the heroic task is to put in words the singleness of one's inner being. "There's not a man/ That lives who hath not had his godlike hours," he says; and "Each man is a memory to himself," to the extent that he is able to be.<sup>22</sup> This poet, in the solitude he seeks, is compelled to speak of what otherwise would be lost, unrealized, unremembered, unimaginable.

At another point early in the poem, he who had been

<sup>20</sup> *The Prelude*, III, 178-185.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 186-187.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 189f.

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made to feel "perhaps too much/ The self-sufficing power of solitude,"<sup>23</sup> and who had felt too keenly the inward pull towards an "abyss of idealism," gives this key sense of having been left alone in the world, in briefest detail, as if mentioning it without intending to show feeling about it:

For now a trouble came into my mind  
From unknown causes. I was left alone,  
Seeking the visible world, nor knowing why.  
The props of my affections were remov'd,  
And yet the building stood, as if sustain'd  
By its own spirit!

(II, 291-296)

Wordsworth refers to the death of his parents, incidents actually six years apart, here rendered as one memory. In its context in Book II the passage is suggested no doubt by his having been talking about the crucial relationship of Mother and Babe as the type of human relatedness to the actual world and of the origin of the first poetic spirit. Only with considerable difficulty can it be shown how much the poetic sense remains preoccupied with that original relationship and that lost object of love, wonder, and power. Here I shall only suggest this connection between the objects of the "visible world," in which one must continue to live, and the lost objects and relationships that constitute the awesome appeal of the "invisible world," which is revealed momentarily by Imagination when the light of sense goes out.

Wordsworth's recollection of the child being "left alone"—an aloneness that entailed "seeking the visible world" and resisting the frightening inward pull towards an "abyss of idealism"—must be related to his gradual realization of an even greater search beyond the ordinary consciousness of self. The man and poet emerge from the child, and upon them devolves this search or journey that makes of poetry an "heroic argument" about encounters with the "invisible

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 77-78.

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world" and with inner reality. Elsewhere he describes this as "the Mind of Man—/ My haunt, and the main region of my song."<sup>24</sup> In pursuing these connections, I shall emphasize what seem to me to be their apparent causes—that is, the psychogenesis of this sense of significant experience that is rendered metaphorically as soul and search.

Here, for instance, is one such connection to be further elaborated later:

whether we be young or old,  
Our destiny, our being's heart and home,  
Is with infinitude, and only there.  
(vi, 603-605: 1850 version)

This excerpt is from one of the two passages we began by reading for their similarity, in which we found the journey metaphor and the growth metaphor fused: the growing faculties of the soul sensing something more to pursue, the self sensing something glorious related to itself beyond its ordinary consciousness, when Imagination has overwhelmed it. Leaving aside being and becoming for the moment, let us observe the "heart and home" that are—different though they are as images—the object in infinitude of this metaphorical journey. The journey metaphor suggests, somewhat mechanically, that one goes towards the eternal and the infinite, as for instance in the Christian pilgrimage of life, through death to eternal life. But there is also very strongly the suggestion of "returning" in that journey "home" to the place one left, or of returning to the condition that obtained before the search or journey began, as indeed the Christian sense of the origin of the soul in Eternity has always had it. Yet that "home"—an image of a tangible object outside one—is curiously paired with a "heart" which one would suppose to be inside one, the way our undivided "being" must be contained if it is felt to be un-

<sup>24</sup> "On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life . . .," "Preface to the Edition of 1814," *The Excursion, Poetical Works*, pp. 589-590.

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divided. Children, some have suggested,<sup>25</sup> have a more easily divisible sense of being than we realize except under special circumstances of inquiry, as I think Wordsworth shows when recalling his mother for the second and last time in *The Prelude*:

Early died  
My honour'd Mother; she who was the heart  
And hinge of all our learnings and our loves:  
She left us destitute, and as we might  
Trooping together.

(v, 256-260)

Here Wordsworth represents his life as a journey undertaken in destitution, the children "trooping together" along the road of life with a crucial connection broken between the heart as the life-sustaining part within one's own being and the much-loved external object symbolized by it. Not only had someone disappeared from the visible world, but perhaps Wordsworth's sense of the wholeness of his being had disappeared as well.

Wordsworth's accounts of his seemingly "mystical" experiences, I shall maintain, contain within them indications of those psychic realities which are most often ignored in the criticism of his poetry.<sup>26</sup> His accounts contain, too, traces of unconsciously remembered past experiences metaphorically associated with remembered experiences. Such memory traces are ordinarily unavailable to the memory as clear memories, and perhaps are only sometimes so available to the imagination with any clarity or consistency as they were for Wordsworth. But I think it is plain that the semblance of explanation, corresponding as it does to the poet's immediate *feeling* of his grasp on the matter he is presenting, is what makes possible for him the imaginative inclusion

<sup>25</sup> See *Love, Hate, and Reparation*, two lectures by Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere.

<sup>26</sup> See F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation*, pp. 171-175. That I think Dr. Leavis seriously wrong will be apparent: see below, Chap. iv, pp. 151-152 and Chap. viii, pp. 384-385; see also Appendix, p. 405.



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of unconscious memories in his significant recollections. Wordsworth was aware of poetic statement as a kind of "modal proposition," a way of dealing declaratively, affirmatively, and generally with the possible, the necessary, the contingent, and the wishful in personal experience. He knew about "what we half-create and what perceive," but he seems to have trusted that the poetic representation of feeling would express the urgency of such activity in the self; and it is this activity—his attempt to take possession of his life by using the feeling of being possessed—that we value and study, if we respond to it. When Wordsworth speaks of fixing "the wavering balance of my mind," the reader is adverted to the perilous nature of such urgency: inactivity is not allowed to seem a simple alternative. The problem to be dealt with first is that of the relationship between expression and understanding as, on the one hand, it is managed by the poet within the poem, and, on the other, as it is interpreted by the reader.

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## CHAPTER II

### FROM "TINTERN ABBEY" TO *THE PRELUDE*

#### 1. The Speaker

"Tintern Abbey," written in the blank verse style to be adopted for *The Prelude*, and written a year earlier than the first longer passages of Books I and II, shares with *The Prelude* the common theme of growth. It also reveals in one poetic whole the characteristic problems of Wordsworth's habit of self-regard, and offers for critical inspection the problem of personality in Romantic art. The problems to be considered are: What is expressed and what is understood in the poem? What may be understood on the basis of the poem? Much of one's reading of Wordsworth is determined by presuppositions about what can be expressed and understood in poetry.

First one must say how one regards Wordsworth as the "character" of the poem, its speaker. There is not, as in a play, a relativity of viewpoint. The character is not making a statement in a context of previous and subsequent statements and actions; we cannot balance expression and understanding as in drama, which imitates life; nor is there any clear sense that Wordsworth is detaching himself as creator from himself as speaker. It is plain that, despite the seemingly dramatic utterance of the poem, the poet does not pretend to know more than his "character" says: he is expressing and understanding himself to the extent that he is able. One has no sense that the poet could consciously intend as an effect of the poem whatever in it may suggest an alternative understanding to the self-understanding of

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the expressive speaker. I do not mean merely that we know it was not Wordsworth's habit to regard anything that he said ironically or to allow the validity of alternative interpretation of himself generally; I mean something more critical. Wordsworth is representing himself, but is not, in the *usual* literary sense of the word, using himself *representatively*. This is, I realize, a commonplace distinction between Renaissance and Romantic poetry.

If we consider Shakespeare only in the sonnets, we can more easily imagine a "character" speaking each of the sonnets, distinct from Shakespeare himself and created for what the sonnet is to express, than we can imagine a "character" distinct from Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey" and created for what the poem expresses. However complex the matter of a Shakespeare sonnet may be, it is representative; one can project oneself into the role of the speaker and have his experience in one's own person, whether it is a matter that is truly resolved or truly ambiguous. The relation of the poem to the facts of Shakespeare's life is irrelevant; perhaps one can imagine the man of the sonnets best by the nature of his interests and the nuances of representation, the tension of surface understandings and probable ironies, but the experience of reading the sonnets generally is that of "having" their experience, in the way that the mind synthesizes poetic experience by playing the role and regarding oneself in it at the same time. One's feelings, if they are alive and responsive to the play of mind in the poem, are being more finely organized than one's own lesser powers of articulation could manage. The poetry of the poet who uses himself representatively provides both the feeling of poetic expression and the feeling of comprehending oneself differently.

If, on the other hand, we consider the Wordsworth of "Tintern Abbey," we find a man in his own mood on his own occasion. One cannot project oneself into the role of the speaker simply by trying to, nor is one supposed to try in that sense. Rather, the speaker is offering himself for

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regard in one particular activity of the self, his own. We are tempted to say that by allowing the forces seeking expression in him to work through him, the speaker realizes what he feels and also understands the self that feels it; and so it seems to many that Wordsworth "realizes" himself in an experience of communing once again with Nature, which has a restorative effect on him, or of communing with himself in Nature. It may be, however, that certain disturbances which are insistent but obscure in the self at times reach a threshold at which they must be expressed in some form if the ego is to maintain its mastery over them by again demonstrating that mastery. The forces that seem to rise from within are of oneself; the ego, one's habitual way of being oneself, must restrain their insurgency even while allowing them occasionally greater expression. Often without realizing quite how, one earns one's composure. What Wordsworth actually realizes, then, is his need and his ability to reaffirm himself at times in this way, which is not quite the same thing as realizing truly the nature of the disturbance. This need is the cause of his seeking the occasion to commune with Nature, which has become implicated in his psychology, as a means of adjusting the one to the other, the disturbance to the affirmation.

The poem, in no simple or direct way, is "about" senses of things that are deeper than the sense of the present occasion; and the reader is being invited only to observe the process of response to the occasion. Wordsworth felt that the poet's function was to give "new compositions of feeling" to the reader;<sup>1</sup> and here we may say that the real success of the poem is in the appearance and feeling of "self-realization"—of expression, restraint, and affirmation—that the reader may take from it. One learns from the poem to appreciate the habit of response demonstrated in it. The occasional, consistent, and recurrent nature of such moods and the consequent sense of self achieved by a responsive relaxation in them are made to seem very attractive. From

<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth, *Letters*, #130.

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this poetic account of the experience, one may learn to allow one's need to affirm oneself to engage one's own disturbances; or one may discover the pleasure of allowing sensation and thought to sustain a mood of attenuated trust, and learn from it, too, to make explicit the connections in one's personal history between the self and the places where it experiences renewal. To achieve any amount of trust and of connectedness in time is no easy accomplishment in life, and the Wordsworth who speaks of what we "half create and what perceive" was not naive about his own attempt to hold to his affirmative intention. It is a question whether or not the realization of self is true, but the process displayed by Wordsworth is an uncommon enough one—urgent, instructive, beautiful. To interpret the "character" of "Tintern Abbey" or of *The Prelude* is inevitably to interpret Wordsworth himself, to accept his self-understanding or oppose it with one's own understanding of him.

One gets the impression from the possessiveness Wordsworth showed towards his poetry that he felt that an understanding of it and of himself as the speaker in it could be conveyed only by the repetition of the poem, a recitation in his own voice with his personal tonal emphases. He was uncomfortable with any understanding of his poetry that merely described what it was about, necessarily in statements other than his own.<sup>2</sup> "But no one," he says, "has completely understood me—not even Coleridge. He is not happy enough. I am myself one of the happiest of men and no man who lives a life of constant bustle and whose happiness depends on the opinions of others can possibly comprehend the best of my poems."<sup>3</sup> This was said by the embarrassing "older" Wordsworth in 1812, but there is something about it generally suggestive of the man. The conditions

<sup>2</sup> The impression Wordsworth made on people was that of a man very much attached to his own utterances, in poetry or in conversation. See Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lamb: *Selections from the Literary Remains of H. C. Robinson*, ed. Edith J. Morley, *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters*, #49.