

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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PRELUDE

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Wordsworth's *Prelude* is an autobiographical epic poem. Subtitled the "Growth of a Poet's Mind," it was begun in 1798 and addressed to his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in the same year that they published *The Lyrical Ballads*, their revolutionary first book of poems. It was to be a prologue to a longer three-part epic called *The Recluse*, which Wordsworth described as "having for its principal subject, the sensations and opinions of a poet living in retirement." But in the later years he wrote only parts of the longer poem, and for this and other reasons *The Prelude* was not published until after his death in 1850. Critics estimate that if the entire project had been completed, it would have been three times the length of Milton's great epic about the Creation and the Fall of Man, *Paradise Lost*.

Nevertheless, *The Prelude* alone is of epic length and a demonstration of how the romantic sensibility viewed the growth of a poet's mind as a subject of epic importance and grandeur. In so doing it also celebrates many central romantic subjects: childhood, nature, revolution, and the god-like power of the individual imagination.

In structure, the poem follows Wordsworth's development from early childhood and "School-Time" (Books 1 and 2); to his studies, vacations, reading, and travel while at Cambridge (Books 3-6); his contrasting experiences afterwards in London and the country (Books 7 & 8); and his residence in France during the French Revolution (Books 9-11). It ends in his later, mature years with philosophical reflections on "Imagination and Taste" and the poetic imagination (Books 12-14).

What distinguishes *The Prelude* from what could be many other accounts of an English life in the same years are Wordsworth's blank verse and his presentation of outstanding moments in his experience as powerful epiphanies that somehow transcend their more or less ordinary surroundings. An early example comes in the middle of Book One. "Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up / Fostered alike by beauty and by fear" (ll. 301-2) he writes, before describing how when he was ten he liked to go out at night snaring woodcocks. But he then confesses that he sometimes stole birds that had been caught in other people's traps, only to hear "among the solitary hills / Low breathings coming after me, and sounds / Of undistinguishable motion, steps / Almost as silent as the turf they trod." (ll. 322-5) This sensation is soon followed by the longer description of his stealing a "little boat tied to a willow tree" (l. 358) on a summer evening. He rows away, looking at a hill astern in order to hold to a straight line, when "a huge peak, black and huge, / As if with voluntary power instinct, / Upreared its head." (ll. 378-80) This "huge peak" that had previously been out of sight behind the lower hill grew taller and darker the farther he rowed, making him feel more and more guilty. It continued to haunt him for days and nights, and was evidence of nature's moral teaching.

Thus does Wordsworth illustrate how nature had a moral presence and power and how such experiences have stayed with him. They are epiphanies, or "spots of time," that arise in the ordinary but also transcend it.

A more famous example comes in Book 6, as he and friends are climbing in the Alps. They stop to eat "Their noontide meal" and fall behind their guide. Then, in attempting to catch up, they climb higher and higher, becoming more and more frightened, only to have a peasant tell them that instead of climbing they "must descend, and there should find the road,..." (l. 579) Without knowing it, "*we had crossed the Alps.*" (l. 591) This experience devastatingly illustrates the power of "Imagination – here the Power so called / Through sad incompetence of human speech,..." (ll.592-3) It was like both an "unfathered vapour" that rose from "the mind's abyss" and also the moment when "in such strength / of usurpation, ... the light of sense / Goes out," and a flash reveals "The invisible world." Here "doth greatness make abode,..." (ll. 599-602).

The young Wordsworth was a restless traveler and seeker, and after college he tried living in London, where he found amusement in its endless sights and diversions. But he also found them trivial, appeals only to what he called "fancy," as opposed to "imagination." So after escaping back to the country, he next went to France, which was in the midst of its revolution. He also took up with a French woman, Annette Vallon, with whom he had a daughter, although this is not revealed in the poem.

Instead, he describes the hopes and horrors of the revolution, saying, at one point, when its hopes and promises were greatest, "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very Heaven!" (Bk., 11, ll. 108-9).

The last three books, being more philosophical, do not reveal as much about his immediate life, except for the account in Book 14 (ll. 1-129) of his climbing Mt. Snowdon, which is the last of his great epiphanies. But unlike the experience of crossing the Simplon Pass in Book 6, it has no elements of awe and terror (what the Eighteenth Century called the Sublime). It even begins very prosaically, including a description of the dog that belonged to his and companion's guide teasing a hedgehog. Then, as Wordsworth sees the ground in front of him appear to brighten with each step, he looks up to see the moon "naked in a firmament / Of azure without cloud, and at my feet / Rested a silent sea of hoary mist." (ll. 40-2) Beyond are the "dusky backs" of hills, and farther off is the Atlantic Ocean, all majestic in the moonlight. The scene, which must be read carefully, is a great romantic moment, where Nature and a man's higher sensibilities merge in the "highest bliss / That flesh can know...." (ll. 113-4).

Questions for Further Study:

1. Compare Wordsworth's descriptions of London in Book 7 with Boswell's experiences in his *London Journal*. What do the differences reveal about their different character and values and the purposes of their autobiographies?
2. Gibbon spent many years in Switzerland, but says little or nothing about its mountains. Wordsworth makes the crossing of the Simplon Pass an epiphany. What does this tell you about their different sensibilities? About the "Age of Reason" and the "Romantic Age"?
3. *The Prelude* is often slow going and its blank verse hard to follow. Is this a defect or the inevitable consequence of Wordsworth's sometimes ineffable experiences and epiphanies? Could the same story be told in prose?