

THE FINALE: THE PRELUDE

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utobiography is the highest and most instructive form in which understanding of life confronts us.”¹¹ The confessional imagination activated while writing autobiography narrates not only the past life or gives a historical account of the author’s growth but also operates to generate for the writer a new vision in life, leading the writer to a new self-discovery. The final product becomes a work of continuity and growth. Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, his crowning achievement and perhaps as great as Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (there are even some lines borrowed directly from Milton), is one of the outstanding examples of autobiography in which the poet emerges as an evolving and transforming self. Through an account of his life, the poet comes to understand himself and the world as changing entities. He thus enters into an unceasing process of writing and revising his autobiographical poem because life and nature perpetually renew themselves. As a result, the work could not be published during Wordsworth’s lifetime because he revised the poem as he acquire more knowledge about himself.

Wordsworth’s autobiographical vision changed greatly throughout the years. When he started writing *The Prelude* he was twenty-nine, very prolific and enthusiastic about his craft. In 1799, he completed the first “Two-part Prelude.” The second *Prelude*, which numbered thirteen books, was written in 1805, leading the poet to the unending process of revision until his death in 1850. “The 1850 *Prelude* is in fourteen books and was

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printed from a fair copy; it incorporated Wordsworth's latest revisions which had been made in 1839, as well as some alterations introduced by his literary executors."ⁱⁱⁱ The work, known to his family and friends as "the poem on the growth of the poet's mind" or "the poem addressed to Coleridge," underwent substantial changes in accordance with the alterations in the poet's personal emotional and intellectual lives, all of which influenced the core of *The Prelude*.

Wordsworth's initial aim had nothing to do with writing a self-confessed autobiography. He thought of *The Prelude* as a part of the larger philosophical poem, *The Recluse*. His ambitious poem, *The Recluse*, however, was never begun and *The Prelude* had to stand alone on its own merits. Wordsworth's attempt to write a self-reflecting poem as the initial stage of his great philosophical poem, and his failure to complete the story of his life—because the poem was not (and could not be) published during Wordsworth's lifetime on account of the poet's unwillingness to publicize his work—reveal some very important characteristics of autobiography and the autobiographical vision. In the *Preface to The Excursion* (1814), Wordsworth mentions his projects for his philosophical poem; he explains his purpose in writing *The Prelude* in a letter to Richard Sharp, the friend of both Coleridge and Wordsworth:

The preparatory poem [for *The Recluse*] is biographical and conducts the history of the Author's mind to the point when he was emboldened to hope that his faculties were sufficiently matured for entering upon the arduous labour which he had proposed to himself.ⁱⁱⁱ

The final product, however, does not satisfy him as understood from his letter to Sir George Beaumont, June 3, 1805:

I have the pleasure to say that I finished my poem about a fortnight ago. I had looked forward to the day as a most happy one; and I was indeed grateful to God for giving me life to complete the work, such as it is; but it was not a happy day for me—I was dejected on many accounts; when I looked back upon the performance it seemed to have a dead weight about it, the reality so far short of the expectation; it was the first long labour that I had finished, and doubt whether I should ever live to write the Recluse, and the sense which I had of this Poem being so far below what I seemed capable of executing, depressed me much.^{iv}

From the letter to Sharp it is obvious that Wordsworth's motive in writing *The Prelude* is to enlighten himself about his craft. He sees autobiography as a vehicle for the poet to mature his faculties: it provides an "inward-looking eye" and therefore a strong self-consciousness. Only

through this inner exploration can a poet widen his scope and shoulder great tasks. Wordsworth, however, could not go beyond *The Prelude* for the work reshaped his mind and hence his emotional evaluation of his present and past lives. He thus entered into a long process of writing: inevitably he had to revise and re-arrange *The Prelude*, a task which Wordsworth undertook consciously.

If the *whole* poem is taken into consideration, Wordsworth reveals that he comes to perceive all phenomena through mutability. Skiddaw, Cambridge, Paris, London, the Alps, are but milestones marking his progress from the turbulence of youth, to the calm "philosophic mind" brought him by experiences and by the passing of years. Until Book VI, however, where he encounters with his imagination and a new sensation seizes him, he is a wandering spirit in search of invariable "noble" paradigms. Although he finds himself some figures—both earthly and human-- to follow (the close relationship between a new born baby and its mother in Book II; "human heartedness" in Book IV; The French Revolution and revolutionary ideas in the later books), he steps outside of those figures as they collapse one after the other. All the shattered figures he left behind, however, bring a "gift" as expressed in "Tintern Abbey" a sense of sublime, making the poet hear "the still, sad music of humanity." What Wordsworth realizes in Book XIV, the concluding book and the climax of the whole poem is that his life consists of perpetual conflicts (both external and internal) and changes. Therefore, there is no beginning, no end to the poem. The symbolic act of ascent of Snowdon by night, and the sudden vision of the moon above the clouds in Book XIV restores his "faith in life endless," making the poet turn back to the beginning of his journey for self discovery, though now with a serene self-consciousness which becomes his driving power for further discoveries and revisions. Each revision of *The Prelude* teaches Wordsworth something new about himself, putting the poet again and again to the beginning, but in a different mood each time, and making him re-evaluate what he has felt and known.

It is from nature that Wordsworth learns more about himself. Through his observations he comes to realize two natural powers: wind and water. He uses these as both images and symbols to suggest change and interaction. Throughout the poem there are direct references to their capacity to change and create life and its rhythm. The images related to these powers also suggest the flowing, transforming quality of nature and the ability of these phenomena to interact with other natural elements. It is in this great harmony of the different polarities like wind and water--the opposing but life-giving potencies--that the poet opens his eyes to the awesome universe; he realizes that life springs from paradoxical forces. As

he believes that his interior life should correspond with external nature, he tries to acquire the ability to hear Nature's language more clearly, and the ability to speak that language more expressively. Through the transcendental experience in Book IV, he senses Nature's motion and listens to its mysterious language. While musing in a wood the poet sits down and narrates his experience:

Continuing there to muse: the slopes
And heights meanwhile were slowly overspread
With darkness, and before a rippling breeze
The long lake lengthened out its hoary line,
And in the sheltered coppice where I sate,
Around me from among the hazel leaves,
Now here, now there, moved by the straggling wind,
Come over and anon a breath-like sound,
Quick as the pantings of the faithful dog,
The off and on companion of my walk;
And such, at times, believing them to be,
I turned my head to look if he were there;
Then into solemn thought I passed once more.^v

This experience leads Wordsworth to review what he "owed to books in early life" and contrasts the freedom of his education, when he was not allowed to read books like *Don Quixote* and *The Arabian Nights*, with the overly rational approach of modern education which deprives the child of the teaching given by nature and by imagination. His departure "with a youthful friend" to France, the country consumed by revolutionary enthusiasm, and across the Alps into Italy, makes him realize the powerful impact of imagination on human soul. Lacking the full consciousness at the beginning of his journey, he blindly climbs the Alps as revealed in Book VI, a symbolic action that summarizes all his previous attempts to explore himself. At first he feels tender melancholy and sweet sadness:

How sweet at such a time, with such delight
On every side, in prime of youthful strength,
To feed on a poet's tender melancholy
And fond conceit of sadness, with the sound
Of undulations varying as might please
The wind that swayed them . . .
(Book VI, 364-369)

When their voyage turns downward—another symbolic action suggesting a turn in psychology—he hears from the lips of the shepherd that they “had crossed the Alps” unaware. A different kind of awareness now haunts the poet. It comes as a powerful eruption:

Imagination—here the Power so called
Through sad incompetence of human speech,
That awful Power rose from the mind’s abyss
Like an unfattered vapour that enwraps,
At once, some lonely traveller. (Book VI, 592-603)

It is the power of imagination that usurps all his passions and emotions. Like the blind upward climbing coming to an end, his crude yearnings are crushed by this very power. Eventually he understands the nature of the sublime he sought after for the sake of philosophical wisdom. It is some lines later that he finds, through his conscious soul, that all sublimity lies in Apocalyptic paradoxes: “Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light/Were all like workings of one mind, the features/Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;/Characters of the great Apocalypse,/The types and symbols of Eternity,/Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.” (Book VI, 635-640) For Wordsworth life and eternity are found in the paradoxes. There is, therefore, no beginning, no middle, and no end. All is one and endless. After this experience he stirs up his own meditative spirit into a new dimension, meditating over all earthly and human themes. Later, turning completely into himself for another inner quest, he tries to establish a much more subtle unity between himself and nature (or its sublimity): the later revisions of the poem are but the attempts to understand the nature of the relation between his own existence and the world, man and nature. Pondering on all those youthful experiences each time he finds a new Wordsworth, who sees things from a different angle.

The Prelude focuses on the self. Although the poet seems to have confined himself into his inner world, the poem, by using this self also projects the social and cultural environment whose fabrics have also been altered through the first person’s changing viewpoint. Carl Dawson argues that “Historical understanding is the highest understanding and if autobiography is the basic language of historical expression, then spiritual autobiography emerges as a peculiar anomaly: historical and ahistorical.”^{vi} *The Prelude*, the spiritual autobiography of Wordsworth, then should be read within both the historical context in which the work was produced, and as an imaginative artifact. From Book VII to the end, Wordsworth mentions more historical events. Reflecting the phantasmagoria and dehumanisation of social life in London in Book VII, he compares the environment of his own

childhood with that of the “enormous city’s turbulent world” (Book VIII). In books IX and X, he re-evaluates his political views. He loses all his faith in revolutions as the revolutionaries “become oppressors in their turn” (Book X). The following books, too, talk about his failure of political hopes. What is left for the poet is only sorrow which turns into a sublime delight as expressed in Book XIII:

Sorrow, that is not sorrow, but delight;
And miserable love, that is not pain
To hear of, for the glory that redounds
Therefore to human kind, and what we are.
(Book XIII, 246-49)

For almost forty-five years Wordsworth tried to explore the nature of his own paradoxes in order to solve the great mystery of Man and his interaction with God and Nature. In Book XIV he makes his final confessions with a sober tone, suggesting that the way for self-discovery is full of obstacles:

Where is the favoured being who hat held
In one perpetual progress smooth and bright?
A humbler destiny have we retraced,
And told of lapse and hesitating choice,
And backward wanderings along thorny ways:
Yet—compassed round by mountain solitudes,
Within whose solemn temple I received
My earliest visitations . . .
(Book XIV, 133-41)

Finding himself at the beginning of his journey for self discovery, and now stuck into paradoxes, Wordsworth cannot help feeling that he is going backward. In the passing forty-five years *The Prelude* becomes his obsession, and the three different *Preludes*—1799, 1805 and 1850—reveal the poet’s new discoveries about man, himself and his craft.

In himself Wordsworth has tried to explore human nature and its interaction with the visible world, both the cosmos and human society. Although this basic pattern of the poem remains unchanged—his search never comes to an end—in the last book Wordsworth recurs to the initial mood of the poem, and in a sense turns again to its beginning. He acts in accordance with his discovery of fatal but endless paradoxes. His final recovery of serenity with his return to the country of his upbringing restores

his "faith in life endless" (Book XIV) that he seems to have lost with the collapse of important figures in his life. Hence, the attempt to understand the pattern of his life he set out to discover in Book I is renewed in Book XIV: the end becomes the beginning, the beginning becomes the end. T.S. Eliot in "Little Gidding" from *Four Quartets* arrives at a similar conclusion: "What we call the beginning is often the end/And to make an end is to make a beginning."^{vii}

The first and second generation of the Romantics had refused the maps offered by traditional political, theological and intellectual authorities. They had also denied the supremacy of reason associated with the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. In their exploration of truth the Romantics had assumed almost heroic status. In Wordsworth, however, though he belongs to the first generation, we see a return to the established standards of thought towards the end of his life. One might claim that it was his admiration of Newton, his love of mathematics, his habit of close and prolonged observation of natural and psychological events that drove him to empiricism. Nevertheless, the changes in tone of *The Prelude* go hand in hand with the changes in the social, political, economic, and scientific developments of the age. The utilitarian worldview that influenced all sections of society must have, after all, exerted pressure on Wordsworth's emotions and his style in poetry. In accordance with the changes in social and individual lives, the poet tones down the powerful assertion of spiritual meditations. He seems to have institutionalised some new but socially accepted beliefs for himself. He leaves the early freedom he enjoyed. We know that in his old age Wordsworth became a Christian. His early creed which consisted of God, Man, and Nature, and the harmonious interaction of the three is later transformed into an orthodox Christian creed. It is, therefore, not surprising to see that Wordsworth's early notions and sensations are dispersed in the later revisions of the poem because life perpetually renews itself and what Wordsworth called "the past" seems to have been shaped in the poet's very present moment, present reality.

When Wordsworth started writing the poem, he dedicated it to Coleridge. The two poets were then great friends. In 1810, however, a quarrel divided them and the loving friendship came to an end. If *The Prelude* of 1805 is compared with *The Prelude* of 1850, the alterations and omitted passages are easily recognized. Helen Darbishire makes a thorough comparison of the two versions. The disparity between the lines while he refers to Coleridge is an especially interesting one:

He [Wordsworth] had addressed himself to Coleridge heart to heart.
I speak bare truth



As if to thee alone in private talk,
he writes. In revising he changes the intimate and personal form, substituting general for particular expressions, replacing the pronoun "I" by impersonal constructions.^{viii}

He later changes the confessional tone of the poem when speaking of Coleridge. Not only his view of Coleridge, but also the psychology of the poem undergoes some certain changes. In another example Darbishire gives, the change in psychology is apparent:

The early *Prelude* insists again and again on the primacy and self sufficiency of feeling. Of his Cambridge days we read:

I lov'd and enjoy'd that was my chief
And ruling business, happy in the strength
And loveliness of imagery and thought

In the final text these lines go out and a single line stands in their stead:

Content to observe, to admire, and to enjoy.
Again, of his unsophisticated childhood he first wrote:
I felt, and nothing else; I did not judge,
but rewrote:
I felt, observed, and pondered, did not judge.^{ix}

It seems that the passing years added some empiricist overtones to the poem and the spontaneous overflow of "crude" feelings is balanced by "observation" and by "pondering". While these alterations can be considered as slight changes, they reveal the experience of many years. During this time of his existence, "spots of time" gain new meanings, and his mind draws new strength.

For any writer, writing autobiography is a voyage in time: the writer goes back to the past to discover more about his present state of existence. It is the renewal of the present moment that reshapes the past, and reshaping of the past exerts its pressure again on the present moment to further reform it. An unending circle occurs, and writers like Wordsworth cannot finish their autobiographies. Wordsworth seems to have realised the vanity of such a struggle—he did not want *The Prelude* to be published during his lifetime; however, it was such an incredible attraction for the poet to travel to and fro

in time for the sake of acquiring new scopes of meaning. When looked at from this angle, autobiography does not and cannot give us accurate information about its writer and the writer's environment because it remains partial and inconclusive. Hence, autobiography comes to mean nothing but itself.

NOTES

- 1- Wilhelm Dilthey, *Meaning in History: Wilhelm Dilthey's Thoughts on History and Society*, ed. H.P. Rickman (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961) 85-86.
- 2- M.H. Abrams, ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 6th ed. (New York and London: Norton, 1993) 206.
- 3- William Wordsworth, "To Richard Sharp" in *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850* ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, et al (New York: Norton, 1979) 532.
- 4- Wordsworth "To Sir George Beaumont" in *The Prelude*, 534
- 5- Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850 version), Book IV, Lines 177-190. All future citations from this poem will be referred to in the article with the book and line numbers.
- 6- Carl Dawson, *Prophets of Past Time* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins U.P., 1988) 26.
- 7- T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding", *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York and London; Norton, 1993) 2169.
- 8- Helen Darbishire, "The Prelude" *Wordsworth: The Prelude*, ed. W. J. Harvey, Richard Gravil (Hong Kong; Macmillan, 1972) 82.
- 9- Darbishire, 84.