

WORDSWORTH'S *PRELUDE* : EIGHT

1. ---A favorite pleasure hath it been with me,
From time of earliest youth, to walk alone
Along the public Way, when, for the night 365
Deserted, in its silence it assumes
A character of deeper quietness
Than pathless solitudes. At such an hour
Once, ere those summer months were pass'd away,
I slowly mounted up a steep ascent 370
Where the road's watry surface, to the ridge
Of that sharp rising, glitter'd in the moon,
And seem'd before my eyes another stream
Creeping with silent lapse to join the brook
That murmur'd in the Valley. On I went 375
Tranquil, receiving in my own despite
Amusement, as I slowly pass'd along,
From such near objects as from time to time
Perforce intruded on the listless sense
Quiescent, and dispos'd to sympathy, 380
With an exhausted mind, worn out by toil,
And all unworthy of the deeper joy
Which waits on distant prospect, cliff, or sea,
The dark blue vault, and universe of stars.
Thus did I steal along that silent road, 385
My body from the stillness drinking in
A restoration like the calm of sleep
But sweeter far. Above, before, behind,
Around me, was all peace and solitude;
I look'd not round, nor did the solitude 390
Speak to my eye; but it was heard and felt.

William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805-6), IV, 363-391; ed. Mark L. Reed (2 vols, Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), I, pp. 159-60; also ed. E. de Selincourt & revised H. Darbishire (Oxford, 1959), pp. 128, 130. As so often, the moment of glittering culmination here, reflected light sparking the scene into unity of imagination, comes from a laconic hint in Dorothy's journal: 'The hawthorn hedges, black and pointed, glittering with millions of diamond drops; the hollies shining with broader patches of light. The road to the village of Holford glittered like another stream'; Helen Darbishire and Mary Moorman (eds), *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth; The Alfoxden Journal, 1798; The Grasmere Journals, 1800-1803* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1971), entry for 31st January 1798. Jonathan Wordsworth notes somewhat acidly: 'Wordsworth incorporated his sister's note within days (and despite the fact that they were in Somerset and he was writing about the Lake District)'; Jonathan Wordsworth (ed.), *The Prelude: the Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)* (London, Penguin Books, 1995), p. 577.

The episode falls into the type represented by, for example, (1805-6) VI, 494-

548 (climbing the Alps) and culminating in (1805-6) XIII, 1-119 (climbing Snowdon). Already at the stage of the poem's composition (*circa* March 1804) in which it was to consist of five books only, the Snowdon episode is headed (in MS W) '5th Book', so that its importance as climax to these earlier types of imaginative recognition was part of an early plan for the poem's unity; see the full discussion of textual genetics in Mark L. Reed, ed., *The Thirteen-Book Prelude* (2 vols, Ithaca and London, 1991), I, esp. p. 35; and for still useful summary J.R. MacGillivray, 'The Three Forms of *The Prelude*, 1798-1805' in M. MacLure & F.W. Watt (eds.), *Essays in English Literature . . . Presented to A.S.P. Woodhouse* (Toronto, 1964), pp. 241-242; a different aspect of the genetics, as a problem for editors and readers, is reviewed with good balance by Zachary Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford, 1996), Chapter 1, and compare also Jack Stillinger, 'Multiple "Consciousnesses" in Wordsworth's *Prelude*', in his *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (New York, 1991), Chap. 4 (pp. 69-95). The actual Snowdon climb itself dates from summer 1791, when Wordsworth was just 21; for further discussion see Jonathan Wordsworth, 'The Climbing of Snowdon', in *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies in Memory of John Alban Finch*, ed. J. Wordsworth (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970) and K.R. Johnston, 'The Idiom of Vision,' in *New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (New York, 1972), together with his *Wordsworth and 'The Recluse'* (New Haven, 1984), pp. 206-10.

Notice how Wordsworth's scene is emptied of all overt social content and reference, so that the specific features of locality, part-erased by listlessness and fatigue, by the easy habit of 'favourite pleasure', can be internalised as a visitation of enlarging distance, thus compensating for reduced self-esteem by disclosing a restorative world of spiritual joy. The later text revised as MS C alters lines 363-5 (above) to read:

A favourite pleasure was it of my Youth
Such is it now, dear friend, to walk alone
Along the public Way (*Thirteen-Book 'Prelude'*, II, p. 71)

But this familiar allusion to the companionship of Coleridge, within the remembrance of solitude, is not permitted to survive. For visitation as spirit-originated see also *The Prelude, 1798-1799*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca, N.Y., 1977), First Part, ll. 67-80; there, 'gentle visitation' (p. 45, also pp. 93, 95) modulates by 1805 to 'gentlest visitation' (*Thirteen-Book Prelude*, I, p. 116), still hovering between active and passive sense ('visiting' a place, 'being visited' by powers there encountered or being by such powers uniquely sought out). Ponder also these thoughts from Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation; Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford, 2003): 'Coleridge is not taken out of himself, but deeper into himself. He discovers a continuous aspiration for sympathy, a longing buried within for some larger connection' but 'this discovery does not point out to a larger society but leads back instead to the domestic' (p. 160); 'If the poetics of retirement routinely pointed back to society . . . the social in Wordsworth takes an extremely attenuated and restricted form' (p. 255).

For a less favourable description, compare McGann: 'Reality is interior, the geography of the meditative mind; and the imagination's recreations of the

world (i.e. poetical works) are themselves what compensate for the losses we sustain in our everyday lives' ('The Anachronism of George Crabbe', in *The Beauty of Inflections*, p. 311; see below for reference). And yet it is a common error to construe Romantic solitude as anti-social by neglectful default, when may function as a lens rather than a closed door. All rests for its principle of value upon whether the process of visitation and conversion 'amounts to a participation between the ideal and the real' (Beckett), or represents a deluding (self-deluded) contrivance of it. Not to be fully confident that the transaction is secure may demonstrate one of Wordsworth's most most painful and honourable doubts; or rather, it may be occluded self-exculpation. The question however central is infiltrated by its own Romantic preconditions, because it will regress indefinitely without resolving into stable form as a question. Compare further the brief Afterword to John Whale, *Imagination Under Pressure, 1789-1832; Aesthetics, Politics and Utility* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 194-5.

2. The matter comes to this: whether you stand most in admiration of the mind's halt before what it cannot fathom; or of the eloquence by which it consoles itself with its own capacity to make something grand of that halt.

David Bromwich, *Hazlitt; the Mind of a Critic* (New York, 1983), p. 426, n. 18; compare 'Wordsworth's progression in Book VI of *The Prelude*, from sudden privation to a sense of glory and enhancement so well-managed that the discovery has in retrospect a pre-meditated look' (p. 428, n. 18), and compare also the argument of J.J. McGann, 'The Anachronism of George Crabbe', *ELH*, 48 (1981), 555-572, reprinted in his *The Beauty of Inflections; Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford, 1985). See, further, Thomas de Quincey, *Suspiria de Profundis* [1845], esp. Part I: 'The Affliction of Childhood', text in Grevel Lindop (ed.), *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, and Other Writings* (World's Classics, Oxford, 1985, reprinted, 1998), pp. 94 ff, also in M. Elwin (ed.), *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (London, 1956); and compare again Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (first published, 1931; reissued, London, 1965).

3. I want to answer this [the question, why was Burke so committed to the idea of the sublime] by suggesting that the Burkean sublime functions as an aesthetic underpinning to the process of constructing a middle-class ideology in Britain in the first half of the eighteenth century, and that it takes the shape it does in response to the particular discursive issues which beset that process. The sublime occasions, and is occasioned by, an illusion of original creativity: the self's 'creation', and mastery, of what it has heard or seen, raises it in its own opinion and produces 'a sort of swelling and triumph'. The self responds to the perhaps already fictional threat with the creative labour of metaphor-making, a gesture which defends and reaffirms a sense of self, or

7. O joy! again the farms appear.
Cool shade is there, and rustic cheer; 75
There springs the brook will guide us down,
Bright comrade, to the noisy town.

Matthew Arnold, from 'Resignation; To Fausta' (1849); *The Poems*, ed. Kenneth Allott (London, 1965), p. 87. Allott comments that 'like Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" this is a poem addressed to a favourite sister about revisiting a place and the reflections aroused by the two occasions' (p. 84).

8. Leaned on his gate, he gazes--tears
Are in his eyes, and in his ears
The murmur of a thousand years.
Before him he sees life unroll, 190
A placid and continuous whole--
That general life, which does not cease,
Whose secret is not joy, but peace;
That life, whose dumb wish is not missed
If birth proceeds, if things subsist;
The life of plants, and stones, and rain, 195
The life he craves--if not in vain
Fate gave, what chance shall not control,
His sad lucidity of soul.

From 'Resignation; To Fausta' (1849); *Poems*, ed. Allott, pp. 91-2. The stance of stoical acceptance is deeply contrary to Wordsworth's underlying optimism, though it is of course also found *in* Wordsworth and calls forth Arnold's just admiration for 'Michael'; but acknowledging an alienation in second nature Arnold deliberately renounces any accessible bounty in nature's companionship. This is the Arnold who later averred that 'The *Excursion* and the *Prelude*, his poems of greatest bulk, are by no means Wordsworth's best work' (*Essays in Criticism*, Second Series, 1888). For sharp critique see Richard Bourke, *Romantic Discourse and Political Modernity; Wordsworth, The Intellectual and Cultural Critique* (Hemel Hempstead, 1993), pp. 57-64, 71-80.

9. And so we all of us in some degree
Are led to knowledge, whencesoever led,
And howsoever; were it otherwise,
And we found evil fast as we find good
In our first years, or think that it is found, 445
How could the innocent heart bear up and live!

William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805-6), VIII, 441-446; ed. Mark L. Reed (2 vols, Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), I, p. 222. Compare *The Prelude* (1850), VI, 111-112: 'languages that want the living voice / To carry meaning to the natural heart';

Jonathan Wordsworth (ed.), *The Prelude: the Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)* (London, Penguin Books, 1995), p. 213. Thus, in a contested journey towards knowledge, books and nature shall strengthen the mind in early joy, 'And knowledge, rightly honor'd with that name, / Knowledge not purchas'd with the loss of power!' (*The Prelude*, 1805-6, V, 426-7; Reed ed., I, p. 173); the question of *purchase* is part of the contest, its cost (Walker's *Dictionary*, 1819 ed., defines 'to purchase' *int. al.* as 'to expiate or recompense by a fine or forfeit').

PONDERABLE/ADVERSARY READINGS

William Hazlitt, 'Character of Mr. Wordsworth's New Poem, The Excursion', *The Examiner*, 21st August, 1814, pp. 541-2; 28th August, 1814, pp. 555-8; 2nd October, 1814, pp. 636-8; see *The Complete Works*, ed. P.P. Howe (21 vols, London, 1930-4), Vol. XIX, and compare Thomas De Quincey, 'On Wordsworth's Poetry', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* (1845), reprinted in J.E. Jordan (ed.), *De Quincey as Critic* (London, 1973), Chap. 28; compare also David Bromwich, *Hazlitt; The Mind of a Critic* (New York, 1983), pp. 178-185.

N.P. Stallknecht, 'The Tragic Flaw in Wordsworth's Philosophy', in *Wordsworth and Coleridge; Studies in Honor of George McClean Harper*, ed. E.L. Griggs (Princeton, 1939).

E.P. Thompson, 'Disenchantment or Default: A Lay Sermon', in Conor Cruise O'Brien and William Dan Vanech (eds), *Power and Consciousness* (New York, 1969).

Jerome J. McGann, 'The Anachronism of George Crabbe', *ELH*, 48 (1981), 555-572; reprinted in his *The Beauty of Inflections; Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford, 1985).

Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge; The Radical Years* (Oxford, 1988).

Mark L. Reed (ed.), *The Thirteen-Book 'Prelude'* (2 vols, Ithaca and London, 1991), Introduction, I, pp. 50-53.

David Bromwich, 'The French Revolution and "Tintern Abbey"', in his *Disowned by Memory; Wordsworth's Poetry of the 1790s* (Chicago, 1998), Chap. 3.

Jon Mee, 'Wordsworth's Chastened Enthusiasm' in his *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation; Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford, 2003).

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