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Two Types of Wordsworthian Ambiguity

William Empson famously distinguished seven types of ambiguity, all of which he conceived as giving "room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (1). Under the generic concept of ambiguity, he included both convergence, in which multiple meanings reinforce each other and resolve themselves into a unitary meaning, and divergence, in which multiple meanings expose conflict within the author's mind or an apparent absence of meaning creates conflict between the author and the reader. Wordsworth, however, presented a challenge to Empson's scheme. Unable to derive a clear meaning from lines 89–103 of "Tintern Abbey," especially the speaker's professed "sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused […] that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things," Empson condemned the poem as a *failed* example of his fourth type of ambiguity, in which alternative meanings "combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author" (133). Of the many poetic faults of which Wordsworth has been accused, not writing in conformity to Empson's taxonomy of ambiguity is surely one of the more pardonable ones. Even conceding that this passage of "Tintern Abbey" is ambiguous, as I think we must, we might reasonably ask whether the interpretive impasse it supposedly presents is not due as much to Empson's own assumption about its purpose as to Wordsworth's "holding muddled opinions" (154). Pursuing this question will be the point of departure for a broader consideration of temporal ambiguities in *The Prelude*.

Empson disapproved of the ambiguity of "Tintern Abbey" because he disapproved of what he took to be the reason for it, namely Wordsworth's desire to express a pantheistic creed without shocking his readers. Instead of expressing "definite opinions on the relations of God, man, and nature, and on the means by which such relations can be known" (152), the poet prevaricated. If he lacked the nerve to state his creed openly and clearly, Empson implies, then Wordsworth ought not to have given the impression that he was doing just that. Yet the critic's exclusive focus on fourteen of the poem's 160 lines prevents him from acknowledging two remarkably bold statements that Wordsworth makes in his final verse paragraph. First, he assures his sister that nature has instilled in them a faith so powerful that neither the negativity of other people nor "the dreary intercourse of daily life, / Shall e'er prevail against [them]" (ll. 122–35)—an allusion to Christ's words to Peter in Matthew 16:18: "upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Second, he proclaims himself a "worshipper of Nature" who is not only "[u]nwearied in that service" since his first visit to the Wye valley five years earlier, but possessed of a "far deeper zeal / Of holier

love" (ll. 153–57).[1] Had Wordsworth been trying to disguise the incompatibility of his attitude to nature with Christian orthodoxy, he could scarcely have chosen a worse way of doing so than by appropriating a phrase that would be criticized (as the poet later acknowledged) for "not distinguishing between nature as the work of God and God himself" (*Letters* 3:188).

If Wordsworth was not actually obfuscating his religious "creed" in "Tintern Abbey," why did he not convey it less ambiguously? In fact the poem never claims to offer something as specific as a statement of doctrine, and the passage analysed by Empson describes the "sense sublime" of a presence that, inhering "in the mind of mind" as well as in nature and connecting both ("All thinking things, all objects of all thought"), cannot be separated from the mind's activity and therefore cannot be fully elaborated discursively as a known object by the knowing subject, even if the recognition of the presence is prompted by external phenomena that give it what Kant would call *den Anschein einer objektiven Realität* (cf. *Kritik der Urteilskraft* § 49). Empson's relentlessly rational analysis, which is nonplussed by a comparative that makes no comparison ("something far more deeply interfused") and a "something" that is also supposed to be a "motion and a spirit," resists the passage's very effort to dissolve distinctions—between feeling and thought, perception and imagination, nature and human mind, subject and object, sympathetic identification and moral character. If this is pantheism, it is not susceptible of a Spinozan *modus geometricus*: Wordsworth's rhetorical question in *The Prelude*, "But who shall parcel out / His intellect by geometric rules […] ?" (2.208–9), is among other things a warning about how *not* to read his "philosophic Song" (1.233).

Wordsworth's ambiguities in "Tintern Abbey" and (as we shall see) in *The Prelude* contribute to a tendency contrary to the "desynonimizing" that Coleridge, who repeatedly proclaimed Wordsworth a philosophical poet, considered an essential philosophical and indeed moral task. Nor do these ambiguities, dissolving distinctness and obscuring boundaries, confirm Coleridge's assertion that Wordsworth "effected a compleat & constant synthesis of Thought and Feeling" (*Collected Letters* 2:1034), for synthesis implies a conscious working through of opposed ideas towards a higher unity. Judged by either Coleridge's or Empson's criteria of philosophical discourse, Wordsworth is more nearly an *anti*-philosophical poet. But the poems, "Tintern" implicitly and *The Prelude* explicitly, disavow such criteria even as they assume a didactic stance, the shorter poem by offering Dorothy a proleptic interpretation of her own experience of the Wye Valley scenery, the longer poem by declaring Wordsworth and Coleridge instructors of permanent values in a "time / Of dereliction and dismay" (2.246–47, 13.428–52).

Rather as Marjorie Levinson (chap. 1) wanted "Tintern Abbey" to offer a report on the labor conditions of iron production in the Wye Valley, Empson wanted it to offer a straightforward statement of pantheistic belief: each in effect condemned the poet for

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1 Quotations of Wordsworth's poetry are from the Norton Critical Edition of *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose* unless otherwise specified.

being deficiently discursive and attributed this deficiency to his ideological unreliability. In other words, both critics would have preferred the poem to be less ambiguous on their terms because they associated its ambiguity with evasion (whether of historical reality or of religious heterodoxy). Had Empson considered lines 89–103 not in isolation but in relation to the rest of the poem, however, he would have found that their affirmation of the presence that "rolls through all things" is heavily qualified in any event. The qualifications constitute ambiguity not in Empson's sense, namely as polysemy, but in the word's original Latin sense of uncertainty (*ambiguitas*, from the verb *ambigere* = to be uncertain or undecided, to doubt).

The "sense sublime" is first referred to in lines 36–50 as having been felt in the past, during the interval between Wordsworth's first and second visits to the Wye Valley; but in that passage he relates the mood only hesitatingly to his memories of the landscape and feelings of human fellowship (ll. 23–36): "Nor less, *I trust*, / To them, I *may* have owed another gift, / Of aspect more sublime" (emphasis added). And no sooner has he described "that serene and blessed mood" in which "[w]e see into the life of things"—an experience itself already past—than he questions its verity: "If this / Be but a vain belief" (ll. 50–51). When he returns to Wye Valley, it is with "gleams of half-extinguish'd thought" and recognitions "somewhat of a sad perplexity" (ll. 59–61); when he summons up "the joy / Of elevated thoughts" (ll. 95–96) once again, it is in the optative mood: "other gifts / Have followed […] I *would believe*, / Abundant recompense" for the loss of the unself-conscious delight in nature that he had enjoyed in youth (ll. 87–89; emphasis added). Finally, he diminishes the recognition of the grounding and guiding of his affections and moral sense "[i]n nature and the language of the sense" (ll. 109–12) by suggesting that he might have felt no worse without this recognition simply because of his sister's presence: "Nor, perchance, / If I were not thus taught, should I the more / Suffer my genial spirits to decay: / For thou art with me" (ll. 112–15). This repeated self-questioning weakens, if not altogether undermines, the assertions that the remembered landscape compensates both for "the still, sad music of humanity" (l. 92) and for the loss of youth's "dizzy raptures" (l. 86). Taken as a whole, then, "Tintern Abbey" is as expressive of doubt as it is of any faith: its subject is precisely the challenge of defining the individual's sense of being in the world in the face of his alienation not only from "the dreary intercourse of daily life" but from his own past experience of nature. What Empson calls Wordsworth's pantheism (a term the poet himself never uses) becomes the object of reflection only in its loss.

The ambiguities I have been considering may be classified as one of two basic types: positive statements that dissolve conventional epistemological and ontological distinctions (between perception and imagination, subject and object, self and other, man and nature), and qualifications that reveal those statements to be wishful rather than definitive. I shall call these A-type and B-type ambiguities. What gives rise to the latter, the qualifications, is above all the conflict between a linear conception of cognitive development as a progression from sensation to consciousness and the desire to recover an original, as it were pre-conscious, sense of oneness with nature. Whereas according

to Christian soteriology the soul may be redeemed from sinfulness by means of divine grace, in Wordsworthian "philosophy" the feeling of "the one Presence, and the Life / Of the great whole" (*Prelude* 3.130–31) cannot be revived by means external *or* internal to the self. Why not?

First, the adult recognizes that that feeling *always* involved an imaginative projection of agency onto natural phenomena: that it "had no need of a remoter charm, / By thought supplied" was a fiction whose original success was owing precisely to its seeming to be a reality. Now, though "still a lover of the meadows and the woods," the Wordsworth of "Tintern Abbey" acknowledges that the senses "half-create" as well as perceive their objects (ll. 103–7). In *The Prelude*, even when the narrator endorses his boyhood understanding of nature as an inculcator of morality, the representations of such "spots of time" as the game-stealing and boat-stealing incidents expose the subjectivity of that understanding and hence transfer moral agency back from nature to the observer. The boy *heard* "Low breathings, coming after [him]" after he emptied the snares; "the sky *seemed* not a sky / Of earth" when he removed the raven's eggs; the cliff appeared on the horizon "*As if* with voluntary power instinct" when he rowed the stolen skiff in Ullswater (1.332–33, 353–54, 410; emphasis added). The recollected "spots" thus resolve the A-type ambiguity in the verse paragraph that begins by addressing the powers of the mind ("The mind of man is framed even like the breath / And harmony of music") and ends by affirming that "Nature" (here capitalized and given a feminine pronoun) sought to form Wordsworth's character not only by "gentlest visitation" but by "severer interventions" (1.354–74): does the "dark invisible workmanship that reconciles discordant elements," referred to in the second sentence of the paragraph (1.355-57), reside in nature or the mind? The answer is a matter of temporal perspective. But only from an adult perspective does the question itself arise.

A similar B-type ambiguity concerning the relationship between nature and mind is disguised by an A-type ambiguity in a fragment composed in Goslar in 1798–99 (when *The Prelude* too was begun) and much later incorporated into the beginning of book 9 of *The Excursion*. What at first glance seems a clear assertion of the subsumption of the oppositions of animate and inanimate, moving and still, natural world and human mind under a universal and unifying power, unravels upon closer inspection into a curious incoherence, as if the series of emphatic claims were less straightforwardly indicative than "haunted by a desire, or a need, or a wish" (Jarvis 31):

> There is an active principle alive in all things:
> In all things, in all natures, in the flowers
> And in the trees, in every pebbly stone
> That paves the brooks, the stationary rocks[,]
> The moving waters, and the invisible air.
> All beings have their properties which spread
> Beyond themselves, a power by which they make
> Some other being conscious of their life;
> Spirit that knows no insulated spot,
> No chasm, no solitude,—from link to link
> It circulates, the soul of all the worlds.

> This is the freedom of the universe;
> Unfolded still the more, more visible,
> The more we know; and yet is reverenced least,
> And least respected, in the human mind,
> Its most apparent home. (ll. 1–16; *Lyrical Ballads* 309)

The superabundant enumeration of entities ("in all things"—twice—*and* "in all natures," "pebbly stone" *and* "stationary rocks," "brooks" *and* "moving waters"), the insistent plurals ("beings," "their life," "worlds"), and the shifting account of the spirit's action (from existing in all things to existing in each thing individually to circulating from one to another) belie any claim of the unity of the world thus evoked: this is not a pantheistic but a monadic universe, and its harmony is not pre-established but in need of establishment. That the universal spirit is supposed to be most at home in the human mind raises the suspicion that Wordsworth, perhaps in spite of himself, is offering more a cognitive allegory than a cosmological theory. As the mind becomes aware of phenomena, it attributes its own power to them as a universal principle, precisely the purported universality of which disguises the unidirection of its movement.[2]

If this fragment of 1798 is haunted by a desire, it is also haunted by consciousness. This brings us to the second reason why the sense of the "one Presence" cannot simply be recovered consciously: it was lost in the first place through the growth of consciousness. The path of mental development he retraces is not from passiveness to activeness, but from unawareness to awareness of activeness. Wordsworth's observation, in *The Prelude*, that his childhood memories make him seem "[t]wo consciousnesses," as if he were confronted with "some other Being" (2.32–33), is borne out paradoxically in the A-type ambiguity whereby an adult interpretation is superimposed upon the recollected emotional force of the original experience. Indeed, the poet calls attention to this ambiguity after summarizing his desultoriness at Cambridge in an uncharacteristic parade of personified abstractions (probably indebted to William Cowper's *Task*):

> Of these and other kindred notices
> I cannot say what portion is in truth
> The naked recollection of that time
> And what may rather have been called to life
> By after meditation. (3.645–47)

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2 The editors of the Cornell edition of *The Excursion* suggest a passage in Shaftesbury's *Moralists* as the source of the poet's notion of the "active principle" (419); but the passage they quote is in fact itself a quotation (not identified as such by Shaftesbury) from Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid*: "The active Mind, infus'd thro' all the Space, / Unites and mingles with the mighty Mass." Though Wordsworth may have encountered these lines in Shaftesbury, he of course knew Virgil's epic in the original very well. Anchises's explication of the interaction of the *spiritus intus* (which sustains the cosmos) and the *mens* (which suffuses and guides it), offered in the underworld to his son (6.724–29), is a generic piece of Epicurean philosophy.

Such ambiguity attests to the limit of imagination, which can neither fully reproduce the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen* nor fully assimilate it to the present. To be conscious of a past self in addition to a present one is to recognize the inexorability of temporality. Childhood memories therefore define not only Wordsworth's sense of the formation of his poetic identity, but, precisely because they "yet have such self-presence in [his] mind" (2.30), his sense of what has been lost to him in the course of that formation. As Christoph Bode remarks, *The Prelude* thematizes this loss as a challenge to the poem's own composition (28–29). To recall the past is one thing, to recover it another:

> Thence did I drink the visionary power.
> I deem not profitless those fleeting moods
> Of shadowy exultation: not for this,
> That they are kindred to our purer mind
> And intellectual life; but 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. (2.330–41)

Thus in book 8 (ll. 428–36), rebuking the unnamed "ye" who would dismiss as a "shadow, a delusion" the "sanctity of nature" with which his childhood imagination had invested the shepherds he saw in the Cumbrian hills – "In size a Giant, stalking through the fog, / His Sheep like Greenland Bears" (8.401–2), or "A solitary object and sublime, / Above all height" (8.407–8) – Wordsworth refers only to the past, when the imagination could be morally formative in its effects because its operation was unconscious. His view of humanity has benefitted, he insists, from having been conditioned by his early identification of shepherds, isolated as they were, with the landscape rather than with human society, of whose follies and vices he only later became aware:

> something of a better life
> Perhaps was round me than it is the privilege
> Of most to move in, but that first I looked
> At Man through objects that were great and fair,
> First communed with him by their help. And thus
> Was founded a sure safeguard and defence
> Against the weight of meanness, selfish cares,
> Coarse manners, vulgar passions that beat in
> On all sides from the ordinary world
> In which we traffic. (8.448–57)

But as in his lyric "We Are Seven," which exposes the obtuseness of its speaker's relentless questioning of the little girl about her deceased siblings, Wordsworth here

contrasts a reductive adult rationalism with an unreflective juvenile imaginativeness, thus leaving open the question of the role of the fully conscious *adult imagination*.

In book 8 Wordsworth attacks rationalism as a kind of idolatry that mistakes the disenchanted nature of its own creation for the real thing: "Whose truth is not a motion or a shape / Instinct with vital functions, but a Block / Or waxen image which yourselves have made, / And ye adore" (433–36). This critique is consistent with the praise, in book 2, of Coleridge as one to whom the "unity of all has been revealed" because he is

> no slave
> Of that false secondary power, by which,
> In weakness, we create distinctions, then
> Deem that our puny boundaries are things
> Which we perceive, and not which we have made. (220–26).

Yet since the subjective result of the imaginative process narrated in the recollected "spots of time" is strikingly similar to that of the analytical process denounced in the lines just quoted – that is, in shaping what is understood as the external world – Wordsworth in effect opposes an absolutism of imagination to one of reason.

In the "blessed babe" passage of book 2, composed in 1799 and first incorporated into the two-part *Prelude* (2.267–310), Wordsworth offers his "best conjectures" (l. 238) on the working of the infant imagination. The passage is striking for using some of the same monistic rhetoric as "Tintern Abbey," but in a significantly different way: the feeling of a "belovèd Presence" evoked here subsists in the relationship not between human and nature, but between infant and mother. This interaction, in particular the mother's manifestation of affection and care for her child, which Wordsworth elaborates over twenty-five lines, conditions and nurtures the mind's synthetic powers, offering as it were a model for the infant's cognitive engagement with nature:

> Such feelings pass into his torpid life
> Like an awakening breeze, and hence his mind
> Even in the first trial of its powers
> Is prompt and watchful, eager to combine
> In one appearance, all the elements
> And parts of the same object, else detached
> And loathe to coalesce. (2.245–50)

More explicitly than with his own "spots of time," where he was as concerned to recount the experience from the child's perspective as to interpret it from the adult's, the poet remarks in the "blessed babe" the mind's active role in perception, and he derives the sense of unity with nature from a prior sense of unity with the mother: "From this belovèd Presence, there exists / A virtue which irradiates and exalts / All objects through all intercourse of sense" (2.258–60). Appropriating from "Tintern Abbey" the verb *interfuse*, Wordsworth now applies it to the baby's internalized sense of maternal love: "Along his Infant veins are interfused / The gravitation and the filial bond / Of nature, that connect him with the world" (2.262–64). The consequence of this feeling is the mind's assertion of its power over nature, in an act that Wordsworth, perhaps recalling Mark Akenside's *Pleasures of Imagination* (1744) and anticipating Coleridge's

definition of the "primary imagination" in the *Biographia Literaria*, associates with the divine act of creation, although this association is immediately qualified with the concession that the mind must first receive the objects on which it exercises its powers:

> From nature largely [i.e., generously] he receives; nor so
> Is satisfied, but largely gives again,
> For feeling has to him imparted strength,
> And powerful in all sentiments of grief,
> Of exultation, fear and joy, his mind,
> Even as an agent of the one great mind,
> Creates, creator and receiver both,
> Working but in alliance with the works
> Which it beholds. (2.267–75)[3]

What the infant exhibits is merely "the first / Poetic spirit of our human life" (2.275–76). When, in his accounts of crossing the Alps (in 1790) and climbing Mt. Snowdon (in 1791), Wordsworth addresses his own imagination, he asserts emphatically the subordination of nature to the mind. Neither account is what each seems upon a superficial reading to be, namely a recollection of a typically sublime experience in which the mind reacts to the overwhelming sight of a mountain with an exultant recognition of its own power. On the contrary, any implied causal connection between the perception of the natural scene and the affirmation of the imagination—implied more by the conventions of the natural sublime in eighteenth-century aesthetics than by the poem itself—is weakened by the relative insignificance accorded to the respective mountain ranges. As David Collings rightly observes, Wordsworth deviates from the scenario of the Kantian sublime, with which he seems to "flirt" half-heartedly (199, 204). For not only does the apostrophe to the imagination in book 6 appear after Wordsworth, having already descended from the highest point of the Simplon Pass (2005 meters) to the crossroad at Gabi (1228 meters), learns that his intended path follows the river Doveria downhill through the Gondo Ravine, but its temporal relationship to his Simplon excursion is obscure. Shifting from past to present tense in an example of A-type ambiguity, the poet leaves unclear whether he is recalling an experience that took place in the Simplon Pass nearly fifteen years earlier or referring to his present doubts about his poetic vocation:

> Imagination! lifting up itself
> Before the very eye and progress of my Song
> […] here that Power,
> In all the might of its endowments, came
> Athwart me; I was lost as in a cloud,
> Halted without a struggle to break through

3 Cf. Akenside, *The Pleasures of Imagination* 3.410–27. Akenside's account of the imagination's "Promethean art" almost certainly derives from Shaftesbury's description of the artist as "a second Prometheus under Jove" (1:207). See Wu (entry 3), for the evidence of Wordsworth's reading of Akenside up to 1799.

> And now recovering, to my Soul I say
> I recognise thy glory. (6.529–32)

In book 13 the corresponding experience, although specified to have occurred on Mt. Snowdon and therefore in the past, shares with its Alpine counterpart the substitution of a mental image for the physical scene. While in book 6 the image is of a mist, "an unfathered vapour" (6.527), in book 13 it is of the mist that shrouds the mountain and more specifically a "blue chasm" in the mist through which "the roar of waters, torrents, streams" is heard, although the rapids themselves are not seen (13.55–59). Only after that scene – a scene of the invisible – has "passed away" in fact does it reappear as an imaginative construct, interpreted by its creator as, in accord with the "blessed babe" passage, an emblem of imagination itself in its resemblance to the divine creator: "[t]he perfect image of a mighty Mind, / Of one that feeds upon infinity" (13.69–70). Although his meditation is provoked not by the direct sight of the mist but by the recollection of it, the poet attributes to nature itself, in obscuring a landscape "most awful and sublime" (13.76), a power analogous to the imagination's:

> the express
> Resemblance, in the fullness of its strength
> Made visible, a genuine Counterpart
> And Brother of the glorious faculty
> Which higher minds bear with them as their own;
> This is the very spirit in which they deal
> With all the objects of the universe. (13.86–92).

Whereas the meditative response to the Alpine crossing remains self-centered, here it becomes impersonal, the traveler, as Collings notes (204–5), being confronted not with his own disembodied imagination but with a universal mind whose connection with the individual on the one hand and with nature on the other is intimated by "an under-presence, / The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim / Or vast in its own being" (13.71–73). Momentarily, then, by the assimilation of the self into the "mighty Mind" that works through nature, Wordsworth seems to have recovered the sense of unity for whose loss "Tintern Abbey" ambivalently offered compensation. This would be a triumphant conclusion to *The Prelude*, which began with self-doubts about the poet's fulfilment of "the sweet promise of the past" (1.139)—if it *were* the conclusion. But Wordsworth's elaboration of the vision confirms that his conception of the imagination assumes a fundamentally oppositional relationship between human subject and natural object, even if that relationship is not presented in terms of the sublime.

The sense of an "under-presence" that authorizes the claim of brotherhood between nature and the human mind is far from the pantheism that Empson thought to be too cautiously espoused in "Tintern Abbey." For if the landscape must be absent from the sight and replaced by a mental image of itself for nature to be exalted as an image of the mind, then nature and mind are hardly siblings: rather, the mind is an only child with an imaginary playmate. Summarizing abstractly his own treatment of the landscape in the Snowdon passage, Wordsworth, while continuing to acknowledge a receptive aspect to

imagination, emphasizes the faculty's creative and projective aspects, which manifest themselves fully only in "higher minds" (13.90):

> They from their native selves can send abroad
> Like transformation, for themselves create
> A like existence, and, whene'er it is
> Created for them, catch it by an instinct. (13.93–96).

Precisely because both the Alpine crossing and the ascent of Snowdon deviate from the scenario of the sublime, the poem implies that the ontological content of the landscape on which the imagination acts is largely a matter of indifference: nature serves less as the stimulant than as a mirror for the mind's recognition of its sovereignty. The composition histories of both passages, which reveal a certain arbitrariness in the connection between the particular landscape and the succeeding meditation, reinforce this conclusion. In the earliest draft of book 6, as preserved in MS. WW from early 1804, the Alpine crossing was followed immediately by the extended simile about caves ("As when a Traveller […]") which Wordsworth eventually relocated and applied to his first experience of London (8.711–27), while the apostrophe to his imagination was drafted separately, amidst composition for what became book 8 (*Prelude* 2:255, 257). For the description of the loud waters on Mt. Snowdon, he appropriated details of the Alpine streams in lines 504–5 of his *Descriptive Sketches*, published eleven years earlier: "Loud thro' that midway gulf ascending, sound / Unnumber'd streams with hollow roar profound" (88). Any mountain would do, since for the adult Wordsworth imagination was independent of nature and "the mind of Man," as he put it in the concluding lines of *The Prelude*, a "thousand time more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells" (13.446–47).

Presenting the Simplon and Snowdon experiences as encounters with projections from his own mind, the poet liberates the imagination, identified with "reason in her most exalted mood" (13.170), from dependence on an external stimulus, such as a "sublime" phenomenon, for the recognition of its power. Such recognition occurs even and precisely in the absence of sublimity: the anticlimax of having already crossed the Alps, the obfuscation of the view from Snowdon by fog and darkness (in *Descriptive Sketches* the rapids had been encountered in the morning). The aesthetics of the sublime, whereby the subject takes a troubled pleasure in its apparent incommensurateness with what it perceives, are characteristic of the immature imagination, which attributes to objects an agency that actually resides within itself. Situating anti-sublime episodes, in which the imagination affirms its power without assistance from nature, in landscapes conventionally associated with the sublime, thus intimates the point that Wordsworth was to make explicitly in a fragmentary essay composed around 1811–12 (probably in connection with his *Guide to the Lakes*): "The true province of the philosopher is not to grope about in the external world &, when he has perceived or detected in an object such or such a quality or power, to set himself to the task of persuading the world that such is a sublime or beautiful object, but to look into his own mind & determine the law by which he is affected" (*Prose* 2:357). In book 13, where imagination is acknowledged to

have "been our theme" all along (13.185), the trajectory of the mind's development is revealed by its stated completion: from sensation to reflection, from unconsciousness to self-consciousness, from subordination *to* nature to subordination *of* nature, from being taught to becoming a teacher.

Yet it is significant that Wordsworth expresses the power of imagination as a kind of spatial transformation. As we have seen, Wordsworth's claims for the faculty's ability to manipulate temporality are much more qualified. The keenly felt disjunction between early childhood and early adulthood presents him with a challenge to which he is not certain his imagination is equal:

> The days gone by
> Come back upon me from the dawn almost
> Of life: the hiding-places of my power
> Seem open; I approach, and then they close;
> I see by glimpses now; when age comes on
> May scarcely see at all; and I would give
> While yet we may, as far as words can give,
> A substance and a life to what I feel;
> I would enshrine the spirit of the past
> For future restoration. (11.334–42)

For the present, enshrinement is also entombment; restoration is not yet possible. In *The Prelude* as in "Tintern Abbey," the growth of consciousness and imposition of human affairs on that consciousness are held responsible for the loss of the sense of cosmic unity. This is a necessary process, not in itself to be regretted, as Wordsworth avers to Coleridge:

> thus the life
> Of all things and the mighty unity
> In all which we behold, and feel, and are,
> Admitted more habitually a mild
> Interposition, and closelier gathered thoughts
> Of man and his concerns, such as become
> A human Creature […]
> And so the deep enthusiastic joy,
> The rapture of the Hallelujah sent
> From all that breathes and is, was chastened, stemmed,
> And balanced, by a Reason which indeed
> Is Reason; duty and pathetic truth. (13.253–65)

But while reason in this sense, as an awareness of the human as a distinct ontological category, separate and separated from all else in the world, enables the poet better to appreciate the imagination as a mental faculty, it does not enable that faculty better to perform the task demanded of it, namely to produce some enduring "philosophic Song."

The Prelude originated in 1798 in Wordsworth's frustration with his lack of progress on *The Recluse*, his projected epic on "Nature, Man, and Society" (*Letters* 1:212, 214). And although he defended the subject of his "own heart" and "youthful mind" as "in truth heroic argument" (3.175–76, 180), the Miltonic allusion (to *Paradise*

Lost 9.13–14) reinforcing the claim to epic status, he did not present *The Prelude* as a substitute for the unrealized *Recluse*:

> 'tis a theme
> Single, and of determined bounds; and hence
> I chuse it rather, *at this time*, than work
> Of ampler, or more varied argument. (2.670–73; emphasis added)

(In that respect Wordsworth's readers, at least in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, have been for once more generous to him than he asked them to be.) Of the poem's two narratives, that of the poet's intellectual development and that of his preparation to write *The Recluse*, the latter, in contrast to the former, ends exactly where it began: with an expression of self-confidence in his ability to compose the epic, notwithstanding his lack of progress thus far, and of hope that he will compose it in the future:

> we have reached
> The time (which was our object from the first)
> When we may, not presumptuously, I hope,
> Suppose my powers so far confirmed, and such
> My knowledge as to make me capable
> Of building up a work that should endure. (13.273–78; cf. 1.650–55)

Coleridge's backhanded compliment in the *Biographia* (544), that Wordsworth was *capable* of producing the world's first genuinely philosophical poem – a judgment that denied the palm to either *The Prelude* or *The Excursion*, which had been published in 1814 with the subtitle *A Portion of The Recluse* (Bode 111) – thus accorded with Wordsworth's own assessment of the autobiographical poem. If it was not quite "a thing unprecedented in Literary history that a man should talk so much about himself," as Wordsworth told his patron Sir George Beaumont in 1805 (*Letters*, 1:586) – Rousseau, after all, had done so at greater length and with more frankness – it was certainly unprecedented that a poet should write an epic about his qualification to produce another epic that he was berating himself for not producing.

Of course, more was at stake for Wordsworth than his self-conception as a poet. In September 1799, Coleridge had encouraged him to write a blank-verse poem, possibly as part of *The Recluse*, addressed to those "who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind" (*Collected Letters* 1:527). Internalizing this encouragement, the thirteen-book *Prelude* considers what imaginative compensation Wordsworth himself has found for the political disappointment that followed the early days of the Revolution. Surveying his changes of attitude towards events in France, from initial enthusiasm for the Revolution and sympathy for the Girondist faction to revulsion against the Terror, rejoicing at Robespierre's execution, renewed revulsion against Napoleon's rise, and retrospective skepticism about the entire enterprise (see especially 10.627–29), the poet characterizes the exchange of political engagement for a poetic vocation in terms of public good. Had he remained in France in 1792 and made "common cause / With some who perished" – the Girondists expelled from the Convention in spring 1793 and

guillotined in October – he would have made a "poor mistaken and bewildered offering" and remained "a Poet only to [himself], to Men / Useless" (10.196, 199–200). To be socially useful he must be a poet.

Thus book 10 ends with the affirmation of Wordsworth's renewed dedication to poetry in the wake of the moral crisis provoked by his political disillusionment. Betrayed by historical events which had failed to fulfill the epochal hopes invested in them, he turns from social to personal life, acknowledging the assistance of Coleridge and Dorothy. As in "Tintern Abbey," and not unlike the vapors of his Alpine crossing and descent of Mt. Snowdon, his sister is presented as a projection of himself, by means of which he maintains "a saving intercourse / With [his] true self" (10.914–15) until his poetic vocation is reintegrated into his self-identity. Renouncing political philosophy, whose incommensurability with political reality had reduced him to despair – or so he claims self-dramatizingly in the poem, there being no external evidence of such a crisis (Gill 81) – Wordsworth recovers his individual integrity by, as it were, excluding himself from contemporary history:

> Nature's self, by human love
> Assisted, through the weary labyrinth
> Conducted me again to open day,
> Revived *the feelings of my earlier life*,
> Gave me that strength and knowledge full of peace […]
> Which through the steps of our degeneracy,
> All degradation of this age, hath still
> Upheld me, and upholds me at this day. (10.921–29; emphasis added)

If his travels to France are the geographical symbols of his lost faith in revolutionary politics, then his recollections of childhood are, or are supposed to be, the temporal symbols of his rediscovered faith in the poetic imagination.

The perplexity that Wordsworth experienced with regard to the course of the French Revolution was characteristic of an epoch that not only defined itself as such but conceived its epochal nature to consist in an irrevocable rupture from the historical past: "France standing on the top of golden hours, / And human nature seeming born again" (6.353–54; see also Halmi). This insistence on the radical newness of the present denied historical understanding its traditional resort to the past for patterns and models by which contemporary events could be interpreted and future events predicted. The unanticipated consequences of the Revolution and the disappointed expectations of its early supporters (including Wordsworth) presented themselves as the extreme manifestation of what Reinhart Koselleck calls the "open future" posited by a temporalized, which is to say linearly temporal (as opposed to cyclical) concept of history (338). In the face of this menacing openness, not least a prolonged war whose outcome in 1804, when book 10 was composed, still hung in the balance, Wordsworth seeks solace in the familiarity and comfort of his childhood relationship with nature. Thus while book 10 addresses public events from the fall of the Bastille to Napoleon's self-coronation, book 11 returns to Wordsworth's private "spots of time."

As with the "spots" in the opening books, Wordsworth is concerned with the two in book 11 (transplanted from part 1 of the two-part *Prelude*) to express the original intensity of the experiences. But here he emphasizes, as he had not in 1799, the active role of imagination from a distinctly adult perspective: "We have had deepest feeling that the mind / Is lord and master, and that outward sense / Is but the obedient servant of her will" (11.271–73). Despite introducing the episodes with the now-famous declaration of their "renovating Virtue" by which "our minds / Are nourished and invisibly repaired" (11.258–68), he does not explain how specifically the memories evoked – first the bleak sight of a gibbet and a girl struggling against the wind while holding a pitcher above her head (11.279–326), then the impatient waiting for the horses sent to convey him and his brother from Hawkshead back to Cockermouth for the Christmas vacation during which their father was to die (11.345–89) – renovate or repair the mind that by its own account had given way "to over-pressure of the times / And their disastrous issues" (11.47–48). The ambiguous conjunctive phrase with which Wordsworth concludes the book, "Behold me then / Once more in Nature's presence thus restored, / *Or otherwise*" (11.394–95; emphasis added), subtly invites us to question the poet's claim that these "spots" demonstrate nature's benignant influence on his development (12.1–14). Their placement at this point of the poem, after the reflections on the French Revolution and the personal moral crisis of 1796, suggests rather the retrospective association of both with human suffering and death. And Wordsworth nearly concedes as much with regard to the second episode, observing that his father's death acted on him as a "chastisement" (12.370) and made painful the memory of waiting for the horses. It is as if the teleology of his intellectual history now demands of his childhood what, for example, the nine-year-old's sight of a drowned man (5.450–81) had not provided ("for my inner eye had seen / Such sights before"): intimations of mortality.

Whereas in book 6 Wordsworth had declared, in the meditation on his Alpine crossing, "I was lost" (6.529), in book 11, referring to the "mystery of Man," he changes the tense to the present:

> I am lost, but see
> In simple childhood something of the base
> On which thy greatness stands, but this I feel,
> That from thyself it is that thou must give,
> Else never canst receive. (11.328, 330–34)

Precisely that feeling is the speaker's problem, as is the comparable feeling for Coleridge in his "Dejection: An Ode" (1802), to which Wordsworth clearly alludes. For now, in full consciousness of his imaginative powers, he knows that his juvenile understanding is not only irrecoverable but was in fact never "simple." Standing in isolation not only from the other "spots of time" but from the first half of book 11, which warns rather listlessly against the tyrannies of analytical reason and prescriptivist aesthetics, the childhood memories seem to be included less for the insight they offer into the poet's intellectual and moral formation than in the hope that they will provide, like the

anticipated memories of "Tintern Abbey," "food / For future years" (ll. 65–66). If they reverse the biographical clock of the narrative from 1796 to ca. 1775 (the sight of the gibbet) and December 1783 (the death of his father), they cannot restore the imagination to the prelapsarian state in which its workings were invisible to itself. If they helped make Wordsworth "A sensitive, and a creative Soul" (11.257), it is not certain how they will contribute to the creation of *The Recluse*, a task he simultaneously adverts to and deflects while mentioning the subject of how nature regulates the mind and directs it towards "the great aims of Liberty and Power": "But this is matter for another Song" (11.178–85). What is true of *The Prelude* as a whole is particularly true of book 11, that it enacts as it narrates deferral.

Deferral is an expression of ambivalence. *Paradise Lost* could begin by referring to events beyond the scope of its own narrative because it assumed the place of human history within the scheme of Christian soteriology: "till one greater Man / Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat" (1.4–5). But Wordsworth cannot invoke a heavenly muse; his "own voice cheared" him on in 1798–99 to begin what would become *The Prelude* (1.64). And reflecting on all that had happened since "the glad time when first [he] traversed France" in July 1790 (10.449), he draws the lesson that humanity must rely on its own resources for compensation for the Revolution's failure:

> If from the affliction somewhere do not grow
> Honour which could not else have been, a faith,
> An elevation, and a sanctity,
> If new strength be not given, or old restored,
> The blame is ours not Nature's. (10.425–29)

Of the two options, the restoration of the old – if by that is meant a reversal of the process of growth that made him the poet of *The Prelude* and a return to a conception of nature he no longer possesses – is impossible, and the acquisition of the new not yet possible.

Whether the crisis of 1796 was a biographical fact or a poetic fiction, Wordsworth as self-analyst knew that his imagination was shaped no less by "this time / Of dereliction and dismay" (2.446–47; see also 10.355, 989) than by nature, no less by his experience of human society than by that of "solitude / In lonesome places" (3.233–34). His own history was implicated in contemporary European history – to a greater extent, indeed, than he chose to reveal in *The Prelude*. And however much he may have despaired of making sense of political developments since 1789, his attempt to make sense of his own development shared with his historical consciousness a modern concept of open temporality. If *The Prelude* ends as it began, looking forward with a mixture of confidence and anxiety – which is to say, ambiguously – to the redeeming project of *The Recluse*, that is because its author recognizes that no amount of studying his past can ensure the fulfilment of his poetic promise in the future. The realization of *The Recluse* belongs to a time as indefinite as that of the historical events for whose disappointments it would offer a compensation.

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