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A Study on the Prelude by William Wordsworth

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INTRODUCTION

The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem is an autobiographical conversation poem[1] in blank verse by the English poet William Wordsworth. Intended as the introduction to the more philosophical *Recluse*, which Wordsworth never finished, *The Prelude* is an extremely personal and revealing work on the details of Wordsworth's life. Wordsworth began *The Prelude* in 1798 at the age of 28 and continued to work on it throughout his life. He never gave it a title; he called it the "Poem (title not yet fixed upon) to Coleridge" and in his letters to Dorothy Wordsworth referred to it as "the poem on the growth of my own mind". The poem was unknown to the general public until published three months after Wordsworth's death in 1850, its final name given to it by his widow Mary.

The poem was intended as the prologue to a long three-part epic and philosophical poem,*The Recluse*. Though Wordsworth planned this project when he was in his late 20s, he went to his grave at 80 years old having written to some completion only *The Prelude* and the second part (*The Excursion*), leaving no more than fragments of the rest.

Wordsworth planned to write this work together with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, their joint intent being to surpass John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (*Table Talk* II.70–71; IG3). Had *The Recluse*been completed, it would have been approximately three times longer than *Paradise Lost*(33,000 lines versus 10,500); often, in his letters, Wordsworth commented that he was plagued with agony because he failed to finish the work.[*citation needed*] In the 1850 introduction, Wordsworth explains what the original idea, inspired by his "dear friend" Coleridge, was: "to compose 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."[3]

Coleridge's inspiration and interest is evidenced in his letters. For instance, in 1799 he writes to Wordsworth: "I am anxiously eager to have you steadily employed on 'The Recluse'... I wish you would write a poem, in blank verse, addressed to those who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost Epicurean selfishness, disguising the same under the soft titles of domestic attachment and contempt for visionary philosophies. It would do great good, and might form a Part of 'The Recluse'." (STC to WW, Sept. 1799).

In the 1850 edition, Wordsworth pays tribute to Coleridge in his introduction, saying that the "work [is] addressed to a dear friend, most distinguished for his knowledge and genius, and to whom the author's intellect is deeply indebted."[3]

Literary critic on *The Prelude*[edit]

According to Monique R. Morgan's "Narrative Means to Lyric Ends in Wordsworth's *Prelude*," "Much of the poem consists of Wordsworth's interactions with nature that 'assure[d] him of his poetic mission.' The goal of the poem is to demonstrate his fitness to produce great poetry, and *The Prelude* itself becomes evidence of that fitness."[4] It traces the growth of the poet's mind by stressing the mutual consciousness and spiritual communion between the world of nature and man.

The work is a poetic reflection on Wordsworth's own sense of his poetic vocation as it developed over the course of his life. But its focus and mood present a sharp fundamental fall away from the neoclassical and into the Romantic. Whilst Milton (mentioned by name in line 181 of Book One) in Paradise Lost rewrites God's creation and The Fall of Man so as to "justify the ways of God to man," Wordsworth chooses his own mind and imagination as a subject worthy of epic.

This spiritual autobiography evolves out of Wordsworth's "persistent metaphor [that life is] a circular journey whose end is 'to arrive where we started / And know that place for the first time' (T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*, lines 241-42). Wordsworth's *Prelude* opens with a literal journey [during his manhood] whose chosen goal [...] is the Vale of Grasmere. *The Prelude*narrates a number of later journeys, most notably the crossing of

the Alps in Book VI and, in the beginning of the final book, the climactic ascent of Snowdon. In the course of the poem, such literal journeys become the metaphorical vehicle for a spiritual journey—the quest within the poet's memory [...]".[2]

The Prelude is considered by some to be Wordsworth's greatest masterpiece, since it embodies the spirit of Romanticism so well. It is also fairly well known as the second greatest Romantic poem, second only to Lyrical Ballads

The Prelude affords one of the best approaches to Wordsworth's poetry in general and to the philosophy of nature it contains. However, the apparent simplicity of the poem is deceptive; comprehension is seldom immediate. Many passages can tolerate two or more readings and afford new meaning at each reading. Wordsworth, it will be recalled, likened his projected great philosophical work to a magnificent Gothic cathedral. And he explained (in the Preface to *The Excursian*) that *The Prelude* was like an antechapel through which the reader might pass to gain access to the main body of the structure.

The poem begins in his boyhood and continues to 1798. By the latter date, he felt that his formative years had passed, that his poetic powers were mature, and that he was ready to begin constructing the huge parent work. Alternating with his almost religious conviction, there is an unremitting strain of dark doubt through the poem. The poem itself therefore may be considered an attempt to stall for time before going on to what the poet imagined would be far more difficult composition. As he tells the reader repeatedly, his purpose was threefold: to provide a reexamination of his qualifications, to honor Coleridge, and to create an introduction to *The Recluse.*

It was actually finished in 1805 but was carefully and constantly revised until 1850, when it was published posthumously. It had been remarked that Wordsworth had the good sense to hold back an introductory piece until he was certain that what it was to introduce had some chance of being realized. Moreover, *The Prelude* contained passages which promised to threaten the sensibilities of others, as well as himself, during the rapidly changing course of events after 1805. The year 1805 is the approximate date of his conversion to a more conservative outlook. However, his later-year recollection was that this change occurred some ten years earlier, and he tries in his revisions to push the date back.

The 1805 original draft was resurrected by Ernest de Selincourt and first published in 1926. A comparison of it with the 1850 (and final) version shows the vast change the work underwent. Some passages in the earlier version do not appear at all in the later; others are altered almost beyond recognition. The 1805 draft contains the clearest statement of Wordsworth's philosophy and is fresher and more vigorously written. The toned-down work as published in 1850 represents the shift of his thought toward conservatism and orthodoxy during the intervening years. The student is likely to find the 1850 version much more accessible for the purpose of reading the whole poem. Yet on the whole, critics tend to prefer the 1805 version when citing actual lines from the poem.

The only action in the entire poem is an action of ideas. Similarly, it would be inaccurate to speak of the poem has having a plot in any standard sense. Its "story" is easily summarized. The poem falls rather naturally into three consecutive sections: Books 1-7 offer a half-literal, half-fanciful description of his boyhood and youthful environment; Book 8 is a kind of reprise. Books 9-11, in a more fluid and narrative style, depict his exciting adventures in France and London. Books 12-14 are mostly metaphysical and are devoted to an attempt at a philosophy of art, with the end of the last book giving a little summary.

Each of these three "sections" corresponds roughly to a phase in Wordsworth's poetic development and to a period in his life. The first dates from the time of his intuitive reliance on nature, when he wrote simple and graceful lyrics. The second represents his days of hope for, and then disappointment with, the Revolution, and his adoption of Godwinian rationalism, during which he wrote the strong and inspiring sonnets and odes. The last coincides with his later years of reaction and orthodoxy, when he wrote dull and proper works such as *The Excursion* and *Ecclesiastical Sonnets. The Prelude* is critically central to his life work because it contains passages representing all three styles.

In the last analysis, *The Prelude* is valuable because it does precisely what its subtitle implies: It describes the creation of a poet, and one who was pivotal in English letters. In fact, *The Prelude* was so successful in its attempt that there was nothing left to deal with in *The Recluse.* Wordsworth could reach the high level of abstraction needed for a true philosophical epic only sporadically, in some of the shorter lyrics and odes, and could not sustain the tone.

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