

Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Book First through Book Fourth: The Inner and Outer Pursuits

The history of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is a complex one. It helps to remember that Wordsworth not only wrote shorter versions of the long poem, but also that he intended it as a kind of introductory poem for the larger planned poetic testament, *The Recluse*, only portions of which he ever completed. It also helps to recall that Wordsworth's own philosophical-religious beliefs were in transition over his life. The young panentheist poet of 1805 was different from the broad latitudinarian churchman of Wordsworth's later years. We will be reading the 1805 version and making occasional comparisons to the 1850 version in part to help us see how some of his more radical ideas would create tension for him as his life progressed.

Exploratory Questions (Books One through Four)

- Are we what we love?
- To what or to whom do we owe gratitude?
- Is there something purer or more unstained about rural life? About natural settings?
- How much does nostalgia shape our memories? Is nostalgia a good thing?
- Can anything be truly spontaneous? Why and/or why not?
- What makes college life a period of growth and transition?

The Prelude is a poem both of the young man's maturation and of his poetic education. In the first few books, Wordsworth explores his childhood, his first few years at the university, and in general his theories of the poet as divine seer. *The Prelude* is, in its own way, an epic poem comparable to *The Iliad* or *Paradise Lost*, yet it is also vastly different, for Wordsworth now believes that the epic subject is the inner world of one's self. Consider the following "invocation to the Muse" that Wordsworth intended for the larger project of *The Recluse*:

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| <p>"On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life Musing in Solitude, I oft perceive Fair trains of imagery before me rise, Accompanied by feelings of delight Pure, or with no unpleasing sadness mixed; And I am conscious of affecting thoughts And dear remembrances, whose presence soothes Or elevates the Mind, intent to weigh The good and evil of our mortal state. —To these emotions, whenceso e'er they come, Whether from breath of outward circumstance, Or from the Soul—an impulse to herself, I would give utterance in numerous Verse. —Of Truth, of Grandeur, Beauty, Love, and Hope— And melancholy Fear subdued by Faith; Of blessed consolations in distress; Of moral strength, and intellectual power; Of joy in widest commonalty spread; Of the individual Mind that keeps her own Inviolable retirement, subject there To Conscience only, and the law supreme Of that Intelligence which governs all; I sing:—"fit audience let me find though few!"</p> | <p>[His three great themes] [The necessity for the work of recollection] [Images and emotions work together] [The nature of consciousness central] [Memory's end is test life's meaning] [The question of subjectivity/objectivity] [The grand subjects also are dogged by the problem of evil] [Understanding, conscience, and <i>sensus communis</i> – all ground the individual] [Internal conscience and external natural law (of a sort)] [The allusion to the epic invocation]</p> |
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For Wordsworth, "Nature" is not only the biological, natural world, but also that of human nature, and he judges life as most authentic when it is lived more closely to a natural (the rural) setting and with simplicity (living "naturally"). At the same time, the phenomenon of human consciousness is experienced in not only one's mental judgments and imagination, but also in the emotions by which we undergo joy, fear, energy and repose. It is highly inward or subjective. While Wordsworth's concern with life's meaning is not what philosophers would call that of theodicy, it is a matter of the problem of evil and suffering—namely, on what grounds does one come to terms with the world's threats to one's moral and existential meaning—those high matters of truth, beauty, love, and freedom.

The Central Ideas in Wordsworth's Poetic Theory

M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* summarizes Wordsworth's poetic theory as the following:

- 1) Poetry is the expression or overflow of feeling, or emerges from a process of imagination in which feelings play the crucial part.
- 2) As the vehicle of an emotional state of mind, poetry is opposed not to prose, but to unemotional assertions of fact, or 'science.'
- 3) Poetry originated in primitive utterances of passion which, through organic causes, were naturally rhythmic and figurative.
- 4) Poetry is competent to express emotions chiefly by its resources of figures of speech and rhythm, by means of which words naturally embody and convey the feelings of the poet.
- 5) It is essential to poetry that its language be the spontaneous and genuine, not the contrived and simulated, expression of the emotional state of the poet.
- 6) The born poet is distinguished from other men particularly by his inheritance of an intense sensibility and a susceptibility to passion.
- 7) The most important function of poetry is, by its pleasurable resources, to foster and subtilize the sensibility, emotions, and sympathies of the reader. (101-103)

One can also (following William Berek) line out the key questions from *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* in this manner:

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| What is the subject matter of poetry? | "incidents and situations from common life" |
| In what language is poetry written? | "language really used by men" |
| What exactly is poetry? | "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" but also "emotion recollected in tranquility" leading to the creation of a new emotion in the mind |
| What is the truth that poetry discovers for us? | "the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement" |
| What is the larger cultural role of poetry? | "the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society" as opposed to the scientist who is after a particular fact/discovery in isolation |
| What is the nature of the poet as compared to other people? | "nothing differing in kind from other men, but only in degree"; "more lively sensibility"; "more enthusiasm and tenderness"; "greater knowledge of human nature"; "more comprehensive soul" |
| What is the training required to be a poet? | "habits of meditation," particularly, it seems a development of the associative powers of the mind |

How does poetry create its meaning? through the ability to be affected by "absent things as if they were present" and to express "thoughts and feelings" that arise "without immediate external excitement"

The Poet-Prophet's Calling Divine & Its Appropriation of Christianity

Along with Wordsworth's poetic theory, he invokes the traditional ideas of the poet as a seer or prophet. In doing so, Wordsworth speaks as a typical romantic writer, one who assigned to the artistic and subjective almost sacred powers. Romanticism, like most complex literary, artistic, philosophical, theological, and political movements, cannot be easily distilled down to a few key ideas, though scholars often do so in order to give us all something to "hang our hats on." It would be a mistake, for instance, to too quickly gloss over the *differences* between Rousseau, Wordsworth, Keats, Emerson, and Whitman, to name only a few. Nonetheless, they do often have certain things in common that make them "Romantic," and some of these are of concern to a Christian worldview.

Romanticism tends to place the subjective self at the center of the creation and perception of truth. Truth is discovered, sometimes exclusively, through subjective imagination, perception, and reflection. As a group, romantics continued to hold that truth existed in other realms -- the larger world, Nature, human emotion, even (in some cases such as the later Wordsworth and Coleridge) in the metaphysical. But the way this truth was *accessed* was primarily individualistic and innate. The romantics held little place for community, tradition, or dogma. Looking back with two centuries of hindsight, scholars have pointed out that this subjective shift in Romanticism eventually led more and more to a "secularization of the spirit" and to a "natural supernaturalism." Namely, the powers assigned to the supernatural or metaphysical were increasingly assigned to the natural and psychological.

Thus, Romanticism's religious vision often had either an atheistic slant, with a complete denial of metaphysical elements, an explicit or implicit pantheism, with divine being transfused in nature or people, or a theism that nonetheless stressed Nature and the subjective experience at the expense of authority and scripture. In all cases, the language of Romanticism tended to be borrowed from Christianity, its historical predecessor. As J.R. Watson observed, "The Romantic poets saw their experience in parallel terms to those of evangelical patterns--involving dedication, commitment, inspiration, even holiness, what Keats called 'the holiness of the heart's affections'. But it remains their own experience, and starts from there" (198). Of course, the danger here is not so much the stress on truth having a subjective and natural component. Christians agree that God has revealed truth in the world and through people, but rather the danger is in the neglect or rejection of the revelation of scripture and church tradition.

Because of its emphasis on the self as the center of truth and its distrust of tradition and dogma, Romanticism tended to "deify" inspiration, spirit, and art. Poets, for example, were understood as prophets of great truths. Because these elements were considered to offer a unique avenue to truth, they were given a kind of quasi-divine status. Thus, Wordsworth, for example, could see his poetic gift as having prophetic and priestly functions. The danger of Romanticism is to think that such limited means as imagination and perception are of the same caliber as special revelation, which is to treat such general truths as assumptive, formative, and directive. The Romantic language of inspiration and spirit is valuable when it reminds of something higher, something non-mundane, non-pragmatic, even non-material about human life, purpose, and culture, yet such language is also too fuzzy, too "loose" when it ignores the specifics of God's written revelation to us. The biblical language of spirit is more specific

because it takes general "unfocused" truths of energy and inspiration and assigns them to the *person* of the Holy Spirit.

Brief Commentary and Discussion Questions

Book First [*Introduction: Childhood and School-time*]

1.1-32—Why the poet finds freedom in the countryside. [The classical theme of the city versus the country is part of the background here and will be expanded in books seven and eight.]

1.33-54—A general poetic shalom—life and language, energy, joy, dignity, and so forth. Notice the importance of breath and wind (i.e. spirit). [Also notice how the 1850 version (1.31-45) places this creativity closer to the life of liturgy.]

1.55-67—A rather classic statement of the Romantic language of the poet as prophet-seer. [See the discussion of this theme above.]

1.68-115—The next two stanzas describe how the poet, returned to Grasmere Valley, experiences refreshing renewal of the day, yet also the disappointment in a failed attempt at composing verse.

1.116-156—He next explores the hopes and disappointments that he has had for his calling. Notice how he narrates the consciousness of his desires and feelings. 1.141-156 focus on a maternal image of the poetic, meditative mind.

1.157-271—The next longer sections look at the preparation necessary for a great work of (epic) poetry—the spiritual helps, the use of memory, and the search for a proper theme for the epic. [He expands this topic somewhat in the 1850 version cf. 1.170-185.] He wonders if a more philosophical theme, such as human brotherhood might serve, but he focuses more on the sense of bewilderment and confusion at lacking any truly noble subject.

1.272-350—He describes memories of his childhood at age 5 (bathing in the summer stream), at age 9 (hunting woodcocks), picturing himself in the later as a dark destroyer in his own mind. An interesting meditation on what aspect of boyhood violence is necessary to adult character.

1.351-371—An aside on the associative nature of the mind and its memories, and how Nature used this to shape him. Wordsworth will follow this pattern of childhood memory interspersed with praise of Nature for much of the rest of first book.

1.372-426—The episode of the stolen boat ride also accounts for us one of Wordsworth's earlier encounters with the sublime. He in particular realizes in retrospect the tacit understanding of negation he was absorbing as a child through this.

1.427-451—Another hymn to Nature as Wisdom and spirit with an especial focus on gratitude.

1.452-524—He recounts the joys of ice skating--notice how Wordsworth describes what it is like to be a boy inside the serious play—and he makes similar observations about kite flying. Between these, he reflects on Nature, gratitude, and emotions.

1.525-570—The blessing of living in a cottage. He brings us inside boyhood card games with their mock battles, and he contrasts this time indoors with the wintery conditions outside, more truly dangerous. Another meditation here on the need for boyhood violence, however sublimated.

1.571-585—This next hymn to Nature looks more closely at how these events shaped his childhood sense of security.

1.586-640—Wordsworth recalls the manner in which a child might be touched by Nature while at play in it (as part of it). He particularly notes how these experiences become formative even without the child's focal notice of them.

1.641-674—He ends the first book by reflecting on his purpose so far: to let these memories spur him on to greater reflections, even if he does not succeed. He concludes that his epic theme can only be the story of his own poetic life.

Discussion Questions for Book First

1. Why does Wordsworth spend so much time initially describing his internal (or subjective) states of mind and emotion?
2. How essential does he think that joy is to authentic living?
3. Is he correct to attribute this authenticity to his experience growing up in a rural setting?
4. How would you describe his early memories of playing in the outdoors?
5. Is Nature a (quasi-)spiritual power? How distinct is it (she) from Wordsworth's own perceptions?
6. What is the effect of the pattern of alternating between childhood memories and hymns to Nature?
7. In what ways is Wordsworth's shifting, associative subject like the human mind itself?
8. Why do you think that Wordsworth concludes that a modern epic can only be about the development of his own poetic life and mind?

Book Second [*School-time (Continued)*]

2.1-98—Wordsworth describes with envy the past joys of being a boy, especially in summer. He gives us a picture of the bodily existence of such a young man, the joys of racing and boating among the small islands. In 2.70-78 he describes the way these experiences shaped his character. He, in turn, praises the frugality of his and his brother's allowance, their meals, and their rural lives.

2.99-202—An extended narration of trips they took at age 17 to Furness Abbey and the Old White Lion Inn. He recounts humble yet patriotic loyalty to a place. Notice how the two experiences are really one-of-a-piece in some ways, the social common life having the tranquil, "spiritual" center less remarked upon but still essential.

2.203-235—Wordsworth examines the nature of consciousness, especially the difficulty in dividing it, the seeming conflicts between logic and imagination and the unity of reality.

2.236-280—Continuing along in this theme, Wordsworth suggests a relationship between the mother infant relationship and one's place within a world and one's mind in relation to it. The mind functions both actively and passively in relation to the world.

2.281-371—The infant mind begins to experience isolation and a relationship to the world other than that of mother; the youth full of life’s joys also begins to learn something of solitude. A variety of sensations shape the sense of the beautiful and the sublime. He recalls morning walks, as one example. Yet there is no simple tracing backward to past experiences.

2.372-434—Continuing to meditate on poetic creation, he also reflects on social sympathy such as that he experienced at age 17. In particular, he thinks on the joy and wonder and transport he experienced.

2.435-484—He affirms that Nature has kept his faith in the basic possibility of humanity even in the face of human wickedness. He believes that Coleridge’s urban experience nonetheless can affirm the same truths.

Discussion Questions for Book Second

1. What kinds of emotions does he associate with the Abbey and the Inn? What makes them good and admirable, worthy of emulation?
2. How successful is Wordsworth in trying to picture the process of thinking, recalling, and feeling oneself within a world?
3. Is threat and violence an essential aspect of childhood in general or boyhood in particular?
4. Do you find convincing the connections he draws between infant-mother relations and a child’s later confidence, as well as independence in the larger world?
5. Is there a relationship between the social world and the world of faithful awe?
6. Does Wordsworth protest too much that his faith in humanity and Nature is strong? Why or why not?
7. Is Nature an actual person to be addressed by Wordsworth? If so, why? If not, why not?

Book Third [Residence at Cambridge]

3.1-59--He describes his initial expectations and self-fantasies as he first arrives at Cambridge. Note the energy he uses in generalizing and yet particularizing those first few weeks of experiences. He also lets us know where he is living and the sounds of being in that place. “I was the dreamer; they the dream,” raises epistemological questions, as well.

3.60-121—One of the more complex examinations of his state of mind at the time and what it suggests about the life of the mind in college. It is also one of the passages that he altered more in the 1850 version. In both versions, Wordsworth is asking what did it mean to be a person set apart by a gift—to be a poet?

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| 3.80-88—His sense of having a holy calling—not to be of that place but to be present to gather up impressions from it as food for a future work. | 3.80-91a—He distinguishes what he was gifted for from natural law and from Christian hope and faith. Instead his holy powers were to write once the surroundings themselves ceased to dazzle. |
| 3.89-97a—He sees himself as a strong freeman with a special giftedness prepared for writing when the immediate ceased to move. Here, he also distinguishes his gift from rationality or conscience but more obliquely. | 3.91b-97—The language is more muted here—he is distinct from his comrades “at least” in this manner—his mind doesn’t flag when left to itself to recollect. |

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| 3.97b-106a—"At least," he recognizes his powers especially when he is out under heaven's blue sky. | 3.98-107—Here he makes the language stronger—though he asked to be pardoned for doing so—he is more aware of what particular solaces he has been given, what sets him apart. |
| 3.106b-121—The height of the passage as he describes with quick lists the sensations of poetic inspiration with the promise of "a steadfast life." | 3.108-126—Keeps much of the energetic language but also mitigates it with an echo of Eden and <i>Paradise Lost</i> , as well as altering "Upholder" to now be a more orthodox comment on the Holy Spirit's role in inspiration, who "lives in glory immutable." |

3.122-167—What it was like to be set apart with a poetic world that one made, yet also that one has received from Nature. Perhaps it was not unlike what the earth's original people would have experienced—a more direct poetic engagement with reality.

3.168-194—And in truth this lively, god-like existence is something that all human beings have. He loads this passage with words involving glory, power, genius, ability, and heroism. (We are all epic heroes, he seems to be saying, if we had eyes to see.)

3.195-258—The distractions and joys and confusions of early college life. Wordsworth balances off a variety of social joys in this section.

3.259-328—While not a very serious or focused time, he did read and learn from writers such as Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton, especially Milton. Again, he describes this in enlivened ways. These are not just mundane experiences. He also describes compulsory chapel and his negative attitude toward it, which he will take up again shortly.

3.329-407a—He assesses his "mixed" state—a state in which the mind is not as focused or as vibrant as it could be. Youth should be alive, energetic, and striving for the heights of ideas and abilities.

3.407b-459—Given that youth will strut about, let them do so, but keep worship humble. The compulsory high chapel discredits God and the academy. The simple country worship that Wordsworth had experienced was far more genuine.

3.460-490—A long idealization of the medieval university and the medieval chapel. [And rather wrong, if one considers actual descriptions from the Middle Ages.]

3.491-563—All things considered, his was not a state to be deeply regretted—it could have been far worse. Notice again that he assesses it in terms of what he now gains from it for poetry's sake. While not a focused student, he was learning something of the ways of people, and he was gradually moving towards a more serious resolve for his life.

3.564-644—He admits that in being surrounded by such a microcosm of life's virtues and vanities that he was not particularly apt to appreciate the subtle complexities of this world, being raised to idealize the rural life he loved. [Nor does he ever; it would be hard to see Wordsworth trying to write a Jane Austen novel, for example.] He ends this section with an epic catalogue of moral universals.

3.644-672—Wordsworth concludes with a fine image of his life at this time being like a visitor to a curio museum.

Discussion Questions for Book Third

1. How does the older Wordsworth regard his freshman self? What does this reveal about the nature of memory, especially nostalgia?
2. Why does Wordsworth rework the passage from 3.60-121 as much as he does? Which version do you prefer?
3. Is it possible that earlier periods of history had a more poetic direct engagement with the world through their language?
4. How glorious (or mundane) are humans? Would you judge Wordsworth's language as fitting of people?
5. Is Wordsworth's experience of college similar to your own? Explain. Is he correct to suggest that there are some better uses of one's time than others? Is some reading more worth our time than other?
6. Likewise, does Wordsworth have any wisdom concerning chapel in a college setting? Explain.
7. Wordsworth's judgment of his first period in college raises an interesting question about social setting and experience. How much is college about relationships and meeting new, diverse types of people?

Book Four [Summer Vacation]

4.1-83—A rather rich passage that describes his joy at returning to his home for summer vacation, of returning to its natural beauty and familiarity. He especially idealizes his landlady, the Old Dame. [The revisions of the 1850 versions at 4.5-11, 14-15, and 22-35 tried to make this more epic, and fail in doing so. I concur with de Selincourt's judgment of the Charon allusion—a rather grotesque slip in Wordsworth's judgment.]

4.84-120—He recounts his friendship with the terrier, including their walks together and how the dog played scout while Wordsworth talked aloud to himself.

4.121-180—A passage about happiness, but one that also explores the relationships between soul and body—Is Wordsworth an anthropological dualist? Is the soul eternal (even preexistent) as compared to the body? Note in 4.169ff. how he again returns to the wind as breath and spirit. [Compare with 4.396-399.]

4.181-221—He expands his reflection to social life and idealizes the plain living of his village.

4.222-344—Two longer passages which again seek to assess the mixed state of Wordsworth at that time—his growing sense of poetic awakening (4.244-246) contrasted with another seduction of falling off or away (4.268b-285). Between these he employs an extended epic simile (4.247-268a). The verses after these until 4.304a offer a sharp reading of the human condition. The remaining lines consider again his mixed state even in this rural social setting, still yet to learn he is “a dedicated spirit” destined for poetry.

4.345-504—Along with a brief transition, the remainder of Book Four is “The Discharged Solider,” an episodic detour that nonetheless speaks into the main current of the poem. The poem-within-a-poem comes closer to examining the meaning of the body. It invokes the Good Samaritan parable, as well.

Discussion Questions for Book Fourth

1. Does Wordsworth do justice to what it is like to come home for the first time?
2. Does his short passage on the dog belong in the overall poem?
3. Is it possible to be destined for a special task and be preparing for it, and yet not know it?
4. How should we best understand the relationship between our souls (minds or selves) and our bodies? How does Wordsworth understand this relationship? Is he consistent?

