

# The Prelude: As a Psychological Epic Poem

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Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is the greatest autobiography in verse in English, and it is Wordsworth's greatest poem. With a man like Wordsworth, who had dedicated himself to his art, it became an epic of which Wordsworth was the hero. He was perfectly aware that for a poet to talk so much about himself might lay him open to a charge of conceit, but he knew too, that self-examination of this kind in sincerity and humility can reveal to humanity the whole picture of its own glory and despair.

*The Prelude* is something unique in the literature of the world because it combines the epic power and range of poems like *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* and *The Four Quartets* with the introspective voice of the writer himself. The whole atmosphere of *The Prelude* is one of the freshness of experiences remembered by a very great poet thinking about his past. In it Wordsworth achieves something that he never came near to in the often cumbersome sentimentalising of his other work.

*The Prelude* has a message for future worth: its fine, open and unobtrusive. But it has its conflicts — “the changes and commotions of the mind”; its crisis — “the revolutions, fluxes and reflexes of the thought”; its resolutions — victories in the world of spirit. For Wordsworth the growth of the mind is not a set process proceeding according to inescapable laws, and “continents of moral sympathy” divide his recreation of it from an analysis based on any such presupposition.

It may be objected that the subtitle of *The Prelude* is “Growth of a Poet's Mind”, not “Growth of a Human Mind”. But the poet's mind is the most truly representative human mind. He is representative not as the norm of mediocrity, as the static average in which every living difference is obliterated, but representative in being genuinely and freely human. The poet is the standard of humanity, not the standard man. He is the standard of man as poetry is the standard of human discourse — as Wordsworth said — as “the true standard of poetry is as high as the soul of man has gone or can go”.

High among the qualities of the responsible man Wordsworth set “simplicity” — and insight into the constitution of the human mind. These were gifts of character and intellect which he himself had in good measure, and their combination gives to Wordsworth's sensibility its special flavour: generosity of understanding towards lives and natures very different from his own, together with a manner strict, controlled and ascetic; a prodigality of sympathy.

Childhood on after life. That is also the lesson of modern psychology, which says that the child is father to the man. *The Prelude* is a great monument of blank verse; it is impossible not to recognize the sudden thrill and splendour of great poetry in the three prescribed extracts from it.

*The Prelude* is described in its subtitle as the “growth of poet's mind”. The growth of the mind is a theme exactly fitted to make Wordsworth's genius work with intense and characteristic life. It possesses the triple qualification of a Wordsworthian subject. In Wordsworth's own words his poetry ceased to flow from “an inward impulse” and became the “serious mood” even as a boy. Here is an indication of “the withdrawn contemplative collectedness” which marks Wordsworth's poetry. Wordsworth's poetry has nothing spectacular about it. A simple incident is described here. It has no value as an event. It does not stir many, but it stirred him to the depth of his being and he communicates to us in a convincing way the meaning of his deep perceptions.

In this extract, “the boy's mind is represented as passing through precisely the train of emotion which we may imagine to be at the root of the theory of many barbarous peoples.” This passage might fairly be cited as an example of the manner in which these objects, or these powers can impress the mind with that awe. Critical appreciation of the second episode from “*The Prelude*”, Wordsworth recounts another mysterious experience of his boyhood. One winter evening he was enjoying skating on polished ice along with some of

his school friends. He and they were all making a lot of noise. It appears as if they were participating in the game of hunting in a forest. The cliffs around them resounded with their loud voice and even the leafless trees and icy crags tinkled with iron. But in the midst of the tumult the poet was aware of an alien sound – the melancholy voice sent forth by the distant hills. While in the west the orange colour of evening sky was fast fading away. This experience also produced an abiding impression on his mind. This again shows how very sensitive the poet was even in his boyhood.

Small circles glittering idly in the moon,  
Until they melted all into one track,  
Of sparkling light.

The other characteristic of these periods Wordsworth describes in one of those general statements which as used by him are never brisk summaries or formulae of compromise but rather the slow, even the grudging deposit of years lived with scrupulous integrity and examined with a steadily adverted mind.

Wordsworth stresses that the mind's most piercing perception is always grounded in sensory particulars, and the more spiritual the one, the more vivid the other. And where the philosopher and psychologist agree a case, supporting it with evidence abstracted from the whole, Wordsworth's aim is to realise the completeness of a deeply felt event of his own life. What in that event corresponds to a philosophical idea or a psychological hypothesis remains wholly engaged in the particular instances in which it was experienced.

To keep the idea shining through the detail, to enclose the general in the particular requires of a poet a rare integrity of intelligence. It asks for subtlety in selecting and restraint in not exaggerating or overaccumulating the concrete particulars. It takes prescience to seize, and temperance not to expose crudely or abruptly, the idea. These virtues of intellectual continence and moral sensibility are expressed fully in "The Prelude", most intensely in "Tintern Abbey". They are also the unified life of the mind; he did not take the view that experience was unilinear and not to be discriminated as more or less important.

In the eleventh book of *The Prelude*, when meditating on the history of his mind, now brought to laborious completion, he writes:

There are in our existence spots of time,  
Which with distinct pre-eminence retain  
A vivifying virtue whence — — — —

These pre-eminent spots of time, he notes in the same places, were scattered throughout our lives but are conspicuously concentrated in childhood. These experiences, in which the mind expands and sees that it is expanding, is transformed and knows that it is being transformed, are notable for two seemingly contrary characteristics. The first is shown in the three great models of such experience which Wordsworth chose to delineate in the first book of "The Prelude", the famous episodes of snaring, boating and skating. In these passages, it will be remember

Constituents of that "wise passiveness" which enabled Wordsworth to accept his experience without forcing it and to record it without distorting it. And it is these gifts which helped him to define the nature of the mind's influence on these moments of growth, to specify exactly the quality of that "auxiliar light" which the mind played upon them. If we scrutinize any of the passages devoted to these experiences in "The Prelude", we find that they are compounded in a strange way of fear and joy, of panic and serenity.

But the intimate relationship with Annette Vallon and the birth of a daughter brought about such intense emotional crisis, that it is difficult to assess his outlook on the political event. According to the chronology established by – Wordsworth lost his faith in the French Revolution in the spring of 1795. He was filled with disappointment when he realized that the revolution was merely a sequence of terror and bloodshed.

Dealing with Wordsworth's place in the Romantic age, one is struck by the polarity of attitudes of the two major poets of the age, Wordsworth and Keats. Wordsworth's egotistical sublime is a contrast to the negative capability of Keats. It is observed that Wordsworth's egotistical sublime is a contrast wrote a lot of philosophy and occasionally, poetry. Arnold remarks that "The Excursion" and "The Prelude", his poems of greatest bulk, are by no means Wordsworth's poems in precious because his philosophy is sound. Arnold utters a note of warning against idolatrous praise; perhaps we shall one day learn to make this proposition general and to say: "poetry is the reality; philosophy the illusion." But in Wordsworth's case, at any rate, we cannot do him justice until we dismiss his formal philosophy. One encounters two critical views of contrary attitudes is dwelling upon the philosophical purpose in Wordsworth's poetry. Philosophy which obtrudes a poetry and which is never universal has robbed Wordsworth's poetry of its immediate and intense impact. The shorter pieces make delightful reading, whereas huge chunks of the longer poems can be dismissed as they do not bring us moral of joy in widest commonalty spread.

Another aspect of Romanticism in Wordsworth's poetry is the unflinching faith on the greatness of the individuals. Like many American writers, Wordsworth showed in reverence. He dedicated himself:—

"To Nature and the power of human mind,  
To men as they are men within themselves."

Like Emerson and Whitman, he felt that every human being was intrinsically great and was capable of infinite development.

It is this faith in the greatness of the individuals that combines Romantic belief in the supremacy of the human mind with the religious acceptance of the idea that man is created in the image of God. This faith is accompanied by deep sympathy for human suffering. It is not surprising that Wordsworth was much attracted to the most significant political event of his time, the French Revolution. He wrote in "The Prelude" explaining his expedition to the Alps:

"But nature then was sovereign in my mind,"

But Europe at that time was thrilled with joy,  
France standing on the top of golden hours,  
And human nature seeming born again.

As Herbert Read points out, these lines imply that the impulse to see the Alps was made irresistible by the light of glory streaming from that land of liberty through which the poet must go? But he wrote to Dorothy, "Among the more awful silences of the Alps, I had not thought of man or a single created being." Wordsworth had placed high hope in the French Revolution.

Romantic poetry. Wordsworth, like Blake, was a poet of vision. The visionary quality so vital that a poet experiences a traumatic agony when it fails him. In "Intimations of Immortality", Wordsworth expresses this agony.

The things which I have seen  
I now can see no more.

The same emotion is expressed in an equally poignant mood by Coleridge.

I see, but not feel, how beautiful they are.

A poet is not content with sensory perceptions. His imagination invests these impressions with new significance. Without imagination, poetry is, as it were, nothing and the visionary gleam is fled. One can point out how the imagination transmutes a sensual perception into an elevated intuitive vision from the popular anthology-piece, "I wandered lonely as a cloud." The flowers become the source of infectious joy, alleviating human suffering, haunting the mind of the poet in a vacant or pensive mood.

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