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Author(s): Geoffrey H. Hartman

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A POET'S PROGRESS: WORDSWORTH AND THE
VIA NATURALITER NEGATIVA

GEOFFREY H. HARTMAN

THE exact role that Nature played in Wordsworth's experience has not been defined beyond controversy. A number of readers have felt that his poetry honors and even worships Nature; and in this they have the support of Blake, a man so sensitive to any trace of "Natural Religion" that he blamed some verses of Wordsworth's for a bowel complaint which almost killed him.¹ Scholarship, luckily, tempers the affections, and the majority of scholarly readers have emphasized the poet's progression from Nature Worship or even Pantheism to a highly qualified form of natural religion, with increasing awareness of the "ennobling interchange" between mind and Nature and a late yielding of primacy to the activity of the mind or the idealizing power of Imagination. A very small group, finally—represented by occasional insights rather than by a sustained position—has pointed to the deeply paradoxical or problematic character of Wordsworth's dealings with Nature and suggested that what he calls Imagination may be *intrinsically* opposed to images culled or developed from Nature.² This last and rarest position seems to me quite close to the truth, yet I do not feel it conflicts totally with the more traditional readings, which stress the poet's adherence to Nature. My purpose is to show, via three important episodes of *The Prelude*, that Wordsworth came to realize

that Nature itself led him beyond Nature; and how and when the realization was achieved. The poet's sense of a reality in Nature is kept alive by the very fact that Nature itself weans his mind, and especially his poetic mind, from its early dependence on immediate sensuous stimuli. And since this movement of transcendence, or what mystics have often called the negative way, is shown by Wordsworth as inherent in life, and as achieved without violent or ascetic discipline, I have thought to name it a *via naturaliter negativa*.

I

The Prelude opens with a success immediately followed by a failure. Released from the "vast city" and anticipating a new freedom, the poet pours out a rush of fifty lines: "poetic numbers came / Spontaneously to clothe in priestly robe / A renovated spirit" (I, ll. 51-53).³ Here is the consecration, the promise of poetry as a sacrament, a gift efficacious beyond the moment. Why should a chance inspiration assume such significance? The reason is that Wordsworth was not used to make "A present joy the matter of a song"; yet here, apparently, is evidence that he may soon become self-creative, or need no more than a "gentle breeze" (the untraditional muse of the epic's opening) to produce a tempest of poetry. "Matins and vespers of harmonious verse!" is the hope

¹ See Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lamb, etc., being *Selections from the Remains of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. E. J. Morley (Manchester, 1932), pp. 5 and 15.

² Only Paul de Man has, so far as I know, brought this out strongly in "Structure intentionnelle de l'Image romantique," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, No. 51 (1960), pp. 1-17. As this goes to press, I receive Harold Bloom's relevant and important study of the problem, *The Visionary Company* (New York, 1961).

³ Quotations, unless otherwise stated, are from the 1850 text of *The Prelude*, ed. E. de Selincourt (Oxford, 1928). Charles Moorman has established that there is a pattern to the opening episode of *The Prelude*, although I will differ somewhat from him in my view of the pattern and its meaning. See "Wordsworth's *Prelude*: 1, 1-269," *MLN*, LXXII (June, 1957), 416-20; R. D. Havens, *The Mind of a Poet* (Baltimore, 1941), II, 290 ff., had failed to see any pattern.

held out to him, and having punctually performed Matins the poet is content to slacken, to be gradually calmed by the clear autumn afternoon.

He meditates beneath a tree on a great poetic work soon to be begun. The sun sets, and city smoke is "ruralized" by distance. He starts to continue his journey, but now it is clearly time for vespers:

It was a splendid evening, and my soul
Once more made trial of her strength, nor lacked
Aeolian visitations [ll. 94-96].

An outside splendor challenges the creative mind. Is the poet strong enough to answer it spontaneously, as if he needed only a suggestion, the first chord?

but the harp
Was soon defrauded, and the banded host
Of harmony dispersed in straggling sounds,
And lastly utter silence! "Be it so;
Why think of anything but present good?"
[ll. 96-100].

Wordsworth once again sees present good, like present joy, strangely opposed to the quickening of verse. The poetic outburst which he had considered a religious thing ("punctual service high . . . holy services") is now disdained as profane and *servile*:

So, like a home-bound labourer I pursued
My way beneath the mellowing sun, that shed
Mild influence; nor left in me one wish
Again to bend the Sabbath of that time
To a servile yoke [ll. 101-5].

His reversal of mood is surprisingly complete. One who, at the impassioned outset of his reflections, had been so sure of the freely creative, autonomous nature of his poetic soul that famous passages on the emancipated spirit—from *Paradise Lost* and *Exodus*⁴—swell the current of his verse, while he thinks to possess total freedom of choice,

⁴ Emancipated—but through exile. See *Prelude*, I, ll. 14 and 16-18. The significance of the frame of exile will become apparent. A reminiscence of Vergil, *Bucolics* I, may also be present.

now free,
Free as a bird to settle where I will

that same person now writes of himself, with a slight echo of Gray's *Elegy*:

So, like a home-bound labourer I pursued
My way. . . .

The meaning of the reversal is not immediately clear. It does not deject the poet; it endows him, on the contrary, with a Chaucerian kind of cheer and leisure:

What need of many words?
A pleasant loitering journey, through three days
Continued, brought me to my hermitage.
I spare to tell of what ensued, the life
In common things—the endless store of things
[ll. 105-9].

The form of the reversal is that of a return to Nature, at least to its rhythm. For the moment no haste remains, no tempest, no impatience of spirit. It is the mood of the hawthorn shade, of a portion of Wordsworth's Cambridge days, when he laughed with Chaucer and heard him, while birds sang, tell tales of love (III, ll. 278-81).

In the exultant first lines of *The Prelude* Wordsworth had foreseen the spirit's power to become self-creative. Though fostered by Nature it eventually outgrows its dependence, sings and storms at will (ll. 33-38). The poet's anticipation of autonomy is probably less a matter of pride than of necessity: he will steal the initiative from Nature, so as to freely serve or sustain the natural world, should its hold on the affections slacken. His poetic power, though admittedly in Nature's gift, must perpetuate, like consecration, vital if transitory feelings. Without poetry the supreme moment is nothing.

Dear Liberty! Yet what would it avail
But for a gift that consecrates the joy?
[ll. 31-32].

The reversal teaches that this desire for immediate consecrations is a wrong form of

worship. The world demands a devotion less external and wilful, a wise passiveness which the creative will may profane. The tempest "vexing its own creation" is replaced by a "mellowing sun, that shed / Mild influence." Nature keeps the initiative. The mind at its most free is still part of a deep mood of weathers.

Wordsworth's failure to consecrate, through verse, the splendid evening is only the last event in this reversal. It begins with the poet placing (so to say) the cart before the horse, Poetry before Nature: "To the open fields I told / A prophecy: poetic numbers came . . ." (ll. 50 ff.). He never, of course, forgets the double agency of inward and outward which informs every act of poetry. So his heart's frost is said to be broken by both outer and inner winds (ll. 38 ff.). Such reciprocity is at the heart of all his poems. Yet he continually anticipates a movement of transcendence: Nature proposes but the Poet disposes. Just as the breeze engendered in the mind a self-quickenning tempest, so poetry, the voice from that tempest, re-echoing in the mind whence it came, seems to increase there its perfection (ll. 55 ff.). The origin of the whole moves farther and farther from its starting point in the external world. A *personal* agent replaces that of Nature: "I paced on . . . down I sate . . . slackening my thoughts by choice" (ll. 60 ff.). There is a world of difference between this subtle bravado and the ascendancy of *impersonal* constructions in the final episode: "Be it so; Why think of anything but . . . What need of many words? . . . I pursued My way . . . A pleasant loitering journey . . . brought me to my hermitage."

This change, admittedly, is almost too fine for common language. Syntax becomes a major device but not a consistent one. In the 1850 text, while the poet muses in the green, shady place, certain neoclassical patterns, such as the noble passive combined with *synecdoche*, create an atmosphere in which

personal and impersonal, active and passive, blend strongly:

Many were the thoughts
Encouraged and dismissed, till choice was made
Of a known Vale, whither my feet should turn
[ll. 70-72].

Devices still more subtle come into play. In the passage immediately preceding, Wordsworth describes the quiet autumn afternoon:

a day
With silver clouds, and sunshine on the grass,
And in the sheltered and the sheltering grove
A perfect stillness. [ll. 67-70].

"Sheltered and sheltering"—typical Wordsworthian verbosity? The redundance, however, does suggest that whatever is happening here happens in more than one place; compare "silver clouds and sunshine on the grass." The locus doubles, redoubles: that two-fold agency which seems to center on the poet is active all around to the same incremental effect. The grove, sheltered, shelters in turn, and makes "A perfect stillness." The poet, in a sense, is only a single focus to something universally active. He muses on this intensifying stillness, and within him rises a picture, gazing on which with *growing* love "a higher power than Fancy" enters to affirm his musings. The reciprocal and incremental movement, mentioned explicitly in ll. 31 ff., occurs this time quite unself-consciously, clearly within the setting and through the general influence of Nature.

No wonder, then, that the city, which the poet still strove to shake off in the first lines, appears now not only distant but also "ruralized," taking on the colors of Nature, as inclosed by it as the poet's own thought. The reversal is finalized by the episode of the splendid sunset. Wordsworth not only cannot, he *need* not steal the initiative from Nature. Her locus is universal, not individual; she acts by expedients deeper than

will or thought. Wordsworth's failure intensifies his sense of a principle of generosity in Nature. That initial cry of faith, "I cannot miss my way" (l. 18), becomes true, but not because of his own power. The song loses its way.

Wordsworth's first experience is symptomatic of his creative difficulties. One impulse vexes the creative spirit into self-dependence, the other exhibits Nature as that spirit's highest guardian object. The poet is driven at the same time from and toward the external world by dynamic dissatisfaction. No sooner has he begun to enjoy his Chaucerian leisure than restiveness breaks in. The "pilgrim," despite "the life in common things—the endless store of things," cannot rest content with his hermitage's sabbath. Higher hopes, "airy phantasies," clamor for life (ll. 114 ff.). The poet's account of his creative difficulties (ll. 146–269) documents in full his vacillation between a natural and a more-than-natural theme, between a Romantic tale and one of "natural heroes," or "a tale from my own heart" and "some philosophic song"—but he adds, immediately swinging back to the humble, "Of Truth that cherishes our daily life." Is this indeterminacy the end at which Nature aims, this curious and never fully clarified restlessness the ultimate confession of his poetry?

It would be hard, in that case, to think of *The Prelude* as describing the "growth of a poet's mind"; for what the first part of Book I records is, primarily, Wordsworth's failure to be an epic poet, a poet in the tradition of Spenser and Milton. "Was it for this," he asks, that Nature spent all her care (ll. 269 ff.)? The first six books of *The Prelude* trace every moment of that care. There is little doubt in Wordsworth that Nature intended him for a poet. Why else that continual prediction and fostering of the spirit's autonomy from childhood on? And yet, the very moment the spirit tries to seize autonomy, to quicken like Ezekiel's self-

moved chariot, Nature humbles it by an evidence of subtle supremacy, or Wordsworth humbles himself by shrinking from visionary subjects.

Wordsworth never achieves his philosophic song. *Prelude* and *Excursion* are no more than "ante-chapels" to the "gothic church" of his unfinished work. An unresolved antagonism between Poetry and Nature prevents him from being a sustained visionary poet in the manner of Spenser and Milton. It is a paradox, though not an unfruitful one, that Wordsworth should so scrupulously record Nature's workmanship, which prepares the soul for its independence from sense experience, yet refrain to use that independence out of respect to Nature. His greatest verse *takes its origin* in the memory of given experiences to which he is often pedantically faithful. He adheres, apparently against Nature, to natural fact. That is his secret, and our problem.

II

It might seem that the failure of poetic nerve recorded in *Prelude* I is simply a sign of Nature's triumph over the poet. He recognizes poetry is not prophesy or a sacramental gift. Though Wordsworth suffers a reversal, and the splendid evening shows his soul's weakness, such a conclusion is premature. Nature, for Wordsworth, is never an enemy but always a guide or guardian whose most adverse-seeming effects are still pedagogy. *Prelude* I is filled with examples of Nature's unpredictable, often fearful methods. Even if we do not appeal to further knowledge of his work, the poem's opening drama shows only that Wordsworth cannot write poetry about Nature as an immediate external object. That may appear to contradict what readers have valued most, his power to represent the natural world with childhood intensity, to give it back its soul, to awaken the mind (as Coleridge remarked) to the lethargy-shrouded loveliness of common things. There

is, however, a distinction to be made between the immediacy of Nature and the immediacy of a poem dealing with Nature, though they are often so close that Matthew Arnold sees Nature herself guiding the pen in Wordsworth's hand.

Wordsworth's poetry places itself at a significant remove from the founding experience. This is not a naïve or purely personal fact. *The Prelude* never represents Nature simply as an immediate or ultimate object, even where the poet's recall is most vivid. Every incident involving Nature is propaedeutic and relates to that "dark Inscrutable workmanship" mentioned by *Prelude* I, ll. 340 ff. I have suggested elsewhere how the fine skating scene of the first book (ll. 425–463), though painted for its own sake, to capture the animal spirits of children spurred by a clear and frosty night, moves from vivid images of immediate life to an absolute calm which foreshadows a deeper yet also more hidden or mediate source of life.⁵ This apparent action of Nature on itself, to convert the immediate or external into the quietly mediate, which then unfolds a new, less exhaustible source of life, is analogous to the action of the mind on itself which characterizes the poet in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Poetry, says Wordsworth, is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, but qualifies at once: "It takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind."

One process potentially results in poetry, the other in the mind making that poetry. The two have a similar, perhaps continuous structure. Both show the passing of immediacy into something more mediate or

meditative, but also its revival as a new kind of immediacy. Now this, surely, is like the basic movement of the *Prelude's* first episode. It begins with an outburst, a "passion" of words rising immediately from the poet like animal spirits from children, having no full external cause. Then as the moment of fervor spreads, the landscape reveals its secret pressures, blends with and overshadows the thoughts of the poet. A splendid image, finally, outspeaks the poet, just as Nature in I, ll. 458 ff. foretells her ever calmer presence to the reflective child. Thus Nature is not an "object" but a presence and a power; a motion and a spirit; not something to be worshiped or consumed, an immediate or ultimate principle of life, but—and here it becomes most hard to find terms that preserve the poet in the thinker—something whose immediacy, like that of a poem, is not separable from the work of perfect mediation. Wordsworth fails to celebrate his sunset because poetry is not an act of consecration and Nature not an immediate external object to be consecrated. When the external stimulus is too clearly present, the poet falls mute and corroborates Blake's strongest objection: "Natural Objects always did and now do weaken, deaden and obliterate Imagination in Me."⁶

A second, though chronologically earlier failure vis-a-vis the external world is related in *Prelude* VI. It occurs just before Wordsworth feels love for man begin to emerge out of his love for Nature. The poet, having finished his third year of studies at Cambridge (he is twenty years old), goes on a walking tour of France and Switzerland. It is the summer of 1790, the French Revolution has achieved its greatest success and acts as a subtle, though in the following books in-

⁵ *The Unmediated Vision* (New Haven, Conn., 1954), pp. 17–20.

⁶ Marginalia to Wordsworth's poems. Northrop Frye, *Selected Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (New York: Modern Library ed.), p. 455. I may venture the opinion that Wordsworth, at the beginning of *The Prelude*, goes back to Nature, not to increase his chances of sensation, but rather to emancipate his mind from immediate external excitements, the "gross and violent stimulants" (1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*) of the city he leaves behind him.

creasingly human, background to his concern with Nature. Setting out to cross the Alps by way of the Simplon Pass, Wordsworth and his friend are separated from their companions and try the ascent by themselves. After climbing some time and not overtaking anyone, they meet a peasant who tells them they must return to their starting point, and follow a stream down instead of further ascending, i.e., they had already crossed the Alps. Disappointed, "For still we had hopes that pointed to the clouds," they start downward beset by a "melancholy slackening," which, however, is soon dislodged (ll. 557–591, 617 ff.).

This simple episode stands, however, within a larger, interdependent series of events. An unexpected revelation comes almost immediately (ll. 624–40), while the whole is preceded by a parallel instance of disappointment with the natural world followed by a compensatory vision (ll. 523 ff.). In addition to this temporal structure of blankness and revelation, of the soulless image and the sudden renewed immediacy, we find an amazing instance of a past event's transtemporal thrust. The poet, after telling the story of his disappointment, is suddenly, in the very moment of composition, overpowered by a feeling of glory to which he gives expression in rapturous and almost self-obscuring lines (ll. 592 ff.). Not until the moment of composition, some fourteen years after the event,⁷ does the full motive behind his blind upward climb and subsequent melancholy slackening strike home: and it strikes so hard that Wordsworth, for the first time in his narrative, gives to the unconditioned power revealed by the extinction of the immediate external motive (his desire to cross the Alps), as by the abyss of intervenient years, the explicit name *Imagination*:

Imagination—here the Power so called
Through sad incompetence of human speech,
That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss
Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost;
Halted without an effort to break through;
But to my conscious soul I now can say—
"I recognize thy glory" [ll. 592–99].

Thus Wordsworth's failure vis-a-vis Nature (or its failure vis-a-vis the Poet) is doubly redeemed. After descending, and passing through a gloomy strait (VI, ll. 621 ff.), he encounters a magnificent view. And crossing, one might say, through the gloomy gulf of time, his disappointment becomes retrospectively a prophetic instance of that blindness to the external world which is the tragic, pervasive, and necessary condition of the mature poet. His failure taught him gently what now (1804) literally *blinds* him; the growing independence of Imagination from the immediate external world.

I cannot miss my way, the poet exults in the opening verses of the *Prelude*. And he cannot, as long as he respects the guidance of Nature, which leads him along a gradual *via negativa*, to make his soul more than "a mere pensioner / On outward forms" (VI, l. 737). It is not easy, however, to "follow Nature." The path, in fact, becomes so circuitous that a poet follows Nature least when he thinks to follow her most. He must pass through the gloomy strait where the external image is lost yet suddenly revived with more than original immediacy. Thus a gentle breeze, in *Prelude* I, calls forth a tempest of verse, but a splendid evening wanes into silence. A magnificent hope, in *Prelude* VI, seems to die for lack of sensuous food, but years later the simple memory of failure calls up that hope in a magnificent tempest of verse. The poet is forced to discover the autonomy of his imagination, its independence from present joy, from strong outward stimuli—but this discovery, which means a

⁷ That the rising up of Imagination probably occurred as Wordsworth was remembering his disappointment, rather than immediately after it (i.e., in 1804, not in 1790) was pointed out by W. G. Fraser in the *TLS* of April 4, 1929, No. 1,418, p. 276.

transcendence of Nature, is brought on gradually, mercifully.

The poet does not sustain the encounter with Imagination. His direct cry is broken off, replaced by an impersonal construction, "—here the Power . . .," and it is not Imagination but his "conscious soul" he addresses directly in the following lines. What, in any case, is a soul to do with its extreme recognition? It has glimpsed the height of its freedom. At the end of this passage Wordsworth returns to the idea that the soul is halted by the light of its discovery, as a traveler by a sudden bank of mist. But the intensifying simile this time suggests not only a divorce from but also, proleptically, a return to Nature on the part of the independent soul:

Strong in herself and in beatitude
That hides her, like the mighty flood of Nile
Poured from his fount of Abyssinian clouds
To fertilise the whole Egyptian plain
[ll. 613–16].

III

We are now in a position to compare the structure of all the episodes. The first (I, ll. 1 ff.) falls roughly into three parts: the spontaneous "tempest" of verse, the quietly active grove, and the splendid evening that ends too calmly. In the skating scene of Book I, the splendid silence of a winter evening, set off by the clear strokes of a clock, increases to a tumult of reciprocal sounds, which yield in turn to a vision of a silently sustaining power. In the one case we go from Poetry to Nature, in the other from Nature to a more deeply mediated conception of Nature. Thus, at the beginning of his narrative, Wordsworth prefers to plunge into *medias res*, where the *res* is Poetry, or Nature only in so far as it has guided the poet to a height whence he must find his own way.

The major episode of Book VI, the encounter with Imagination, may also be

regarded as falling into three parts. Its first term is neither Nature nor Poetry. It is, rather, Imagination in embryo—muted yet strengthened by Nature's inadequacies. Though the poet's memory of Nature's past intimacy reaches its height, her presences are no longer intimate. Blankness and utter dark vacillate before his eyes, relieved only occasionally by sights of "milder magnificence." At first the vine-clad hills of Burgundy, the valley of the Saône, and later of the Rhône, lead him and his friend gently on; but soon the quiet river, the church spires and bells, disappear, and they enter the solitary precincts of the Alps. Nature now appears in turn excessive or null; sublimity and profound calm, known from earliest childhood, revolve in their intensity, are too awe-ful or too calm. A human response is scarcely possible in the face of such "ungrateful" vicissitude.

Yet this is the very time of the active Imagination's birthpangs. "The poet's soul was with me," Wordsworth writes at the beginning of the book, and later notes, in his curiously matter-of-fact, yet absolutely unrevealing fashion, that dejection itself would often lead him on to pleasurable thoughts. Still deeper than such dejection, a "stern mood, an under-thirst / Of vigour" (ll. 558 ff.) makes itself felt and produces a special sort of sadness; and now, in order to throw light on the nature of that sadness, the "melancholy slackening" which ensues on the nature of the peasant's words, he tells the incident of his crossing the Alps.

The first part of the tryptich, then, illustrates a critical stage in the history of the poet's Imagination. The stern mood can only be Wordsworth's premonition of spiritual autonomy, of independence from the immediacy of sense experience, fostered in him by Nature since earliest childhood. We know with some precision how this mood manifests itself. In *Prelude* II, ll. 312 ff., it is described as "an obscure sense / Of possible sublimity"

for which the soul, remembering *how* it felt but not *what* it felt, continually aspires to find a new content. The element of obscurity, therefore, is inseparable from the soul's capacity of growth; it is obscurity that both feeds the soul and vexes it toward self-dependence. The divine yet natural pasturage becomes viewless; the soul cannot easily find the immediate external source from which it used to drink the visionary power; and, while dim memories of passionate commerce with external things drive it more than ever to the natural world, this world makes itself more than ever inscrutable.⁸ The travelers' separation from their guides, then that of the road from the stream (ll. 568 ff.), and finally their trouble with the peasant's words, that have to be "translated," all subtly express the soul's desire for a world "beyond." Yet only when poet, brook, and road are once again "fellow-travellers" (l. 622), when Wordsworth holds on to Nature, does that reveal (a Proteus in the grasp of the hero) its prophesy.

With this we come to what was, originally, the second part of the adventure: the dislodgement of melancholy and the gloomy strait's "Characters of the great Apocalypse" (ll. 617-40). In its temporal rather than narrative sequence, therefore, the episode has only two parts. The first term, the moment of natural immediacy, is omitted; we go straight to the second term, the inscrutability of an external image, which leads via the gloomy strait to an apocalyptic image. Yet, as if this pattern demanded a substitute third term, Wordsworth's tribute to "Imagination" severs the original temporal sequence and forestalls Nature's exhibition to the bodily eye with an ecstatic excursus on the inner eye.

In the 1805 *Prelude* the transition from the poet narrating the past, gazing like a traveler into the mind's abyss, to the poet gripped by something rising unexpectedly

⁸ Cf. the Great Ode; also *Prelude* I, ll. 597 ff.

from that abyss, is still respected in cursory fashion (l. 526); but the 1850 *Prelude*, as if the poet labored under a "strong confusion," solders past and present so well that the circuitous series of events seems immediately to evoke "Imagination." The apocalypse of the gloomy strait loses, in any case, the character of a *terminal* experience and appears as an anagogical device, now transcended. For the Imagination, at the time of writing, is called forth by the barely scrutable, not by the splendid image. This (momentary) displacement of emphasis is the more effective in that the style of ll. 617 ff., and the very characters of the apocalypse, suggest that the hiding places of power cannot be localized in Nature.⁹

Thus the three parts (henceforth VI-a, VI-b, and VI-c) trace the mind's growth toward independence from the immediate external world. The measure of that independence is "Imagination," and to define what Wordsworth means by this word is to add a sad incompetence of the interpreter to that of the poet. But we see that the mind must pass through a stage where it experiences Imagination as a power separate from Nature, that the poet must come to think and feel by his own choice or from the structure of his own mind.¹⁰

VI-a (ll. 557-91) shows the young poet still dependent on the immediacy of the external world. Imagination secretly frustrates that dependence, yet its victory dooms more than

⁹ Of the four sentences which comprise ll. 617-40, the first three alternate the themes of eager and of restrained movement ("melancholy slackening . . . Downward we hurried fast . . . at a slow pace"); and the fourth sentence, without explicit transition, commencing in mid-verse (l. 624), rises very gradually and firmly into a development of sixteen lines. These depend on a single verb, an unemphatic "were," held back till the beginning of l. 636; the verb thus acts as a pivot that introduces, without shock or simply as the other side of the coin, the falling and interpretative movement. This structure, combined with a skilful interchange throughout of asyndetic and conjunctive phrases, always avoids the sentiment of abrupt illumination for that of a majestic swell fed by innumerable sustaining events, and thereby strengthens our feeling that the vision, though climactic, is neither terminal nor discontinuous.

¹⁰ Cf. Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802): "[The poet] has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing . . . especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement. . . ."

the external world. For its blindness toward Nature is accompanied by a blindness toward itself.

VI-*b* (ll. 592–616) gives an example of thought or feeling that came from the poet's mind without immediate external excitement. There remains, of course, the memory of VI-*a*, and VI-*a* tells of an experience with an external, though no longer immediate, world. From the perspective of VI-*b*, however, that world is not even external. The poet recognizes that the power he has looked for in the world outside was really within and frustrating his search. The shock of recognition then feeds the very blindness toward the external world which produced that shock.

In VI-*c* (ll. 617–40) the landscape is once more an immediate external object of experience. The mind cannot separate in it what it most desired to see and what it sees bodily. It is a moment of apocalypse, in which the poet sees not as in a glass, darkly, but face to face. Thus, VI-*c* magnifies subtle details of VI-*a* and *seems* to actualize figurative details of VI-*b*.¹¹ The matter-of-fact interplay of quick and lingering movement, of up-and-down perplexities in the ascent (ll. 562–85) reappears in larger letters; while the interchanges of light and darkness, of cloud and cloudlessness, of rising like a vapor from the abyss and pouring like a flood from heaven have entered the landscape almost bodily. The gloomy strait also participates in this actualization. It is revealed as the secret middle term which leads from the barely scrutable presence of Nature to its resurrected image. The travelers who move freely with or against the terrain, hurrying upward, pacing downward, perplexed at the crossing, are now led narrowly by the pass as if it were their rediscovered guide.

¹¹ VI-*b* was composed before VI-*c*, so that while the transference of images goes *structurally* from VI-*b* to VI-*c*, *chronologically* the order is reversed.

IV

The Prelude, as a history of a poet's mind, foresees the time when the "Characters of the great Apocalypse" will be intuited without the medium of Nature. The time approaches even as the poet writes and occasionally cuts across his narrative, the Imagination rising up, as in Book VI, "Before the eye and progress of my Song" (1805).¹² This expression, so rich when taken literally yet so conventional when taken as a simple figure, Wordsworth replaced in the 1850 version, but did not lose sight of. It suggests that the Imagination forestalled Nature, so that the very "eye" of the song, trained on a temporal sequence with the vision in the strait as its last term, was disrupted, obscured. The poet, in both versions, says that he was halted and could not or did not make any effort to "break through." If this has an intent more specific than to convey abstractly the Imagination's power—if, in other words, the effect the Imagination has tells us something specific about the power behind that effect—then the poet was momentarily forced to deny Nature the magnificence of self-representation it had shown in the gloomy strait and to attribute that instead to Imagination, whose interposition (VI-*b*) proves it to be a power more independent of time and place than Nature, and so a better type "Of first, and last, and midst, and without end" (l. 640).

In VI-*b* something that happens during composition enters the poem as a new biographical event. Wordsworth has just described his disappointment (VI-*a*) and turns in anticipation to Nature's compensatory finale (VI-*c*). He is about to respect the original temporal sequence, "the eye and progress" of his song. But as he looks forward, in the moment of composition, from blankness toward revelation, a new insight

¹² De Selincourt (*op. cit.* p. 542) calls this rightly a Shakespearean doublet, and refers to *King John* II, i, 208.

cuts him off from the latter. The original disappointment is seen not as a test, or as a prelude to magnificence, but as a revelation in itself. It suddenly reveals a power that worked against Nature in order to be recognized. The song's progress comes to a halt because the poet is led beyond Nature. Unless the temporal, which is also the natural, order be respected by the poet, his song, at least as narrative, must cease. Here Imagination, not Nature (I, l. 96), defeats Poetry.

This conclusion may be checked by comparing the versions of 1805 and 1850. The latter replaces "Before the eye and progress of my Song" with a more direct metaphorical transposition. Imagination is said to rise from the mind's abyss "Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps, / At once, some lonely traveller." The (literal) traveler of 1790 becomes the (mental) traveler at the moment of composition. And though one Shakespearean doublet has disappeared, another implicitly takes its place: does not Imagination rise from "the dark backward and abysm of time" (*The Tempest*, I. ii. 50)? The result, in any case, is a disorientation of time added to that of way; an apocalyptic moment in which past and future overtake the present; and the poet, cut off from Nature by Imagination, is, in an absolute sense, lonely.

The last stage of Book VI as a progress poem has been reached. The travelers of VI-*a* had already left behind their native land, the public rejoicing of France, rivers, hills, and spires; they have separated from their guide and, finally, from the unbridged mountain stream. Now Imagination separates the poet from all else, human companionship, the immediate scene, the remembered scene. The end of the natural *via negativa* is near. There is no more "eye and progress": the invisible progress of VI-*a* reveals itself now as a progress independent of visible ends, engendered by the desire for an "invisible world" —the substance of things

hoped for, the evidence of things not seen
Wordsworth descants on the Pauline definition of faith:

in such strength
Of usurpation, when the light of sense
Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
There harbours; whether we be young or old,
Our destiny, our being's heart and home,
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be

[ll. 599–608].¹³

If there is any further possibility of progress for the enwrapped and rapt poet, it is that of song itself, no longer subordinate to the mimetic function, the experience faithfully traced to this height. The poet is a traveler in so far as he must respect Nature's past guidance and retrace his route. He did come, after all, to an important instance of bodily vision. The way is the song. But the song all the time strives to become the way. And when this happens, when the song seems to capture the initiative, in such supreme moments of poetry as VI-*b* or even VI-*c*, the way is lost. Nature's apocalypse shows "Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn," destroys the concept of the linear path, and also severs finally the "eye" from the "progress."¹⁴

In VI-*c*, however, Nature still stands over and against the poet; he is yet the observer, the eighteenth-century gentleman admiring new manifestations of the sublime, even if the "lo!" or "mark!" is suppressed. He moves haltingly, but he moves; and the style of the passage emphasizes continuities. Yet with the Imagination athwart there is no movement, no looking before and after. The song

¹³ The last line of this passage echoes and resolves Wordsworth's comment on Mt. Blanc. The latter is said to have "usurped upon a living thought / That never more could be" (VI. l. 527 f.). The two verses, juxtaposed, sound the depth of the contrast between Nature and Imagination.

¹⁴ Cf. *The Unmediated Vision*, pp. 129–132.

itself must be the way, though the way of a blinded man, who admits "I was lost." When he *speaks* once more to his conscious soul (l. 598), he can only recognize that "in-finitude" is not at the end of the path but in a crossing and a losing of the way, by which a power transcending all single ways guides the traveler to itself.

The poet's desire to cross the Alps may already imply a wish to overcome Nature. Yet the stern mood of VI-a (Imagination not yet recognized as a power distinct from Nature) helps the poet to gain more than this—its own—end. It gains the poet's end *imperceptibly* in order to defeat the very idea of an end as the motive power. The travelers' *melancholy* slackening, when they think the end attained, proves it was more than a specific end (here the crossing of the Alps) which moved them. And in VI-c Nature itself affirms this lesson. The travelers find a vision which both clarifies the idea by which they were moved and destroys it as the idea of an end—specifically the idea of Nature as an end. It is, rather, the idea of something "without end" and, specifically, *the idea of Nature itself teaching the travelers to transcend Nature*. The apocalypse is a picture of a self-thwarting march and countermarch of elements, a divine mockery of the concept of the Single Way. Nature seems to have guided the travelers to a point where they see the power which causes it to move and be moving. This power, when distinct from Nature (as in VI-b), is called Imagination. But, when thus distinct, when

unmediated, it blinds speech and extinguishes the light of the senses. The unfathered vapor, as it shrouds the poet's eye, also shrouds the eye of his song, whose tenor is Nature guiding and fostering the power of song.

Wordsworth has discovered the hidden guide which moved him by means of Nature as Beatrice moves Dante by means of Vergil. It is not Nature as such but Nature indistinguishably blended with Imagination which compels the poet along a *via naturaliter negativa*. Yet, if VI-b prophesies against the world of sense experience, Wordsworth's affection and point of view remain unchanged. After a cloudburst of passionate verses he returns to the pedestrian attitude of 1790, when the external world and not imagination appeared as his guide ("Our journey we renewed, / Led by the stream," etc.).¹⁵ For, with the exception of VI-b, Imagination never moves the poet directly, but always *sub specie naturae*. The childhood "vistings of imaginative power" depicted in Books I and XII also appeared in the guise or disguise of Nature. Wordsworth's journey as a poet can only continue with eyes, but the Imagination experienced as a power distinct from Nature opens his eyes by putting them out. Thus, Wordsworth does not adhere to Nature because of natural fact, but despite it and because of human and poetic fact. Imagination is not called an awe-ful power for nothing.

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¹⁵ The "return to nature" is anticipated by the last lines of VI-b (ll. 613-16). See above, p. 220.