

2. WORDSWORTH: THE LONG JOURNEY HOME

I have "never read a word of German metaphysics, thank Heaven!" Wordsworth wrote to Henry Crabb Robinson.⁴⁵ This claim is no doubt the literal truth; yet as Robinson several times remarked, Wordsworth's thinking frequently parallels that of his philosophical German contemporaries. Prominent in Wordsworth, for example, is his version of the great commonplace of the age: unity with himself and his world is the primal and normative state of man, of which the sign is a fullness of shared life and the condition of joy; analytic thought divides the mind from nature and object from object, and this division, if absolute, kills the object it severs and threatens with spiritual death the mind from which it has been severed. In the second book of *The Prelude* Wordsworth praises Coleridge as one to whom "the unity of all has been reveal'd," and who is therefore free from the slavery "Of that false secondary power, by which,/ In weakness, we create distinctions" that we mistake for real divisions. He goes on to oppose to "analytic industry" his own "observations of affinities/ In objects where no brotherhood exists/ To common minds," with the eventual result that "in all things/ I saw one life, and felt that it was joy." In a manuscript passage he adds that "by such communion" he was "early taught" that the separate "forms and images" evident to passive perception, as well as the divisive processes of active "thought/ Prospectiveness, intelligence or will," seem but "relapses"—that is, a falling away—from the undifferentiated oneness of self with nature, and of both these with God:

Such consciousnesses seemed but accidents
Relapses from the one interior life
Which is in all things, from that unity
In which all beings live with God, are lost
In god and nature, in one mighty whole
As undistinguishable as the cloudless east

At noon is from the cloudless west when all
The hemisphere is one cerulean blue. [46](#)

Some two years earlier, in a passage intended for *The Ruined Cottage*, Wordsworth's Pedlar had denounced the false kind of "science" which, instead of serving "the cause/ Of order and distinctness" (that is, by distinction without division), murders, by disconnecting, both the objects seen and the self that sees:

For was it meant

That we should pore, and dwindle as we pore ...
On solitary objects, still beheld
In disconnection dead and spiritless,
And still dividing and dividing still,
Break down all grandeur ...

waging thus

An impious warfare with the very life
Of our own souls?

"Let us rise," he cries, "From this oblivious sleep"—patently this is the "sleep of Death" from which Wordsworth undertook to waken "the sensual" in his *Prospectus*—and reunite the severed parts in a resurrective interchange in which (as Coleridge was to phrase it in his *Dejection*) the life of all things will be the eddying of our living soul:

Thus disciplined

All things shall live in us and we shall live
In all things that surround us....
For thus the senses and the intellect
Shall each to each supply a mutual aid ...
And forms and feelings acting thus, and thus
Reacting, they shall each acquire
A living spirit and a character
Till then unfelt. [47](#)

In *The Fountain* (1799) Wordsworth gave to the old man Matthew a memorable statement about the unhappy consciousness of self-divided and knowingly mortal man and the happy

self-unity of creatures who act by instinct, and without memory or anticipation:

The blackbird amid leafy trees,
The lark above the hill,
Let loose their carols when they please,
Are quiet when they will.

With Nature never do *they* wage
A foolish strife; they see
A happy youth, and their old age
Is beautiful and free.

Like Schiller and Coleridge, Wordsworth here expresses, through the medium of an invented character, man's discontent with being human and civilized. When he speaks in his own person, however, Wordsworth conceives the mature mind as an integrity of disparate elements which is the product of a growth that necessarily involves self-division and conflict. His general norm is a unity which retains individual identity, and his particular ideal of life (as John Jones has put it) ⁴⁸ is to sustain solitude in relationship. Thus Wordsworth proclaimed, in one version of his Prospectus,

Of the individual mind that keeps its own
Inviolate retirement, and consists
With being limitless, the one great Life
I sing. ⁴⁹

The great distinction of Wordsworth's *Prelude* in its age is that it is not (as Coleridge tried to make it) a philosophical poem, nor an extended cosmic myth, nor a symbolic or allegorical fable, but the presentation of a particular person, unique yet humanly representative, as he develops from infancy to maturity through his evolving experience with his natural environment, with other men, and with the great public events of his time. Wordsworth nevertheless claimed that his poetry possessed a systematic intellectual ground; as he said of *The Recluse* of which *The Prelude* was a part, while "it is not

the Author's intention formally to announce a system ... the Reader will have no difficulty in extracting the system for himself." ⁵⁰ His confidence in the reader is perhaps excessive; but our present point of vantage enables us to discern in *The Prelude* a coherent understructure of ideas and a sustained evolution of images which mark its consonance with the thought and design of a number of other, and very diverse, Romantic works of literature and philosophy.

I remarked in Chapter Two that, on one recurrent level of narrative, Wordsworth undertakes to represent the growth of a poet's mind—just as German philosophers undertook to construct the development of generic and individual consciousness—within the limits of a two-term scheme of reference: the interactions between subject and object, mind and nature. Unlike the German Idealists, however, Wordsworth does not posit an initial One, or absolute, which subdivides into the knowing mind and the object known, but instead begins, as he says in the Prospectus, with a "Mind" which is fitted to "the external World" and an "external World" which is "fitted to the Mind." In the early books of *The Prelude* he sets out to show the slow and complex workings of "those first-born affinities that fit/ Our new existence to existing things" (I, 582-3), in the process by which the mind of the child, through the mediation of its senses, grows into community with its environing world. Natural objects enter, flow, are received, and sink down into the mind, while the mind dwells in, feeds on, drinks, holds intercourse with, and weaves, intertwines, fastens, and binds itself to external objects, until the two integrate as one. These are Wordsworth's recurrent metaphors, the essential lexicon he developed to enable him to say, about the development of man's cognitive and emotional involvement with the milieu into which he is born, what had never been explicitly said before, and with a subtlety that has not been exceeded since. In the crowning figure of this metaphoric complex the babe, in the security of his mother's arms, evolves into awareness of a world which is so thoroughly humanized that the pull of gravity is experienced as a familial relationship. "In one beloved presence,"

there exists

A virtue which irradiates and exalts
All objects through all intercourse of sense.
No outcast he, bewilder'd and depress'd;
Along his infant veins are interfus'd
The gravitation and filial bond
Of nature, that connect him with the world.

(II, 255-64)

The dynamic element in the growth of the mind in nature is a play of polarities which is not, in Wordsworth, a systematic dialectic, but instead operates, as Charles J. Smith has said, as "a very strong habit of thinking in terms of paired opposites or contrarities. Everywhere in nature, in individual man and in society, [Wordsworth] saw a constant interplay of opposing forces." ⁵¹ Chief among the contraries in nature, we already know, are those which Wordsworth introduces in his opening lines on his interaction with the natural scene: "I grew up/ Foster'd alike by beauty and by fear" (I, 305-6). Related to this opposition between incitation by beauty and discipline by terror are other contraries which constitute the poles between which flow the forces of "this active universe." "Calmness" and "emotion," "peace and excitation," "stillness" and "energy" —"these two attributes/ Are sister horns that constitute her strength."

In Wordsworth's account, his community with the natural milieu precedes, and is instrumental to, his development of a community with other men: "Love of Nature" leads to "Love of Mankind." The integrity of mind that he has achieved receives its first serious test in London, both on his first brief visit, when he "felt in heart and soul the shock/ Of the huge town's first presence" (1850; VII, 66-7), and during the period of his later residence there. The "blank confusion" of the metropolis terrified Wordsworth by a double threat to his sense of individuation-in-unity: by fragmenting community into an anarchy of unrelated parts, and by assimilating the parts into a homogeneity in which no individuality survives,

melted and reduced

To one identity, by differences
That have no law, no meaning, and no end.

But the strength of the integral fabric of consciousness wrought by his earlier education in nature enabled him to manage even this "unmanageable sight," as one who "sees the parts/ As parts, but with a feeling of the whole." "The forms/ Perennial of the ancient hills," changeless in "the changeful language of their countenances," had provided him with a model for reconciling "multitude,/ With order and relation"; and now "the Spirit of Nature" remained "present as a habit," and served to diffuse through

the press

Of self-destroying, transitory things
Composure and ennobling harmony.

(VII, 695-740)

This development "Of intellectual power, from stage to stage/ Advancing, hand in hand with love and joy,/ And of imagination," is shattered by the "over-pressure of the times/ And their disastrous issues" (XI, 42-8). Wordsworth describes the process of his breakdown as the cumulative fragmentation and conflict of once integral elements. He turned to abstract reason to furnish support for his failing hopes, but this was in effect to foster a divisive inner "war against myself," in the attempt "to cut off my heart/ From all the sources of her former strength" and to unsoul by logic "those mysteries of passion which have made ... / One brotherhood of the human race" (XI, 74-88). Analytic reason divides, but it cannot reunify, for it sets up the kind of inert contraries which cannot be resolved: "Sick, wearied out with contrarities," I "Yielded up moral questions in despair. This was the crisis of that strong disease" (1850; XI, 304-6). At the same time the "life of nature," which should have sustained and guided him, had itself succumbed to the same work of "logic and minute analysis." Hitherto he had rejoiced in its passion and its life, in which he had participated because he had confronted nature with unified and cooperative faculties and feelings,

now all eye

And now all ear; but ever with the heart
Employ'd, and the majestic intellect.

But inner division became inner conflict and resulted in a state in which "the eye was master of the heart" and "often held my mind in absolute dominion" (XI, 96-180). The consequence of such division between mind and nature, and the resulting enslavement of the mind by "the laws of vulgar sense," was to destroy "a world of life" and transform it into "a universe of death" (XIII, 102-3, 138-41).

The poet's recovery, correspondingly, is represented as a gradual reintegration of all that had been divided: his faculties, senses, and feelings, his past and present self, and his mind and outer nature. My sister, Wordsworth says, "Maintained for me a saving intercourse/ With my true self," while "Nature's self ... led me back" to the earlier "counsels between head and heart" (1850; XI, 335-54); the persistence in memory of "spots of time" helped him to reestablish continuity between the self that he is and the self that he was; and he finally reachieved the integrity of being that he had lost, although now on a level of consciousness which preserved the critical experiences through which he had passed.

Behold me then

Once more in Nature's presence, thus restored
Or otherwise, and strengthened once again
(With memory left of what had been escaped). [52](#)

It is time to notice that Wordsworth's account of unity achieved, lost, and regained is held together, as various critics have remarked, by the recurrent image of a journey: like a number of works by his contemporaries, Wordsworth's "poem on my own poetical education" [53](#) converts the wayfaring Christian of the Augustinian spiritual journey into the self-formative traveler of the Romantic educational journey. The poem in fact opens, as Elizabeth Sewell has said, "with the poet in a prospect of wide landscape and open sky," on a literal walk which serves as "the great over-all poetic figure or trope of a journey which he is about to undertake." [54](#) In the course of this episode the aimless wanderer becomes "as a Pilgrim resolute" who takes "the road that pointed toward the chosen

Vale," and at the end of the first book the road translates itself into the metaphorical way of his life's pilgrimage:

Forthwith shall be brought down

Through later years the story of my life.
The road lies plain before me....

(1850; I, 91-3, 638-40)

The Prelude is replete with "the Wanderers of the Earth," ⁵⁵ and after the period of childhood, its chief episodes are Wordsworth's own wanderings through the English countryside, the Alps, Italy, France, and Wales—literal journeys through actual places which modulate easily into symbolic landscapes traversed by a metaphorical wayfarer. This organizing figure works in two dimensions. In one of these, *The Prelude* represents the life which the poet narrates as a self-educative journey, "from stage to stage/ Advancing," in which his early development had been "progress on the self-same path," the crisis following the French Revolution had been "a stride at once/ Into another region," and the terminus was his achievement of maturity in "the discipline/ And consummation of the Poet's mind." ⁵⁶ In the second application, the poet repeatedly figures his own imaginative enterprise, the act of composing *The Prelude* itself, as a perilous quest through the uncharted regions of his own mind.

At times the vehicle for this latter poetic journey is a voyage at sea, connoting the wanderings of Odysseus in his search for home:

What avail'd,

When Spells forbade the Voyager to land,
The fragrance which did ever and anon
Give notice of the Shore? ...
My business was upon the barren sea,
My errand was to sail to other coasts. ⁵⁷

Elsewhere Wordsworth's implied parallel is to Dante, who "Nell mezzo del cammin di nostra vita" had been granted a visionary journey, with a relay of guides, through hell and the earthly paradise to heaven:

A Traveller I am,

And all my Tale is of myself; even so,
So be it, if the pure in heart delight
To follow me; and Thou, O honor'd Friend!
Who in my thoughts art ever at my side,
Uphold, as heretofore, my fainting steps.

(III, 196-201)

At the beginning of the ninth book, "as a traveller, who has gained the brow/ Of some aerial Down" and "is tempted to review/ The region left behind him," Wordsworth turns back to his earlier youth, before he moves reluctantly on into the discordant "argument" that begins with his residence in France — "Oh, how much unlike the past!" ⁵⁸ The eleventh book, narrating the process of Wordsworth's recovery, opens in a parallel to Milton's description of his epic journey back from hell to the realms of light (XI, 1-7; see *Paradise Lost*, III, 13-20). And through all these regions the imagined presence of Coleridge serves both as auditor and guide, heartening the exhausted poet in his pilgrimage and quest:

Thou wilt not languish here, O Friend, for whom
I travel in these dim uncertain ways
Thou wilt assist me as a Pilgrim gone
In quest of highest truth.

(XI, 390-3)

The last book of *The Prelude*, in symmetry with its first book, also opens with a literal walk which translates itself into a metaphor for the climactic stage both of the journey of life and of the imaginative journey which is the poem itself. This time the walk is not a movement along an open plain but the ascent of a mountain, the traditional place for definitive visions since Moses had climbed Mount Sinai. As in Hegel's *Phenomenology* the spirit, at the close of its educational journey, recognizes itself in its other, so Wordsworth's mind, confronting nature, discovers itself in its own perfected powers:

A meditation rose in me that night
Upon the lonely Mountain ...

and it appear'd to me

The perfect image of a mighty Mind.

In the earliest stage of its development Wordsworth's "Babe,/ Nurs'd in his Mother's arms" had not only acquired "The gravitation and the filial bond ... that connect him with the world," but had also, as "inmate of this *active* universe," established the beginnings of the reciprocative power by which his mind ...

Creates, creator and receiver both,
Working but in alliance with the works
Which it beholds.—Such, verily, is the first
Poetic spirit of our human life.

(II, 265-76)

On Mount Snowdon, in an evident parallel and complement to this early passage, his mind recognizes, in that image of itself "which Nature thus/ Thrusts forth upon the senses" the same power, which has now developed into "the fulness of its strength." As mist and moonlight transform the natural scene, so higher minds by a similar "Power"

can send abroad

Like transformation, for themselves create
A like existence, and, whene'er it is
Created for them, catch it by an instinct ...
Willing to work and to be wrought upon

by the works which they behold. An essential alteration, however, is that the mature poetic mind, whose infant perception had been a state of undifferentiated consciousness, has acquired self-consciousness, and is able to sustain the sense of its own identity as an individuation-in-unison with the objects it perceives. In Wordsworth's terse rendering,

hence the highest bliss

That can be known is theirs, the consciousness
Of whom they are habitually infused
Through every image, and through every thought,
And all impressions.

(XIII, 84-111)

I have already remarked (Chapter Two, Section i) that *The Prelude* has a circular organization. This circularity of its form,

we now see, reflects the circularity of its subject matter. In the opening passage of *The Prelude* the narrator is confirmed in his vocation as a poet-prophet and, in response to an impulse from the autumnal wood, chooses as his goal "a known Vale, whither my feet should turn," in the assurance "of some work of glory there forthwith to be begun." "Keen as a Truant or a Fugitive,/ But as a Pilgrim resolute," and also (in a complementary pedestrian metaphor) "like a home-bound labourer," he then pursued his way until a three days' walk "brought me to my hermitage" (1850; I, 71-80, 90-107). At the end of *The Prelude* Wordsworth, having taken up his "permanent abode" (XIII, 338) in this hermitage, calls "back to mind" the occasion of its beginning. But *The Prelude* has a complex function, for it is designed not only as a poem in itself, but also as a "portico" to *The Recluse*. The spiritual journey thus circles back at its conclusion to the literal journey with which it had originated; but this beginning at once turns over into the opening book of Wordsworth's "work of glory," *The Recluse* proper, which describes his way of life in the chosen vale. ⁵⁹ Only now does he identify the aspect of the vale which had all along made it the goal of his tortuous literal, spiritual, and poetic journey. That goal, as in all the ancient genre of the circuitous pilgrimage, is home— *Home at Grasmere*.

The initial passage of *Home at Grasmere* makes it clear that the place to which the poet has returned is not his literal home but one which, on his first overview of the "Vale below" when, solitary, he had chanced across it as "a roving School-boy," he had recognized to be his spiritual home. "Perfect was the Spot ... stirring to the Spirit"; and he had immediately felt that "here/ Must be his Home, this Valley be his World." Throughout his youth the vale had lingered in memory, "shedding upon joy/ A brighter joy," and now the home of his imagining has become his actual home (the word reverberates through the opening passage):

And now 'tis mine, perchance for life, dear Vale,
Beloved Grasmere (let the Wandering Streams
Take up, the cloud-capt hills repeat, the Name),
One of thy lowly Dwellings is my Home. ⁶⁰

The place in which, "on Nature's invitation" (line 71), Wordsworth's literal and metaphoric wanderings have terminated is identified, after the venerable formula, as a home which is also a recovered paradise. In his Pisgah-sight of it as a schoolboy he had looked upon it as a "paradise before him" (line 14); and it remains, after he takes up his abode in it, an "earthly counterpart" of heaven (line 642), which he describes in terms echoing Milton's description of the Garden of Eden, and in which Wordsworth and Dorothy, "A solitary pair" (line 255) are somewhat incongruously the Adam and Eve. The journey to this ultimate stage has taken him through "the realities of life so cold," but this had been a fortunate fall into experience, for "the cost" of what he has lost from the earlier stage of his life is greatly outweighed by "what I keep, have gain'd/ Shall gain," so that

in my day of Childhood I was less
The mind of Nature, less, take all in all,
Whatever may be lost, than I am now.

For him, man's ancient dream of felicity has been brought down from a transcendent heaven and located in this very world-

the distant thought

Is fetch'd out of the heaven in which it was.
The unappropriated bliss hath found
An owner, and that owner I am he.
The Lord of this enjoyment is on Earth
And in my breast. [61](#)

Here he dwells, therefore, as a second and more fortunate Adam, because unlike his predecessor he possesses an Eden which has been gained:

The boon is absolute; surpassing grace
To me hath been vouchsafed; among the bowers
Of blissful Eden this was neither given,
Nor could be given, possession of the good
Which had been sighed for, ancient thought fulfilled

And dear Imaginations realized
Up to their highest measure, yea and more. [62](#)

As in comparable passages in Hölderlin and Novalis (in Blake the parallel is more with Beulah than with the New Jerusalem), all the natural scene becomes alive, human, and feminine, and encloses the poet in an embrace of love:

Embrace me then, ye Hills, and close me in....
But I would call thee beautiful, for mild
And soft, and gay, and beautiful thou art,
Dear Valley, having in thy face a smile
Though peaceful, full of gladness.

(lines 110-7)

And when the solitary pair had first entered this valley together in the winter season, its elements had addressed them as fellow beings:

"What would ye," said the shower,
"Wild Wanderers, whither through my dark domain?"
The sunbeam said, "be happy." When this Vale
We entered, bright and solemn was the sky
That faced us with a passionate welcoming,
And led us to our threshold

—a threshold which in an earlier version of the text had been that of "a home/ Within a home, which was to be" (lines 168- 73, and footnote).

This terminus of all the poet's journeyings is not only home and paradise, but also a recovered unity and wholeness which he had experienced nowhere else except "as it found its way into my heart/ In childhood"; for this "blended holiness of earth and sky" is

A termination, and a last retreat,
A Centre, come from wheresoe'er you will,
A Whole without dependence or defect,
Made for itself; and happy in itself,
Perfect Contentment, Unity entire.

(lines 135-51)

And only here does he find a genuine human community. Man "truly is alone" only in the "vast Metropolis," where he is "doomed/ To hold a vacant commerce ... / With objects wanting life, repelling love," and where "neighbourhood serves rather to divide/ Than to unite." In this rural place, however, all is on a human scale, a multitude-in-unity in which individuality is preserved in a society which is a family writ large, and which finds itself thoroughly at home in its natural milieu.

Society is here

A true Community, a genuine frame
Of many into one incorporate....
One household, under God, for high and low,
One family, and one mansion ...

possessors undisturbed

Of this Recess ... their glorious Dwelling-place.

(lines 592-624)

The poet's spiritual home, however, remains ineluctably a paradise of this earth, for in the vale man differs "but little from the Man elsewhere" and exhibits the common qualities of "selfishness, and envy, and revenge ... / Flattery and doubledealing, strife and wrong" (lines 347-57). But, he asks, is there not a strain of words that shall be "the acknowledged voice of life," and so speak "of solid good/ And real evil" in a higher poetic harmony than that of the unalloyed pastoral fantasy-

More grateful, more harmonious than the breath,
The idle breath of softest pipe attuned
To pastoral fancies?

(lines 401-9)

For this poetry of real life he dismisses the poetry of wish-fulfillment, "All Arcadian dreams/ All golden fancies of the golden Age" engendered by man's "wish to part/ With all remembrance of a jarring world" (lines 625-32). Confident of "an internal brightness," he assumes "his office" as a mature artist and announces his manifesto: in this "peaceful Vale ... / A Voice shall speak, and what will be the Theme?" (lines 660-90, 751-3).

Home at Grasmere concludes with the answer to this question, in the passage Wordsworth later excerpted to serve as the Prospectus to the subject and argument of *The Recluse* and all its related poems. This statement in fact epitomizes, and proclaims as valid for other men, what the poet himself has learned from the long and arduous journey of his life that has terminated in Grasmere Vale. The subject, he tells us, will incorporate the narrative of that life itself, in the account of "the transitory Being" who had beheld the "Vision" which constituted his poetic credential, and which it was his unique mission to impart. This vision is of "the Mind of Man," through which he will undertake a poetic journey that must ascend higher than Milton's heaven and sink deeper than Milton's hell. Of this audacious poetic enterprise it will be the high argument that we can re-create the experienced world, and that this new world, despite the inescapable fact of evil and anguish—no less evident in the solitude of "fields and groves" than when they are "barricadoed ... / Within the walls of cities"—will provide a sufficient paradise to which we have immediate access. Here we return to Wordsworth's central figure whose complex genealogy, widespread currency, and personal significance I undertook, two chapters back, to explicate. Only let a man succeed in restoring his lost integrity, by consummating a marital union between his mind and a nature which, to the sensual in their sleep of death, has become a severed and alien reality, and he shall find "Paradise, and groves Elysian ... A simple produce of the common day."

3. ROMANTIC LOVE

One cannot leave the great Romantic subject of the divided and reunited mind without reference to *Prometheus Unbound*, and Shelley's masterpiece gives occasion for specifying the conditions which fostered this pervasive view of radical good and evil. The Romantic era was one of technical, political, and social revolutions and counter-revolutions—of industrialization, urbanization, and increasingly massive industrial slums; of the