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Introduction

Mais ce ne sont pas des impératifs de méthode;
tout au plus des prescriptions de prudence.[1]

*

Urania, I shall need
Thy guidance, or a greater Muse, if such
Descend to earth or dwell in highest heaven!
For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink
Deep – and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds
To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.
All strength – all terror, single or in bands,
That ever was put forth in personal form –
Jehovah – with his thunder, and the choir
Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones –
I pass them unalarmed. Not Chaos, not
The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
By help of dreams – can breed such fear and awe
As fall upon us often when we look
Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man –
My haunt, and the main region of my song.[2]

Well before Stanley's expedition into 'darkest Africa' and the archeological triumphs of a Schliemann or Evans, there was no shortage of metaphors for 'depth' psychology. When in his famous letter to Reynolds of 3 May 1818, therefore, Keats wrote that Milton 'did not think into the human heart, as Wordsworth has done',[3] he was doing little more than echo a claim which Wordsworth had been able to make for himself rather more flamboyantly four years before. For the lines above first became public in the preface to *The Excursion* in 1814, and it is from them, moreover, that Keats quotes earlier in his letter when he wonders 'whether Wordsworth has in truth epic passion[s], and martyrs himself to the human heart, *the main region of his song*'.[4] The substitution of 'heart' for 'Mind' is one that can be justified by reference to Wordsworth's own practice.[5] It does not make less likely that, in the more well-known phrase from the letter which I quoted first, Keats was conscious of confirming Wordsworth's

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own sense of where his chief distinction would lie in comparison with Milton (the challenge to the latter being implicit in the way the lines from the *Excursion* preface recall *Paradise Lost*, and in particular the opening of Book VII). If one were forced to rely on a single word to describe that distinction, one would have to say that, although Wordsworth has the diversity of all great writers, his main strength is 'psychological'. This is the belief which underlies a great deal of what follows.

With 'psychological' I separate Wordsworth's highly distinctive curiosity about the workings of the mind from his lyricism (for example), or his philosophy. Such distinctions are artificial but I make them in the interests of an emphasis which used in fact to be quite common. And it was because so much of Wordsworth's best poetry was regarded as psychological that it often attracted in the past a critical approach which could be called by, or (as would probably happen more frequently nowadays) dismissed under, the same name. The most notable English examples of what I mean are the books by Herbert Read and F. W. Bateson.[6] The frequent dismissal of these two writers in recent criticism is due partly to objections to their method, many of which I think are valid; but it is also, perhaps, a result of the uneasiness which *any* psychological reading has tended to provoke as various Freudian concepts become more and more widely disseminated. In the wake of Freud, the psychological critic has increasingly risked appearing like some bumbling amateur. When, therefore, in the preface to his massive psycho-analytic study of *The Prelude*, R. J. Onorato refers pejoratively to 'the intuitive psychologizing that offers no account of itself. . . implicit in many literary studies',[7] he is playing a variation on a very familiar theme. The contrast, as I understand it, is with the advantage the psycho-analytic critic has in being able to trace back his observations to a body of theoretical writing which is coherent and of proven validity. Not that the writing in question is then regarded as just one kind among many to which this kind of critic might refer, for it is virtually inevitable that in his view Freud should emerge as someone who brought about a change in our understanding of human nature which was fundamental, altering it as radically as did (to take Freud at his own, often repeated, estimate) Copernicus or Darwin: that he should be regarded as the thinker who brought system and rigour to a mass of previously disparate material and, through the elaboration of

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a reliable experimental method (analysis itself), first gave full scientific credibility to the study of the mind.

In at least two important respects I shall mention shortly, the kind of reading of *The Prelude* attempted here is very broadly in the tradition of Read and Bateson. This means that Freud is something of a lion in my path: his name the constant reminder of a special problem. One obvious, practical solution lies in pointing to how drastically the difficulties in the application to literature of an interpretative technique evolved for quite different purposes have been underestimated by most psycho-analytic critics (perhaps because of the encouragement they take from the way they were also underestimated by Freud). But this hardly dispenses one from responsibility for some general attitude to psycho-analysis and its founder. It would be fair to say that in England the most common practice has been to deny that either has much importance for literature. That seems to me wrong, and something rather worse when the denial is buttressed by scepticism about the relevance to 'normal' behaviour or feelings of perceptions many of which were derived from contact with people who, because they sought Freud's help in the first place, were declaring their state pathological. (Whatever its *degree* of truth, Freud's notion that the difference between mental health and neurosis is quantitative rather than qualitative is a reliable as well as civilizing one to stand by.)[8] Since literature tends to be concerned with human nature and since at some level or other of the collective mind – because there is a sense in which we all use the same language – it has probably become impossible even for those who have never read Freud to have thoughts on that subject without taking him into account, such a denial could well be pointless also. But its main drawback is that it cuts the critic off from writings which are full of suggestive thought and whose contribution to our better understanding of human development, motive and behaviour, has clearly been very great.

It is some indication of the difficulty Freud presents however that this talk of 'contribution' would not be acceptable to many of his admirers. For reasons very much associated with the allegedly scientific status of his thought, the stopping-places on the road between repudiation of its relevance for literary studies and wholesale acceptance are few and far between. Freud was the founding-father of a way of thinking which summons us to operate more or less exclusively within it. The *New Introductory Lectures on*

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Psycho-Analysis include not only the declaration that 'no-one has a right to join in a discussion of psycho-analysis who has not had particular experiences which can only be obtained by being analysed oneself',[9] but a warning to any reader who might think he was in a position to pick and choose.

> What is also new is that a sort of buffer-layer has formed in scientific society between analysis and its opponents. This consists of people who allow the validity of some portions of analysis and admit as much, subject to the most entertaining qualifications, but who on the other hand reject other portions of it, a fact which they cannot proclaim too loudly. It is not easy to divine what determines their choice in this. It seems to depend on personal sympathies. One person will take objection to sexuality, another to the unconscious; what seems particularly unpopular is the fact of symbolism. Though the structure of psycho-analysis is unfinished, it nevertheless presents, even today, a unity from which elements cannot be broken off at the caprice of whoever comes along: but these eclectics seem to disregard this.[10]

Whether or not one heeds this warning might depend, in the first instance, upon whether one regards Freud as in fact the same kind of thinker as Copernicus or Darwin, and then on numerous small local decisions concerning his use of evidence or logical procedures. The kind of unease which is generated by having to take these without being what many would regard as properly qualified – as (for example) a non-medical as well as unanalysed reader – would be more acute if one had not grown so used to it. Because all literary study is in essence multi-disciplinary, anyone to whom it matters is bound to take up positions in areas where he is not a specialist, and where even the specialists disagree. Although this does not free him from the obligation of holding views on relevant philosophical, psychological and linguistic issues which are at least defensible, it makes it seem more obvious that his first responsibility is merely to make clear what those views are. I can do that by declaring a preference for psychological reading (somewhat) in the old style because eclecticism was in fact at the heart of that approach. If the 'account of itself' which it could offer, and to which Onorato refers, is not always very coherent, that is partly because its origins and debts are so numerous and diverse. My aim in reading Wordsworth has been to consider Freud as one, very important, debt amongst the several I owe: to find some intermediate point between the illusion that he doesn't matter, and enclosure within his system and language.

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This essay on *The Prelude* therefore is simultaneously an enquiry into method, as all criticism is forced to be to some extent now that the 'structuralists' have so energetically blown the whistle on attitudes which could once be thought of as 'natural'. In its course, and in order to define better my own position, I take Onorato as representative of a psycho-analytic approach. There is something unavoidably arbitrary in that. Even before his death Freud's thought was being developed in different directions by competing groups, not notably friendly towards each other. Literary criticism which is entitled to call itself psycho-analytic today reflects the consequence of that situation by being connected with Freud in very different ways: via the ego-psychologists, for example, or Melanie Klein, or Lacan.[11] To take full account of that fact would transform what follows into *nothing but* an enquiry into method. I have concentrated on Onorato because he is the only psycho-analytic critic to have written a whole book on *The Prelude* and thus developed fully his thought. But that would not in itself be a justification if the book he wrote had dropped like a stone. A likely sign that it didn't is the inclusion of an extract from it in the section entitled 'Recent Critical Essays' in the Norton *Prelude*. There are only six other pieces in this section and their authors include critics such as Abrams, Hartman and Empson.

Wordsworth has an unusual talent for conveying the light and shade of feeling in a memorable way, as when he describes how he found himself treading water at Cambridge – 'The memory languidly revolved, the heart / Reposed in noontide rest, the inner pulse / Of contemplation almost failed to beat' (III, 336–8); or how he recovered from the effect of university life in his first summer vacation – 'As on I walked, a comfort seemed to touch / A heart that had not been disconsolate, / Strength came where weakness was not known to be, / At least not felt; and restoration came / Like an intruder knocking at the door / Of unacknowledged weariness' (IV, 143–8). But this subtle attentiveness to what he had felt in the past is secondary in him to the more important gifts or ambitions hinted at in the *Excursion* preface. That is why this enquiry is mainly concerned not with *The Prelude* as a whole, but its so-called 'spots of time' and the extent to which they can be understood or 'read'. For it is on these episodes where Wordsworth's self-understanding appears stretched to its limits,

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rather than on subtleties of self-observation which are in essence incidental, that the claims he implicitly made for himself have to rest.

A drastic shortage of appropriate terms (how else to explain the success in recent years of Joycean 'epiphany', and even the derived 'epiphanic') means that 'spots of time' is an expression with which everyone interested in literature will be familiar. Everyone interested in *The Prelude* will know the two strange episodes with which it is more specifically associated: Wordsworth's memory of waiting for some horses to take him home from school, a week or so before his father died; and his account of how, finding himself separated from an adult companion on a riding excursion, he once stumbled on through a place where a gibbet had stood and then saw, 'A naked pool that lay beneath the hills, / The beacon on the summit, and more near, / A girl who bore a pitcher on her head / And seemed with difficult steps to force her way / Against the blowing wind' (XI, 303–7). Good students read each part of *The Prelude* with care, but on the off-chance they don't, or the assumption that not all students are good, there is a well-established habit in teaching of associating these two episodes with Books I and II in any recommendations for special attention. Even though they appear in Book XI of *The Prelude*'s 1805 version (from which I quote the lines above), and in Book XII of the text published in 1850 by Wordsworth's executors, obvious thematic similarities would make this association seem reasonable without the textual evidence which could be adduced in its support. But now that a full reading text of the Two-Part *Prelude* of 1798–9 is so readily available (in, for example, the Norton *Prelude* I shall be using), it is easy to remind oneself how closely linked the spots of time and the other childhood episodes once were, and that their separation is a consequence of Wordsworth's decision to use his 1799 text as a basis for the much more comprehensively autobiographical poem in thirteen books which he finished in 1805.

The various stages in the development of the 1805 text have been very closely investigated in recent years. Describing some of them, the editor of the Two-Part *Prelude* in the 'Cornell Wordsworth' series has written, 'While the first half of Part One and its long conclusion remained in order in 1805, the breaking up of the "spots of time" and their distribution to other books pulled the center out of the poem of 1798–1799.'[12] And what was

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central in 1799 was apparently meant to provide the finale for a Five-Book version of the poem which Wordsworth was considering in the early part of 1804.[13] Although the crucial importance of the spots may not be so obvious in the structure of the 1805 *Prelude*, they remain powerfully intriguing. Through the simple but effective device of repetition, Wordsworth manages to convey the quasi-hallucinatory force of experiences which have clearly continued to haunt him. It is one of the major problems of reading any long poem that not all the parts which are especially significant for its understanding are well written. But in concentrating on the spots of time one can at least be confident that they would be generally recognized as showing Wordsworth at or near his best.

'Good Poetry' they may well be then, but what precisely is their significance? To take cover behind Jonathan Bishop's admirable directness in an article which had a good deal of currency before interpretation came to be regarded as naive: 'What sense do these crucial experiences make as we go over them in our minds? What do they appear to be about?'[14] It was the absence in the critical literature of any widely agreed answer to these questions which began this enquiry or, more accurately, the discomfort which followed the discovery of this absence after the adoption of the teaching habit just mentioned. (To recommend what you yourself don't understand can be embarrassing.) The more it continued, the more difficulties of explication drove into the background any notion of 'literary merit' as an essence which could be isolated through some distilling process, and the more I was no doubt tempted to think of *The Prelude* as an extraordinarily intriguing human document which happens to have been written in verse rather than one of the world's 'great poems'. No totally incompetent reader of verse could of course begin to understand *The Prelude*, but the meaning of competence in this context will be determined by how satisfied one is that certain passages in the poem can be both so much admired and, on the relatively infrequent occasions a serious claim is made to understand them, so very differently understood.

The spots of time present more of a problem the less one is inclined to adopt two common critical strategies for diminishing it. The spirit of the first can be conveyed with this remark from one of the most recent books entirely devoted to *The Prelude*: 'The spots of time, of course, raise perhaps the single most vexed

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question in *Prelude* criticism, and their rich and elusive suggestiveness may never – and never need – be satisfactorily explicated.'[15] To be conscious that satisfactory explication may never be achieved doesn't seem to me to take away the need. 'Elusive suggestiveness', moreover, is not *necessarily* a literary virtue (even when an autobiographer has taken what – from the point of view of literary history – is the unusual step of choosing to write his life-story in verse); and it is hardly a compliment to Wordsworth to decide that the meaning of crucial episodes in his life doesn't need to be sought for when he himself is so clearly preoccupied with that task.

It is in connection with this preoccupation that the second of the two strategies for making the spots of time less problematic becomes available. This involves accepting the obligation to interpret but only insofar as it means limiting oneself to explication of Wordsworth's own commentaries. Why do more (or other) if, as Hugh Sykes Davies has said in a reference to the spots of time, 'it is impossible to improve on Wordsworth's own generalizing comment upon such experiences and their place in the growth of the mind'.[16] Wordsworth's 'generalizing comment' in *The Prelude* is often sufficiently obscure for its explication to be in itself a feat. And since most people who write on literature hope to be able to say to themselves that at least they have been useful, to try to perform that feat (and nothing else) is understandable. But as Sykes Davies's remark may not sufficiently suggest, a more important motive for self-imposed restraint is reverence. To claim, as I would, that such reverence may be misplaced exposes one to a double charge of immodesty: of thinking one knows not only better than a genius, but better than the genius to whom the experiences at issue actually happened.

It would be hard to counter this charge without the help of one of the other great autobiographers of the Romantic period. 'But the reader,' Stendhal writes in his *Vie de Henry Brulard*, 'if there ever are any for these puerilities, will perceive without difficulty that all my *whys*, all my explanations, could be very wrong (*fautives*). All I have are very clear images, all my explanations come as I write this, forty-five years after the events.'[17] Like Wordsworth, Stendhal was what is usually called a genius yet he implicitly recognizes not only the commonplace that a man is unlikely to be the best interpreter of all the details in his own past, but also that to write an autobiography is to invite

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the reader to a discussion of it. A suspicion that the invitation will be accepted even if it isn't sent out probably makes his gesture less ingenuous than it seems. He wouldn't have needed to make it had he believed there could be a whole class of readers who felt their activities should be limited to working out what his 'whys' meant. The existence of that class in Wordsworth's case has less to do with a tone in his commentaries more uninviting than either Rousseau's or Stendhal's (which it certainly is) than with nineteenth-century English bardolatry. Even today there is a habit of reverence inherited from past critics which is powerfully operative but not necessarily synonymous with respect, and it may be that the best way a reader can show his appreciation of *The Prelude* is by the whole-heartedness with which he enters a discussion that, as Stendhal appears to have suspected, any autobiography cannot help but propose (even when it happens to be in verse).

What follows, then, is based on the premise that reading an autobiography means entering into debate with its author about the meaning of his experience (taking into account, of course, not only what but how he writes – his 'style'), and that the inevitable outcome will be the elaboration of an idea of 'self' which is by no means identical with the author's own. But what will be the relation of these ideas of 'self' to a putative historical or biographical reality? Without having some notions on that vexed topic from the outset, it becomes very difficult to establish the relevance to episodes like the 1805 'spots' of, on the one hand, earlier and later drafts of the same incidents or accounts of similar moments in non-autobiographical works, letters etc.; and, on the other, the so-called facts of history and biography. In the past, the practice of most English critics has been to make everything grist to their mill. In building up a composite figure, they have tended to give each item of information (whatever its source) similar status; that is, if its status hasn't varied with the degree to which it supports the critic's view of whatever he happens to be discussing.

The difficulties which arise here will become clearer as I go on, but some of them can be illustrated by a brief, initial consideration of the first spot of time. In the 1805 version, which I shall be using, when the frightened young Wordsworth stumbles down into a hollow where the gibbet had been, he sees cut in

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the turf the name of the murderer whose body had once hung there. No reference to letters in the grass can be found in the earlier version of 1798–9 where Wordsworth talks only (or instead) of 'a long green ridge of turf. . . / Whose shape was like a grave'.[18] Unless one is reading these two versions with a preternatural innocence of biographical intention, one is bound to wonder which of the two corresponds closest to reality ('what really happened'), and be led from there to other issues, equally thorny. Thus Jonathan Wordsworth, quoting initially from the 1805 version, writes,

> 'The monumental writing was engraven / In times long past' – Thomas Nicholson, the murderer in question, had been hanged for killing a local butcher in August 1767, only two and a half years before the urchin's birth. The letters, even if carved *very* 'soon after that fell deed was wrought', were at most seven or eight years old; the gibbet, unless made of remarkably inferior wood, would not even have fallen, much less 'mouldered down'. For all the circumstantial detail, we are dealing not with fact, but with poetry of the imagination.[19]

The way in which the verse continues after the first phrase to be quoted here ('and still', Wordsworth says, 'from year to year, / By superstition of the neighbourhood / The grass is cleared away; and to this hour / The letters are all fresh and visible') suggests that in writing 'long past' he may be looking back from the time of composition. But, although this could solve the problem of the letters, it does not affect that of the 'gibbet-mast' which depends rather on the exact meaning of 'mouldered down' and the state of the timber industry in the late eighteenth century. More importantly, it also depends on the degree to which childhood memories are the products of fantasy or affected by the need (in this case) for a presentation in artistic form. All these issues are too awkward to be wafted away by a reference to 'poetry of the imagination'. If an implication of that phrase (in its opposition to 'fact') is that Wordsworth was in no way constrained in composition by any need to recall the past as accurately as he could, it is one I find hard to accept easily. Although it can be shown that in certain parts of *The Prelude* Wordsworth is 'led on' by words to the obvious detriment of truth (see below p. 30), the impression he nevertheless gives in it is of a man striving to record with precision. Unless one is to face the problems raised by a writer such as Frank Harris (who also had plenty of imagination), autobiography needs to inspire that kind of trust. Its reader

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