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0521319374 - The Pedlar Tintern Abbey: The Two-Part Prelude

William Wordsworth

Excerpt

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Introduction

Readers of Wordsworth's great autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, must very often have wished it was shorter. Few can have been aware that the poet had at one stage written a version covering the most important periods of his life, childhood and adolescence, in under a thousand lines. The two-Part *Prelude* (1799) is an independent and beautifully self-contained work, which not only includes most of the famous poetry that has become known through later forms of the poem, but presents the great sequences – the 'spots of time'¹ especially – in their original and most striking combination. Wordsworth did not himself publish any version of *The Prelude*, but he worked on the poem intermittently for more than forty years. His final text, made neater but on the whole weakened by revision, was published by his executors in 1850. Seventy-six years later, Ernest de Selincourt printed from the manuscripts the earliest of the full-length *Preludes*, belonging to 1805; first publication of the original two-Part poem was delayed till 1973.² In the present volume the text completed in 1799 is offered for the first time in a separate and annotated edition. For the convenience of the reader, it is prefaced by similarly annotated texts of the two poems that form a natural introduction: *The Pedlar* and *Tintern Abbey*, both of 1798.

The beginnings of Wordsworth's great philosophical poetry can be dated very accurately to February 1798. The poet had moved with his sister Dorothy to Alfoxden in Somerset to be close to Coleridge, who was living in the nearby village of Nether Stowey. The previous summer, Wordsworth had composed his great narrative poem, *The Ruined Cottage*, and in November Coleridge had written two of his most famous works, *Kubla Khan* and *The Ancient Mariner*.³ Both men were

¹ Childhood memories that had particular importance for Wordsworth; discussed below, pp. 10–13.

² It was first published in *The Poems of William Wordsworth*, selected and ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, Limited Editions Club (Cambridge, 1973). Since then it has appeared in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* and been edited with photographs and transcripts of the manuscript by Stephen Parrish as a volume in the Cornell Wordsworth Series (Ithaca, N.Y., 1977). Most recently it has appeared in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York, 1979).

³ Both *The Ruined Cottage* and *The Ancient Mariner* existed at this stage in short versions that have not been preserved.

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suddenly writing at their very best – as indeed was Dorothy, whose *Alfoxden Journal* tells us so much about the life they were all living, and the materials out of which the poetry was being made. *The Pedlar*, composed by Wordsworth in February, was designed to go into *The Ruined Cottage*; and though it is the poet's first autobiographical work – and sections of it were later included in *The Prelude* – it is written in the third person. In writing a life-history for the narrator of Margaret's tragic story, Wordsworth makes use of his own experience not just because it comes readily to mind, but because he now sees *The Ruined Cottage* as a way of expressing new philosophical views he has taken over from Coleridge.

Coleridge was a Unitarian; in fact in January 1798 he had applied for a job as a minister. Following the great scientist and founder of modern Unitarianism, Joseph Priestley, he denied the doctrine of the Trinity, believing instead that Christ was the son of Joseph and an ordinary man. The positive aspect of this belief, which is to be found in a succession of Coleridge poems of the period, and which inspired the Wordsworth of *The Pedlar* and *Tintern Abbey*, was that God is present in the natural world as a pervasive life-force,

A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

(*Tintern Abbey*, 101–3)

To Coleridge, and to the Wordsworth of early 1798, it seemed that God's presence could actually be perceived in Nature:

in all things

He saw one life, and felt that it was joy.

(*Pedlar*, 217–18)

The *Pedlar* was created by Wordsworth as an ideal – a man fully responsive to the One Life, and therefore responsive also to his fellow men. Looking back, it seemed to the poet that his own upbringing among the lakes and mountains of Cumbria had been especially favoured, and childhood is offered in his poem not just as a period of especial happiness, but as the source of adult strength and security:

He many an evening to his distant home
In solitude returning saw the hills
Grow larger in the darkness, all alone
Beheld the stars come out above his head,
And travelled through the wood, no comrade near
To whom he might confess the things he saw.

So the foundations of his mind were laid.

In such communion, not from terror free,
While yet a child, and long before his time,

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He had perceived the presence and the power
Of greatness . . .
(*Pedlar*, 20–30)

It is interesting to put beside this very early piece of Wordsworth autobiographical poetry, a passage from *Frost at Midnight*, the poem that Coleridge was writing in the same month. He too is thinking about childhood and the formative influence of the One Life, but his terms are more evidently Christian:

thou, my babe, shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain . . .
so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.
(*Frost at Midnight*, 54–62)

The two poets were influencing each other in everything they wrote. Coleridge, who had at this stage scarcely been near a lake or ancient mountain, is to be seen wishing for his son, Hartley, the landscape of a Wordsworthian childhood; Wordsworth meanwhile confers upon the child Pedlar (effectively upon his own earlier self) a form of communion with the One Life. At times the views that Wordsworth holds at this period do find expression in terms of God, but he seems to have taken over Coleridge's Unitarianism in a very undoctinal way, almost as if it were the confirmation of something he instinctively believed. Coleridge as philosopher and theologian was trying to understand (often in scientific terms that now seem crazy) how it was that a God who was all spirit could be present in the solid matter that composes the universe.¹ Wordsworth's focus was quite different. He too was looking for an explanation, but it was for his own sense of the numinous, his experience that in certain exalted moods the individual is capable of reaching out beyond the boundaries of the self.²

The Pedlar and *Tintern Abbey* have it in common that they offer these models as mystical experience, a loss of bodily awareness, and merging of the self into a total harmony that is love, or joy, or God. Looking out over the coastline at sunrise, the Pedlar responds to the sea and the landscape as sharing his own 'gladness and deep joy' – or

¹Priestley's experiments led, for instance, to speculation that God might be present as electricity, charging the apparently lifeless material world.

²For discussion of these moods, see Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Borders of Vision* (Oxford, 1982).

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perhaps it is that he is sharing theirs:

The ocean and the earth beneath him lay
 In gladness and deep joy. The clouds were touched,
 And in their silent faces did he read
 Unutterable love. Sound needed none,
 Nor any voice of joy: his spirit drank
 The spectacle. Sensation, soul, and form,
 All melted into him; they swallowed up
 His animal being. In them did he live,
 And by them did he live – they were his life.
 In such access of mind, in such high hour
 Of visitation from the living God,
 He did not feel the God, he felt his works.
 Thought was not; in enjoyment it expired.
 Such hour by prayer or praise was unprofaned;
 He neither prayed, nor offered thanks or praise;
 His mind was a thanksgiving to the power
 That made him. It was blessedness and love.

(Pedlar, 98–114)

There is an interchanging of roles that goes on throughout the passage, as the Pedlar's feelings are either conferred upon, or felt to be present in, the external world. The clouds seem human not only in their silent faces, but in being 'touched', responsive; and the Pedlar receives back his own sensation as a gift. Most strange and powerful of all these exchanges is the 'access of mind'. It is as though mind has become a quality beyond the self, and the poet raises his verse to a new rhetorical level in describing the experience as a 'high hour / Of visitation from the living God'. What follows is quite unexpected. God, who has seemed to have the full support of Christian tradition as he carries out his impressive polysyllabic 'visitation', is suddenly diminished in a line of monosyllables that take from him all grandeur and personal authority: 'He did not feel the God, he felt his works'. The definite article seems especially belittling – to be '*the* God', as opposed to God himself, is well on the way to being merely *a* god. Power is transferred from the Creator to his creation; and as a part of this, the Pedlar gives thanks not through the time-honoured rituals of prayer and praise, but simply in the act of response. Like the clouds he is touched, and the love that he reads in their faces is the sensation – the blessing and the blessedness – of his own mind.

Important as the *Pedlar* lines are, they are rather inaccessible as poetry. We are conscious all the time of being presented with an ideal. Wordsworth's tones seem needlessly emphatic (the heavy assonance and alliteration of 'Such hour by prayer or praise was unprofaned' is the extreme example), and the verse because it is made up of so many

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individually impressive statements lacks the fluency that would draw us in. The comparable passage in *Tintern Abbey* is far more persuasive. With the help of Coleridge's Conversation Poems, *Frost at Midnight* especially, Wordsworth has found a way of making the big assertions, and yet staying on a personal level. Instead of poetry that describes a state of mind, he offers now the perfect evocation of a mood, achieved through a building up of rhythms that enforce and complement the claims that are being made.

Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime: that blessed mood
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened – that serene and blessed mood
In which the affections gently lead us on,
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body and become a living soul,
While, with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

(*Tintern Abbey*, 36–50)

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this great passage – aside from the sheer quality of the writing – is the situation in which the poet's mood has been experienced. Wordsworth under his dark sycamore in early July 1798 is not responding directly to the 'steep and lofty cliffs' and other features of the Wye Valley above Tintern Abbey; he is recalling a response made, at different times and in different places, to a landscape of the mind – a peculiarly vivid memory that had been stored up from an earlier visit to the scene that is now in front of him. That Wordsworth placed an unusual importance on visual memory is shown as early as September 1790 when he comments to Dorothy on the beauty of the Alps: 'perhaps scarce a day of my life will pass in which I shall not derive some happiness from these images'.¹ Storing up images (mental pictures) seems at times to have been almost a conscientious process; but of course it worked because of the strength of the poet's original emotion. Once again it is *The Pedlar* that offers the most useful insights. 'Deep feelings',

¹To Dorothy Wordsworth, 6 September 1790; *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787–1805* ('EY' in future references), revised by Chester L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967), p. 36.

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Wordsworth writes,

had impressed

Great objects on his mind with portraiture
 And colour so distinct that on his mind
 They lay like substances, and almost seemed
 To haunt the bodily sense . . .

he thence attained

An *active* power to fasten images
 Upon his brain, and on their pictured lines
 Intensely brooded, even till they acquired
 The liveliness of dreams.

(Pedlar, 30–4, 39–43; Wordsworth’s italics)

If one thinks of the various stages of this process in the case of *Tintern Abbey*, the story begins in August 1793 when Wordsworth in an exhausted state of mind first encountered the Wye Valley, having walked largely without food across Salisbury Plain. Either deliberately using his ‘*active* power to fasten images / Upon his brain’, or simply as the result of an emotional response to the scenery, he carries away with him especially vivid memories. In their strange tangibility, these are felt to ‘haunt the bodily sense’, just as ‘the sounding cataract’ is said to have haunted the poet ‘like a passion’ (*Tintern Abbey*, 77–8) at the time of his original visit. Fascinated by the clarity of the Tintern memories, the mind returns to them again and again in the years that follow, brooding over them in a process that creates for them the imaginative quality of a dream. At all periods in Wordsworth’s life such recollections were a source of delight – the daffodils, for instance, that he and Dorothy had seen on Ullswater in April 1802 are said two years later to ‘flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude’ (*Daffodils*, 15–16) – but only in *Tintern Abbey* does he make the extraordinary claim that images of Nature within the mind can lead to a mystical perception of God.

Perhaps the belief in the One Life was too exalted to last, or maybe it needed to be sustained by companionship with the Unitarian Coleridge; at all events, extreme pantheist claims of this kind, though they do appear elsewhere in Wordsworth’s poetry, are typical only of his stay near Coleridge at Alfoxden in the first half of 1798. When he begins work on the two-Part *Prelude* in the autumn, the poet and Dorothy are at Goslar in Germany, and away from any direct influence. His new poem shows him to be still preoccupied with memory, and with the effect of Nature on the human mind, but he is interested now in different, less tranquil, forms of experience, and he is looking for different kinds of explanation. Taking up a notebook later used by Dorothy for one of her *Journals*, Wordsworth asks himself a series of questions: ‘*Was it for this . . . ? For this didst thou, / O Derwent . . . ? Beloved*

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Derwent, fairest of all streams, / *Was it for this . . . ?*' Already, it seems, he is worried at his failure to get on with writing *The Recluse*, the great philosophical work which had been planned with Coleridge in the spring, and which would in fact never be completed.¹ How could he explain his present apathy when the childhood that he looked back on had seemed to promise so much?

It is clear from the notebook that the two-Part *Prelude* had not been planned. It began because Wordsworth allowed his mind to play over one or two early memories that had come to seem specially important:

'twas my joy
To wander half the night among the cliffs
And the smooth hollows where the woodcocks ran
Along the moonlight turf . . .

Oh, when I have hung
Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass
Or half-inch fissures in the slippery rock
But ill sustained, and almost, as it seemed,
Suspended by the blast which blew amain,
Shouldering the naked crag . . .

(1799, l. 30–3, 57–62)

As well as their vividness, the memories have in common the presence of fear. Like the boy Pedlar who 'travelled through the wood, no comrade near / To whom he might confess the things he saw' (ll. 24–5), the child is in almost all these episodes frightened at his solitude. Suspended above the raven's nest he experiences a sort of awe – 'With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind / Blow through my ears' (l. 64–5) – and the woodcock-snaring episode ends with still more positive menace:

and when the deed was done
I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
Of undistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod.

(l. 45–9)

Though as readers we know that the child's fears are imaginary (produced on this occasion by guilt at having stolen a woodcock from somebody else's snare), we are invited to enter into his mind, experience with him the sense of a punishing supernatural presence. More surprisingly we are also asked to regard his experience as formative, beneficial, evidence that the poet had been from the first 'a chosen son'

¹For an account of Wordsworth's forty years of hope and disappointment over *The Recluse*, see *The Borders of Vision*, Epilogue, 'The Light That Never Was'.

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(*Pedlar*, 326). ‘The mind of man’, Wordsworth writes impressively,
is fashioned and built up

Even as a strain of music. I believe
That there are spirits which, when they would form
A favored being, from his very dawn
Of infancy do open out the clouds
As at the touch of lightning, seeking him
With gentle visitation . . .

(l. 67–73)

The placing of ‘I believe’ alone at the end of a line sounds very much like the beginning of a Creed, and in Wordsworth’s mind the spirits he refers to must be related to the One Life of *The Pedlar* and *Tintern Abbey* which he had certainly taken seriously. Their being in the plural, though, makes them seem more literary, and they don’t really seem very different from the guardian-spirits who appear in so many eighteenth-century poems merely as decoration. Wordsworth’s purpose, however, is clear. The spirits represent forces that he believes to have been at work in his childhood, and they enable him to distinguish between formative influences that were gentle in their effect, and the harsher kinds of experience that seemed in his case to have been more important:

Others too there are, who use,
Yet haply aiming at the self-same end,
Severer interventions, ministry
More palpable – and of their school was I.

(l. 77–80)

Wordsworth is not just talking about happy and unhappy childhood experiences. There is an odd mixture of tenderness and power even in the image he chooses of ‘gentle visitation’ – ‘the touch of lightning’ – and however one may react to the literariness of the spirit world, what the poet’s language (‘use’, ‘aiming’, ‘end’, ‘interventions’, ‘ministry’, ‘school’) is stressing again and again is his sense of having been positively singled out. Five years later, in the beautiful *Intimations Ode* (1802–4), he goes so far as to give thanks for the guilts and terrors he has had to put up with as a child – the ‘blank misgivings of a creature / Moving about in worlds not realized’ (ll. 142–3).

As a climax to the ‘severer interventions’ that make up the first section of 1799, Part 1, Wordsworth offers the episode of the stolen boat. Rowing out onto Ullswater by night, the child fixes his eye on the ridge that forms the horizon, and is startled by the sudden appearance of a larger, more distant, crag as he gets further from the shore.¹ In these terms it all seems very simple, but for the child it had been a

¹For diagram, see note to 1799, l. 107–10.

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moment of 'blank misgiving', and the experience draws from Wordsworth some of his finest poetry:

twenty times
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And as I rose upon the stroke my boat
Went heaving through the water like a swan –
When from behind that rocky steep, till then
The bound of the horizon, a huge cliff,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head. I struck, and struck again,
And, growing still in stature, the huge cliff
Rose up between me and the stars, and still,
With measured motion, like a living thing
Strode after me. With trembling hands I turned,
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the cavern of the willow-tree.

(l. 103–16)

Wordsworth's sense of what it was like to be the child – first proud of his swan-like boat, then terrified by the motion that his own rowing has imparted to the cliff, then stealing guilty through the silent water – is exceptionally strong. On this occasion he takes us beyond the experience and its immediate effects, and into the mind that 'works' (like the swell of the sea) 'with a dim and undetermined sense / Of unknown modes of being':

In my thoughts
There was a darkness – call it solitude,
Or blank desertion – no familiar shapes
Of hourly objects, images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,
But huge and mighty forms that do not live
Like living men moved slowly through my mind
By day, and were the trouble of my dreams.

(l. 121–9)

Rising up between him and the stars (which have been a reassuring natural presence), the mountain deprives the child of 'the ballast of familiar life' (1805, vii. 604) – images of dependable ordinary things that have been impressed on his mind as in *The Pedlar*. He has lost his sense of actuality, become indeed 'a creature / Moving about in worlds not realized'. Worse still is the new 'moving about' that is going on within the world of his mind – a slow torture as the mountain possesses his imagination, striding through the internal solitude with a 'measured motion' that gives it life, but gives it also the terrible power of the automaton.

At this stage in the two-Part *Prelude* readers of the 1805 and 1850

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texts will have noticed that the long introduction to Book I has yet to be written, but may have seen few other differences. In 1799, however – and only in 1799 – the episodes that have so far been discussed are balanced by a further series: the great ‘spots of time’ sequence, which in 1805 is moved from its original place, one episode going to Book v, the other two to Book xi¹. The result of moving the sequence was not merely to weaken Book I in later versions of the poem, but to destroy a very important progression of thought. The memories that lead up to the stealing of the boat show in the child an imaginative response that is valued by the adult poet both for its vividness, and because it seems to justify his feelings of having been singled out; but no links are made between past and present. In the ‘spots of time’, written two or three months later at the beginning of 1799, Wordsworth goes on to suggest a positive continuity within the mind. Childhood experience is not just interesting to look back on, it is the source of the poet’s strength at the time of writing:

There are in our existence spots of time
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed
By trivial occupations and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds –
Especially the imaginative power –
Are nourished and invisibly repaired.
Such moments chiefly seem to have their date
In our first childhood.

(l. 288–96)

In the background is *Tintern Abbey*: once again Wordsworth is talking about a process that lightens ‘the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world’ (ll. 40–2). And once again the process works through the tendency of the mind to go back to memories that have achieved a special importance. In *Tintern Abbey*, however, the memories had been of landscape, and had led to a mystical seeing into the life of things; now they are of personal experience, and the mind acknowledges no power beyond its own. The new claims ought to be less impressive, but Wordsworth himself doesn’t seem to think them so. For the first time in his writings he has become preoccupied with his own creativity. The memories that concern him have a ‘fructifying virtue’ – a power to make the writer fruitful.

No kind of justice can be done to the ‘spots of time’ in a brief account. The sequence as a whole, 114 lines in its original form, must be among the two or three greatest passages of blank verse that

¹ 1799, l. 258–79 become 1805, v. 45–73, and l. 288–374 are revised and extended to form 1805, xi. 257–388.