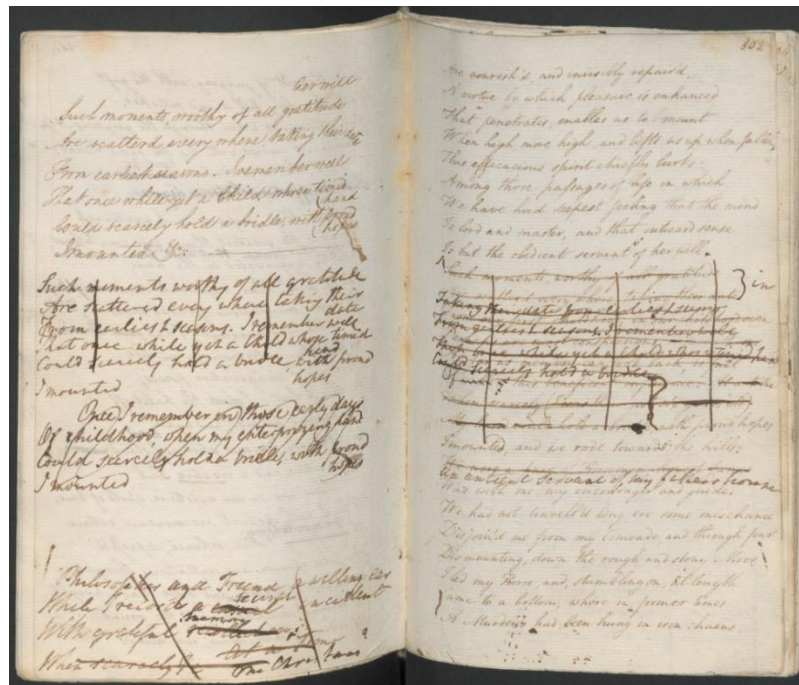

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‘A Higher Power than Fancy Gave Assurance of Some Work of Glory’: Poetic Vocation and the Growth of the Poet’s Mind in William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*



Manuscript of *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth. BL, undated.

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16TH OF JUNE, 2016

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Abstract

William Wordsworth is one of the eminent founding fathers of the English Romantic tradition. His long and unfinished autobiographical poem, *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind*, is regarded as a milestone of English Romanticism. This Degree Paper is concerned with Wordsworth's representation of individual talent and genius as stemming from a deep understanding of and communion with nature. While scholars have often viewed the narcissistic tendencies of the Romantics in the negative, my thesis in the present project is based on the positive character of narcissism. Does Wordsworth's love towards nature foster his heightened vision of himself as a man of genius? Why does his mind grow as it does his deep understanding of nature? The analyses that attend to these questions point at Wordsworth's shifting representations of nature as a healing force that can only cure the individual poet of his self-doubt.

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Introduction

“What is a poet?” asked William Wordsworth and Samuel T. Coleridge in their Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in 1802. Philip Sydney had formulated exactly the same question in his *Defence of Poesie* in 1579: “What is a poet”? While both texts expound of what is ‘old’ and ‘new’ poetry for them, they understand the figure of the poet in a different manner. Sydney defines a poet in terms of what he does –the poet masters “the art of imitation and feigning”, and “writes things like the truth” (125)– whereas Wordsworth and Coleridge are concerned with what the poet “is”. Romantic poets usually fulfil the requirements established in their description: extremely sensible and isolated individuals in contact with Nature who were capable of accessing wisdom through the Imagination. Poets were also committed to share this wisdom with their community, thus becoming a bard or guide. However, William Wordsworth went a step further and subjected his life to a process of poetic self-analysis in order to discover the growth of his mind from childhood to adulthood. The author devoted most of his life, at irregular intervals that would even span forty years, to the composition of what most critics consider his masterpiece: *The Prelude* (1850).

Wordsworth’s autobiographical piece results in what Jonathan Wordsworth defined as “the first example of what has since become a major genre: the account of the growth of an individual mind to artistic maturity, and of the sources of its creative powers” (1979: ix). Nonetheless, the first intention of the author was to write a deeply philosophical poem about Man, Nature and Society, called *The Recluse* –to which *The Prelude* would be a mere ‘ante-chapel’. However, he committed himself so much to the composition of *The Prelude* that it became what Kenneth R. Johnston calls his “unintended masterpiece” (2003: 72). This work is divided in fourteen books in the posthumously publication of 1850.

Although *The Prelude* comprises fourteen books, the centrality of the present project falls on the first two books, entitled “*Childhood and School-Time*”. What is interesting is that Book I and Book II of the final edition were actually a finished two-part poem which Wordsworth wrote in 1798-9. Scholars refer to it as *The Two-Part Prelude*. As Stephen Gill remarked, “Books I and II are the foundation of *The Prelude*. The childhood experiences themselves substantiate the poet’s claim that his soul had a ‘Fair seed-time’ (I, 305) (1991: 60). The events that took place during the poet’s infancy were of major importance to construct the genius that he later became. For this reason, this Degree Paper focuses on the concentrated power of the first two books which deal with the foundational moments of his poetic and self-examining impulse.

The centrality of nature in William Wordsworth’s life and literary career is well-known. In the childhood episodes of *The Prelude*, Nature grants him the “breeze” that becomes his vocation. Virtue awakens with this first breeze, which later transforms into a tempest within himself, thus starting the activity of his mind. As a child and as an adult, Wordsworth enjoyed his full-immersion in natural scenery. In his earlier years, he drank from Nature, which peopled his mind with unconscious images of the sublime and made him love them (I, 546-7). “Heightened emotions [lead] to heightened response” (Wordsworth 1970: 580). This gave the boy a predisposition to extreme sensibility which transferred to the adult in the most mature form of creativity. As Mary Jacobus beautifully puts it: “The child is written; the adult deciphers.” (1989: 151).

The thesis of this project is drawn from the analysis of the construction of the figure of the poet in Book I and II of *The Prelude*: especially, the positive character of Wordsworth’s awareness of his elevated position as a poet. I intend to tackle the following questions, with no pretence to finding definitive answers: where does Wordsworth’s high notion of himself originate? Is it triggered by his communion with Nature, that bestows

on him its exalted attributes, or does it stem from a narcissistic and self-centred intellectual recreation of the figure of “the poet”? Although Robert Crossley considers that Wordsworth “tried imagining an epic centred on “some unknown man” who “suffered in silence for the love of truth” (2015: 121), I argue that the author did not consider himself “some unknown man”. Wordsworth did consider himself superior, but it might not have been a matter of pedantry. The connotations of his self-awareness or self-centredness are not negative, on the contrary: his narcissism as an artist is poetically constructive. The discovery and exaltation of the “author” in the Romantic period has often led to the criticism that the main topics of poets and writers are themselves and their emotions. Therefore, writing a verse autobiography might be regarded as the epitome of narcissism.

In her article on *The Prelude* “Reflections on Reflections: Wordsworth’s Narcissistic Landscapes” (2011), Aurélie Thiria argues that the poet, much learned in the disciplines of the picturesque, used landscapes to implicitly reflect his image and marvel at it. “[Wordsworth] admires himself in what he sees: the surrounding Nature is his priceless mirror. But because this self-love troubles him, he finds indirect ways to enjoy it, and turns lake reflections into intellectual ones” (2011: 55). In my opinion, this self-love did not trouble him. Wordsworth embraces it naturally, though it is true that he avoids the risk of the explicit and prefers to use elaborated metaphors to express it. This self-love originates in Nature, as explained by Thiria, as an imitation of a mirror effect: “The poet comes to love himself through other objects that love themselves” (59).

Wordsworth’s absorption in himself, his narcissism or self-centredness, cannot detach itself from the Romantics’ discovery of the figure of the genius. Even though autobiography as a Romantic genre is still an understudied subject due in part to the difficulties in establishing both the form and the content of what constitutes

autobiographical matter, these “elastic boundaries” (Stelzig, 2009) of the genre started to take shape in the Romantic period because of the belief in the necessity to record the poetic career of talented and visionary individuals: “Wordsworth was not alone in becoming philosophical by getting personal” (Johnston 2003: 74); what Wordsworth intended to explain was the nature of “genius” –understood as being ‘original’ and not ‘imitative’– through an accessible work written in the language of man, but above all, he wanted to understand himself. That is why *The Prelude* is “always and everywhere” about himself (Johnston 2003: 74). Also out of his narcissism grows the discrepancy between the perception of his talent and the lack of recognition of his work in the early stages of his career. This aspect will also be dealt with in this paper.

The secondary sources used to complement my research are a selection of articles and books that approach *The Prelude* from different critical perspectives in an attempt to ascertain Wordsworth’s authorial intentions. The bedrock of my thesis –the positive foundation of narcissism in Wordsworth’s poetry by dint of being blessed by “the breezes that breathe the breath of paradise”, and therefore, mirroring the narcissistic qualities of Nature itself– is mostly challenged by Geoffrey H. Hartman in his article “A Poet’s Progress: Wordsworth and the *Via Naturaliter Negativa*” (1962). In this article, Hartman claims that the poet transcends Nature through his Imagination. Thus, “Wordsworth not only cannot, he *need* not steal the initiative from Nature.” (1962: 602). I will attempt to defend that Wordsworth *always* needed Nature to use his Imagination, because she is the source of his “visionary power” (II, 311), and not vice versa. Nature would make the poet, not the other way round. M.H. Abrams wrote that a distinctive element in the poetry of Wordsworth is not the “attribution of life and soul to nature, but the repeated formulation of this outer life as a contribution of, or else as in constant reciprocation with, the life and soul of the observer” (1971: 64).

William Wordsworth suffered from what W. J. T. Mitchell describes as “The new moral principle of “Vanity” [which] requires the collapsing of any distinction between the private man and the public work, and requires the revelations of the autobiographical, confessional mode.” (1990: 654). The author sacrificed his life to his poetic career because he firmly believed that his work was worthy of being transcendent and not forgotten. Thus *The Prelude*, considered by scholars as his indisputable masterpiece, becomes an unfinished work, or a work-in-progress that captures everything he ever experienced.

Chapter 1

The Parental Care of Nature in Wordsworth’s Childhood

The magnificent landscape in which William Wordsworth spent most of his life deeply impressed him. He was born in the Lake District of Northern England, characterised by beautiful rivers, lakes, and green hills. Being in contact with Nature became essential to his poetic career even in his early years: “I look about; and should the chosen guide / Be nothing better than a wandering cloud, / I cannot miss my way. I breathe again!” (*Prel.* I, 16-8). Nature was always dear to him, but it was in his childhood when the effect of this connection was most powerful, and he indeed realised that he was “Much favoured in [his] birthplace” (I, 303).

As W. J. B. Owen emphasizes in his preface to the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* edited in 1969, Wordsworth internalised “the educative value of the mere experience of the natural scene” (xxviii). The author took long and solitary walks in the woods even when he was as young as 5 years old, and became an orphan at the age of 13. The role of Nature as a mother –and as a teacher– is of extreme relevance for the poet.

Stephen Gill considers that the culminating passage in Book II is from line 170 to 180: “This beautiful passage is characteristic of many such in the first two books of *The Prelude*, which celebrate the intense experiences of childhood with a power unparalleled in English poetry.” (1991: 58). These “intense experiences” took place when Wordsworth was surrounded by Nature. It was with no doubt the most important aspect of his childhood, exercising parental care and teaching the author to love Nature itself. He explains that “already I began / To love the sun; a boy I loved the sun” (II, 176-7). In fact, according to Wordsworth himself, “*the* formative moment in his poetic life [...] was once noticing the outline of an oak against the sun setting in the west. From that moment, he said, ‘I date... my consciousness of the infinite variety of natural appearances.’” (note to *An Evening Walk*)” (Gill 1991: 44).

Wordsworth learned that “the natural world offered a subject for contemplation and a source of delight” (Gill 1991: 45) and realised that “the soft breeze [could] come / To none more grateful than to [him]” (I, 5-9). Often he expresses his gratitude towards Nature for choosing him and granting the visionary power that allowed him to understand not only himself but also the rest of humanity. It is Nature that creates the Poet, and he already considered himself as being such a figure from a very early age, stating in Book II that he looked for a dwelling “More worthy of a *poet*’s love” (II, 147, my emphasis). Because of Nature, Wordsworth became aware of his self-value already in his infancy. As stated in the introduction of the present project, this narcissism does not have the inherent negative connotations of the concept; “this infant sensibility” was in Wordsworth “Augmented and sustained” (II, 270, 272) and because he noticed that he was special, he could develop his potential and become a “Prophet of Nature” (XIII, 442).

However, the author of *The Prelude* did not always believe in himself. The “chosen son” (III, 82) did not doubt that “Nature intended him for a poet” (Hartman 1962:

603), but what he did doubt was whether he would be able to fulfil his mission. In the first two books, there are indeed passages where Wordsworth regrets and questions the choice of Nature. He did not feel that his abilities could rise to the challenge, and asks: “Was it for this” (I, 269) that Nature gifted him with the superior sensibility and powers to be a Poet? He is frustrated, but Geoffrey Hartman suggests that this is false humbleness. I would not completely agree with Hartman in this case, because it was important for William Wordsworth, the poet, to make sense of the source of his vocation and its implications from an early age, since understanding himself provided a definition of what a poet *is*, not only *does*. The inexperience of the child and adolescent could not frame what he intended to create. Wordsworth mentions his predecessors constantly, especially John Milton, to whom he reserved a special admiration. Later in this project I will discuss that Wordsworth interpreted that the purpose of his talent was to surpass his master and become the Milton of his age. But again, age was limiting him. He felt intensely, but was not able to transmit it through his poems, for he was still merely a child. He hoped “That mellow years will bring a riper mind / And a clearer insight” (I, 236-7). And yet, his position kept favouring the mind and feelings of the child even in his adulthood, feeling nostalgia towards his earlier years.

The memories of his childhood, which Wordsworth remembers still so clearly, create a conflict within himself which increases his feeling of disassociation and frustration. Although Jonathan Wordsworth argues that “the memories are restorative and non-nostalgic” (1970: 571) I firmly believe that the effect is the contrary. Books I and II are permeated by an impossibility of recovering the past which affects Wordsworth’s writing. The author makes constant claims about how he remembers that “even then / I held unconscious intercourse with beauty / Old as creation” (I, 561-3) and “even then... Nature spake to me / Rememberable things” (I, 585, 587-8), nevertheless Mary Jacobus

argues that Wordsworth is unable of “representing the child’s state of mind” and this seems to mark a repression (1989: 17). Indeed, this frustration is due to the fact that he is unable to disentangle the past from the present and because he cannot represent the feelings of the child of the past as faithfully as he would like to. Therefore, “two consciousnesses” are created:

A tranquillising spirit presses now
On my corporeal frame, so wide appears
The vacancy between me and those days
Which yet have such self-presence in my mind,
That, musing on them, often do I seem
Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
And of some other Being. (II, 27-33)

Although Jacobus avoids the straightforward interpretation of these “two consciousnesses” and allows for a more complex meaning, I would agree with Gill and say that, “To put it simply: the Wordsworth who began *The Prelude* was not the Wordsworth who finished it, and his awareness of that fact is one of the shaping powers of the poem.” (1991: 11), and therefore, the 5-10-year-old Wordsworth, the protagonist of the first two books, is far away from the Wordsworth who started writing *The Prelude*.

This first section intended to make clear that Wordsworth’s childhood was undeniably marked by “the filial bond / Of nature that connect him with the world” (II, 243-4). Because of this bond he understood that the source of his visionary power was Nature, and from this originates his narcissism. It does not find its origin on materiality – such as egoism–, but rather it is an exaltation of his love for Nature that inverts the negative sign of his narcissism. The starting and foundational point in which it was internalised was his childhood. In fact, Wordsworth refers to the figure of “the Infant Babe” (II, 233) who, according to Jonathan Wordsworth, “can [already] tell us which are

the sources of the adult creative power” (1970: 582). The author wrote *The Prelude*, in part, to prove to Nature –and to himself– that it was “not in vain / Nor profitless” (I, 591-2) that he became the chosen one. However, Stephen Gill considers that acknowledging that “[Wordsworth] was unique, or that the context of his early life was the only possible one in which a human being could develop” are absurd claims (1991: 61). I completely disagree, because indeed those two claims are what shape Books I and II, where Wordsworth is constantly making reference to his own awareness of being different and superior *precisely* because of the natural landscape that surrounded him, which granted him the supreme sensibility of a Poet.

Chapter 2

The Role of Nature in the Construction of the Genius

As already mentioned in the previous section, the construction of William Wordsworth as an inspired Poet started in his childhood, but it was his creative maturity what, eventually, allowed him to produce his major work. There are different approaches concerning the role of Nature in the growth of Wordsworth’s mind. What has been stated and is obvious by now, is that Nature deeply impressed him as a young boy. But did Wordsworth transcend Nature and reach the higher state of his qualities thanks to his Imagination? To put it another way: did Wordsworth’s Imagination become independent from Nature? This question will be discussed in the present section, and the position which will be defended is that his Imagination never went beyond Nature; it originated in it and remained dependent on it throughout his life. This claim will be supported by a brief analysis of *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* (1798).

Both Robert Barth and Geoffrey H. Hartman support the hypothesis that Wordsworth's Imagination disentangled from Nature after his childhood. Barth considers Imagination to be the "feeding source", and pictures the growth of the poet's mind as a river where Imagination is the water. He takes Book V to support his thesis, and points out that "we see a significant deepening of the poet's imaginative power [...] which moves beyond the power of nature in stirring the imagination, to the very power of poetry itself" (2000: 27). But does it? It is true that Wordsworth changed his perception from the first two books to the rest, but as it will be proposed later, his poetry is characterised by a circular movement, which makes him end where he began although he is no longer the same: he is in a superior position of moral perspective. Barth goes on to say that it is the Imagination which enables Wordsworth to understand and envision the world (2000: 31), not Nature. I will attempt to qualify this argument in the next paragraph. Barth seems to have based his article on Geoffrey Hartman's critical essay whose thesis is very similar to his: "Nature proposes but the Poet disposes" (1962: 601). My own reading of the poem would not favour this claim, mostly because the Poet does not 'dispose' anything without Nature. It is Nature, as Wordsworth states in several passages of both *The Prelude* and *Tintern Abbey*, which grants the Poet the inspiration. Hartman tries to demonstrate that Nature ceases to be a medium and becomes merely "the external world" (1962: 610). For him, Wordsworth "humbles himself by shrinking from visionary subjects" because Nature triumphs over the Poet. However, "Nature, for Wordsworth, is never an enemy but always a guide or guardian" (1962: 603).

This rather inconsistent argument is supported by claiming that the discovery of his own Imagination was gradual and merciless, and thus, the transcendence from Nature was both involuntary and traumatizing (1962: 606). At least, it is implicit that Wordsworth's love for Nature was beyond, and breaking apart from its embrace would be a great shock.

Fortunately, he could never separate from it. William Blake, in a marginalia to Wordsworth's poems, wrote: "Natural Objects always did and now do weaken, deaden and obliterate Imagination in Me." Far from attacking Nature, I think that what Blake wanted to express, which Wordsworth shares, is that Nature is so powerful and impressive that it seems impossible to reach its level. It is only admiration, profound and tender.

In spite of Barth and Hartman's thesis, Wordsworth always needed Nature because not only did "nature speak through him, but [also] he [spoke] with nature's voice" (Jacobus 1989: 165). Imagination is a consequence of Nature's impact on Wordsworth's mind, it is the "correspondent breeze" that he "felt within" in response to the breeze of Nature (I, 34-5). The nuanced distinction to understand my counterargument to Barth and Hartman is that they believe that Imagination, originated in Nature, surpasses its 'progenitor' and acts autonomously, while in my interpretation of it, Imagination cannot act without Nature. When Wordsworth talks about "a higher power / Than Fancy [which] gave assurance of some work / Of glory" (I, 77-9) he is referring to how the gift of Nature uplifted him sufficiently enough to be able to create magnificent poetry. Once again, the origin of Wordsworth's narcissism is his love and understanding of Nature; he felt "worthy of [himself]... Thanks to the means which Nature deigned to employ" (I, 350-1). He was well aware of his qualities, among them, his Imagination:

...I neither seem
To lack that first great gift, the vital soul,
Nor general Truths, which are themselves a sort
Of Elements and Agents, Under-powers,
Subordinate helpers of the living mind:
Nor am I naked of external things,
Forms, images, nor numerous other aids
Of less regard, though won perhaps with toil
And needful to build up a Poet's praise. (I, 149-157)

The growth of the Poet's mind, and therefore, his creative maturity, is subsequent of the communion with Nature (Gill 1991: 50), not of the detachment from it or a mere reflection of a poet's mood in a pathetic fallacy. Imagination comes from Nature, but it can never transcend it. Both Nature as a source of understanding and Imagination as a means of developing the "Poetic spirit of our human life" are necessary, and what distinguishes Wordsworth from an ordinary person is that "In most, [the Poetic spirit is] abated or suppressed; in some / Through every change of growth and of decay, / Pre-eminent till death" (II, 261, 263-5). Thus, the importance of Nature is present "through every change of growth and of decay". The different stages of the growth of his mind changed his perception, his maturity; but what did not change was that Nature was "[his] obeisance, [his] devotion hence, / And hence [his] transport" (II, 375-6). As he states, "From Nature and her overflowing soul, / I had received so much, that all my thoughts / Were steeped in feeling..." (II, 396-9), thus recognizing that his mind was always permeated by Nature and he did never dispense with it.

In *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, a poem written at the same time when Wordsworth finished *The Two-Part Prelude* (1798-9), there is a further account of the author's 'poetic paralysis' when separated from Nature. If Barth and Hartman's thesis were plausible, Wordsworth's period in London (Book VII) would have not troubled him, for he would have not needed Nature to compose poems; but it was not so. This issue will be discussed in further sections of this Degree Paper. In *Tintern Abbey*, the poet returns to Nature after 5 years away from it. He realised he had missed it terribly, and became aware that he *needed* the initiative from Nature, disagreeing thus with Hartman. In fact, already in Book II of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes imagination as "A local spirit of his own" yet "Subservient strictly to external things / With which it communed" (II, 365, 367-8), that is, Nature. In *Tintern Abbey* he confesses that he has

often, while being in the city, thought about Nature and felt a “tranquil restoration” (30). “How often has my spirit turned to thee!” (57), he tells it. Would he feel this need to come back to Nature if he had transcended it? I highly doubt it. Nature is “The anchor of [his] purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of [his] heart and soul” (109-10), and to it he owes the “gift, / Of aspects more sublime” (36-7). Therefore, his description of Imagination in *Tintern Abbey* is once again one which subjects it irrevocably to Nature:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man... (93-9)

This poem is about coming back to the origins, and he learns, after having been detached from Nature for a while, what Nature has done for him. To put it radically, he realises that he cannot survive as a poet without it. He misses it and needs it to produce his work. After all, he is “A worshipper of Nature” (152).

Chapter 3

The Clash with Reality

What is extremely significant in Wordsworth’s career is, as mentioned before, the formative character of his poetry, its power of *anagnorisis*, which was particularly important in the years when he resided in London and visited France. His original intention was to follow the steps of his much admired predecessors, William Shakespeare and John Milton, in order to broaden his perspective. However, his time in the city made him feel inferior, not special –as he felt among Nature–, and above all, not capable of

exquisite feeling. His Imagination did not help him, for, in fact, he explains that it was asleep: “I feel the imaginative power / Languish within me; even then it slept” (VII, 468-9). This is further explicit evidence that he needed Nature to awaken his Imagination. Perhaps the overpopulation struck him by surprise, and although he actually wanted to experience it, he was unable to feel integrated; this was a source of profound frustration. In London, his feeling of being an outsider did not reside in his superior position as a ‘blessed’ Poet, as it did in his hometown, but rather in his inferior position due to the lack of recognition he received in such a cosmopolitan city. However, both feelings of alienation are excited by narcissistic tendencies.

Wordsworth suffered a spiritual crisis after his excursion to the Alps and it culminated in his sojourn in London. In the first place, it is relevant to take into account that the “fervour” of poets “was generally dubbed ‘enthusiasm’, which meant in the eighteenth century a state almost indistinguishable from madness” (Gill 1991: 44) and akin to religious fervour. Hence, the feeling of isolation in Wordsworth was already supported by this basic perception of poets. However negative the connotations of ‘madness’, it was still attached to the figure of the Genius. But what Wordsworth felt was not pleasant. He became the ‘vulgar’ outsider that so often starred his poems: “the unfortunates, the outcasters, or the abnormal members of society.” (Owen, 1969: xxx), “Of these, said [Wordsworth], shall be my song” (XIII, 232). Nevertheless, what troubled him was not the self-lamentation of not being properly recognized, but rather his inability to understand why. As Owen explains, “Wordsworth is not concerned to pity so much as to understand” (1969: xxx). His confusion was absolutely *genuine*. In Book XIII, he carries out the introspection which is lacking in Book VI –where he describes his residence in London–, and confesses that he hoped for admiration and did not receive it: “[...] *still* I craved / An intermingling of distinct regards / And truths of individual

sympathy” (XIII, 110-2, my emphasis). He could not understand why he was not cherished, since he already published *Lyrical Ballads* two years ago and considered it a gift to humanity, much accessible and useful to understand the ways of our heart, observing “affinities / In objects where no brotherhood exists / To passive minds” (II, 384-6). What was most shocking to him is that other works, “seeking their reward / From judgements of the wealthy Few” (XIII, 208-9), –therefore, not accessible to everyone– were receiving what he missed. He considered that these books misled people, and were judged partially. And yet, why did not, even this “wealthy Few”, judge his work? He poses this question to Samuel T. Coleridge, to whom *The Prelude* is addressed, and adds “for *then* / We were as strangers” (XIII, 360-2, my emphasis), appealing to the fact that they were at the same level of other unpopular authors. For this reason, he considered the city to be “where the human heart is sick” (XIII, 204) and a source of “heart-depressing wilderness” (XIII, 111). Nevertheless, this cynicism which made him eventually retire to Nature to heal his soul was necessary to reach his maturity as a poet. Stephen Gill quotes M. H. Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1973) to account for this:

There is a process of mental development which, although at times suspended, remains a continuum; this process is violently broken by a crisis of apathy and despair; but the mind then recovers an integrity which, despite admitted losses, is represented as a level higher than the initial unity, in that the mature mind possesses powers, together with an added range, depth, and sensitivity of awareness, which are the products of the critical experiences it has undergone.
(77)

The deeply favourable perception that Wordsworth had of himself clashed with reality. He knew that he was a “glorious creature”, “One in... ten thousand” (XIII, 87-8), but could not understand why there were not millions like him if the mission was so important. Therefore, since Nature placed its hope on him, he deserved the special attention which should be given to the chosen one. After all, minds are “elevated most when most admired” (XIII, 160), so humanity would do itself a favour if it provided

Wordsworth with such admiration. The reason for this claim is that Poets, “whose verbal gifts and epiphanies” (Crossley 2015: 131) allow the rest of the community to “see into the life of things” (*Tintern Abbey*, 48), are our guides. So if we feed them with admiration, the benefit will be *pro domo nostra*. Wordsworth asks himself: “Why should I speak of what a thousand hearts / Have felt, and every man alive can guess?” (IV, 44-5) and gives himself an answer in Book XIII: because he has the “Heaven’s gift, a sense that fits him to perceive / Objects unseen before” (XIII, 304-5) which allows him to express what others have felt but failed to frame in a poem.

These episodes of self-absorption were already present in Wordsworth’s earlier years, “Humility and modest awe, themselves / Betray[ed] [him], serving often for a cloak / To a more subtle selfishness” (I, 243-5). Once again, the positive and even formative character of his secluded and narcissistic tendencies are rooted in a deep understanding of Nature. Although he refers to ‘selfishness’, which carries negative connotations, he was already aware that his talent would not only prove useful to himself but also to others. Also, it was his firm belief in his self-value which allowed him to persevere in his claim to literary merit. Thus, he never surrendered—in spite of the obstacles—and achieved what he always wanted: sincere recognition and admiration. He could deliver his oeuvre as a gift to humanity and be acknowledged, however late, for it was between 1840 and 1880 when Wordsworth’s reputation was at its peak, and he died in 1850. Nonetheless, he reached the highest position that a poet could achieve in England; he was made Poet Laureate in 1843. Throughout history, facts have spoken by themselves and Wordsworth has ever since been recognised as a master poet with superior skills and a deep sensitivity.

Chapter 4

Romanticising Wordsworth's Life

William Wordsworth carried out a poetic analysis of his own mind for several reasons, mainly for his conviction that it was his responsibility to do it. In a private letter of 1804, he states the reasons why he decided to attempt to write *The Recluse*, making a direct reference to *The Prelude*:

Several years ago, when the Author retired to his native Mountains with the hope of being enabled to construct a literary Work that might live, it was a reasonable thing that he should take a review of his own Mind, and examine how far Nature and Education had qualified him for such employment. As subsidiary to this preparation, he undertook to record, in Verse, the origin and progress of his own powers... the result of the investigation which gave rise to it was a determination to compose a philosophical Poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society; and to be entitled, *The Recluse*... The preparatory Poem is biographical, and conducts the history of the Author's mind to the point where he was emboldened to hope that his faculties were sufficiently matured for entering upon the arduous labour which he had proposed to himself...

Notice how Wordsworth refers to himself as “the Author”, taking already an authorial distance in order to produce “a review of his own Mind”. However, the most relevant passage is that in which he explains that writing is his “employment” and that “Nature and Education” had “qualified him” for it. Out of this special qualification, which has been repeatedly discussed in previous sections, arises his perception that he has a mission, and therefore, a responsibility. However, Wordsworth doubted himself many times, questioning his capacity to fulfil his duty and even considering that it was a mistake that “The heavy weight of many a weary day” fell into his shoulders, because it was “Not [his], and such as were not made for [him]” (I, 22, 23). Kenneth R. Johnston points out that Wordsworth “reluctantly acknowledged the social responsibility he was shirking.” (2003: 80). Nevertheless, we know that he accepted this commission made by Nature,

and the reason why is that he reached maturity and loved Man through Nature (Book VIII: “*Retrospect – Love of Nature Leading to Love of Man*”). Therefore, he wrote out of this love, knowing that his work would be a gift, a guide for the people. He adds: “The gift is yours” (II, 432) because he has lived “With God and Nature” (II, 430) and there has been a communion which led to an understanding of himself and of the rest of the world. Still he reinforces his position, appealing to Nature itself: “The blessing of my life – the gift is yours... thine, O Nature! Thou hast fed / My lofty speculations; and in thee... I find / A never-failing principle of joy / And purest passion.” (II, 445-51). He thanks Nature constantly, for it is from it that his narcissism drinks and it empowers him to compose and to overcome his insecurities. Mary Jacobus argues that, in the end, *The Prelude* is only written “for Coleridge’s sympathetic ear” (1989: 178), but my reading would not favor this interpretation. It is true that Wordsworth’s original intention was to dedicate it to Coleridge –and actually, *The Two-Part Prelude* was known as ‘the poem to Coleridge’– but *The Prelude* evolved throughout the many years in which it was composed, becoming a song about and written for Man, Nature and Society.

As already stated in the introduction, the autobiographic genre gained momentum during the Romantic period for its elasticity and lack of definition, which might have added to Wordsworth’s motivation to experiment in the composition of *The Prelude*: remembrance and memory as a genre. As Stephen Gill emphasizes, there is an “anxiety disclosed in the confessional passage and evidence that it was not a momentary emotion but a deep concern of Wordsworth’s” (1991: 13). The author wanted to create “a literary Work that might live”, and as Mary Jacobus reminds us, “central to all autobiography is the longing for invulnerability to death” (1989: 20). Wordsworth asks the reader throughout *The Prelude* that its lines shall “not be forgotten” for everything he felt is “here / Recorded” (I, 49, 50-1). Taking into account that his work was a gift of inspiration,

it might sound quite didactic to say that Wordsworth intended people to follow his steps. Whatever his true intention, what is obvious is that he only wanted his memory to linger forever, for “after the death of the poet, there still remains immortal verse.” (Jacobus 1989: 176). Wordsworth managed to provide his memory a place in literature’s history because not only is it obvious that his talent was overwhelming, but also that he transcended his predecessors by both creating a voice that distinguished him from them and moving towards a new tradition. This new tradition parted from the epic ideal inherited by Milton and moved towards philosophy, being *The Prelude* a perfect example of it. Jacobus points out that Wordsworth wanted to surpass “Milton in particular” (1989: 171), and I would agree with her, since Milton, as Johnston notes, was a figure with whom Wordsworth had “a relationship of inheritance [which] he took very personally (with Coleridge’s encouragement), and for which he alone, of all the eighteenth century’s imitators of Milton, may be said to have proved himself worthy” (2003: 73). Wordsworth could not equate with Milton in London when he was younger, but he eventually reached his level in talent.

As Aurélie Thiria argues in her article “Reflections on Reflections: Wordsworth’s Narcissistic Landscapes” (2011), what Wordsworth did in *The Prelude*, consciously or unconsciously, was to find reflections of himself in Nature. This comes from vanity, which, as W. J. T. Mitchell explains, turned out to be “the ruling virtue of the Revolution” (1990: 653). One significant aspect of this analysis is that Wordsworth’s image in Nature was uncanny to him. His self-image had always been familiar, but seen in reflections, and thus, from a *distance*, it was appealing. He admires himself throughout his work by projecting his best image on his surroundings and using a “hyperbolic language to express the existential divinity of this Poet figure and his proposed accomplishments” (Johnston 2003: 76). His language does not risk immediate recognition either and opts for elaborated

metaphors, following the typical line of Wordsworth's poetry. Stephen Gill considers *The Prelude* to be a "marvellously rich poem [which] is essentially a hymn of exultation" (1991: 8) and it is so indeed, for Wordsworth elevates himself by eulogizing his superior talent and sensitivity, and cleverly disguising this direct reference by introducing the "two-consciousnesses" and writing from a distance. His voice, Jacobus says, "is always a doubling of self, and more often a multiplication or alienation." (1989: 170). By alienating from the version of his own identity whom he is praising in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth is "privileging self-address over narrating the past" (1989: 166), which reinforces the presence of this authorial distance and his need to dialogize with himself while remembering his own life. But is this only egotism? Is he full of himself? My own close-reading in this project informs me that the answer should be in the negative. Wordsworth was not a pure elitist, as most critics have argued. He professed a deep and sincere love towards humankind that stemmed from the way he conceptualized his poetic mission inscribed in Nature. He dedicated his life to illuminate and inspire people, and always considered that divinity was within everyone. In the end, Wordsworth's narcissism was positive both for himself and for the community, as Johnston defends in the following passage:

Wordsworth's egotism has been a stumbling block in the road of his reputation from the beginning, but it is a measure of his stature as a culture hero to reflect that millions of people now make their inner consciousness of themselves the psychic bedrock of reality, as he does here. In this sense, Wordsworth is not an egotist but a realist. (2003: 84)

Wordsworth became "a culture hero", as Johnston puts it, and therefore, fulfilled his responsibility: he acted as a guide. Returning to the definition of a poet that he and Coleridge offered in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth eventually satisfied his conception of this figure and, with beautiful grace, managed to be remembered for it.

Conclusion

In this Degree Paper I have sought to provide an analysis and interpretation of Wordsworth's own changing notion of his poetic worth and genius as it is represented in *The Prelude*. While Wordsworth considered his talent to be of a superior quality, his self-confidence underwent several crises. These troubled episodes correlate to the periods of his life where he was detached from Nature. He doubted himself when he was away from it, but returned to it in order to heal. This restorative power of Nature stimulates, as we have seen, the poet's sense of purpose, mission and value, and his narcissistic tendencies towards self-absorption stem from this willingness to find himself in Nature. Without Nature and surrounded by materiality, Wordsworth was unable both to feel the uplifting quality of the "chosen son" and to compose worthy poems. Only when he goes back to Nature and communes with it he comes to understand and love Man, and thus himself. For this reason he created his work, and granted it as a gift for the rest of humanity since he knew, not out of egotism but of luck and respect, that he was one of the few who had the power to envision and capture in words that what others and himself felt. George Eliot thanked Wordsworth for this when she said that she "never before met with so many of [her] own feelings, expressed just as [she] could like them" (letter, 22 November 1839) (Gill 1991: 97).

Wordsworth felt that his position was of "uncomfortable authority" (Johnston 2003: 88) but thanks to Nature and its revelations, he internalized his duty and accepted it with pleasure only after intimate encounters with a natural scenery. These encounters provided him with the self-love that he needed to continue with his poetic career and reach the point, as Gill noted, to "know his strength and [...] believe that he knows why he knows it." (1991: 9). It is such an arduous task to carry out, but his success needs no external reinforcement when it comes from Nature. William Wordsworth succeeded in composing

a poetic masterpiece that relied on how both the material and immaterial events in his life shaped his mind and afflicted or comforted his soul. Only Nature allowed him, as M.H. Abrams wrote, to become a “lamp”.

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