From Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814 Yale UP, 1964

ture drew him out, released the life in him, and gradually made it conscious. In a dramatic paragraph of Book III he cries that only this outgoing is true "heroic argument." Nature, he suggests, was the occasion rather than cause of his love, and his soul went out to her unself-consciously, by creative acts of purest generosity. "Of genius, power, / Creation and Divinity itself / I have been speaking . . ." (III.173 ff.). But at the very point of finding his theme, he apparently bids it farewell, for he knows that the generous and heroic age is past, and that he must tell of what happened afterward—in Cambridge, in France, and amid "the many shapes / Of joyless daylight."

It is only, however, when separated from his early unself-conscious relations to nature that Wordsworth begins to understand her role. In this "second act," while Imagination sleeps (III.259 ff.), nature begins to shine surprisingly through time and alienation. Various experiences, including "spots of time"—strong memories dating from the first act of his life, surviving in him as fresh as when they happened, and often unconsciously restorative—guide him like stars. The past of "genius, power," etc. is still with him. In the depth of his estrangement, such memories of nature, and of his own strength vis-à-vis nature, preserve him for another day when imagination might meet the world once more as at least its equal.

Now this may appear to be "a theme / Single and of determined bounds." Wordsworth's great claim is that the imagination can be naturalized, and that the "heroic age" of its naturalization saves it from being lost to human life. Without this intermediate stage, when the child faces nature by himself, and feels her mystery as his own,

> How awful is the might of souls,
> And what they do within themselves while yet
> The yoke of earth is new to them, the world
> Nothing but a wild field where they were sown . . . (III.180–83)

the imagination would have to go underground, buried by the necessities of custom and social life, or become apocalyptic. If imagination, however, blends in childhood with the forms of na-

ture, not only does its influence survive via strong reminiscences, but a hope is set up that it might be humanized, even as it had been naturalized.

The only trouble is that Wordsworth's own imagination refuses to accept this argument. It rejects the history imposed on it. Imagination can never be fully attached but remains a force that isolates man, and from which he draws the consciousness of individual being:

> Points have we all of us within our souls
> Where all stand single; this I feel, and make
> Breathings for incommunicable powers. (III.188–90)

Nature, time, memory, and poetry itself, can only fitfully bind an imagination which is radically in excess of nature as of every socializing principle.

If the word "imagination," because associated with "image," seems inappropriate to describe the special consciousness that brings a man home to himself, another term should be coined. Yet in one sense the term is quite appropriate, for what is popularly understood by imagination is the first, strong, "imaginal" reaction to this pointed and mortalizing state of mind. The images we associate with imagination are an antidote to self-consciousness drawn in part from consciousness itself. It is certainly true that wherever you find self-consciousness raised to a certain pitch there you will find imagination: cause and effect are so close, that they are, by metonymy, interchangeable.

The Early Manuscripts and the "Spots of Time"

The textual growth of *The Prelude* is similar to that of "The Ruined Cottage," which it follows closely in time. The development of the poem from first to final state presents a real analogue to organic process: it is a development by accretion, extension, and interpretative division of one type of experience which is the nuclear cell of the whole. This experience is again related to an obsession with specific place. Wordsworth recalls various places that affected him in time past and still strongly modify his consciousness—so strongly, in fact, that they are places in his mind as well

as in nature. They 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.30–33). Named "spots of time," and distributed over several books of the completed *Prelude,* they are found massed together and linked desultorily in the earlier manuscripts.[6]

It is hard to decide whether the first or second member of the partitive construction "spots of time" should be emphasized. If we derive the origin of the notion from Wordsworth's attraction to specific place (the omphalos or spot syndrome), and notice that "spot" is subtly used in two senses—as denoting particular *places* in nature, and fixed *points* in time ("islands in the unnavigable depth / Of our departed time")—the emphasis would fall on the initial word. But the natural pull of the phrase, and the fact that these spots are not only *in* time, like islands, but also creative *of* time or of a vivifying temporal consciousness, throws the emphasis to the second noun and evokes a beaconing "time-spot." The concept is, in any case, very rich, fusing not only time and place but also stasis and continuity. The fixity or fixation that points to an apocalyptic consciousness of self is temporalized, reintegrated in the stream of life.

How did Wordsworth raise himself from his obsession with specific place to the key notion of spots of time? I suspect the intermediate concept to have been that of *genius loci,* or "spirit of place." The renovating energy flowing from the spots of time is really spirit of place reaching through time with a guardian's care. The *genius loci* was a guardian as well as indwelling spirit of his abode. To link that kind of genius to the genius of the poet—the spirit, namely, that inspires or guards his "genial" powers—is an easy matter, and the early MSS of *The Prelude* show several at least implicit instances of it.[7] There are apostrophes not only to powers of the earth, beings of the hills, and spirits of the springs, but also to "genii" who form the poet by means of gentle or severer visitations.[8] The "powers" and "presences" retained in the final versions of *The Prelude* reflect the same belief purged of some of its anthropomorphism. There is also one direct and beautiful association of poetic genius and guardian genius. MS 18a (Goslar, 1798–99)

has an abortive beginning to what is now Book II, an address to Coleridge that reads: "Friend of my heart and genius . . ."[9]

Wordsworth uses the notion of spirit of place as liberally as any writer of the Renaissance. It is only necessary to remember that "Nutting"* stems from the same time, that it contributes an overflow passage to MS JJ and another to the "second beginning" of *The Prelude,* in which a gentle breeze heralds the poet's turn from crisis to peace and restoration; that in MS 18a (which contains, except for JJ, the earliest sketches for *The Prelude*) a version of "Nutting" is found in which the "dearest Maiden" there addressed is named Lucy;[10] and that the Lucy of the Lucy poems, likewise from that rich winter harvest in Germany, is perhaps an embodiment of *English* spirit of place:

> and she shall lean her ear
> In many a secret place
> Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
> And beauty born of murmuring sound
> Shall pass into her face.[11]

One may also recall that the crime of the Mariner is basically one against spirit of place, and that it was Wordsworth who suggested it to Coleridge.[12]

This "efficacious spirit,"[13] one that lurks in the spots of time, renews the poet vis-à-vis nature. He again meets the world with a sensitive, creative soul, as in his youth. Yet it renews the poet in two different ways, perhaps insufficiently distinguished by Wordsworth. One of the "tutelary" functions of the *genius loci* was to prevent or revenge desecration of its abode. Now Wordsworth, by his own confession, was guilty of a peculiar sin against Nature during the years of crisis. His description of this sin leads, in fact, to the passage on the spots of time in the final (1805 and 1850) texts of *The Prelude:*

> Oh! Soul of Nature! that dost overflow
> With passion and with life, what feeble men
> Walk on this earth! how feeble have I been

* "With gentle hand / Touch—for there is a Spirit in the woods."

When thou wert in thy strength! Nor this through stroke
Of human suffering, such as justifies
Remissness and inaptitude of mind,
But through presumption, even in pleasure pleas'd
Unworthily, disliking here, and there,
Liking, by rules of mimic art transferr'd
To things above all art. (1805, XI.146–55)

His violation of nature was too abstract an idea of nature, one inherited from his age, and tending to foster a "picturesque" and dissective attitude.

Wordsworth's sensitivity to spirit of place eventually countered this abstract view and restored him as nature's inmate. A complementary influence of the *genius loci* is, however, more interesting, though harder to understand. Related to revenge as well as to preservation, it is mediated by the sterner aspects of nature. In the early manuscripts, the episode of the drowned man fished up with ghastly face introduces two other memories, which are the ones specifically named "spots of time." The first tells how Wordsworth, then less than six years old, riding with a servant through a desolate region near the Scottish border, is accidentally parted from him, and experiences a dread-inspiring impression of place. The second is from later childhood, from just before his father's death, and again recalls an ordinary scene invested with visionary dreariness.[14] To these, which in *The Prelude* proper are transferred to the later book telling of Wordsworth's restoration, we can add other incidents retained as part of Books I and II: the robbing of birds' nests, the boat-stealing, and similar wanton or willful acts.

The common factor in all these is a violation of nature (a secret or patent violence directed against nature) linked to the developing self-consciousness of the child. In episodes where the violation is patent we can say that the spirit of place rises up in revenge against the violator. But where it is secret, as in the two spots of time (for no clear desecration has occurred), we must assume that the boy's very *awareness* of his individuality—a prophetic or an-

ticipatory awareness nourished by self-isolating circumstances*—reacts on him as already a violation. A sudden self-consciousness, transferred to outward things, is raised against him under the mask of nature. Only this could explain Wordsworth's statement that the spots of time give "Profoundest knowledge to what point, and how, / The mind is lord and master—outward sense / The obedient servant of her will" (XII.221–23). Wordsworth must think that both experiences, despite the important role of sensation, really manifest the child's imagination as a power unself-consciously active. I knew, he says, prefacing these events, "Too forcibly, too early in my life, / Visitings of imaginative power" (XII.202–03).

This leads into a last and crucial point about the spots of time. It is quite clear the child does not know that what he sees and feels is an effect of the power of his imagination. The impact of the scenes on him is inseparable from overwhelming sense-impressions. For the retrospective poet, however, the power that belonged to the external world is now seen to have belonged to the mind. The boy's imagination accepted nature's images so forcefully that he is deceived, not able to dissociate nature's strength from his own, and even blind to all but the latter. The question therefore arises why this should be so, why, from a providential perspective, the child is granted but a masked suspicion of the mind's power.

The reason is that such ignorance shields the child from paralyzing recognitions that might prevent growth of mind. Though the imagination is often said to be a life-giving or animating power, it is not, in Wordsworth, life-giving initially. The poet's later strength has its origin in experiences that intimate (negatively) a death of nature and (positively) a faculty whose power is independent of nature. This faculty of imagination is profoundly conservative. It strives to retain, as the Intimations Ode says, giving the experience a mythical turn, recollections of a previous, immortal existence. Nature, on its side, does the best it can to act as Heaven's substi-

* The death of his father, in the second spot of time, seems to have confirmed the boy's solitude, which is not happily accepted, but felt as a chastisement.

tute, and the imagination, deprived of directly numinous data, seizes on nature's imagery to fill the vacuum. But imagination remains too strong for the milder, perishable beauties of nature. The shadow of its power often erases the reality of the familiar world or is affixed to parts of it with overwhelming psychic effect. Were it not, at the same time, in the gift of Nature to provide the mind with a substitute Heaven, the child might not forget its former "home," and so never be an "inmate of this active universe" (II.254).

The spots of time, then, bring the child closer to confronting the power or mystery of its own imagination. They have significant points of resemblance to Wordsworth's adventure in the Alps followed by the retrospective appearance of "Imagination . . . That awful Power." In the first spot of time, for example, he is separated from his guide; a perplexed up-and-down movement ensues; he sees "characters" that subsist against a background of decay; pool, beacon, and woman are, in fact, perceived singly and with the sharpness of individually engraved signs; even the rhythm of the travelers in Book VI, now hurried, now halting, finds its counterpart. The three things (pool, beacon, girl) suggest, moreover, a *stasis* (the transfixed, halted consciousness) verging on powerful motion. "A naked pool that lay beneath the hills"—"lay" divines the weight, the ominous quiescence. "The beacon on the summit"—fixed solitude, but also a steadfast monitory light, potentially guiding. "A girl, who bore a pitcher on her head . . ."—another solitary, rigid figure, but moving against an invisible force.

The halted Alpine traveler was transfixed by a consciousness that erased the idea of this world as the end of his journey. He recognizes that his home is with infinity. The recognition, however, frees him for the world it denies because he is now absolutely sure of imagination's autonomy. It has shown itself distinct from nature, as an unmediated, apocalyptic force. The visionary dreariness of the spots of time also foretells the insufficiency or even the destruction of nature. A terrible beauty is born; familiar features become stark hieroglyphs.

The great difference between the episodes is that the young boy does not yet recognize his own imagination. Nor, as he flees "Faltering and faint, and ignorant of the road," does nature appear as

his guide: on the contrary, it repeats in larger letters the writing on the turf. Nature's only guidance is to intimate an imperishable *consciousness* which outlives even nature.[15] The boy senses this; both his future loss and the grandeur it implies; but he does not come face to face with his imagination. The experience, however, remains etched in his mind, as freshly visible among the moldering effects of time as the name under the gallows.

Yet without this transference to nature—the fixity of the memorial writing being repeated in the fixtures of nature (pool, beacon, girl) and so engraved on the mind—the event could not have reached through time. That the imagination appears here *sub specie naturae* is already a freeing from deadly stasis, and to talk of "projection" catches the point but misses its import. The transference to nature reveals that imagination may receive a new content without ceasing to be "the dread watch-tower of man's absolute self."[16] Naked pool, Beacon, and Woman are monitory enough. The reaching through time, or temporalizing of this "spot," is therefore a second kind of liberation analogous to the first (the transference to nature). Because the fixating strength of imagination is transferred to the images as images, the boy seeks nature as well as imagination, and is driven toward *this* world. His emotions become more transitive, his sympathies expand, and when Wordsworth, thirteen years later, roams the same region, it is still alive to him though in a different way (XII.261–71).[17]

There is a last and curious turn to the whole sequence. Even as the poet praises nature, and time's mercy, a confession usurps him. It resembles, in its ecstatic and vacillating manner, the sudden apostrophe to Imagination in Book VI, leaping from past to present:

> Oh! mystery of man, from what a depth
> Proceed thy honours. I am lost, but see
> In simple childhood something of the base
> On which thy greatness stands; but this I feel,
> That from thyself it comes, that thou must give,
> Else never canst receive. (XII.272–77)

It is impossible, initially, to say whether the "but see" and "but this I feel" are contrary or complementary. One feels only the

"turns and counterturns, the strife / And various trials of our complex being" (XII.148–49). The eddying of the style shows Wordsworth almost face to face with Imagination, as in Book VI. For the ground of his argument, which is also the ground of Nature, its ability to sustain the Imagination, is being taken from him. There is the same apostrophe, the same quick change of persons, even the same cry "I was lost" (VI.596), "I am lost" (XII.273). That cry of confusion evokes the traveler, lonely and halted, who has momentarily lost the guidance of Nature.

Yet Wordsworth recovers almost at once, and clutches a certainty revealed from the depths. His cry is followed by two strong adversatives, like a regaining of balance. The first "but" (line 273) affirms: *I am not lost,* my soul can still see the basis in nature on which its vigor rests. The counterturn replies: but (line 275) whatever strength nature had in childhood was really given to it by imagination. Hence *you are not lost,* because this power is within you, and only lent to nature through an amply rewarded generosity. But then *nature also is not lost,* for should you keep your instinctive childhood trust, and continue to go out to her, will she not repay that generosity again, sustain imagination as before?

Though this is followed by a further vacillation, it is clear that the intent of *The Prelude,* to review the sources of the poet's faith in himself, is often diverted. The poem reviews instead the sources of the poet's faith in nature, even though the latter is at most "something of the base" of his strength as poet. The confusion cannot be helped. For Wordsworth's childhood experiences work in two conflicting ways, they (1) prophesy the independence from nature of his imaginative powers, *and* (2) impress nature ineradicably on them. His genius as a poet arises primarily from the first of these actions; through the second, he becomes an inmate of the world, a man speaking to men. The first reminds him his home is with infinity and only there; the other binds him to this world.

The Prelude leaves many things obscure. Yet its theme is ultimately clear, and its argument no argument but a vacillation between doubt and faith. The soul has dwelt with nature in the past, and nature gave the soul what it required; then if it dwell with nature again, can nature give it once again what it requires? "I would enshrine the spirit of the past," writes Wordsworth, "for future restoration" (1805, XI.342 ff.).

Books I–IV: The Binding of Imagination

The reciprocal generosity of nature and imagination is referred to in a famous passage of "The Recluse," published as a kind of manifesto-preface to the 1814 *Excursion.* It is a passage to which Blake took violent exception. Wordsworth there proclaims as his "high argument" (1) that the mind is exquisitely fitted to the external world, (2) that the external world is also fitted to the mind, and (3) that the blended might of mind and nature accomplish something deserving of the name of creation. Blake will not believe such "fitting and fitted." He rejects Nature categorically as a source of Inspiration.[18]

Yet for Wordsworth, as *The Prelude* makes clear, the interaction of nature and mind remains a mystery, "The incumbent mystery of sense and soul." There is no mechanical "epistemological" fitting of the one to the other.[19] Wordsworth supposes, in fact, that the soul is born into this world an alien. To be of the world and not only in it, the individual is forced to create his own bonds, to forget himself to nature. Here the principle of generosity begins to operate in memorable time: a soul that does somehow *go out* to nature receives an eternal recompense. Its might is fertilized by that of the external world. In its celestial soil (to use a Wordsworthian metaphor) nature sows and plants images "for immortality."[20]

This seems to me a mythical or transcendental and not a strictly associationist point of view. The necessitarian terminology, moreover, often found in *The Prelude,* emphasizes rather than lightens the mystery in this progress of the soul. It suggests that the external world is only associated to the soul, that it bears no intrinsic relationship, but that if the association has been established in childhood by an act of the soul's generosity responding to or uncovering nature's, it becomes indefeasible, and impels the child