

The Prelude: An Autobiography

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Abstract: "The Prelude" by William Wordsworth expresses a strong personal and autobiographical element in the poem. In the poem, the author sets out to show himself in the whole truth of his Nature. "The Prelude" is a record of the author's life from childhood to early middle age. The Nature of the poem is indicated by its sub title, "The Growth of Poet's Mind". It is a tracing of how Nature moulded the mind of the poet in childhood, how disappointments; not selfish and personal but generous and poetical unsettled his mind and how Nature acting through more kindly influences reawakened the creative impulse and made the poet the master of his fate. This is also known as the confessional element. In this poem, the poet also truthfully admits the gentle crimes committed by himself such as the boat stealing incident and the plundering of the bird's nests. The soul of his moral being was Nature, which continued to grow with each passing day. The poet's childhood though not very happy as he was an orphan, provided an excellent preparation for his poetic future. His uncles regarded him with great disfavor but circumstances were kind enough for the poet to shine as bright as he could. The circumstantial evidence is the poetry that he has left for the Nature lovers to enjoy.

Index Terms: Nature, poetic, autobiography, stages, intense consciousness, poetic imagination, theme, rhythm, movement

"The Prelude" is a very personal poem. It is primarily a philosophy of mind in which the poet chooses himself as the hero. The poetry of "The Prelude" focuses the struggle of thought and advances it to conclusions. It shows us the mind on the move. The Nature of "The Prelude" is indicated by its subtitle "The Growth of a Poet's Mind". The poem is a record of the author's life from childhood to early middle age. The poem has a distinct beginning, middle and an ending as it is not an unfinished story. At the time of writing this poem, Wordsworth had reached his poetic maturity. It is the history of his early promise, succeeded by disappointment and ending in triumph. It stands in the highest rank among the long poems of the nineteenth century. It has the varied interest of a great narrative sustained by beautiful and sublime passages. One of Wordsworth's peculiar achievements was to raise poetic autobiography into a region of universal interest. He says "the poet is a man speaking to men", and we do not lose sight of the human significance in his poetic progress.

Between the years 1798 and 1805, the most fruitful years of his poetic life Wordsworth composed a long autobiographical poem, known to his family and friends as the poem on his own early life or the poem on the growth of his mind. Wordsworth never intended to publish his autobiography until his great philosophical poem "The Recluse" was completed. "The Recluse" was never completed, and he came to realize that "The Prelude" must stand on its own merits and that he must prepare it for posthumous publication. In style, the simplicity gave place to more decorative literary form. In the early months of 1798, Wordsworth conceived the idea of writing a history of the growth of his own mind. Partly on the suggestion of Coleridge, he resolved to compose a great philosophic poem to be called "A Recluse". He proposed to complete it in two years, but soon began to falter. He decided to examine how far Nature and education had qualified him for his task and so he wrote "The Prelude" in "The Prelude" he wrote his poetical autobiography and penetrates furthest into his inner recesses of his mind and shows us the spring of his most unusual psychological insights. His aim is to trace his own development and reveal the process by which he became a poet. It is a very personal poem. "The Prelude" focuses the struggle of thought and advances it to original conclusions.

The inspiration of Wordsworth's poetry had its vitalizing source in the power with which he realized a peculiar experience. The experience begins in sensation and ends in thought. It begins with such an adventure of the senses as that of his boyish bird nesting [Oh! When I have hung above the raven's nest, by knots of grass] a passage whose power and significance is inexplicable. It ends with such thought as that of a famous invocation [Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe!]

The core of the experience was an intense consciousness of Nature passing through his senses to his mind, and the growth of that consciousness, its action and reaction on his inner life is the main theme of "The Prelude". The experience was peculiar in its intensity. His senses led a very pure and simple life that this intensity passed on the tide of his feeling into the life of his spirit. Here lies the mystery which in a very significant line he says "the incumbent mystery of sense and soul". Wordsworth expressed the inner working of his mind as nakedly and truthfully as he could. The simple truth about his inner life which Wordsworth set out to tell in "The Prelude" is strange and startling. Physical images have a power in the poet's inner life which the ordinary man knows only in delirious state. Wordsworth is aware of his two lives – one he leads with the rest of the world and another life beneath this, in which with a deep drop into himself he seems to join the inner life of the whole universe. In Nature, he was alive to the perpetual energy of motion. He seems to find the very essence of life in this motion. The soul lives a life of its own shut away from our ordinary conscious life.

"The Prelude" was first published in 1850, shortly after Wordsworth's death. From the beginning of its composition until shortly before its publication, more than half a century later, the poem remained without a title. It was Mrs. Wordsworth who after her

husband's death gave the work its name; "The Prelude", or "Growth of a Poet's Mind: An Autobiographical poem". It was intended both to relate and to be a prelude to the beginning of the poet's imaginative life, eventually down to the year of publication of the "Lyrical Ballads" when he was 28 years old. It was to be a prelude to a much longer and more ambitious poem which he hoped would be his greatest literary achievement, a work that was never completed and hence the delay in publication. The long ambitious poem was "The Recluse –Views on Nature, Man and Society".

In "The Prelude" Wordsworth distinguishes stages in the development of an imaginative mind, and records a boy's passionate joy in the world of Nature and in the very experience of being alive. In the whole of Nature, the youth came to recognize life and the presence of mind. The time span covered in "The Prelude" is restricted to childhood and school days only. The single theme pervading throughout the poem is the awakening of imagination. Each of the two parts has its own time limit, the first one being of childhood and to the age of about ten years and the second until the end of school days when the writer was seventeen years of age. The whole poem shows an unusual number of devices of formal structure with considerable success. The reminiscences are varied to represent not only the particular activities of the child usually at play but also the activities of each of the four seasons of day and night, morning and evening, within and without, in society and in solitude.

In every remembered episode there is a primary matter of fact event described vividly and with a sense of joy, but there is also a secondary event that really mattered in the boy's mind and imagination, the awareness of beauty and mystery or of purposeful power and life in the whole world of Nature. These moments of imaginative intensity, of insight, came rarely and sometimes on unlikely occasions.

The first part of the poem gave the boy the glimpses of the darker side of life. The opening lines of "The Prelude" set the date and the season of adventure experienced many times by the boy Wordsworth. This note of repetition occurs as each memory develops. Wordsworth is always conscious of movements, the river Derwent "blends" and "flows" and "winds" and the young boy "plunges" "scours" and "leaps" and the movements become a rhythm of repeated actions. The presence of powerfully repeated actions seems linked with another common element, the emergence of a solitary figure from the crowd. While skating the boy Wordsworth detaches himself from the games of his playmates to cut across the reflex of a star. The climax of the next plundering memory comes at the moment when his own movement checked; the boy hangs on the face of the rock while winds and cloud move for him.

The most vivid example of reciprocation is the stolen boat memory. The boy rows his skiff out into the lake, his eyes fixed on a peak behind as a mark, lustily enjoying his motion through the water. Suddenly his own actions bring about another vaster motion and farther peak rises up behind his mark.

"Struck and struck again\And growing still in stature, the grim shape
Towered between me and the stars, and still\For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing\Strode after me"

His action is guilty, he has stolen a boat and the Nature's reaction is correspondingly punitive including the low breathings heard by the boy following him when he stole birds from other's snares. There is always a guilt attached even to the innocent actions. Running into the fields becomes "wantonness" and climbing the trees after eggs becomes "plundering". At the climax of the stolen boat episode the language puts us in touch with more severe crime than theft. We read it astonished and he "struck again and again" with his oars as if in an act more violent than rowing alone.

Often the key experiences take place in the darkness, with inner illumination by the sudden presence of light. The role of the Moon is worth following for its own sake. Trees too have a special meaning. A repeated action, an action with guilty overtones, expressive of power and pride, checked and retaliated by a counter motion or a voice precipitating catastrophe can be experienced in "The Prelude".

Wordsworth's poetry honors and worships Nature. With three important episodes in "The Prelude" Wordsworth realized that he was being led by Nature itself beyond Nature. His sense of reality is kept alive by the very fact that Nature itself weans his mind, especially his poetic mind from its early dependence on immediate sensuous stimuli. This movement of transcendence or mysticism has been achieved by Wordsworth without any violence or ascetic experience.

"The Prelude" is simply a sign of Nature's triumph over the poet. He recognizes poetry as not merely a prophecy or sacramental gift, although the evening that he enjoys shows is soul's weakness. For Wordsworth, Nature is always a guide or a guardian.

"The Prelude" never represents Nature simply as an immediate or ultimate object, even where the poet recalls, it is most vivid. Every incident that involves Nature is propaedeutic and relates to that dark inscrutable workmanship.

Poetry according to Wordsworth is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, but qualifies immediately by saying it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility. The emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility gradually disappears and emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation is produced and actually exists in mind. This is the basic movement of "The Prelude's" first episode. It begins with an outburst, a passion of words rising immediately from the poet like animal spirits from children. Then as the movement of fervor spreads, the landscape reveals its secret pressures, blends

with and overshadows the thoughts of the poet. A Splendid image, out speaks the poet, foretells her calmer presence. Thus Nature is not an object but a presence and a power, a motion and a spirit. It is not something to be worshipped or consumed. Wordsworth fails to celebrate his sunset because poetry is not an act of consecration. Thus a gentle breeze in "The Prelude" book 1 calls forth a tempest of verse and splendid evening wanes into silence.

The structure of all the episodes in "The Prelude" falls roughly in three parts. The first part being the tempest of verse, second the quietly active grove and thirdly the splendid evening ending in serenity. In the skating scene of book 1, the splendid silence of the winter evening, set off by the clear strokes of a clock, increases to a tumult of reciprocal sounds, which yield in turn to a vision of a silently sustaining power. In this case we go from poetry to Nature, in the other from Nature to a more deeply meditated concept of Nature.

Wordsworth was born in the heart of an "unfenced region of society", a region of green valleys bleak moorlands, rugged mountains, lakes and streams, rocks and torrents. The poet enshrines the quintessence of his boyhood days in the arms of Nature in two significant lines;

"Fair seed – time had my soul, and I grew up /Fostered alike by beauty and fear...."

The first book records five such memorable incidents, most of them amidst the heart of wild Nature, amidst frightful solitude and darkness of evening and night. They are all what he calls "Sports of wider range" but the sports widen into the range of strange, and on most of them fear and terror is involved.

Throughout "The Prelude" he laid great emphasis on the word "power", to mean the capaciousness and amplitude of mind, the exaltation and the mystical delight that Nature, her spirit and forms sent to his soul. These powers awakened his own imaginative power and opened his visionary faculties.

In Book 2, the severer interventions and the gentler visitations made way. This second stage came in two phases; a desire for "calmer pleasures" followed by enlarged sympathies when the Sun, the Moon, and the common range of visible things were growing dear to him. From boyish sports and animal joys to intimate love of the forms of Nature, of changing seasons, of solitary walks, of darkness and tempests. It was in this phase the Nature was sought after for its own sake.

Wordsworth then speaks of the love which he had conceived for the sun purely for the sake of the beauty which it lent to the hills and mountains in the mornings and in the evenings. Then he records the third stage in the influence of Nature on his mind. He now loved Nature because of the beauty it possessed.

Wordsworth's poetry is valuable for the ideas it expresses. It presents the poet in quest of his own identity. It is a self – reflexive poem but it is not a self-portrait. It is concerned with the development of sensibilities, and only those aspects and incidents of his life that affected him are included. "The Prelude" is addressed to Coleridge and was read to him by Wordsworth himself. There are incidents which may appear ordinary but they are the characteristics of boyhood in general, they are extraordinary in telling.

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