



## Wordsworth's *The Prelude*: Poetry Through the Means of Philosophy

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### **Abstract:**

William Wordsworth's epic poem *The Prelude* was not intended by its author to be an epic, rather a precursor to an upcoming work only comparable to *Paradise Lost*. However, the small self-reflective piece intended for his then friend S.T. Coleridge was expanded over the course of about 40 years. In the poem, Wordsworth proposes to Coleridge and effectively to himself the matter of his intended epic.

*The Prelude* is the germ that translated into *The Recluse* but in itself it supplanted all other works of his for being deeply philosophical. Wordsworth's style is elliptical as he hovers around the center of his own psyche, in attempt to understand the subject of his epic i.e. man. This essay proposes that Wordsworth achieves a Copernican turn in likeness to Kant's philosophy when he makes himself the object of study and through this transposition, the modern human subject is conceived.

**Keywords:** Wordsworthian epic, Romanticism, *The Prelude*, circularity, Kantian philosophy.

*The Prelude* has been thematized under names that are ultimately self-referential. It is a supplement or a preface which should resolve the problematic place it acquires in Wordsworth's canon, that which it ultimately demolishes through its uncategorizable or even unnamable character. As it is to be generally understood, *The Prelude* must tell us something about the poet's mind, more specifically its maturity, but only if it were to end after book two where the pre-adolescent poet learns to appreciate nature for its own sake. In order to justify the length of the poem one might then shift the perspective to mean the outlining of a growth of a poet's mind throughout the Wordsworth's life, in reference to events that have special significance as "spots of time" (XI. 257). In that case, what accords *The Prelude* the structure which any poem requires? How many spots of time must the poet reminisce upon to gain that useful insight so that the poem may be deemed successful?

Though *The Prelude* can hardly be called a successful poem for the fact that it has undergone countless changes and it might also be pointed that it wasn't even intended or ready to be published. In other words, *The Prelude* remained a supplement to its incomplete text. However, it is at least determined that it is a complete text in itself, a poem that sufficiently abides by the requirements of the task the poet set about to accomplish and I might argue it excels in its

completeness so much so that it exhausts the possibility of a follow-up text. *The Prelude* achieves, through its very execution (inasmuch as it also conceives itself), the project of proffering a subject matter for Wordsworth's epic and goes further to inhabit the execution of the epic in the very outlining of that subject matter; because, Man as the matter of the proposed epic is conceptualized and then realized through the growth of the poet's mind. *The Prelude* achieves this due to that general character of poetry, as one separate from sciences, *when* it is performed *through* the means of philosophy-as-science. Since pure philosophy must provide the means to acquire its results when pure reason is involved, it must always do that in isolation, while poetry performed at its expense exposes the limits of rationality. Wordsworth manages to avoid the logical deadlock of philosophy by sacrificing philosophy for moral ends i.e. in order to achieve a conceptualization of Man as the moral maxim, Wordsworth refuses to deduce that category through seeded logic where one way is the only way. Wordsworth posits the seeds of his inspiration in logically random moments in space and time, not in order to satisfy any other order, rather the object of Wordsworth's philosophy is grounded through entirely intuitive means which only satisfy its own needs. In other words, Wordsworth, must conceive his subject matter through its creation and vice versa. Therefore, the act of going back against the flow of time in the beginning of poet's childhood in order to trace the flow of poetry quite literally, is the beginning of philosophy where the thought must conceive itself thinking. But this is also the point where poetry departs from philosophy even though their concern is the same: where philosophy must situate its *a priori* statements in complete faith only to realize them through induction, poetry need not satisfy that same logic of conceptualization, because aesthetic judgement unlike scientific knowledge do not lie on cause-effect continuum but functions on a causality loop where the poet conceives the poem in the very form it exists on paper, open for judgement.

Exemplifying this very distinction is the strange cause-effect relation between *The Prelude* and *The Recluse*, where *Prelude* was meant to be conception and *Recluse* to be explication of his subject matter. *Prelude* was to be the thought, in its raw, winding form while *Recluse* was to be the concept behind the thought. Hence, Wordsworth must have decided *The Prelude* could not be published since it is basically the machinery behind the grandiose claims of concepts, truths that *The Recluse* was supposed to be but failed. *The Prelude* captures a thought in its infancy, before it is deformed through systematic logic, so that it is not reduced in service of an end that is externally motivated but it succeeds in spite of its low ambitions or more specifically despite itself.

*The Prelude* captures a special moment in cultural landscape of eighteenth century when it was conceived. It follows after the great dispute between the German rationalists and British empiricists regarding what would be the epistemological project of Enlightenment. The debate would eventually be settled by the great moralist Immanuel Kant whose firm belief that the problem of irreconciliation between natural sciences and metaphysics can and must be solved through metaphysics alone, but for other ends. Kant's urgency was not in concern with the disunity of reason itself but for the sheer necessity of a morality grounded in reality although emerging outside it. He picked up after Hume who had eventually failed, with the belief that though tenets of morality can be induced from exemplary instances, they must ensue from a supra-sensual faculty in order to conceive behavior that lie beyond self-interest. In order words, Kant proceeds to go beyond sense experience, deduces apriority of certain facts which make his eventual argument not only plausible but necessary. Kant appeals to a Copernican turn in metaphysics by causing a mere change in perspective, where the object he uses i.e. category of *a priori* is data immanent. It is the method of reflexive analysis of reason itself which revolutionizes his thought in a bold way making man himself an object of enquiry in knowledge system. By invoking the immanent, Kant has acquired a

concept in its ready-made form which now he can show to be induced from natural, empirical understanding of the human cognition thus transcending the huge chasm in pure and practical rationality paving the way for constitution of categorical imperatives. Wordsworth also performs this transcendental turn, with the similar purpose of establishing his own understanding of morality where Man, through the faculties of memory and imagination, exists in Nature nurtured by it and conceived in return, where this final step of Nature-conception demonstrates the necessity of freedom for a Wordsworthian morality. He achieves this union of senses and imagination without any need for externally invoking apriority of facts, but through sheer circularity of his *ars poetica* where form and content reflect each other.

For both Kant and Wordsworth, man is the subject who orders the form of conceptual knowledge as well as is the object of its knowledge. The Prelude, as Wordsworth's life writing puts the human subject in verses in service of the poetics of Wordsworthian Man, the free subject, the poet once dissolved nature, knows it as the other and then finally sees himself in nature.

Looking at *The Prelude* through the lens of a teleological perspective, one understands why it was necessary and why it had to end at Mount Snowdon, but also why *The Recluse* is unnecessary. The creative imagination behind *The Prelude* displaces the exalted proposed position of his upcoming glorious piece by incorporating an aesthetic experience which “encompass[es] the poetic narrative of that life itself” (Abrams 597). 'Was it for this?' as a prototype for *The Prelude* begins his task of evasively approaching the deadlock between living and being or aesthetic and metaphysical definitions of man, where the former is ephemeral, contingent fragment of imagination: spot/s of time, while the latter is the immanent, conceptual framework for the former. Through a flow of time that goes back and forth, Wordsworth demolishes the empirico-transcendental boundary. He, instead, establishes the aesthetics of co-presence: a form of dialectic where a past which exists for the

present coincides with a present that must go back to the past. Kant imposed the subject-object circularity as necessary means for conceptualization of man to establish categorical understanding of morality. Wordsworth's circularity between his "two consciousness" serves its own purpose in inducing, through sheer magnitude of phenomenological descriptions of his life which is something akin to an epic, the necessity of man as being contingent upon nothing other than the factitude of freedom (II. 32). Wordsworth as a poet-prophet has the "privilege" to presume Man to be essentially free through his act of preparing the subject, which must not attempt to represent mind of man through functional logic but acquire it inductively by implementing elements of life-writing which only offer vague outlines into values that seem to refer Wordsworth in particular, but more clearly to man in general (XI. 309).

The Wordsworthian Man cannot be reduced to an object of contemplation as it is only through knowing "men as they are...in themselves" that grants Wordsworth the vision of "Of a new world...whence our dignity originates/That which...gives it being" thereby bringing categorical morality in the realm of practical knowledge (XII. 225; 374-75). The self-reflexive aesthetic of poetry refuses to analyze, categorize, label, or even establish who exactly is the hero of his epic. Wordsworth realizes a subject who imagines, reasons, understands, feels and loses the poet-as-object and gains man-as-subject, envisioning the transcendental imagination at work between "the object seen, and the eye that sees" (XII. 379).

## References

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