

The 1805 Prelude We cannot be sure what William Wordsworth would have thought of the title by which readers now know his major work, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind*. The poet's widow gave the poem that title when her husband's literary executors published it in July 1850, three months after his death. Wordsworth himself had referred to it, variously, as "the poem to Coleridge" or "the poem on the growth of my own mind." Wordsworth's readership had known of the existence of this autobiographical poem since his 1814 publication of *The Excursion*, which had the subtitle "Being a portion of *The Recluse*." In the preface to that poem, which explained that *The Excursion* was part of a philosophical poem, still in preparation, titled *The Recluse*, Wordsworth revealed further that *The Recluse* would appear with a supplement: a poem, "long finished," he stated, that traced how Nature and Education had prepared the poet for executing the "arduous labour" which that philosophical poem would entail. This other poem—which is the one we now know as *The Prelude*—scrutinized his qualifications for that task. The "two Works have the same kind of relation to each other," he explained, as an ante-chapel has to a nave or "body of a gothic church."

Where *The Recluse* was never really begun, despite what that 1814 subtitle and preface indicated, *The Prelude*, by contrast, appears to have been a poem that Wordsworth could never really declare finished. He completed it, and then, rather than declaring it ready for the press, he completed it again. Revision occupied him for a half-century, claiming the time he had aimed to devote to *The Recluse*. Because he held it back from publication, this poem of self-scrutiny became a kind of lifetime companion to the poet, its account of his past altered to keep pace with the changes that age brought to its creator. The resulting gap between its dates of composition and date of publication is obliquely acknowledged in the title Mary Wordsworth devised. *The Prelude* was a good title, one of Wordsworth's executors observed, precisely because it would discourage readers from supposing that "it was his final production, instead of being, as it really is, one of his earlier works." Wordsworth had so arranged things, however, that when at last in 1850 it appeared as a book, this "earlier" work did double duty (in the words of Wordsworth scholar Mary Jacobus) as "a self-authored epitaph."

In 1926 Ernest de Selincourt, working from manuscripts, printed the version of the poem that Wordsworth completed in 1805, and which for many readers since then has become the preferred version. Other scholars later established the existence of a still earlier and shorter version that Wordsworth composed in 1798–99. The process that produced these three principal versions of *The Prelude*—1798–99; 1805; 1850—seems to have unfolded as follows.

1. While living in Germany during the autumn and winter of 1798–99 Wordsworth composed a number of blank verse passages about his formative experiences with nature, meaning thus to begin the philosophical poem Coleridge had urged him to write. Then, after settling with his sister, Dorothy, at Grasmere, what had first been intended as part of *The Recluse* evolved further, becoming a poem of almost a thousand lines, in two parts, that described his life up to the end of his school days. This poem corresponds to books 1 and 2 of later versions of *The Prelude*.

2. In 1801 Wordsworth began to expand this poem, adding the material that would ultimately form the beginning of book 3. He renewed this work in earnest at the start of 1804, with a new plan for a poem in five books. Scholars disagree as to whether this version, whose concluding book would have begun with the poet's vision on Mount Snowdon (later transposed to the poem's conclusion) and moved to the discussion of "spots of time" (later transposed to book 11), ever materialized. However, it is clear that by March 1804, Wordsworth had determined that the poem would require further enlarging. It would have to represent some of his experiences in France

during the 1790s and the failure of his hopes for the French Revolution, dramatizing the interaction of the imagination and historical forces, as well as the interaction of the imagination and nature. Adding books 6, then 9, and 10, and 8, he completed this new version in thirteen books in May 1805 and had Dorothy and his wife copy it out. This is the version printed in this volume, which reproduces the edition of the 1805 text that Jonathan Wordsworth, Stephen Gill, and M. H. Abrams prepared in 1979 for the Norton Critical Edition of *The Prelude*.

3. For the next thirty-five years, without altering in any essential way the *Prelude's* subject matter or design, Wordsworth revised. This period also saw some parts of the poem published separately. "There was a boy" (from book 5) and "Simplon Pass" (from book 6), for example, appeared in Wordsworth's *Poems* of 1815. Coleridge (the first outside Wordsworth's family to encounter the 1805 text) had earlier published sections from books 1 and 6 in *The Friend*. The version of the whole poem his executors ushered into print in 1850 was in fourteen books, Wordsworth having split book 10 into two parts in 1832. The printer's copy was the transcript the poet's daughter and a friend had prepared in 1838 of the 1832 text, and into which Wordsworth and his clerk had later inserted corrections.

As this summary of the *Prelude's* multiple recastings suggests, Wordsworth's vision of his poem—his view of himself, too—altered substantially over the years, at the start of the process especially. When he decided to enlarge the two-part *Prelude* of 1799, he committed himself to expanding lyric introspection to epic dimensions. It was "a thing unprecedented in Literary history," he observed in an 1805 letter that hints at this experiment with genre, "that a man should talk so much about himself." Between 1801 and 1805 he heightened his poem's style and incorporated allusions to earlier epics, self-consciously measuring his achievement as a poet-prophet against Milton's in *Paradise Lost*. Another prototype for his poem can be found in the tradition of spiritual autobiography that Saint Augustine had founded with his *Confessions* in the fourth century and that the scandalous Frenchman Jean-Jacques Rousseau had revived in the 1780s. Rousseau's *Confessions* made big, bold claims for the fascination of the author's subjectivity in all its unique intricacies, and Wordsworth's *Prelude* in some measure follows suit, as it personalizes epic and makes a literary form devoted to the public life of great collectivities (the fall of Troy or of Man) absorb representations of childhood anxieties and guilt that we might nowadays think of as belonging to a psychological case history. But as narrator, rather than narrated subject, Wordsworth insists on the wider import of this singular story. *The Prelude* thus asks to be read as the representative testimony of someone who (along with Coleridge, to whom the poem is addressed as a kind of letter, and along with an entire generation, in fact) has grappled with the traumatic experience of revolutionary optimism followed by defeat.

The poet has made it his urgent task to recover that lost faith: "I would enshrine the spirit of the past / For future restoration" (11.341–42). The persistent metaphor of *The Prelude*, shared with many autobiographies, is that of life as a circular journey. This poem of many wanderers and journeys concludes by installing the wandering poet back in his starting place. The prodigal son has completed the long journey home, after being lured into a crisis of identity by youthful radicalism and a residence in France. The poet declares the poem itself to be proof that he has realized the vocation he had queried at his setting-out. For many modern readers, however, much of the brilliance of *The Prelude* inheres in the passages in which the poet confesses to his failure to close the circle. What these readers value are Wordsworth's recurring expressions of doubt as to whether memory could ever bind the disparate materials of the individual's life into a coherent whole. A sense of the disjuncture between the man and the boy, the self who remembers and the self who is remembered, haunts this poem. This autobiographical enterprise demonstrates that sometimes self-estrangement—"I seem / Two consciousnesses—conscious of myself, / And of some other being" (2.31–33)—and self-knowledge proceed hand in hand.