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MEMORY IN *THE PRELUDE*

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Immediately after Wordsworth rejoices at his liberation from the “City’s walls” in the opening lines of *The Prelude*, he makes the following comment:

Thus far, O Friend! did I, not used to make
A present joy the matter of my Song,
Pour out, that day, my soul in measur’d strains,
Even in the very words which I have here
Recorded: (I,55-59)¹⁾

As a poet who is not used to making a present joy the matter of his song, Wordsworth admits that the preamble of *The Prelude* is a sort of exception. Indeed much of Wordsworth’s poetry springs from remembered experiences. While his earliest poems, such as *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*, are essentially descriptive, and the poems of his second period are based upon observation reinforced by sympathetic intuition, his poems from “Tintern Abbey” onward can safely be called the poetry of memory. Even in “nature poetry”, it is not the nature itself but rather the state of mind induced in him by the after-contemplation of nature that seems so preferable to him. For example, after-contemplation is perfectly rendered in the poem about daffodils: “I Wandered Lonely”. Recalling the daffodils, he says:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;

And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.²⁾

In his letter of May, 1805 to Sir G. Beaumont, Wordsworth wrote:

It will be not much less than 9,000 lines, not hundred but thousand lines, long; an alarming length! and a thing unprecedented in Literary history that a man should talk so much about himself.³⁾

Of course here he is referring to the composition of his great poem *The Prelude*. In a sense *The Prelude* is an autobiography in which he talks about himself, about his own life in the past — but so it is only “in a sense”. It will be a mistake to read this poem as an autobiography as such, for we cannot expect to find here a frank account of his personal life. The deliberate avoidance of objective, autobiographical recording is demonstrated even by the first paragraph of the poem. Wordsworth has escaped into the countryside from some town:

from yon City's walls set free,
A prison where he hath been long immured.
(I, 7-8)

Much effort has been made so far to determine what city Wordsworth actually refers to — was it London? or Bristol or even Goslar in Germany?⁴⁾ But to the rereader of *The Prelude*, the name of the town seems to be of little importance; what counts here is not so much London (or Bristol or Goslar for that matter) as the feeling such a big City had come to represent. This method of writing is typical of *The Prelude*.

The Prelude's peculiar way of treating the past becomes even more evident when it is compared with the “Autobiographical Memoranda” which Wordsworth dictated in

1847. In the latter he offers concrete facts, events of a publicly verifiable nature, for example:

In the month of October, 1787, I was sent to St. John's College, Cambridge, of which my uncle, Dr. Cookson, had been a fellow. The master, Dr. Chevallier, died very soon after;⁵⁾

On the other hand, *The Prelude* leaves out all such details. The entire Book III and part of Book VI are, as their titles "Residence at Cambridge" and "Cambridge and the Alps" respectively suggest, devoted to the life at Cambridge, but it is almost surprising that we cannot find there any such data and information as "Autobiographical Memoranda" provides.

In short, *The Prelude* should be called subjective autobiography or even creative autobiography expressing poetically the impact of his past experience upon a developing mind. Unlike in a thoroughly conventional method of autobiography, however, this unprecedented method proved to be a very difficult one.

Wordsworth well understood its difficulty as well as some of the problems it might raise, and he reveals his concern about this matter repeatedly in the poem itself:

I began

My story early, feeling as I fear,
The weakness of a human love, for days
Disown'd by memory, ere the birth of spring
Planting my snowdrops among winter snows.

(I,640-644)

or

But who shall parcel out
His intellect, by geometric rules,
Split, like a province, into round and square?
Who knows the individual hour in which
His habits were first sown, even as a seed, (II,208-212)

or

Of these and other kindred notices
 I cannot say what portion is in truth
 The naked recollection of that time,
 And what may rather have been call'd to life
 By after-meditation. (III,644-648)

At one level Wordsworth feels that the "heart" of his former experience is almost the same now as then; he writes:

— Unfading recollections! at this hour
 The heart is almost mine with which I felt
 From some hill-top, on sunny afternoons
 The Kite high up among the fleecy clouds
 Pull at its rein, (I,517-521)

This is a straightforward identification by way of memory with a past experience — one instance of delights that memory can give. But Wordsworth is sometimes at pains to separate his past self which it is the object of the poem to explore, from the present self:

so wide appears
 The vacancy between me and those days,
 Which yet have such self-presence in my mind
 That, sometimes, when I think of them, I seem
 Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
 And of some other Being. (II,28-33)

This seems to be partly in antithesis to the preceding example: he seems to insist on a complete separation between the past emotion and the present one; and yet he is also insisting on the "self-presence" of those past days, so that there is in fact some confusion between the time remembered and the present self which speaks directly to the reader.

This awareness of “two consciousnesses” is further elaborated in the beautiful and subtle image of a man bending from a drifting boat on a still water; this exquisite figure of speech reveals the characteristics and degree of Wordsworth’s self-consciousness perfectly:

As one who hangs down-bending from the side
 Of a slow-moving Boat, upon the breast
 Of a still water, solacing himself
 With such discoveries as his eye can make,
 Beneath him, in the bottom of the deeps,
 Sees many beauteous sights, *weeds, fishes, flowers,*
Grots, pebbles, roots of trees, and fancies more;
 Yet often is perplex’d and cannot part
 The shadow from the substance, *rocks and sky,*
Mountains and clouds, from that which is indeed
 The region, and the things which there abide
 In their true dwelling; *now is cross’d by gleam*
Of his own image, by a sunbeam now,
And motions that are sent he knows not whence,
 Impediments that make his task more sweet;
 – Such pleasant office have we long pursued
 Incumbent o’er the surface of past time
 With like success; (IV,247-264, my italics)

Here Wordsworth compares his effort to recollect his past life to a boatman. And in so doing the poet successfully elaborates on the relation between “two consciousnesses” by illustrating how they interfuse each other. In this image of a boatman there are, I think, three levels of experience. First, what he is consciously exploring are real things under the water – “weeds, fishes, flowers, / Grots, pebbles, roots of trees”; in other words he is exploring the self in time past. On the second level, with a kind of optical inevitability he cannot

separate the shadow of the world around him from the substance, real things under the water. This represents the usual difficulty of seeing clearly what is in the depth of the self in time past.

By the third level I mean these lines — “; now is cross’d by gleam/Of his own image, by a sunbeam now,/And motions that are sent he knows not whence”. This level, of course, overlaps with the second one (his own present image, like the world around him, falls on the surface of past time), and yet it retains its subtle independence syntactically by the use of semi-colon before “now”. Furthermore, such Wordsworthian images as “gleam” and “motions” seem to lend to this level of experience some special quality which distinguishes this level markedly from the others. This “gleam” reminds us of visionary “Gleams like the flashing of a shield” (1,614) felt by him in his childhood mystic experiences, or even of “the visionary gleam” in “Immortality Ode”. And “motions” here seem to have more than physical significance: they “are sent he knows not whence”. Wordsworth’s use of the word “motion” is always worth watching and he seems to find in motion the very essence of life,⁶ like in an arresting phrase “Ye motions of delight, that . . . find your way/To the recesses of the soul!” (X1,9-12) or in “a motion and a spirit that impels/All thinking things, all objects of all thought,” of “Tintern Abbey”. So, this extended simile of the third level shows how the image of his present self comes between him and his past, or rather, how his past tends to give back his own present image of himself while revealing at the same time, and more significantly, *a good deal more of himself beneath it*. This “gleam” of his own image, that is, a revelation of his hidden but truer self, occurs not as a result of any deliberate

act of the will but rather as an unwilling gift to the introspective mind. Throughout *The Prelude* Wordsworth is persistently concerned with this aspect of memory.

As he writes in *The Prelude* "Our childhood sits,/Our simple childhood sits upon a throne" (V,531), Wordsworth regarded a childhood as the most ideal period of man's life. The lyric on the rainbow "My Heart Leaps Up" reveals Wordsworth's strong desire to preserve the continuity of his former self into his later life. But in "Immortality Ode" he expresses a bitter sense of loss of this continuity: "Whither is fled the visionary gleam?/Where is it now . . .?" (*PW*, IV,280). This sense of loss led him to the deep and philosophic meditation of the latter half of the Ode. Among many delightful childhood experiences, there are some which Wordsworth particularly esteems as sources and objects of his poetry. They all have, in a sense, mystic aspects and he calls them "Spots of time"⁷⁾ which, with their distinct pre-eminence, stand out in the whole description of *The Prelude*. Wordsworth tried to find nourishment in those past experiences, and memory acted as a kind of storehouse to nurture him. But the power latent in these experiences is not so easy to draw:

But a shy spirit in my heart,
That comes and goes — will sometimes leap
From hiding-places ten years deep;
Or haunts me with familiar face;
Returning, like a ghost unlaid,
Until the debt I owe be paid.⁸⁾

The sources of spiritual power are not only deep but also hidden, — hard to find and hard to explain to others. Furthermore, the sense of difficulty is accompanied by the

sense of a crisis:

the hiding-places of my power
Seem open; I approach, and then close;
I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,
May scarcely see at all, . . . (XI,336-339)

From "Immortality Ode" we can learn what the crisis really meant to Wordsworth – how deep the despair was, how he accepted and overcame it. Out of this sense of crisis came the following determination:

I would give,
While yet we may, as far as words can give,
A substance and a life to what I feel:
I would enshrine the spirit of the past
For future restoration. (XI,339-343)

Generally speaking, the Romantic poets including Wordsworth have been accused of such vices as subjectivism or a formless and undisciplined emotionalism. But in Wordsworth's recollection of the past we can find very little sentimentalism or nostalgic feeling which might easily be expected from a Romantic poet, especially when one reflects on his past. In *On Wordsworth's Prelude* Herbert Lindenberger compares Wordsworth's treatment of memory with that of eighteenth century poets, particularly with that of Samuel Roger. Lindenberger writes:

For it is Wordsworth's unique experience with time which has not only determined the form of the poem, but has endowed it with that peculiar intensity which distinguishes it at once from such a late eighteenth-century disquisition on time as Samuel Rogers' once celebrated *Pleasure of Momory* (1792). . . For Rogers . . . the pleasure of memory

consists of little more than sentimental reflection: . . .

The contemplation of the past . . . in *The Prelude* partakes of the nature of revelation.⁹⁾

This quality of “peculiar intensity” in Wordsworth’s sense of time is, I think, understandable even by the passing references I have made so far to his attitude toward memory. For Wordsworth the act of memory means far more than sentimental reflection; memory serves as a means for the restoration of the powers associated with a lost or fading past; it has also become a creative and autonomous power of mind evoking past experience and adding new experience in the evocation. By examining one of the most famous episodes from *The Prelude* I intend to show how the act of memory produces a sort of poetic effect which is peculiarly Wordsworthian.

The episode appears in Book VI of *The Prelude*, and is usually called “Simplon Pass episode”. The crossing of the Alps through the Simplon pass was for Wordsworth the particularly memorable journey of a summer spent on the continent during the college vacation in 1791. Wordsworth and his friend Jones were eagerly climbing up the Simplon pass to reach the top of the Alps and confront the natural world at its most sublime — the whole episode takes its energy from this original desire. But they became detached from their guide and grew uncertain of their way. While in doubt, they met a peasant and questioned him:

We questioned him again, and yet again;
 But every word that from the peasant’s lips
 came in reply, translated by our feelings,
 Ended in this — *that we had crossed the Alps.*

(1850 version, VI,588-591)

Thus their eager spirit of upward-climbing endeavour – the ambition of youth – was turned back by these tidings. What makes this section of the poem extraordinary is an interruption in the description of this past event:

Imagination – here the Power so called
 Through sad incompetence of human speech,
 That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss
 Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
 At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost;
 Halted without an effort to break through;
 But to my conscious soul I now can say –
 'I recognise thy glory:' in such strength
 Of usurpation, when the light of sense
 Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
 The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,

.....

The melancholy slackening that ensued
 Upon those tidings by the peasant given
 Was soon dislodged. Downward we hurried fast,

(1850, VI,592-602, 617-619)

If we examine the most literal level of the meaning of the six lines (592-597), we may interpret them as referring to the experience which took place during the crossing of the Alps. Past verb tense is used: "Imagination . . . That awful Power rose", "I was lost". The imagery is precisely that of the poet's wandering over the Alps – "abyss", "vapour", "lonely traveller". The peasant's words must have exerted something of a hypnotic power so that a vapour seemed to wrap the poet's mind, cutting him off from the world of senses. But immediately after these lines, the tense shifts to the present, "But to my conscious soul I now can say –/I recognise thy glory:", which of course reflects his reaction at the time of

the writing. As long as we interpret the preceding lines as referring to the past experience, this shift strikes us as very abrupt and almost embarrassing. In fact, there is only a semi-colon to separate the two tenses: “. . . to break through;/ But to my ...”. It seems that the gulf of fourteen years between the two tenses is too wide for the semi-colon to bridge. Then, when did the Imagination rise and when was the poet lost? Most critics, however, seem to be far less perplexed by this point than I. M.H. Abrams, for example, says; “At the time the narrator had felt only a dejection, a ‘dull and heavy slackening’; but now, in the process of recollection and writing, Imagination suddenly ‘Like an unfather’d vapour’ comès ‘Athwart’ him”.¹⁰) Further, the earlier text seems to make it clearer than the later that this whole experience occurred during the writing of *The Prelude*:

Imagination! lifting up itself
 Before the eye and progress of my Song
 Like an unfathered vapour; here that Power,
 In all the might of its endowments, came
 Athwart me; I was lost as in a cloud,
 Halted, without a struggle to break through.
 And now recovering, to my Soul I say
 I recognise thy glory; . . . (1805, VI,525-532)

This earlier text seems to explain the meaning of the two verb tenses in the later one: Imagination rose in him at the time of composition and he was lost, but after a moment he recovered and could say “I recognise thy glory”. In other words, the semi-colon separating the two tenses (1850, 597) bridges only a moment of silence – just long enough to recover from being lost.

Still, however, I am not wholly convinced. One hesitates to differ from so fine a critic as M.H.Abrams, yet I confess that

to me Abram's assertion "whole experience occurred during the writing" sounds too affirmative. Even in the earlier text there seem to be some indications to support my suspicion. The imagery here is still that of the Alps — "unfathered vapour" and "cloud". When the poet writes "Before the eye and progress of my Song", the "eye" reminds us of one which surveys the sublime view of the Alps. And when he says "I was lost as in a cloud,/Halted, ...", perhaps the feeling of being lost itself comes directly from the preceding accounting of losing the path through the mountains. Further the common pattern of Wordsworth's revision is that crude and ambiguous passages in the earlier text are often made clearer in the later one, but it is worth noticing that in the "Imagination" passage the 1850 text is far more ambiguous as to the "time" of the experience than the 1805 text.

With these evidences before us, it seems to me that Wordsworth may have had double intention: the experience of Imagination belongs to the time of crossing the Alps as well as to the time of the recollection and composition; and here these two levels of experience seem to be delicately synthesized. On the Alps Wordsworth felt not "only a dejection", as Abrams asserts, but also an "awful Power"; he was lost for a moment and "in such strength of usurpation" he thought he had caught the glimps of something like an "invisible world", but at that time he was too young and inexperienced to recognize the meaning of his experience. It was not until fourteen years later when he was recollecting this puzzling experience that in an intense moment of imaginative vision he recognized the real meaning of the past experience. When he had carried his narrative up to the line "*we had crossed the Alps*", these words once again as in fourteen years before exerted something of a hypnotic power and carried him away

into a state of other-worldness, and the act of composition was held in suspension for a moment. But now he could see the reality of this experience and could say to his conscious soul “I recognise thy glory”. So the six lines 592-597 (1850) may be viewed as the product of two kinds of consciousness, old and new. He might feel such process to be mysterious, but he was too truthful an observer of his own mental process not to make some attempt to describe it. This, at least, is my reading of the meaning of the disputed passage. And as far as this passage is concerned, 1850 version seems to be an example of later improvements since it results in finer poetry without the older Wordsworth having changed the implications of the passage.

The Romantic Imagination, we are usually told, is a faculty consciously exercised and directed by the mind. But in the present passage Wordsworth speaks of Imagination not as a faculty which he exercises but as an “awful Power” which visits and seizes him in its grasp. And there comes a shift of address from the all-inclusive name “Imagination” to the limited “my conscious soul”. First his mind was moved by the experience of “unsurpation”, — by the visiting of Imagination — and is now moved by itself. The mystery lies in this sudden deepening, or an inward sinking. He saw something new about his own soul with a clarity he had never known before. He now can say, “I recognise thy glory” because he sees that his conscious soul can reveal the infinite in the finite, as he writes:

Our destiny, our being's heart and home,
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.

(1850, VI, 604-608)

Here it is worth noticing that the recognition of the soul is achieved as a sort of a by-product of the act of memory, as an unwilling gift to the recollecting mind. The whole process seems, to a surprising degree, to correspond to the simile of a boatman discussed earlier in which Wordsworth elaborated on his complex time-consciousness.

In *The Prelude* Wordsworth not only describes "the growth of a poet's mind" in the past, but he also demonstrates the Imagination as a living and present mode of vision. The Simplon Pass episode is perhaps Wordsworth's most complex and dramatic account of his time-consciousness.

NOTES

- 1) *The Prelude: or, Growth of a Poet's Mind*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd ed. rev. by Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1959). I have used the 1805 version throughout unless otherwise indicated.
- 2) *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1940-1949), vol. II, 216. Hereafter cited as *PW*.
- 3) *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Early Years 1787-1805*, ed. Ernest De Seincourt, 2nd ed. rev. by Chester L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967), p.586.
- 4) A detailed discussion on this point is developed by Shunichi Maekawa in the Introduction to *The Prelude*: with notes by Torao Taketomo, rev. with Introduction by Shunichi Maekawa, vol. I, (Tokyo, 1967).
- 5) *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1974), vol. III, 373.
- 6) Helen Darbishire, *The Poet Wordsworth*, (Oxford, 1950) p. 127.
- 7) In a strict sense, "Spots of time" should only be applied to two particular episodes in Book XI of *The Prelude*, but usually this phrase is used more loosely.
- 8) "The Waggoner", *PW*, II, 204.
- 9) *On Wordsworth's Prelude*, (Princeton U.P., 1963), pp.131-133. In this book he emphasizes Wordsworth's time-consciousness and identifies *The Prelude* as an ancestor of modern "time-books" like those of Joyce and Proust.
- 10) "*The Prelude as a Portrait of the Artist*" in *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, (Cornell, U.P., 1970), p.214.