# Book Twelve of *The Prelude:* Wordsworth's Balancing Act

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In Book Twelve of *The Prelude,* Wordsworth begins to speak on the theme which he has been leading up to for eleven books: Imagination or, to use his title, "Imagination and Taste, How Impaired and Restored." This is a significant place in the poem; after several false spurts of optimism and dedication to the poetic life, as in Book Four, the young Wordsworth is ready to sift through the pieces of fallen idols and dashed hopes and to construct his personality in his own way.

The critics disagree about the intellectual pattern of Book Tswelve; though one cannot assume *The Prelude* to be chronologically exact,[1] in Book Twelve Wordswoth seems to focus on a period around 1795 after he "had yielded up moral questions in depspair" (Book 11, 1.305).[2] Earnest de Selincourt asserts that this despair is due to his disappointment in Hodwinism; Book Twelve, he continues, describes Wordswoth's successful attempt to purge himself of his obsession with Godwin's analytical doctrine of Benevolent Necessity and Utilitarianism by returning to nature.[3] Ben Ross Schneider concurs with de Selincourt, saying that at Racedown, Wordsworth recovered from his disillusionment with Godwin's Reason. However, he calls this despair a mental sickness and believes that Wordsworth filled the gap caused by his denial of Reason with the philosophies of Descartes, Plato, Plotinus, Berkeley, Lucretius, and Spinoza, which his Cambridge fellows had consisered false.[4] Raymond Dexter Havens says simply that Book Twelve tells Wordsworth's state of mind following the time he spent entranced with Godwin's philosophies and relates two incidents of boyhood which aided him in recovery from this despair.[5] Though these interpretations are certainly valid, Book Twelve cannot be filed into a narrow slot. More than a chronicle of Wordsworth's purging himself of Godwinism through nature, Book Twelve is a miniature history of his past and contains his personal application of the three ages of man.

The first stanza of book twelve serves as an abstract of the book and in this way separates itself from the progression of the other stanzas. In these first lines, Wordsworth tells of a time of confusion and "utter loss of hope itself/and things to hope for!" (11. 6–7) in the past, but indicates that his life did not begin in despair and will not and that way. He has taken new hope from nature: from breezes, brooks, waves, groves. He concludes this first stanza with a hopeful tone:

> • • • The morning shines
> Nor heedeth Man's perverseness; spring returns—
> • • • in Nature still
> Glorying, I found a counterpoise in her,
> Which, when the spirit of evil reached its height,
> Maintained for me a secret happiness (11. 31–32, 40–43).

A pivotal word in these lines is "counterpoise," meaning to bring into a a condition of equilibrium or stability. The implication here, which is supported further in the text, is that Wordsworth did not substitute revelry in nature's beauty for his preoccupation with syllogistic reasoning; he struck a balance between the two. In this initial stanza, he briefly outlines the pattern of the book: the poet, "inwardly oppressed," sees in nature" the wondrous influence of power gently used" (1.15)—rather than the abusive use of power by the French Revolutionaries-and strikes a mental balance using the same beauties of nature he loved as a boy to offset his recent submersion in philosophical reasoning.

In the two stanzas following the introductory stanza, lines 44–74 and 75–92, Wordsworth gives a more detailed review of his past, which is also a recapitulation of the first eleven books of *The Prelude*, dealing with his intense appreciation of nature as a child "Until that natural graciousness of the mind/ Gave way to overpressure from the times/And their disastrous issues..." (11. 50–52). He seems to see himself as two separate begings: one, a younger, peaceful man sheltered in a harbor "of blissful gratitude and fearless love" (1.56), and another, "parted, as by a gulph/From him who had been..." (11. 59–60). This second self, he says, turns the

"open eye of reason" to the things he had held dear and discovers that nothing stands without imperfections under reason's calculating gaze: not the "sage, warrior, patriot, hero," not history, not poetry, not friendship. These stanzas establish a definite separation of Wordsworth's development into two stages. One is prejudgmental, when as a child he had a non-critical appreciation for the world around him. The second is painstakingly judgmental; he uses his powers of intellectual reasoning to dissect his world and to destory his strong feelings for people, nature, and poetry which had sustained him in his early life. So in stanzas two and three, Wordsworth reviews the first eleven books of *The Prelude* and tells of a significant point in his life when he is at war with himself "a bigot to a new idolatry" (1.77).

In two further sections of the poem, one of which is exclusive to the 1805 manuscript, Wordsworth explores the prejudgmental and judgmental stages in greater detail. In the 1805 passage, Wordsworth examines the stage"...when reason...Is of all idols that which pleases most/The growing mind" (11. 123, 127–128). Speaking in more general terms—"the growing mind" rather than "my growing mind" Wordsworth is not totally critical of this judgmental stage, but, as de Selincourt notes, recognizes its value as a progression in mental development.[6] He does not list the "obvious benefits" gained from this stage, just as he does not list"... narrow estimates of things/ Which hence originate..." (11. 131–132), but says"...danger cannot but attend/Uon a function rather proud to be/ The enemy of falsehood, than the friend/Of truth, to sit in judgment than to feel" (11. 134–137). In lines 73–150 in the 1850 manuscript, Wordsworth examines his early youth, when he viewed nature as friend and as a power: "O Soul of Nature! Excellent and fair! /That didst rejoice with me, with whom I, too,/ Rejoiced through early youth..." (11.73–75). This is a prejudgmental stage. He speaks of nature sharing his emotions as if he and nature were in some way united; nature "sustained and governed" him, giving him an "impassioned life." He had not yet learned to see the world functioning apart from his own being. Though Wordsworth found this non-critical stage rewarding, he seems to have become occupied with an aesthetic movement which caused him to make critical comparisons

and judgments of objects in nature. He sees himself in this stage "Bent overmuch on superficial things,/Pampering myself with meagre novelties/ Of colour and proportion..." (11. 116–117); he was too caught up in the philosophy of beauty to allow a more sensory appreciation of nature. His preoccupation with aesthetics interrupted his "deeper feelings," as did "a twofold frame of body and of mind." This dualistic concept seems to be in reference to the Cartesian theory that matter is extended but does not think and the mind thinks but is not extended. Descartes distinguishes between thinking and sensing. Thinking is cognition of the world as it is, namely, a universeof unextended minds and of material substances possessing only "length, breadth, and depth." Sensing is perception of a world of colored, sounding, and odorous bodies. According to Descartes, men take perception too seriously; they assume that the senses yield information about "the essence of the bodies which are outside" them.[7] Wordsworth, like Descartes, is negative toward an over-emphasis of sensory perception, represented by the eye: "I speak in recollection of a time/ When the bodily eye, in every stage of life/The most despotic of our senses, gained/Such strength in *me* as often held my mind/in absolute dominion..." (11. 127–131). His sensory perceptions seem to have nullified his mental activity. In these closer examinations, Wordsworth finds strengths and weaknesses in both stages of his life. He values the analytical skills he gained in his preoccupation with syllogistic reasoning, though he sees a pure application of this thought process to be negative and destructive, logically dismissing all the feelings that unite men. And he values the depth of feeling and support he found in his prejudgmental unity with the natural world, though he realizes the sensory perceptions are of little value without the application of thought.

Descartes concludes, after stating men take their perception too seriously, that men must strike a balance between sensory perceptions and mental activity; in other words, the mind and body problem must be resolved. Wordsworth seems to concur with this conclusion and tells of a maid whose

...eye was not the mistress of her heart;

Far less did rules prescribed by passive tastes,
Or barren intermeddling subleties
Perplex her mind...(11. 153–156).

This maid seems to have reached a synthesis of the prejudgmental and judgmental stages; she has found "a perfect happiness of soul, /Whose variegated feelings were in this/Sisters..." and has achieved a nonrelational unity of experience which has passed beyond judgment. Wordsworth takes inspiration from this maid. He survives "The first diviner influence of this world,/As it appears to unaccustomed eyes" (11. 182–183), shaking off his bent towards negative criticism of the world and stands in "Nature's presence...A sensitive being, a *creative* soul" (11. 206–207). Like the maid, Wordsworth reaches the third stage, a postjudgmental stage in which the critical faculties do not tear down the sensory perceptions, but observe them accurately, in a positive way. The post-judgmental stage, then, is a compatible union of the prejudgmental and judgmental stages: the balance is struck.

The lines which follow-lines 208–335 illustrate Wordsworth's new-found synthesis and self-proclaimed arrival as a "*creative* soul." These are the familiar "spots of time" passages. The first, lines 225-287A, is a recollection of a boyhood horseback ride when he became separated from his father's servant and came upon the murder's initials carved on the common. The second, lines 287B–335, is a remembrance of the Christmas his father died. His explanation of these could serve just as well as an explanation of his post-judgmental period:

This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
Among those passages of life that give
Profoundest knowledge to what point, and how,
The mind is lord and master-outward sense
The obedient servant of her will...(11. 220–223).

These "spots of time" apparently are remembered events which undergird the balance between sensory perception and positive analyzation, and

Wordsworth continues, these moments "Are scattered everywhere, taking their date/From our first childhood..." (11. 224–225). Further, these "spots of time" might also be viewed as Wordsworth's justification for taking on the life of a poet. In the lines following the first recollection, he explains that these recollections give:

> ...As far as words can give,
> Substance and life to what I feel, enshrining,
> Such is my hope, the spirit of the past
> For future restoration (11. 283–287).

wordsworth calls upon the poetic form to crystalize certain meaningful moments in his past for use in the present and as a stay against the variable future.[8] These two passages are adequate examples of his poetic abilities; they prove he had a right to proclaim himself a "*creative* soul." By including these "spots of time" at the end of Book Twelve, Wordsworth cooperates with a bit of well-worn advice for writers: do not tell your reader; show him.

Book Twelve of *The Prelude* is more than a description of one poet casting aside his preoccupations with Godwinistic Reason and Utilitarianism; it is a microcosm of *The Prelude* and a microcosm of Wordsworth's life to that point. He describes his theory of man's emotional and intellectual development, the Three Ages of Man, by relating them to his own life. The initial stage is a pre-judgmental one when the child cannot see himself separate from the world around him. The second is a judgmental stage; the man sees himself apart from his environment and is intensely critical of every part of that environment. The final stage is a post-judgmental one. This is a synthesis of the others and might aptly be called a balanced maturity. Wordsworth seems to have taken what Eric Ericson would call a long moratorium on adult life; yet he achieves this adulthood and becomes, as the "spots of time" prove, a "*creative* soul."

## Notes

1) F.W. Bateson, *Wordsworth: A Re-Interpretation* (London: Lowe and Beydon, 1960), p. 165.

2) William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, ed.J. J.C. Maxwell (New York: Penguin Books, 1976). All lines cited in this paper are from this text. Line numbers will be given after each citation.

3) William Wordsworth, *The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (London Oxford Univ. Press, 1947), pp. 313–14.
de Selincourt (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1947), pp. 313–14.

4) Ben Ross Schneider, Jr., *Wordsworth's Cambridge Education* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1957), p.230.

5) Raymond Dexter Havens, *The Mind of a Poet: A Study of Wordsworth's Thought in Particular Reference ot The Prelude* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1946), p.560.

6) Wordsworth, ed. de Selicourt, p.313.

7) W.T. Jones, *Hobbes to Jume*, Vol. III of *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), p.181.

8) John R. Grandine, *The Problem of Shape in The Prelude: The Conflict of Private and Public Speech* (Cambrdige: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968), pp.18–19.