

Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal

Volume 3

Article 12

2011

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Recommended Citation

Persia, Danny (2011) "The Gift of Immortality: Man, Nature, and Human Nature in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*," *Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal*: Vol. 3 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue/vol3/iss1/12>

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The Gift of Immortality: Man, Nature, and Human Nature in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*

By Danny Persia

The aesthetic dimensions of William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* highlight the unity of man and nature prevalent in nineteenth century Romantic literature. Wordsworth's autobiographical work traces "the growth of a poet's mind" as it becomes suffused with the elemental teachings of nature. Wordsworth relates his experiences in a progression from youth to maturity; he explores the immediate and the eternal, the ordinary and the sublime. However, he does not profess that one reaches immortality through a linear progression, but rather that one recognizes innate eternity through a circular progression. Thus, Wordsworth suggests that a child is the possessor of infinite wisdom, wisdom that man may attain only by reverting into a state of youthful innocence. Man's journey through life becomes the stream through which he travels; he gains experience as he travels further inland, yet the purest of his faculties are eroded along the way. The onset of his journey is quiet and serene; the duration is muddled, erratic, and saturated with experience. Wordsworth is quoted for having declared, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" ("Preface" 460). Throughout *The Prelude*, such tranquility may be found in both infancy and maturity; solitude does not come to signify loneliness, but rather the sole connection between childhood memories and adulthood experiences.

The commonalities between *The Prelude* and Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollection of Early Childhood" are abounding; the aesthetics of nature allow man to return to the serenity of a former time, a time in which the natural world surrounded an innocent being. Reflection through nature allows the individual to revisit

his/her distant past and to probe the inherent imagination of the mind manifested during infancy. Accordingly, Wordsworth is able to “see further into man by seeing him from a distance,” by reflecting on the imaginative whims of his childhood days (Ogden 258). The gift of immortality does not fade throughout the progression of life, but rather flourishes in the midst of childhood memories. Wordsworth thus explores an infinite power: the power to understand that immortality is nature’s inborn gift to man.

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth first establishes the aura surrounding an innocent child as he is brought into the world (See Appendix). Learning from sensory experiences while engaging in oxymoronic “mute dialogues” with his mother, the child displays an “infant sensibility” that transcends the capacities of any adult man (*The Prelude*, ll. 268, 270). The silence is pleasing to him; he interacts with his mother in a way that is simplistic yet infinitely meaningful. As though still resting in the womb of his mother, the newborn cannot speak or utter his thoughts, yet he is fully receptive to emotions. Thus, “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting,” a state of solitude and immeasurable knowledge that fades with the growth of the mind and body (“Ode,” l. 58). Wordsworth evokes the soothing connotations of sleep to suggest that childhood is a gentle time, a time for innocent understanding of the natural world. However, as the child grows, the “shades of the prison-house begin to close,” and he begins to search for a greater connection to the outside world (l. 67). Once nourished by his mother, cradled in her arms, the “infant Babe” is no longer shielded from adulthood’s despair (*The Prelude*, l. 232). The child is released into the world, traveling further downstream on his journey through life.

Wordsworth expounds upon this notion by reflecting on the lack of guidance in his own life as a child, meanwhile shedding light on his journey to adulthood and his consequent interaction with nature’s domain. As Wordsworth grew up, the challenges that he faced were often unexpected. His mother

died when he was but eight years of age, his father five years later. However, Wordsworth assures the reader that, though “The props of [his] affections were removed, / . . . the building stood, as if sustained / By its own spirit!” (*The Prelude*, ll. 279-281). Wordsworth refers to the culmination of his intellectual pursuits and his understanding of the world around him; in his mind he hosted firm beliefs, for “All that [he] beheld / Was dear” (ll. 281-282). Wordsworth was nursed and cared for as an infant, yet he was tasked alone with enduring hardship and the bereavement of his loved ones. “Though nothing can bring back the hour / Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower,” Wordsworth perseveres to construct a relationship with nature symbolic of his yearning for a time once cherished (“Ode,” ll. 177-178). He seeks to vivify his memories, for they are the only remnants of his past. Thus, Wordsworth introduces the human desire for permanence, the coveted ability to recollect the joys of an infinite past without the limitations of time.

Moreover, Wordsworth discovers a mechanism for remembrance that even he as a child can comprehend. Wordsworth notes, “The seasons came, / And every season wheresoe’er I moved unfolded transitory qualities, / . . . / left a register / Of permanent relations, else unknown” (*The Prelude*, ll. 289-293). Although they are fleeting, a child understands the seasons; they are an integral part of nature’s renewal. The seasons reappear with the passing of time, each occurrence sharpening the child’s perception of nature. Even in the absence of his parents, the child senses the delicacy of his life, for “Along his infant veins are interfused / The gravitation and the filial bond / Of nature that connect him with the world” (ll. 243-244). The tranquility of the mother-child bond at birth is not lost through the progression of time; it is guarded in the heart of nature and sensed by the heart of man. Wordsworth explores the ways in which this spiritual sensation is redeemed after the loss of family, and, even greater, the loss of youth.

Just as the seasons contribute to nature's rebirth, memories serve as a vital component of human growth. Wordsworth claims, "The Child is Father of the Man"; wisdom precedes maturity, and youth is the time of pure existence ("Ode" 186). This retrogressive model suggests that a memory is an incomplete image in comparison to the actual event. However, Wordsworth is not concerned with the actual memory that is within one's grasp, but rather the process of extracting that memory from the natural world: "Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" ("Ode," l. 57). Wordsworth proposes that the sensations of youth, the innate wisdom passed from mother to child, can be relived in a realm of tranquility, for ". . . beauty, solitude / [is] more active even than 'best society'" (*The Prelude*, ll. 294-295). Nature holds the spiritual ties of memory, for with each renewal of the season comes a rebirth of memory's bliss: "O joy! that in our embers / Is something that doth live, / That nature yet remembers / What was so fugitive!" ("Ode," ll. 129-132). Wordsworth recognizes the power of nature in capturing the stills of life, or the moments that pass as brief spots of time. He depicts the glowing embers to signify the persistence of memory and to suggest that the flames of the past are never fully extinguished. The powers of solitude contribute to recollection of the past, fueling the flares of memory that linger in the natural world.

Wordsworth further portrays the beauty of silence by reflecting on his own interactions with the natural world. Wordsworth reveals that he would often "walk alone, / under the quiet stars," still sensing the "power in sound" silently echoing all around him (*The Prelude*, ll. 303-304). Solitude offers a time of spiritual contemplation, a period of inner growth rooted not in societal concerns, but in internal values. Even in the midst of a coming storm, Wordsworth upholds his faith in nature. "Beneath some rock, listening to the notes that are / the ghostly language of the ancient earth," he continues to view nature as the sole link between the past and present (ll. 308-309). The transition between these two time frames is

ambiguous; there is no line that distinguishes past from present, youth from adulthood. Wordsworth notes that nature's symphonies, the notes of the ancient earth, "make their dim abode in distant winds" (l. 310), winds that "come to [him] from the fields of sleep" ("Ode," l. 28). Wordsworth thus reverts back to the notion of sleep, painting an image of the winds gliding from the innocence of infancy to the storms of maturity. "Though inland far we be," claims Wordsworth, "Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea / Which brought us hither" (ll. 162-163). Solitude is not lost in the journey inland, or the progression toward maturity, for youth remains on an infinite horizon that extends in all directions. Although youth has presumably vanished into the past, it remains visible to man, who seeks to return to innocence in the circular progression of life. The horizon is distant and imagined; it represents the intangibility of innate immortality, the presence of something longed for by man yet ultimately unattainable.

Wordsworth transcends the ordinary in search of this unattainable ideal, this renewed state of infinite wisdom into which a child is born. He looks to nature- its sounds, sights, and glories- for a sense of understanding, a sense of identity that exists beyond man's conscious existence. What Wordsworth finds is the power of nature: the capacity of raw beauty to transform his perspective of knowledge and immortality. He discovers that there are "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears," and that although a "philosophic mind" will forever prevent his return to innocence, it will not restrain his appreciation of the sublime ("Ode," 186, 203). Thus, Wordsworth receives nature's gift to man with open arms, and he has made worthy his acceptance of transformative beauty. His ability to become immersed in nature, to absorb its instruction through sound and sense, enables him to follow a circular progression. Wordsworth traces the path from innate wisdom to an acquired consciousness of morality, then back to inherent knowledge once again. The final bend of this lifelong stream can only be traversed with the cleansing of the human

soul, the erosion of life's distractions and the induction of a higher state recollected in tranquility. Such cleansing is embodied by an appreciation for nature: a reflection on the innocence of childhood and the experiences of maturity. In developing this realization, Wordsworth does not simply accept nature's gift and abandon all sense of imagination. Rather, he captures the essence of nature through the use of creative language: through the use of his poetry. Read by those who have already progressed out of youth and into the currents of the stream, Wordsworth's poetry provides man with an opportunity to revert into innocence and achieve immortality. His immortal words live on, ceaselessly wavering on the edge of eternity.

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Appendix

The Prelude

William Wordsworth

Book Second

School-Time (Continued)

Blest the infant Babe
(For with my best conjectures I would trace
Our Being's earthly progress), blest the Babe
Nursed in his Mother's arms, who sinks to sleep 235
Rocked on his Mother's breast; who with his soul
Drinks in the feelings of his Mother's eye!
For him, in one dear Presence, there exists
A virtue which irradiates and exalts
Objects through widest intercourse of sense. 240
No outcast he, bewildered and depressed:
Along his infant veins are interfused
The gravitation and the filial bond
Of nature that connect him with the world.
Is there a flower, to which he points with hand 245
Too weak to gather it, already love
Drawn from love's purest earthly fount for him
Hath beautified that flower; already shades
Of pity cast from inward tenderness
Do fall around him upon aught that bears
Unsightly marks of violence or harm. 250
Emphatically such a Being lives,
Frail creature as he is, helpless as frail,
An inmate of this active universe.
For feeling has to him imparted power
That through the growing faculties of sense 255
Doth like an agent of the one great Mind
Create, creator and receiver both,
Working but in alliance with the works

Which it beholds. –Such, verily, is the first
Poetic spirit of our human life, 260
By uniform control of after years,
In most, abated or suppressed; in some,
Through every change of growth and of decay,
Pre-eminent till death.

From early days, 265
Beginning not long after this first time
In which, a Babe, by intercourse of touch
I held mute dialogues with my Mother's heart,
I have endeavored to display the means

Whereby this infant sensibility, 270
Great birthright of our being, was in me
Augmented and sustained. Yet is a path
More difficult before me; and I fear
That in its broken windings we shall need
The chamois' sinews, and the eagle's wing: 275
For now a trouble came into my mind
From unknown causes. I was left alone
Seeking the visible world, nor knowing why.

The props of my affections were removed,
And yet the building stood, as if sustained 280
By its own spirit! All that I beheld
Was dear, and hence to finer influxes

The mind lay open, to a more exact
And close communication. Many are our joys
In youth, but oh! what happiness to live 285
When every hour brings palpable access
Of knowledge, when all knowledge is delight,
And sorrow is not there! The seasons came,
And every season wheresoe'er I moved

Unfolded transitory qualities, 290
Which, but for this most watchful power of love,
Has been neglected; left a register

Of permanent relations, else unknown.
 Hence life, and change, and beauty, solitude
 More active even than 'best society'— 295
 Society made sweet as solitude
 By inward concords, silent, inobtrusive
 And gentle agitations of the mind
 From manifold distinctions, difference
 Perceived in things, where, to the unwatchful eye, 300
 No difference is, and hence, from the same source,
 Sublimer joy; for I would walk alone,
 Under the quiet stars, and at that time
 Have felt whate'er there is of power in sound
 To breathe an elevated mood, by form 305
 Or image unprofaned; and I would stand,
 If the night blackened with a coming storm,
 Beneath some rock, listening to notes that are
 The ghostly language of the ancient earth,
 Or make their dim abode in distant winds. 310
 Thence did I drink the visionary power;
 And deem not profitless those fleeting moods
 Of shadowy exultation: not for this,
 That they are kindred to our purer mind
 And intellectual life; but that the soul, 315
 Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
 Remembering not, retains an obscure sense
 Of possible sublimity, whereto
 With growing faculties she doth aspire,
 With faculties still growing, feeling still 320
 That whatsoever point they gain, they yet
 Have something to pursue.