

Swarthmore College

Works

Philosophy Faculty Works

Philosophy

10-1-1986

Self-Understanding And Community In Wordsworth's Poetry

Richard Thomas Eldridge

Swarthmore College, reldrid1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Richard Thomas Eldridge. (1986). "Self-Understanding And Community In Wordsworth's Poetry". *Philosophy And Literature*. Volume 10, Issue 2. 273-294. DOI: 10.1353/phl.1986.0026
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy/236>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by . It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.



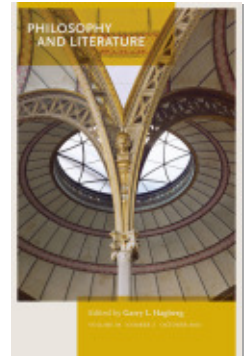
PROJECT MUSE®

Self-Understanding and Community in Wordsworth's Poetry

Richard Eldridge

Philosophy and Literature, Volume 10, Number 2, October 1986, pp. 273-294 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/phl.1986.0026



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/phl/summary/v010/10.2.eldridge.html>

SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND COMMUNITY
IN WORDSWORTH'S POETRY

PRIOR TO the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century, to understand oneself was to know one's place in a teleologically organized universe. Human actions, together with natural events in general, were intelligible as aiming at the realization of given purposes or ends. To be a human person was to have a particular sort of end: intellectual contemplation, according to Aristotle, or oneness with God, according to Augustine.

Self-knowledge becomes problematic, however, once events in nature are conceived in terms of the new physics to be only materially caused, not purposive. Given that human actions are events in nature, physical explanations then seem to be both necessary and sufficient for understanding them. It then becomes no longer possible to understand and explain one's actions as grounded in a partial grasp of an intelligible order of things. The self, it seems, is not real; bits of matter are, and their motions are mechanical, not plotted in a divinely ordered book of nature. Thus the self or the person as a locus of autonomous agency and understanding tends to come to be regarded as a fiction, not a physical something and not effective in the occurrence of events, so not a something at all. Human actions tend no longer to be seen as stemming from persons who can alter and are responsible for them, but instead as complex events falling under physical laws.

Yet despite the revolutionary revisions in the explanation of human action and the account of personhood seemingly forced by the new physics, self-knowledge is not something easily abandoned in favor of knowledge of matter. It is not easy to conceive of one's actions as nonpurposive and of oneself as an unreal plaything of fortune. Determinism seems incompatible with individual responsibility and hence with morality. Determinists make claims, investigate things, and regard these activities as significant

and under their control, yet it is hard to see how this could be if physicalist determinism were true. Even within modern scientific understanding, autonomous creativity and human understanding are generally allotted roles in experimentation as well as in the rest of life. Yet this acknowledgment of human autonomy is seemingly in fundamental conflict with the commitment to the explanation of all events under physical laws that is characteristic of the modern scientific attitude.¹

In the absence, however, of a well worked out description of how we can autonomously generate partial understandings of our proper ends as persons, understandings to which we then give expression in action, these objections will seem hollow, and the sense that it *must* be possible to explain our actions fully under physical laws will press upon us. If we cannot say how we can understand ourselves and our end in ways that inform our actions, then it will seem wise to abandon trying to understand agentic persons and to try instead to formulate the physical explanations of the motions of our bodies that are seemingly in order.

Here Wordsworth's poetry can be of special value, for one of Wordsworth's chief poetic concerns was to diagnose and locate skepticism about the possibility of self-understanding as a natural but temporary stage in the lives of persons who *can* grasp their proper end. Skepticism about action-guiding self-understanding, on his showing, is a plight of mind to which self-conscious end-directed beings succumb just as they most fully assert their particularity and separateness from others. Recovery from this plight occurs naturally when they come both to see that genuine autonomy requires community with others in a particular sort of expressive activity and to find themselves already so engaged. Further self-conscious and effective engagement in this expressive activity then emerges as the proper end of persons and as an end that is to be achieved communally. The scandal of philosophy, as Wordsworth would have it, is that this natural development of the mind, a development Wordsworth traces throughout his own career, should be ignored in favor of the pursuit of overly abstract, narrow, and impoverishing causal explanations of our behavior.

Wordsworth thus offers us a detailed and comprehensive description of how action-guiding self-understanding of our end is possible. If his account of his career is convincing, so that we can see our own natural plights of mind and possibilities of recovery reflected in it, then we will be able after following it out to say a good deal about how we are able to understand ourselves and our end, and we will be able to locate the investigation of causal relations as not the sole route to understanding anything in nature, but rather as one activity among many in the lives of

self-conscious moral beings naturally directed and directing themselves to a given end. Rehearsing Wordsworth's account of his development and checking its plausibility is hence a way for us to test our own possibilities of self-understanding.

I

In characterizing his poetic project in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth remarks that he has attempted, by following certain principles, to produce "a class of Poetry . . . well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and not unimportant in the quality, and in the multiplicity of its moral relations."² That is, it is the aim of his poetry to reveal to us how our nature leads us both to act and to be bound to act in certain ways, to come to stand in certain moral relations. To know that our nature so leads us would be to possess self-knowledge of permanent interest.

This poetic project is to be accomplished "by tracing [in various 'incidents and situations from common life'] . . . the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement" (Pref., p. 447). The poet seeks to reveal how and what, given our shared nature, we think and feel in various circumstances and furthermore what forms of life are appropriate for beings who think and feel in these ways. Poetic power consists in the ability to speak as an immediately responsive human being, not as an essentially particular person, and possession of this power is tested in the responses of others to the poet's speech. Cultivation of this power for affective and normative speaking is the sole route to self-understanding, so that cultivation of this power is necessary for leading the life of a person who lives according to a partial conception of objective value.

Wordsworth's poetry is thus fundamentally shaped by his sense that self-characterizations are necessary for leading a stable, coherent life expressive of who one is and by his sense that empirical observation alone yields no self-characterizations that are both morally informative and believable. In contrast with the putatively empirically grounded, but in fact unfounded and useless, claims about the operations of the mind put forward by scientists, Wordsworth offers us only "*best conjectures* [of] Our Being's earthly progress,"³ and he insists that such conjectures must suffice, if anything does, in enabling adequate and morally significant self-characterizations. Conjectures are explicitly the sorts of claims that are tested for plausibility through such things as conversation with others (both imaginary and real), rehearsals of past evidence of a talent for con-

jecturing, and their acceptance or rejection by others. Moreover, to issue conjectures about oneself is as much a mode of self-creation as it is a mode of self-observation. When we turn to conjecturing about the unities or drifts of our personalities in the past and about the appropriateness for us of various vocations or ways of life, then what happens is, as Hegel put it, that "consciousness no longer aims to *find* itself *immediately*, but to produce itself by its own activity. It is *itself* the End at which its action aims, whereas in the role of observer it was concerned only with things."⁴ We continuously recreate ourselves out of who we already are by positing ends for ourselves and articulating conceptions of objective value. It is this ongoing activity of persons that is both described and displayed in Wordsworth's poetry in its complex interlocking of self-example and theoretical formulation.

The specific occasion of Wordsworth's display and description of his ongoing self-recreation is an overdetermined problem all at once of artistic discipline, political judgment, happiness in activity, and the burden of personhood. As W. B. Gallie has characterized it, Wordsworth's immediate problem as a poet was to blend his primitive responsiveness and memories, the impulses of his poetry, on the one hand, with his maturity and craft, on the other, in such a way that poetry of genuine value would result: "There appeared to be two opposing elements in poetic inspiration: on the one hand the spontaneous receptivity and response characteristic of childhood and on the other hand the self-mastery, the calm of mind, the conscientiousness of the mature artist. How could these be brought together into a satisfying and productive harmony?"⁵ Impulse without craft can issue only in incoherence; craft without impulse can issue only in the sort of sterility and academicism that Wordsworth scorned in the Augustans. Only if impulse and craft are blended can the mind engage in genuinely poetic activity. Book I, lines 1-269, of the *Prelude* describe Wordsworth's anxiety about his inability to fit craft to impulse, as his major poetic work lies, to his mind, before him unaccomplished, until in line 269 the problem of entering into the state of mind productive of poetry becomes itself the subject of the *Prelude*.

The problem of entering into this state of mind is not, however, the poet's alone. Echoing Plato's analogy between the structures of the soul and the state, Wordsworth finds the problem of the direction of our capacities and experiences into poetic activity reflected in the problem of the proper direction of the state. As James Chandler has noted, "the crisis we see enacted in book 1 with respect to the psychology of poetic composition is congruent or homologous with the crisis we see narrated in book 11

with respect to the psychology of political morality.”⁶ And beyond analogy there may even be a causal interrelation between the problem of the poetic mind and the problem of political judgment. The poet is under an obligation as poet to win an audience, under “the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human being possessed of that information which may be expected from him . . . as a Man” (Pref., p. 454). But if the state, which provides the public space for human action and development, is badly directed, then the poet may find this obligation nearly impossible to satisfy. Conversely, without the guidance of a poetic vision of the human, of its place in nature, and of value, the public life of the state may become hollow and dominated by empty formalisms and false pieties.

Finally, the problem of engaging our capacities and experiences in productive activity in such a way that ongoing self-direction and self-recognition are possible is neither the poet’s nor the politician’s alone. It is, as Gallie has noted, “the wider problem . . . of the active happiness, responsive and responsible, of every good man” (p. 655). How can one engage in coherent, self-expressive, fulfilling, and recognition-enabling activity, especially when this question is raised from a position of reflective nonactivity? This is what one might call the moral burden of personhood, for in the absence of character-expressive, recognition-enabling action there is, one might say, only physical motion or nothing left that is distinctive of responsible agency.

All these worries — the poetic, the political, and the moral — are fused in the 269 lines that open the *Prelude* into a general problem of waywardness or recreance of mind, an inability to invest oneself in any particular activity, in as much as the routes to self-recognition through activity seem closed. Wordsworth’s anxieties about waywardness of mind and the inexpressibility of personhood culminate in the summary passage of the opening.

Thus my days are past
 In contradiction; with no skill to part
 Vague longing, haply bred by want of power,
 From paramount impulse not to be withstood,
 A timorous capacity from prudence,
 From circumspection, infinite delay.
 Humility and modest awe themselves
 Betray me, serving often for a cloak
 To a more subtle selfishness; that now
 Locks every function up in blank reserve,

Now dupes me, trusting to an anxious eye
 That with intrusive restlessness beats off
 Simplicity and self-presented truth.
 Ah! better far than this, to stray about
 Voluptuously through fields and rural walks,
 And ask no record of the hours, resigned
 To vacant musing, unreproved neglect
 Of all things, and deliberate holiday.
 Far better never to have heard the name
 Of zeal and just ambition, than to live
 Baffled and plagued by a mind that every hour
 Turns recreant to her task; takes heart again,
 Then feels immediately some hollow thought
 Hang like an interdict upon her hopes.
 This is my lot; for either still I find
 Some imperfection in the chosen theme,
 Or see of absolute accomplishment
 Much wanting, so much wanting, in myself,
 That I recoil and droop, and seek repose
 In listlessness from vain perplexity,
 Unprofitably travelling toward the grave,
 Like a false steward who hath much received
 And renders nothing back.

(I, 237-69)

Here the image of false stewardship in recreance of mind captures the sense that recreance threatens the maintenance and very existence of personhood. To have a mind so baffled and perplexed is to verge on failing to exercise the capacities of agency, responsibility, and expressive activity that are definitive of personhood. The affective mark of such a mind, in Romantic poetry, is melancholy, a burdensome sense of lassitude in feeling oneself to be unable to go on expressively.

Wordsworth's characteristic way out of this recurrent situation is to throw himself into the activity of investigating its occurrence and cure. Thinking about his melancholic condition and transforming it are fused in writing about and out of it, beginning with the question "Was it for this?" in line 269 that sets the *Prelude* on its course. Wordsworth's desperate interest in the conditions of occurrence and the cure of waywardness and melancholy is similarly reflected in the backward-looking lines that open so many of his most important self-diagnostic poems: "Five years have passed; five summers with the length / Of five long winters" in "Tintern Abbey"; "There was a time . . ." in the "Intimations Ode"; "Six changeful

years have vanished . . ." in Book VII, as Wordsworth resumes in 1804 the poem he had begun in 1798 and abandoned in 1799; "There was a roaring in the wind all night" in "Resolution and Independence." In each case, the effort is to ask, "what brought me to this condition, and what way on or out is there?" The "this" of Book I, line 269 thus refers, as James Chandler has put it, to the nearly inexpressible "situation" of waywardness and self-dissolution "over which poetry triumphs to come into being" (p. 188) and beyond that to the situation we all must overcome through the exercise of something like poetic judgment in order to go on living expressively as persons at all. To ask "was it for this?" is, in Wordsworth, to ask "why am I unable to go on, and how could I now go on, with my life as a person?"

In responding to this question, Wordsworth is concerned less with a priori proofs about either the nature of personhood or the nature of human happiness than he is concerned to discover, as Gallie has it, "the *way* of happiness (to use a religious phrase) or (if the phrase be preferred) the *art* of it." In other words, Wordsworth does not consider personhood or happiness abstractly or as having transcendent essences, the route to the exemplification of which would always remain a further problem even after they had been understood. Instead, he looks for a way of expressive activity and human happiness that is immanent in human life, in particular in his own.

His answer to [the problem of "the true end of man"] is at once normative and interpretative; it is an attempt to show the reality of certain "may-bes" in human experience with a view to convincing us that these are, in the ethical sense, "must-bes." . . . [Wordsworth] makes the essential moment of morality one of recognition. . . . And he believed that to *show* [the way of happiness] was the only way to make men better.⁷

Wordsworth's strategy then is to consider how he has so far lived, thence to reinterpret his present condition as a merely temporary or apparent disengagement from both a discipline or activity and connections to others. Under scrutiny, waywardness of mind is seen to disappear in favor of already established habits of activity and response. As Chandler puts it, "One's present discipline resides in the habitual contemplation of how one supposes oneself to have been disciplined in the past" (p. 215).

Wordsworth's normative-interpretive or conjectural approach to the problem of how to discharge the burden of personhood in expressive activity is thus radically opposed to any naturalist subsumption of psycho-

logical states under material causal laws. Wordsworth continually scorned those engineers of human souls who would seek to analyze away self-sustaining moments of self-interpretation and self-recognition in favor of causally law-governed psychic events, those “Sages who in their prescience would control / All accidents, and to the very road / Which they have fashioned would confine us down / Like engines” (V, 355–58). Persons are essentially self-interpreting beings, simultaneously looking backward to see how they have already been disciplined and looking forward to see how they can go on, and in this looking encountering not unambiguous data, but always already interpreting what they see. What has happened to make one who one is — a being with certain habits, capacities of activity, and social relations — is not sharply separable from who one now, in the effort to go on, imagines oneself to be. Retrospective self-recognition cannot be wholly parted from prospective self-creation.

Of these and other kindred notions
I cannot say what portion is in truth
The naked recollection of that time
And what may rather have been called to life
By after meditation.⁸

(III, 612–16)

To ignore or dismiss our moments of self-interpretation in favor of the explanation of events under causal laws is not only to make a mistake about the situation and interpretive character of consciousness — “Hard task, vain hope, to analyse the mind, / If each most obvious and particular thought, / Not in a mystical and idle sense, / But in the words of Reason deeply weighed, / Hath no beginning” (II, 228–32) — it is to impoverish us, to “confine us down” by directing us away from the exercise of our interpretive capacities.

In seeing ourselves as self-interpreting beings and in forging new self-interpretations, it is important to recognize that, while they are not unambiguous, our specific pasts do nonetheless constrain our self-shaping self-interpreting. Chandler emphasizes that the interpretive conception of persons at which Wordsworth arrives, according to which conjectures about one’s past habits and experiences point the way to further expressive activity, is a specifically English way of thinking about who one is. Wordsworth’s deepest moments of self-confrontation, the so-called spots of time through which he interpretively recovers his discipline and habits of activity and commitments, must be understood, as Chandler puts it, “as

representing the triumph not only of mental discipline, but also of discipline as tradition, a discipline grounded on what Burke calls prejudice. In Burke's description, . . . this conception of discipline is specifically English" (p. 199). In recovering himself interpretively and thus emerging from melancholy, Wordsworth accomplishes "a reunion not only with the English countryside but also with the English mind and character, with a way of thinking and feeling" (p. 200).

This is, in a deep sense, true, in that one emerges as a particular person as already a part of a specific culture and community, against which one will take one's bearings and out of whose standard evaluations one will shape one's own, which then constitute and maintain one's specific personhood. England is, as it were, the place of Wordsworth's emergence, and the English respect for English tradition and culture bespeaks a strong sense of the importance of place and lineage to specific personhood.

Yet in a somewhat deeper sense, Wordsworth's rediscovery of his Englishness can also be read as metaphorical for his acknowledgment of the social and historical roots of self-consciousness, responsibility, and agency in persons in general. Our evaluative and interpretive capacities, definitive of us as persons, do not originate, Wordsworth shows us, in us as individuals. Not only does he, in his crisis of waywardness, recapture his Englishness, he also recaptures the sort of thing that anyone must capture who is to live expressively as a person. There is a "flaw" or "incoherence" in the individualist conception of personhood and value, and this shows in Wordsworth's progress; one episode of his crisis of waywardness occurs precisely when he attempts, under the temporary sway of French rationalism and individualism, to live as a person and as a moral agent on, in Chandler's phrase, "his private stock of reason." The fruits of individualism are self-dissipation and melancholy.

Importantly, however, none of this is to say that one is completely bound in articulating one's conceptions of value by whatever is locally current. Rather, what goes on as we as evaluators take our points of departure from our culture is that we look, in attempting to extend our evaluations to new situations, to the ideals of flourishing they were meant to serve, as it were to their essence. Wordsworth does not recover himself by beginning to do whatever the English were doing at the moment; he deplored the "degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation" (Pref., 449) displayed by his urban countrymen in particular. Instead he attempted to recover and live according to the deep and hidden values of being English—where being English means, again, being attached to specific others and places and reflecting these attachments in conversation, con-

cern, and poetic activity. Thus, Wordsworth shows us, our situation as persons emergent in specific places and cultures is to find ourselves confronted with the task of aligning ourselves and our projects with our cultures, which may mean, among other things, radically transforming a culture that had disciplined one in the past but which has now lost touch with the ideals that once gave it shape. In going on, with my life, from my culture, in my culture, and on its behalf, "What I require is a convening of my culture's criteria, in order to confront them with my words and life as I pursue them and as I may imagine them; and at the same time to confront my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture's words may imagine for me: to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me."⁹

Thus, in taking up a normative-interpretive approach to the situation and problems of personhood, one comes to define oneself and to act not simply according to prevailing custom, but rather according to what one takes to be best or best served by a complex history of customs and values itself in need of interpretation. Persons are seen through interpretation as in their pasts and cultures already on the way, imperfectly and not always progressively, to the achievement of an immanent human *telos*. Wordsworth offers us his account of this *telos*, putting it before us as objective and his achievement of it as proleptic, as he describes the understanding of personhood and value he has arrived at on Snowden and will henceforth attempt to live by. A certain power of higher minds

. . . is the very spirit in which they deal
 With the whole compass of the universe:
 They from their native selves can send abroad
 Kindred mutations; for themselves create
 A like existence; and, whene'er it dawns
 Created for them, catch it, or are caught
 By its inevitable mastery,
 Like angels stopped upon the wing by sound
 Of harmony from Heaven's remotest spheres.
 Them the enduring and the transient both
 Serve to exalt; they build up greatest things
 From least suggestions; ever on the watch,
 Willing to work and to be wrought upon,
 They need not extraordinary calls
 To rouse them; in a world of life they live,
 By sensible impressions not enthralled,
 But by their quickening impulse made more prompt

To hold fit converse with the spiritual world,
 And with the generations of mankind
 Spread over time, past, present, and to come,
 Age after age, till Time shall be no more.
 Such minds are truly from the Deity,
 For they are Powers; and hence the highest bliss
 That flesh can know is theirs — the consciousness
 Of Whom they are, habitually infused
 Through every image and through every thought,
 And all affections by communion raised
 From earth to heaven, from human to divine;
 Hence endless occupation for the Soul,
 Whether discursive or intuitive;
 Hence cheerfulness for acts of daily life,
 Emotions which best foresight need not fear,
 Most worthy then of trust when most intense.
 Hence, amid ills that vex and wrongs that crush
 Our hearts — if here the words of Holy Writ
 May with fit reverence be applied — that peace
 Which passeth understanding, that repose
 In moral judgments which from this pure source
 Must come, or will by man be sought in vain.

(XIV, 91-129)

The *telos* these higher minds achieve and to which, Wordsworth is suggesting, his own past has led him inextricably combines an *activity* (“for themselves create,” “build up greatest things,” “willing to work”), a *capacity for response* (“are caught by,” “willing . . . to be wrought upon,” “need not extraordinary calls to rouse them”), a *mood* (“bliss,” “cheerfulness”), a *consciousness of self* (“the consciousness / Of Whom they are”), a *relation to others* and a *power of affection* that defeat alienation (“a like existence,” “fit converse . . . with all the generations of mankind”), a *capacity for agency, self-responsibility, and morality* (“repose in moral judgments”), and an *overcoming of waywardness and disengagement* (“Hence endless occupation for the soul”). Persons are reflected to themselves in others’ and their own recognitions of them in activity. Human happiness is neither a state of feeling alone nor a state of knowledge alone nor a social relation alone nor an activity alone, but all of these intermingled into joy, that contrary of melancholy which blends feeling, knowledge, and sociality in activity.

Both understanding this *telos* and arriving at it — acts which are in any case not wholly separable — are inherently public phenomena, requiring a community for their realization. Success in revealing others to themselves

is a criterion of self-understanding as an objectively *telos*-directed being. But if this is so, and further if there are no others to endorse one's interpretations and share in *telos*-directed expressive activity, then the self-interpreting poet will have failed to overcome the subjectivity of value and will have failed all at once in self-understanding, mood, agency, and activity. The confirmation of a self-interpretation is always deferred to new audience after new audience, any one of which may always understand itself and those it reads (or ignores) differently. Truthfulness or authenticity in self-interpretation is not a matter of describing what is unalterably there; it is a matter of articulating a self-shaping conception of value, a *telos* toward which one lives, in such a way that one's living and personhood can be recognized and shared in through this articulation.¹⁰ One's interpretation of self or value may always be found fantastic or hallucinatory or self-deluding. The threat of melancholy must always haunt joyful activity.

This fact accounts for the somewhat desperate or pleading tone evident in Wordsworth's addresses to his audience, from the prayer in the "Prospectus" ("Fit audience let me find though few!"),¹¹ to the addresses to Dorothy in "Tintern Abbey" ("Oh! yet a little while / May I behold in thee what I was once;" "Thy memory be as a dwelling place;" "Nor, perchance, wilt thou then forget") and above all to Coleridge in the *Prelude* — ". . . thus should neither I be taught / To understand myself, nor thou to know / With better knowledge how the heart was framed / Of him thou lovest; need I dread from thee / Harsh judgments . . ." [I, 626–31]; "And certain hopes are with me, that to thee / This labour will be welcome, honoured Friend!" [I, 646–47]; "what we have loved, / Others will love, and we will teach them how . . ." [XIV, 446–47]). One seeks one's confirmation and full achievement of personhood in the acceptance by others of the then objective *telos* in the pursuit of which one finds oneself. We seek to be, for others, "joint labourers in the work / (Should Providence such grace to us vouchsafe) / Of their deliverance, surely yet to come" (XIV, 441–43) by bringing to them self-knowledge, activity, and moral peace, delivering them from waywardness. One feels both that the posited *telos* of personhood is objective, that its acceptance is "surely yet to come," and that one cannot know with certainty that this is so, that whether it is a matter of mysterious grace.

If certainty in self-interpretation always eludes us as we wait upon the responses of others, if, in the end, grace is always required for self-understanding, knowledge of value, and the overcoming of waywardness, then what closure can there be to the labor of poetic self-interpretation? What achievement of self-understanding can there be? What peace?

II

In a canceled "Advertisement" to the 1807 edition *Poems, in Two Volumes*, Wordsworth remarks that the short poems of that work were composed "when I had not resolution to apply myself"¹² to *The Recluse*, the projected great philosophical poem on which he staked his ultimate value as a poet. As Kenneth Johnston has observed, this "use of the word *resolution* . . . suggests that the great 'Resolution and Independence,' which first appeared in 1807, may . . . be a poem about the difficulty of writing *The Recluse* [and] avoiding 'despondency and madness' . . ." ¹³ That is to say, this poem asks *how* the poet's work of the interpretation of personhood and its proper *telos* can be accomplished. The argument of the poem is that the way of self-understanding is to be found not in a solution or answer, but only in a resolution which is, as Harold Bloom has noted, both a way out of, a resolving, of the problem of self-interpretation and an act of determination, a commitment, to continuous activities of self-interpretation, remembrance, and conversation.¹⁴ These two senses of *resolution* are intimately linked; only through the activities to which the poet recommits himself, and not through the mere acceptance of certain propositions, can personhood be sustained and can it come to terms with itself. "Resolution and Independence" depicts Wordsworth's fall away from and reattachment to the activities essential to the life of personhood.

The poem opens with an expression of the poet's sense that nature is there to be comprehended through the use of the senses. ("There was a roaring in the wind all night; / The rain came heavily and fell in floods.")¹⁵ Now nature is intelligibly present to him. Where once there was a roaring, now there are singing, chattering, answering, and a sweet voice, and the poet is able quite precisely to name and know what speaks: doves, jays, and magpies.

But now the sun is rising calm and bright;
The birds are singing in the distant woods;
Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods;
The Jay makes answer as the Magpie chatters;
And all the air is filled with the pleasant noise of waters.

(3-7)

After the first two lines, the first two stanzas are in the present tense, as though all that is described is taking place now, at the moment of writing, so that the protagonist's present is the author's present, the preceding

night belonging to both of them. In the third stanza, however, the narrative abruptly shifts into the past tense (“I was a Traveller then upon the moor; / I saw . . . / I heard . . .” [15–18]), where it remains for the rest of the poem, save for the future tense of the quotation that appears in the last two lines. The daytime traveler-protagonist is now being remembered by the poet-narrator. The suggestion of this shift is that the poet is now remembering his earlier experience as a protagonist and drawing on his memory to solve a present problem in writing, very like the past problem encountered and resolved by the protagonist. Whatever problem this is, it is, it seems, one whose resolution must always be reaccomplished. The closure of self-understanding that is to be achieved consists more in continuous re-engagement in an activity than in simply knowing certain truths about persons.

What is this problem once resolved and now recurring? It is described straightforwardly as a fall from joy in contemplation of the beautiful and intelligible natural scene into dejection.

But as it sometimes chanceth, from the might
Of joy in minds that can no further go,
As high as we have mounted in delight
In our dejection do we sink as low;
To me that morning did it happen so. . . .

(22–26)

There is undoubtedly a kind of psychological dynamic here, reminiscent of the Boethian wheel of fortune, Chaucer’s “joy after woe, woe after gladnesse,”¹⁶ and Keats’s view that melancholy “dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die; / And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips / Bidding adieu, and aching Pleasure nigh, / Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips. . . .”¹⁷ As Harold Bloom puts it, “the very strength of joy engenders its contrary. When delight reaches its limits, dejection replaces it.”¹⁸ But the simple postulation of a psychological dynamic leaves unexplained – especially in light of the general connection in Wordsworth’s writing between melancholy and failures of self-understanding, responsibility, and agency – why the protagonist feels just the particular sort of dejection he comes to feel and why that dejection can subsequently be cured through an encounter with another. Why, there and then, (in the protagonist’s present) and now (in the poet’s present), that dejection, with that cure?

What is more plausible is that this experience of dejection, like others, is

occasioned precisely by the protagonist's sudden sense of his inability as an isolated merely experiencing individual to know himself, his place in nature, and his proper end. Recall that the transition to dejection opens with the poet's recitation of his perceptions as protagonist ("I saw . . . ; I heard . . . ;" [16-17]). The protagonist had not been particularly concerned with the objectivity of his perceptions, with whether they accurately represent objects apart from him. ("I heard the distant waters roar; / Or heard them not, as happy as a boy:" [17-18].) Immersed in his own subjective perceptual experience, the protagonist finds himself apart, not a member of a community.

The pleasant season did my heart employ:
My old remembrances went from me wholly;
And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy.

(19-21)

And so he loses himself, as the fleeting pleasantness of the moment masks the self-dissolving character of the lack of remembrances. Without "the ways of men," without membership in a community, one is left only with the flux of one's experience. One becomes unable to go on to lead the life of a person, expressing one's personhood in action. There is no knowledge, either of nature or of oneself, no sense of one's freedom, purposiveness, or ability to grasp and achieve ends for oneself, no sense of either power over oneself or a power to apprehend and shape nature: only the inrush of unintelligible subjective experience is left. "And fears and fancies thick upon me came; / Dim sadness — and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor could name" (27-28). Without the words provided by the language one shares with others, one finds oneself unable even to characterize one's private experience. The protagonist finds himself unable to name what happens to him, unable to characterize even his own thoughts. The dominant feature of his dejection and his anxiety is his awareness of his apparent lack of autonomy. Things come upon him and to him unbidden, not under his control. And if blind thoughts and fears and fancies can thus come unbidden, then why not yet worse things? "But there may come another day to me — / Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty" (34-35).

What is the way out of this dejection and to a sense of one's power or ability to know and to act? It is pointedly not the way of waiting praised in Milton's claim "who best / Bear his milde yoaik, they serve him best."¹⁹ According to Wordsworth, in contrast, we must bring ourselves to act,

take our lives and fates into our own hands. "But how can He expect that others should / Build for him, sow for him, and at his call / Love him, who for himself will take no heed at all?" (39–41). Wordsworth here joins forces with Hegel, who likewise criticized the religious attitude of "lifeless indifference which steadfastly withdraws from the bustle of existence, alike from being active as passive, into the simple essentiality of thought."²⁰ Such an attitude enables only an empty, unreal freedom, not a sense of one's concrete, embodied autonomy and power as an agent and apprehender.

Still, as Hegel also knew, the mere determination to act, not wait, is not enough to enable freedom, self-knowledge, and self-realization. Alone, such determination remains a sign of distress. One must concretely find one's way out of absorption in subjective experience and to actual knowledge and to rational and expressive action. How can this move be made?

Only through the experience of an other. Locked in his despondency, and seeking a way out, the protagonist suddenly finds himself to be not alone.

Now, whether it were by peculiar grace,
A leading from above, a something given,
Yet it befell that, in this lonely place,
When I with these untoward thoughts had striven,
Beside me a pool bare to the eye of heaven
I saw a Man before me unawares:
The oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs.

(50–56)

Despite the language suggestive of divine Providence ("grace," "from above," "something given"), the subordinating conjunction "whether" makes it clear that the protagonist was unaware of exactly how the other had come to be there, and that this does not matter, it simply befell him to find himself in another's presence. So, it will then seem, do persons in general find themselves.

The resulting encounter is enabling for the protagonist not so much in virtue of what the old man says — the protagonist pays little attention to that ("his voice to me was like a stream / Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;" [107–8]) — but rather through the old man's serving as an emblem of both rootedness in nature and community with others. In the first place, the old man is there, so that sheer aloneness, and conse-

quent derangement and dejection, clearly need not be permanent conditions. Secondly, the old man is clearly rooted within the natural world, not subject to fits of solipsistic disconnectedness. His body is nearly made a part of the natural scene, as he is compared to a stone and to a sea-beast reposing in the sun (57, 62). But perhaps the most important fact about the old man is that he is, despite his appearance in this isolated spot, in his essence neither a man apart nor a victim of melancholy. The form of his speech makes it clear that he is a member of a community and that he has carried the capacities and powers enabled by community membership with him in his wanderings.

His words came feebly from a feeble chest,
 But each in solemn order followed each,
 With something of a lofty utterance drest —
 Choice word and measured phrase, above the reach
 Of ordinary men; a stately speech;
 Such as grave Livers do in Scotland use,
 Religious men, who give to God and man their dues.

(92-98)

This man's life is informed by a project in which he engages with others — he is one of those “who give to God and man *their* dues” — and his participation in this common project has given him what the protagonist alone had seemed to lack: the power to speak, to name things, and the power to act expressively, to grasp and move toward appropriate ends.

Realizing that the old man has acquired these powers by being connected with others, and realizing that the old man and he are alike — they are in this spot together, and, like the old man, he also in fact comes from a community — the protagonist finds his mood immediately lightened. The old man's powers, which survive his reduced circumstances and stem from his participation in a communal project, make the protagonist aware of his own powers. If the old man, a figure of consciousness reduced to its minimal essential condition, retains his powers throughout his solitary wanderings in virtue of his community with others, then the protagonist must likewise retain his powers and his connectedness to others, even in *his* most dejected, passively subjective moments, both in the past and now in their recurrence. What the poet says of the old man in conclusion provides an apt characterization of himself as well. “I could have laughed myself to scorn to find / In that decrepit Man so firm a mind” (137-38). The dejection that had appeared to be unavoidable and possibly perma-

ment has emerged as a transient mood grounded in a temporary, natural, and yet naturally overcome forgetting of one's community with others in direction toward an end.

What the backward-looking poet then learns through his present memory of this enabling encounter is that characteristically human nature, or human capacities for self-understanding and freedom, are realized, or only really exist, as Hegel claimed "in an achieved community of minds" (para. 69, p. 43), in which alone their exercise is possible. This is the poetry not of nature and not of the visionary imagination's solitude, but of the exemplary discovery of the social nature and the possibilities of life of persons.

Not only is community necessary for self-understanding, agency, and the overcoming of waywardness, but a certain way of acting and interpreting is necessary for community. Our communities will provide sustenance for our capacities of action and interpretation only as long as we exercise those capacities and so sustain the community. Thus the protagonist resolves "I'll think of the Leach-gatherer on the lonely moor!" (140) in order to commit himself, by remembering their locus and home in a community the Leach-gatherer symbolizes, to the activities of public self-interpretation and conversation. Only through a resolution to engage in these activities is it possible to maintain an end-directed community that enables the overcoming of dejection and the emergence, out of blind nature, of the human.

And beyond the protagonist's resolution, there is the poet's actual remembrance of the protagonist's encounter and his own echoing resolution in the present tense. Here, in the poet's echo of resolution, there is in fact ongoing activity of self-interpretation. Wordsworth simultaneously displays in recall and enacts in interpretive activity a self-sustaining commitment to go on with the project of understanding personhood through its public activities. Self-understanding consists not in abstract knowledge, but in engagement in cooperative interpretation of the end of persons and its contextual requirements. Closure is continuation, the acceptance of the ongoing revelation of ourselves to ourselves that occurs only through our interpretations of what we do and that enables the overcoming of waywardness. Resolution is re-engagement in this interpretive activity; independence is its fruit.

III

To be a person at all, Wordsworth's example shows us, is to be engaged with others in an unending activity of the interpretation of oneself as ob-

jectively directed to certain ends. In the absence of such activity, there is no scope for talk about what *we* do in acting. Interpretive self-activity continuously sustains our personhood. Even quietism, stoicism, and skepticism — conscious withdrawals from the continuing rearticulation and pursuit of objective ends — are themselves genuine, but defective, modes of interpretive self-activity.

This interpretive activity is inherently public, in two important senses. It both begins from the shared conception of value of a community into which one has been initiated and is carried out in the language of a community. This might be called the fact of the sociality of personhood: that persons exist as interpreters of their objective ends only insofar as they live in society.

But beyond that, the interpretations of value for persons that one produces are objective for persons in general, insofar as they both are to be shared and are to enable cooperative and authentic community, itself necessary for anyone to lead a life fully expressive of personhood. The *telos*, posited by Wordsworth, of activity, responsiveness, bliss, consciousness, power, agency, and engagement is not, in his conception, peculiar to him. And it is only in arriving at a conception of an objective *telos*, one by design to be pursued cooperatively by persons in general, that his personhood is expressed and sustained. This *telos* may, and must, admit of various modes of pursuit and achievement: poetry for some, or politics, or experimental inquiry, or teaching, or child-rearing, or farming. But no matter how variously it may be pursued, the *telos* to which we are directed nonetheless sets objective constraints on us; any achievement of it must display the seven or so features Wordsworth notes. Individuals are not left free to pursue whatever projects they wish. The pursuit of this *telos* through activity is essential to the maintenance of personhood, to going on as a person, and its pursuit and achievement necessarily involve one in a community of similarly directed persons. Together, these might be called the facts of the community of personhood: that persons live in authentic and cooperative society only insofar as they are similarly directed to objective ends.²¹

What defects there are in Wordsworth's interpretation of personhood lie in his occasional failure to acknowledge the community of personhood in the directedness of all persons to an objective and necessarily cooperatively achieved end. Wordsworth did a great deal through his writing to cure himself and us by putting forward a new interpretation of personhood that ran contrary to the Humean naturalist background. Yet he tended sometimes to live out this interpretation by withdrawing into the role of the recluse or the isolated sage of Grasmere, abandoning cooperative interac-

tion with others in general. While it remained his aim always to speak for us all "from the necessities of [our] nature" (Pref., 445) and further to write the great poem on social theory that would set out the conditions for the cooperative pursuit of variant exemplifications of the human *telos*, his retirement too readily suggests that the achievement of this *telos* can be accomplished by educated and isolated elites. Any suggestion of this tends to collapse our community in end-directedness into our mere sociality and to ignore the impoverishment of human possibilities that stem from present social structures. While it is true that only an interpretation of the directedness of persons to an objective end can save us from melancholy and waywardness, it is also true that articulating such an interpretation alone is not enough: one must also find oneself recognized as living in light of it by others in general who cooperate in so living. Whether one's audience can accomplish this recognition — whether an audience for one's interpretation even exists — will depend in part upon the material and cultural circumstances of persons in general, circumstances which one may hence have an obligation to scrutinize and reform in the interest of having one's own interpretation of personhood upheld and in the interest of one's own recovery from melancholy.

Yet, despite his own tendencies to withdraw into retirement and apparent self-completion, it remained Wordsworth's deepest aim both to display our community in directedness toward an end and to work to see it acknowledged. That aim is evident both in his ambition to produce a social philosophy and in the character of his overcoming of melancholy. His discovery of his directedness to a specific end is one we are all to repeat, and the pursuit of this end is to become evident as already a common project of which we will henceforth become self-conscious. As the poet remembers the protagonist's encounter with the Leech-gatherer, in this remembrance uncovering his proper end and finding himself engaged with others in expressive activity directed toward it, so we are to uncover our end and our engagements in Wordsworth's poetry of remembrance. Wordsworth's project of eliciting from us a recognition of ourselves as persons directed in activity to an end of responsiveness, bliss, self-consciousness, power, responsibility, agency, and engagement is intended as a remembrance of our common nature, and this project may have its fulfillment in our reading of his work.

I am grateful to Carol Bernstein, James Chandler, Morris Dickstein, Peter Hacker, Kenneth Johnston, Hugh Lacey, Joan Vandegrift, Kathleen Wright, and an anonymous referee for PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article and for their patience.

1. Charles Taylor makes this point in *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 6–10.
2. William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)," in *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p. 445; hereafter abbreviated "Pref."
3. Wordsworth, *Prelude*, in *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, Book II, ll. 233–4, p. 212, italics added. Subsequent references to the *Prelude* will be to this edition and will be given in the text by book and line numbers.
4. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), paragraph 344, p. 209.
5. W. B. Gallie, "Is *The Prelude* a Philosophical Poem?" *Philosophy* 22 (1947): 124–38; reprinted in William Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850: Authoritative Texts, Context and Reception, Recent Critical Essays*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), p. 665.
6. James K. Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 194.
7. Gallie, p. 667.
8. Compare "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey . . .," in *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ll. 75–6, p. 109. "I cannot paint / What then I was."
9. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 125.
10. It is possible to hear something like this in the following remark of Wittgenstein's. "The criteria for the truth of the *confession* that I thought such-and-such are not the criteria for a true *description* of a process. And the importance of the true confession does not reside in its being a correct and certain report of a process. It resides rather in the special consequences which can be drawn from a confession whose truth is guaranteed by the special criteria of *truthfulness*." (*Philosophical Investigations*, 3d. ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe [New York: Macmillan, 1958], p. 222e.)
11. Wordsworth, "From *The Recluse*," in *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, 1. 776, p. 45.
12. Wordsworth, "Advertisement," cited in Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 238, from Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 527.
13. Johnston, p. 238.
14. Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company*, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 165.

15. Wordsworth, "Resolution and Independence," in *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, lines 1-2, p. 165. Emphasis added. All references to this poem will be to this edition and will be given by line numbers in parentheses in the text.
16. These first two associations are James Chandler's, whom I thank for them.
17. John Keats, "Ode on Melancholy," in *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), ll. 21-24, pp. 209-10.
18. Bloom, p. 165.
19. John Milton, "When I consider how my light is spent . . ." in *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Milton* (New York: Random House, 1950), ll. 10-11, p. 86.
20. Hegel, paragraph 199, p. 121.
21. Hugh Lacey suggested the distinction between sociality and community and prompted the final section as a whole.