The Prelude
and Other Poems

William Wordsworth
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The Prelude*
The following poem was commenced in the beginning of the year 1799 and completed in the summer of 1805.

The design and occasion of the work are described by the author in his preface to *The Excursion*, first published in 1814, where he thus speaks:

“Several years ago, when the author retired to his native mountains with the hope of being enabled to construct a literary work that might live, it was a reasonable thing that he should take a review of his own mind and examine how far nature and education had qualified him for such an employment.

“As subsidiary to this preparation, he undertook to record, in verse, the origin and progress of his own powers, as far as he was acquainted with them.

“That work, addressed to a dear friend most distinguished for his knowledge and genius, and to whom the author’s intellect is deeply indebted, has been long finished, and the result of the investigation which gave rise to it was a determination to compose a philosophical poem containing views of man, nature and society, and to be entitled *The Recluse* – as having for its principal subject the sensations and opinions of a poet living in retirement.

“The preparatory poem is biographical and conducts the history of the author’s mind to the point when he was emboldened to hope that his faculties were sufficiently matured for entering upon the arduous labour which he had proposed to himself, and the two works have the same kind of relation to each other, if he may so express himself, as the antechapel has to the body of a Gothic church. Continuing this allusion, he may be permitted to add that his minor pieces, which have been long before the public, when they shall be properly arranged, will be found by
the attentive reader to have such connection with the main work as may give them claim to be likened to the little cells, oratories and sepulchral recesses ordinarily included in those edifices.”

Such was the author’s language in the year 1814.

It will thence be seen that the present poem was intended to be introductory to The Recluse, and that The Recluse, if completed, would have consisted of three parts. Of these, the second part alone, viz., The Excursion, was finished and given to the world by the author.

The first book of the first part of The Recluse still remains in manuscript, but the third part was only planned. The materials of which it would have been formed have, however, been incorporated, for the most part, in the author’s other publications, written subsequently to The Excursion.

The friend to whom the present poem is addressed was the late Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who was resident in Malta, for the restoration of his health, when the greater part of it was composed.

Mr Coleridge read a considerable portion of the poem while he was abroad, and his feelings, on hearing it recited by the author (after his return to his own country), are recorded in his verses addressed to Mr Wordsworth, which will be found in the Sibylline Leaves, p. 197, ed. 1817, or Poetical Works by S.T. Coleridge, vol. i., p. 206.

– Rydal Mount,
July 13th, 1850
INTRODUCTION – CHILDHOOD
AND SCHOOL TIME

Oh, there is blessing in this gentle breeze,
A visitant that while he fans my cheek
Doth seem half-conscious of the joy he brings
From the green fields and from yon azure sky.
Whate’er his mission, the soft breeze can come
To none more grateful than to me, escaped
From the vast city, where I long had pined
A discontented sojourner – now free,
Free as a bird to settle where I will.
What dwelling shall receive me? In what vale
Shall be my harbour? Underneath what grove
Shall I take up my home? And what clear stream
Shall with its murmur lull me into rest?
The earth is all before me. With a heart
Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
I look about – and should the chosen guide
Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
I cannot miss my way.* I breathe again!
Trances of thought and mountings of the mind
Come fast upon me: it is shaken off,
That burthen of my own unnatural self,
The heavy weight of many a weary day
Not mine, and such as were not made for me.
Long months of peace (if such bold word accord
With any promises of human life),
Long months of ease and undisturbed delight
Are mine in prospect; whither shall I turn,
By road or pathway, or through trackless field,
Up hill or down, or shall some floating thing
Upon the river point me out my course?

Dear Liberty! Yet what would it avail
But for a gift that consecrates the joy?
For I, methought, while the sweet breath of heaven
Was blowing on my body, felt within
A correspondent breeze that gently moved
With quickening virtue, but is now become
A tempest, a redundant energy,
Vexing its own creation. Thanks to both,
And their congenial powers, that while they join
In breaking up a long-continued frost,
Bring with them vernal promises, the hope
Of active days urged on by flying hours –
Days of sweet leisure, taxed with patient thought
Abstruse, nor wanting punctual service high,
Matins and vespers of harmonious verse!

Thus – O friend! – did I, not used to make
A present joy the matter of a song,
Pour forth that day my soul in measured strains
That would not be forgotten, and are here
Recorded: to the open fields I told
A prophecy – poetic numbers came
Spontaneously to clothe in priestly robe
A renovated spirit singled out,
Such hope was mine, for holy services.
My own voice cheered me, and, far more, the mind’s
Internal echo of the imperfect sound;
To both I listened, drawing from them both
A cheerful confidence in things to come.
Content and not unwilling now to give
A respite to this passion, I paced on
With brisk and eager steps, and came, at length,
To a green shady place where down I sat
Beneath a tree, slackening my thoughts by choice,
And settling into gentler happiness.
'Twas autumn, and a clear and placid day,
With warmth, as much as needed, from a sun
Two hours declined towards the west – a day
With silver clouds and sunshine on the grass,
And in the sheltered and the sheltering grove
A perfect stillness. Many were the thoughts
Encouraged and dismissed, till choice was made
Of a known vale, whither my feet should turn,
Nor rest till they had reached the very door
Of the one cottage which methought I saw.
No picture of mere memory ever looked
So fair, and while upon the fancied scene
I gazed with growing love, a higher power
Than fancy gave assurance of some work
Of glory there forthwith to be begun –
Perhaps too there performed. Thus long I mused,
Nor e’er lost sight of what I mused upon,
Save when, amid the stately grove of oaks,
Now here, now there, an acorn, from its cup
Dislodged, through sere leaves rustled, or at once
To the bare earth dropped with a startling sound.
From that soft couch I rose not till the sun
Had almost touched the horizon. Casting then
A backward glance upon the curling cloud
Of city smoke, by distance ruralized,
Keen as a truant or a fugitive,
But as a pilgrim resolute, I took,
Even with the chance equipment of that hour,
The road that pointed toward the chosen vale.
It was a splendid evening, and my soul
Once more made trial of her strength, nor lacked
Aeolian visitations, but the harp
Was soon defrauded,* and the banded host
Of harmony dispersed in straggling sounds
And lastly utter silence! “Be it so:
Why think of anything but present good?”
So, like a homebound labourer I pursued
My way beneath the mellowing sun, that shed
Mild influence, nor left in me one wish
Again to bend the sabbath of that time
To a servile yoke. What need of many words?
A pleasant loitering journey, through three days
Continued, brought me to my hermitage.
I spare to tell of what ensued, the life
In common things – the endless store of things,
Rare, or at least so seeming, every day
Found all about me in one neighbourhood –
The self-congratulation* and, from morn
To night, unbroken cheerfulness serene.
But speedily an earnest longing rose
To brace myself to some determined aim,
Reading or thinking – either to lay up
New stores or rescue from decay the old
By timely interference: and therewith
Came hopes still higher, that with outward life
I might endue some airy fantasies
That had been floating loose about for years,
And to such beings temperately deal forth
The many feelings that oppressed my heart.
That hope hath been discouraged; welcome light
Dawns from the east, but dawns to disappear
And mock me with a sky that ripens not
Into a steady morning: if my mind,
Remembering the bold promise of the past,
Would gladly grapple with some noble theme,
Vain is her wish; where’er she turns, she finds
Impediments from day to day renewed.
And now it would content me to yield up
Those lofty hopes awhile for present gifts
Of humbler industry. But – oh, dear friend!
The poet, gentle creature as he is,
Hath, like the lover, his unruly times –
His fits when he is neither sick nor well,
Though no distress be near him but his own
Unmanageable thoughts: his mind, best pleased
While she as duteous as the mother dove
Sits brooding, lives not always to that end,
But, like the innocent bird, hath goadings-on
That drive her as in trouble through the groves.
With me is now such passion, to be blamed
No otherwise than as it lasts too long.

When, as becomes a man who would prepare
For such an arduous work, I through myself
Make rigorous inquisition, the report
Is often cheering, for I neither seem
To lack that first great gift, the vital soul,
Nor general truths, which are themselves a sort
Of elements and agents, under-powers,
Subordinate helpers of the living mind;
Nor am I naked of external things,
Forms, images, nor numerous other aids
Of less regard, though won perhaps with toil
And needful to build up a poet’s praise.
Time, place and manners do I seek, and these
Are found in plenteous store, but nowhere such
As may be singled out with steady choice –
No little band of yet remembered names
Whom I, in perfect confidence, might hope
To summon back from lonesome banishment
And make them dwellers in the hearts of men
Now living or to live in future years.
Sometimes the ambitious power of choice, mistaking
Proud spring-tide swellings for a regular sea,
Will settle on some British theme, some old
Romantic tale by Milton left unsung;
More often turning to some gentle place
Within the groves of chivalry, I pipe
To shepherd swains, or seated harp in hand,
Amid reposing knights by a riverside
Or fountain, listen to the grave reports
Of dire enchantments faced and overcome
By the strong mind, and tales of warlike feats,
Where spear encountered spear, and sword with sword
Fought, as if conscious of the blazonry
That the shield bore, so glorious was the strife;
Whence inspiration for a song that winds
Through ever-changing scenes of votive quest,
Wrongs to redress, harmonious tribute paid
To patient courage and unblemished truth,
To firm devotion, zeal unquenchable
And Christian meekness hallowing faithful loves.
Sometimes, more sternly moved, I would relate
How vanquished Mithridates northward passed
And, hidden in the cloud of years, became
Odin, the father of a race by whom
Perished the Roman Empire – how the friends
And followers of Sertorius, out of Spain
Flying, found shelter in the Fortunate Isles
And left their usages, their arts and laws,
To disappear by a slow gradual death –
To dwindle and to perish one by one,
Starved in those narrow bounds, but not the soul
Of Liberty, which fifteen hundred years
Survived and, when the European came
With skill and power that might not be withstood,
Did, like a pestilence, maintain its hold
And wasted down by glorious death that race
Of natural heroes.* Or I would record
How, in tyrannic times, some high-souled man,  
Unnamed among the chronicles of kings,  
Suffered in silence for truth’s sake; or tell  
How that one Frenchman, through continued force  
Of meditation on the inhuman deeds  
Of those who conquered first the Indian Isles,  
Went single in his ministry across  
The ocean – not to comfort the oppressed,  
But, like a thirsty wind, to roam about  
Withering the oppressor;* how Gustavus sought  
Help at his need in Dalecarlia’s mines;*  
How Wallace fought for Scotland – left the name  
Of Wallace to be found, like a wild flower,  
All over his dear country – left the deeds  
Of Wallace, like a family of ghosts,  
To people the steep rocks and riverbanks,  
Her natural sanctuaries, with a local soul  
Of independence and stern liberty.  
Sometimes it suits me better to invent  
A tale from my own heart, more near akin  
To my own passions and habitual thoughts –  
Some variegated story, in the main  
Lofty, but the unsubstantial structure melts  
Before the very sun that brightens it,  
Mist into air dissolving! Then a wish,  
My best and favourite aspiration, mounts  
With yearning toward some philosophic song  
Of truth that cherishes our daily life,  
With meditations passionate from deep  
Recesses in man’s heart, immortal verse  
Thoughtfully fitted to the Orphean lyre;  
But from this awful burthen I full soon  
Take refuge and beguile myself with trust  
That mellower years will bring a riper mind  
And clearer insight. Thus my days are passed  
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, unproved 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.*

Was it for this
That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved
To blend his murmurs with my nurse’s song
And from his alder shades and rocky falls,
And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
That flowed along my dreams? For this, didst thou,
O Derwent, winding among grassy holms*
Where I was looking on, a babe in arms,
Make ceaseless music that composed my thoughts
To more than infant softness, giving me,
Amid the fretful dwellings of mankind,
A foretaste, a dim earnest, of the calm
That Nature breathes among the hills and groves?
When he had left the mountains and received
On his smooth breast the shadow of those towers
That yet survive, a shattered monument
Of feudal sway,* the bright-blue river passed
Along the margin of our terrace walk –
A tempting playmate whom we dearly loved.
Oh, many a time have I, a five years’ child,
In a small mill-race* severed from his stream,
Made one long bathing of a summer’s day,
Basked in the sun and plunged and basked again
Alternate, all a summer’s day, or scoured
The sandy fields, leaping through flowery groves
Of yellow ragwort; or when rock and hill,
The woods and distant Skiddaw’s* lofty height
Were bronzed with deepest radiance, stood alone
Beneath the sky, as if I had been born
On Indian plains and from my mother’s hut
Had run abroad in wantonness to sport,
A naked savage, in the thunder shower.

Fair seed time had my soul, and I grew up
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear:
Much favoured in my birthplace, and no less
In that beloved vale to which erelong
We were transplanted – there were we let loose
For sports of wider range. Ere I had told
Ten birthdays, when among the mountain slopes
Frost and the breath of frosty wind had snapped
The last autumnal crocus, 'twas my joy
With store of springes o'er my shoulder hung
To range the open heights where woodcocks run
Along the smooth green turf. Through half the night,
Scudding away from snare to snare, I plied
That anxious visitation – moon and stars
Were shining o'er my head. I was alone,
And seemed to be a trouble to the peace
That dwelt among them. Sometimes it befell
In these night wanderings that a strong desire
O'erpowered my better reason, and the bird
Which was the captive of another’s toil
Became my prey; and when the deed was done,
I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
Of undistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod.

Nor less when spring had warmed the cultured vale
Moved we as plunderers where the mother bird
Had in high places built her lodge. Though mean
Our object and inglorious, yet the end
Was not ignoble. Oh! When I have hung
Above the raven’s nest, by knots of grass
And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock
But ill-sustained and almost (so it seemed)
Suspended by the blast that blew amain,
Shouldering the naked crag, oh, at that time
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ear! The sky seemed not a sky
Of earth – and with what motion moved the clouds!

Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
Like harmony in music; there is a dark
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements – makes them cling together
In one society. How strange that all
The terrors, pains and early miseries,
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes interfused
Within my mind, should e’er have borne a part –
And that a needful part – in making up
The calm existence that is mine when I
Am worthy of myself! Praise to the end!
Thanks to the means which Nature deigned to employ,
Whether her fearless visitings or those
That came with soft alarm, like hurtless light
Opening the peaceful clouds – or she may use
Severer interventions, ministry
More palpable, as best might suit her aim.

One summer evening (led by her) I found
A little boat tied to a willow tree
Within a rocky cave, its usual home.
Straight I unloosed her chain and, stepping in,
Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth
And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice
Of mountain echoes did my boat move on,
Leaving behind her still, on either side,
Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
Until they melted all into one track
Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,
Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point
With an unswerving line, I fixed my view
Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,
The horizon’s utmost boundary: far above
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
She was an elfin pinnace. Lustily
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
Went heaving through the water like a swan,
When, from behind that craggy steep, till then
The horizon’s bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
And growing still in stature the grim shape
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned,
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the covert of the willow tree.
There in her mooring place I left my bark,
And through the meadows homeward went, in grave
And serious mood; but after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o’er my thoughts
There hung a darkness – call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!
Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought,
That givest to forms and images a breath
And everlasting motion, not in vain
By day or starlight thus from my first dawn
Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me
The passions that build up our human soul;
Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,
But with high objects, with enduring things,
With life and nature, purifying thus
The elements of feeling and of thought,
And sanctifying, by such discipline,
Both pain and fear, until we recognize
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.
Nor was this fellowship vouchsafed to me
With stinted kindness. In November days,
When vapours rolling down the valley made
A lonely scene more lonesome, among woods,
At noon and mid the calm of summer nights,
When, by the margin of the trembling lake,
Beneath the gloomy hills homeward I went
In solitude, such intercourse was mine –
Mine was it in the fields both day and night,
And by the waters, all the summer long.

And in the frosty season, when the sun
Was set and, visible for many a mile,
The cottage windows blazed through twilight gloom,
I heeded not their summons: happy time
It was indeed for all of us – for me
It was a time of rapture! Clear and loud
The village clock tolled six. I wheeled about,
Proud and exulting like an untired horse
That cares not for his home. All shod with steel,
We hissed along the polished ice in games
Confederate, imitative of the chase
And woodland pleasures – the resounding horn,
The pack loud chiming and the hunted hare.
So through the darkness and the cold we flew.
And not a voice was idle: with the din
Smitten, the precipices rang aloud;
The leafless trees and every icy crag
Tinkled like iron; while far distant hills
Into the tumult sent an alien sound
Of melancholy not unnoticed, while the stars
Eastward were sparkling clear and, in the west,
The orange sky of evening died away.
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