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Wordsworth's Lifelong Lie

Lying has always been an important part of autobiography. While you would think that a first-person account would yield the most accurate rendering of a person's life as opposed to an outside source, the reality is that no one has more of an agenda than the subject himself (or herself). William Wordsworth is well known for writing about himself—decades before the American poet Walt Whitman sang of himself, Wordsworth made literary history doing the same—but while Wordsworth lied with the best of them, he did so for very different reasons. His goal was not self-aggrandizement but the attaining of a better understanding of his own life and the world around him, an understanding which he could then share with his readers. Indeed, I assert that his efforts in writing autobiographically were not egotistical but rather empathetic. Wordsworth constructs his autobiography by carefully shaping, and in some cases fabricating, his memories of actual life experiences (such as in “Tintern Abbey” and *The Prelude*). The success of his quasi-autobiographical efforts is evident in our ability as readers to draw from and sympathize with his fictionalized bank of experiences just as he did throughout his life. Indeed, Wordsworth's recognized status as the poet of the everyman is in many ways a reflection of his readership's ability then and now to identify with those everyday happenings and encounters that Wordsworth described so well.

Stephen Gill, one of the great Wordsworth biographers, to whom I am indebted for his commentary on the topic at hand, asserted that for the poet “autobiography was the well-spring of his creative powers” (Gill, *A Life* 153). The first source of this spring is what I described as

Wordsworth's shaped recounting of actual life experiences—what Gill refers to as “history-making” (153)—and is most famously exercised in his works “Tintern Abbey” and *The Prelude*. These early works were initiated as attempts to find some clarity for himself in his past experiences as well as provide some direction for his future, much like a personal journal. Anyone who regularly keeps a personal journal understands that what you record about yourself is not a history (despite your best intentions) but rather a narrative founded around your own perceptions and priorities. In the interest of time and space you choose those things which you find to be “most relevant” to your life, and this concept of relevance has everything to do with what you think you're all about. Of course, this introspection is a major reason why people keep personal journals in the first place, and is certainly one of Wordsworth's prime motives for writing about his past as he does. Gill writes that *The Prelude*, for example, was written, unlike most autobiographies, “not only to present a self-image... but to assist the writer to understand his own life, so that the rest of it might be lived more purposefully and in accordance with truths perceived in the act of writing the poem” (2). When Wordsworth says of his “Tintern Abbey” visit that “in this moment there is life and food / For future years,” he is referring to this spot of time's ability to sustain him not only as a tender memory but as an instructive experience whose lesson he may keep with him throughout his life (Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey” 290). Through “Tintern Abbey” as well as *The Prelude*, Wordsworth supplies some degree of understanding of life not only to himself but to his readers as well, and the truths and purposes he espouses can be universally applied.

That Wordsworth's poetry is empathetic is in direct contrast to what his detractors such as John Keats have consistently said about him. To Keats, the “wordsworthian” was synonymous with the “egotistical”—by his reckoning, Wordsworth nurtured an undue, unpoetical sense of

“self” (Keats, *Letter to R.W.* 973) and attracted improper attention to himself by shouting as a retired flower on the highway, “admire me I am a violet! dote upon me I am a primrose!” (Keats, *Letter to J.H.R.* 969). However, contrary to what Keats and others say, the reality is that the Wordsworth of 1798 was not pretending at all to fame and self-recognition. As Gill points out, Wordsworth commenced his autobiographic literature when he was an unknown in society, and neither *The Prelude* nor “Tintern Abbey” fit in with what would come to be the standard of autobiographies as “books written by people who have demonstrated their power and earned the right to present themselves as they think fit to a public whose regard they have already won (Gill, *A Life* 3). While it’s true that Wordsworth continued to revise *The Prelude* in his later years when he had garnered some fame, *The Prelude* never devolved into merely a means of blowing his own horn. In fact, from the very beginning *The Prelude*, while autobiographical, was written as “a direct-love offering to Coleridge,” his great friend and companion. At the very heart of it, his autobiography was intended to reach out to and benefit others, not to call attention to himself or his own greatness.

There are, of course, limitations to his autobiographical endeavors, as Wordsworth was very much aware, such as the issue of the veracity of his work. Whether justified or not, many critics have ripped Wordsworth for giving a false representation of what his life was really like. Gill says outright of “Tintern Abbey” that “factually it is not true” (Gill, *A Life* 153) and cites Wordsworth’s inaccurate representation of his school days (21) as well as his supposed confidence in the 1793 period of his life (a disheartening time for Wordsworth) as being out of place in the reality of his life’s history (154). These inaccuracies are problematic not only because they question the integrity of the rest of Wordsworth’s autobiographical accounting but also because they put into question what effectiveness autobiography has at all if it can’t be

based purely and entirely on what really happened. Wordsworth was fully aware of this problem, and expressed in the 1798 Preface to his and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* that "[t]he obstacles which stand in the way of the fidelity of the biographer and historian, and of their consequent utility, are incalculably greater than those which are to be encountered by the poet who has an adequate notion of the dignity of his art" (Wordsworth, *Preface* 300-301). The question we must ask, then, is where is the value of writing "autobiography" if it is really nothing more than a narrative lie?

Despite these obstacles, Wordsworth, the master liar, was able to turn limitations into opportunities. First of all, the time which separated Wordsworth from the events he was writing about can be seen on the surface level as an obstacle hindering him from an accurate recounting of those events, but Wordsworth took advantage of that time to let his thoughts and ideas develop and deepen. As Gill records, *The Prelude* is based on "events which impressed his mind with images which accrued significance with the passing of time" (Gill, *A Life* 9). Experiences which may not have meant as much to him at first came to mean more and more to him as he progressed in life, and his continual revising of *The Prelude* until his death shows his lifelong commitment to continue revisiting and reanalyzing those life experiences which came to form a part of him. As he wrote in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, "poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply" (Wordsworth, *Preface* 295). Surely Wordsworth had thought of nothing so "long and deeply" as his own life and *The Prelude* to which so much of his life was dedicated.

Wordsworth's long lifespan (something which sets him apart from some of the other major Romantic poets) gave him even more opportunity to look back at the past at different

points in his life with different perspectives. As Stephen Gill said, “the Wordsworth who began *The Prelude* was not the Wordsworth who finished it, and his awareness of that fact is one of the shaping powers of the poem”—that is, not only did he grow as he wrote it, but he was keenly aware of that growth and made it a part of the poem (Gill, *The Prelude* 11). Indeed, as the critic David Miall points out, even the famous “Tintern Abbey” poem is not written *at* Tintern Abbey but rather, as the title suggests, “a few miles *above* Tintern Abbey” (Miall). Wordsworth himself had to be removed and even elevated from the situation of his past to be able to see it in the perspective that allowed such a powerful reminiscence. His distancing himself from the situation yields him the clarity not only of an elevated viewpoint but also of hindsight, and as another critic said, this “[d]istance serves Wordsworth as a principal means through which imagination exercises its power” (Ogden 246) and “enables him to perceive more clearly and more fully what is before him, to understand the significance of what he sees” (247). According to Monique R. Morgan, Wordsworth’s lyric poetry in particular “creates a timeless present, an indefinitely suspended moment, which contrasts with narrative’s past progression of events” and “creat[es] a sense of immediacy among the reader, text, and content” (Morgan 301).

This sense of immediacy that Wordsworth creates for the reader is one of the fruits of his carefully reader-directed writing. In the case of “Tintern Abbey,” where someone else would see the difficulty of describing a place so important to the poet as accurately and as precisely as it should be, Wordsworth saw the opportunity of generalizing and thus creating a more accessible setting for his readers. Gill points out that the “Tintern Abbey” poem “strikingly avoids localizing detail” and that “[i]t opens with the evocation of a particular place... but for all its apparent specificity the scene remains generalized” (Gill, *A Life* 152). By keeping the scene generalized, Wordsworth saves the natural elements of this famous locale (the waters, the cliffs,

the cottage-ground, etc.) from being fettered to this one place, and thus they can be just as meaningful to the reader as they are to the author. Wordsworth's autobiographical selflessness allows the moment of revisiting a familiar place to be just as much a part of our life's story as it was of his. Furthermore, he writes in the first-person to allow the reader to join him above the Abbey and to experience what he experiences. As I, the reader, go through "Tintern Abbey," it is *I* who hears the waters, *I* who beholds the steep and lofty cliffs, *I* who repose there, etc. (Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey" 288-89). Gill surmises that "[t]he poet is concerned not with what is seen in itself, but with the eye that sees" (Gill 153). That eye is our own as much as it is Wordsworth's and Wordsworth often uses the first-person plural to invite us to see with him and join him in whatever experience he is undergoing.

In the end, Wordsworth's autobiographical writing, whether firmly based on reality or deliberately fictionalized, served to fulfill his desire to understand life even at its most common or vulgar roots and then help the reader to do the same. This is a man who wrote that, "[t]o me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears," and perpetuated that principle of appreciation throughout his life's work (Wordsworth, *Ode* 341). Wordsworth always "kept his eyes open and wanted to hear what people had to tell," (Gill, *A Life* 26) and the fact that he "knew no certainty [whether in life or in philosophy] could be achieved did not stop him searching" (13). The underlying motivation of his autobiographical writing was his belief that "[t]he past and the present will combine... against all the adversities the future might bring, to sustain [the] 'cheerful faith that all which we behold / Is full of blessings'" (153), a conviction which has affected and inspired millions of readers all over the world for over two centuries.