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NOTE

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Introduction: The ‘Huge and Mighty Forms’ of *The Prelude*

The object of this *Guide* is to introduce the reader to key critical readings of the great autobiographical poem by William Wordsworth (1770–1850), *The Prelude*. Commenced in 1798 and periodically expanded and revised until Wordsworth’s death in 1850, the work was never published during the poet’s lifetime, although the manuscript was known to a small circle of friends and relatives, including his sister Dorothy (1771–1855), his friend and collaborator Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), and the essayist Thomas De Quincey (1785–1859). Despite this history (or perhaps because of it), *The Prelude* has come to assume a central place in Wordsworth’s literary output. Stated barely, the synopsis of the poem sounds unremarkable: in fourteen books (thirteen in the 1805 version), it charts the poet’s intellectual and emotional development from childhood to early adulthood, encompassing his earliest recollections of growing up in the Lake District and his time at school and Cambridge University, his time spent in London and travelling through France, and his first-hand experiences of the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution in the early 1790s.

As anyone already familiar with the poem will testify, however, this summary conveys nothing of the qualities that have caused controversy and debate among readers for over two centuries. For these readers (both supporters and detractors), it is in the intense and lyrical passages of self-reflection, where the poet meditates upon his own consciousness, and upon the relationship between imagination, nature, and society, that the true interest of the poem resides. And yet, for many, the density and opacity of these passages can be as overwhelming as the mountain that rears up – in one of the poem’s most celebrated sequences – to pursue the boy Wordsworth across Ullswater:

■ a huge cliff,

As if with voluntary power instinct,
 Upreared its head. I struck, and struck again,
 And, growing still in stature, the huge cliff
 Rose up between me and the stars, and still
 With measured motion like a living thing
 Strode after me.
 [...]

for many days my brain
 Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
 Of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts
 There was a darkness – call it solitude
 Or blank desertion – no familiar shapes
 Of hourly objects, 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 my mind
 By day, and were the trouble of my dreams. □

(1805, l, 405–412; 418–426)

Confronted with such lines for the first time, the reader might be forgiven for experiencing his or her own sense of ‘darkness’ or ‘blank desertion’. Certainly, *The Prelude* makes few concessions to its reader. The things to which it ultimately refers, the ‘huge and mighty forms that do not live / Like living men’, appear shrouded in obscurity, accessible only dimly, through an ‘undetermined sense / Of unknown modes of being’. Rather than unpacking itself before the reader, *The Prelude* holds its meanings in reserve, promising riches that somehow lie beyond the immediate significance of the words on the page. The question of how to respond to this aura of an evasive, transcendent meaning in *The Prelude* is one of the central questions behind a long and diverse history of criticism and commentary on the poem, a tradition which – in its myriad attempts to ‘understand’, ‘interpret’, ‘appreciate’, ‘psycho-analyse’, ‘deconstruct’, ‘gender’, ‘historicise’, and ‘green’ the poem – is now, with consummate irony, every bit as daunting as the poem itself. Perhaps more than most then, the student of *The Prelude* is a student in need of a guide to criticism of *The Prelude*. Accordingly, the principal aim of this book is to provide the reader with a framework for *Prelude* commentary and scholarship by outlining the theoretical and historical contexts of the ‘major’ critical trends that have influenced it.

Before proceeding further, I wish to take a leaf out of Wordsworth’s book and articulate the scope of this *Guide* negatively. In other words, I want to begin by clarifying what this book is *not*. First, at the risk of stating the obvious, it is not a guide to Wordsworth criticism, but to *Prelude* criticism. With a few notable exceptions, it does not discuss at length studies of Wordsworth that have chosen not to focus their attention on *The Prelude*. Second, the present volume is not and cannot be an *exhaustive* survey of *Prelude* criticism. *The Prelude* is a key text in the canon of English Literature: more than this, as one recent commentator has noted, it is a significant text in the creation of the discipline itself.¹ Since its publication in 1850, a great deal of ink has been spilt on the poem – more, far more, than it is feasible for a companion such as this

to survey. In selecting the critical texts to be discussed, I have had to strike a balance between range and depth. What the reader will find below, then, is a guide to 'Essential' (at least, what this author feels to be 'essential'), but not *all*, *Prelude* criticism. To explore this landscape further, readers are encouraged to consult the reading lists provided at the end of the book.

Although it lay unpublished until 1850, the existence of *The Prelude* was something of an open secret in early nineteenth-century literary circles. As I detail in Chapter 1, however, the existence of (at least four) different versions of the poem was less well known. The only text widely available until 1928 – the fourteen-book *Prelude* – met with a mixed reception. Early reviewers were perplexed by the poem's peculiar fusion of the mundane and the transcendental, the personal and the sublime. In the second section of Chapter 1, I trace how critics such as Leslie Stephen (1832–1904) and Matthew Arnold (1822–88) attempted to wrest *The Prelude* from the grips of the 'Wordsworthians', a group of enthusiasts who, inspired by John Stuart Mill (1806–73), championed the poem as a guide to living a good life. Arnold's argument that Wordsworth is fundamentally a poet of nature was in turn contested by the 'aesthetic', impressionistic reading of the poem proffered by Walter Pater (1839–94).

The debate between Arnold and Stephen as to whether Wordsworth is a nature poet or a moral philosopher writing in verse swiftly becomes a key question for *Prelude* commentary, as does the problematic relationship between the poem's quotidian or 'natural' and transcendental or 'supernatural' aspects. In Chapter 2, I examine the attempt of A.C. Bradley (1851–1935), in his influential *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1909), to move beyond these perspectives by stressing the poem's philosophical profundity and its sublime and unparaphrasable qualities. I also discuss the ramifications of two publications from this period: the revelatory biography by Émile Legouis (1861–1937), *La Jeunesse de William Wordsworth* (1896), and the 1928 edition of the 1805 *Prelude* (the first published) by Ernest de Selincourt (1870–1943). These works not only spurred new interest in biographical/psychoanalytical approaches and textual scholarship respectively, they also helped to move *The Prelude* to the centre of Wordsworth studies.

Around mid-century, the study of English literature was increasingly polarized between 'critics', who treated literary works formally, as aesthetic objects, and 'scholars' or intellectual historians, who attempted to understand literature within its historical, cultural, or intellectual contexts. Accordingly, Chapter 3 assesses the impact of the 'New Criticism' upon studies of the style of *The Prelude* by critics such as William Empson (1906–84), Herbert Lindenberger (born 1929), and Christopher Ricks (born 1933), before turning to the rise of the History of Ideas. Within

this latter tradition, Morse Peckham and Robert Langbaum (born 1924), building upon earlier work by Arthur Beatty and Newton Stallknecht, argue that *The Prelude* signals a decisive break from the intellectual traditions of eighteenth-century Britain, while M.H. Abrams (born 1912) makes a strong case for reading the poem as the culmination of a late Enlightenment drive ‘to naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine’. The same drive is also identified by Geoffrey Hartman (born 1929) as the energy behind the poem’s Hegelian ‘dialectic of consciousness’, a concept derived from the German idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1830). Harold Bloom (born 1930) gives this ‘dialectic’ a distinct twist towards the theories of the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). As one of the most successful and influential attempts to account for the poem’s ‘natural supernaturalism’ and ‘poetic philosophy’, Hartman’s reading of *The Prelude* in his 1964 *Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787–1814* stands at a pivotal point in the history of Wordsworth criticism.

The coming of the culture wars of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s transformed *Prelude* criticism. During the 1970s, critics influenced by the ideas and methods of feminism, deconstruction, and the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan (1901–81), rejected many of the assumptions that had underpinned earlier readings of the poem. As I demonstrate in Chapter 4, such commentators no longer saw the ‘author’ as the focal point of literary criticism. On the contrary, they saw this category as bound up with the very notion of the stable, autonomous ‘subject’ that they now sought to question. Gradually eroding the conventional interpretative triad of ‘author/work/world’ with one closer to ‘discourse/text/history,’ these critical movements came to view *The Prelude* – one of the great reflexive narratives of the self – as a seminal text in the creation of western ideology of the subject. Thus, Paul de Man (1919–83) argues that the poem testifies to a predicament of writing, not consciousness, while Frances Ferguson (born 1947) doubts whether the language of the poem could ever live up to the Romantic totems of ‘sincerity’ and ‘organic form’. Feminist commentators like Mary Jacobus, meanwhile, frequently use the techniques of deconstruction and psychoanalysis to detect in *The Prelude* concealed anxieties about gender and the ‘legitimacy’ of autobiographical poetry – or, in the cases of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (born 1942) and Margaret Homans respectively, to speculate on how the poem appropriates the voice of the ‘female’ and overcomes the Oedipal complex at its core. Indeed, psychoanalytical readings of the poem, earlier pioneered by critics such as Herbert Read (1893–1968) and F.W. Bateson (1901–78), continue to gain currency in this period. Accordingly, I close this chapter by examining two critics – Richard Oronato and David Ellis (born 1939) – who read the poem as an early example of psychotherapy, a kind of self-analysis in verse.

Like psychoanalysis, the emergence of New Historicism in the 1980s has had a considerable and sustained effect on how modern criticism has come to read *The Prelude*. The defining feature of this family of approaches is its refusal to treat the poem as a purely formal entity. Rather than see it as possessing the completed (or even fragmented) unity of the aesthetic object then, historicists view *The Prelude* as first and foremost a product of historical discourse. Chapter 5 sheds light on the three principal modes of New Historicist commentary on *The Prelude*: the search for a social and historical context (pioneered, among others, by Marilyn Butler [born 1937] and Nicholas Roe); the identification of ‘displacement’ as the key strategy of the ‘Romantic ideology’ (central to the work of Jerome McGann [born 1937], James Chandler, David Simpson [born 1951], and Marjorie Levinson [born 1951]); and a final elimination of formalism from literary criticism by the application of the concept of ‘historicity’ (found in the work of Alan Liu [born 1953] and Clifford Siskin). As becomes clear, each of these modes has very different implications for what a ‘historicist’ reading of *The Prelude* might look like.

In the final chapter, I make a brief survey of the main developments in *Prelude* criticism over the past fifteen years or so. Despite having had their theoretical foundations attacked over the years, the techniques and methods of deconstruction and New Historicism continue to pervade the field, as is evident in the work of Richard Bourke and Geraldine Friedman. Alternative perspectives, however, have recently emerged in a rapidly changing critical landscape. The first of these is a resurgence in ‘formalist’ approaches, presented most forcibly in the work of Susan Wolfson (born 1948) and Thomas Pfau (born 1960). Both writers present the case for what I call a ‘neoformalist’ approach to *The Prelude*, treating the poem not as a finished aesthetic object (as traditional formalists tended to do), but as a work that itself engages with the very problems raised by the agency of form in understanding the construction of subjectivity and history. A second, important critical current to have surfaced in recent years is ‘green’ criticism, or ‘ecocriticism’. This tendency reverses the prioritization of ‘history’ over ‘nature’ enforced by New Historicism. The result, as demonstrated in the work of Jonathan Bate (born 1958), Karl Kroeber (born 1926), and James McKusick (born 1956), is that the question of humanity’s relationship to the natural environment re-emerges as an urgent and salient (rather than merely displaced) concern of Wordsworth in *The Prelude*. In the closing section of this chapter, I turn to two focal topics of current *Prelude* commentary: the poem’s engagement with the question of ‘vagrancy’ and its relationship to contemporary discourses of space, topography, and geology. Finally, in the book’s Conclusion, I consider the possibility that a rising tide of literary criticism, influenced by the French philosopher Gilles

Deleuze (1925–95), may soon lead to the widespread acceptance of a ‘nomadic’ *Prelude*.

By then, the study of English Literature will probably have moved on, transformed, or even fragmented, into new disciplines. The norms and practices of literary study that *The Prelude* itself helped to create may have disappeared. There can be no guarantees, of course, that *The Prelude* will continue to hold its privileged position within the canon of English Literature – nor, for that matter, is there any certainty that the canon will continue to exist in any recognisable normative or pedagogical form (though it has proved remarkably durable so far). What is certain, however, is that *The Prelude* has already accumulated a massive body of critical texts, each of which is as revealing about the era in which it was written as it is about Wordsworth. This text is designed to guide the reader of what is arguably Wordsworth’s greatest poem around that body.

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