

The Equanimity of Influence: Milton and Wordsworth*

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Northrop Frye argued that “[l]iterature may have life, reality, experience, nature, imaginative truth, social conditions, [...] for its content; but literature [...] is not made out of these things. Poetry can only be made out of other poems” (Frye 97). If, with some allowance for exaggeration, this is the case, it is especially true of epic, the most intensively self-reflexive genre. At least from the time that Vergil contained the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* in the two halves of his *Aeneid*, epic poets have competed with predecessors whom they seek to contain and surpass.¹ In this essay I will address how Wordsworth makes his poetry out of Milton’s poetry, and particularly his *Prelude* out of *Paradise Lost*, continuing a line of argument that I introduced in an essay on Wordsworth’s “Nutting.” I will suggest that for Wordsworth, reading Milton’s poetry is a profoundly enabling condition for writing his own.

My title of course gestures towards Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*. By recasting the relation of Wordsworth to Milton, with I hope more accuracy than elegance, as one of “equanimity of influence,” I mean to suggest that in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth is in a dialogue with Milton’s *Paradise Lost* that is both conscious and notably free of anxiety. Wordsworth has here, that is to say, left behind much of the anxiety that marks the Prospectus to the 1814 edition *The Recluse*, a poem dating from the turn of the nineteenth century. There Wordsworth both boasts that *The Recluse*, by plumbing the depths of

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <http://www.connotations.de/debate/wordsworth-and-milton/>.

the “Mind of Man,” will have more profound effects of awe and fear than Milton’s poem, which navigates “Chaos” and “The darkest pit of lowest Erebus” (35-41), and worries that in describing the “lowly matter” of “the Mind and Man / Contemplating” he might be seen as engaging in “labour useless” (94-99). The dialogue with Milton here is uneasy and defensive. I want to suggest that Milton’s influence on Wordsworth’s poetic project in *The Prelude*, on the other hand, was enabling and less marked by defensiveness, despite the fact that Wordsworth was still in competition with Milton. At the same time, I point in my title to the astonishing equanimity in the face of sorrows and adversity achieved by the narrator of *Paradise Lost* as the deepest legacy Milton left to his successor. What Wordsworth gains from Milton in much of his best poetry, is, I suggest, a deep balance of joy and sorrow, a mental poise Wordsworth himself describes in same Prospectus as “feelings of delight [...] with no unpleasing sadness mixed” (4-5). I will follow Milton’s presence in the 1805 *Prelude* in what I take to be increasingly significant steps, 1) as the source of frequent allusion, 2) as a model of epic ambition, and 3) as one who has achieved and modeled the equable mind that is one of the central achievements of the *Prelude*.

The Prelude’s Allusions to Paradise Lost: A Brief, Exemplary Catalogue

Wordsworth alludes in *The Prelude* to several of Milton’s poems, but most insistently to *Paradise Lost*. Writing a blank verse epic in English, Wordsworth could hardly have avoided engagement with Milton, and his insistent allusions make clear that he welcomed comparisons between *The Prelude* and *Paradise Lost*. While Wordsworth seems to strike out on virgin ground in writing an epic of the self, I have argued elsewhere that even here he has been anticipated by Milton (Fallon, “Intellectual History” 347). *The Prelude*, like its great model, is an epic of a lost paradise and its recovery through spiritual discipline. In Milton’s case, though not in Wordsworth’s, that discipline is specifically moral and insistently Christian, and the great summation of that

discipline, in the words of Raphael to Adam near the end of *Paradise Lost*, is bracketed by the theological virtues of faith and love, / By name to come called charity, the soul / of all the rest" (*PL* 12.582-585). While there is a moral element in the spiritual discipline of *The Prelude*, as is evident already in the first book in the boat-stealing episode, the emphasis is more on the maturation of the imagination, and, as we shall see below, Wordsworth's goal is less the love that is "By name to come called charity" than "love more intellectual" (1805, 13.166).

The Prelude is in dialogue with *Paradise Lost* not only in its narrative and thematic arcs but also in and between its lines. One paradoxical index of how thoroughly *Paradise Lost* informs Wordsworth's poem is the incidental nature of many of the allusions. His simile in Book 8 describing a traveler's gradually expanding visual field after entering a cave ("He looks and sees the cavern spread and grow, / Widening itself on all sides, sees, or thinks / He sees, ere long, the roof above his head" [1805 *Prelude* 8.715-17]) recalls Milton's simile describing a vision of fairy elves, "Whose midnight revels, by a forest side / Or fountain some belated peasant sees, / Or dreams he sees" (*PL* 1.782-84). The borrowing here is precise and complex, at once verbal, syntactical, and prosodic. When Wordsworth credits rare individuals endowed with vital imagination as the sources of "religion, faith / And endless occupation for the soul, / Whether discursive or intuitive" (13.111-13) he employs terms introduced in Eden by Raphael to describe the soul's reason, "and reason is her being, / Discursive, or intuitive" (5.487-88). Wordsworth's lament for the imagined youth unmoved by the Alps, "Unchastened, unsubdued, unawed, unraised / To patriarchal dignity of mind" (6.442-43), echoes Milton's description of Abdiel confronting Satan and his followers "Unshaken, unsecluded, unterrified" (5.899), not only in being a line of negated adjectives but in the line's rhythms and phonemes (*Unchastened, unsubdued* and *Unshaken, unsecluded*). Pervasive borrowings of this kind show how thoroughly and intimately Milton's verses saturate Wordsworth's.

Epic Ambition

Wordsworth announces his own epic ambition in *The Prelude* in terms borrowed from Milton's announcement of his own. And in an implicit assertion of his poem's going beyond its epic predecessor, Wordsworth splices the beginning of his epic (and both the beginning and the end of its first book) to the end of Milton's, suggesting that he will begin where Milton ended and thus go far beyond him. Milton's epic ends with the departure of Adam and Eve from the Garden, in lines to which I will return:

The world was all before them, where to find
 Their place of rest, and providence their guide:
 They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
 Through Eden took their solitary way. (12.646-49)

A few lines into *The Prelude*, Wordsworth depends on our knowledge of these lines to orient us to his succeeding epic:

The earth is all before me—with a heart
 Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
 I look about, and should the guide I chuse
 Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
 I cannot miss my way. (1.15-19)

The switch from third to first person announces *The Prelude* as an epic of the self as opposed to Milton's epic of creation and fall, though, as I have suggested, Milton's is also an epic of the self. The "wandering cloud" as chosen guide is a Romantic replacement for the "providence" that guides Adam and Eve. Most interesting to me, however, is the way in which Wordsworth here rewrites the end of Milton's epic, much as Richard Bentley did in 1732, to edit out the balance between sorrow and joy, consolation and alienation, a balance that Wordsworth will achieve only in the course of *The Prelude*, though, when he writes a few lines from the end of the first book that "The road lies plain before me" (1.668); he might by an allusion to Adam's and Eve's descent to the "subjected plain" (12.640) gesture toward that more measured perspective.

That the reconciliation of joy and sorrow with which *Paradise Lost* ends is also at the heart of *The Prelude* suggests that Wordsworth may have revised the epic project less than he insists. His redefinition of epic heroism as internal virtue (in both senses of *virtue*) rather than martial prowess is itself derived from Milton. When Wordsworth writes,

how awful is the might of souls,
And what they do within themselves while yet
The yoke of earth is new to them, the world
Nothing but a wild field where they were sown.
This is in truth heroic argument
And genuine prowess (3.178-83),

he is adapting Milton's own revisionary stance in his own epic heroism. Milton will be

Not sedulous by nature to indite
Wars, hitherto the only argument
Heroic deemed, chief mast'ry to dissect
With long and tedious havoc fabled knights
In battles feigned; the better fortitude
Of patience and heroic martyrdom
Unsung. (9.27-33)

Both Milton and Wordsworth counter the traditional emphasis on epic action. Wordsworth's poem may be more obvious in this respect, as he focuses explicitly on the "growth of a poet's mind," as *the Prelude's* subtitle has it. But Milton also focuses on what passes within both his heroes and himself, on "patience and heroic martyrdom," which manifest themselves passively as well as actively, and which characterize a poet tried by blindness and political defeat.

Equanimity and the Paradise of Daily Life

While both *Paradise Lost* and *The Prelude* contain cataclysmic events, notably the War in Heaven and the French Revolution, the most significant actions are not martial feats in the service of nations or

peoples but the education of the soul or mind as it achieves calm of mind and discovers paradise in the quotidian. When Wordsworth writes early in *The Prelude*, “I yearn towards some philosophic song / Of truth that cherishes our daily life” (1.230-31), he echoes Adam’s summation of Raphael’s teaching on the proper sphere of knowledge, “to know / That which before us lies in daily life, / Is the prime wisdom” (8.192-94). The daily life of Milton’s readers, if not of the Adam and Eve of Book 8, unfolds in a fallen world, which, unlike Eden, holds sorrows alongside joys.

For Milton, whose poem is set within the Christian myth of creation, paradisaical innocence, a disastrous fall, our fallen current state, and the promise of regeneration, paradise is attainable here on earth through the growth in virtue enabled by divine grace. As Michael instructs Adam,

add
 Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add faith,
 Add virtue, patience, temperance, add love,
 By name to come called charity, the soul
 Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loath
 To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
 A paradise within thee, happier far. (*PL* 12.581-87)

The Romantic Wordsworth, writing more than a century later, would adapt Milton’s story of recovered paradise through cultivation of the mind and virtues in a new context, in which nature and imagination will play the part earlier played by God and divine grace.² *Mutatis mutandis*, Wordsworth’s poem follows a similar trajectory of innocence, fall, regeneration, and recovered paradise. *The Prelude* opens with scenes of childhood among the lakes and mountains of Cumberland. While there are intimations of guilt in, for example, the boat-stealing episode, the keynote is innocent joy. Wordsworth claims to have been “Much favored in my birthplace, and no less / In that beloved vale to which erelong / I was transplanted” (1.307-8), a transition that resembles Adam’s, first created and then himself transplanted to the “woody mountain” of Eden (8.303).

Wordsworth repeatedly describes the Cumberland of his childhood as a paradise. He recalls that he was “trained up in paradise / Among sweet garlands and delightful sounds” (3.377-78). Wordsworth mimics Milton in contrasting this paradise with mythical spots legendary for their beauty. It is a “tract more exquisitely fair / Than is that paradise of ten thousand trees, / Or Gehol’s famous gardens” (8.121-23) a landscape

gorgeous as the colours side by side
Bedded among the plumes of tropic birds;
And mountains over all, embracing all,
And all the landscape endlessly enriched. (8.139-42)

The scenery of Wordsworth’s youth surpasses these fabulous gardens, “lovelier far than this the paradise / Where I was reared” (8.144-45), just as Milton’s Garden of Eden is more beautiful, to cite two of many examples, than “where Abassin kings their issue guard, / Mount Amara, though this by some supposed / True paradise under Ethiop line” (4.280-82), or than “those gardens feigned / Or of revived Adonis, or renowned Alcinous [...] / Or that, not mystic, where the sapient king / Held dalliance with his fair Egyptian spouse” (9.439-43).³ And if Raphael tells Milton’s Adam that “Earth hath this variety from Heav’n / Of pleasure situate in hill and dale” (6.640-41), Wordsworth yokes the landscape of his youth with both Eden and Heaven: “the sun in heaven / Beheld not vales more beautiful than ours” (1.505-06).

But there is something immature in the ecstasies of Wordsworth’s remembered childhood. While paradisaical recollections sustain Wordsworth in later years, the growth of the poet’s mind must assimilate life’s inevitable sorrows and pain, what he calls “The terrors, all the early miseries, / Regrets, vexations, lassitudes” (1.356-57). The distance between the mature and the boyish mind is measured, significantly, in a reflection on Milton as Cambridge student and mature man:

Yea, our blind Poet, who in his later day,
Stood almost single; uttering odious truth—

*Darkness before, and danger's voice behind,
Soul awful—if the earth has ever lodged
An awful soul—I seemed to see him here
Familiarly, and in his scholar's dress
Bounding before me, yet a stripling youth—
A boy, no better, with his rosy cheeks
Angelical, keen eye, courageous look,
And conscious step of purity and pride. (3.286-95; my emphasis)*

The imagined youthful Milton bounds among the buildings and lawns of Cambridge as the younger Wordsworth bounds among the hills and vales of the Lake District. This young Milton would be tempered by “Darkness and danger’s voice” and emerge as “Soul awful.” There is a faint echo here of Satan’s visceral reaction to Eve: “abashed the Devil stood, / And felt how awful goodness is” (4.846-47). And Wordsworth’s lines unmistakably recall the invocation of *Paradise Lost* 7, where Milton voices the trials that tempered his character: “though fall’n on evil days, / On evil days though fall’n, and evil tongues; / In darkness, and with dangers compassed round” (7.25-27; my emphasis). Wordsworth captures, in this portrait of Milton, the growth of a poet’s mind through stages of innocent joy, experience of sorrow and fear, and greatness of soul and equanimity. Wordsworth expresses the fashioning of the singer in musical terms: “The mind of man is framed even like the breath / And harmony of music. There is a dark / Invisible workmanship that reconciles / Discordant elements” (1.351-54), and he marvels that “The calm existence that is mine when I / Am worthy of myself” has been made up in part of “early miseries, / Regrets, vexations, lassitudes” (1.360-61, 356-57). It is a painstaking progress, as the wayfaring poet must contend with “the weight of meanness, selfish cares, / Coarse manners, vulgar passions, that beat in / On all sides from the ordinary world / In which we traffic” (8.454-57). This is an ordinary world that somehow must be redeemed, a point to which I will return.

The reconciliation of joys and sorrows is the task of both *The Prelude* and the angel Michael in the final books of Milton’s epic. God commands Michael:

Dismiss them not disconsolate; reveal
 To Adam what shall come in future days,
 As I shall thee enlighten, intermix
 My cov'nant in the woman's seed renewed;
 So send them forth, though sorrowing, yet in peace. (12.113-17)

There is a heavy burden of pain in "what shall come in future days," but Michael is to balance that with reminders of the covenant between God and fallen humankind. A mixture of joy and sorrow structures the final books of *Paradise Lost*. Adam's eyes are purged with "euphrasy and rue," herbs with signifying names; the freight of *rue* is obvious, the Greek *euphrasy* means "cheerfulness." Adam's discursive education by Michael and Eve's intuitive education by God in a dream leave them "though sad, / With cause for evils past, yet much more cheered / With meditation on the happy end" (12.604-06). The final books of *Paradise Lost* record the gradual tempering of Adam's violent swings between exaggerated joy and exaggerated sorrow. He is being educated toward the complex state of mind caught in the exquisite balance of the poem's concluding lines:

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;
 The world was all before them, where to choose
 Their place of rest, and providence their guide:
 They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
 Through Eden took their solitary way. (12.645-49)⁴

A similar reconciliation of joy and sorrow structures and makes possible *The Prelude*. The joyous peace of mind instilled in a youth nurtured in natural beauty is unsettled by the sordidness and moral dubiousness he observes in London and in the revolutionary France that first seemed glorious and unproblematic. As a result, he faces a crisis of faith:

I lost
 All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,
 Sick, wearied out with contrarities,
 Yielded up moral questions in despair. (10.897-900)

Like Adam under Michael's instruction, Wordsworth veers between joy and despair. He begins a journey back to mental health nursed by Coleridge, his sister Dorothy, and finally Nature: "Nature's self, by human love / Assisted, through the weary labyrinth / [...] / Revived the feelings of my earlier life, / Gave me that strength and knowledge full of peace / Enlarged, and never more to be disturbed" (10.921-26). This enlarged perspective assimilates sorrow and pain into a higher imaginative vision, into what he calls a "love more intellectual," which

cannot be
Without imagination, which in truth
Is but another name for absolute strength
And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
And reason in her most exalted mood. (13.166-70)

A book earlier, Wordsworth calls this "amplitude of mind" by the Miltonic name "right reason," which "lifts / The being into magnanimity" (12.26, 32).

The growth of the poet's mind for Wordsworth depends on reservoirs of deep mental vitality fostered by a childhood in nature, which provide the strength necessary to absorb the pains, sorrows, and sordidness of adult life. Both for themselves and others, Wordsworth's ideal poets imagine and thus realize a world of beauty countering the harshness of existence. Without this, there is, according to Wordsworth, a

tendency, too potent in itself,
Of habit to enslave the mind—I mean
Oppress it by the laws of vulgar sense,
And substitute a universe of death,
The falsest of all worlds, in place of that
Which is divine and true. (13.138-43)

The striking phrase "a universe of death" is one of Milton's names for Hell (2.622). Hell results from a failure of the imagination, a capitulation to what seems to be the case from the perspective of "vulgar

sense." Avoiding it requires a kind of heroism, the heroism of the gifted poet founded on a deep sanity springing from communion with Nature. Such a figure can reconcile us to the suffering in the world as well as reconcile joy and sorrow.

This reconciliation of joy and sorrow, modeled on Milton's, allows Wordsworth to re-commit himself to his role as prophetic poet. This joy is not quite the same as the joy of Keats's "Ode on Melancholy," or the joy in the beauty of dying generations in Wallace Stevens's "Peter Quince at the Clavier"; for them, it is the brevity of beauty and joy that makes them precious. We cannot have the one without the other, so we accept the sorrow of mortality in order to have the joys of beauty. This is the luxuriance of melancholy. We hear a hint of this in Wordsworth's Book 6: "'Twas sweet at such a time [...] / [...] / To feed a poet's tender melancholy / And fond conceit of sadness" (6.375-78). But the more authentic Miltonic and Wordsworthian note is an acceptance of sorrow as valuable in itself, not merely as a foil for happiness.

Another version of the acceptance of sorrow as the price of the exaltation of joy is the fortunate fall, an acceptance of sin, suffering, and death because they make possible the redemptive incarnation of the Son of God. Jonathan Wordsworth finds in *The Prelude* an echo of what he sees as Milton's articulation of the Fortunate Fall: "Wordsworth's justification of pain and fear as ultimately serving love is parallel to Milton's justification of God's ways to men, *Paradise Lost*, XII, 469 ff.: 'goodness infinite, goodness immense! / That all this good of evil shall produce, / And evil turn to good'" (annotation to 1805 *Prelude* 13.149). This is a misreading of Milton's epic and, I think, of Wordsworth's. Wordsworth ascribes his poetic and prophetic powers of imagination to "early intercourse / In presence of sublime and lovely forms / With the adverse principles of pain and joy— / Evil as one is rashly named by those / Who know not what they say" (13.145-49). In the Fortunate Fall, the evil of sin is overbalanced by the joy of the incarnation and redemption. In Wordsworth and Milton, I want to argue, sorrows are accepted for their own sake, as part of

what Wordsworth calls in "Tintern Abbey" "The still, sad music of humanity" (91), and in the "Immortality Ode" "the soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering; / [...] / In years that bring the philosophic mind" (183-86).⁵

Milton comes closest perhaps to capturing in poetry the acceptance of a world of intermixed sorrows and joys in a paradoxical simile describing the cherubim descending to usher Adam and Eve out of the garden. They are "as ev'ning mist" that

Ris'n from a river o're the marish glides,
And gathers ground fast at the laborer's heel
Homeward returning. (12.630-32)

At the moment that Adam and Eve are driven from the only home they have known, they are compared to the "laborer [...] Homeward returning." They are driven from a home from which sorrow has been excluded, and they are yearning, by the logic of poetry, for their home in which sorrow is inescapable. It is the only home that they now know, the only home *we* have ever known, a home where greatness of soul is impossible without the experience of sorrow.

This is the world also limned in the final pages of *The Prelude*, in a passage beginning with an echo of the "subjected plain" to which Adam and Eve descend, and ending with a subtle and indissoluble fusion of joy and sorrow:

Anon I rose
As if on wings, and saw beneath me stretched
Vast prospect of the world which I had been,
And was; and hence this song, which like a lark
I have protracted, in the unwearied heavens
Singing, and often with more plaintive voice
Attempted to the sorrows of the earth—
Yet cent'ring all in love, and in the end
All gratulant if rightly understood. (13.377-85)

All is “gratulant,” all expresses joy in the end, even the “sorrows of the earth.” Sorrow is an avenue to the depth of experience, without which one remains immature, an alien in a home in which sorrow is an essential part.

Wordsworth’s chosen theme is the “very heart of man” tempered and improved by religious faith, good books, and “Nature’s presence,” a heart that not only endures but welcomes sorrow. He will sing

the very heart of man
As found among the best of those who live
Not unexalted by religious faith,
Nor uninformed by books (good books, though few),
In Nature’s presence—thence may I select
Sorrow that is not sorrow but delight,
And miserable love that is not pain
To hear of, for the glory that redounds
Therefrom to human-kind and what we are. (12.240-48)

In *The Prelude* Wordsworth advocates, as does Milton, a mature acceptance and celebration of the human condition.

Poets, Wordsworth insists, must

exercise their skill
Not in Utopia—subterranean fields,
Or some secreted island, heaven knows where—
But in the very world which is the world
Of all of us, the place in which, in the end,
We find our happiness, or not at all. (10.722-27)

This passage, in a kind of shorthand, repeats the earlier, Miltonic passages comparing his paradise to fabulous, lesser paradises. One might think that Wordsworth’s quotidian place of happiness is a world apart from Milton’s visions of Eden and of glorified life in heaven. But Milton again is closer to Wordsworth than might appear. Michael, after prophesying a grim future of sorrow and suffering, tells

Adam that, before death and before potential glorification, he will achieve something worth more than “all th’ethereal powers, / [...], all nature’s works / [...] / And all the riches of the world” (12.577-80). Here, while still on Earth, he tells Adam, “wilt thou not be loath / To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess / A paradise within thee, happier far” (12.585-87). This is a paradise founded not merely on nature or contingent joys, but on a cultivated state of mind and soul, a possession of virtues that will make Adam sufficient to confront life, to absorb its sorrows, and to remain equable in both joy and sorrow, a state very much like that of Wordsworth’s mature poet.⁶

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NOTES

¹A miniature case in point: when Milton asserts that in *Paradise Lost* he will capture “things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” (1.16) he translates directly a line from the beginning of sixteenth-century romance epic *Orlando Furioso* (1.2), which Ariosto in turn borrowed from Lucretius in his *De rerum natura* (1.925-30) of the first century BCE.

²See Bortolotti and Hutcheon for an analysis of homologies between biological and literary adaptation and an argument for judging adaptations not by fidelity to an original but by ability to thrive in new cultural contexts.

³See also 4.268-71 and 4.272-74.

⁴A measure of the delicacy of this balance is Richard Bentley’s misunderstanding and disastrous rewriting of these lines at the end of his edition of *Paradise Lost*: “THEN hand in hand with SOCIAL steps their way / Through Eden took, WITH HEAV’NLY COMFORT CHEER’D” (12.650-51).

⁵For a deeply illuminating argument that Wordsworth’s mature philosophic perspective is indebted to Milton and to Kant’s reading of Milton, see Sanford Budick, “Acts of Meditative Mind in ‘The Ruined Cottage.’”

⁶I am grateful to Sanford Budick, John Sitter, and Henry Weinfield, whose comments resulted in an improved paper.

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