On the Textual History of *The Prelude* (AL)

We have seen this week that Wordsworth's long autobiographical poem *The Prelude* has a complex textual history: there are three main, substantially different versions of the poem (the 1798-99 version, the 1805 version, and the 1850 version), spread across twenty-four surviving manuscripts, and Wordsworth, an inveterate reviser, worked on the poem, writing and rewriting, for over forty years. As Jeff Cowton points out in the first of this week's videos, *The Prelude* grows and changes as Wordsworth grew and his ideas and vision of the poem changed. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who collaborated with Wordsworth on *Lyrical Ballads*, is an important presence; prior to its first publication in 1850 under the title (chosen by Wordsworth's wife, Mary) '*The Prelude*', the poem was referred to in the Wordsworth circle under the working title 'the poem to Coleridge'. It is Coleridge whom Wordsworth addresses directly in the 1798-99 version as 'my friend who knows me'; in the 1805 version, he is referred to directly (e.g. 'With such a theme / Coleridge – with this my argument – of thee / Shall I be silent? O most loving soul…'); in the 1850 version, he remains, even in spite of the fact that his and Wordsworth's relationship had effectively broken down long before Coleridge's death in 1834. It was Coleridge who initially encouraged Wordsworth to write 'a philosophical Poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society; and to be entitled, The Recluse' (Wordsworth's Preface to *The Excursion*, 1814). As the Advertisement to the 1850 *Prelude* states, 'the present Poem [*The Prelude*] was intended to be introductory to the Recluse, and […] the Recluse, if completed, would have consisted of Three Parts. Of these, the Second Part alone, […] the Excursion, was finished, and given to the world by the Author'. The challenge set by Coleridge, who thought Wordsworth was fitted to the task, clearly proved too great, and *The Recluse* project (which had frustrated Wordsworth from the outset: 'Was it for this?') gradually stalled (were the themes of 'Man, Nature, and Society' simply too grand, too overwhelming, especially in a period of rapid sociocultural change in Britain?). In reading the 'preparatory Poem' *The*

Prelude, a work described as being 'biographical, and conduct[ing] 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 [of writing *The Recluse*]' (Preface to *The Excursion*), we gain a rich and fascinating insight into, as the 1850 subtitle proclaims, the 'growth of a poet's mind'. In appreciating the various revisions Wordsworth made to *The Prelude* throughout his life, we also gain a valuable insight into how Wordsworth responded to the pressures of trying to write the never-realised *Recluse*: in the face of difficulty, he revisited and gave serious attention to what he *had* managed to write, even in spite of the fact that his vision of what *The Prelude* was to be (part of the larger *Recluse* project) had changed. In my view, that *The Recluse* remained unfinished does not really matter; working on the project created the conditions to produce one of the first and finest works of poetic autobiography that we have.

On the 'Spots of Time' (AL)

In the 1798-99 *Prelude*, Wordsworth writes:

> There are in our existence spots of time
> Which with distinct preeminence retain
> A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed
> By trivial occupations and the round
> Of ordinary intercourse, our minds –
> Especially the imaginative power –
> Are nourished and invisibly repaired;
> Such moments chiefly seem to have their date
> In our first childhood.

In the 1805 version of the poem, Wordsworth expands on the idea:

> There are in our existence spots of time,
> Which with distinct preeminence retain
> A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
> By false opinion and contentious thought,
> Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight
> In trivial occupations and the round
> Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
> Are nourished, and invisibly repaired –
> A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
> That penetrates, enables us to mount
> When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.
> This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
> Among those passages of life in which
> We have had deepest feeling that the mind
> Is lord and master, and that outward sense
> Is but the obedient servant of her will.
> Such moments, worthy of all gratitude,
> Are scattered everywhere, taking their date
> From our first childhood – in our childhood even
> Perhaps are most conspicuous.

The childhood ‘spots of time’ that Wordsworth immediately evokes after both extracts – firstly, becoming separated from ‘honest James’, his guide, while out riding, before coming across a gibbet mast (gallows) and a girl carrying a pitcher on her head who is struggling to walk in the wind, and, secondly, waiting for the horses that will take him home from school for the Christmas holidays – describe fairly mundane events; Wordsworth even admits of the first ‘spot’ that ‘It was, in truth, / An ordinary sight’. Yet they are both, Wordsworth later affirms in the 1805 *Prelude*, ‘to [him] affecting incidents’. Both ‘spots’ are remembered in fine detail: in Wordsworth’s memory, he recalls, of the gibbet mast ‘spot’, that the girl’s ‘garments [were] vexed and tossed / By the strong wind’, and, of the waiting for horses ‘spot’, that he was ‘sate half sheltered by a naked wall. / Upon my right hand was a single sheep, / A whistling hawthorn on my left’. In both cases, Wordsworth remembers being in vast, open spaces (a ‘bare common’ in the first ‘spot’, and the ‘highest spot’ of ‘a crag / An eminence’ in the second), yet, also in both cases, he remains capable, years later, of describing the very minutiae of what he observed there, now deeply impressed on his memory. Recalling these and similar ‘spots of time’ ‘nourishes’ and ‘repairs’ the mind in both *Preludes*; quite how this process works remains open to interpretation. What is apparent, though, is that replaying these past incidents in mind, and visualising them again in the present with as much ease as if they were recent events, reminds us of the extraordinary facility of memory, of the capacity of what Wordsworth elsewhere calls the ‘inward eye’ to see (or, rather, to see and see again) with astonishing clarity that which has passed away but, nevertheless, retains a mysterious significance to us and us alone.