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The Prelude
and Other Poems

The Prelude*

Advertisement

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. 1., p. 206.

– Rydal Mount,
July 13th, 1850

Book First

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 10
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 20
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? 30

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, 40
 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 50
 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 60
 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 70
 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, 80
 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, 90
 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?" 100
 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 110
 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 120
 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 130
 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 140
 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 150
 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 – 160
 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 170
 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 180
 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 190
 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 200
 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, 210
 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. 220
 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, 230
 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 mellow 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, 240
 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 250
 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. 260
 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 270
 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 280
 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, 290
 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. 300

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 310
 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 320
 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 330
 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 340
 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! 350
 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, 360
 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, 370
 The horizon's utmost boundary: far above
 Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
 She was an elfin pinnacle. 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, 380
 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 390
 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. 400

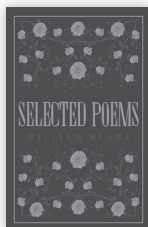
Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!
 Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought,
 That givest to forms and images a breath
 And everlasting motion, not in vain
 By day or starlight thus from my first dawn
 Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me
 The passions that build up our human soul;
 Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,
 But with high objects, with enduring things,
 With life and nature, purifying thus 410
 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, 420
 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.

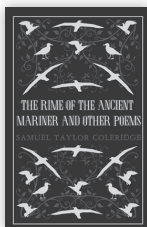
And in the frosty season, when the sun
 Was set and, visible for many a mile,
 The cottage windows blazed through twilight gloom,
 I heeded not their summons: happy time
 It was indeed for all of us – for me 430
 It was a time of rapture! Clear and loud
 The village clock tolled six. I wheeled about,
 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; 440
 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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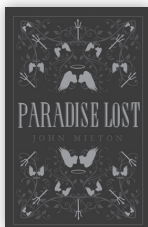
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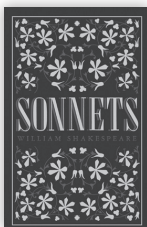
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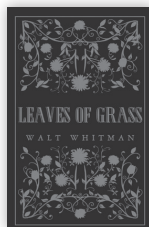
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- 421 Nikolai Gogol, *The Government Inspector*
- 422 Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*
- 423 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Politics and Literature*
- 424 Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*
- 425 Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*
- 426 Frances Hodgson Burnett, *A Little Princess*
- 427 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*
- 428 Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*
- 429 Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Vindications*
- 430 Anonymous, *The Song of Roland*
- 431 Edward Lear, *The Owl and the Pussycat and Other Nonsense Poetry*
- 432 Anton Chekhov, *Three Years*
- 433 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Uncle's Dream*