

Chapter 1

The Prelude: Prophetic Aspirations

Revisited

No other poem of Wordsworth's can voice his prophetic aspirations, self-doubt, affirmation and struggle more intensely than *The Prelude*. The Cornell edition of the poem calls it *Poem (Title Not Yet Fixed upon) by William Wordsworth Addressed to S. T. Coleridge*, because Wordsworth himself did not give the poem a specific name. It was the poet's wife Mary Wordsworth who named it *The Prelude, or, Growth of a Poet's Mind* in the posthumous publishing of the poem in 1850 in fourteen books. A work in progress during the poet's life-time, the poem went through multiple revisions and thus manuscript studies on it have always been an area of interest. Scholars generally agree on five reading versions, a two-book version in 1799, a five-book version of early spring 1805, two thirteen-book versions in 1805 and 1820, and a fourteen-book version in 1850. In 1926, Ernest de Selincourt edited and published a critical edition of *The Prelude* with the 1805 version and the 1850 version on facing pages. He then published the thirteen-book 1805 version in 1933. Both were revised and republished by Helen Darbishire, respectively in 1959 and 1960, the latter made into a second edition by Stephen Gill in 1970. The Penguin edition of *The Prelude* by J. C. Maxwell was published in 1971 containing both 1805 and 1850 texts. The Norton edition published in 1979 presents the 1799, 1805 and 1850 versions, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill. A significant contribution of the Norton edition was to provide a scholarly 1799 version of the poem, alerting readers and critics to the fact that *The*

Prelude, as a work in progress, had undergone through significant revisions. The definitive editions of *The Prelude* widely-used come from Cornell University Press which published the poem's different variations, including in 1977, *The Prelude, 1798-1799*, edited by S. M. Parrish, *The Fourteen-book Prelude* in 1985 edited by W. J. B. Owen, and the two-volume *The Thirteen-book Prelude* in 1991 edited by Mark Reed. Reed provides two reading texts: Volume I presents stage AB version based on the first two fair copies of the poem made in late 1805 and early 1806 by Dorothy Wordsworth between November and February (Dove Cottage MS. 52; *Prelude* Ms. A) and by Mary Wordsworth between December and February (Dove Cottage MS. 53; *Prelude* Ms. B); Volume II presents stage C version made between 1818 and 1820 which is incomplete and often unreliable. Quotations in this chapter, if not otherwise specified, are taken from Volume I, stage AB reading text, because it is the first complete version and most relevant to our discussion.

Much has been said about *The Prelude* to the extent that the study of Wordsworth nowadays cannot leave out this important poem. Various literary investigations have been carried out to elucidate the poem, however, as explained in the introduction, the prophetic was noticed and acknowledged only as a garnish but never a main course. Discussions would mention the prophetic but then quickly shift to other topics. An example is M. H. Abrams' renowned book *Natural Supernaturalism*. Simply put, Abrams acknowledges Wordsworth's invocation of the prophetic spirit, but his focus is to establish a redemption model in the romantic poetry. In this model, the alienation from nature and fellow men is compared to the fall of humanity, and the redemptive power lies in imagination. The prophetic is discussed for its own merit in Hartman's essay 'The Poetics of Prophecy' first published in 1981 and later included in *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* in 1987. Hartman examines two 'spots of time' in *The Prelude*: one is the episode of awaiting horses to ride home days before the death of the poet's father and the other climbing Mount Snowdon. He argues that a poetics of prophecy can be applied to Wordsworth's

poetry, shown as voice and vision in the form of a ‘blast of harmony’.¹ He then unfolds tension in the ‘blast of harmony’ in Jeremiah by closely examining how the pressures are reconciled on the textual level, the pressure of prophets offering a ‘timely utterance’ and the contradictions within the utterance seen as an event. Hartman’s discussion poses some interesting questions. He admits that the relationship between poetics and the prophetic is complicated, hard to be accommodated, and open to unresolved questions. Curiously enough, later Wordsworth scholars seem not to have picked up on Hartman’s suggestion of treating the prophetic in Wordsworth as a proper subject. Even Ian Balfour’s much acclaimed book does not do so. The second part of *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* deals with the prophetic in the poems of Blake and Hölderlin, but not Wordsworth. In light of this, this chapter will further Hartman’s findings and demonstrate that a new interpretation of the prophetic can be made by disclosing the complexity of the poet’s prophetic aspirations in relation to his identity-building. The prophetic is more than an aura or a feature. It is a mode of Wordsworth’s self-fashioning.

1.1 ‘Something unseen before’ and ‘a mighty scheme of truth’: Poet and prophet compared

The Prelude traces the poet’s personal development, various influences that helped to shape his mind—literature, politics, philosophy, and also the crisis of belief he experienced. Eventually, it presents a narrative of the growth of his mind. Along with the growth of mind, there is also a growth of the poet’s sense of identity, first and foremost, as a prophetic poet. Wordsworth explicitly speaks of his aspiration to be a prophet in Book XII.

...Dearest Friend,
Forgive me if I say that I, who long

¹ Geoffrey Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*, pp. 163-181. Detailed accounts can be found in section 1 in Introduction.

Had harbour'd reverentially a thought
 That Poets, even as Prophets, each with each
 Connected in a *mighty scheme of truth*,
 Have each for his peculiar dower a sense
 By which he is enabled to perceive
Something unseen before: forgive me, Friend,
 If I, the meanest of this Band, had hope
 That unto me had also been vouchsafed
 An influx, that in some sort I possess'd
 A privilege, and that a work of mine,
 Proceeding from the depth of untaught things,
 Enduring and creative, might become
 A power like one of Nature's...
 (*The Prelude*, 1805, XII, 298-312)¹

As the Introduction tries to demonstrate, the concept of 'prophet' should be considered in broader terms as someone proclaiming the truth. Prophets are of different kinds. The word can refer to the ancient Greek oracles, or biblical prophets, or what Wordsworth tries to establish in *The Prelude*—prophets of nature.

Balfour claims that the analogy between a poet and a prophet is made hypothetically,² but this book will argue that the use of subjunctive mode 'if' is false modesty. Such an analogy is firmly grounded in Wordsworth's belief that poets and prophets share some fundamental qualities. First, they both possess the ability to see things that others cannot see (seer is indeed another name for prophet in the Old Testament). For Wordsworth, the poet possesses 'more than

1 William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude, Volume I*, ed. by Mark L. Reed (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 311. Unless specified, quotations from *The Prelude* in this chapter are all from the 1805 version, reproduced as the stage AB reading text by Mark Reed in the Cornell *Thirteenth-Book Prelude*. Italics mine.

2 Ian Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, p. 23.

usual organic sensibility' and can see 'something unseen before'.¹ Second, they are both concerned with disclosing truth. God's words are the prophet's truth, the Delphic oracle discloses Apollo's intention, whereas poets reveal truth in that 'something unseen before'. Each one sees something of the truth, thus, they become interlinked and form a 'mighty scheme of truth'. Third, both poets and prophets, having perceived part of the truth, seek to impart it. Biblical prophets speak to the nation, the Delphic oracle speaks to those who consult it, while poets speak to their readers.

Wordsworth adopts the concept of prophet and transplants it into his poetic scheme. In his system, the poet takes the place of the prophet, while nature takes the place of God in the Hebrew Bible and of the Greeks gods. For a clear and concise comparison, even if at the risk of being too simplistic, the Delphic oracle is dedicated to Apollo, the biblical prophets see themselves as mouthpieces of God, and Wordsworth sees poets as the messengers of nature, or one might say that Apollo speaks through the Delphic oracle, God speaks through biblical prophets, and nature speaks through poets like Wordsworth.

Such design is bottom up instead of top down. Wordsworth is concerned with the figure of the prophetic poet who turns to nature in search of his divine inspiration. This partly explains the problematic pantheist tendency in his poems as noticed by scholars of previous generations. However, the truth perhaps is that Wordsworth does not give nature much thought in ontological terms. It is simply a given. He is concerned with what nature does rather than what nature is. Nature to a poet is God to biblical prophets or gods to classical prophets. As prophets of nature, just like prophets of God and of Apollo, poets aim to teach and to instruct.

Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak
A lasting *inspiration*, sanctified
By reason and by truth: what we have loved

¹ 'More than usual organic sensibility'. See William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. by James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 744.

Others will love; and we may *teach them* how,
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this Frame of things
(Which 'mid all revolutions in the hopes
And fears of men doth still remain unchanged)
In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of substance and of fabric more divine.
(XIII, 442-452)

Similar to the prophets, the poet has the responsibility to instruct and to teach, and more specifically, to teach about the magnificence, beauty and divinity of the human mind. Wordsworth feels compelled to justify his claim that he is fit for such responsibility by presenting an initiation story in which he examines various forces—political, literary, and historical, as well as their effects on the cultivation of his mind. In doing so, he also makes his own mind as an example of the human mind at work, a subject for experiment and exploration. *The Prelude* kills two birds with one stone. It aims to prove the poet's capability to write in order to teach on the complexity of the human mind, and it does so by showing the complexity of one particular specimen: his own mind.

1.2 'A chosen son' yet 'so much wanting': Aspiration and struggle

Although forcefully put forward in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's aspiration and claim to be a prophet of nature are not proposed as simply given. It is through experiencing hope, joy, self-doubt and disillusion at various turns of fortunes that the poet reaffirms himself. This process resembles the experience of biblical prophets in the Old Testament. Several distinctive features of the Old Testament prophets are shared by the speaker in *The Prelude*, including the need to answer their prophetic calling, resistance to such calling, emotional

tensions in the process, experiencing voice and vision, as well as concerns with nation and justice.

Widely existing among the Old Testament prophets is the claim of prophetic calling, but equally common is the resistance to that calling. For instance, the Lord reveals himself in a burning bush to Moses and commands him to lead the Israelites out of the land of oppression (Exodus 3.1-3.12).¹ Yet, Moses is afraid that people would not believe him and he pleads the Lord to send someone else (Exodus 4.1-4.13). Similarly, Jeremiah is ordered to be a prophet by the Lord (Jeremiah 1.4-1.5), but he resists, claiming that he is a child and thus could not speak (Jeremiah 1.6). There is also Jonah who flees from the Lord (Jonah 1.3), and Ezekiel who protests against God's wrath and pleads to end the torment soon (Ezekiel 9.8; 11.13). The emotional tension Ezekiel experiences is common among biblical prophets who are always on the verge of being torn while they preach the message and behold tormenting visions. Jeremiah confesses that he is seen as a traitor and mocked (Jeremiah 20.7-20.8), and thus is an inch away from surrender. Hosea experiences a mixture of anger and tenderness towards Israel (Hosea 4.1-3). Isaiah, upon seeing the vision, describes the anguish he experiences 'as the pangs of a woman that travaileth' (Isaiah 21.3).

It is no secret that Biblical prophets usually receive divine messages through vision and voice. They often claim to behold a miraculous scene which the Lord has meant them to see and hear voices telling them what to do. Examples are Amos, Obadiah, Zechariah and Ezekiel among others. The messages delivered often carry a profound concern with the nation, involving attacks on the follies of the day and judgement from God. For instance, the Book of Isaiah starts with a condemnation of the nation and proceeds to an apocalypse with volcanic upheavals and earthquakes (Isaiah 24.1), the fall of Babylon and the return of the exiles to Jerusalem. Opening with the

¹ The Bible used in this book is the King James Version, which would have been familiar to Wordsworth. *The Bible, Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*, ed. by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

denunciation of a rebellious Israel, the Book of Ezekiel goes on to oracles against foreign nations, the Ammonites, the people of Tyre, and Egypt. In the Book of Amos, refusing to listen to the prophet's teaching is arrogance and will provoke God's anger and vengeance (Amos 2.12-2.16). Actions showing idolatry are seen as betrayal. Those turning their back on the Lord and worshipping other gods would be punished in Zephaniah (Zephaniah 1.6-1.9).

Faced with these follies, biblical prophets appeal to justice. They put faith in God, picturing the punishment of the sinful nation which restores justice to the human world. Isaiah 56.1, Jeremiah 11.20; 12.1, Habakkuk 1.3; 3.8, and Malachi 2.17; 3.14 are all good examples. Even if this cannot be achieved at the time being, there is still hope of future restoration. Almost one third of the Book of Ezekiel is taken up by a blueprint of the restoration of the people of the Lord (Ezekiel 33-48). In Hosea, the prophet expects a return from the long exile and reconstruction of the society (Hosea 11.11). The hope of future restoration also appears in the Book of Amos (Amos 9.14).

Almost all the aforementioned features shared among the Old Testament prophets find an echo in *The Prelude*, but in varying degrees. Most prominent are the first two features, the prophetic calling and the emotional tension. Visions and national concerns will appear later in the discussion of *Lyrical Ballads* and 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' where they are more explicitly shown than in *The Prelude*.

For a start, the sense of prophetic calling in the biblical prophets is translated into a sense of being chosen in *The Prelude*. Early in the poem, the poet rejoices in his childhood and school-time memories. He makes nature his playground, wandering in the woods and the hills, bathing in the river, and plundering bird nests. It is a carefree time full of joy and happiness. He is convinced that nature favours him and provides a shaping hand.

...But I believe
That Nature, oftentimes, when she would frame
A favor'd Being, from his earliest dawn

Of infancy doth open out the clouds,
 As at the touch of lightning, seeking him
 With gentlest visitation: not the less,
 Though haply aiming at the self-same end,
 Does it delight her sometimes to employ
 Severer interventions, ministry
 More palpable, and so *she dealt with me*.
 (I, 363-372)

These are interesting images and emotions. Light going through clouds and reaching the ground is a fairly common image in religious paintings. Rubens' 'The Conversion of St. Paul' (1620s) shows Christ up in the clouds radiating lights that shine on St. Paul who has fallen off his horse and is lying on the ground. Benjamin West used the similar concept in 'Joshua Passing the River Jordan with the Ark of the Covenant' (1800), in which the light serves as guidance. Light through clouds also appears in some apocalyptic paintings, such as Francis Danby's 'The Opening of the Sixth Seal' (1828) in which a beam of light goes through the rock. Wordsworth's light through clouds here seems to be calm and gentle, but not without a sense of the supernatural at work.

There is a hint of fear in such favour. 'I grew up / Foster'd alike by beauty and by fear' (I, 306-307). Nature does not only bestow a carefree childhood upon him, but also employs 'severer interventions.' Wordsworth continues with the boat-stealing episode. The boy Wordsworth stole a boat and while rowing it, he found the mountains behind him fearful in their unknowable dark forms. This fear troubled his sleep for several days. Jonathan Wordsworth in *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision* (1982) regards the fear of unknowable forms as one of the borderline experiences, '...the child had approached that borderline of human experience at which sounds of undistinguishable motion can be heard and the supernatural apprehended—whether it is present or not.'¹

1 Jonathan Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 44.

Severer interventions from nature than the boat-stealing episode gradually unfold. The poet experienced a hard time at Cambridge. As Stephen Gill's investigation in *William Wordsworth: A Life* shows, the poet did not do well academically, only graduating with a pass.¹ Wordsworth confesses that for someone who came from the northern village, 'a northern Villager', 'a mountain Youth' (III, 32-33), he was not fit for the manner of life at Cambridge. Here is his description of that experience: 'to myself I seem'd / A man of business and expense' (III, 23-24), and 'From street to street, with loose and careless heart. / I was the Dreamer, they the Dream' (III, 27-28). Not only was the manner of life at Cambridge overwhelming, but also, he did not find scholarship in academia particularly interesting. He felt misled by the nature of classic scholarship of his time which prized verse in Latin and Greek, something he described as:

...overpriz'd
And dangerous craft of picking phrases out
From languages that want the living voice
To make of them a nature to the heart, ...
(VI, 129-132)

Coleridge in Chapter 1 of *Biographia Literaria* addresses this problem of borrowing words and phrases from classical poets to express one's own idea, even though Latin was almost a dead language.

...Whatever might have been the case in the fifteenth century, when the use of the Latin tongue was so general among learned men, that Erasmus is said to have forgotten his native language; yet in the present day it is not to be supposed, that a youth can think in Latin, or that he can have any other reliance on the force or fitness of his phrases, but the authority of the author from whence he has adopted them. Consequently he must first prepare his thoughts, and then pick out, from Virgil, Horace, Ovid, or perhaps more compendiously from

¹ Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 38-44.

his Gradus, halves and quarters of lines, in which to embody them.¹

Wordsworth thinks this craft endangers scholars, both young and old, because it lacks vitality and does not possess the power to enlighten. It fails ‘To tell us what is passion, what is truth, / What reason, what simplicity and sense.’ (VI, 133-134)

Under such circumstances, Wordsworth developed the feeling that he was ‘not for that hour, / Nor for that place’ (III, 80-81). Yet, he quickly recovered from the thought and reaffirmed himself by addressing his sense of being favoured, as a ‘chosen Son’.

...But wherefore be cast down?
Why should I grieve? *I was a chosen Son.*
For hither I had come with *holy powers*
And faculties, whether to work or feel:
To apprehend all passions and all moods
Which time, and place, and season do impress
Upon the visible universe; and work
Like changes there by force of my own mind.
(III, 81-88)

The word ‘chosen’ suggests the poet’s belief that similar to the prophets selected by God or gods, he was specially chosen by nature which endowed him with ‘holy powers / And faculties’. The mind possessing such holy powers enabled him to feel and to apprehend.

This sense of being chosen continued from the Cambridge years to his residence in London. Wordsworth calls London the ‘great city’. His description of entering London in Book VIII is rich in religious references. The poet sat ‘On the Roof / Of an itinerant Vehicle...’ (VIII, 693-694) and saw the buzzing city life, full of ‘vulgar men’, ‘vulgar forms’ (695) and ‘Mean shapes’ (697). At this exact

¹ S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 21.

moment, he experienced something mysterious and divine, 'A weight of Ages did at once descend / Upon my heart' (703-704). He could not think but feel, because there was 'no thought embodied, no / Distinct remembrances; but weight and power, / Power, growing with the weight' (704-706). Wordsworth perhaps was awed, even overwhelmed by the magnificence of the city of London as a living reminder of the long history that had produced it and was still continuing.

...alas! I feel
 That I am trifling: 'twas a moment's pause,
 All that took place within me, came and went
 As in a moment, and I only now
 Remember that it was a thing divine.
 (VIII, 706-710)

This particular episode of entering the great city London reminds readers of Jesus entering the great city Jerusalem (John 12. 12-19). The crowd greeting Jesus were 'vulgar shapes'. Wordsworth adopts the image and transforms it in the street scene in London. The great city of London is compared to the great city Jerusalem. There is also a similar sense of retrospection in both: when Jesus sat on a donkey, the disciples did not know what was going on initially. 'These things understood not his disciples at the first' (John 12. 16). Likewise, Wordsworth did not know what he experienced at first either. Only years after that moment, did he 'Remember that it was a thing divine' (710).

The phrase 'the great city' also reminds us of the opening of *The Prelude* when Wordsworth, having escaped from this great city, feels that he can now think about his future. He does so in a way that echoes *Paradise Lost*, as suggested by the Norton critical edition of *The Prelude*.¹ The opening of *The Prelude* picks up where *Paradise Lost* ends.

The World was all before them, where to choose

1 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. by Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), p. 28, note 3.

Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.
(*Paradise Lost*, XII, 646-649)¹

‘The World was all before them’ and with ‘Providence their guide’, Adam and Eve exited from Paradise. They obtained a new freedom with all the possibilities ahead. At the beginning of *The Prelude*, the poet sees himself as the captive in the city who has recently been set free. With a joyful heart, he questions himself where to choose his ‘place of rest’.

What dwelling shall receive me? In what Vale
Shall be my harbour? Underneath what grove
Shall I take up my home, and what sweet stream
Shall with its murmurs lull me to my rest?
The earth is all before me: ...
(I, 11-15)

Exiting from Paradise marks the beginning of human history, while exiting from the great city marks the beginning of Wordsworth’s poetic career to come. However, what the Norton critical edition does not highlight is the aspirations following this echo of *Paradise Lost*. The speaker gets out of the great city with a mission. He must prophesy, for prophecy in poetic form flows into him:

...to the open fields I told
A prophecy: poetic numbers came
Spontaneously, and cloth’d in priestly robe
My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem,
For holy services: ...
(I, 59-63)

¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 317.

Wordsworth is not shy in putting forward his sense of being chosen to prophesy as seen in the line 'poetic numbers came / Spontaneously'. 'Poetic numbers came' echoes Alexander Pope in *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, 'I lisp'd in Numbers, for the Numbers came' (128) and further confirms Wordsworth's poetic ambitions.¹ He is 'singled out' for 'holy services'. This claim provides *The Prelude* with a strong opening. By suggesting that something beyond the secular world is at work, it also gives the poem certain sublimity.

Much the same as the biblical prophets who struggled to answer the prophetic calling and also had problems in finding language appropriate to their calling, the poet exhibits a similar difficulty in living up to his aspirations. He feels incapable of doing so: '... 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...' (I, 264-268). Although endowed with 'holy powers and faculties', he feels there is still 'so much wanting' in himself. The compulsion to fulfil his prophetic mission and the feeling of being incapable of doing so are at two ends of the spectrum. The struggle between these two builds up the tension and functions as a thread that holds *The Prelude* together. To a certain extent, the poem is about the poet's journey to combat such incapability in order to justify his talent as a poet.

The tension between the sense of being chosen and the feeling of not being capable of answering the calling can also be seen in moments of hesitation and uncertainty when he hopes that a mature age would elevate his mind and perfect his thoughts so he could fulfil his obligations as a poet. The act of postponing poetic production is also interwoven with Wordsworth's theory of the mind. For him, human minds interact with objects. These interactions might not have immediate impressions on the mind, but they are proven to be at work later at a maturer age: 'if haply they impress'd / Collateral objects and appearances, / Albeit lifeless then, and doom'd to sleep / Until maturer seasons call'd them forth / To impregnate and to elevate the mind.' (I, 621-625). A

1 Alexander Pope, *Alexander Pope: Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 341.

maturer age can recall thoughts generated in those early interactions and arm the mind with power. For Wordsworth, it is the power to produce.

...my hope has been that I might fetch
Invigorating thoughts from former years,
Might fix the wavering balance of my mind,
And haply meet reproaches, too, whose power
May spur me on, in manhood now mature,
To honorable toil. ...
(I, 649-654)

The 'honorable toil' for the moment is to bring out the story of his life for the purpose of demonstrating the power of the human mind. The expectation of delaying any poetic work until his maturity is repeated towards the end of the poem.

Of these, said I, shall be my Song, of these,
If future years mature me for the task,
Will I record the praises, making Verse
Deal boldly with substantial things, ...
(XII, 231-234)

Here, Wordsworth is wrapping up *The Prelude* after retracing his growth through childhood and life in Cambridge, London, as well as in France. We would naturally expect that the poet finally finds the confidence and reassurance he needs. Yet he does not. He still recoils from the task hoping that future years would bring him the maturity to produce appropriate verse. Thus, *The Prelude* forms a circle: it begins with aspiration, and with aspiration it finishes. However, it is not quite the same when the poem finishes, because tensions have been built up. Faced with his prophetic calling, the poet harbours a sense of inability and struggles to meet the demands.

Wordsworth's prophetic ambition and recoil from it mirror those of the Old Testament prophets, but at the same time, there is also a Hellenistic tendency in his use of the word 'prophet'. The figure Wordsworth aspires to be

is a prophet poet, and primarily a poet with prophetic quality. The relation between poets and prophets in Wordsworth was briefly discussed earlier in the Introduction, where the argument made is that poets and prophets are interlinked through the shared scheme of truth. Truth is what concerns them both, and teaching about truth links the two professions. The Delphic Oracle delivered divine messages in verse form, hence was both prophet and poet. Over time, the two professions grew apart. Wordsworth's use of prophet and poet has a tendency to bring the two back together. The poet's profession is uplifted through its association with prophets.

Apart from the biblical and the classical prophets, Wordsworth also looks up to the literary figure close to the prophet, the bard. There are four poets that he calls bard in *The Prelude*, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton and Thomson. 'And that gentle Bard, / Chosen by the Muses for their Page of State, / Sweet Spenser' (III, 279-281); '...that darling Bard / Who told of Juliet and her Romeo' (IX, 638-639); 'Time out of mind, honor'd by Milton's name; / The very shell reputed of the abode / Which he had tenanted. O temperate Bard!' (III, 297-299); '...the Bard who sang / Of the Enchanter Indolence hath call'd / "Good-natured lounging"' (VI, 200-202). The phrase 'Good-natured lounging' is from Thomson's 'The Castle of Indolence':

Here naught but candour reigns, indulgent ease,
 Good-natured lounging, sauntering up and down:
 They who are pleased themselves must always please;
 (Canto I, 127-129)¹

Wordsworth's admiration for these four poets is no secret, but what is worth noticing is that he often refers to them as bards. 'Bard' is not simply an archaic name given to poets. It highlights two distinctive features of this specific group of poets, the use of music and their concern with nation (which places the bard

¹ James Thomson, *The Complete Poetical Works of James Thomson*, ed. by H. Frowde (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908), p. 258.

close to the biblical prophets). Wordsworth's idea of the poet as the prophet of nature is further complicated by his invocation of the bardic figure. The bard is the Wordsworthian prophet-poet.

1.3 'The holy life of music and of verse': Assimilating the bardic tradition

The Oxford English Dictionary states that the word 'bard' comes from Celtic culture. 'An ancient Celtic order of minstrel-poets, whose primary function appears to have been to compose and sing (usually to the harp) verses celebrating the achievements of chiefs and warriors, and who committed to verse historical and traditional facts, religious precepts, laws, genealogies, etc.'¹ *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* gives the definition of the 'bard' as 'the current standard English definition of this Celtic word, as a poet of exalted status, i.e., the voice of a nation or people.'² In both Irish and Scottish Gaelic, this kind of poet is called 'bard' as well; the Welsh term is 'bardd'; in Greek, it is βάρδος (bārdos), referring specifically to the Celtic poets. Various forms of the word 'bard' indicate a shared bardic tradition among these cultures.

Historical records show that the bards had already been an established group as early as the time of Caesar. They were intricately linked with the Druids. In Chapter 13 to Chapter 20 of Book VI in *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (*Commentaries on the Gallic War*), Caesar gives a detailed description of the society of Gaul and the Druids' status within it which becomes an indispensable source for studies of the Druids. In these descriptions, the society of Gaul was divided into three classes, the King, land-owning freemen consisting of knights and Druids, and landless bondmen. The Druids were engaged in sacred things, conducting special rituals, settling controversies, and decreeing rewards or punishments. Succeeding generations of Druids were trained for this role. They

1 OED. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/15474?rskey=iF5ilD&result=1#eid>. Accessed 10 June, 2012.

2 James Mackillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 31-32.

were also exempted from wars. ‘Tempted by these great rewards, many young men assemble of their own motion to receive their training; many are sent by parents and relatives. Report says that in the schools of Druids they learn by heart a great number of verses, and therefore some persons remain twenty years under training.’¹

The indication of Druids being familiar with verses is strengthened by Strabo who observes in Book IV of *Geographica* that the Druids have intricate relations with the bards, with whom they share the same priesthood in Gaul. ‘Among all the Gallic peoples, generally speaking, there are three sets of men who are held in exceptional honour; the Bards, the Vates and the Druids. The Bards are singers and poets; the Vates, diviners and natural philosophers; while the Druids, in addition to natural philosophy, study also moral philosophy.’²

As singers and poets, the bards mostly celebrated the brave deeds of distinguished men. Ammianus Marcellinus suggests in his *Res Gestae* (literal meaning as ‘things having been done’, and translated as *Roman History*) that ‘the Bards sang to the sweet strains of the lyre the valorous deeds of famous men composed in heroic verse.’³ The Elizabethan poet Michael Drayton in his *Poly-Olbion* also writes ‘Ye sacred bards, that to your harps melodious strings / Sung th’ancient heroes deeds (the monuments of Kings)’ (1612, 31-32).⁴ Harp in hand and singing heroic deeds, bards are noted especially for their musical skills, also shown in the poetry itself. The earliest Gaelic poetry used a less fixed word order and alliterations, and was deliberately obscure. Later in the 7th century, rhyme was introduced and the basic principle was to divide the lines

1 Caesar, *The Gallic War*, trans. by H. J. Edwards (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: William Heinemann Ltd & Harvard University Press, 1917), Book VI, Chapter 13, pp. 337-339.

2 Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. by Horace Leonard Jones (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: William Heinemann Ltd & Harvard University Press, 1923), p. 245.

3 Ammianus Marcellinus, *Ammianus Marcellinus*, trans. by John C. Rolfe (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: William Heinemann Ltd & Harvard University Press, 1935), Book XV, Chapter IX, 8, pp. 179-180.

4 Michael Drayton, Thomas Carew, et al, *A Complete Edition of the Poets of Great Britain, Volume the Third, Containing Drayton, Carew and Suckling* (London: Printed for John & Arthur Arch, 23 Gracechurch Street. and for Bell & Bradfute & I. Mundell & Company, Edinburgh., 1793), p. 240.

according to syllables. A variety of stanza types were invented based on the number of lines, the length of each, and the rhyme-scheme. One of the simplest and most commonly used form is the *debide*, a quatrain with seven syllables in each line, and the rhyme-scheme is aabb.¹ It should be noted that unlike epic poetry, these poems are usually short and designed to be sung with the harp, although virtually none of the music that accompanied to them survived.

The tradition of the bards in Gaul was preserved and continued in Wales and Ireland. In early Ireland, two classes of poets were distinctive, the *fili* and the *baird*, the former learned and the latter less so. The highest among *fili* was the *Ollam*. It is said that mastering over 350 stories and 12 years of study were required to become an *Ollam*.² The Norse invasions from the 8th century gradually destroyed distinctions between the *fili* and the *baird*, but training for such vocations continued until the 17th century. Bards in Wales enjoyed an even higher position than those in Ireland. *Cynfeirdd*, meaning early or original poets, was a name given to the poets who sing in Welsh. Five of the earliest bards renowned in the 6th century were Talhaearn, Blwchfardd, Aneirin, Taliesin and Cian. Welsh manuscripts of only two of them survived, known as *The Book of Taliesin* and *The Book of Aneirin*.³ Tennyson in his *Idylls of the King* briefly mentions Taliesin with a slightly different spelling Taliessin. ‘Taliessin is our fullest throat of song, / And one hath sung and all the dumb will sing’ (‘The Holy Grail’, 300-301).⁴

The bardic tradition in Wales was prominent for six centuries from the sixth to the 12th century, before the legendary massacre of the bards under the rule of King Edward I in the late 13th century. It was said that during the turbulent years of the Welsh war, King Edward I transported Welsh bards to

1 For a brief overview of early Gaelic poetry, please refer, ‘Verse’, entry under ‘Gaelic Literature’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/art/Celtic-literature/Verse>, accessed 6 January, 2014.

2 Matthieu Boyd, Preface in *Ollam: Studies in Gaelic and Related Tradition in Honor of Tomás Ó Cathasaigh*, ed. Matthieu Boyd (Vancouver: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016), pp. xiii-xvii (xiii).

3 For further information, please refer to A. O. H. Jarman, *The Cynfeirdd: Early Welsh Poets and Poetry* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1981)

4 Lord Alfred Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, ed. by J. M. Gray (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 214.

England with the intention of hearing them sing. The bards refused to sing for the Saxon invader, hung up their harps and remained silent. This angered the King, leading to a subsequent massacre of 500 Welsh bards, which was addressed by Thomas Gray in his *The Bard* (1757) (how Gray's *The Bard* is relevant to our reading of Wordsworth, especially in terms of his national concerns, will be discussed later in Chapter 5). In Gray's poem, the bard is cloaked in a robe, his beard loose, his hair blowing in the wind, harp in hand, with a zealous yet sorrowful air. 'Robed in the sable garb of woe, / With haggard eyes the Poet stood; / (Loose his beard, and hoary hair / Stream'd, like a meteor, to the troubled air) / And with a Master's hand, and Prophet's fire, / Struck the deep sorrows of his lyre' (l.2, 16-22)¹. This vivid and informative description of a bard drew attention from artists and several paintings of 'the bard' were modelled on it, including those by Thomas Jones (1774), by Benjamin West (1778), and by William Blake (1809). More than a decade before his tempera painting of the bard, Blake had already shown his interest in bards in the opening of *Songs of Experience* (1793). 'Hear the voice of the Bard! / Who Present, Past, & Future sees / Whose ears have heard, / The Holy Word, / That walk'd among the ancient trees' ('Introduction', 1-5)².

Gray, Blake and painters like Jones were not the only ones who were keen on the bardic tradition five centuries after its heyday. In fact, the second half of the 18th century witnessed a bardic revival. James Macpherson published *Poems of Ossian* (1760-1765), a collection of poems he claimed to be translations from ancient Scottish Gaelic manuscripts. The controversy over whether the poems were really translated from the original manuscripts, or whether Macpherson simply wrote them himself, lasted for nearly half a

1 Thomas Gray, *The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray*, ed. by H. W. Starr and J. R. Hendrickson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 19.

2 William Blake, *William Blake, The Complete Poems*, ed. by Alicia Ostriker (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 30.

century but never reached an agreement.¹ Nevertheless, the interests in the bard became more and more noticeable. Thomas Percy, later Bishop of Dromore, published a collection of ballads and popular songs entitled *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). Evan Evans devoted himself into the study of Welsh literature, collecting and transcribing Welsh poetry. His *Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Ancient Welsh Bards* came out in 1764. In 1784, Edward Jones' *Musical and Poetical Relics of the Welsh Bards* was published. Five years later, Charlotte Brooke published *Reliques of Irish Poetry*. Brooke's title resembles Percy's, but her collection provides the Gaelic original to show that there were genuine sources to the translations. Edward Williams, best-known as Iolo Morganwg, a poet with a special interest in Druidism and the bard, collaborated with Owen Jones and W. O. Pughe on a selection of medieval Welsh literature under the name *The Myvyrian Archaiology of Wales* (1801-1807).

Both Edward Jones and Edward Williams were present at the congregation of Welsh bards in September, 1792, recorded by *The Gentleman's Magazine*. A group of Welsh bards residing in London gathered on Primrose Hill and performed a ritual, in which a circle of stones was formed as an altar. Two odes on the Bardic discipline and Bardic mythology were recited separately by David Samwell and Edward Williams. Earlier that year in July, Ireland was celebrating its own bardic tradition by holding the 'Belfast Harp' Festival'.

There are various traces of Wordsworth's awareness and interaction with the 18th-century bardic revival. *Memoir of William Wordsworth* records that when attending the Hawkshead Grammar school, he was often found 'either alone, or with a favourite companion, repeating aloud beautiful passage from Thomson's *Seasons*.'² In a letter to Allan Cunningham, editor of the four-volume work *The Songs of Scotland, Ancient and Modern* (1769), Wordsworth confesses

1 Regardless of the debate on its authenticity, modern scholarship has rediscovered the merits of Macpherson's work and its importance to the Scottish Romanticism. See Fiona Stafford, 'Scottish Romanticism and Scotland in Romanticism', in *A Companion to European Romanticism*, ed. by Michael Ferber (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 49-66.

2 Christopher Wordsworth, 'Memoir of William Wordsworth', in *The New Monthly Magazine and Universal Register*, ed. by A. A. Watts, Vol 11 (1819), pp. 48-50.

that ‘I have been indebted to the North for more than I shall ever be able to acknowledge. Thomson, Mickle, Armstrong, Leyden, yourself, Irving (a poet in *spirit*), and I may add Sir Walter Scott were all Borderers.’¹ In the same letter, he also talks about Macpherson’s *Poems of Ossian*, although he sees it as a fraud, claiming that he hopes the public taste has been improved ‘since the time when Macpherson’s frauds met with such dangerous success.’²

Macpherson’s success reflects the popularity of and interests in the bardic tradition and Wordsworth is no stranger to such tradition. Gravil in *Wordsworth’s Bardic Vocation, 1787-1842* explores the poet’s fascination with the ancient Druid bards. He argues that influenced by the social context of rehabilitation of Druidism during the 18th century, Wordsworth produced some of his best poems. For Wordsworth, the bards have a healing and connecting function. Their role is ‘to commune with the invisible world, and to assure the tribe that paradise can be the simple produce of the common day.’³ Like the Druidic bards who are poets of the tribe, Wordsworth finds himself defending the common people as early as in poems written in 1790s (Part 2 of Gravil’s book). In depicting the minstrel figures and shadowy survivors such as Lucy, the discharged soldier, and the leech-gatherer, Wordsworth is ‘reconfiguring the tribal past to reflect a more pacific, milder future’⁴ (Part 3). Part 4 of the book further demonstrates the complexity of Wordsworth’s bardic vocation by investigating the poet’s several sets of two consciousness at work, for instance man writing and child experiencing, the poet’s desire of change versus his dread of change, and his pagan belief confronted by his Christian belief.

Gravil’s book supplies us with an interesting angle to see Wordsworth in the light of the bardic tradition, but his focus is largely on the poet’s tribal or national concern when he claims ‘To Wordsworth a bard is one who urges upon

1 LY, I, p. 402.

2 Ibid., p. 402.

3 Richard Gravil, *Wordsworth’s Bardic Vocation 1787-1842*, p. 29.

4 Richard Gravil, *Wordsworth’s Bardic Vocation 1787-1842*, p. 5.

his tribe.¹ Gravi's research answers the question of what Wordsworth, following the bardic vocation, can do to the general public and serve his people, which is undoubtedly an important concern, but the present book is more interested in why Wordsworth looks up to the bardic tradition in the first place and how his bardic aspirations help him to construct a poetic and personal identity.

The bardic poetry fascinates Wordsworth, for whom bardic verse and music are inseparable in forming poetry. Poems are frequently referred to as songs in *The Prelude*. 'Thus far, O Friend! did I, not used to make / A present joy the matter of *my Song*, / Pour out, that day, my soul in measur'd strains' (I, 55-57). 'Imagination! lifting up itself / Before the eye and progress of *my Song* / Like an unfather'd vapour; ...' (VI, 525-527). For Wordsworth's speaker, the Hebrew Bible is full of poetic songs, '...the voice / Which roars along the bed of *Jewish Song*' (V, 203-204). Poetry, in general, is song.

... Then, last wish,
My last and favorite aspiration! then
I yearn towards *some philosophic Song*
Of Truth that cherishes our daily life;
With meditations passionate from deep
Recesses in man's heart, immortal verse
Thoughtfully fitted to the *Orphean lyre*;
(I, 229-235)

This seems to be an echo of Milton's pastoral poem 'L'Allegro' ('The Happy Man'), in which the poet claims

Then to the well-trod stage anon,
If Johnson's learned Sock be on,
Or sweetest Shakespears fancies childe,
Warble his native Wood-notes wilde,
And ever against eating Cares,

¹ Ibid., p. 19.

Lap me in soft Lydian Aires,
 Married to immortal verse

 That *Orpheus* self may leave his head
 From golden slumber on a bed
 Of heapt Elysian flowers...
 (L'Allegro, 131-147)¹

Orpheus mentioned here is a musician, poet and prophet in Greek mythology. The story of him retrieving his wife Eurydice from the underworld is constantly revisited by literature. Overcome with grief upon discovering his wife's dead body, Orpheus played such sad music that made the gods weep. They suggested that Orpheus should go to the underworld and use music as a plea to bring Eurydice back. Orpheus did so. His music moved Hades and Persephone who agreed to let Eurydice come back to the upper world, but on one condition that Orpheus should walk in front of Eurydice and must not look back until they both return to the upper world. Orpheus, carried away with excitement, forgot this requirement. He looked back for his wife and she vanished, this time, forever.

Having Orpheus in mind, and possibly influenced by Milton's 'L'Allegro', Wordsworth aspires to produce 'immortal verse' that can correspond to and be as good as what was sung to 'the Orphean lyre'. The idea of verse fitted to music finds resonance in *Home at Grasmere*. The poet describes the involuntary passion urging him to compose as music traversing the soul. 'Thinking in solitude, from time to time / I feel sweet passions traversing my Soul / Like Music; unto these, where'er I may, / I would give utterance in numerous verse.' (960-963)² Another example can be found at the beginning of *The Prelude*. The poet feels 'a corresponding mild creative breeze' (I, 43), recognises its power,

1 John Milton, *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. by Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 23-24.

2 William Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*, ed. by Beth Darlington (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 102.

and expresses his urge to dedicate himself to ‘the holy life of music and of verse’ (I, 54). He would speak ‘of truth, of grandeur, beauty, love, and hope— / Hope for this earth and hope beyond the grave’ (*Home at Grasmere*, 964-965).

Prophet, poet and bard in Wordsworth overlap with each other. The boundaries between them are not clear-cut. Poetic licence enables him to merge these three roles altogether and create a new identity—a poet who inherits the bardic tradition and speaks of truth.

Then the question naturally comes—what do we make of Wordsworth resorting to this prophet-poet-bard composite? A close reading would reveal that this composite is vital in Wordsworth’s self-fashioning and the construction of his sense of authorship.

1.4 The prophetic and authorship: A brief account

To engage with the discussion of the age-old concern about authorship, one could start by reflecting on the Homeric question (the debate over the identity or identities of Homer), which was much discussed by Robert Wood in the generation before Wordsworth.¹ The evolving definitions and connotations of authorship are of such complexity and vivacity that they themselves form a literary tradition. The debate never ceases. Questions centring on what is an author and what is the author-function are raised and discussed. To name just a few, Plato banishes the poet from the Republic because the poet writes following divine inspiration and is not in his right mind. Horace claims that the purpose of writing is to entertain and instruct. The Latin term for author is ‘auctor’ which is etymologically associated with authority. The invention of copyright protection in the late 18th century was indispensable in the establishment of writing as a profession. Romantic poets, by exploring subjectivity and the self in writing, were among the first to articulate the

¹ Robert Wood, *An Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer (1769 and 1775): With a Comparative View of the Ancient and Present State of the Trade* (Georg Olms, 1775)

modern concept of authorship in full, a fact acknowledged by both Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, two important figures in the modern discussion of authorship. Barthes famously decentres the author by claiming that the author is dead in his 2500-word essay ‘The Death of the Author’ (1967). Foucault, in answering Barthes, aims to recover and construct the historicity of the author in ‘What Is An Author?’ (1979).

Interestingly, both Barthes and Foucault acknowledge that the modern concept of authorship begins to be fully articulated in the late 18th and early 19th century. Seán Burke in his preface to *Authorship: From Plato to Postmodern: A Reader* (1995) also suggests that the historical change in the conceptions of authorship is a fruit of ‘romantic revolutions and the 18th-century philosophical and aesthetic discourses.’¹ Andrew Bennett in *The Author* (2005) states that the Romantic theory of authorship is a paradox. On the one hand, the Romantic authors are designated as ‘autonomous, original and expressive,’² on the other hand, their idea of genius is the ability to go beyond the mortal and to transcend the self, which in a way, ‘evacuate[s] authorship of subjectivity.’³

Wordsworth’s involvement in the discourse of Romantic authorship is the typical romantic paradox as Bennett calls it. He strives for originality and individuality, but at the same time, he goes beyond the focus on the self and calls for the prophetic spirit, as if verses he is writing or about to write are products of the divinity which speaks through him, and as if he is submissive to that prophetic power. So often, Wordsworth wobbles between autonomy and the prophetic strain. To follow either way is bound to be problematic and prone to create anxiety. Harold Bloom gives one aspect of this anxiety a name—‘the anxiety of influence’—to describe poets’ anxiety about breaking away from their

1 Seán Burke, *Authorship: From Plato to Postmodern: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. xix.

2 Alan Bennett, *The Author* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 56.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

precursors and producing poetry that can enable them to join their precursors.¹

Having said that, Wordsworth's anxiety may be more complex than just the anxiety of influence. It is further complicated by the social and historical contexts in which the poet is situated. It is useful to follow Foucault's method of historicising the author, and we may also turn to Stephen Greenblatt's theory of self-fashioning for explanations. Contemporary to Foucault's essay, Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-fashioning* (1980) puts forward the theory of self-fashioning as the process of constructing one's identity by adapting to social rules and norms as well as combating the 'monsters' which confine and threaten the self. Greenblatt's theory of self-fashioning, although based on the Renaissance context, still offers an interesting insight in seeing the prophetic Wordsworth. Chapter 2 and 3 of this book will investigate how the prophetic contributes to the poet's self-fashioning and how it is related to the poet's anxiety. They argue that Wordsworth's choice of the prophetic in combating anxiety and in self-fashioning is highly personal, but is made possible by the developing knowledge economy and the millennialism of his time.

¹ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn, 1st edn published in 1973 (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).