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Wordsworth, *The Excursion* (1814), and the Crisis of Knowledge

Abstract: *This essay proposes to read Wordsworth's undervalued poem The Excursion as a response to the late-Enlightenment turn towards philosophical skepticism associated with the thought of John Locke, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. Their ideas helped to dethrone Cartesian metaphysics and to unsettle Western culture's religiously based conception of what it means to know, while industrialization and profit-driven commercial values brought about profound social changes. In this context, the poem is a response to a crisis of knowledge that is both personal to Wordsworth and part of a much broader 19th-century realignment of the relationship between philosophy and poetry. As a basis for a future ethics and politics, The Excursion embraces a limited kind of knowledge rooted not in religious belief (despite its frequent references to the human capacity for faith), but in a secular, anthropological understanding of human experience.*

1 *The Excursion* and the 19th-Century Reader

Despite recent work by Sally Bushell, Kevis Goodman, Paul Hamilton, Stephen Gill, and others, *The Excursion* is still widely regarded as one of the less approachable works in the Romantic canon, and an artistic failure, even if, for some critics, an interesting one. Kenneth R. Johnston, whose *Wordsworth and The Recluse* still provides one of the most perceptive commentaries on the poem, astutely remarked that Wordsworth “gave his Victorian epic [*The Excursion*] to the Romantics; his Romantic one [*The Prelude*], to the Victorians” (291). Johnston’s description of *The Excursion* (first published in 1814) as a *Victorian* epic encapsulates the way in which modern readers tend to perceive the poem: its tone of high seriousness appears to today’s readers more “Victorian” than “Romantic,” and for most of the 19th century it was certainly more highly respected, and considered more influential, than it has been for the past hundred years.

To understand not just why this poem came to be so highly valued by Victorian readers, but also what it reveals about the era in which it was published, it is necessary to redirect attention away from the usual “romantic”

preoccupation with an individual's experience of crisis (emotional, spiritual, or "existential"), exemplified in Byron's *Childe Harold*, Keats's Odes, and Wordsworth's own *Prelude*, and consider the broader epistemological crisis of Wordsworth's time, a crisis of knowledge which was simultaneously a crisis of religious faith and of political stability.

Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* had rejected the Cartesian system of metaphysics as too reliant upon philosophical conceptions or "innate principles" that were themselves based on nothing more than ancient, unexamined dogmas, such as the notions of "Substance" and "Cause." Locke took the radical approach of beginning his enquiry by examining the human understanding itself, to "see what objects our understandings were or were not fitted to deal with," as he put it in "Epistle to the Reader." The *Essay* belongs to the early phase of the Enlightenment: it asked the fundamental, potentially disquieting question "what can we know?" – the same question that Kant was to revisit many decades later.

In Book II, however, Locke did provide an account (one that, for many readers, was persuasive) of how the human mind builds up, or arrives at, its ideas. This is known to philosophers as the Lockean "philosophy of experience." By the time of Wordsworth's birth, Locke was required reading at the universities, his "philosophy of experience" existing more or less comfortably alongside mainstream Christian belief. But the far more radical skepticism of David Hume – doubting the permanence and coherence of the mental constructs Locke named "ideas" – demonstrated that ideas are all too easily subject to the vagaries of human emotions and imagination, and that our supposed "knowledge," all the way up to the idea of God, is at best mere *probability*, not certainty. This philosophical challenge threatened to leave a complete void where religious belief had once been. It was this crisis of knowledge that led Kant to arrive at his carefully-crafted distinction between the Pure and the Practical Reason, assigning religious beliefs to the domain of the Practical Reason.

The Excursion was written specifically as a response to this contemporary situation – not only the political upheaval associated with the French Revolution, but the "Copernican Revolution" in thought brought about by Kant's first two *Critiques*. It was therefore very much a poem both *of* and *for* its own time. To balance Johnston's characterization of *The Excursion* as "Victorian," I would recall David Simpson's equally true assertion: "this

is a poem that must be central to any coherent understanding of Wordsworth, and to any scrupulous account of what Wordsworth meant to his contemporaries” (185).

This essay, therefore, takes up Simpson’s emphasis on the contemporaneity of *The Excursion*, setting aside its embryonic “Victorian” qualities. The aim of the essay is to demonstrate that the poem is a response to a crisis of knowledge that is both personal to Wordsworth and part of a much broader 19th-century realignment of the relationship between philosophy and poetry.

2 *The Recluse* project and *The Prelude* of 1805

When Wordsworth first conceived of *The Recluse*, at the time of his close collaboration with Coleridge in the late 1790s, it was envisioned as a response to the political, moral, and epistemological crisis of the time. It was to be a poet’s affirmation of hope, signaling the way forward after the reformers’ hopes for social and political change were crushed by the combined effects of the French revolutionists’ swerve from democratic republicanism to repression and militarism, and the British government’s brutal suppressing of dissent.

The Recluse was to be “addressed,” as Coleridge put it in the autumn of 1799, “to those, who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness” (qtd in Moorman 443). The crisis of hope that Wordsworth’s contemporaries faced at the start of the new century called for nothing less than a new way of knowing, of which poetry must be the vehicle. As the political philosophers had apparently failed to offer any real grounds for confidence or reasons for optimism, it was time for a *poet* to attempt a recovery of the hopes for the “amelioration of mankind” that so many had abandoned.

Coleridge himself later remarked that he “looked forward to ‘The Recluse’ as the first and only true philosophical poem in existence” (qtd in Wordsworth, *Poetical Works* 5.364). From this perspective, *The Excursion* did not seem an auspicious start. Yet in many ways, the poem did succeed in defining what one scholar calls the “epistemological and political crisis” that marked the reception of Kant’s writings (Swift 2).

Coleridge's wish that his friend address a blank verse poem "to those, who [...]. have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind" was not an abandonment of the progressive outlook characteristic of late-Enlightenment writing, but rather a proposal that the two poets – "joint-labourers in the work"¹ – take a longer and more comprehensive view, just as William Godwin had already begun to do in his 1797 publication *The Enquirer*. In "Essay III" in that work, Godwin remarks on how the "promise of understanding" is commonly seen in young children, even in the children of peasants, but by age fourteen the traces of these gifts are obliterated: "They are brutified by immoderate and unintermitted labour. Their hearts are hardened, and their spirits broken, by all that they see, all that they feel, and all that they look forward to [...] [T]he present order of society [...] is the great slaughter-house of genius and of mind" (89). Part of this striving towards a more comprehensive view, for Coleridge as also for Godwin, entailed a thorough reexamination of the grounds of human knowledge. But by 1799, Coleridge had come to believe that the way forward for such an investigation led not through Godwin's writings, but through those of Immanuel Kant.

Romanticists have tended to associate Coleridge's Kant studies too exclusively with his turn towards more conservative political views, and towards Trinitarianism, during and immediately after his sojourn in Malta, 1804–1805. But as Monika Class has recently shown in her meticulous and crucially important book, this underestimates how well-acquainted Coleridge had already become in the late 1790s with the general principles and purposes of the critical philosophy, and misrepresents the way Kant's thought was received and understood in the dissenting and radical milieu of England between 1796 and 1800. It is quite wrong, Class shows, to assume that Kantianism inevitably led to "escapism and political disenchantment" (38).

In particular, the London-based German scholar and lecturer Friedrich August Nitsch realized that the idea of freedom, both political and religious, "constituted a unique selling point of critical philosophy for his 1790s English audiences" (Class 43). It was thanks to Nitsch's work as an advocate

1 William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*. "Reading Text" (13.349), hereafter cited as *Prelude [1805]* followed by book and line numbers.

for Kant's teaching, more than to any other intermediary, that English audiences learned about Kant's concept of the categorical imperative; and, as Class points out, the categorical imperative "served as a means against the unjust limitation of individual freedom; indeed it aimed to protect people's lives from religious and political control" (74). Three of the men with whom Coleridge was in regular contact in the late 1790s – Thomas Beddoes, John Thelwall, and William Godwin – either attended Nitsch's lectures in person or are known to have read the lectures as published his *General and Introductory View of Professor Kant's Principles Concerning Man, the World, and the Deity*. This introduction to Kant, published in 1796, "offered a possible formulation of the 'true laws' [of freedom] to the friends of freedom" – that is, among others, to Coleridge and his circle, which at this time included representatives of many intersecting groups opposed to the policies of William Pitt's government: Rational Dissenters, liberal Whigs, reformists, radical democrats (Class 82). Nitsch's *General and Introductory View* was widely reviewed in both radical-reformist and conservative periodicals. Both through this work and through other publications such as J. A. O'Keeffe's 1795 pamphlet *On the Progress of Human Understanding* (which particularly emphasized how the critical philosophy could support a radical politics), news of Kant's great revolution in philosophy would certainly have reached Coleridge's eyes and ears long before he first set foot in Germany in the autumn of 1798.

The idea that Kant's writings offered a strong philosophical underpinning for a progressive politics contradicts a view of Kantianism that has long been entrenched in Anglo-American scholarship, partly because of Coleridge's own later invention of a conservative, Christianized Kantianism. But it also helps to account for the peculiarly incompatible goals that Coleridge tried to set for Wordsworth, his fellow laborer, when in 1799 he urged him to address a blank-verse poem to those contemporaries who were disillusioned by the failure of the Revolution. Coleridge would have anticipated that in *The Recluse* Wordsworth would set out grounds for hope based not on pre-Kantian religious dogmatism, but on the critical philosophy's understanding of the limitations of human reason: admitting, as inevitable, doubts and mental sufferings such as those endured by Wordsworth's alter-ego the Solitary (who is often referred to in the poem as "the Sceptic"), but pointing towards a post-Kantian resolution, a new

structure of knowledge that would be the basis for a new moral/religious belief system.

Yet this task posed a considerable challenge for a poet brought up in the tradition of Spenser and Milton. To be taken seriously, any new moral/religious belief system would have to take as its starting-point philosophical skepticism, rather than faith. Kant had “saved” human freedom by giving up the possibility of achieving certainty in ultimate knowledge. For the rigorous Kantian, one cannot have knowledge of things-in-themselves at the same time as effective human freedom. This has its theological dimension too, as Kant admitted in the Preface to the 1787 edition of *Critique of Pure Reason*: “I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*” (29). All of Coleridge’s later career as a thinker was in a sense aimed at repairing this – to him – scandalous deficiency, positing the individual’s conscience as the missing source of assurance, and placing the “Conscience, with its categorical Command” in the position of the authority that “proves it to be my Duty to *choose to believe in a God*” (Coleridge, *Marginalia* 4.409–10).

But if this program, a restatement of hopes for the “amelioration of mankind” based on what Coleridge understood as Kantian “practical Reason,” were to be carried out in the way Coleridge hoped, the “poet-knowledge” that Wordsworth strove to preserve in the 1805 *Prelude* – that powerful statement of his poetic coming-of-age – would somehow have to be reconciled with (or absorbed into) a different, carefully-qualified kind of knowledge, grounded on the new philosophical order. It is clear from some of the speeches given to the Pastor in the later books of *The Excursion* that, though he never immersed himself in Kant’s writings as Coleridge did, Wordsworth did have at least an informed layman’s understanding of the critical philosophy. Yet, in the dialogues between Solitary, Wanderer, Poet, and Pastor, the Pastor’s mild Kantianism ultimately carries rather less poetic force than the Wanderer’s expressions of his unquestioning religious faith, and his deep love of nature.

A careful reading of the thirteen-book *Prelude* indicates that between 1798 and 1805, Wordsworth was already developing his own sense of the kinds of knowledge that belonged particularly to the poet – the knowledge that sets the poet slightly apart from the rest of humankind, and provides those revelations and insights that only poetry is able to communicate.

The word “knowledge” itself is used sparingly in the 1805 *Prelude*; but when it does occur, it is of crucial importance.

There is one passing reference to “knowledge” in the first fifty-four lines of the thirteen-book *Prelude*. It comes at the very end of the “glad preamble,” when the poet enumerates those things he hopes will now occupy his days:

the hope
Of active days, of dignity and thought,
Of prowess in an honorable field,
Pure passions, virtue, knowledge, and delight,
The holy life of music and of verse. (*Prelude* [1805], 1.50–54)

As the 1805 *Prelude* was taking shape, then, it does not seem that the topic of “knowledge” was one the poet wanted to bring *immediately* to the reader’s attention.² The conclusion to the “glad preamble” suggests rather a mood of confidence than any great anxiety about whether the poet possessed the appropriate knowledge for his enterprise. In the climactic concluding line, the emphasis is on a way of life, “The holy life of music and of verse,” an idea that seems to encompass and embrace all these other things in perfect harmony: “prowess in an honorable field, / Pure passions, virtue, knowledge, and delight.” The “honorable field” can only be that of poetry; and the knowledge referred to is clearly the knowledge that belongs exclusively to a poet. This poet-knowledge is invoked again in the well-known lines that describe how the River Derwent would “Make ceaseless music through the night and day,” and how the sound of the river gave him, “Among the fretful dwellings of mankind, / A knowledge, a dim earnest of the calm / Which Nature breathes among the hills and groves” (*Prelude* [1805], 1.280, 284–86). But at this early point in the narrative, it is not clear how the poet of these pastoral beginnings can become one whose ambitions

2 Although some lines incorporated in the “glad preamble” are to be found in the earliest drafts of the poem, written at Goslar in the autumn and winter of 1798–1799, the preamble as a whole was probably not composed until *after* the fair copies of what is now referred to as the *Two-Part Prelude* had been completed by Mary Hutchinson and Dorothy Wordsworth, in mid-November 1799. By the spring of 1801, it seems Wordsworth considered the lines as forming a preamble to his autobiographical poem; early in 1804, they were definitively assigned this place, see Reed (1.5–6).

are Miltonic in scope – who will eventually write the poem for his age, the poem referred to, from the time of its first conception, as *The Recluse*.

In Books 12 and 13 of the 1805 *Prelude*, the poet-knowledge alluded to in the “glad preamble” returns as a topic, but with a more explicit genealogy. Book 12 opens with a thoroughly naturalistic account of creativity: “From nature doth emotion come, and moods / Of calmness equally are nature’s gift [...]” (12.1–2). The verse-paragraph that follows constitutes the poet’s self-diagnosis or act of contrition, apologizing to nature for the error of having looked for knowledge in the wrong places: “Long time, in search of knowledge desperate, / I was benighted, heart and mind [...]” (12.20–21). The poet’s recovery from this state of dark despair and mental paralysis is owed to another gift of nature, by which in early days he learned “To look with feelings of fraternal love / Upon those unassuming things, that hold / A silent station in this beauteous world” (12.50–52).

Such contemplation of “unassuming things” is represented as an erotically-charged experience. Wordsworth explicitly compares it to the “bliss” of “walking daily in Life’s prime / Through field or forest with the Maid we love”:

Oh! next to such enjoyment of our youth,
 In my esteem, next to such dear delight
 Was that of wandering on from day to day
 Where I could meditate in peace, and find
 The knowledge which I lov’d, and teach the sound
 Of Poet’s music to strange fields and groves (12.135–40)

“The knowledge which I lov’d” is clearly a knowledge derived from the apparently purposeless but actually creative activity of *wandering*: a connection that takes us back to the “glad preamble” and reaffirms its celebration of wandering “By road or pathway or through open field” (1.30). Such wandering – with no specific aim other than that of “meditat[ing] in peace” and finding, as if by chance, “The knowledge which I lov’d” – once again seems to be the primary, essential poetic activity from which everything else flows. Like the knowledge invoked in the “glad preamble,” the knowledge so gathered is more a state of being – receptiveness of feeling, responding sympathetically to the things he sees around him – than a matter of collecting impressions or scientific data; even less, of philosophical enquiry. It is alluded to also in Book 6, when Wordsworth refers to the unprofitable

time he spent as an undergraduate at Cambridge, and recalls that “My inner knowledge, / (This will I barely note) was oft in depth / And delicacy like another mind / Sequester’d from my outward taste in books [...]” (6.113–16). Yet it is this *other* mind, and the knowledge it possesses, that renews and energizes Wordsworth’s poetic self.

In *The Excursion*, Wordsworth brings the poet-knowledge he has discovered through reflection on his own formative experiences into dialogue with the disillusionment of the post-revolutionary age, as exemplified in the character of the Solitary.

3 Wanderer and Solitary: “what avails Imagination high / Or Question deep?”

The character of the Wanderer has a long and complex history. First introduced as the Pedlar in the earliest manuscript of “The Ruined Cottage” in 1797, he was developed and given his own history in 1798, then renamed “the Wanderer” some years later, as Wordsworth worked on *The Excursion* from 1806 until its first publication in 1814 (Gill 49; Butler xii–xiii). Some aspects of the Pedlar’s boyhood, as described in the 1798–1799 manuscripts, particularly the intense and transformative experiences he has when alone among the mountains, were transferred with minimal revision into the 1805 *Prelude*. This suggests to most critics that the Pedlar/Wanderer was, if not a *persona* of Wordsworth, at least an embodiment of some of his feelings and responses (see Bushell 38; Gill 63, 68–69; Johnston 95, 99; J. Wordsworth, 17).

In 1801, however, Wordsworth gave the Pedlar a Scottish birthplace and upbringing. This stayed with him as “the Wanderer” in the 1814 text, perhaps signaling that the Pedlar was *not* after all to be identified with Wordsworth himself. But in the notes that Wordsworth dictated to Isabella Fenwick in 1843, he partly modified this act of authorial distancing, remarking, “had I been born in a class which would have deprived me of what is called a liberal education, it is not unlikely that being strong in body, I should have taken to a way of life such as that in which my Pedlar passed the greater part of his days. At all events I am here called upon freely to acknowledge that the character I have represented in his person is chiefly an idea of what I fancied my own character might have become in his

circumstances" (*Excursion* 1214–15 [Appendix III]). This is an interesting claim, as if the mature Wordsworth were reluctant to disown the youthful spiritual enthusiasm of the Wanderer, and was even to a degree doubtful whether "what is called a liberal education" was anything more than a suit of clothes that might not fit the wearer.

Whatever part Wordsworth's younger self may have played in creating the Wanderer, the salient point about this figure in the 1814 *Excursion* is his profound belief in God. As the narrator tells us in his account of the Wanderer's early life, "in the mountains did he feel his faith" (1.247); and this religious conviction remains with him in old age. He has the awesome assurance of a man who has never had religious doubts.

By contrast, Wordsworth says rather less about the individual on whom the Solitary is based; but more than one scholar has suggested that the Solitary is at least as much a version of Wordsworth himself as the Wanderer is (Johnston 264–65; Gravil 207). He shares with Wordsworth some emotionally devastating experiences – notably the loss of his two children, and later his bitter disappointment over the course taken by the Revolution; and his opposition to the new economic theory is identical to Wordsworth's own. In the wider context of Wordsworth's hopes for *The Recluse*, the skepticism and despondency of the Solitary – his acute awareness of the fragility and thinness of human knowledge – are a dramatic device, a way of dramatizing the need for the supposedly corrective and cheering reassurances of the Wanderer, and later, the Pastor. But the Solitary also poses a challenge of a different kind: the questioning and implied rejection of traditional theodicy. In this drama, the Solitary is a Hamlet figure; that is, one who raises metaphysical questions that the subsequent dialogue and action cannot possibly resolve.

The plan of *The Excursion* calls for the older men – the Wanderer and the Pastor – to take the role of instructors, imparting the knowledge they have gained over many years of meditative thought and of quiet interaction with those rural dwellers whose "passions" are "incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature," as it is expressed in the 1802 "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (21). In Book 4 ("Despondency Corrected"), the Wanderer, often referred to as "the Sage," or "venerable Sage," recommends to the discouraged, doubting Solitary that he learn from his rural neighbors, who live simply, but in a dignified, self-reliant manner:

“These, with a soothed or elevated heart,
 May we behold, their knowledge register,
 Observe their ways; and, free from envy, find
 Complacence there” (4.384–87)

The Wanderer’s tendency to praise the *knowledge* of poor rural folk was an offence against the prejudices and assumptions of early 19th-century readers.³ But the high valuation the Wanderer places on the knowledge of rural people is a move that is written into the very argument of the poem. Though radical in terms of the aesthetic of the time, it does also harmonize with the Wanderer’s argument for religious faith, which to modern tastes is a more “conservative” feature of the poem.

In the opening section of Book 4, from which these lines are taken, the Wanderer is attempting to diagnose the moral and spiritual sickness from which the Solitary suffers, a sickness closely related to the general crisis of the time. The Wanderer blames the Solitary’s political pessimism, “The loss of confidence in social Man” (4.262), on excessive, utopian hopes, “exalted confidence” (4.267); and, in a remark that now appears even more dogmatic, he recommends to the Solitary – who has lost his wife and two children to sudden, unexplained illnesses – dutiful submission to the will of God, and the law of conscience:

“— The darts of anguish *fix* not where the seat
 Of suffering hath been thoroughly fortified
 By acquiescence in the Will Supreme
 For Time and for Eternity” (4.18–21)

At such a point, the reader may find something almost inhuman in the Wanderer’s rock-solid religious faith.

However, the Wanderer also recommends that the Solitary pursue knowledge of the world around him, provided he does it in a “meek” and “humble” spirit. The description of the Solitary’s humble cottage in Book 2 has made it sound like the laboratory of a gentleman scientist, the instruments and paraphernalia of haphazard scientific experiments being strewn around the floor and piled on tables (2.663–69). In Book 4, however, the Wanderer

3 It did not win Coleridge’s approval either. In *Biographia Literaria*, he remarked: “whether this be a character appropriate to a lofty didactic poem, is perhaps questionable” (2.118); Hazlitt made a similar criticism (4.113, 123).

recommends the cultivation of knowledge through a revised and updated version of the “*Beatus ille*” *topos*, a familiar one to those 19th-century readers who knew Latin, as it originates in Horace’s *Epodes* II.i: “*Beatus ille, qui procul negotiis, / Ut prisca gens mortalium, / Paterna rura bubus exercet suis, / Solutus omni faenore.*” This notion of the happiest man being the one who stays far removed from public affairs, tilling his “paternal acres” with his own oxen, is a familiar one in 18th-century poetry, and seems to point in the direction of Vergilian georgic. Here, the Wanderer’s version of the “*Beatus ille*” trope emphasizes that the quest for knowledge is profitable only when it is carried out in a “meek, / Sincere, and humble Spirit”:

“Happy is He who lives to understand!
 Not human Nature only, but explores
 All Natures, — to the end that he may find
 The law that governs each; and where begins
 The union, the partition where, that makes
 Kind and degree, among all visible Beings;
 The constitutions, powers, and faculties,
 Which they inherit, — cannot step beyond, —
 And cannot fall beneath; that do assign
 To every Class its station and its office,
 Through all the mighty Commonwealth of things;
 Up from the creeping plant to sovereign Man.
 Such Converse, if directed by a meek,
 Sincere, and humble Spirit, teaches love” (4.335–48)

This way of talking about knowledge as reassurance and delight, the discovery of an ordered “commonwealth of things” in which every thing has its “station,” now sounds outdated, and not just because of the allusion to Horace. For some readers (such as Alan Liu), georgic is itself synonymous with a turn away from “history” towards the cultivation of self. In the present context, Kevis Goodman is surely right to argue against Liu that georgic tropes need not equate to a denial of history, and can function as “agents of disclosure” (3). There is a further issue to be considered, however: whether or not this way of talking about knowledge as reassurance and delight would also have sounded outdated, and even complacent, to many of Wordsworth’s contemporaries.

There are two kinds of objection that can be raised against the Wanderer’s concept of knowledge, and both objections were certainly available

to Wordsworth's readers in 1814. The first has to do with the natural sciences, the second with ethics. It was already becoming apparent to the more reflective thinkers and scientists of the time that the orderly hierarchy of species which the Wanderer seems to take for granted (with "sovereign Man" at its apex) derived more from the conditions under which human beings acquired and arranged their observations – from, that is, the limitations of humans' sense-perceptions, and the necessity for the mind to structure them under the categories of time and space – than from any order inherent in the universe itself. Further, though modern readers must be careful not to project a "Darwinian" understanding of the natural world backwards into the early 19th century, in some scientific disciplines (geology, astronomy, life sciences) there were already stirrings of a non-anthropocentric, evolutionary understanding of universal forces.

The more strictly ethical problem with the Wanderer's pronouncement has to do with the revealing phrase, "sovereign Man." The Wanderer's speech, with its references to "Kind and degree," alludes to the noble speech that Milton gives to the Angel Raphael, as he discourses to the not-yet-fallen Adam in Book 5 of *Paradise Lost*:

O Adam, one Almighty is, from whom
 All things proceed, and up to him return [...]
 Each in thir several active Spheres assign'd,
 Till body up to spirit work, in bounds
 Proportion'd to each kind. (5.469–70, 476–79)

The Wanderer cannot *know* that such a divinely-appointed hierarchical order exists – or rather, he can know it only as a deduction from his religious faith. By his own admission, it is "by faith" that he holds to this belief, this "support / For the calamities of mortal life" (*Excursion* 4.21; 10–11). The Solitary, lacking the Wanderer's faith, is guided by a wholly different kind of knowledge and by different assumptions about what knowledge is. Though he is an ordained minister of the Church of Scotland, he has seen the suffering and death of the innocent; he has witnessed the deaths of his two children and then of his beloved wife; and – almost equally devastating, since it robbed him of the hopes for the future of humankind that awoke him out of his intense grief for his own loss – he lived through the intoxicating time of early optimism about the Revolution, then the faltering

and perversion of republican ideals, and the subjection of France to “iron bonds / Of military sway” (*Excursion* 3.829–30).

It is not surprising, then, that the Solitary’s observations of the world cannot easily be brought into harmony with the Wanderer’s pious assurances. Quite simply, what the Solitary “knows” is a knowledge radically different from the Wanderer’s. It is the Solitary who in Book 2 (2.755–929) tells the story of the old man, living alone and virtually friendless, who died three weeks after spending the night on an upland fell – a narrative that once again brings into the poem the question: what is the purpose of a human life? And, why is it that some people’s lives are destined to end with unmerited and often prolonged suffering? The question is first raised through the story of Margaret, in Book 1 of *The Excursion*. In its original form as “The Ruined Cottage,” that part of the poem offered no reassuring formulations of comfort or recompense. Nor are these the only stories in the poem to raise these troubling questions: the narrative of Joseph Sympson, the “Patriarch of the Vale” (7.262), is similarly pessimistic, and even nihilistic.⁴

The Solitary’s challenge to the Wanderer is an urgent restatement of the post-Kantian problem. When the Poet reminds him about his little friend, the “fair-faced Cottage-boy” (3.202), perpetually creating models of life (and in his ceaseless creativity very much like the “six years’ darling” in the “Intimations” Ode), the Solitary’s astonishing response is that it would be best if the boy never had to grow up at all – a remark that seems to echo a well-known line from Sophocles’ *Oedipus Coloneus*, “Not to be born is best”:

“Far happiest,” answered the desponding Man,
 “If, such as now he is, he might remain!
 Ah! what avails Imagination high
 Or Question deep? what profits all that Earth,
 Or Heaven’s blue Vault, is suffered to put forth
 Of impulse or allurement ...
 if neither in the one
 Nor in the other region, nor in aught

4 The narrative of Joseph Sympson was originally written in 1808 and included in a never-published blank verse poem, “The Tuft of Primroses,” see Kishel’s introduction to *The Tuft of Primroses with Other Late Poems for The Recluse* (18).

That Fancy, dreaming o'er the map of things,
 Hath placed beyond these penetrable bounds,
 Words of assurance can be heard; if no where
 A habitation, for consummate good,
 Or for progressive virtue, by the search
 Can be attained, a better sanctuary
 From doubt and sorrow, than the senseless grave?"
 (*Excursion* 3.212–17, 221–29)

From the Solitary's perspective, there is no longer any *place* on earth or in heaven where the thought of the highest ("consummate") good can reside, since human thought and will, though notionally free, are finite. Our faculties of imagination and reason prove to be incapable of discovering or hearing "Words of assurance," in any universe we can know. The Solitary is expressing, as a poet might, the very same bafflement that a contemporary would have felt, upon reading in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that

happiness and morality are two specifically *distinct elements of the summum bonum*, and therefore their combination *cannot* be *analytically* cognized ... but must be a *synthesis* of concepts. Now since this combination is recognized as *à [sic] priori*, and therefore as practically necessary, and consequently not as derived from experience ... it follows that the *deduction* [legitimation] of this concept [consummate good] must be *transcendental*. (209)

As our finite will and imperfect cognitive powers cannot of themselves combine virtue and happiness into harmony, it is necessary to refer the question to the "idea" of an infinite moral being.⁵ For the skeptic, the fact that our minds have developed the concept of a being possessing "infinite will, power, and intelligence" is of no help: it cannot *prove* that such a being exists. The Wanderer's answer to the Solitary's predicament is essentially that the words of assurance he seeks are to be found in the Bible. But the Solitary tells his companions that when he did turn to the Bible for such "guidance," he found none, because "the infallible support / Of faith was

5 This is well explained by Frederick C. Beiser's paraphrase of *Critique of Practical Reason*, "Dialectic," Section V: "our finite human will cannot be a sufficient cause for happiness to correspond with morality [...] the only such cause would be an infinite *moral* being, that is, one having an infinite will, power, and intelligence" (605).

wanting” (3.872–73). In this part of *The Recluse*, the Solitary’s “despondency” is not “corrected,” his despair not replaced by faith.

4 “We see, then, as we feel”

In a poem that so often echoes the language of Milton, and contains many explicit allusions to *Paradise Lost*, a reader would expect to find some kind of reaffirmation of Christian theodicy. But the Solitary has what for us in the 21st century is a recognizable kind of tragic knowledge: the knowledge of the waste of human potential; futile and apparently arbitrary suffering inflicted on innocent people who just happened to be in the way of forces outside their control, especially of human actions unthinkingly taken (wars, revolutions). His rejection of Christian faith is a rejection of traditional theodicy, according to which human suffering is part of a divine plan that will eventually redeem the fallen world. It is also an ethical stand against the transaction, the ‘repayment’ of ‘debt,’ that is implied in the redemption narrative. Even if God does intend to make everything right in the end, the skeptic says, I reject the idea of justifying the sufferings of individuals in this world in order to secure a more blessed future in another world.

In *The Excursion*, there is no equivalent to the story of redemption told in *Paradise Lost*. The Wanderer and Pastor instead offer an alternative, secularized kind of self-discipline and psychotherapy, based on love of nature and fulfilling one’s obligations to a community – far short of a rigorously Kantian position (since for Kant, only the practical Reason, not “nature,” nor the shared values of a community, could be a basis for moral faith). This is what seems to be suggested by how the Wanderer summarizes the Pastor’s first speech: “‘We see, then, as we feel,’ the Wanderer thus / With a complacent animation spake” (5.559–560). And for 19th-century intellectuals, as Johnston puts it, “placement of the human person at the center was the new condition of philosophy, not metaphysical elaboration” (118).⁶

For all the Wanderer’s and Pastor’s attacks on the skeptical trend in 18th-century thought, they both accept that humankind’s reasoning powers are limited, and that stoic acceptance of one’s fate is the wisest course.

6 As Paul Hamilton points out, in the Prospectus to *The Recluse* Wordsworth had already “secularized the Miltonic theological apparatus” (146).

The Pastor gives this quasi-Kantian assessment of the constraints under which human reason must operate:

“for ourselves,
That speculative height we may not reach.
The good and evil are our own; and we
Are that which we would contemplate from far.
Knowledge, for us, is difficult to gain —
Is difficult to gain and hard to keep —
As Virtue’s self; like Virtue is beset
With snares; tried, tempted, subject to decay.” (483–90)

For the Wanderer, it seems that the key to overcoming despair and the poison of skepticism is to follow the lead of those who live as the Solitary’s rural neighbors do. The “Shepherd-lad,” as the Wanderer imagines him, sets his own internal moral clock by the regularity of nature’s times and seasons. He learns to divide up his “pastoral duties” each day according to the sun’s progress across the sky; and, the Wanderer continues,

“Early he perceives,
Within himself, a measure and a rule,
Which to the Sun of Truth he can apply,
That shines for him, and shines for all Mankind.” (4.803–06)

The implication is clear. The Solitary should learn from those who live simpler lives close to nature, those whose knowledge is formed from their daily routines and observations of nature’s workings. He will thus discover within himself “a measure and a rule” that will enable him to live the rest of his days virtuously, and in contentment. With a similar intention, the Pastor offers his narratives about the lives of those who belonged to the Vale, exemplifying either in a positive sense or a negative one the values implicit in what the Poet later calls “The old domestic morals of the land” (8.238).

The poem certainly represents these domestic morals as under attack by the rapid social changes forced on communities by the factory system, and the displacement of old agrarian values by profit-driven commercial ones. This attempt to defend the values of traditional rural society has led some critics to conclude that the poem retreats from its original concern with the “amelioration of mankind” to a nostalgic, “Burkean” validation of ancient institutions – chivalry, the squirearchy, the Church of England, and so on (Chandler 25–26).

However, it is also possible to see *The Excursion* as giving up the elusive assurance of faith for a limited kind of “knowledge” that takes its cue from the Pastor’s words: “we / Are that which we would contemplate.” Hamilton’s commentary is illuminating:

our anthropological situation, how we fit in the world, is what makes Wordsworth think of advancement. We move forward not in line with a banal Whiggish interpretation of history [...] but [...] through a more Marxian idea of a natural history of self-transformation. (145)

Such a stance sets aside debates about religious belief as unnecessary and unproductive, treating the transcendent as acting powerfully on subjectivities like that of the Wanderer, but ultimately as something to be left to the individual conscience; and metaphysics as something to be left to philosophers. The poet, living closer to ordinary human beings, seeks a different basis for a future ethics and politics, one rooted in a secular, anthropological understanding of human experience (“how we fit in the world”); and in the accumulated knowledge shared by existing communities.

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