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Myself and Some Other Being: Wordsworth and the Life Writing

(University of Iowa Press, 2014)

by Daniel Robinson

THIS SLIM VOLUME is part of the Iowa Muse Books Series in Creativity & Writing, in which each "book will present what a seminal literary figure had to say about ages-old questions of reading, writing, and creating" (www.uiowapress.org/search/browse-series/browse-MB.htm). These studies are intended to elucidate fundamental literary and aesthetic issues for a general audience as opposed to academics specializing in the author and/or period in question. William Wordsworth makes for a good fit for the Muse Books, and Daniel Robinson does for the most part an admirable job in explaining how "a young writer, both ambitious and insecure, who is cognizant of his potential and his originality but uncertain about whether or not anyone will buy what he's selling" (5) turned himself into a major poet by writing what is now considered his greatest poem, his "epic memoir in blank verse" and portrait of the artist as a young man, *The Prelude*, in a famously ironic scenario where "Wordsworth presumed that literary immortality would come as the result of other work" (the never-completed philosophical epic, *The Recluse*) (2).

Robinson explains the odd-sounding phrase in the subtitle—*and the life writing*—thus: "This person, the life writing (that is, the living person doing the writing), William Wordsworth, writes his life in the hope of finding words worthy of writing himself as a writer, *Wordsworth*" (2). In nine short sections Robinson focuses on different aspects of *The Prelude* "to show how Wordsworth's writing explores memory in cooperation with imagination," an exploration that "involves… the *poetics*, of past, present, and future as a fiction of identity" (3). In the second section, "Two Consciousnesses," whose title quotes the phrase in Book 2 about the gap between the poet's present and past self ("conscious of myself/ And of some other Being"), Robinson argues that Wordsworth draws on a "past that does not exist: it is a fiction" (8). Unfortunately Robinson's discussion of Wordsworth's "poetics of memoir" demonstrates no awareness of the large body of theory and criticism dealing with the role of imagination and fiction in autobiographical reconstructions of the past, beginning decades ago with such major studies as John Eakin's *Fictions in Autobiography* (1985). Robinson's neglect of recent autobiography criticism and even of the genre itself also explains his introductory speculation that "perhaps more so than any other writer before him, Wordsworth examines what it means to write about oneself" (4). In fact, Rousseau had done so spectacularly in his *Confessions*, and in a sense Robinson's repeats Wordsworth's own amnesia about his famous predecessor in Romantic

autobiography when he wrote (in a letter of 1 May 1805) after finishing the 1805 version that it is "a thing unprecedented in Literary history that a man should talk so much about himself."

Robinson, who does double duty as an English professor and as a singer-songwriter for a Philadelphia rock group (Milton and the Devils Party), writes an informal prose that can at times sound flippant ("most of the time, writers don't understand what they're doing anyway," 5) and that slides readily into vernacular registers indicative of his teaching style. Thus in the second chapter in which he does a good job discussing "Tintern Abbey" as a "meta-poetic" blending of memory and imagination that is a "template" for *The Prelude*, a process that is also evident in "his famous daffodil poem," he cannot resist the temptation to insert the following assertion-cum-confession: "An English professor I know (me) inculcates an important lesson to his students: 'It's not about the fucking daffodils!'" (5-6). At times, he is also given to careless assertions ("In 'Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth says nothing about his pre-adult self," 19) and dismissive snap judgments ("the occasionally tedious, frequently pompous, overtly defensive but nonetheless influential preface [to *Lyrical Ballads*]," 69). He is also more than willing to bring his personal interests to bear on his reading of Wordsworth: in the confessional "Finale," he again links the twentieth-century American poet James Dickey ("who, I am proud to say, was my teacher," 100) to Wordsworth as poets of "the mundane sublime" (101), and, reflecting his own rock proclivities, invokes Bruce Springsteen, Kurt Cobain, and Neil Young as relevant parallels to "Wordsworth's writing about himself" (102). There is some poignancy to the claim that Springsteen's "Thunder Road" appealed to "dreamers, writers, and would-be-rock-n-rollers in shithole towns all across America. Growing up in Ronoake, Virginia, I heard that call and started a band" (102). As Robinson's acknowledgment demonstrates, famous poets writing about themselves "to achieve immortality" tempt others to write about themselves, but to conclude that "it is very rock-n-roll, isn't it?" (103) is a bit of a stretch.

Given the fact that Robinson's analysis of Wordsworth's life writing is intended primarily for a non-specialist audience, his lack of any in-depth engagement with the huge body of Wordsworth criticism is understandable. While he does acknowledge that his "thinking about Wordsworth has been influenced by a long and distinguished tradition of scholarship" (105), his in-text references to particular critics are sporadic and perfunctory. It is regrettable, for instance, that there is no mention of what may still be the best study of Wordsworth's epic autobiography, Hebert Lindenberger's *On Wordsworth's Prelude* (1963). However, Robinson is well informed about the different (manuscript and published) versions of *The Prelude*, and as he explains in a brief prefatory Note on Editions, "keeping the different versions… straight is difficult" but "they are all *The Prelude*" (ix). He wisely chooses to work mostly with the first complete version of the poem when Wordsworth was at the height of his poetic powers (the thirteen-book 1805 text), but he takes into account important changes in the three main versions in

analyzing different episodes, and he also demonstrates a sophisticated awareness of the textual instability of the poem that Wordsworth kept revising for decades and that he refused to give a title to: "*The Prelude* is itself a rather frail shrine for housing Wordsworth's writing life / life writing. As several of Wordsworth's late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century editors acknowledge, we have no final, definitive version of the poem that we can be certain is the version Wordsworth authorized" (80).

If Robinson's failure to consider *The Prelude* in the context of the genre of autobiography is regrettable, one of the signal strengths of his book is his placing of the poem in the context of the epic tradition, and especially Milton: "*The Prelude* picks up where *Paradise Lost* left off, with Wordsworth as a new Adam at liberty to choose the means by which he may regain Paradise. *The Prelude* is a virtual sequel to *Paradise Lost*" (57). Here Coleridge, who burdened Wordsworth with the demand that he write the great philosophical epic of the modern age, plays a crucial role: as Robinson astutely points out, "*The Prelude* in a way begins as an escape from Coleridge's vision of Wordsworth, even as Wordsworth continues to depend on that vision" (44). And if Wordsworth wrote "an epic poem about not being able to write an epic poem" (55), Coleridge plays the role of "the muse as partner, collaborator, mentor" (57). The result of that complex dynamic is that without realizing it, Wordsworth's "preparatory" poem to his projected philosophical epic "was the most original contribution to the epic tradition since Milton and would be the last successful epic poem ever written" (54).

The most illuminating part of this study is Robinson's discussion of the autobiographical poems and fragments Wordsworth wrote during that famously cold winter of 1798-99 in Goslar, Germany, where he "found himself relying on memories of home to supply material for composition" (33). What "the Goslar notebook… reveals" is "Wordsworth's earliest attempts to understand the relationship between memory and creativity for the process of writing *The Prelude*" (34). Wordsworth's escape from his epic ambitions for *The Recluse* into autobiography continues when he "repurposes" the "education among nature" of the "The Pedlar" (intended for *The Recluse*) "for his own history—not of a peddler's mind, but a poet's" (44-45). Conversely, the Boy of Winander "spot of time" in Book 5 is Wordsworth shifting his own experience of communing with nature into the third person. As Robinson nicely puts it, "There *was* a boy, and it used to be Wordsworth" (60), because in the Goslar notebook, "after introducing the boy in the third-person, Wordsworth, perhaps unconsciously, slips into the first-person pronouns to describe his own hooting at the owls" (61).

Robinson's contextual reading of *The Prelude* takes into account other poems written up through the completion of the 1805 version, and one of the most probing is his interpretive take on "the two groups of poems popularly known as the Matthew poems and the Lucy poems but sometimes also referred to as the 'Goslar lyrics'" (70). Robinson discerns the confessional dimension of these "most psychologically probing poems of his career" as

"dark poems [that] explore the isolation of subjectivity" (70). In an ingenious analysis of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," he suggests that it "may not even belong among the Lucy poems," because contemporaneous with the beginnings of *The Prelude*, it "may also be quasi-autobiographical meta-writing about the epic project underway" (74). Robinson connects this famous lyric with the apocalyptic Arab-Quixote dream of Book 5 about the fragility of books, those "shrines so frail," arguing that "as befits this neo-Neo-Platonist, Wordsworth considered publication to be a kind of slumber, then, that seals the creative spirit by delimiting it, leaving only a textual monument behind—an epitaph" (75). Leaving aside whether Wordsworth was a neo-Neo-Platonist (a questionable assumption), this is an unusual and suggestive reading of "A Slumber," though a more plausible autobiographical reading would be that this famously compressed and cryptic lyric is a trope for the adult Wordsworth's sense of the loss of (his own) childhood.

After the probing analysis of the autobiographical beginnings of *The Prelude* in the Goslar notebook, Robinson's final chapter on the "Spots of Time" is something of a disappointment, in part because it is not adequately grounded in the long interpretive history regarding these intensely imaginative episodes scattered throughout the poem, and in part because there is almost no analysis of particular "spots" other than the culminating ascent of Mount Snowdon. Robinson relies too readily on general assertions ("because he is a poet and not a metaphysician, Wordsworth must translate whatever the mind can do with experience into words," 84), the most productive of which is that a "spot" is "a lyric center of gravity" and that in "the longer versions [of *The Prelude*] the 'spots of time'… appear as interpolated lyric moments in an overarching narrative" (91). If the assertion that "they are points at which the timbre of the verse changes to announce 'here comes some poetry!'" (91) sounds dismissive, the point that Wordsworth "violates the chronology of *The Prelude*, the narrative, to privilege the lyric" (91) is well taken. The poet chose to make the ascent of the mountain, which occurred in 1791, the imaginative conclusion of the poem, whose time line ends in 1798: "In order to make a satisfying climax for such a long poem, Wordsworth found he had to twist the chronology" (92). If this was poetic license, it certainly paid off. But the fact that Robinson attempts no interpretive commentary on this magisterial "spot of time" in which the moon-lit landscape becomes an extended trope for the imaginative or higher mind suggests that Robinson has run out of hermeneutic steam.

A short but very readable and informative book about Wordsworth's *Prelude* as "the making of a writerly self out of memories" (94), *Myself and Some Other Being* is a significant if at times uneven contribution to our understanding of Wordsworth as a pioneering life writer well worth his words.