

Imaginary Narratives

Abstract

Two spectacular but contrasting sites constitute the *loci* of the memories narrated in Books 6 and 7 of William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850): a natural site, the Alps, and an urban site, London. Nevertheless, they are not represented as self-evident points of reference, but as points of an absent reference, and only therefore they become dynamical centers of the epic trajectory that narrates the growth of the I's mind. I set out to investigate how the contrasting sceneries, through the narrative process and in spite of their differences, exercise the same effect on the I forcing him through art to transform the experience of loss into identity. Thus, *The Prelude* is seen as an imaginary narrative anticipating the self-reflective epic of Modernism.

Resumé

To markante lokaliteter af kontrasterende karakter udgør de centrale steder for de erindringer der fremstilles i Bog 6 og 7 i William Wordsworths *The Prelude* (1850): en naturlig lokalitet, Alperne, og en urban, London. De er imidlertid ikke repræsenteret som selvindlysende referentielle holdepunkter, men som repræsentationer af fraværende steder, og netop derfor bliver de dynamiske centre for den episke fremstilling af udviklingen af Jegets bevidsthed. Jeg forsøger at undersøge hvordan de kontrasterende scenerier gennem den narrative proces og på trods af deres forskellighed udøver den samme virkning på jeget ved at tvinge ham til gennem kunsten at omsætte tabserfaringen til identitet. Derigennem kan *The Prelude* ses som imaginær fortælling der foregriber den selvrefleksive modernistiske epik.

Romantic vs Epic Poetry

To discuss the Romantic epic poem taking as our point of departure William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* may seem to betray the genre already at the outset. However, if epic poetry from Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance possesses clear boundaries in terms of themes, values and characters, it is already an almost oxymoronic move to enumerate it amongst the types of Romantic poetry. That poets like Pushkin, Preseren, Byron, Goethe, Blake and others on the surface prolong the life of the epic poem, does not preclude that their being romantics also may force them to produce fractures in the foundations of their poems. In Romanticism, maybe more so than in other periods, even the most astounding revival of the heroic tradition will be surrounded with and enter into intertextual relationships with other genres and discourses prefiguring modernity on all cultural levels. The purity of the epic poem as a romantic subgenre is a myth and has, I think, always been so. Even for tragedies impurity is there from the beginning: Aristotle seemed to believe that among all the Greek tragedies only the one of King Oedipus was a real one, the others being more or less imperfect attempts. So, if we want to focus on the fragile character of the Romantic epic poem, Wordsworth's work may after all not prove to be a bad choice.

It can hardly be contested that it is Romantic, is epic and is a specimen of poetry. But if we want to zoom in on one of those qualities and push the others aside, we might begin to argue. It is not easy to specify its epic character, the narrative structure not being very elaborate to say the least. To ask for a plot will be to miss the point. And if we concentrate on its being poetry, we may be forced to underestimate its overall beauty. Let us be honest, not all lines deserve to be anthologized or quoted. And to say that the poem is Romantic will not say very much about the particularity of the poem itself, but just make it another example of the more or

less general features of Romanticism and turn our approach into a didactic exercise and not an interpretation. The romantics loved nature and sublime solitude, took a sceptic stance toward the city, focused on the creative individual with a touch of intimate and emotional togetherness. What else is new?

I want to approach Wordsworth's poem by framing it with a genre specification that places it – alongside its being romantic, epic and poetic – as one of the early modern examples of the genre of *confessions*. These date back to St. Augustine's work in the 4th century and subsequently made their way into modern times via Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Les Confessions* and his other autobiographical writings. This is what we are dealing with in *The Prelude*, but moulded there into the form of romantic epic poetry. My claim is that the self-reflectivity of Romantic poetry undermines its epic features.

To be a poet, not to be epic

From this perspective, Wordsworth's poem works on three distinct levels – one dealing with his poetic *material*, another with its *discursive logic* and a third dealing with its *purpose*, the last one determining the other two. Like the grand epics it is a teleological work, but with its ultimate goal lying beyond the final lines of the book: this being the unfolding of the permanent poetic creativity of the I or the “*creative soul*” (XIII, v. 207, p. 429). Moreover, if Wordsworth had managed to put some kind of finality to the work himself without the intervention of Dorothy, it would still have been a permanent prelude, just as life in Augustine's sense is a permanent *ouverture* to the encounter with God.

(1) *Material*: First we have a *basic quasi-epic or narrative level* covering his travels and sojourns in different sites in England and on the continent. The basic organizing principle on this

level is simply the *physical movement*, in itself neither very goal oriented nor chronological. Although it is not important for the general compositional logic of the text, a chronology can of course be detected or reconstructed following his course of life. But this basic story does not deliver the basic criteria for inclusion or exclusion of details, nor the criteria for where we begin or where we end in the different parts, or how we come from one song to another. "... external things ../ [...] / In plenteous store, but nowhere such / As may be singled out with steady choice" (I, v.154-160, p. 37), as he admits when it comes to the rendering of concrete details. Of course, we are not facing a haphazard series of travel experiences or a surrealistic sense of being outpaced if we imagine him a modern backpacker following both his Lonely Planet guide and a strategy of bar crawling and partying up the Eastcoast of Australia. But still, his route and observations do not make him come up with 'steady choices'.

(2) *Discursive logic*: The second level embraces a *process of self-recognition*, a story of the "growth of my own mind, taken up upon a large scale" (Wordsworth 1979: 533) as he wrote to George Beaumont in 1804 when the creative process was still in its making, imbued as it also was with the plans for *The Recluse*. This is definitely a far off echo of the tradition of confessions from St. Augustine, although their notion of what the larger scale might be differs. After having turned to Christianity Augustine's goal was to come to know himself in all his intimate details and sins. Not only to reach perfection as far as possible, but to come to know himself as God has created him and therefore, openly and honestly, direct his soul toward his celestial origin. This is, of course, a never ending process, as St. Augustine humbly acknowledges and therefore it is just as relevant with respect to how it is performed as with respect to its final outcome.

The self-recognition, therefore, acquires its authenticity and honesty more by the way the process is carried out than by its content. It is not only related to us as an account of and a reflexion on past events and present doubts and experiences, but as an ongoing dialogue with God. He presents what he knows about himself to God and for God, to challenge himself *vis-à-vis* this ultimate test of honesty and reliability. Because he has to stand trial for God through the quality of this process, dialogue and not monologue is the basic mode of the confessions, even when the addressee is only implicitly there. We witness a dialogue, not a set of pleasurable or painful events. These are only there to feed the dialogue. This is, to quote Wordsworth, Augustine's "larger scale" of the "history of his mind."

With Jean-Jacques Rousseau this way of confessing and this notion of the larger scale changed (Starobinski 1971). The dialogical structure is retained in Wordsworth, though, as well as the purposive self-recognition. But the dialogue is now oriented toward his fellow man. *There* is the locus of his ultimate test of honesty, although apostrophies to God are abundant in Rousseau's autobiographical texts. I come to know myself through the dialogue with my most trusted fellow men. This is *his* "larger scale". There is a plea to the reader to 'take my words for it' throughout the poem. If the physical movement is the basic logic of the narrative ground level of the poem, then *dialogue* is the basic logic of the confessional discursive level, organizing the inner voyages of the mind.

The order of the narrated events, their extension, their modulation and interruption is dictated by what is worth telling Coleridge and others in order for them to accept that he really knows himself in good faith, in profound honesty and in complete authenticity. The dialogical logic provides the process with its timing, not with its content. Whether he actually saw the Alps or not is not important - in a certain sense he did not -,

the dialogue about the event can be equally well modulated for his self-recognition via his interlocutors. At least Coleridge responds as a true interlocutor and calls Wordsworth "God's great Gift to me" (in the poem he made after Wordsworth's reciting of the poem in 1807 when Coleridge comprehended that it concerned "the history and growth of his own mind" (Wordsworth 1979: 542). And Dorothy did so as well in her own way, taking responsibility for manuscripts and publications. As we can see, although there is an appeal to God, Wordsworth's epic is only an affair between humans. Wordsworth himself ends on this secular note in book XIII: "Thus moderated, thus composed, I found/Once more in Man an object of delight,/Of pure imagination, and of love" (13, v48-52).

(3) *Purpose*: This leads us to the third and final level governing the overall process of the poem: the pure imagination, "imagination having been our theme", as he bursts out (XIV, v. 206, p. 469) (let us not here repeat the contrast between imagination and fancy (cf. VIII, v. 365ff, p. 293)). What he is finding out about himself, looking back and resuming his life up to that point, is that the growth of his mind into what he truly is, is that it *makes him a poet* and liberates his imagination. To prove and legitimise his status and function as a poet, is the purpose of the poem. He does not see God, but himself as a poet who possesses imagination and the "the poetic faculty" (VIII, v. 365, p. 293) or "the wond'rous power of words" (VII, v. 119, 233). "The Poet's soul was with me at that the time", he now remembers (VII, v. 42, 189). Through the dialogue searching for recognition *vis-à-vis* his fellow man, he is led to master the dialogue of poetic expression addressed to the "prophets of Nature" - "we to them will speak" (XIV, v. 446, p. 483). His counter power here is neither God nor his fellow man, but - as we know from his others works, too - nature:

/.../ I had known
Too forcibly, too early in my life,
Visitings of imaginative power
For this to last: I shook the habit off
Entirely and forever, and again
In Nature's presence stood, as now I stand,
A sensitive being, and a *creative* soul. (XII, v. 199-207, p. 429)

The habit he is talking about is his habit of just liking any sensuous beauty without judgment or selection and without paying attention to their imaginative potentials.

So, if the basic *material*, rendered to us on the first level, consists of the details of sensual experience during his travels, and the discursive mode of organizing them is the *dialogue*, then the ultimate *purpose* turns out to be the appearance of the poet, visible to his fellow men as a poet for them in harmony with nature's essence but not with its details. The last quote is built up on the contrast between the past - 'I stood' - and the present - 'as now I stand'. Therefore, the basic medium for the emergence of the poet is *memory* erecting a bridge between the past and the present. From this point, the basic logic that governs both the first narrative level of his movements and the second of the turns of the dialogues, is *memory*.

Let me reflect a few moments on memory. It is of great importance in all epic literature, but is regarded in different ways throughout cultural history (see my list of references). In *The Prelude* it does not have a particularly rich content, but relates to specific points in the life of the I where the pre-figuration and determination of the creativity of the soul are triggered off. The imagination, released to feed creativity, transcends the experience that calls it to life and may even change it once released. Memory is guided not by the content of the past on the brink of oblivion, but by the future oriented goal of the present - to keep the continuous poetical process going and thus secure his status of a creative soul.

So, whether his experiences originated in London or in the Alps, they are only of interest if they can be memorized and rendered as dialogically structured language bound to these experiences in a way that makes both London and the Alps representations of his self-development as a poet. They are not seen as wonders of nature or civilisation or as moments of self-recognition as such. They are moments in the unfolding self-reflective process of poetic creativity. The same goes for the dialogues: they are not shaped as a form through which the I talks to someone in mutual interest or respect, but are rather attempts to go beyond the others. The others are ultimately silenced as tools for his self-development as a poet. At the end of the day his appraisal of nature, human potentials and his fellow men is a neglect of them all. Memory is a process in the present, not a container of the past. As Geoffrey Hartman has pointed out, Wordsworth needs both nature and other people to have his poetic kick off, but then he continues in his own world. They are fuel to his fire in a *via naturaliter negativa* (Wordsworth 1979: 599).

City and nature

I want to end with a quick look at two scenes, one of social nature with lots of fellow men, another of natural nature, as it were, the sublime Alps, in order to see how sensual experience is actually presented for it to be able to prompt the ongoing poetic process. The first is found in book VII, the second in book VI. There are three modes of sensual experience.

Interactive: Both sites frame a decisive material experience. In both cases this experience follows the same general logic of mutual attraction and withdrawal, if not repulsion, which constitutes the overall basic logic of his sensual experience. He is attracted by the material world that triggers his imagination, but has to leave it again, only to return to it once more, though,

to set the imagination afire again. This interactive structure is present in all its sensual details, as for instance “A balance, an enobling interchange/Of action from without and from within;/ The excellence, pure function, and best power/Both of the object seen, and eye that sees” (XIII, v. 375-378, p. 457).

Or, more pronounced, we see this in book VI when he praises the idyll of a lake in the Alps: “But here I must break off, and bid farewell/ To days each offering some new sight, or fraught/ With some untried adventure” – but why break off? Not because he does not enjoy the scenery, not because there is nothing more to tell us, but because he wants to avoid falling victim to his mind being “a mere pensioner/ On outward forms” (VI, v. 727-738, p. 223-25). The events are not narrated according to the unfolding of the experience during his tour; neither are they related according to the dialogue with an interlocutor. They are broken off in order for the memory to be turned into a resource for the imaginative power here and now, while writing, which must not get lost in the immediate fascination of the past sensual details themselves. The experience is unfinished and penetrated with his subjectivity, it is stopped before the thing in itself is presented. The double structure of breaking off and returning also dictates the overall composition of the poem where he repeatedly returns to the London experience and the Alp-scene in order to reflect on the power of words and imagination (e.g., XIII, v. 360ff, p. 457).

As for the memory, it means that memory is not, as is most often held, a container of the past made present, but an active force in the present that reshapes the past to make it fit the future oriented purposes of the present – the unfolding of the poetical imagination. Therefore, memory cannot deliver the content of the dialogue to make the appearance of the I reliable *vis-à-vis* another. At that point he breaks off, as we just heard. And he cannot retain the details of the past, based as they are on

an endless interaction. He can only retain what he can use here and now to realize himself as a poet.

Undecidable: Besides the general interactive mode of sensual experience two more features of sensual experience, each of them characteristic for one of the two books, can be added. His impressions of enormous London are sceptical and penetrated by his reluctance to throw himself into the boiling life of the city, the main point being that the experience cannot be evaluated according to one standard – black or white, good or bad. The city is the locus of extreme and irreconcilable contrasts, now and then with a Whitmanian touch as in the famous passage of the city as an anthill (VII, v. 149ff, p. 235).

He is particularly fond of things that balance between contrasts: the boy performing at the market, but with a sense of imaginative freedom; the crowds of unfree people who upon a closer glance still belong to a realm of nature revealed by their mutual care (VII, v.723ff, 265-67). So, when he stops in his description of a maiden from the inn and calls her “a memorial tribute to my theme” (VII, v. 317, p. 245), he does not do so because he has a specific anecdotic event to relate or a rounded portrait of the girl to communicate to his interlocutor, but because in her appearance he has found the undecidable balance between visibility and invisibility that releases imagination. When this has been revealed, he stops his description. His later memory of the city focuses on those contrasting moments that make the experiences undecidable as purely sensual phenomena. He stops “where I found/The general air still busy with the stir/Of the first memorable onset” (X, v. 246ff, p. 371).

Absent: Now, the Alp-scene shows a third important feature of sensual experience besides its general interactive mode and its permanently pending undecidability. In book VI he arrives into

the Alp-region, of course taken in by its sublime awe and magnificent solitude. "The Voice/ Was Nature's, uttered from the Alpine throne;/ I heard it then and seem to hear it now - " (VI, v. 430f, p. 209). But what did he actually hear to make us believe his story? Actually nothing. He and Robert Jones crossed the Alps without noticing that they had actually done so, as a shepherd informed them when they asked where they could find the Alps. But strange enough, at that point he does not regret the lack of actual experience or of the unreliability of his account. No, right after the shepherd told them that they missed the whole thing, instead of lamenting or swearing, he praises at length and in reflective detail "Imagination" - "That awful Power [that] rose from the mind's abyss" (VI, v. 591ff, p. 217). In the Alps he is dealing with the ultimate sublime and "with infinitude" (VI, v. 605, p. 217), that is with something which, seen or unseen, is placed on the brink of what can be experienced at all. So, the fact that he missed the Alps is but a more radical expression of that fact, and a more efficient one to him because it is a more enticing challenge to imagination and thus a more decisive moment in his formation as a poet than the actual view of the Alps.

The interactive mode of experience, its undecidable character or its sheer absence make his story a lousy narrative and himself an unreliable storyteller, but it also makes him - and for the very same reasons - reliable as a poet relating his imaginary narratives. In his incantation of nature, sense of community and dialogue he, paradoxically, produces his own solitude as a poet. This paradox makes *The Prelude* a modern, confessional, romantic, epic poem.

The fate of the epic

In Wordsworth there is no epic and no poetry without these being filtered through a permanent self-reflection in the poet and in his text. This is a common Romantic denominator that

sets the conditions for any fictional or poetical work in the Romantic and post-romantic era. There are only epic works if they can meet these conditions. The Romantic epic poem may refer to the classical heroic tradition or the great epics of Christianity, but even if it does succeed in using traditional techniques and features, the Romantic epic poem has to face a problem that makes it a marginalized genre on the brink of dissolution. The epic poem of tradition had as its purpose the legitimisation of values and characters presented in the poem in relation to set and unquestioned general values that offered criteria for beginnings, endings and transitional stages in between. These values constitute a platform from which the characters and their behavior can be judged and which guarantees that the poems could always be brought to an end. But in the Romantic epic poem – of a mythological, religious, national or melodramatic bent, you name it – the superposed platform has to be reflected upon and legitimized.

If the nation, to take an important example, can be praised in an epic poem, it is never praised as an unquestioned fact finally revealed, but as a project to be pursued with no guarantee of a positive result. The Romantic epic poem, therefore, is squeezed between lyrical poetry having subjective self-reflection as its center, and the novel having the reflection on collective values as its core. The Romantic epic poem is an ephemeral and regional phenomenon and not part of the general trend of European literature, although it is productive in most places. It tends to mould its notions, especially of nature and nation (two terms that are etymologically identical), in forms that take them to be absolute givens and not in the last analysis conditioned by historical processes and human creativity, a view that impedes the approach to the place of nations and nature as changing projects and as objects of profound reflection in the post-romantic and modern era (cf. Larsen 1999). They propagate nation and nature as entities existing on

universal conditions, not as projects in changing historical contexts that will need other artistic forms both when they emerge and when they develop. We know the results all too well.

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