Short Title:

STRUCTURAL PATTERNS IN WORDSWORTH'S THE EXCURSION

ABSTRACT

STRUCTURAL PATTERNS IN WORDSWORTH'S THE EXCURSION

ROYDON SALICK

DEP'T OF ENGLISH

McGILL UNIVERSITY

M.A. THESIS.

Except for Lyon's treatment of the sources and analogues of The Excursion, there has not been any detailed discussion of the structure of the poem. This essay shows that The Excursion does possess an overall epic pattern. This essay further examines the intricate relationship between the actual pilgrimage and the spiritual odyssey of the Solitary. Too, this essay discusses Wordsworth's ingenious use of a liturgical pattern and its correlation with the various stages of the excursion, actual and spiritual.

STRUCTURAL PATTERNS IN WILLIAM WORDSWORTH'S THE EXCURSION

by

ROYDON SALICK

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Department of English
McGill University
Montreal.

July 1971.

In 1949 Ernest de Selincourt produced the long-awaited Oxford Edition of The Excursion, which Helen Darbishire revised and corrected in 1959. This Darbishire-de Selincourt Edition has become the definitive edition. In 1950 J. S. Lyon published an excellent introduction to The Excursion; and in 1965 Mary Moorman gave us the standard biography of Wordsworth. Although the spadework has been completed, there remains much to be done; the artistic elements, especially the structure and imagery, of The Excursion have been sadly neglected. The time seems ripe, therefore, for a close critical analysis of The Excursion. This essay purports to be at least the beginning of such a study.

I should like to express my thanks to Professor Alec Lucas who introduced me to The Excursion and suggested, in part, the subject of this thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In the only study entirely devoted to The Excursion, Judson Stanley Lyon[1] has furnished students of Wordsworth with an excellent introduction to the poem. In the third chapter, Lyon thoroughly investigates the "sources and analogues" of The Excursion. He postulates and proves that Wordsworth, in writing The Excursion, was strongly influenced by the poetic trends of Pope, Thomson, Cowper, and other eighteenth-century poets. These were the very trends that Wordsworth criticized adversely in his famous Lyrical Ballads. Lyon asserts that Wordsworth's essentially damaging criticism of the poetic trends he inherited and followed, affected the initial reception of The Excursion and, to some extent, may be the cause of its lingering unpopularity.

Lyon quotes Coleridge's anticipated plans for The Excursion and reiterates that Wordsworth was unable to fulfil Coleridge's aspirations for the poem. Wordsworth, Lyon asserts, "was utterly incapable of executing such an ambitious, grandiose, speculative design as that for

[1]Judson Stanley Lyon, The Excursion: A Study, (New Haven, 1950). Since the publication of Lyon's study, there have been three other fairly lengthy studies of The Excursion. None, however, deals with structure or imagery. In Wordsworth's Decline in Poetic Power, (New York, 1963), Carson C. Hamilton devotes sixty-four pages of negative criticism to The Excursion. His final appraisal of the poem reveals the destructive nature of his critical bias: "The Excursion is an unstable compound, an inconstant - impossible - mixture, a dish unpalatable and indigestible, concocted out of the scraps of yesteryear's transcendentalism and today's Anglicanism, served up with a garnish of social reform." In The Poetry of Wordsworth 1784-1814, (New Haven, 1964), Geoffrey Hartman presents a shorter and more reasonable critique of The Excursion. He pays close attention to Wordsworth's imagination and, for the most part, neglects the artistic merits of the poem. Bernard Groom, in his book, The Unity of Wordsworth's Poetry, (New York, 1966), focuses his criticism on the philosophical implications of the epitaphs and of The Excursion, as a whole.

The Recluse without the constant stimulation and nourishment of his intellectual faculties which Coleridge had supplied during the Quantock period."[2] It is possible, however, to argue that Wordsworth deliberately abandoned Coleridge's plans for The Excursion in favour of those he considered more valid and, in some respects, more deserving of treatment. Coleridge's ambitions for The Excursion have been quoted so often that it is unnecessary to repeat them here. Suffice it to say that The Excursion, as Coleridge initially anticipated, was to be "the first and only true Phil[osophical] Poem in existence,"[3] surpassing the aesthetic merits of the poetry of Lucretius. Coleridge had hoped that Wordsworth, in writing The Excursion, would achieve a happy blend of poetry and philosophy, thus succeeding where Lucretius had failed. The Excursion that Coleridge envisioned should have initiated a new literary genre - the true philosophical poem. It failed, however, and, as Lyon states, "falls within well established forms."[4]

Lyon rightly asserts that four main streams of eighteenth-century literature meet in the structure of The Excursion - the long blank-verse didactic poem, the philosophical dialogue, the short verse narrative of humble life, and the funeral elegy.[5] James Thomson's The Seasons (1726-30), David Mallet's The Excursion (1728), which most probably influenced Wordsworth's choice of name for his poem, Richard Savage's The Wanderer (1729), Edward Young's Night Thoughts (1742-44), Mark Akenside's Pleasures

[2]Lyon, p. 30.

[3]Earl Leslie Griggs, ed., Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Oxford, 1959), IV, 574.

[4]Lyon, p. 31.

[5]Lyon, pp. 31-46.

Of Imagination (1744), Thomas Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard (1751), Oliver Goldsmith's The Deserted Village (1769), and William Cowper's The Task (1784), among other works, informed both the structure and theme of The Excursion. Lyon further comments that The Excursion "is most nearly akin to the long, blank-verse didactic poem of the eighteenth-century."[6]

Though Lyon is thorough in his investigation of the background of The Excursion, he nevertheless pretermits Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress as a possible source and analogue of Wordsworth's poem. More surprising is the fact that Wordsworth, nowhere in his correspondence, mentions either Bunyan or The Pilgrim's Progress. But since Bunyan's masterpiece exerted an immeasurable influence on the English-reading world, it is reasonable to assume that Wordsworth was familiar with it. Published in 1678, The Pilgrim's Progress during the succeeding two centuries became the most widely-read book in English save the Bible. At least unconsciously it influenced Wordsworth during his writing of The Excursion. The probability is greater when we realize that there is a marked similarity in theme and general structure between both works. Both works make use of the journey, physical as well as spiritual. Both works are largely autobiographical; Wordsworth and Bunyan personally knew the baleful effects of morbid despondency. Most significantly, both The Pilgrim's Progress and The Excursion describe the ambulatory peregrinations of a despairing Christian who is cured of his "absolute despair" during his walk through the help of friends.

[6]Lyon, p. 30.

The Canterbury Tales is another quite probable source and analogue of The Excursion omitted by Lyon. We know that Wordsworth greatly admired and lavishly praised Chaucer as "one of the greatest poets the world has ever seen,"[7] and a "mighty Genius."[8] In 1827, thirteen years after he published The Excursion, Wordsworth wrote:

> When I began to give myself up to the profession of a poet for life, I was impressed by the conviction, that there were four English poets whom I must have continually before me as examples - Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton. These I must study, and equal if I could; and I need not think of the rest.[9]

We know too that Wordsworth attempted, with little success, to modernize certain portions of The Canterbury Tales. Of course, The Canterbury Tales is a frame-story and The Excursion is not; yet there exists some structural affinity between both poems. The Canterbury Tales resembles The Excursion in that it describes the journey of pilgrims who, as they travel, narrate tales which teach some moral lesson or embody some practical truth. Most significantly, both poems roundly assert the benevolent supremacy of God and man's essential need of social fellowship.

[7]Markham L. Peacock, Jr., The Critical Opinions of William Wordsworth (The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1950), p. 211.

[8]Ernest de Selincourt, ed., The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years (Oxford, 1939), II, p. 998.

[9]Peacock, p. 211.

PART ONE

Though Lyon has cogently argued that The Excursion partakes of the four principal streams of eighteenth-century poetry, he does not consider it an epic poem. He does mention, however, that Wordsworth may have "been attempting to achieve some degree of epic unity"[10] in The Excursion. This epic tendency, Lyon adds, "would seem to be indirectly supported by the presence of Homeric similes and of other classical or neoclassical stylistic traits, but there is no further evidence to support it and it must remain speculation."[11] Brian Wilkie[12] is more categorical in his judgement of The Excursion:

> To be epic a poem needs more than an appropriately great subject; it must have an epic pattern as well. Although the theme of The Excursion - Despondency and its Correction - has negative overtones, it is not really very different from the theme of mental discipline celebrated in The Prelude. But the method of The Excursion is discursive rather than narrative and therefore could never be considered epic unless the term were unreasonably broadened, narrative method being one of the few things which epic theorists have agreed to demand of the epic.[13]

This is a very surprising assertion in view of the fact that Wilkie considers The Prelude an epic. It is more startling in view of the fact that Wilkie's definition of 'epic' is quite orthodox; it includes the ordeal-journey, the purposefulness of action, the presence of supernatural agencies, the descent into the underworld, the in medias res convention, and heroic action.

Obviously in one respect The Excursion is not an epic poem in the same way that The Odyssey, The Iliad, and The Aeneid are. For The Excursion

[10] Lyon, p. 135.

[11] Lyon, p. 135.

[12] Brian Wilkie, Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition (Madison, 1965), pp. 59-111.

[13] Wilkie, p. 77.

does not recount the military exploits and the amorous adventures of a superhuman favourite of a particular deity who ensures the hero's ultimate victory over overwhelming odds. The Excursion does, however, possess an epic pattern. It possesses certain identifiable epic devices of structure such as the invocation of the Muse, the epic question, the in medias res beginning, the statement of the poem's argument, the catabasis or descent into the underworld, the nekya or meeting with the dead, the epic catalogue, and the final happy result of the hero's epic journey. It should be emphasized at the outset that, although Wordsworth was very familiar with the epics of Homer and Vergil and certainly knew the prescriptive demands of the genre, he nevertheless used some of the epic devices of structure unconventionally in The Excursion.

In an informative and scholarly work, H. T. Swedenberg[14] has discussed the epic tradition which Wordsworth inherited. Swedenberg states that, although the French critics did not agree on the telos of the epic, nearly all the English scholars, however, agreed "that the epic was a poem based on fable, designed to teach high moral lessions."[15] While the epic poet was expected to entertain he could not lose sight of his high moral purpose. Swedenberg further comments that all French and English critics agreed with Aristotle that the epic must possess artistic unity, unity of action, and unity between the episodes and the main action. John Dryden and other eighteenth-century critics, continues Swedenberg, argued forcibly that a modern epic "should be based on Christian matter and peopled by the machinery of Christian origin."[16] It is interesting to note that

[14] H. T. Swedenberg, Jr., The Theory of the Epic In England, 1650-1800, Univ. of California Publications in English, XV (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1944).

[15] Swedenberg, p. 147.

[16] Swedenberg, p. 149.

Coleridge agreed with Dryden's argument.[17] This is the tradition of the epic which Wordsworth inherited and upon which he drew when he came to write The Excursion.

Wordsworth has left very little comment on the epic. In an undated letter to Robert Southey, he expressed his opinions on the epic:

> My opinion in respect to epic poetry is much the same as that of the critic whom Lucien Bonaparte has quoted in his preface. Epic poetry, of the highest class, requires in the first place an action eminently influential, an action with a grand or sublime train of consequences; it next requires the intervention and guidance of beings superior to man, what the critics, I believe, call machinery; and lastly, I think with Dennis that no subject but a religious one can answer the demand of the soul in the highest class of this species of poetry. Now Tasso's is a religious subject, and in my opinion a most happy one; but I am confidently of the opinion that the movement of Tasso's poem rarely correspond with the essential character of the subject; nor do I think it possible that, written in stanzas, it should. The celestial movement cannot, I think, be kept up, if the sense is to be broken in that despotic manner at the close of every eight lines. Spenser's stanza is infinitely finer than the ottava rima but even Spenser's will not allow the epic movement as exhibited by Homer, Vergil and Milton.[18]

The reference to the critic that is really the key to understanding Wordsworth's comments has been identified by de Selincourt as Clement's seventh letter to Voltaire. Clement's letter forms part of the preface to Charlemagne, ou L'Eglise sauvée, Poème Epique en 24 chants (1814) by

[17]Coleridge wrote in 1832: "The destruction of Jerusalem is the only subject now remaining for an epic poem; a subject which, like Milton's Fall of Man, should interest all Christendom, as the Homeric War of Troy interested all Greece .... Here there would be the completion of prophecies - the termination of the first revealed national religion under the violent assault of Paganism, itself the immediate forerunner and condition of the spread of a revealed mundane religion; and then you would have the character of the Roman and the Jew, and the awfulness, the completeness, the justice. I schemed it at twenty-five; but alas! venturum expectat." S. T. Coleridge, Specimens of Table Talk (London, 1851), pp. 172-3.

[18]Letters, The Middle Years, II, pp. 633-34.

Lucien Bonaparte. The relevant passage reads:

> Without a doubt, the intervention of God, of angels, and saints, ought not to be employed to enliven our poetry, as Homer employed Mars, Juno, Vulcan, Venus and her cestus. The marvellous of our religion, which tends only to grandeur and sublimity, ought not to be prodigally introduced, and indeed cannot be employed with too much caution and judgement, but in our system, as in that of the ancients, the marvellous ought to animate the whole poem; the poet who calls himself inspired, and who ought to be so, should be seized, if I may so express it, with the decrees of Providence: may see the chain which links the events of this world to the divine will, and the supernatural agents which direct and influence mankind. The entire action of the poem ought to be connected with the marvellous; so that Heaven should decree and mankind conduct themselves accordingly. From the beginning to the end we should see the supernatural agents give an impulse to the actors, and man everywhere under the direction of God.[19]

The view of the epic machinery expressed in this letter is a very unorthodox one. Though the subject be a Christian one, in other words, and though the epic dimension be necessary, the machinery cannot include angels, saints, or God. Clement's prescription runs counter to the practice of Milton in Paradise Lost. Wordsworth agreed with the sentiments expressed above; in The Excursion, as will be shown later, he put them into practice.

Did Wordsworth consider The Excursion an epic poem? We cannot answer definitely, but we do know that he had planned to write an epic poem. In a letter to George Beaumont Wordsworth wrote in 1805:

> I have the pleasure to say that I finished my poem about a fortnight ago. I had looked forward to the day as a most happy one; and I was indeed grateful to God for giving me life to complete the work, such as it is; but it was not a happy day for me; I was dejected on many accounts; when I looked back upon the performance it seemed to have dead weight about it, the reality so far short of the expectation; it was the first long labour that I had finished, and the doubt whether I should ever live to write The Recluse, and the sense which I had of this poem being so far below what I seemed capable of executing,

[19]Lucien Bonaparte, Charlemagne, or The Church Delivered, trans. Samuel Butler and Francis Hodgson (London, 1815), I, xiv-xv, quoted by Brian Wilkie, Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition (Madison, 1965), pp. 61-62.

> depressed me much....This work may be considered as a sort of portico to The Recluse, part of the same building, which I hope to be able, ere long, to begin with in earnest; and if I am permitted to bring it to a conclusion, and to write further, a narrative Poem of the Epic Kind, I shall consider the task of my life as over.[20]

In this extremely important letter Wordsworth does not indicate whether or not The Prelude, the unsatisfactorily finished poem referred to in the above-quoted letter, or The Excursion is an epic poem. He does tell us, however, that he considered the writing of an epic poem part of the task of his life. Wordsworth did not complete The Recluse; neither did he "write further" an epic poem. I think, however, that The Excursion, the only portion of The Recluse to be completed, became that "narrative Poem of the Epic Kind," which Wordsworth had hoped to compose. Though Wordsworth, nowhere in his correspondence mentions that The Excursion possesses epic dimensions, it is reasonable to assume that the presence of so many identifiable epic conventions of style and structure[21] are deliberate, rather than an accident of the poet's unconscious drawing upon its intimate familiarity with the epics of Homer, Vergil and Milton.

[20] Letters, The Early Years, II, p. 497

[21] During the last decade, structure has been one of the most discussed literary terms. René Wellek, in a recent book, Concepts of Criticism (Yale, New Haven, 1963), pp. 54-68., has given a brief but intelligent history of the various meanings critics have assigned to the concept of structure. In that book Wellek offers no definition, but in a more famous study, written in collaboration with Austin Warren - Theory of Literature (New York, 1956), he offers this excellent definition: "It would be better to rechristen all aesthetically indifferent elements 'materials', while the manner in which they acquire efficacy may be called structure.... Structure is a concept including both content and form so far as they are organized for aesthetic purposes." This definition has been adopted in this paper. When I say that The Excursion possesses an epic structure, I mean that The Excursion possesses certain structural devices which have been organized to achieve epic efficacy.

The first structural convention of the epic is, for convenience, best called the prologue. The prologue includes the statement of the argument, the invocation to the Muse from whom the epic poet solicits and anticipates the vitally necessary inspiration, and the epic question on which the poem pivots. For the entire narrative seeks to answer the epic question. In this respect and in others, it is rewarding to compare The Excursion with the traditional epics. Milton states his theme and invokes his Muse in this way:

> Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit
> Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste
> Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
> With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
> Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
> Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
> Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
> That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
> In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
> Rose out of Chaos; (I. 1-10).[22]

He asks his epic question in this manner:

> Say first, for Heav'n hides nothing from thy view
> Nor the deep Tract of Hell, say first what cause
> Mov'd our Grand Parents in that happy State,
> Favor'd of Heav'n so highly, to fall off
> From the Creator, and transgress his Will
> For one restraint, Lords of the World besides? (I.26-32).

[22]Complete Poems and Major Prose of John Milton, ed. Merrit Y. Hughes (New York, 1957). The Odyssey begins thus: "Speak to me Muse, of the adventurous man who wandered long after he sacked the sacred citadel of Troy.... Of this, O goddess, daughter of Zeus, beginning where thou wilt, speak to us also." The epic question of The Odyssey reads: "Did not Odysseus seek your favour beside the Argive ship and offer sacrifice upon the plain of Troy? Why then are you so wroth against him, Zeus?"

Wordsworth, following the practice of Homer and Milton, invokes his Muse, states his "high argument," and asks his epic question in this way:

> Urania, I shall need
> Thy guidance, or a greater Muse, if such
> Descend to earth and dwell in highest heaven!
> For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink
> Deep - and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds
> To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.
> All strength - all terror, single or in bands,
> That ever was put forth in personal form -
> Jehovah - with his thunder, and the choir
> Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones -
> I pass them unalarmed. Not Chaos, not
> The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
> Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
> By help of dreams - can breed such fear and awe
> As fall upon us often when we look
> Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man -
> My haunt, and the main region of my song.
> - Beauty - a living Presence of the earth,
> Surpassing the most fair ideal Forms
> Which craft of delicate Spirits hath composed
> From earth's materials - waits upon my steps;
> Pitches her tents before me as I move,
> An hourly neighbour. Paradise, and groves
> Elysian, Fortunate Fields - like those of old
> Sought in the Atlantic Main - why should they be
> A history only of departed things,
> Or a mere fiction of what never was?
> For the discerning intellect of Man,
> When wedded to this goodly universe
> In love and holy passion, shall find these
> A simple produce of the common day.
> - I, long before the blissful hour arrives,
> Would chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse
> Of this great consummation: - and, by words
> Which speak of nothing more than what we are,

> Would I arouse the sensual from their sleep
> Of Death, and win the vacant and the vain
> To noble raptures; while my voice proclaims
> How exquisitely the individual Mind
> (And the progressive powers perhaps no less
> Of the whole species) to the external World
> Is fitted: - and how exquisitely, too -
> Theme this but little heard of among men -
> The external World is fitted to the Mind;
> And the creation (by no lower name
> Can it be called) which they with blended might
> Accomplish: - this is our high argument. (Preface, 25-71).[23]

Homer sang of the military exploits and the amorous adventures of Achilles and Odysseus; Vergil sang of "arms and the man"; Milton described the adventures of God, Angels, Man and Satan, the protagonists of Christian mythology. Wordsworth, shunning conventional epic themes, decides with confidence to sing of the exquisite harmony which exists between the external world and the mind of man. Wordsworth's hero is neither Classical nor Miltonic; he is peculiarly Wordsworthian, a misanthropic Solitary who gradually comes to reaccept the benevolence of God's omnipotence and the essential goodness of social man.

It seems necessary to defend my use of the term 'hero' in connexion with the Solitary, since most critics of The Excursion hold an opposing view. Etymologically, 'hero' means "a man of superhuman qualities favoured by the gods."[1] In this essay, this is the meaning of 'hero' when the term is applied to such figures as Achilles, Aeneas, and Odysseus. When it refers to the Solitary, however, 'hero' is used as a synonym of

[23]Citations from The Excursion in my essay are to The Excursion, ed. E. de Selincourt and H. Darbishire (Oxford, 1959).

[1]Concise Oxford Dictionary, p. 573.

'protagonist', "the chief person in drama, plot or story."[2]

In A Handbook to Literature, Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman offer this definition of 'hero' - "The character who is the focal point of the readers' or spectators' interest, often without reference to the superiority of the moral qualities of one character over another" (219). In A Glossary of Literary Terms, M. H. Abrams offers a more detailed definition of 'hero':

> The chief character of a work, on whom our interest centers, is called the protagonist or hero . . . . In addition to the conflict between individuals, there may be the conflict of a protagonist against fate, or against the circumstances that stand between him and a goal he has set himself; and in some works, the conflict is between opposing desires or values in a character's own mind (128).

The character of the Solitary fulfils the requirements of both definitions. From his very first appearance in the narrative to his final farewell, the Solitary captures and retains the readers' interest. Furthermore, his gradual recovery is the principal action of The Excursion, and the raison d'être of virtually all the action and utterance of the other characters. The Solitary is the only character who faces an antagonist, which is "absolute despair," and not the Wanderer as Hartman asserts (306). Most significantly, the Solitary is the only character in The Excursion who evinces any genuine inner conflict, any pyschological and spiritual change. The Solitary is the 'hero' of The Excursion in much the same way as Christian is the 'hero' of The Pilgrim's Progress.

It should be noted that in Books I-II, before the Solitary appears, the Wanderer is the 'hero' or 'protagonist'. The Wanderer, rather than the Poet, is the one who captures the readers' attention, by virtue of the fact that he dominates the action of the first two books. In this respect, there is a structural parallel between The Excursion and Paradise Lost, where Satan, most will agree, is the 'hero' of Books I-II, because he, too, holds the readers' interest and dominates the action.

Although Wordsworth has very little to say on the topic of epic poetry in his correspondence, he has nevertheless, in poetry, expressed significant opinions on the choice of an appropriate epic theme. To this end Wordsworth devotes approximately one hundred lines of the first book of The Prelude.[24] There he tells us his mind moved from some "British theme, some old/Romantic tale by Milton left unsung"; to "tales of warlike feats"; to Mithridates and Odin; to Dominique de Gourges, "that one Frenchman" who "conquered first the Indian Isles"; to Gustavus I, who freed his country, Sweden, from the tyranny of Denmark; to Wallace the Scot; to a "tale from his own heart, more near akin/To his own passions and habitual thoughts." The poet's mind then yearns "toward some philosophical song/Of truth that cherishes our daily lives." In her quest after a fitting epic subject, the poet's mind wavers and "where'er she turns she finds/Impediments from day to day renewed." The poet abandons his search in the hope that "mellower years will bring a riper mind/And clear insight."

In The Conclusion, Wordsworth finally states on four occasions the theme of The Prelude:

> Imagination having been our theme
> So also hath that intellectual Love,
> For they are each in each, and cannot stand
> Dividually. - Here must thou be, O Man! (XIV. 206-209).
>
> And now, O Friend! this history is brought
> To its appointed close: the discipline
> And consummation of a Poet's mind,
> In everything that stood most prominent,
> Have faithfully been pictured; (XIV. 302-306).

[24]Citations in this paragraph from The Prelude are to The Prelude, ed. E. de Selincourt and H. Darbishire (Oxford, 1959), I. 155-240.

> It will be known, by thee at least, my Friend!
> Felt, that the history of a Poet's mind
> Is labour not unworthy of regard. (XIV. 411-413).
>
> 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. (XIV. 448-454).

There is a close thematic similarity between The Prelude and The Excursion; both poems, to a large extent, treat of the harmonious reciprocity between Nature and the mind of man. This theme is not slight; on the contrary, it is perhaps the most persistent and urgent theme of man's graduation into civilization. Its implications are vast, nay unlimited; and for Wordsworth it was a suitable theme for his longest poem.

Another structural convention of the traditional epic is the in medias res beginning. Initially laid down by Horace,[25] this rule won the approval of almost all succeeding critics and epic theorists. The in medias res beginning, Horace suggests, serves to arouse the interest of the reader and to place the beginning, middle and end of the epic action in the proper perspective desired by the poet. The Aeneid opens with the landing of Aeneas and his fellow-Trojans on the Lavinian shore. This is the very first event Vergil chooses to discribe; why they land remains for some time an unanswered question. In Book II, at the request of Queen Dido, Aeneas relates the true beginning of the narrative - the Trojan War, the victory of the Greeks, the burning of Troy, and the escape of the narrator and his followers. Milton, following the practice of

[25] Classical Writings, trans. T. A. Moxon (London, 1947), p. 66. In Ars Poetica Horace writes: "He the epic poet always moves on quickly to the action and hurries the reader to the midst of the story, assuming it as known."

Vergil, first describes Satan and his fallen angels rallying to revenge their defeat at the hands of the heavenly host. Much later, in Book VII, Milton eventually informs the reader that there was a war in heaven when one-third of the angels led by Lucifer rebelled against God and, defeated, were hurled into Hell.

Similarly The Excursion begins in medias res, in the middle of things, with the Poet under the summer[26] sun toiling across a wide Common:

> 'Twas summer, and the sun had mounted high
> Southward the landscape indistinctly glared
> Through a pale steam; . . . .
> Across a bare wide Common I was toiling
> With languid steps that by the slippery turf
> Were baffled; nor could my weak arm disperse
> The host of insects gathering round my face,
> And ever with me as I paced along. (I. 1-3, 21-25).

Unlike the Poet at the beginning of The Divine Comedy, the Poet here, at the beginning of The Excursion has not lost his way; neither is he walking purposelessly. Rather he is walking with a particular goal in mind, "a grove/The wished-for port to which his course was bound." The poet introduces the element of causality, giving the reason for the Poet's journey a few lines later. He is journeying to meet his venerable friend, the Wanderer:

> For the night
> We parted, nothing willingly; and now
> He by appointment waited for me here,
> Under the covert of these clustering elms. (I. 48-51).

In these lines the Poet relates the first true event, the real beginning of the epic narrative. Plot as opposed to story requires the element of

[26] It is interesting to note that The Aeneid, too, begins in summer - 'septima aestas', the 'seventh summer' of the wanderings of Aeneas and his followers.

causality; the pre-textual appointment between the Poet and the Wanderer is the beginning of the plot of The Excursion.

On the fourth morning of their journey, the Wanderer relates the story of the Solitary. He recounts the tale as a fitting "brief communication" to his meeting with the despondent Solitary. Soon after his meeting the Wanderer and the Poet, the Solitary gives a more detailed account of his friend's "brief communication." At first glance, this retelling of the same story seems an unnecessary repetition. The epitaphs are variations on a common theme, yet different in their choice of individual subject. But in this case the subjects of the stories of the Wanderer and the Poet are the same. Why then does Wordsworth repeat almost identical stories in such close proximity?

It seems safe to assume that Wordsworth was following the conventional 'flashback' technique common to the epics of Homer, Vergil and Milton. The flashback occurs early in the narrative and takes the reader back into time; into past events which have a definite bearing on the present; into the genealogy and life of the hero. During the first four books of The Odyssey the hero is absent, but we hear of him from the epic poet and from other characters. We first see Odysseus in Book V, sitting forlorn on the shore of Calypso's island where he held against his will. In Book IX, Homer has his hero relate his personal adventures to the Phaeacian nobles assembled in hall of King Alcinous' palace. Similarly in The Iliad, Achilles, the hero, is withdrawn into the background until Book IX. In Books I-VIII, the epic poet and other characters tell of Achilles' life and adventures in the Trojan War. In the first book of The Aeneid, the epic poet remarks on the past exploits and on the present situation of Aeneas, the hero. In Book II, Aeneas, at the request of Queen Dido, his

lover, relates his activities in and his escape from Troy. In Book I of Paradise Lost, Milton shows us Satan and his fallen angels in Chaos. Later in the same book, the epic poet allows his hero[27] to address his cohorts and through his speech to reveal his past and present attitude towards God's divine majesty.

In The Excursion, Wordsworth allows the Wanderer, a friend of the Solitary, to tell the story of chagrin before the hero makes his appearance. We first hear of the Solitary in the second book when he is referred to as "One who lives secluded there/Lonesome and lost." Three hundred and forty lines later in Book II, the Solitary makes his appearance. Soon after the Solitary exchanges friendly greetings with the Wanderer, Wordsworth has him, after the fashion of Homer, Vergil and Milton, relate his own quite moving story. He takes us back into the past and paints graphically the events that have moulded his present attitudes. Like the epic flashback, the Solitary's regression into time reveals the hero's genealogy and life. If there is tedious repetition in The Excursion it is qualitatively the same as that of The Iliad, The Odyssey, and Paradise Lost. The accusation of dull prolixity against The Excursion becomes far less tenable when one recognizes the epic structure of the poem.

An important structural element of the epic is the scope which comprises the temporal and spatial dimensions. The term 'epic', most would readily agree, has become a synonym for 'vast'; and this correlation derives from the temporal and spatial dimensions, both of which are usually indicative of magnitude and vastness. In The Iliad and The Odyssey, there are two temporal schemes. The main action of The Iliad covers only fifty days in a ten years' war; the principal events from the beginning

[27]Most critics will agree that Satan is the protagonist or hero of the early part of Paradise Lost.

of the fighting to the death of Hector occupy a mere four days! The actual events of The Odyssey take place within six weeks, while Odysseus' wandering lasts twenty-four years. The Aeneid, an unfinished epic, opens with Aeneas and his followers reaching the shores of Lavinia during the seventh year of their wandering since their escape from burning Troy. The actual events from the landing to the killing of Turnus occupy an indefinite period of months.

Both The Divine Comedy and The Excursion depart from the epic tradition as regards their temporal schemes. The entire action of The Divine Comedy occupy four days, from the first day spent on the foothills of the Antipurgatorio, to the morning of the fourth day when the Poet, with Vergil as his guide, explores Paradiso Terrestre. Like The Divine Comedy, The Excursion possesses only one actual time scheme. The entire journey lasts five days, from the forenoon when the Poet is seen walking across the bare, wide Common, to the evening when the Solitary bids farewell to the Poet, the Wanderer, and to the Pastor and his family. There is no larger actual temporal dimension which corresponds to those of the classical epics.

The temporal dimension of the epic is best understood metaphorically. Almost invariably the epic journey is metaphorically a journey of rebirth and spiritual change. Too, it is a journey from homelessness to a discovery of a new home. Odysseus, after wandering for twenty-four years, returns home a changed man; from the darkness of the grotto on Calypso's island, he travels into the sunlight of Ithaca, his home. Aeneas and his followers escape the doom of their home and journey to find a new home in Rome. Aeneas is a spiritually changed man at the end of his wanderings; from despair he, somewhat like the Solitary, eventually attains sufficient

confidence in the help of the gods and his friends to defeat the Italian forces and claim Latium as his new home. Paradise Lost describes the wanderings of Adam and Eve after their expulsion from the Garden of Eden to the moment when they find a new home on earth. By the time they are ready to occupy their new home they are spiritually chastened children of God.

The journey of the Solitary, like other epic journeys, is one of spiritual change and rebirth. During his night and day of travel in the company of the Poet and the Wanderer and the meeting with the Pastor and his family he does not encounter physical obstacles comparable to those which confront the Classical heroes. But he does encounter despondency and "absolute despair", formidable obstacles to the bravest of heroes. The Solitary returns to his cottage at the end of his excursion a spiritually changed man; he is no longer the misanthrope awaiting death. Now he has regained faith in God and confidence in social man.

Another aspect of the temporal dimension of The Excursion is its cosmic implications. Paradise Lost has been termed the most cosmic of epics, encompassing all time and all space.[28] Its implied overall time scheme spans all time, from the 'fiat lux' to the revelationistic millenium which the archangel, Michael, reveals to Adam.[29] Implied in The Excursion is a similar time scheme stretching from creation to the apocalypse. This is how Wordsworth describes the beginning of time:

> Upon the breast of new-created earth
> Man walked; and when and whereso'er he moved,
> Alone or mated, solitude was not.

[28]The College Survey of English Literature, ed. Alexander Witherspoon et al., (New York, 1942), p. 393.

[29]Books XI and XII of Paradise Lost.

He heard, borne on the wind, the articulate voice
Of God; and Angels to his sight appeared
Crowning the glorious hills of paradise;
Or through the groves gliding like morning mist
Enkindled by the sun. He sate - and talked
With winged Messengers; who daily brought
To his small island in the ethereal deep
Tidings of joy and love. - From those pure heights
(Whether of actual vision, sensible
To sight and feeling, or that in this sort
Have condescendingly been shadowed forth
Communications spiritually maintained,
and intuitions moral and divine)
Fell Human-kind - to banishment condemned
That flowing years repealed not: and distress
And grief spread wide; but Man escaped the doom
Of destitution; - solitude was not.
- Jehovah - shapeless Power above all Powers,
Single and one, the omnipresent God,
By vocal utterance, of blaze of light,
Or cloud of darkness, localized in heaven; (IV. 631-654).

Apocalypse is described in a vision which the hero experiences:[30]

Through the dull mist, I following - when a step,
A single step, that freed me from the skirts
Of the blind vapour, opened to my view
Glory beyond all glory ever seen
By waking sense or by the dreaming soul!
The appearance, instantaneously disclosed,

[30]It is interesting to note that by attributing a visionary experience to his hero, Wordsworth may well have been following a traditional device of the epic. In The Aeneid Vergil attributes a vision to his hero; during the vision Hector appears (II. 268-297). In Book XI of The Odyssey the hero experiences a vision; in Book XVIII of The Iliad, Homer once more uses this structural device of the epic. Milton employs this epic device in Book XII of Paradise Lost.

Was of a mighty city - boldly say
A wilderness of building, sinking far
And self-withdrawn into a boundless depth,
Far sinking into splendor - without end!
Fabric it seemed of diamond and of gold,
With alabaster domes, and silver spires,
And blazing terrace upon terrace, high
Uplifted; here, serene pavilions bright,
In avenues disposed; there, towers begirt
With battlements that on their restless fronts
Bore stars - illumination of all gems!
By earthly nature had the effect been wrought
Upon the dark materials of the storm
Now pacified; on them, and on the coves
And mountain-steeps and summits, whereunto
The vapours had receded, taking there
Their station under a cerulean sky.
Oh! 'twas an unimaginable sight!
Clouds, mists, streams, watery rocks and emerald turf,
Clouds of all tincture, rocks and sapphire sky,
Confused, commingled, mutually inflamed,
Molten together, and composing thus,
Each lost in each, that marvellous array
Of temple, palace, citadel, and huge
Fantastic pomp of structure without name,
In fleecy folds voluminous, enwrapped.
Right in the midst, where interspace appeared
Of open court, an object like a throne
Under a shining canopy of state
Stood fixed; and fixed resemblances were seen
To implements of ordinary use,
But vast in size, in substance glorified;
Such as by the Hebrew Prophets were beheld
In vision - forms uncouth of mightiest power
For admiration and mysterious awe. (II. 829-869).

It may be argued that Wordsworth's final vision is secular rather than spiritual, for he does present more forcibly and more convincingly a secular apocalypse in The Excursion. He advocates for and can anticipate a time when illiteracy will be non-existent, and a golden age when the state will be the spiritual stay and moral guide of its happy subjects.

> This land shall witness; and as days roll on,
> Earth's universal frame shall feel the effect;
> Even till the smallest habitable rock,
> Beaten by lonely billows, hear the songs
> Of humanized society; and bloom
> With civil arts, that shall breathe forth their fragrance,
> A grateful tribute to all-ruling Heaven.
> From culture, unexclusively bestowed
> On Albion's noble Race in freedom born,
> Expect these mighty issues; from the pains
> And faithful care of unambitious schools
> Instructing simple childhood's ready ear:
> Thence look for these magnificent results! (IX. 385-397).

So compelling was Wordsworth secular apocalypse that The Excursion became "the poetic charter of the poor, the ignorant, and the underprivileged in a way that no English poem has been before or since."[31] The Excursion, continues Mrs. Moorman, "had become almost the Bible of the poetry-reading public, and Wordsworth's concern with the spiritual dignity of the poor earned him an honorary degree at Oxford."[32] The apocalypse is finally for Wordsworth both a spiritual and secular one; for, to him, one perforce implies the other.

The spatial dimension like the temporal is invariably vast in actuality. The travels of Odysseus spans the vast region from Ogygia to Scheria to his homeland, Ithaca. The setting of The Aeneid is vaster,

[31]Mary Moorman, William Wordsworth: A Biography (Oxford, 1965), II, 182.

[32]Moorman, p. 183.

covering almost the entire ancient world known to Vergil; from Troy Aeneas and his followers journey until they reach Latium. Considered in their proper historical perspective, and the difficult conditions of transport then taken into account, the travels of Odysseus and Aeneas are truly vast and arduous. Paradise Lost is cosmic in its setting, occupying all conceivable space, heaven, hell, and intervening chaos. The actual setting of The Excursion, however, is localized. In The Fenwick Note Wordsworth has left meaningful comments on the landscape of The Excursion:

> And now for a few words upon the scene where the interviews and conversations are supposed to occur. The scene of the first book of the Poem is, I must own, laid in a tract of country not sufficiently near to that which soon comes into view in the second book, to agree with fact. All that relates to Margaret and the ruined cottage etc., was taken from observations made in the South West of England, and certainly it would require more than sevenleague boots to stretch in one morning from a common in Somersetshire or Dorsetshire to the heights of Furness Fells and the deep valleys they embosom. For thus dealing with space I need make, I trust, no apology, but my friends may be amused by the truth.[33]

There are other inconsistencies as Wordsworth himself has pointed out and others which Lyon has found. Lyon comments:

> ... that the Grasmere island is not fringed with birch trees, there are no lilies of the vale of Grasmere, there are no goats or waterfalls near Grasmere, all of which Wordsworth describes. There are details drawn from Rydal Water and Windermere included in the description of Grasmere, which in turn has been transplanted to Little Langdale. Graves are moved from all parts of the Lake Country into the Grasmere churchyard. Wordsworth really drew his scenery from wherever he wished, and it is a hopeless and useless task, to identify all the details or try to bring them into consistency. (43)

Wordsworth's attempt at localizing his setting is deliberate as we gather from his notes already quoted. For this attempt he offers no apology, and hopes that no reader will request one. There must be a very good reason for his localizing of the setting of The Excursion, for it remained unchanged through many years of revision. Lyon misunderstands Wordsworth's poetic technique here. Behind the deliberate attempt at

[33]Alexander B. Grosart, ed., The Prose Works of William Wordsworth (London, 1876), III, p. 36.

localizing lies the poet's intention to harmonize the setting of The Excursion with its epic dimensions. Wordsworth intentionally tried to create the feeling of epic vastness when he brought scenes of Dorsetshire, Garsmere, Little Langdale, Furness Fells, and Loughrigg Fell into a localized landscape. Hazlitt understood this when he wrote, "The poem of The Excursion resembles that part of the country in which the scene is laid. It has the same vastness and magnificence . . . ."[34] Placed within the context of the kind of epic Wordsworth was writing, consciously or not, the localizing of the landscape is effective and in harmony with the unconventional use of other epic devices in The Excursion. The localizing of the scene is not "unfortunate" as Lyon asserts.[35]

Another significant structural convention of the epic journey is the catabasis, the descent into the underworld, together with the nekya or meeting with the dead.[36] Book XI of The Odyssey, appositely titled The Land of the Dead, describes Odysseus' descent into the underworld where he meets his mother and the heroes and heroines of Greek mythology. In the sixth book of The Aeneid Vergil has his hero, with the help of the Cumaean Sybil and the talismanic Golden Bough, descend into Hades and commune with the unburied dead. Dante, in accordance with epic convention, has his Poet and Vergil journey down into hell to learn from the lost

[34]William Hazlitt, "Observations on Mr. Wordsworth's Poem The Excursion," English Romantic Writers, ed. David Perkins (New York, 1967), p. 613.

[35]Lyon, p. 43.

[36]Even Pope, in his mock-epic masterpiece employs this device. See Canto IV of The Rape of The Lock, where the Cave of Spleen represents Hades.

souls there. Milton, too, employs this epic device less conventionally when he takes the reader to Hell where Satan and his cohorts reside. Wordsworth uses this structural device still less conventionally than Milton. Books VI and VII of The Excursion are Wordsworth's quite unorthodox version of the traditional catabasis and nekya.[37]

Geoffrey Hartman considers Books VI and VII of The Excursion "an involuntary parody of the epic nekya or descent to the dead." Although Hartman is the only critic to discern a possible epic structural dimension in The Excursion, he is guilty on two counts. First he misuses the term nekya, in that he confuses it with the catabasis. These terms are not interchangeable. Secondly, Hartman does not really understand Wordsworth's poetic method here. A narrow examination of the Oxford Annotated Edition of The Excursion reveals that Wordsworth very consciously Christianized certain parts of the poem. He rejected sections in favour of passages fraught with Christian overtones. Since both the theme and matter of The Excursion are Christian, Wordsworth, in order to be artistically consistent, had to Christianize certain epic conventions. The combined catabasis and nekya is one that required Christianization.

Since the obstacle is spiritual in the case of the Solitary, the physical descent is appropriately replaced by a spiritual and emotional descent. Classical Hades is replaced by a village churchyard. Unlike

[37]In Book II of The Excursion there seems to be another catabasis and nekya, though a less convincing one. The epic poet tells us that the Poet and the Wanderer experience "a steep and difficult descent" into the "profound abyss" out of which issues a funeral train. The descent and the overtones of death conveyed by the funeral suggest a catabasis. Once the descent is completed the Wanderer and the Poet meet the Solitary, whom they initially assumed dead. Tenuously implied, I think, is a version of the epic nekya, or meeting with the dead. The perceptive mind will note that the Wanderer is the hero of The Excursion until the appearance of the Solitary. There is a structural parallel in Paradise Lost where Satan is the hero of the first two books. It is the hero who usually makes the catabasis and the nekya; to discern that the Wanderer is the hero makes Wordsworth's use of this epic device consistent with traditional usage though it remains unorthodox.

Dante and Milton, authors of Christian epics, Wordsworth in his Christian epic does not allow his hero to descend physically into hell. Rather he allows the Pastor, a spiritual guide, to conduct the Solitary through the lives of the deceased. The line, "Ere we descend into these silent vaults" (V. 668), thoroughly suggests the epic catabasis or descent into the underworld. The catabasis invariably leads to the nekya. Like the Poet of The Divine Comedy the Solitary, too, descends "into these silent vaults" with a spiritual guide.

The Solitary meets the dead in a less tangible way than do the heroes of Homer, Vergil and Dante. He has no verbal contact with the dead as Aeneas and Odysseus do; neither does he have any visual contact with the dead as the Poet of The Divine Comedy has. Yet the Solitary is considerably moved as the Pastor eloquently pronounces his "authentic epitaphs." So graphic and compelling is the Pastor's description, that the deceased seem to "live in song." In the lives of the deceased the Solitary sees much of his own suffering.

As in the Classical epics, the nekya in The Excursion is a turning point for the hero. During the his nekya, Odysseus is shown his future obstacles and is advised how to obviate or overcome them. In the nekya of The Aeneid, Anchises expounds to his son, the hero, the Pythagorean doctrine of the transmigration of souls and shows him the future illustrious figures of Roman history. This interview with Anchises dispels Aeneas' diffidence, and confirms his courage thus ensuring the successful outcome of the hero's epic journey. Likewise, to the Solitary, his nekya or meeting with the dead is by far the most telling event, the most rewarding experience, of his entire excursion. Like the Classical heroes, he, too, is taken back into the past and is shown a way to future happiness. It is during his meeting with the dead that the Solitary regains

his belief in God and his confidence in social man. Like Odysseus and Aeneas, the Solitary is a spiritually changed person as a result of his nekya, his meeting with the dead.

Another important structural device of the epic which The Excursion exhibits is the epic catalogue. The epic catalogue traditionally enumerates characters, their temperament and their special abilities, which are brought into focus as the narrative unfolds. In The Iliad Homer presents two separate epic catalogues, one of the Greek ships (II. 484-785) which he no doubt considers characters, and the other of the Trojan forces (II. 786-877). In Book VII of The Aeneid, Vergil catalogues in formal detail the Italian tribes and their leaders who are joining forces to expel the Trojans (647-817). Milton describes, in epic fashion, the fallen angels in first book of Paradise Lost, and in Book II he has them utter speeches which reveal their attitudes, past and present. Wordsworth, like Homer, chooses a series of non-human objects as the subject of his catalogue. Homer chooses Greek ships; Wordsworth chooses trees and endows them with human attributes as Homer did to his ships.

> Full oft his doings leave me to deplore
> Tall ash-tree, sown by winds, by vapours nursed,
> In the dry crannies of the pendent rocks;
> Light birch, aloft on the horizon's edge,
> A veil of glory for the ascending moon;
> And oak whose roots by noontide dew were damped,
> And on whose forehead inaccessible,
> The raven lodged in safety. - Many a ship
> Launched into Morecamb-bay, to him hath owed
> Her strong knee-timbers, and the mast that bears
> The loftiest of her pendants; He, from park
> Or forest, fetched and enormous axle-tree
> That whirls (how slow itself) ten thousand spindles:
> And the vast engine labouring in the mine,
> Content with meaner prowess, must have lacked

The trunk and body of its marvellous strength,
If his undaunted enterprise had failed
Among the mountain coves.
Yon household fir,
A guardian planted to fence off the blast,
But towering high the roof above, as if
Its humble destination were forgot -
That sycamore, which annually holds
Within its shade, as in a stately tent
On all sides open to the fanning breeze,
A grave assemblage, seated while they shear
The fleece-encumbered flock - the JOYFUL ELM,
Around whose trunk the maidens dance in May -
And the LORD'S OAK - would plead their several rights
In vain, if he were master of their fate;
His sentence to the axe would doom them all. (VII. 595-624).

One structural convention of the epic that The Excursion does not possess is the epic machinery which, according to Pope, is "that part which the Deities, Angels, or Daemons are made to act in a poem."[38] Homer and Vergil employ the gods and goddesses of Classical mythology as characters in their epics. Milton, drawing upon the Christian heritage, uses God, Satan, and the nine orders of Angels to form his epic machinery. Wordsworth, however, breaks with tradition and completely omits the epic machinery in The Excursion. In omitting the epic machinery from his poem, Wordsworth is acting in accordance with his artistic beliefs. For he agrees with Clement who, in a letter already quoted (pg. 8), wrote to Voltaire: "Without doubt the intervention of God, of angels, and saints, ought not to be employed to enliven our poetry, as Homer employed Mars, Juno, Vulcan, Venus and her cestus." Instead of employing the epic machinery, Wordsworth followed Clement's prescription and created "an air of inspired prophecy and supernatural wonder diffused throughout the

[38] From the Preface to The Rape Of The Lock (1712).

entire poem, a spiritual atmosphere which shows a mysterious link between man and an order more powerful than and superior to man."[39] Wordsworth was a keen student of Homer and Vergil and know the conventional requirements of the epic. Yet he was courageous enough, in practice, to disagree with, and depart from, a venerable tradition when that tradition was no longer valid.

We may conclude then that The Excursion is a poem which exhibits almost all the major structural devices of the Classical and Miltonic epic. Some of those devices, however, are used unconventionally. The Excursion is epic in structure, possessing its invocation to the Muse, its epic question, its statement of its "high argument," its in medias res beginning, its unconventional but identifiable catabasis and nekya, its vast, epic scope, its epic catalogue, and the basic metaphor of a journey of rebirth. Its epic dimensions are further enhanced by the presence of twenty-six epic similes, many of which "have an authentic Classical, Miltonic quality."[40] To say that The Excursion is an epic poem is not mere speculation as Lyon asserts (133). Despite Wilkie's categorical claim to the contrary (77), The Excursion achieves the distinction of being the most successful attempt at true epic expression in the Romantic Age. More than any other Romantic poem, The Excursion is carefully patterned after the epics of Homer, Vergil, and Milton. Yet it remains an original and unique epic in many respects.

[39]Wilkie, p. 62.

[40]Lyon, p. 135.

PART TWO

Within the larger epic structure of The Excursion there are two other structural patterns that ought to be discussed. They are related to, yet separate from, the epic structure. The structure of The Excursion is the structure of a pilgrimage, closely resembling at certain stages the journey of the Poet and Vergil in The Divine Comdey. The journey operates on two separate levels of interpretation; the literal level which recounts the physical wanderings of the pilgrims, and the metaphoric plane which describes the journey as a spiritual and mental odyssey. There is in The Excursion always a positive correlation between the physical excursion and the mental and spiritual attitude of the pilgrims.

The Excursion opens with the Poet toiling languidly across the slippery turf of a "bare wide Common," under the pleasant sun of a summer forenoon. Like a ship, the Poet journeys steadily to the "wished-for port," the shade of "a brotherhood of lofty elms." Here on this flat "open moorland," the Poet meets the Wanderer who soon becomes his spiritual guide as they journey along. The structural parallel with The Divine Comedy is apparent here. It is quite significant that the Wanderer and the Poet meet on flat ground, for the flatness of the physical landscape suggests metaphorically the normal level of spiritual life. The journey for the Poet and the Wanderer does not begin on an incline or in a vale but on flat country.

It is also significant that the Poet is described as "toiling" whereas the Wanderer as "resting" There is a spiritual difference between the Poet and his moral guide. This difference is nicely phrased by Lyon who writes: "the Solitary represents the metaphysical terminus a quo and the

Wanderer the terminus ad quem, with Poet falling somewhere between the two and the Pastor presenting a detached special point of view" (68). The Poet is toiling because he has not yet reached the metaphysical goal, though he desires to.

The Wanderer relates, for the spiritual edification of the Solitary, the moving story of Margaret, the last tenant of the cottage close to which they are standing. Night falls and the two pilgrims pass the night at a village inn. Morning dawns, and the Poet and his spiritual guide, after the fashion of Dante, set out under "favourable skies." On the fourth morning, the Poet describes the first ascent of the poem:

> We started and he the Wanderer led me toward the hills,
> Up through an ample vale, with higher hills
> Before us, mountains stern and desolate (II. 90-92).

This physical ascent at the same time suggests a lifting of spirits. For it is during their ascent from the flat "open moorland," that their spirits are elevated to such a height that the Poet can say with pleasant gratification:

> pacing side by side,
> Could, with an eye of leisure, look on all
> That we beheld, and lend the listening sense
> To every grateful sound of earth and air;
> Pausing at will - our spirits braced, our thoughts
> Pleasant as roses in the thicket blown,
> And pure as dew bathing their crimson leaves (II. 104-10).

During their ascent the Poet and the Wanderer encounter "a throng of people," proclaiming "the annual wake." 'Blithe notes of music," the raising of flags, the "party-coloured knot," all suggest an atmosphere of merry fulfilment. Here on this rising ground, even nature herself seems to favour the activities of the joyous revellers.

> Beyond the limits of the shadow cast
> By the broad hill glistened upon our sight

That gay assemblage. Round them and above,
Glitter, with dark recesses interposed,
Casement, and cottage-roof, and stems of trees
Half-veiled in vapoury cloud, the silver steam
Of dews fast melting on their leafy boughs
By the strong sunbeams smitten. Like a mast
Of gold, the Maypole shines; as if the rays
Of morning, aided by exhaling dew,
With gladsome influence, could re-animate
The faded garlands dangling from its sides (II. 126-37).

The Maypole ceremony provides a structural parallel to the funeral train which issues from the "profound abyss." This juxtaposition - for the funeral is in effect the next event to be described, is the juxtaposition of opposing ideas. There is of course the contrast between the merriment and fulfilment suggested by the Maypole ceremony, and the bereavement and sense of loss implied by the funeral. There is, too, an implied contrast between Paganism and Christianity; but the joyousness of the "gay assemblage" does not seem inferior to the solemnity of the funeral procession. Indeed the Pagan ceremony reveals a harmony between man and nature which is the theme of The Excursion; the funeral suggests a breach in nature.

But the real significance of the juxtaposition lies in its hermeneutical relationship with the stages of the metaphoric journey. The Wanderer and the Poet encounter the "gay assemblage" during their ascent, the funeral as they begin their descent into the lonely dell. The physical contrast between ascent and descent is redolent of a contrast of spiritual climates. The world of the "gay assemblage" is one which asserts confidence in human fellowship; the funeral is a world of death and separation.

The Wanderer and the Poet pause at the top of the abyss to observe closely the funeral train as it issues from the "heart/Of that profound

abyss," to which their course is directed. After the sombre strains of the funeral dirge fade in the distance, the two pilgrims attempt "a steep and difficult descent" into the home of the Solitary, who "wastes the sad remainder of his hours,/Steeped in a self-indulgent spleen." Thinking that the funeral they saw was the Solitary's, the Poet and the Wanderer, in this new physical and spiritual atmosphere, decide to explore this "cool recess." The sense of life and fellowship evident during their ascent is absent here. The absence of life serves to confirm their belief that the Solitary is dead. Suddenly, they behold the Solitary approaching from "the enclosure of green fields," leading and comforting a child who walks at his side. The three men exchange friendly greetings, and the despondent Solitary begins the story of the funeral. Having finished his story for the time being, the Solitary invites the two pilgrims to his dwelling to "be feasted with the best." They share a "pastoral banquet" and the host, at the request of Wanderer, resumes and completes his affecting story. They leave the hut. The Solitary's physical and spiritual journey has begun.

Wordsworth explicitly describes the journey of The Solitary as a gradual ascent preceded by a period of stasis. Wordsworth has made the mind of man the "haunt and main region" of his poem; the physical setting of the poem, therefore, is also the landscape of the mind. The Solitary begins his journey from within the deep "urn-shaped" valley, geographically the lowest point of the physical landscape. Analogically, then, the Solitary begins his spiritual odyssey from his spiritual nadir, from spleenful despondency and loss of faith in God and in social man. From this lowest point, the Solitary, with the Wanderer and the Poet, leaves his cottage and journeys "through a strait passage of unencumbered ground," and soon reaches a spot where "all further progress was barred." As the Poet

looks around this "enclosed nook," he espies a mass of rock resembling a stranded ship, with keel upturned. This is indeed apt, for Wordsworth presents it as a imagistic correlative of the Solitary's spiritual plight. Here, in this "enclosed nook," where "all further progress [is] barred," the Solitary symbolically resembles the stranded ship, with keep upturned, which cannot without help, make further progress and reach its haven of rest. The "sick" Solitary desperately needs the help of God and social man if he is to journey to his haven of spiritual fulfilment.

The Wanderer and the Poet possess a transcendental faith in God's benevolence; consequently they do not betray any despondent emotions correspondent with those which the Solitary feels and expresses. They retain their sanguine cheerfulness which they exhibited throughout the journey across the "open moorland," during their ascent towards the hills, and in their descent into the keep recess. The merriment and fellowship which the "gay assemblage" evince may very well be an imagistic reflection of the spiritual buoyancy of the Poet and the Wanderer; in the same way the funeral may represent the gloom and absence of vital life that has characterized the Solitary's spleenful existence for so long.

While in this nook where "all further progress [is] barred," the Solitary utters his most despondent sentiments. The Wanderer, blessed with an impregnable faith in God, in Nature, and in Man, is able to praise these surroundings, perceiving behind them "A semblance strange of power intelligent." He considers the closed recess "a cabinet for sages built,/ Which kings might envy!" The despondent Solitary, however, cannot share his friend's positive attitude. He deems the same recess, "The sport of Nature, aided by blind Chance/Rudely to mock the works of toiling Man." At this lowest point of his physical and spiritual journey, the Solitary

continues his morbidly despondent feelings:

> 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, for the Soul
> To quit the beaten track of life, and soar
> Far as she finds a yielding element
> In past or future; far as she can go
> Through time or space - if neither in the one,
> Nor in the other region, nor in aught
> That Fancy, dreaming o'er the map of things,
> Hath placed beyond those penetrable bounds,
> Words of assurance can be heard; if nowhere
> 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? (III. 211-24).

The Wanderer replies sententiously:

> verily, methinks
> Wisdom is ofttimes nearer when we stoop
> Than when we soar (III. 228-30).

His faith is not at its lowest ebb, neither is the Poet's during their confinement in this "enclosed nook," While the Solitary remains here, however, his despondency increases and reaches its most abject intensity:

> If I must take my choice between the pair
> That rule alternately, the weary hours,
> Night is more acceptable; sleep
> Doth, in my estimate of good, appear
> A better state than waking; death than sleep:
> Feelingly sweet is stillness after the storm,
> Though under covert of the wormy ground (III. 275-81).

The Wanderer recognizes the urgent necessity of moving on from the enclosed recess which has prompted the darkest words of despair from the Solitary. Offering an excuse for his spate of words, the Wanderer

invites both the Solitary and the Poet to continue their journey; for remaining in this spot cannot help the Solitary:

> But why this tedious record? - Age we know,
> Is garrulous; and solitude is apt
> To anticipate the privilege of Age.
> From far ye come; and surely with a hope
> Of better entertainment; - Let us hence! (III. 325-29).

The Poet, in his habitual optimism, is loth to forsake the spot and still more loth to be diverted from the "present theme." Quite surprisingly he acquiesces with sentiments of the Solitary; the Poet's acquiescence only fosters further despondency in the mind of the Solitary. Still at his spiritual nadir, the Solitary scathingly criticizes the futility of the efforts of those who seek the tranquil fulfilment of their hopes. He voluntarily embarks on his moving story and doggedly asserts that "Mutability is Nature's bane." He concludes his story by resigning himself to the hope

> That his particular current soon will reach
> The unfathomable gulf, where all is still! (III. 990-91).

Just as in The Divine Comedy the vision of hell is the necessary preliminary to the visions of Purgatory and of Paradise, and as hell is the death that must, artistically, precede rebirth; so, too, in The Excursion it seems that the Solitary must descend to the lowest depths, physical and spiritual, before he can begin his long, arduous ascent. His telling of his personal story is best understood as a homeopathic act. In spleen he relates his tragic story in order to purge himself of his spleen. While at this lowest point, he must relive his heart-rending chagrin as a necessary preparation for spiritual change.

The Solitary ends his "mournful narrative." The Wanderer replies by asseverating that a firm belief in God is the only adequate stay for human life under affliction. "Faith absolute in God," continues the

Wanderer, is the safeguard of the world, and the cure for "the sick at heart," and for languid spirits. These are the Wanderer's last sentiments before he continues his walk. As he once more is on the move, the Wanderer praises the immanence of God and avers that he is "bound to worship, here and everywhere." He importunes that Duty exists and is alone subject neither to wane nor to eclipse. Immutably Duty survives, for though the "universe shall pass away," Duty will live on as a lambent reflection of God's infinite majesty. The Wanderer's remarks become more applicable to the Solitary. For the wise, old man knows that once the Solitary is removed from that "shy retreat," his spiritual stasis is over and he can begin his spiritual ascent. The Wanderer, as he moves away from the "enclosed nook," blandly chides the Solitary's despondency and "absolute despair," and discusses tactfully the noxious effects of such negative emotions. Conscience should be obeyed, postulates the Wanderer, for Conscience is "God's most intimate presence in the soul/And his most perfect image in the world." (IV. 226-27).

The Wanderer ends his speech and he and his two companions are next seen travelling across "A plot of green sward, seemingly preserved/By nature's care from wreck of scattered stones." (IV. 242-43). The plot is small but "smooth and commodious" and resembles

> a stately deck
> Which to and fro the mariner is used
> To tread for pastime, talking with his mates,
> Or haply thinking of far-distant friends,
> While the ship glides before a steady breeze. (IV. 246-50).

Wordsworth once more employs the metaphor of the ship; this time, however, the ship "glides" instead of being shipwrecked, with keel upturned. It is through such metaphors and "fair trains of imagery" that Wordsworth expresses the various stages of the Solitary's spiritual growth. The Solitary, removed from the nook where "all further progress was barred,"

is now like the ship that "glides" to the "wished-for port to which its course is bound."

As the afternoon advances, the three pilgrims make their way back to the Solitary's cottage. It is during their walk from the "enclosed nook" back to the cottage that the Solitary evinces the first signs of a changing mind. While he enjoys the camaraderie of the afternoon walk, the Solitary expresses a genuine desire to change his inveterate way of life. There is an implied unity of action in the setting out from and return to the cottage. Significantly, the Solitary returns home a changed person. His change is a direct result of his excursion.

In the morning, however, the Solitary resumes his habitual despondency, for he refuses to join the Wanderer and the Poet as they resume their excursion. The three pilgrims pause on a "rocky knoll" and, here on this "rocky knoll," the Solitary "puts forth his hand/In sign of farewell" (V. 67-68). Wordsworth's characterization of the Solitary is subtle here; so is his use of landscape. The physical ascent should suggest a corresponding spiritual change; but the Solitary "absolute despair" has long been a personal praxis and cannot be cured in an instant.

On the height of this "rocky knoll" the Solitary has reached a crossroads of decision. On this rising ground, he decides, though reluctantly, to accompany the Wanderer and the Poet as they begin their walk to the village churchyard. The Solitary has made a positive and crucial decision, and this marks a high point in his spiritual development. Here on this "rocky moorland" the Solitary finally decides to quit his lonely dwelling, to forsake his life of self-indulgent spleen and enjoy Nature's bounty and the rewards of human fellowship. Here on this height the Solitary once more starts his spiritual and physical excursion.

The three pilgrims descend from the "rocky moorland" and soon "Attain

a point that showed the valley." From this spot they behold "not distant far/Upon a rising ground, a grey church tower," their immediate destination. Significantly the church is set upon "rising ground"; for on this "rising ground," all three pilgrims and, in particular, the Solitary, are spiritually elevated. On this "rising ground," the Wanderer and the Poet reaffirm their faith in God, and the Solitary experiences a spiritual rebirth. This is a high point for all three, especially for the Solitary.

When the Pastor invites the three pilgrims to visit his dwelling, the Solitary shrinks "with backward will." Again, he agrees very reluctantly to join the fellowship. Moments after the spiritual edification of the Pastor's moving homily, the Solitary is still mistrustful of social man, who had once betrayed his most cherished ambitions. The pilgrims, accompanied by the Pastor, journey to his mansion which, like the church, is situated on an elevation. It is situated on a "smooth slope," surrounded by an Arcadian landscape of gay flowers and flowering shrubs. The Pastor's mansion is a metonymic image of its tenants. Their tranquil happiness, their close proximity to God and to Nature as suggested by their dwelling and its surroundings. In much the same way the Solitary's lonely hut is a metonymic image of its tenant; the inner "wreck" of the cabin quite accurately mirrors the mental and spiritual disorder that have long tormented the Solitary.

The four men enter the Pastor's mansion and greet the Pastor's wife, whom the Poet meaningfully describes as "a stately ship" which "Sails in smooth weather by the coast on homeward voyage." Wordsworth once more employs the metaphor of the ship; the "goodly Matron" is on her homeward voyage to that final haven of rest. The Solitary admires, even to the point of harmless envy, the "consummate harmony" of the Pastor's dwelling. On this

"rising ground," and surrounded by amenities conducive to spiritual change, the Solitary addresses most significant words to the "goodly Matron," "A blessed lot is yours!"

After "a plain repast," the Pastor's wife extends an invitation to all:

> How temptingly the landscape shines! the air
> Breathes invitation: easy is the walk
> To the lake's margin, where a boat lies moored
> Under a sheltering tree. (IX. 423-26).

For the first time in the narrative, the Solitary accepts an invitation to enjoy social fellowship without any reluctance. All rose together, narrates the Poet, and "all were pleased and went down the vale," mute or conversing, single or in pairs. As he descends into the vale, the Solitary is evidently a changed person; he has apparently regained his confidence in social man. The company pursue their way and board a waiting boat, which the Poet rows across the lake to a spot

> on the western shore;
> Where the bare columns of those lofty firs,
> Supporting gracefully a massy dome
> Of sombre foliage, seem to imitate
> A Grecian temple rising from the Deep. (IX. 498-502).

This journey towards the west, towards the setting sun, recalls so many other famous journeys in literature. Wordsworth uses to good advantage the persistent literary motif of the journey of spiritual rebirth. Having attained their destination, all participate soon afterwards in a "vesper-service," during which the Solitary's inveterate spleen returns momentarily. His complaint, however, does not disturb the evening tranquillity. As the "vesper-service" comes to a close, the Pastor leads his "flock" up a green hillside to the 'soft heath" of "an elevated spot" from where they enjoy a fair prospect of the surrounding landscape bathed

in the soft glow of the setting sun. Here on this fertile height, the company sit reclined and enjoy spiritual edification and feel at one with the "unity sublime." Here on this geographical and spiritual height the Pastor pronounces his benediction. Here on the highest point of the excursion the Solitary's journey ends.

Once the "vesper-service" has ended, the company descend and make their "homeward course," in mute composure across the "dewy fields" to the door of the Pastor's dwelling. From the elevation of this special communion, they return to the flat Common of normal life. Before he reaches the Pastor's door, the Solitary exchanges farewell greetings with all, promising that he "would share the pleasures and pursuits/Of yet another summer's day" (IX. 776-77). The Solitary takes "the slender path that leads/To the one cottage in the lonely dell " (IX. 774-75). He returns home a spiritually converted man.

The Excursion possesses an impressive unity of landscape and action. The poem begins with the Poet toiling across "the slippery turf" of a "wide Common," and appropriately ends with the Poet, among others, journeying across the "dewy fields." The Solitary's excursion from, and return to, his cottage suggests a unity of action. Too, his journey is artistically well executed. His excursion begins as he issues from the "enclosed nook" where "all further progress was barred," and ends on an elevated spot which commands an unlimited prospect of the surrounding landscape. Greater unity of action and landscape is apparent when we recall that the Solitary makes his very first appearance in the narrative approaching his hut from "the enclosure of green fields"; as he fades from the narrative he is journeying to his cottage along "the slender path" that leads to his dwelling.

The geographical ascents and descents in The Excursion represent the

analogous spiritual elevations and falls of the Solitary. His spiritual nadir is evident when he is enclosed in that nook where "all further progress was barred"; and his spiritual zenith occurs on that elevated spot when he feels part of the "unity sublime" of the universe. Over mountains and valleys of spiritual experience the Solitary has travelled and finally attains the plain of his former positive belief in the benevolence of God, of confidence in social man. The physical excursion has spiritually "healed" the "sick" tenant of the lonely vale.

PART THREE

Within the overall epic pattern of The Excursion, there are, besides the structure of the journey itself, certain liturgical elements. Several aspects of a Protestant worship service are present. There is prayer of invocation, a prayer of thanksgiving, a homily, an identifiable eucharist, a song that is analogous to the recessional lymn, followed by a benedictory prayer. To be sure, all the elements of a Protestant eucharist service are not present; yet those elements that are employed are so organized as to give the reader the impression that The Excursion possesses a unified structural pattern in the form of a Protestant worship service. In Book IV, the Wanderer utters his prayer of invocation; forty-six lines from the end of The Excursion, the Pastor concludes his "vesper-service" with a benedictory prayer.

Wordsworth's choice and use of the liturgical pattern are fortunate, for through them he enjoys greater possibilities of expression. Wordsworth himself was gradually becoming enamoured of the doctrines of orthodox Anglicanism; the conscious Christianizing of certain passages and the use of the liturgical pattern with which he very familiar may very well reflect his spiritual change. The use of the liturgical pattern is, in one way, Wordsworth's answer to the Classical spatial journey. The journey in The Excursion is, in the main, a spiritual, temporal one since the emphasis is on the spiritual and mental recovery of the "sick" Solitary. The hero of The Excursion no longer embodies the Classical ideal of theios aner,[1] or the attainment of divinity. The Classical epic hero attained fulfilment to a great extent through exploits that required

[1] Otis Brooks, Vergil: A study in Civilized Poetry (Oxford, 1964) p. 220. Brooks offers a brief but scholarly account of this concept in connection with Aeneas, its embodiment in The Aeneid.

military expertise and physical prowess. The Christian seeks fulfilment through normal experience, an integral part of which is the worship of God. The spiritual odyssey has supplanted the Classical epic journey which invariably entailed the hero's meeting and overcoming of almost insuperable obstacles. Organized worship affords the Christian an opportunity to reaffirm his faith in God's supremacy, an opportunity to foster his spiritual growth, and the opportunity to enjoy social fellowship. Herein lies the true significance of Wordsworth's use of the liturgical pattern in The Excursion.

After the Solitary has undergone the purgatorial experience of graphically recounting his own affecting story, the Wanderer, in his reverend wisdom, asserts that

> One adequate support
> For the calamities of mortal life
> Exists - one only; an assured belief
> That the procession of our fate, howe'er
> Sad or disturbed, is ordered by a Being
> Of infinite benevolence and power;
> Whose everlasting purpose embrace
> All accidents, converting them to good. (IV. 10-17).

This pithy remark on the benevolence of God resembles, in tone and theme, the call to worship or prayer of invocation that normally initiates the service of worship.[2] Very appositely, the Wanderer's prayer of thanksgiving and supplication follows not long afterwards. It is appropriate that the liturgical pattern should begin here; for this conjuncture is, in effect, the real beginning of the Solitary's spiritual

[2]William D. Maxwell, Outline of Christian Worship: Its Development and Forms (Oxford, 1936), pp. 152-3.

journey. The prayer of thanksgiving and supplication reads:

> How beautiful this dome of sky;
> And the vast hills, in fluctuation fixed
> At they command, how awful! Shall the Soul,
> Human and rational, report of thee
> Even less than these! Be mute who will, who can,
> Yet I will praise thee with impassioned voice:
> My lips, that may forget thee in the crowd,
> Cannot forget thee here; where thou has built,
> For thy own glory, in the wilderness!
> Me didst thou constitute a priest of thine,
> In such a temple as we now behold
> Reared for thy presence: therefore am I bound
> To worship, here, and everywhere - as one
> Not doomed to ignorance, though forced to tread,
> From childhood up, the ways of poverty;
> From unreflecting ignorance preserved,
> And from debasement rescued. - By the grace
> The particle divine remained unquenched;
> And, 'mid the wild weeds of a rugged soil,
> Thy bounty caused to flourish deathless flowers,
> From Paradise transplanted: wintry age
> Impends; the frost will gather round my heart;
> If the flowers wither, I am worse than dead!
> - Come, labour, when the worn-out frame requires
> Perpetual sabbath; come, disease and want;
> And sad exclusion through decay of sence;
> But leave me unabated trust in thee -
> And let thy favour, to the end of life,
> Inspire me with the ability to seek
> Repose and hope among eternal things -
> Father of heaven and earth! and I am rich,
> And will possess my portion in content! (IV. 34-65).

The Wanderer offers his prayer in gratitude to God because His presence is immanent and, above all, because He is a just and merciful God. The Wanderer implores God to prosper his efforts and to speak to

the heart of him who has utterly forsaken God and utterly lost "confidence in social man." The Wanderer's religious orthodoxy is calculated to instil some life in the spiritually moribund heart of the despondent Solitary. The "reverend sage" then asserts the love of fellowship that is apparent in all Nature's manifestations; and exhorts the Solitary to "Take courage and withdraw himself from ways/That run not parallel to Nature's course" (IV. 489-90). Like the minister who invites his congregation to join in the worship of God, the Wanderer invites the Solitary to "Rise with the lark," to emulate the bee that flits from garden to "new-blown heath," to chase the wild goat, so that when twilight shadows lengthen he will "sink at evening into sound repose."

As in a worship-service the desired atmosphere is created, so too, here at this point in the excursion the necessary atmosphere is evoked. The desire atmosphere is ideally one that is conducive to spiritual growth. The Solitary is apparently deeply moved by the Wanderer's prayer and words of advice and encouragement and, with "kindling eye" raised "towards the hills," he begins a speech that betrays a changing attitude towards God, Man, and Nature. Perhaps Wordsworth, in describing the Solitary's attitude, had in mind the words of that great Psalm of hope, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help."[3] Change dawns upon the heart of the "sick" man. With change there is hope. In a strain of transport, the Solitary proclaims:

> Oh! What a joy it were, in vigorous health,
> To have a body (this our vital frame
> With shrinking sensibility endued,
> And all the nice regards of flesh and blood)
> And to the elements surrender it
> As if it were a spirit. (IV. 508-12)

[3]The Book of Common Prayer, Psalm CXXI, p. 663.

The lambent light of encouragement and hope has begun to dispel the thick gloom of disillusionment that has palled the mind of the Solitary since his abortive ambitions for the French Revolution. In words the Solitary relives the "virgin passion" of a soul over-powered by Nature's ravishing charm:

> How divine,
> The liverty, for frail, for mortal man
> To roam at large among unpeopled glens
> And mountainous retirements, only trod
> By devious footsteps: regions consecrate
> To oldest time! (IV. 513-18).

The Wanderer and the Poet are both delighted with these words of positive thinking from the Solitary. The Wanderer resumes his insistent exhortation, even departing from exhortation to tactfully chide the apostate Solitary, as the minister is wont to do. In content and tone the Wanderer's words of encouragement resemble a sermon; its personal as well as universal applicability is also evident.

> A piteous lot it were to flee from Man -
> Yet not rejoice in Nature. He, whose hours
> Are by domestic pleasure uncaressed
> And unelivened; who exists whole years
> Apart from benefits received or done
> Mid the transactions of the bustling crowd;
> Who neither hears, nor feels a wish to hear,
> Of the world's interests- such a one hath need
> Of a quick fancy and an active heart,
> That for a day's consumption, books may yield
> Food not unwholesome; earth and air correct
> His morbid humour, with delight supplied
> Or solace, varying as the seasons change. (IV. 575-87).

Egged on by the stream of his own homiletic discourse, the Wanderer shifts the focus of his message back to the immanence of God which, he contends, all must feel. Even the Chaldean shepherds, pagan though they

were, as they ranged the "trackless fields," the Wanderer asserts, felt this presence and in response to it built the tower of Belus. The "venerable sage" further reasons that all Classical mythology is an imaginative attempt to explain the mysterious presence and its relationship with mortals. Once more the Wanderer's words have a markedly positive effect on the Solitary. The effect is described by the Poet in this way:

> The strain was aptly chosen, and I could mark
> Its kindly influence, o'ver the yielding brow
> Of our Companion, gradually diffused (IV. 888-90).

The "yielding brow," I would put forward, suggests more significantly the gradual yielding of an inveterately obdurate mind to the soothing influence of cogent, persuasive argument. The Solitary, in his spiritual climb, questions the propriety of the Wanderer's "sowing afresh/The weeds of Romish phantasy" (IV. 907-8), and comments appropriately on the "blessed restoration" and the praiseworthy activities of St. Anne, St. Fillian, and St. Giles, saints especially revered in Scotland.[4] A sense of patriotism and religious solicitude is slowly infiltrating the changing mind of the Solitary as, by degrees, he is emerging from his self-imposed cocoon of taciturn dormancy.

When the Wanderer has finished his moving homily on the "spiritual presence," and the immutable "law of duty," and had gently pleaded with the Solitary to seek "lights and guides" more edifying than Candide, because the distressed spirit cannot hope to find any lasting refuge in the levity of this "dull product of a scoffer's pen," the Solitary, we are told, is "touched/With manifest emotion" (IV. 1078-79). The "yielding brow" is surely becoming the yielding mind and heart. From despair and apostasy the Solitary has travelled to arrive at the crossroads of desire, a few

[4]The Excursion, p. 428.

steps away from resolution on the way to final acceptance of the benevolence of God and the essential goodness of social man:

> But how begin? and whence? - "The mind is free -
> Resolve," the haughty Moralist would say,
> "This single act is all we demand."
> Alas! such wisdom bids the creature fly
> Whose very sorrow is that time shown
> His natural wings! To friendship let him turn
> To succour; but perhaps he sits alone
> On stormy waters, tossed in a little boat
> That holds but him, and can contain no more! (IV. 1080-88).

Doubt lingers in the Solitary's mind, but through the fading mist we catch glimpses of the kindling fires of spiritual longing. Like the unregenerate sinner, the Solitary in the presence of the Almighty, wonders whether he is worthy of God's "bounty absolute." He asks if Heaven will condescend to him, the most unworthy of men; to him whose heart owns not God; if Heaven will send showers of Grace and promise into his "parched and withered soul." He wonders, too, whether his groaning spirit "can cast her load/At the Redeemer's feet" (IV. 1098-99).

The Solitary's spiritual questioning is answered by the Wanderer who avers that for the Solitary "assuredly, a hopeful road/Lies open"; and adds that there are manifold ways of reaching God. The wise old man further asserts that Nature never fails to provide "impulse and utterance" to the heart that is open to receive her. The Wanderer extends an invitation to the Solitary to accompany the Poet and himself as they seek to hear and understand "the inarticulate language" of Nature which perforce speaks at Heaven's command. When the three pilgrims decide to spend the night in "the small cottage in the lonely dell," we realize that the Solitary has accepted his companion's invitation. He decides to explore Nature in the hope of recapturing something of his past affection for God and Nature. This is his decision as night brings inviting sleep and soft

forgetfulness to tired limbs.

Night gives the Solitary enough time to think over his decision and, in the morning with his returning cynical attitude, he raises his hand in a sign of farewell to the Wanderer and the Poet. The Wanderer, however, encourages the reluctant pilgrim to remain with them and meet the Pastor. Once within the sacred Pile, the Solitary assumes a meditative pose as he leans against the baptismal font, standing "gracefully" as "if his mind were rapt, or lost/In some abstraction" (V. 213-14). "Gracefully" is indeed a truly significant word especially since it is used in connection with the baptismal font and a spiritually changing sceptic. For although its denotative meaning is applicable in this context, "gracefully" should be interpreted connotatively. The Solitary is symbolically standing in God's grace. This pregnant scene anticipates the Solitary's re-baptism into the grace of God and into the grace of human fellowship at the end of The Excursion.

Pauline conversions are rare indeed; the scepticism born of chagrin returns to plague the yielding mind of the Solitary. From observation on the inherent rightness of baptism, the Solitary descends into an acrid harangue on Religion and Philosophy:

> Philosophy! and thou more vaunted name
> Religion! with thy statelier retinue,
> Faith, Hope and Charity - from the visible world
> Choose for your emblems whatsoe'er ye find
> Of safest guidance on firmest trust -
> The torch, the star, the anchor; nor except
> The cross itself, at whose unconscious feet
> The generations of mankind have knelt
> Ruefully seized, and shedding bitter tears,
> And through that conflict seeking rest - of you,
> High-tilted Powers, am I constrained to ask,
> Here standing, with an unvoyageable sky
> In faint reflection of infinitude

Stretched overhead, and at my pensive feet
A subterraneous magazine of bones
In whose dark vaults my own shall be laid,
Where are your triumphs? Your dominion where?
And in what age admitted and confirmed? (V. 331-48).

Cynicism once more raises its cantankerous voice. The Solitary, we sense, has not been fully cured of despondency nor of his cynicism; his wonted mental attitude returns to question and doubt the mysteries and truths that his companions categorically accept. His harangue is blandly answered by the Poet's impregnable faith in God. But then the Poet surprisingly comes to acquiesce with the Solitary's sneering point of view. This acts as tinder to the fires of discontent which are still consuming the Solitary's mind, and he launches on another verbal obloquy on the unjust contradictions that beset man's life.

The Solitary's acerbity is interrupted by the approach of the "reverend Pastor" who, after exchanging salutations with the three pilgrims accedes to a fervent plea by the Wanderer:

Accord, good Sir! the light
Of your experience to dispel this gloom:
By your persuasive wisdom shall the heart
That frets, or languishes, be stilled and cheered.(V. 481-84)

This becomes more significant when we realize that the Pastor has a more specific task than is initially apparent. For "the heart/That frets, or languishes" is none other the Solitary's. In other words the Pastor has accepted the commission of bringing the sinning Solitary back into the fold of Christian believers. The Wanderer wishes to hear the Pastor pronounce some "authentic epitaphs" so that the three listening pilgrims may learn to prize the breath they "share with human kind," and to "look upon the dust of man with awe." Again we sense that the Pastor's office is not as much for the benefit of the Wanderer and the Poet, as it is for

the spiritual edification of the saturnine Solitary, who just uttered his heart-rending remorse. The Solitary has expressed his desire to change his negative outlook on life.

The Pastor then begins in earnest his long homily on epitaphs, which have as their subject the theme of transit gloria mundi. The sermon embraces histories of men and women from the various social echelons; from the "wedded pair in childless solitude," the lowest in social rank; to the "flaming Jacobite" and the "sullen Hanoverian," two men of high military rank; to the knight of Eliza's days who "fixed his home in this sequestered vale." Peasant, shepherd, patriarch, soldier, and noble knight are representative of the entire social spectrum. Most of the bitter experiences that attended the lives of the deceased echo the Solitary's experiences. But the utter trust in God that they displayed in their lives is in marked contrast to the Solitary's total loss of faith. That the chances of life afflict or prosper all is the central truth of the Pastor's discourse; but these chances, the Pastor insists, must be seen as subservient to the unerring working of Providence. The roses and flowers of kings droop and fall, the stars of human glory are cast down, but God brings this ineluctable transitoriness to divine fruition. So moving is the Pastor's sermon that the Wanderer suggests that it will be fitting if the three thank the Pastor whose "pathetic records" evoke feelings of "confident repose In God; and reverence for the dust of Man" (VII. 1056-7).

The Solitary, now significantly referred to as the "pensive sceptic," agrees with the Wanderer's acknowledgements, and we realize that a change has been wrought in the Solitary towards God and man. The Solitary, however, "shrinks with backward will" when the Pastor invites the three to his dwelling. Whenever an invitation into social fellowship is offered the

Solitary, recalling his days of morose self-sufficiency, is apprehensive and reluctant to accept. The pyschology is credible in Wordsworth's characterization of the Solitary. The Wanderer soon embarks upon a caustic criticism of existing social conditions, upon the baleful effects arising out of an ill-regulated and excessive application of powers so admirable in themselves. All men, the Wanderer declares, must recognize the primacy of moral law, and must act in accordance with its dictates, especially in the "temple" of Industry.

The Solitary joins the Wanderer in his criticism by advocating peasant education. This is the Solitary at his critical best, completely oblivious of his own plight and championing the cause of the unfortunate, uneducated poor. The Solitary, by virtue of his selfless criticism, has symbolically entered the fellowship of social man; for as his speech of vital importance indicates, he can once more empathize with others less fortunate than he. Here the Solitary can think of multitudes, who from infancy have breathed unimprisoned air, yet are "abject and degraded." Here the Solitary can think of ways of improving their unhappy lot. The Solitary can now lose himself in the woe of others and can even advocate for a time when peasants no longer will be "sluggish, blank, and ignorant, and strange," but shall walk in the daylight of intelligence. He can anticipate the time when the peasant, while still an infant, will be happily studying the Christ-crossrow, and puzzling through a primer, line by line until "perfect mastery crowns the pain at last." No longer will the rustic mind be captive to ignorance; it shall become a station of liberty as mental horizons broaden and barriers of ignorance fall.

The company soon partake of a "plain repast". The Pastor has finished his sermon, the Wanderer has uttered his prayer of thanksgiving; it is fitting that they should participate in holy communion. The meal is not

a sumptuous banquet; significantly, it is a "plain repast." Participation in holy communion is very fitting at this stage of the Solitary's spiritual growth. For the Solitary has almost completed his physical and spiritual excursion. Communion provides an atmosphere of social fellowship and affords the sinner an opportunity to mend his ways. By actively participating in holy communion, the genuine Christian expresses through his gesture that he is at one with both man and God. The Solitary's willing participation in the "plain repast" symbolizes his re-entry into the fold of believers in God.

Significantly, it is only after the Solitary has partaken of this symbolic communion that we begin to see tangible signs of his spiritual change. He has once more been converted into the fellowship of social man:

> While question rose
> And answer flowed, the fetters of rescue
> Dropping from every mind, the Solitary
> Resumed the manners of his happier days;
> And in the various conversation bore
> A silling, nay, at times a forward part;
> Yet with the grace of one who in the world
> Had learned the art of pleasing, and had now
> Occasion given him to display his skill,
> Upon the steadfast 'vantage ground of truth. (VIII. 524-33).

The Solitary has not only regained confidence in social man; his attitude towards the "goodly Matron" and Nature strongly suggests that he has indeed been cured of his inveterate spleen:

> He gazed, with admiration unsuppressed,
> Upon the landscape of the sun-bright vale
> Seen, from the shady room in which we sate,
> In softened pérspective: and more than once
> Praised the consummate harmony serene
> Of gravity and elegance, diffused
> Around the mansion and its whole domain;
> Not doubtless, without help of female taste

> And female care. - "A blessed lot is yours!"
> The words escaped his lip, with a tender sigh
> Breathed over them. (VIII. 534-44).

As soon as the Solitary can voluntarily empathize with others, as soon as he can praise the "consummate harmony serene" of Nature, his leaden albatross of "self-indulgent spleen" falls from around his neck. He can now utter with a tender sigh breathed over them these significant words, "A blessed lot is yours!" From of his astringent criticism of, and his negative attitude towards, life, the Solitary can now almost bless the Pastor's wife "shining in the beams" of domestic bliss. The eucharistic overtones of the "plain repast." are credible.

The Solitary's cynicism returns as he steadfastly watches the fire die on the beach of the island to which the company has journeyed. To the Solitary, in his returning scepticism, the fire - burning brightly one moment, the next reduced to ashes which not even the fanning breeze can revive - is an emblem of the transitory nature of "all mortal joys." This plaintive note does not, however, disturb the "repose of the still evening." The Solitary has been won back into the fellowship of believers in God, but his conversion is not irrevocable. The Solitary's habitual nature occasionally gains mastery over a slowly returning optimism.

During their short stay on the island, we are told that the company share a "choice repast." The real significance of his "choice repast" becomes evident when juxtaposed with the "plain repast" the company shared at the Pastor's. There is no need for another holy communion, for another would be irreconcilable with liturgical tradition. Wordsworth may very well be employing a liturgical pattern much older than that of a Protestant Eucharist-service of the Romantic Age. This "choice repast" seems part of the Agapé or Love Feast, which was regularly held by early Christians. The Agapé has never totally disappeared; no doubt it was a

known practice in Wordsworth's day. Maxwell tells us that "usually at the conclusion of the Agapé, sometimes apart from it, they [the early Christians] celebrated the eucharist . . . ."(1). Here, the Agapé follows the eucharist; it is held "apart from it."

Soon after the "choice repast" is finished, we are told that

> stiller sounds
> The lovely girl supplied - a simple song,
> Where low tones reached not to the distant rocks
> To be repeated thence, but gently sank
> Into our hearts: and charmed the peaceful flood. (IX. 533-37).

In another literary work in which the liturgical pattern of a Protestant Communion-service is not obvious, this "simple song" will be nothing more. But since The Excursion emphasizes such a pattern, this "simple song" seems analogous to the recessional hymn or Gloria in excelsis that immediately preceds the benediction.[5] Consistent with the chronology of the liturgical pattern, the benediction directly follows. The song ended, the Pastor leads the company up to an elevated spot from which he solemnly pronounces his benedictory prayer.

When the benediction is over, we are told that "This vesper-service closed without delay." The "vesper-service" no doubt refers to the sermon in the churchyard, the "plain repast," and to the activities on the island. But the important phrase also serves to remind the careful reader that the entire journey of the Solitary from Book IV-IX has been initiated and terminated by the first and last elements of a Protestant worship-service. It is through the efficacy of the actual liturgical elements, the Wanderer's invocation and prayer of thanksgiving and supplication, his homiletic words of comfort and encouragement, the Pastor's moving sermon, the eucharistic overtones of the "plain repast," the identifiable

[5]Maxwell, p. 153.

recessional hymn, and the benediction, that the Solitary is able to attain spiritual growth. Appropriately, the liturgical pattern begins when the Solitary starts his excursion, and ends when he completes his journey.

CONCLUSION

The Excursion is not pastiche; it does not slavishly copy the structural pattern of any other poem. Of course, its structure is indebted to the Classical epics of Homer and Vergil, to Paradise Lost and The Divine Comedy, to the four main streams of eighteenth-century poetry, and, to a lesser extent, to The Canterbury Tales and The Pilgrim's Progress. Yet The Excursion possesses its own original and unique structure. In spite of the critical judgements of Lyon and Wilkie, and notwithstanding the connivance in this matter of almost every critic of The Excursion, the overall structure of the poem is discernibly epic. In writing The Excursion, Wordsworth employed the major structural devices of the traditional epic both conventionally and unconventionally. It is a credit to the poet's mastery of his craft that those devices which he uses unconventionally remain identifiable.

Within the larger epic structure of The Excursion are two smaller unified structural patterns. Wordsworth makes the mind of man "the haunt and main region" of his poem; the positive and intricate correlation between the actual excursion and the metaphorical, spiritual odyssey adds greater unity and delicacy to the structure of the poem. Too, certain liturgical elements are organized into a structural unity and the correspondence between the poet's effective use of the liturgical elements and the stages of the Solitary's journey, physical and spiritual, enhances the "pomp of structure" that The Excursion exhibits.

A close analysis of the artistic merits of The Excursion reveals startling results. One of the most striking results is that The Excursion possesses a more unified structure than has hitherto been realized. Too,

a close analysis belies the claims of Lyon and Moorman[1] among others. Most importantly, a critical analysis reveals that the student and scholar should pay greater attention to The Excursion. For such a critique clearly shows that The Excursion is not an unsatisfactory product of Wordsworth's twilight years as the critical consensus would have us believe. In its concern with the improvement of the condition of the poor, and in its urgent proclamation of an imminent secular apocalypse The Excursion is unrivalled among poems of the English Language.[2] In epic expression it surpasses The Prelude; and its structure is more intricate and unified. Finally and not immodestly, The Excursion achieves the distinction of being the most successful poetic attempt at true epic expression since Paradise Lost.

[1]Lyon writes, "There is even something creaky and archaic about the towering and intricate structure of the poem" (30). Mrs. Moorman claims that "The Excursion fails as a poetic unity....." (182).

[2]Moorman, p. 182.

LIST OF WORKS CITED

Brooks, Otis. Vergil: A Study in Civilized Poetry. Oxford, 1964.

Coleridge, S. T. Specimens of Table Talk. London. 1851.

Coleridge, S. T. Collected Letters, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs. 6 vols. Oxford, 1959.

Dante, Alighieri. The Divine Comedy, trans. Dorothy Sayers. 3 vols. Penguin Books edition, 1942

Groom, Bernard. The Unity of Wordsworth's Poetry. London, 1966.

Hamilton, Carson C. Wordsworth's Decline in Poetic Power. New York, 1963.

Hartman, Geoffrey. Wordsworth's Poetry 1787 - 1814. Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, 1964.

Hazlitt, William. "Observations on Mr. Wordsworth's Poem The Excursion," English Romantic Writers, ed. David Perkins, New York, 1967.

Homer. The Iliad, trans. E. V. Rieu. Penguin Books edition, 1950.

Homer. The Odyssey, trans. George Herbert Palmer. New York, 1962.

Horace. "The Art of Poetry," Classical Writings, trans. T. A. Moxon. London, 1934.

Lyon, Judson Stanley. The Excursion: A Study. Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, 1950.

Maxwell, William D. Outline of Christian Worship: Its Development and Forms. Oxford, 1936.

Moorman, Mary. William Wordsworth: A Biography, The Later Years 1803-1850. Oxford, 1965.

Peacock, Markham L. Jr. The Critical Opinions of William Wordsworth. The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1950.

Swedenberg, H. T. Jr. The Theory of the Epic in England, 1650-1800. Univ. of California Publications in English, XV (1044).

Vergil. The Aeneid, trans. W. F. Jackson Knight. Penguin Books edition, 1956.

Wellek, René. Concepts of Criticism. Yale Univ. Press. New Haven, 1963.

Wellek, René and Austin Warren. Theory of Literature. New York, 1956.

Wilkie, Brian. Romantic Poets & Epic Tradition. Univ. of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1965.

Witherspoon, Alexander, ed. The College Survey of English Literature, New York, 1942.

Wordsworth, William. The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. ed. E. de Selincourt, 6 vols. 1935-39.

Wordsworth, William. Prose Works, ed. Alexander B. Grosart. 3 vols. London, 1876.

Wordsworth, William. Poetical Works, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, vol. V. Oxford, 1959.

Wordsworth, William. The Prelude, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, Oxford, 1959.

The Book of Common Prayer. Oxford, 1876.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary, Oxford, 1970.

WORKS CONSULTED

Beatty, Arthur. William Wordsworth: His Doctrine and Art in their Historical Relations. Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison, 1960.

Bowra, Maurice. From Vergil to Milton. London, 1963.

Bradley, Andrew C. Oxford Lectures on Poetry. London, 1965.

Darbishire, Helen. The Poet Wordsworth. Oxford, 1950.

Fergusson, Francis. Dante's Drama of the Mind. Princeton Univ. Press, New Jersey, 1953.

Hough, Graham. The Romantic Poets. London, 1963.

Jones, John. The Egotistical Sublime: A History of Wordsworth's Imagination. London, 1954.

Noyes, Russell. Wordsworth and the Art of Landscape. Indiana Univ. Press, Indiana, 1968.

Sperry, Willard. Wordsworth's Anti-Climax. New York, 1966.