A Reply: To "Prelude and Prejudice," by Jeffrey Baker

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Dr. Baker's review of the Norton *Prelude* raises two major issues. First, his attempt to show by a purely "literary" analysis that the text of 1850 is superior to that of 1805; and second, his argument that the edition is based on editorial principles derived from extraliterary sources.

Dr. Baker is concerned to show "how grave are the shortcomings of 1805, and how great the superiority of 1850." The only conclusion one can draw from his comparison of different versions of various passages in 1805 and 1850 is that it is largely a matter of choice, depending on how one reads and what one is reading for. To the present writer it seems that on some occasions Dr. Baker's preference is understandable, while on others his arguments are unconvincing, or sustained only by not citing the 1805 version. A single example will suffice. Dr. Baker quotes 1850: XIV, 60-2:

> one voice
> Heard over earth and sea, and, in that hour,
> For so it seemed, felt by the starry heavens.

The Norton editors comment that this revision is a "concession to orthodoxy," and Dr. Baker asks what is orthodox about it. Very little in itself perhaps, but in comparison to 1805 it certainly *is* orthodox:

> The universal spectacle throughout
> Was shaped for admiration and delight,
> Grand in itself alone, but in that breach
> Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,
> That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodged
> The soul, the imagination of the whole.
>
> (1805: XIII, 60-5)

The orthodoxy of 1850 is its orthodoxy when compared to the earlier versions. The point is quite simple.

The arguments about the superiority of 1805 or 1850 could, and doubtless will, go on for ever. Dr. Baker concludes his review by declaring that he agrees with Matthew Arnold "that we must see an object as in itself it really is". In the Introduction to his book *Time and Mind in Wordsworth's Poetry* (1980), he ends a very similar discussion of the relative merits of the early and late *Prelude* and *Ruined Cottage* with the same invocation: "One really must try to see a piece of literature as in itself it really is." But to see *The Prelude* as it really is is to see that it is not one poem at all but several poems—1799, 1805, 1850, and all the intermediate versions and stages as well. It exists in different forms, each with its advantages and disadvantages, but each with its specific interest. The task of the critic ought perhaps not to be the fruitless and unresolvable attempt to evaluate one against the other, but rather the exploration of the complex and subtle intertextual relations and differences among the different poems. Instead of asking which is best, we should be asking what does this multiplicity mean, and what are its effects? The great virtue of the Norton edition is that it makes three different versions available to students, who can now begin to perform this difficult and demanding task.

When Dr. Baker cites Matthew Arnold, he implies that he, Dr. Baker, does see *The Prelude* as it really is, whereas, the Norton editors do not. In the Introduction to his book he makes the same point when he says that he is himself "mainly concerned with literary values," whereas, Mr. Wordsworth "sees more than is really there because he is influenced by extraliterary considerations" (pp. 23, 27). In his review of the Norton *Prelude*, Dr. Baker argues that the editors begin with a preconceived notion that the poem espouses "liberal humanist" values, and as a result they misinterpret Wordsworth's later revisions of it: "Far more often the notes suggest that the commentator has found a bias in the revision which he was predisposed to find." According to Dr. Baker, the editors begin with a mistaken critical position and thus edit *The Prelude* according to a mistaken critical method. The principles on which the Norton edition is based "constitute a danger for English studies." The clear implication is that Dr. Baker, on the other hand, can see the poem as it really is, without any preconceptions. The simple fact, of course, is that he can't. As Popper and others have amply shown, we cannot just see an object "as it really is": a pure, unmediated empiricism is not available to any one, even to Dr. Baker. Any treatment of a text, editorial or critical, will involve interpretation. Of course, the Norton Critical Edition involves interpretation by the editors. For the same reasons, Dr. Baker's view of the poem is an interpretation also. The difference between the Norton editors and Dr. Baker is not a question of a misguided ideological preconception versus the object seen as it really is: it is the difference of two interpretations.

What then is Dr. Baker's own critical position and what are his own preconceptions about literature on which he bases his interpretation and argument? Dr. Baker is concerned with "literary value" and "literary evaluation." This means that for him poetry is not primarily a cognitive activity, which is why he is uneasy about *The Prelude's* being a "philosophical poem." In his view, as he puts it in his book, "readers value poetry for its total effect on their sensibilities" not for "reducible thought content." It is a matter of feeling rather than thinking. Against this one could argue that the peculiar quality and brilliance of *The Prelude* is that its poetry is not "reducible" to "thought content" but rather presents, through its characteristic syntactic fluidity and ambiguity, a complex process of cognitive experience that cannot be disassociated from

the form of the language in which it is expressed. But, in fact, even for Dr. Baker the poem is not entirely devoid of "thought content." Mr. Wordsworth is criticized for his interest in defining the different cognitive experiences of the various versions of the poem in relation to their historical positions in Wordsworth's life. For Dr. Baker, on the other hand, the poem expresses something much vaguer about the human mind in general which, ironically, is far more indebted to the humanist notion of a transcendental unified consciousness. *The Prelude*, he tells us, gives "evidence of the mind's subjective energy," proof of "the mind's enormous creative force," and leaves us with an "abiding impression" of an "affirmation of the richness and creative power of consciousness." In other words, the poem presents us with a truth about the mind that is outside or beyond time and history. But as his vocabulary suggests ("energy," "creative," "force," "power," "consciousness"), Dr. Baker's view is itself ideological, that is, derived from specific historical forms of thought, just as his final claim—"in substance it is a poem, celebrating the power, dignity and delicacy of the human mind"—is indebted to the thinking and vocabulary of F.R. Leavis. Dr. Baker has his own preconceptions about the nature of the mind, and he finds "evidence" of them in Wordsworth's poetry. It amounts to an interpretation nevertheless. Far from seeing the object "as it really is," Dr. Baker is caught within the spirals of the hermeneutic circle like everyone else. He takes issue, for instance, with Mr. Wordsworth's controversial preference for the 1799 version of the Gibbet Mast episode. To see the passage "as it really is" turns out to be the discovery that "the heart of the experience is a sense of the persistence of evil in the place where the evil deeds first happened." The lines describing the engraven characters are necessary because they show "the reality of the persistence of evil." Of course they don't actually *say* this: it is Dr. Baker's interpretation. There could be plenty of other interpretations—Mr. Wordsworth's, for instance. The problem and the possibility of validity in interpretation is much more complex than Dr. Baker seems to assume.

His review effectively makes a claim for the true Wordsworth as against a falsified one, but what this really means is his interpretation of Wordsworth rather than that of the Norton editors. Dr. Baker's concluding defence of 1850, which he argues (from very little evidence) more or less became *The Recluse*, is necessarily based on interpretation too. But the empiricist's dream of knowing the thing-in-itself, of extracting its true "essence," is all too obvious: " I am now going to suggest that Wordsworth changed his view of the essential nature of the poem, and until we too grasp what that essential nature is, we shall not understand the greatness of the poem in its final version." But poems don't have essences: they are made of words. Dr. Baker has fallen into the common fallacy of what Nietzsche called mistaking the last for the first. He interprets the poem, and then calls his interpretation the poem's meaning, intention and essence. It is no surprise that his interpretation of 1850 quickly becomes "the kind of poem Wordsworth subsequently perceived *The Prelude* to be." Wordsworth—or Dr. Baker? *The Prelude* doesn't have an "essential nature," and that is the particular challenge of a poem which, thanks to the new Norton edition and its considerable textual scholarship, can now be seen to exist in so many different versions.

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