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Wordsworth's Reflective Vision: Time, Imagination and Community in "The Prelude"

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of imagination in "The Prelude," within the context of recent criticism. In accordance with the impact of new historicism on contemporary Wordsworth studies, considerable attention is given to new historicist readings. It is argued that new history's methodological approach generally undervalues the complex texture of subjectivity in "The Prelude." New historical critiques tend to interpret the Wordsworthian imagination merely as a narrative strategy that enables the poet to displace or elide socio-historical realities. However, "The Prelude" does not entirely support such a reading. On the basis of Wordsworth's autobiography and related prose works, it is asserted that the poet's consciousness of creative decline and mortality potently informs his sense of imagination, and eventuates in a mode of self-perception that precludes subjective autonomy and socio-historical displacement.

Résumé

Cette thèse propose l'analyse de la fonction de l'imagination dans "The Prelude" à la lumière de la critique littéraire récente. Tenant compte de l'impact qu'a l'école critique du *New Historicism* sur les études contemporaines sur Wordsworth, une attention particulière est portée aux lectures émanant de cette orientation critique. On fait valoir que cette approche a tendance à sous-évaluer la texture complexe de la subjectivité dans "The Prelude". Les critiques du courant *New Historicism* interprètent l'imagination wordsworthienne comme une simple stratégie narrative permettant au poète de contourner ou d'élider les réalités socio-historiques. Pourtant, l'évidence textuelle du poème n'appuie pas cette lecture sans problèmes. Dans cette thèse, on se référera à l'autobiographie de Wordsworth et à d'autres écrits en prose pour montrer que la conscience du déclin créateur et de la mortalité imprègne puissamment son traitement de l'imagination et laisse apparaître un mode d'auto-perception qui empêche tant l'autonomie subjective que l'évitement socio-historique.

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Contents

Introduction and Overview

This thesis examines the role of imagination in "The Prelude," within the context of recent criticism. In keeping with the current impact of new historicism on Wordsworth studies, I devote considerable attention to new historicist readings. My object in exploring the new historical practice is to test its validity in relation to "The Prelude." It is argued that new history's typical focus on Wordsworth's desire to purge society and history from consciousness does not properly account for the self-questioning that conditions his autobiographical narrative. Wordsworth's relationship with society and history is a constant source of disturbance, so there is no lasting transcendence of, or escape from, the socio-historical sphere. "The Prelude" therefore does not support the notion that Wordsworth achieves subjective autonomy, and thus, freedom from the realities of the human collective.

My argument begins (after a preliminary look at the work of Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman) by investigating the new historicist claim that Wordsworth supersedes nature by transforming the physical landscape into a textual mirror of the self – what Marjorie Levinson calls a narrative "reproduction of the inner life" (Levinson 51). The operative assumption here is that if Wordsworth is able to re-fashion the self as an idealized or purified nature, then he avoids having to refer to the material facts of history that necessarily impinge upon his consciousness. Critiques by Jerome McGann and Celeste Langan are

discussed in this regard, and are engaged as part of a close reading of the "glad preamble" (Prelude 1805.7.4). It is concluded that the preamble does not assert the poet's autonomy, but on the contrary demonstrates his inability to map his "inner life" over nature.

Nor, it is argued, does the remainder of the first Book provide any evidence that Wordsworth attains imaginative self-sufficiency, for his subsequent recourse to childhood memories as a reserve of inspiration eventuates in an awareness of his estrangement from the creative power that he possessed as a child. The temporal distance of the past, combined with the experiential gap between early vigour and current languor, finally causes Wordsworth to see that his present is grounded on an unstable, flickering relationship with the past. And because Wordsworth's access to the past is transient, so is his access to imaginative power.

Having considered the new historical critique of imagination, I then address the significance of mortality in "The Prelude." I argue on the basis of the poem's textual evidence and related prose works that the texture of Wordsworthian subjectivity is largely influenced by the poet's knowledge of death. Wordsworth's awareness of death is a vital aspect of his experience because it marks for him the transition from childhood spontaneity to his self-conscious sense of otherness to nature. Inchoate intimations of mortality attend Wordsworth's early encounters with nature's alterity, and gradually segue into his

mature understanding of death as the main sign of the mind-nature divide. Wordsworth therefore associates death with his growing separation from his once organic bond with nature. His imagination occasionally overcomes the stifling weight of mortality by tapping into the feelings of eternality and creative potency that spring from childhood. But the victories of imagination over mortality, while inspiring Wordsworth's most visionary assertions, do not ultimately elude the constraints upon his adult imagination and are consequently transitory.

The first section closes by discussing how Wordsworth's perception of imagination is shaped over time by his experience of Cambridge, London and the French Rèvolution. Wordsworth's uneasy experience of urban society, along with his ill-fortuned Revolutionary involvement, ultimately signifies a split from his ideal childhood past that is similar to the fracture created by his consciousness of mortality. In both cases it is an act of imagination, impelled by the recollected feelings of childhood, that enables Wordsworth to maintain his visionary hope despite the stark realities of the present.

The final segment of the thesis, brief enough to be titled "Endpiece," focuses on Wordsworth's representation of the urban and rural modes of life, and of the Revolution. Wordsworth's letters and Guide through the District of the Lakes are used to provide context for the poem. The thrust of my argument here is that although the poet clearly prefers his peaceful, rural paradigm of society, he does not dismiss or displace either urban

materiality or the Revolution. Wordsworth's hierarchy of values in this respect is founded, as always, on a comparison of his ideals with the reality, and is not a matter of excluding one for the sake of the other.

Time and Imagination in "The Prelude"

Paul de Man remarks in a Gauss seminar that the "key to an understanding of Wordsworth lies in the relationship between imagination and time, not in the relationship between imagination and nature" (Romanticism 92). His deliberate emphasis on time is made in response to Geoffrey Hartman's influential view that Wordsworth's visionary faculty springs from his mental transcendence of nature. Wordsworthian imagination is for de Man instead conditioned by time, as a product of autobiographical reflection. Evidence of this dynamic is found in the apostrophe following the Simplon Pass episode:

> here that power,
> In all the might of its endowments, came
> Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,
> Halted without a struggle to break through,
> And now, recovering, to my soul I say
> 'I recognize thy glory'. (Prelude 1805.6.527-32)[1]

While the young Wordsworth was merely bewildered at having unknowingly crossed the Alps, the older poet "recognizes" what happened and sees that failures of expectation are a crucial part of imaginative consciousness. His visionary insight is in this way framed by the autobiographical "now," and is mediated by an act of recollection that compounds prior experience with present understanding. The poet's relationship with the past, and not with nature, therefore predominates as the radical basis for the emergence of imaginative power.

This chapter follows de Man's lead and explores how imagination in "The Prelude" is temporally conditioned. It is argued that Wordsworth's imaginative faculty is contingent upon his remembrance of the past. The poet's relationship with his past is complex and involves a range of memories and perceptions, both positive and negative. On the one hand, for example, his recollection of childhood fuels his creativity by recalling emotions linked with his original creative power. Yet on the other hand, Wordsworth's increasing estrangement from his childhood feeds his concern that he is now unable to access his imagination directly. Wordsworth's memories of Cambridge, London and the French Revolution similarly chasten his current trust in imagination, as instances where his imagination foundered or went astray within the public sphere. Whether his memories of the past are uplifting or troubling though, Wordsworth cannot escape their pervading influence on the present. Even the vatic prospect into "something evermore about to be" afforded by the Simplon insight is informed by the poet's knowledge of how his consciousness has been shaped over time: his revelation therefore does not transcend the past, but works in relation to it as a re-opening of old creative horizons (6.542). Imagination in "The Prelude" thus reflects a mind that is always aware of its roots in time, and is in no sense self-engendering or autonomous.

In writing of an autonomous or autogenetic imagination, I am drawing on a large body of recent criticism that considers imagination in precisely those terms. A seminal text in this

regard is Hartman's Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814, in which the critic posits an empirically disengaged faculty that is only fitfully determined by "Nature, time, memory, and poetry itself" (Hartman 211). According to Hartman, Wordsworth's imagination is ultimately beyond material, temporal and narrative determination because it is inherently different from the external world, as an interior power that functions independently of nature and every other discernible frame of reference. Hartman furthermore observes that because Wordsworth's imagination threatens to eclipse the intelligible order of nature and time, and so overshadow "common things and loves," he is compelled to displace creative agency onto nature and commit himself to a trust in mankind, in order to quell "the necessity of apocalypse or violent renovation" (54 and 252). Poetry provides Wordsworth with the required means of calming and subtilizing the self-sufficient creative soul, and enables him to join imagination with the earthly domain of ordinary existence, if only provisionally.

New historicist critiques likewise often consider imagination as a form of consciousness partially removed from material and social reality. Jerome McGann's landmark The Romantic Ideology interrogates Hartman's privileging of consciousness and ties his formulations with an "uncritical employment of Romanticism's self-representing concepts" that mimics the Romantic desire to escape the socio-historical sphere by focussing on the individual mind (McGann 41). "Tintern Abbey"

is advanced as a representative of this sort of elision. McGann notes that the poet does not mention the beggars and vagrants, or the commerce and industry, which were part of the poem's actual locale, the Wye Valley. Explicit reference to the potentially disturbing resonances of the title's July 13 date, which include Wordsworth's first visit to France and other events surrounding the Revolution, is equally avoided. These omissions are seen as proof that the "poem annihilates its history, biographical and socio-historical alike, and replaces these particulars with a record of pure consciousness" (90). "Pure consciousness" is in this way treated as a narrative strategy that raises the poet above history and culture, and valorizes the subjective mind while shutting out externality.[2] McGann concludes that this strategy extends beyond "Tintern Abbey," and characterizes the escapist "illusion of every Romantic poet" (91).

Where Hartman describes imagination as an ontological slippage then, McGann asserts that it is an ideological evasion of history. Despite their differences however, both critics hold to a concept of pure consciousness that neglects the pervasive importance of time for Wordsworth. Neither reading takes proper account of how memory (the recollected past), or the poet's sense of creative decline (the present and the anticipated future), condition his imagination. Consequently Hartman's version of imagination overlooks the self-reflective character of the Wordsworthian mind. And McGann's sweeping conclusions about the function of consciousness do not acknowledge that Wordsworth's

imagination exists in tension with, and does not elide, the troubled aspects of his experience. McGann's apparent oversight is important, as Wordsworth's assurance in imaginative strength,

> glimmering views
> How life pervades the undecaying mind,
> How the immortal soul with godlike power
> Informs, creates, and thaws the deepest sleep
> That time can lay upon her, (4.154-58)

is qualified for instance by anxieties regarding how such power is increasingly difficult to access: "I see by glimpses now, when age comes on / May scarcely see at all" (11.337-38). The decaying mind is of grave concern in "The Prelude," then, and if Wordsworth transcends nature or history at all, it is only to fall into a world of memory, aging, and psychic disintegration: a consciousness immersed in time and matter.

The force of time on the Wordsworthian mind is dramatized in the brilliant introductory Book of the poem, which depicts the gradual collapse of the kind of subjective autonomy that McGann identifies with the poet's imagination. The Book portrays a poet who is alternately confident and despondent, elated by his release from city confines yet vexed by a roaming desire to engage in the "honorable toil" of his great literary project, "The Recluse" (1.653). The opening lines are hopeful and express a strong confidence in creative power and freedom:

> Oh there is a blessing in this gentle breeze,
> That blows from the green fields and from the clouds

And from the sky; it beats against my cheek,
And seems half conscious of the joy it gives.
O welcome messenger! O welcome friend!
A captive greets thee, coming from a house
Of bondage, from yon city's walls set free,
A prison where he hath been long immured.
Now I am free, enfranchised and at large,
May fix my habitation where I will.
What dwelling shall receive me, (1.1-11)

There is remarkable music here. Long and short "e" sounds thickly mesh the texture and produce an intense pulse that flows through the verse, or gusts through it like the wind which is described. This phonetic energy gathers its initial strength from the word "breeze," which occupies a key position as the headword of the first sentence. The "e" buzzes outward from this "breeze" and conveys the physical presence of the wind as it travels in from the "green fields" to "beat" against the poet's "cheek:" where the wind is, so too is its sound. When agency shifts to the narrator in line 6, his feeling of freedom is similarly associated with the sound-action of the breeze. He is "set free" like the "breeze," to go wherever he shall be "received."

Thus the aural connection that is established between the speaker and the breeze echoes the symbolic transference of creative agency from nature to poet: windy (and winding) sound finally evokes the liberty of the poetic voice itself. Liberty

in this context entails more than emancipation or a trust in the future; it represents the power of the poet's inner "creative breeze" over nature (1.43). This supernatural sway is manifest in the speaker's ability to contain the wind within poetic lines, and to mimic nature through metaphor and literary effect. Nature is in this manner literally re-composed and subjected to the poet's will. The faith that Wordsworth places in his creative control is concretely reflected by his minimal reliance on outward guidance, whereby the merest "twig or any floating thing" will suffice as a source of physical and spiritual direction (1.31).

Wordsworth's unbounded confidence at the beginning of the "glad preamble" would seem to affirm the usurpation of nature by an autonomous imagination (7.4). The poet indeed goes so far as to conjecture that he is a "holy" priest, a self-guided visionary who depends nominally on the "chance equipment" of the external world since the resources he requires for his prophetic work are radically within (1.63 and 99). And because the narrator's creative liberty is troped as empowered wandering, his self-autonomy is made portable and is largely removed from material conditions: creative power can be maintained wherever the speaker chooses to go, and is all but released from the need for natural stimuli. Accordingly the abstract realm of poetry provides the only territory and dwelling that he requires or wishes to have.

Celeste Langan's new historicist study, Romantic Vagrancy, argues that Wordsworth's poetic and imaginative "mastery" of

nature does in fact substitute material reality with poetry (Langan 174). Her argument is subtle and complex, but two main threads can be drawn from it for the purposes of this thesis. First, by linking the trope of vagrancy with perpetual choice, the preamble constructs a paradigm of self-determination which assumes that the poet can simply walk free of social "houses of bondage;" or that he can resolve his thoughts according to his personal disposition, apart from external circumstances. Material reference, like the "city's walls" or the "gentle breeze," therefore exists in the text as something which Wordsworth supersedes through a metaphoric "walking away" that expresses his autonomous volition. Second, Wordsworth's control over nature is reflected by his formal manipulation of it, which is initiated by the symbolic metamorphosis of nature/breeze into self/voice that occurs with the introduction of the poet's inner "creative breeze." Poetry's phonetic, metric and paragraphic regulation of nature formally performs this metaphoric domination of voice over breeze and, more importantly, of self over nature.

Both tropically and formally therefore, the preamble transforms the real natural and socio-historical landscape into a tissue of pure thought and poetry. Langan asserts that this displacement is finally of an ideological character, for the degree to which Wordsworth represents

> the forms of thought as free and independent of . . . so many [socio-historical] *residences* — the cultural heritage of Cambridge, the landscape of the nation,

> finally, the historical field of the French Revolution . . . the site of that freedom is a body undifferentiable from the vagrant's. (157)

Thus in Langan's reading the vagrant's body represents a figurative crossing of an autonomous imagination (whose power is over nature) with a historically transcendent self (whose power is to drift free from socio-historical space): to exercise creativity (by walking and talking) is precisely to exorcise history. In this sense imaginative vagrancy, the continuous freedom to shape the world through the word, is actually a flight from the prison of material and historical determination.[3]

Yet the preamble does not altogether support the principle of autonomy advanced by Langan, as by McGann. Wordsworth's poet cannot sustain his spontaneous inspiration, and his autonomous control over nature falters as a result. The initial evidence of his stumbling step emerges when the narrative breaks into past tense (line 55) and the narrator recounts how his first passion and his composition slowed to a halt. Wordsworth tells the reader that one reason for this paralysis is that he is "not used to make / A present joy the matter of my song;" a statement which corresponds to the poet's remark in the "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" that his writing germinates ex post facto from "emotion recollected in tranquillity" (1.55-56 and Prose 1: 148). A more immediate factor though is that the speaker's near self-enclosure from outward things culminates in a crippling shortage, whereby his mind fails to supply the internal stimulus that it needs to

maintain itself more or less independently of nature. As this creative disability sets in, the narrator's interior gaze fades into a blindness and deafness, "seeing nought, nought hearing," and his early élan succumbs to an almost primal recognition of dependency on nature (1.91). The poet pillows his head on the green earth and is "soothed by a sense of touch / From the warm ground, that balanced me, else lost" (1.89-90). Blind and deaf, his creative bearings rely now on the "sense of touch."

Formally, the poet's disorientation surfaces in the phonetic changes that occur over the first three verse paragraphs of the preamble. In the opening paragraph of course, the sound-pattern conveys active inspiration. Prominent "e" sounds are complemented frequently by other long, short and diphthong vowels that range from the opening "Oh" of address and the staccato "a"s of "and at large," to the "ou" of "clouds." Vowels are so common in this section that sound modulates between them virtually unblocked by consonants. Where consonants are found they are often firm stops like the bilabial "b" of "breeze" and "blows," or they are hard sounds like the fricative "cheek" and the sharp "captive." These stressed consonants counterpoint rather than diminish the effect of the vowels by setting them into relief.

Paragraph two registers a gradual decrease of vowel sounds however, and a more regular and mixed use of consonants that dissipates the breathy, cantorial tone of the first paragraph. This counter-effect is heard especially in the tongue-tied "r"s that strew the section's concluding description of how the

creative impulse overshoots itself and becomes

> A tempest, a redundant energy,
> Vexing its own creation. 'Tis a power
> That does not come unrecognized, a storm,
> Which, breaking up long-continued frost,
> Brings with it vernal promises, (1.46-50)

The inward curling of the tongue as it negotiates the "r" sounds of this passage physically reflects Wordsworth's mental state as his creative energy rebounds and spends itself on the poet rather than in poetry: it is as if Wordsworth is partially swallowing his own breath. Although this "redundant" surplus of energy marks the return of imaginative power briefly, its momentum is finally too strong to harness. Accordingly the consonantal tripping that begins in the second paragraph continues until the opening's "Eolian" vowels are by the third paragraph "dispersed in straggling sounds, / And lastly utter silence" (1.104 and 106-7).[4]

Once the poet's creative disorder has declined in paragraph three into silence and inertia, he enters a listless phase of self-examination, during which he confronts the limits of his creative resources. While he earlier considered "any floating thing" to be an adequate guide for his imagination, he now finds that it is his thoughts which are "floating loose" and lacking stability (1.131). He discovers as well that he is beset by the "vacant musing" of hollow ambition, and by a poetic voice that wants solid grounds, "throughout / Shadowy and unsubstantial"

(1.255 and 227-28). The poet's attempts to substitute nature with mind and poetry thus conclude in failure, as his creative power dwindles into impotency, and his efforts to master nature prove futile. And so Wordsworth, rather than attaining a state of "pure" consciousness or imaginative self-sufficiency, finds that he must abandon the possibility of ever achieving such autonomy.

The preamble thus does not assert the poet's autonomy. On the contrary, Wordsworth's impulse to supersede nature meets with insurmountable resistance. There is therefore no reduction of the empirical world to a mere "reproduction of the inner life:" an absorption of the landscape which would allow Wordsworth to transcend natural and socio-historical phenomena, as per the new historicist argument (Levinson 51). It is in fact Wordsworth's inability to reproduce his "inner life" – his failure to map his mind over nature – that causes his crisis: a crisis which plunges him, in the lines following the preamble, into the recollection of childhood, as a source of inspiration and of consolation. Nor does this recourse to memory provide any new grounds for imaginative autonomy. Wordsworth's remembrance of the past, I will argue, serves only to intensify his sense of alienation from nature, and to heighten his doubts about the power of his imagination.

Wordsworth's transition from nature to memory is abrupt. Realizing that nature has failed to offer any reliable support for his creative aspirations, he begs,

Was it for this

That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved

To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song,

And from his alder shades and rocky falls,

And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice

That flowed along my dreams? (1.272-76)

The syntax of this passage interestingly mirrors the structure of the poem's opening sentence. In both cases the head is represented by a natural agent which is modified by a series of prepositional phrases beginning with "from." The panoramic effect created by these locational phrases enhances the prosopopoeia of a "half-conscious" breeze that beats against the poet's cheek, and of a River Derwent that sends an almost human "voice" into his dreams: the total impression is that nature's sentience is comfortingly expanded as a circumambient embrace. But the fact that the narrator must make an appeal to memory rather than to nature indicates that there has been a permanent loss of connection with the physical world. This loss is only highlighted by the parallelism of the opening and the Derwent section, for the preamble's evocation of nature's presence is so precisely recast in the later passage as a reality that exists exclusively in the remembered past of childhood.

It nevertheless appears at first that the narrator's shift from material space to the temporal sphere of memory successfully compensates for his failed relationship with nature. His recollection of Derwent's "ceaseless music" and "steady cadence"

offsets the straggled sounds of a "defrauded" Eolian harp and the psychic obstruction they represent:

> Oh, many a time have I, a five years' child,
> A naked boy, in one delightful rill,
> A little mill-race severed from his stream,
> Made one long bathing of a summer's day,
> Basked in the sun, and plunged, and basked again,
> Alternate, all a summer's day,
>
> (1.279-80, 105 and 291-96)

Alliteration trills through "delightful rill" and "little mill-race" to generate a burst of sound that summons up the vital energy of the rivulet, and lightens the ominous aspect of the rill's "severed" state: strong phonetic similarity suggests that the affinity between things overcomes their deviation from each other. The repetition of "Basked . . . plunged . . . basked again" meanwhile works to group the child's sportings into a circular chain of action, which is in turn metaphorically objectified as "a summer's day." Action and time are merged organically in this fashion, and the boy's play is depicted as a natural extension of all that time offers (he is himself a germinal outgrowth of time as a "five years' child"). In all, the Derwent vignette epitomizes the harmonious correlation of desire and action which the poet now wants to recover. Again, his current inability to do so is made all the more poignant by his reliance on past experience to steady a wavering imagination.

A coherent psychological drive is perceptible in

Wordsworth's return to the past: his turn to childhood is a means of alleviating his present crisis. Joyful memories like the Derwent episode naturally offer the poet refuge from the worries posed by his imaginative disjunction with the physical world, and by his doubts about the viability of "The Recluse." But to consider only the ideal memories is to look at just half of the picture, as Wordsworth also revisits memories that evoke an element of disturbance or fear, and asserts that his recollection of "terrors, pains, and early miseries" are "a needful part" of his current mental well-being (1850.1.345 and 348). Why does Wordsworth draw on painful experiences as well as happy ones? The best way to approach this question is by examining the shepherd's skiff passage, which epitomizes the kind of negative memory that the poet finds crucial to his mental health.

While at age five the narrator enjoyed an innocent pleasure in nature, there is an ingredient of guilty transgression in the shepherd's boat episode, in which the young Wordsworth steals a skiff. An erotic excitement surrounds Wordsworth's nocturnal "act of stealth / And troubled pleasure," which speaks of moral unease and trespass (1805.1.388-89). This dark sexual tenor carries into the poet's account of how he "unloosed her [the boat's] tether," and "lustily" dipped his oars into the lake (1.382 and 401). The implication of arousal in the bark's feminization is further intimated by Wordsworth's description of "heaving through the water" as he "rose upon the stroke" (1.404 and 403). The very motion of the oar-stroke suggests sexual

activity and evokes a pubescent version of the basking and plunging of the five years' child.[5] Another, more direct parallel bridging Wordsworth's boating adventure and his rill-play is his continued attraction to nature's surface forms, marked notably by the image of ripples trailing the boat, "Small circles glittering idly in the moon, / Until they melted all into one track / Of sparkling light" (1.392-94). These parallels indicate that although the poet's experiences are losing their quality of innocence over time, there is nevertheless a broad continuity in terms of his spontaneous and essentially physical (unmediated) engagement in nature.

The episode's double focus on "animal activities" and ocular phenomena conveys the sheer physicality of the boy's delight in nature: Wordsworth's hungry eye is literally seduced by the scene visibly spread before him (8.478). But his quasi-carnal desire to bond with nature leads to a disturbing encounter when a huge cliff that was hidden ashore suddenly juts from behind a ridge on which he had set his bearings. Wordsworth is baffled by the event and half-sees the cliff as a creature whose rising head threatens to blot out the stars. Feeling frightened and admonished, he returns the boat. The young Wordsworth is thereafter haunted by

> a darkness – call it solitude
> Or blank desertion – no familiar shapes
> Of hourly objects, images of trees,
> Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,

But huge and mighty forms that do not live

Like living men . . . (1.421-426)

He is profoundly unsettled by his inability to apprehend what happened on the lake. Morecver the mysterious occurrence makes him see that nature lies partly beyond his ken, that there is an alien dimension to materiality which cannot be grasped by "living men." Thus the perceptual continuity that had existed from childhood up to this point is disrupted, as Wordsworth's security in nature yields to a new sense of doubt and uncertainty. The affinity underlying this particular loss of relationship with nature and the loss that takes place, or rather that is repeated, in the preamble's opening passage is denoted by the correspondence between the above section and the first three lines of the preamble, in syntax (note the conjunctions, prepositions and nouns) and diction (e.g., "green fields").

As odd as it may seem then, it therefore appears that the narrator revisits the past to rehearse his present crisis. Memories of Derwent underline his change of relationship with nature in the preamble; and the boating incident closely reiterates the trauma of discovering an inner void, after going into nature only to find forces there which cannot be commanded. There is however a constructive purpose impelling the poet's retrograde pattern, which revolves around his desire to mitigate the harsh contrast between now and then. Derwent is really too painful as a reminder of what the poet no longer possesses, so he conjures up the memory of Ullswater where intuitions of the

mind's alterity to nature are still mixed with primitive, organic experience. By taking slow steps from the Eden of Derwent, through the Earth of Ullswater, Wordsworth gradually arrives at a position where he can face his fallen state in the narrative present. The memory of Ullswater thus provides Wordsworth with a middle ground between the ideal conditions of childhood and his troubled adult reality, and allows him to pass more easily from the consideration of one, to the thought of the other.

Wordsworth's Miltonic allusion to the archangel Michael in the shepherd's skiff passage hints at the mediatory role played by the episode. The reference to "Paradise Lost" is established directly in line 388: the boat is said to glide across the water "like a man who moves with stately step / Though bent on speed" (1.387-88). Wordsworth alludes in these lines to the pause that Michael takes halfway through the diluvial history which he is unfolding before Adam; a pause that Milton likens to the noontime rest taken by a traveller even "Though [he is] bent on speed" (Milton 12.2). By associating the Ullswater paddler with Michael's account of the Flood, Wordsworth figuratively places the events of the episode midway "Betwixt the world destroy'd" of Derwent and the "world restor'd" of his current reconcilement to the destruction of that paradise (12.3). Milton's mythos of redemption is in this manner embodied by the Ullswater boy, whose experience of ontological fracture is recalled "to elevate the mind" and soften the sting of present anxieties (Prelude 1.624).

The episode is in this sense a sort of metaphoric Covenant which assures Wordsworth that although the past is scarred by fear and destruction, his memory of childhood joy is strong enough to justify his hope that the future will foster happiness and creative activity.

Anxious childhood memories are in "The Prelude" generally characterized by a mediatory psychological function. The two "spots of time" described in Book XI are important examples in this regard (11.258). The first spot recounts Wordsworth's experience of discovering a mouldering gibbet, and of then watching a girl struggle against the wind. The second spot relates Wordsworth's memory of his father's death. Both episodes signify instances where the poet was confronted with potent and difficult feelings, which he subsequently dealt with and successfully incorporated into his life as a source of emotional strength. Wordsworth in this way converts past challenges into lasting proof that adversity, however great, can be overcome. In the process, he demonstrates that "feeling comes in aid / Of feeling, and diversity of strength / Attends us, if but once we have been strong" (11.326-28). Fear is not merely an emotion to be softened therefore, as is the case in the Ullswater episode; but it is a force to be mastered as well, and a feeling that can empower once this mastery has been achieved.

So the speaker's remembrance of the past acts to cushion his current awareness of creative languor, whether by couching the loss of his childhood paradise within the context of pleasurable

memories, or by reminding him that he has a "diversity of strength" at his disposal to help him through his crisis. The palliative offered by memory comes at a cost however, as it engenders yet another fissure within the self, which adds to the burden of Wordsworth's concerns. The temporal distance of the past, combined with the experiential gap between "infantine desire" and present lassitude, eventuates in a peculiar splitting of the poet's self into "two consciousnesses:"

> so wide appears
> The vacancy between me and those days,
> Which yet have such self-presence in my mind
> That sometimes when I think of them I seem
> Two consciousnesses — conscious of myself,
> And of some other being. (2.26 and 28-33)

The division of identity occurs as Wordsworth alters his focus from the present to the past, and the autobiographical "I" awakens to its estrangement from the "other being" of the remembered self, which time separates from the "me" that is the immediate core of his identity.

Wordsworth's articulation of "two consciousnesses" actually fractures the self into three facets then, an "other being" springing from the past, a nuclear "me" and the conscious "I" that writes them. On one level the temporal fissuring of the "me" into an increasingly distant "other being" expresses Wordsworth's growing anxiety about his ability to cross the divide between now and then for the purposes of self-

regeneration. Yet on another level the "vacancy" wedged between past and present represents a permanent block to the establishment of any stable relationship with the past: whatever glimmering confirmations his imagination finds there are inevitably challenged by the pressing knowledge of a disempowered present, or are interrupted by a flickering memory. There is as a result no single and objective "centre palpable" for the imagination to hold onto, no purchase that it might claim for its own (8.600). The power of imagination is as shifting as its mental ground, and the poet's efforts to gain imaginative autonomy are consequently destined to frustration.

Wordsworth addresses the decentred character of self and imagination in a passage where he describes his gaze "o'er the surface of past time," using the metaphor of a person in a boat who is looking over into the water's depth,

> Yet often is perplexed, and cannot part
> The shadow from the substance, rocks and sky,
> Mountains and clouds, from that which is indeed
> The region, and the things which there abide
> In their true dwelling; now is crossed by gleam
> Of his own image, by a sunbeam now,
> And motions that are sent he knows not whence,
>
> (4.263 and 254-60)

Because the "true dwelling" below water (the past) is layered over by images from the airy world (the present), the eye is unable to discern exactly which elements are superimposed and

which exist underwater. The eye/"I" that glimpses itself self-consciously in the present additionally obscures what belongs where. Consequently, illusion and reality interpenetrate to the degree that some parts of the spectacle are of an entirely unknown origin ("he knows not whence"). Past and present are therefore inextricably mingled within the speculum of autobiographical composition, and their relationship to each other is bound to be defined differently at different moments of observation.

The manifest absence of any fixed subject-position implies, then, that self-perception and imagination are necessarily subject to flux because they are grounded by a signifying field (memory) which is at a remove that can be spanned only moment by moment, figure by figure. David Simpson's comments on the provisional status of figuration in the poem are relevant in this respect:

> There is no privileged figuring [in "The Prelude"]. . . which becomes an objective standard of normalcy; there is only a *series* of figurings, wherein a whole set of positions will be taken up from time to time, rising to vanish like clouds in the sky, (Wordsworth 66)

"The Prelude" is not so much a stable figuration of a unitary self or imagination therefore, as it is a sequence of reflections on self and imagination that are discretely (though successively) located in narrative time. Nor does any one representation of imagination emerge as a definitive manifestation of the creative

self: there is no real consummation or apotheosis of imagination, no insight entirely liberated from the poet's concerns about his imaginative decline. For while the poem's narrative framework binds Wordsworth's self-representations together by referring them to a common autobiographical "now," it is not to the extent that they can be attributed to a temporally unified, autonomous self – one that finds itself fully and forever in the present, free of the need to return once more to the past. Thus, the diachronic play of the poet's memory resists consolidation as the synchronic incarnation of a static and objective "I," so that no one moment offers a total and eternal figure for imagination.

Wordsworth's sensitivity to the fleeting and subjective character of imagination pervades "The Prelude." Evanescence attends the Simplon Pass episode for example, where the apostrophe to imagination arises from a brief insight specific to the bracketed narrative "now:" "And now recovering, to my soul I say – / 'I recognize thy glory'." That such high points are transitory and changeable is indicated by another very different meditation on the past, in which the poet reflects on the hubbub of London and feels "the imaginative power / Languish within me [as even] then it slept" (7.499-500). Most crucially though the perishability of imagination is felt in the reduction of his childhood spontaneity to quick "glimpses" into the past, which later may be scarcely seen: the momentariness of creative strength is immeasurably intensified by the threat that such visitations could with time be almost extinguished.

Wordsworth's awareness of the transience of imagination has important implications for "The Prelude" in general. Consider the passage in Book XIII where the poet recalls when, in Book I, he first

> rose
> As if on wings, and saw beneath me stretched
> Vast prospect of the world which I had been,
> And *was*; and hence this song, which like a lark
> I have protracted, (13.377-81, my italics)

At a glance this passage evokes an image of the poet hovering above the text as though "The Prelude" were one great "prospect" or tableau of the self, envisioned from the outset. Wordsworth's description of the poem as a "protracted" song likewise folds the narrative's beginning, middle and end into a single aesthetic whole that stands (in) for the poet's self-fulfilling consciousness. But this circular reading is undercut by the double reference of "was," which signifies the past with which the author identifies in Book I (as the person he was), and also the closed anteriority of his identity in Book I vis-à-vis Book XIII (where he is no longer the person in Book I). The evidence of Book I's anteriority in Book XIII interrupts the sense of temporal continuity that is required to sustain the notion that the narrative is the unbroken reflection of a completely unified and "synchronic" identity. Consequently what would perhaps appear to be an assertion of creative self-autonomy is upon consideration a rhetorical gesture, rather than a faithful

description of the actual conditions of the poem's writing.

Wordsworth's lack of imaginative autonomy is tacitly recognized as he draws the poem to a close and declares his hopes for the future. Note his cautious tone:

> We have reached
> The time, which was our object from the first,
> When we *may* (not presumptuously, I *hope*)
> *Suppose* my powers so far confirmed, and such
> My knowledge, as to make me *capable*
> Of building up a work that *should* endure.
>
> (13.273-78, my italics)

By presenting "The Prelude" as a sort of proemial preparation for "The Recluse," Wordsworth apparently leaves Book I's anxieties behind. M. H. Abrams advocates such a reading in Natural Supernaturalism, where he posits that the end of "The Prelude" validates the opening's (alleged) confirmation of Wordsworth's "vocation as a poet-prophet" (Abrams 288). Yet Wordsworth's final statement of ambition is obviously modified by a degree of hesitancy and conjecture. These qualifications are substantiated by the profound vocational crisis of the first Book, and by the fluctuations of imaginative power exhibited throughout the poem. Wordsworth is simply too aware that his diminishment in creative strength, and his faltering memory, may mean that his resources are unequal to the task ahead. And finally, there is no better evidence for the real potential of long-term creative failure than the fact that "The Recluse" was never written.

So everywhere Wordsworth turns he is confronted and troubled by the negative effects of time. When he searches nature for inspiration in the glad preamble, he finds that he cannot maintain a spontaneous dialogue with it and a lag ensues where natural event and thought lose their temporal and creative correlation. Similarly when Wordsworth next shifts his mental eye inwards and backwards through time, he discovers that memory too is located at an experiential distance which may eventually expand to the point of nearly eclipsing the creative connection between now and then. Lastly, the process of writing itself is disturbed by the disintegrative effects of time, as imaginative power is segmented over the course of the poem into high and low points which fail to reach the kind of cyclic stability needed to complete an extensive work like "The Recluse."

With so many of the objects of creative consciousness thrown into doubt, one wonders what is confirmed about Wordsworth's imagination in "The Prelude." To suppose with Hartman that there is a core imagination that is driven by "an inner necessity to cast out nature," does not account for the fact that Wordsworth requires nature to help sustain his creative impulse since memory alone is inadequate (Hartman 49). Wordsworth's reliance on tangible form is moreover foregrounded by the Derwent vignette, where childhood organicism poses a forceful contrast to his present lack of connection with nature. Or, if it is claimed following McGann and Langan that Wordsworth elides material (natural and socio-historical) reference by subsuming it within a

"record of pure consciousness," then we risk overlooking the fissures between the self and nature, memory and writing, that contradict the notion of a strictly autonomous or "pure" Wordsworthian self.

I propose that what is basic or constant to self and imagination in "The Prelude" does not lie in the direction of what Wordsworth seemingly transcends or attempts to escape for the sake of autonomy, but rather in the direction of what he knows cannot be avoided: his knowledge of mortality and of society. The idea of death is crucial to Wordsworth's mature sense of imagination because it marks the fundamental transition from childhood spontaneity to a self-conscious awareness of the mind's alterity to nature. Wordsworth's experiences at Cambridge and in London, and during the Revolution, likewise signify a watershed in the history of his imagination, for they challenge his idealistic view of human nature, and cause him to re-evaluate his earliest perceptions within a broader social context. The remainder of this chapter will focus on how death and society inform imagination in "The Prelude," beginning with the role that mortality plays in defining the poet's creative consciousness.

I wish to return briefly to the Ullswater episode, since this key section records one of the poem's earliest adumbrations of mortality, and dramatically registers the gradual decay of Wordsworth's early faith in imagination. The unspoken power of the boy's imagination is conveyed by his almost prodigious stature: he does not even seem like a child in the boat, but

rather like "a man who moves with stately step." There is also a violence to how he "struck the oars, and struck again," which hints at an emotional agitation that is contrary to prior pleasure and naivety (1.385). The boy's canny navigation of the dark waters, "as suited one who proudly rowed / With his best skill," furthermore denotes a conscious mastery of nature that differs from Derwent's purely instinctual engagement (396-97). Thus skilfullness, aggression, and an ironic tone of maturity characterize the boy as preternaturally beyond his roughly eight or nine years, and certainly altered from several seasons before. This change involves an abandonment of innocence and an increase in strong, even demonic impulses, which are instantiated in several other episodes. As a killer of trapped birds for example, he is a "fell destroyer," and as a stealer of eggs he is a "plunderer" (1.318 and 336).

The juvenile Wordsworth always feels some anxiety about his dark doings. After killing birds he is pursued by sounds of breathing and of "undistinguishable" steps, which are the hauntings of his disturbed conscience (1.331). This glimpse via conscience into the human mind, as distinguished from nature, enkindles Wordsworth's instinctual knowledge of the mind's alterity to materiality. But it takes nature's "blank desertion" following the Ullswater incident to clearly impress upon him that there are natural forces which reside outside of material reference, beyond the reach of his mind. While the child does not yet clearly understand the "darkness" of nature's otherness,

he is nevertheless pushed closer towards the self-conscious interiority that dominates Wordsworth's mature perspective; for the Ullswater encounter decisively interrupts his primal "unconscious intercourse" with nature and shows him that his existence cannot be fitted to all outward things (1.589).

The connection between death and Wordsworth's awareness of alterity, which is latent but unstated in the Ullswater passage, is established explicitly in his account of his mother's decease (he was nearly eight at the time). While she was alive her maternal love provided a ballast for the infant Wordsworth's perceptions, which simultaneously directed his attention towards her and towards the external object-world. In this fashion the mind's embracing of the mother was translated into a grasping of nature, where objects were perceptually arranged so as to constitute one seemingly conscious whole. Since there is at this stage "A virtue which irradiates and exalts / All objects through all intercourse of sense," there is no effective distinction between what exists in the mind and what is external: the mind's "virtue" and the objects of sense combine to form a single living gestalt (2.259-60). As Frances Ferguson writes, "the bond between the infant and nature results from an affection between mother and child so strong as to preclude the possibility of the child's recognizing nature as something alien" (Ferguson 135). However once the mother dies, the difference between imagination and matter becomes important because Wordsworth is left alone to negotiate the "visible world," and must discern for himself his

relationship with that world (2.293). And so begins the mutation of the poet's unconscious intercourse with nature into a self-conscious and essentially alienated discourse about nature.

One key realization that Wordsworth has after losing his mother is that the material domain is limited as an object of contemplation, because there is a region of experience which cannot be attributed to the physical presence of nature. Wordsworth has this insight while listening to sounds that transmit "The ghostly language of the ancient earth, / Or make their dim abode in distant winds:" sounds which recede in time and space from concrete perception (2.328-29). This self-conscious awareness, that the mind must actively fill in the negative space beyond what is empirically present, disrupts the fluid consubstantiality of self and nature which existed while the mother was alive. In one respect this is an empowering moment, in that it releases imagination from a crude dependency on "outward sense" and allows it to pursue its innate "sense / Of possible sublimity, to which / With growing faculties she doth aspire" (11.271 and 2.336-38). Yet it also marks a definite loss of ontological security (how does the mind fill in the gap?), a lack which originates with the mother's death, and that continues to haunt the poet on Ullswater lake and finally in the glad preamble.

Since the poet's awareness of alienation from nature is finally traceable to the death of his mother, there is an indelible association in his mind between mortality and self-

consciousness. Wordsworth explores this relationship in the "Boy of Winander" section of Book V. The section begins simply enough as a portrayal of a child who is schooled in nature rather than in spiritually vacuous book-learning. The boy's imaginative vitality is demonstrated by his ability to imitate and elicit the calls of owls:

> with fingers interwoven, both hands
> Pressed closely palm to palm, and to his mouth
> Uplifted, he as through an instrument
> Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls,
> That they might answer him. And they would shout
> Across the wat'ry vale, and shout again,
> Responsive to his call, (5.395-401)

The bodily symmetry of the boy's actions as he cups palm to palm emblematizes the reciprocal, "interwoven" relationship with nature displayed in his skilful imitation of the owls, and in their response. To say though that his calls are "answered" is perhaps misleading, because it is actually the boy who imitates or answers nature and not vice versa: his success depends on his ability to convince the birds that his voice is theirs, that he is always already one of their kind. His voice is, in other words, ideally an echo of the "Redoubled and redoubled," self-multiplying cries of the owls (5.403). The boy's pleasure in mimesis therefore consists in his skill in becoming like an owl that is responding to other owls, which enables him to transform into one of nature's re-sounding voices and forget his alien

status relative to nature.

Nature does not always serve the boy however, and "pauses of deep silence" baffle his skill (5.405). During these lacunae the inimitable "voice / Of mountain torrents" and the infinitely silent "visible scene" penetrate his consciousness, and register the alterity which he sought to forget: the cracks in his mirror are revealed (5.408-9). The portentous feeling hovering over of these fractures is amplified when the reader is told in the next paragraph that the Winander episode is in fact about a child who has died some time ago.

Following the disclosure of the boy's demise, Wordsworth shifts to the narrative near-present and describes thinking about the boy while standing by his churchyard grave. The implicit connection between the boy's awareness of alterity and his death is magnified by the uncanny resemblance between the churchyard which "*hangs* / Upon a slope" and the boy's mental posture as he "hung" listening in silence (5.417-18, my italics and 406). This formal similarity is enhanced by the affinity between Wordsworth's "Mute" stance and the silence that defied the boy's voice (5.422). It is as though Wordsworth is literally standing in the boy's silence, an impression which is clearer in the 1850 version where the emphatically "long half hour" that Wordsworth spends mutely is more obviously allied to the similarly "lengthened pause" experienced by the boy (1850.5.396 and 379). While the boy is confronted by the dumb and "solemn imagery" of nature however, Wordsworth gazes upon a gravestone, the solemn

and silent image of death (1805.5.411). The thematic chiasmus that is thus drawn across the two paragraphs between silence and death, nature and grave, is completed by the contrast of Wordsworth's quietude with the "gladsome sounds" of children playing near the gravesite; a dynamic that echoes the paired binaries of sound/silence and life/death in the Winander passage proper (5.429).[6]

By closing together adulthood and childhood, the two basic strata of experience in "The Prelude," the Boy of Winander section focuses their interrelation. On the one hand the boy's experience lies on the cusp of adulthood, hanging between a simple trust in his connection with nature and the recognition that nature is distinct from the mind. Wordsworth on the other hand is in his maturity familiar with the self's alterity to nature and associates the silence that overwhelmed the boy with what he now understands to be the true sign of his otherness from materiality, death: the older poet knows that while nature never dies, individuals do.[7]

The disparate settings of the two paragraphs underscore the contrast between the Winander boy's relative innocence of mortality and Wordsworth's self-conscious knowledge of it. The churchyard's socialized milieu conveys an artificiality towards death that is missing in the boy's relationship with his primitive environment. For in the graveyard the sublime power of death is deflected since, as Alan Bewell suggests, "Graves idealize the dead by placing them out of sight . . . and by

placing them together, so that they are no longer alone, but can be conceived as a community" (Bewell 212). Wordsworth however erects his personal memorial to the boy not to rehearse but to interrogate the impulse to sublimate and socialize death. His intensely intimate meditation on the nature of death resists social elaboration, and the iconic solitude and silence that he shares with the boy signifies that mortality is a matter of direct and private experience.

Wordsworth's insistent foregrounding of death in the Winander section highlights the thematic importance of mortality in "The Prelude." Death is a crucial concept for the poet since it is the chief sign of his current alienation from nature, and marks the disintegration of his imagination over time. Because death is for Wordsworth the symbolic antithesis to childhood organicism, he associates mortality with the threat of imaginative collapse. Death is therefore often treated in "The Prelude" as a metaphor for creative failure, whether in personal or in general terms. This symbolic dimension to death is active in Wordsworth's assertion that we are "as dust" if the "vulgar sense" of adult life is allowed to dominate over the creative impulses grounded in childhood, and "a universe of death" is thereby substituted for imaginative life (13.152, 140 and 141). Wordsworth's equation of death with creative vacuity is also manifest in the preamble, where it is not the idea of death itself that creates anxiety, but rather the fear that he is "Unprofitably travelling towards the grave" because he is unable

to tap his imagination in order to write his philosophic magnum opus (1.269).

Thus the poet's awareness of death simultaneously reminds him of his creative decline, and spurs him on to the pursuit imaginative restoration. The force that tore him from his mother and from nature is in this manner the impetus that causes him to seek, and strive to maintain, an inner feeling of the imagination that he once possessed. Wordsworth is drawn as a result to memories like the Ullswater and Winander episodes because they enable him to revisit and access childhood's "god-like" being, even as it begins to crumble before his inward gaze through time (3.192). This renewing act of reflection, which momentarily bridges a child's spontaneous creativity and an adult's perception of mortality and radical interiority, constitutes the enduring strength of imagination. It shows as well exactly how the poet's imagination depends on his internal, psychological relationship to time – the past of childhood, the present of adulthood and the future of literal death – rather than on his external, spatial relationship to nature.

Wordsworth's first "Essay on Epitaphs" offers a helpful illustration of how the recollection of childhood perceptions is imperative to restoring creative vigour in the face of death. The "Essay" links childhood's inexperience of death with a feeling of immortality:

> Never did a child stand by the side of a running stream, pondering within himself what power was the

> feeder of the perpetual current, from what never-wearied sources the body of water was supplied, but he must have been inevitably propelled to follow this question by another: "Towards what abyss is it in progress? what receptacle can contain the mighty influx?" And the spirit of the answer must have been . . . a receptacle without bounds or dimensions; — nothing less than infinity. (Prose 2: 51)

Unaffected by the notion of ends, the child's sense of origins tells him that life must continue forever. Wordsworth writes further that this primal sentiment of immortality shapes the early development of "human affections," which are "formed and opened out" under the impression that being is infinite (51).

Such unself-conscious expansions of imagination across space and time constitute the experiential foundation for Wordsworth's visions of the "great whole" of mind and nature in "The Prelude" (3.131). These visions, which extend into late adolescence, are enabled by the feeling of boundlessness discussed in the "Essay." Consider for instance Wordsworth's description of how his creative eye explored the diverse forms of nature, and

> Could find no surface where its power might sleep,
> Which spake perpetual logic to my soul,
> And by an unrelenting agency
> Did bind my feelings even as in a chain. (3.164-67)

Sight and insight, thought ("logic") and emotion ("feelings"), coalesce in this broadly ecstatic state of mind. They are bound

together by an imagination that does not entirely recognize the significance of death, as the stamp of the self's limits before nature. Nature and mind are therefore as one, and there is "no surface" that can resist Wordsworth's creative strength.

Once Wordsworth's imaginative vision has seriously declined with age though, and has been largely replaced by an awareness of mortality and alterity, then the remembrance of childhood becomes a necessary surrogate for an immediate relationship with nature. Only imagination is by this point no longer fixated on nature as an object of play or an arena for "animal activities," but is instead directed towards the philosophical issue of how to sustain love and hope when life appears to be overcast by death. In this regard Wordsworth asserts that love could not ever

> attain any new strength, or even preserve the old, after we had received from the outward senses the impression of death, and were in the habit of having that impression daily renewed . . . if the same were not counteracted by those communications with our internal Being, which are anterior to those experiences. . . . there could be no repose, no joy. (51-52)

If man did not have an unshakeable emotional basis in childhood to balance his awareness of death, there would in truth be no real motivation to act, no purpose to life. And "The Prelude" is not without its shudders of morbid indifference. The preamble is notably fraught with a despondency and "vain perplexity" which

compels the narrator to look within the "internal Being" of memory, so that he might transform spiritual languor into spiritual life, and muster the means of producing a work of meaning and love (1.268).

Wordsworth's fear that he might not always be able to draw upon his childhood memories for creative replenishment is potently thematized in his encounter with the discharged soldier. The incident occurs at a critical juncture in the poet's growing comprehension of death. His year at Cambridge away from rhythms of rural life has sensitized his eye to the subtle changes that have surfaced in his small Penrith community: an old man's usual seat is now empty, babies have learned to walk, girls have married. More importantly though, these tangible signs of alteration enter young Wordsworth's visionary consciousness as well, so that

> Whatever shadings of mortality
> Had fallen upon these objects [of nature] heretofore
> Were different in kind: not tender – strong,
> Deep, gloomy were they, and severe, the scatterings
> Of childhood, (4.240-44)

No fewer than four adjectives ("strong . . .") are used to emphasize how the poet's childhood perception of the "great whole" is troubled by his newborn awareness of human transience. This ominous passage, with its foreboding of psychic disturbance, prepares the way for the discharged soldier, whose sombre and deathly figure further "scatters" Wordsworth's childhood

innocence of the adult beyond.

The soldier makes a startling entrance onto the scenery of Wordsworth's life. Wordsworth is at the time of the event strolling on a road at night in a state of easy meditation that speaks of creative assurance. His even, oneiric flow of thought carries over into "A self-possession felt in every pause / And every gentle movement of my frame:" physical and mental activity are blended into a single continuous stream of onward motion, reminiscent of the preamble (4.398-99). But this forward momentum is interrupted by the appearance of the soldier, whose "uncouth shape" imposes itself on Wordsworth's eye and effectively blocks the road (4.402). It is as if Wordsworth is thus forced to confront a grim and inescapable version of his own future, in which the inspired solitude of empowered wandering succumbs to social isolation and personal "desolation;" and in which his poetic fluency, "like a river murmuring," deteriorates into the soldier's "murmuring sounds, as if of pain / Or of uneasy thought" (4.418, 110 and 422-23).

Partly out of compassion, but also because he wants to come to terms with the soldier's "ghastly" figure, Wordsworth swallows his fear and addresses him (4.411). The soldier's relation of his history only deepens Wordsworth's disquiet however, for

> in all he said
> There was a strange half-absence, and a tone
> Of weakness and indifference, as of one
> Remembering the importance of his theme

But feeling it no longer. (4.474-78)

More than his devastated appearance, it is the soldier's "weakness and indifference" that upsets Wordsworth, for his poverty simply mirrors the spiritual loss suffered by one whose "outward senses" have been so inundated by war and "the impression of death," that his innermost self has become inaccessible. The soldier's estrangement from his "internal Being" is therefore at the core of his brutish reliance on outward things (like charity), a sheer dependency that reflects an absence of meaningful correspondence between the outside world and the individual's inner self. In this sense the soldier provides Wordsworth with a glimpse into the sombre reality that lies on the far side of the "scatterings of childhood," when the sentiment of death exists separately from the repose and love that spring from the soil of early experience. He is finally the image of Wordsworth's fearful other, a poet who is lost from his vital "theme:" the life and hope afforded by childhood once the external world has ceased to be a reliable support for imagination.

If the soldier represents an individual who is blocked from his proper sustenance and is consequently reduced (literally) to "a mean pensioner / On outward forms," then Wordsworth's Alpine journey signifies the possibility of overcoming this kind of dependency and demonstrates how creativity can be recuperated after nature has lost its power to feed the imagination (6.667-68).

Wordsworth left for the Continent, with his college friend Robert Jones, in his third summer at Cambridge. Mary Moorman notes that the scheme was fairly reckless in conception since the travellers had "little money and no previous knowledge of where they were going," and the trip was to take roughly fourteen weeks (Moorman 131). Yet recklessness was part of the adventure, which was "An open slight / Of college cares and study," and an exuberant expression of a "youthful fancy" to behold the "mighty forms" of nature (6.342-43 and 347).

The month that the pair spent walking through France bolstered their high spirits. Jones and Wordsworth found it easy to participate in the country's widespread enthusiasm, as its joy in hope and liberty was at that period largely undiminished by bitter political passion, and because the English were welcomed there as forbearers of liberty. "The Prelude" is careful though to point out that there was an ingenuousness to the "Enchanting show" of picturesque beauty and social hubbub that the men witnessed in their surroundings: an "unripe state / Of intellect and heart" that was overly absorbed in the pursuit of sublimity and beauty, and too quickly animated by the sometimes unruly pleasure of "the boisterous crew" (6.388, 470-71 and 420). Evidence of Wordsworth's great excitement during this leg of the journey is found in a letter to his sister Dorothy, in which he writes that he has "been kept in a perpetual hurry of delight by the almost uninterrupted succession of sublime and beautiful objects" (Letters 32). The letter also mentions that he and

Jones have "met with little disasters occasionally: but far from depressing, they rather gave us additional resolution and spirits" (37). Thus imagination in the form of youthful ardour, instead of visionary contemplation, impelled the travellers' march of "military speed" through France, and on to the Swiss Alps (6.428).

"The Prelude" records in detail how Wordsworth and his companion became lost during their trek across the mountains. The steady flow of scenery which had so far accompanied their travels suddenly gives way to a feeling of disorientation, where "every moment now encreased our doubts" (6.512). Their doubts are confirmed when they learn that they have already passed the mountain peak, and that the only direction remaining is downwards. An anticipated high point is in this fashion translated into a tumbling low which deadens the excitement that had been generated by their first daring to set out, the glorious natural scenery, and by their joy in the joy of millions.

It is upon this bathetic and self-circular moment of error, in which Wordsworth must retrace his steps to regain the path, that the poet erects his first major meditation on imagination:

> Imagination! – lifting up itself
> Before the eye and progress of my song
> Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,
> In all the might of its endowments, came
> Athwart me. (6.525-29)

When the power of imagination initially descended on Wordsworth

it was of course experienced merely as a "heavy slackening" of expectations, and it remains for the mature poet to read the event as a revelation (6.549). His present visionary insight stems from a memory, then, in which the poet's young self discovers simply that his enthusiasm and orderly, picturesque view of nature are not a stable ground for imagination. The older Wordsworth meanwhile interprets the incident as a vital development in his understanding of his alterity to nature. The Simplon Pass episode is therefore like the Ullswater Lake and Winander boy memories, where inchoate intuitions of the mind's otherness to materiality (revealed through the bafflement of expectations) provide the mature Wordsworth with autobiographical markers as to how he arrived at his current sense of radical interiority. The three memories furthermore signify the approaching importance of the "internal Being" of memory, as nature becomes less dependable over time, and as the poet is turned increasingly towards the self centred within.

De Man writes sensitively on the self-reflective character of imagination in the Simplon Pass apostrophe in the essay "Wordsworth and Hölderlin:"

> The moment of active projection into the future [i.e., Wordsworth's anticipation of reaching the peak] . . . lies for the imagination in a past from which it is separated by the experience of a failure (Scheitern). The [present] interpretation is only possible from a standpoint that lies on the far side of this failure,

> and that has escaped destruction thanks to an effort of consciousness to make sure of itself once again.
>
> (Rhetoric 58)

De Man regards Wordsworth's memory of his failure as a crucial part of his imaginative consciousness, for without this challenge to imagination's "projection into the future," the mind would have never adequately grasped its limitations relative to nature: and the Simplon apostrophe depends on this knowledge of limits. De Man's comments in this respect elucidate the intimate relationship between imagination and memory, and strongly suggest how imagination is not really an "unfathered vapour," because it emerges within the context of autobiographical reflection and poetic composition.

The above passage from "Wordsworth and Hölderlin" moreover touches on the workings of imagination in the narrative present, as it struggles to re-centre or "make sure" of itself in the face of Wordsworth's understanding that the ontological props of childhood have fallen asunder. This search for a new, internally directed creative core subtends Wordsworth's chief assertion in the Simplon apostrophe:

> in such visitings
> Of awful promise, when the light of sense
> Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
> The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
> There harbours whether we be young or old.
> Our destiny, our nature, and our home,

Is with infinitude – and only there; (6.533-39)

It is perhaps tempting to read these lines as an expression of a sudden revelation or transcendence, for everything seems to hinge on a momentary "flash" of perception in which the "light of sense" (reason) is extinguished so that a deeper visionary faculty might illuminate the "invisible world." But the critical "flash" is located in the past of the Simplon Pass incident when its meaning was unintelligible, so the real emphasis is on the older poet's ability to proclaim his imaginative power despite the unreliability of the visible natural world. The triumph of imagination in Book VI consists therefore in the poet's capacity to celebrate the mind's separation from nature, and embrace the "infinitude" of his interior reality.

So the Simplon Pass apostrophe, above all other moments in "The Prelude," represents a decisive turn inward for the poet, away from the external world and towards the "internal Being" of his past self. This shift in orientation provides him with a renewed sense of motivation, and fosters the conviction that the proper object of imagination is situated within the self rather than without:

> With hope it is, hope that can never die,
> Effort, and expectation, and desire,
> And something evermore about to be.
> The mind beneath such banners militant
> Thinks not of spoils or trophies, nor of aught
> That may attest its prowess, blest in thoughts

That are their own perfection and reward – (6.540-46)

Wordsworth's imagination, no longer pursuing the "spoils" that it once habitually sought in nature, is now committed to its essential purpose in his adult life: to open up a creative horizon after nature has been largely closed off from access. This hope, buoyed by the "feeling of life endless" derived from childhood memories, furthermore transcends the negative psychic impact of mortality as a creative impulse that "can never die" (13.183). The loss of nature that occurred with the poet's progress into adulthood (which reaches a critical stage in the Simplon Pass) is thus transformed into an imaginative gain. And the fate of the discharged soldier, whose morbid reliance on outward forms testifies to the insufficiency of his internal resources, is cast aside in favour of a life firmly based on the truths that proceed from childhood experience.

The eminent position occupied by the Simplon Pass section, as the poet's most direct and forceful declaration of imaginative strength, reflects its significance in relation to imagination in "The Prelude" as a whole. Amid Wordsworth's anxieties about his alienation from nature, the weakening of his memory and his ability to write "The Recluse," his insight into the Alpine misadventure represents a degree of confidence that at least momentarily outstrips all of his doubts. For as his thoughts are elevated to a level where they become self-adequate – "their own perfection and reward" – the "vacant musing" that hindered his composition in the preamble ceases to be a concern, as do his

worries about nature and memory. Wordsworth's compulsive need to pursue an object, whether that object is poetry, nature or his own childhood, simply loses its urgency when his desideratum, imaginative power, is attained.

Without the creative zenith of the Simplon passage, it is indeed unlikely that Wordsworth would have felt justified in making Book XIII's claims about his competency to write "The Recluse," or for that matter, to advance any other of the optimistic statements in "The Prelude:" imagination for Wordsworth must have some proof of its intrinsic strength, however flashing, if it is to be trusted at all over the long term. Look at the poet's "Preface" to the 1815 Poems:

> the Imagination is conscious of an indestructible dominion; – the Soul may fall away from it, not being able to sustain its grandeur; but, if once felt and acknowledged, by no act of any other faculty of the mind can it be relaxed, impaired or diminished.
>
> (Prose 3: 36-37)

Wordsworth recognizes here that the correspondence between "the Soul" and imagination can ebb, but states that there is a degree of permanent power regardless of such fluctuations, once the basic experience of imagination has been felt and acknowledged. In the context of "The Prelude," the Simplon episode epitomizes this pivotal consciousness of imagination, and so substantiates the poem's theme of everlasting hope, which lives on despite all of the soul's fallings.

While the Simplon apostrophe establishes Wordsworth's creative virility however, it is important to remember that his rapture and feeling of transcendence exist in relation to a radical decline in power. If Wordsworth discovers that "our home / Is with infinitude," he also knows that it is "only there," because the mind can no longer dwell securely in nature. Likewise if he finds within himself a hope that will "never die," he is simultaneously aware that his imagination is subject to its own kind of death or impotence now that it is divorced from childhood's sense of eternality, except as a recollected feeling. What the apostrophe represents therefore is not Wordsworth's escape from the constraints upon his imagination, but rather his arrival at a fairly precise knowledge of the conditions informing his creative faculty: it is, in other words, a coming-to-consciousness. This coming-to-consciousness can be depicted as Wordsworth's mental retracing of a thematic circle that signifies the pattern of his life. The circle begins with his infantine, unconscious communications with nature, arcs through the gradual decay of his spontaneous relationship with nature, and closes with his current success in finding a new "home" for his imagination, in a present that revolves primarily around the remembrance of things past. His prophetic gaze into "something evermore about to be" is founded in this way on the memory of what was, and can be no longer.

Wordsworth's recollections of Cambridge, London and the Revolution play a role in his mature coming-to-consciousness that

parallels the one played by his cumulative awareness of alterity and mortality. Just as the poet's current view of imagination is modified by the knowledge that he has fallen from nature, so is his sense of creative power qualified by his memory of ill-fated commitments within the public sphere. Wordsworth's consciousness of error in the social domain, no less than his alienation from nature, represents "a stride . . . / Into another region," that separates him from his ideal childhood conception of imagination (10.240-41).

Wordsworth's decisive "stride" or break from the past occurs in Book X, when England declares war on France, ten days after France's February 1, 1793 declaration of war on England. The poet loses his moral bearings at this point, feeling utterly betrayed by England's attack on the country that he believes should have served as his nation's guide. To understand why Wordsworth is affected so profoundly by the politics of his time, however, it is essential to know what exactly he had invested in the Revolution. And to grasp the scope of his dedication to France, it is necessary to return to the earlier stages of Wordsworth's life, when his notion of man and society was formed.

Wordsworth's original view of human nature, which is based on his observations of his native Cockermouth community, assumes a considerable degree of individual rationality, self-restraint and moral composure. Wordsworth writes that in Cockermouth he saw

> Man free, man working for himself, with choice

> Of time, and place, and object; by his wants,
> His comforts, native occupations, cares,
> Conducted on to individual ends
> Or social, and still followed by a train,
> Unwooed, unthought-of even: simplicity,
> And beauty, and inevitable grace. (8.152-58)

The attributes of independence and choice which signify man's freedom are in agreement here with the forces of necessity and tradition ("wants" and "native occupations") that compel his behaviour from without; for both liberty and necessity lead equally to "inevitable grace." But perhaps Wordsworth blurs rather than balances the distinction between choice and compulsion, insofar as he glides through his mention of extrinsic constraints without considering how these might affect the individual's freedom of choice. Furthermore, by glossing over possible tensions between the private and public domains, the passage suggests that to whatever degree the people of Cockermouth pursue their personal or social interests ("individual ends / Or social"), they are "*still* followed by a train" of virtues. Cockermouth thus embodies an incorruptible paragon of social stability, in which the complex realities of private conduct and public interaction are unfailingly reduced to the barest of beatific abstractions: simplicity, beauty, and grace.

While the poet's ideal (and idealized) Cockermouth society represents the best in man, Cambridge exposes his mundane

imperfections to the young Wordsworth. Neither the university, nor the manners of student life, provide a social environment that is supportive of Wordsworth's spirit of community or of his imaginative self-development. Rather, his mind is merely set "on edge" by the institution's authoritarian structure, and his privilege as a student instills a vain disregard for the common person (3.571). Wordsworth's conceit is displayed in his behaviour at College Chapel:

> Upshouldering in a dislocated lump
> With shallow ostentatious carelessness
> My surplice, gloried in yet despised,
> I clove in pride through the inferior throng
> Of the plain burghers, who in audience stood
> On the last skirts of their permitted ground,
> Beneath the pealing organ. (3.316-22)

There is a playful neglect of formality in Wordsworth's slapdash treatment of his surplice. Yet there is also a deeper layer of contempt to his "ostentatious carelessness," which is pointed at the chapel's townspeople. Wordsworth's sloppy arrangement of his outer garment reveals the extent to which he takes his status for granted, as though his affected elevation over the "inferior throng" were a sort of inalienable privilege that he need not fuss about. This casually superior pose is also discernible in Wordsworth's description of the burghers, whom he imagines to be standing on "the last skirts" of their designated zone as if they longed to enter the students' space, but were forbidden to do so

by their lower rank. The regular Cantabrigians are moreover tellingly located "beneath," and not in front of, the organ, which further details Wordsworth's perception of hierarchy within the chapel.

Cambridge thus sucks Wordsworth into a spurious reality, in which the beguiling "surfaces of artificial life / And manners finely spun" divert his attention from the simple but profound virtues of his old mountain life (3.590-91). The student Wordsworth accordingly abandons for a time the egalitarian ethos underlying his Cockermouth ideal, where love for the "creature in himself" governs social relations, instead of any "outside marks by which / Society has parted man from man" (8.77 and 12.217-18). Yet this juvenile fascination with outward cultural forms is not so compelling that Wordsworth altogether loses sight of his original beliefs about what constitutes and enables human dignity. He positively recoils from London's social environment, which he sees largely as a "perpetual flow / Of trivial objects" that "have no law, no meaning, and no end" (7.702-03 and 705). Such anarchy is opposed, he feels, to the ennobling influence that hills or mountains have on a rural community like Cockermouth, where their formal grace and unity impart "order and relation" not only the workings of the individual soul, but to the activities of the entire community as well (7.730).

As alienating as London is for Wordsworth, then, he retains his faith in the potential for widespread social harmony. In fact, the show of corruption in London emboldens his "trust in

what we may become," for the city's negative example merely convinces Wordsworth that humanity is capable of achieving a state of existence that is better than the one typified there:

> every thing that was indeed divine
> Retained its purity inviolate
> And unencroached upon, nay, seemed brighter far
> For this deep shade in counterview, (8.807 and 813-16)

In this way the city, while bringing Wordsworth into close contact with the oppressive realities of society, also broadens his moral sensibilities beyond the parochial chauvinism of Cambridge, and fuels his aspirations for humankind. And Wordsworth's dedication to the principle of human perfectibility (as represented by Cockermouth) is strengthened with each new challenge to his social vision, and increases in proportion to his own growing involvement in the illusions of "artificial life."

By the time Wordsworth arrives in Paris in November 1791 therefore, he is more than prepared to identify with the spirit of the Revolution, in the name of radical improvement. For all of his enthusiasm though, he obviously has an outsider's perspective on the events. The "main organs" of political power driving the Revolution are from the outset hidden from his purview, so that he obtains only a minimal understanding of the historical currents at play (9.103). In addition, his fanciful predilection for tales and images evoking "chivalrous delight," along with his general sympathy towards feudal customs, softens

his populist tendencies and further distances him from the main ideological thrust of the Revolution (9.503).

Wordsworth's simultaneous attraction to aristocratic and republican notions furthermore leads him into political contradictions. One such inconsistency arises over the course of his conversations with Michel Beaupuy, a French noble and officer whom Wordsworth befriends at Blois. Theresa Kelley notes that

> What Beaupuy says they are fighting against [in 9.511-43] - the suffering and poverty of the French (especially the female French), the use of *lettres de cachet*, and the absence of a principle of *habeas corpus* - are all misuses of power practiced by the *ancien régime*, whose authority derives from the chivalric past. . . . (Kelley 116)

Wordsworth's rosy view of the Revolution as a chivalric righting of human wrongs causes him to overlook the fact that Beaupuy's republican stance is not typical of the old nobility, whose discredited political, legal and economic control galled the nation: Wordsworth fails to see that his feudal fantasies have no place in the actual Revolutionary scheme. His lack of political acuity additionally demonstrates the extent to which his trust in man's goodness overrides the need for caution. This dangerous hyper-optimism continues to influence Wordsworth well beyond the relatively peaceful phases of the Revolution. He even sees Robespierre's Reign of Terror as a momentary weakness that is bound to be absorbed into a larger good; nor does he care "if the

wind did now and then / Blow keen upon an eminence that gave / Prospect so large into futurity" (10.749-51).

Harsh reality does eventually catch up to Wordsworth though, with England's declaration of war. By this time the novelty of the Revolution has worn off, and France's situation has been deteriorating for so long, that his

sentiments

> Could through my understanding's natural growth
> No longer justify themselves through faith
> Of inward consciousness, (10.784-87)

But Wordsworth does eventually recover from his despair, and returns to his belief in the virtue of "inward consciousness" as a moral instinct that guides individual and social ends towards a mutual good. Dorothy's tender care of her brother acts to restore this trust in humanity, which in turn rekindles his faith in his Cockermouth model of society.

Wordsworth thus turns once again to his "Meek men," the gentle English souls whose activities are aroused not by "the pompous names / Of power and action," but instead by pure domestic passions shaped by the orderly and ordering forms of nature (12.268 and 48-49). And so the poet resolves, at last, to ground his vision of human potential permanently on the "good in the familiar face of life:" those displays of love and fellow-feeling which testify to our capacity for social unity, and which reflect our innate dignity and moral beauty, when nature directs our passions and moderates our thoughts (12.67).

While Wordsworth finds a basis for hope in the humble pursuits of mankind, and is confident that he speaks of "no dream but things oracular," it is nevertheless clear that his ideals have suffered (12.252). The events of the Revolution have proven that his social aspirations will not materialize within the foreseeable future. And the harmful effects of cities like London, along with the class prejudice maintained by institutions like Cambridge, can only provide him with further evidence that he will have to wait indefinitely for his vision to take root. Therefore if Wordsworth considers "things oracular," they are perforce prophetic because if they ever take shape, it will be in a future that he cannot currently imagine. Wordsworth is for the moment restricted to wondering why there are so few examples of his ideal person: "Why is this glorious creature to be found / Only one in ten thousand? What one is, / Why not many be?" (12.90-92) Why not, is the question that endlessly troubles Wordsworth.

Wordsworth's vatic stance is founded, then, on a view of man that was imprinted on his mind in childhood but which has proven over time to possess little material substance. Yet this is not to suggest that the poet, by sustaining his earliest instincts about human nature, eschews social reality for a private dream. Wordsworth is to the contrary fully aware that his ideals exist in inexorable tension with the hard facts of the world: why else would he elucidate the various challenges to his vision? So when Wordsworth writes that his poetry might teach how the mind

becomes "more beautiful than the earth," he is not implying that it is possible to separate oneself from the contingencies of the human collective (13.447). He is instead merely expressing his belief that the passions and creative yearning which spring from childhood can provide a "never-failing principle" for social and individual renovation, and ultimately a better future for all (2.465). But Wordsworth knows that this moral instinct must be continually adjusted to suit the needs of the present, and must be moderated by the wisdom of experience and the careful use of reason, if it is to be of any use. Wordsworth consequently (to paraphrase McGann) does not set himself free of the ruins of history and culture, but stands deliberately in their midst, to consider how they might be restored. This is why "The Prelude" recovers, and does not cover over, the socio-historical terrain of Wordsworth's life.

In conclusion, two basic parallels can be drawn between how Wordsworth's experience of society, and of nature, inform the development of his imagination. One similarity between their respective roles is that they equally represent a loss of early innocence. Wordsworth's first conception of human nature is subjected to the same impossible test of time as his childhood relationship with nature: Cambridge, London and the Revolution demonstrate the impracticability of his Cockermouth ideal, while his gradual alienation from nature confronts him with his mortality and creative decline, which are antithetical to his once organic bond with nature. Finally, it is in both cases an

act of imagination, drawing on the remembered feelings of childhood, that enables Wordsworth to maintain his optimism despite the stark realities of the present.

Wordsworth's mature view of human nature is therefore subject to the same kind of temporal conditions as his Simplon insight. Both manifestations of his imaginative vision signify a hopeful gaze into the future that is inspired by the recollected experience of childhood, yet acknowledges that this experience is divided from the flawed, mundane present. This integration of past, present and future within a single perceptual horizon fundamentally characterizes Wordsworth's prophetic imagination. Thomas McFarland's comments on prophecy in Romantic poetry apply nicely to Wordsworth in this respect:

> present, past, and future, the mundane experience and the ideal possibility, are all necessary components [of the visionary imagination]. Because both future and past are aspects of an existence taken in totality, prophecy's concern for the future can be no more important than its concern for the past – and in fact is linked to it. (McFarland 131)

There is no better evidence for McFarland's argument than "The Prelude," where imagination and reflection, retrospect and prospect, are inextricably linked. For while Wordsworth's memory of the past revitalizes his mundane present, it also enables his visionary trust in the future. And if there is a message to "The Prelude," it is that the hopes of man depend on the principle of

love and imagination that stems from early life, since it is this ennobling principle that makes the mind "more divine" than the imperfect world presently, and perhaps forever, thrust upon us (13.452).

Notes

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all references are to the 1805 text of the Norton edition.

[2] McGann's observations on "Tintern Abbey" do raise the important question of why Wordsworth idealizes the poem's scenery. However, it is not necessary to read the poem as an evasion of politics. Alan Bewell points out that Wordsworth's portrayal of a natural rather than industrialized landscape draws on an Enlightenment tradition of political anthropology, which is based on a notion of natural rights that is "inextricably bound up with reconstructions of a 'natural state'" (Bewell 37). By "greening" the Wye Valley then, Wordsworth sets up a "natural state" in which to explore primal patterns of feeling, and thereby suggest how social principles can be established according to basic human tendencies. Wordsworth quickly veers from the socio-political dimension of his anthropological discourse though, to focus on how Dorothy (an English savage) embodies a state of intimacy with the "wild secluded scene" that Wordsworth can no longer adequately experience (Poetical 2: 6). Thus "Tintern Abbey" finally relates how Wordsworth excavates, and so recovers, a primitive stratum of perception and emotional intensity.

Now, it is of course possible to argue that Wordsworth's anthropological narrative allows him to displace socio-historical factors as easily as any idea of "pure consciousness," for his emphasis on the emotional life of the individual takes precedence

over the reality of the Wye Valley. Yet by invoking the anthropological scheme, the poet signals to the reader that his idealization of the Valley is merely a rhetorical convention, as self-consciously artificial as, say, any pastoral convention. "Tintern Abbey" therefore does not repress or elide its political elements, but instead expressly lays them aside.

[3] David Riede comments in a similar vein:

> Insofar as the wanderer's journey originates and ends in his own psychic unity, the road he takes passes through historical actualities as "shews of being" – its essential existence is not in the topography of history but in the winding recesses and depths of the mind. (Riede 147-48)

The critical problem here is whether Wordsworth actually achieves "psychic unity." If not, then it cannot be claimed that he reduces the external world to a mere aspect or show of his own mind, for a fractured subjectivity precludes stable self-objectification. In other words, if Wordsworth is ultimately unable to assert his own psychic objectivity, then he cannot shield himself against the (objective) socio-historical pressures that inform his subjective consciousness.

[4] In discussing sound as a reflection of meaning, I do not intend to suggest that sound possesses an iconic or intrinsic value – as though vowels were necessarily a sign of inspiration, and consonants one of creative blockage. Wordsworth's use of sound

in the first three paragraphs of the preamble appears to be deliberate however, and thus warrants close consideration. Finally, it is the change that occurs over these paragraphs that gives value to his use of sound: the phonetic shift in his language correlates with the narrative transition from spontaneity to despondency. So vowels gain their value through their structural opposition to consonants; a binary that is semantically informed by the narrative context surrounding the use of sound.

[5] Not everyone will be convinced that there is sexual content in this passage – sometimes a boat is just a boat. In any case, my essential point regarding the episode is that it develops a theme of transgression, which is marked plainly enough by the boy's act of theft.

[6] Wordsworth's initial, 1798 draft for the Winander Boy passage is written partly in the first person. So we read,

> And when it chanced
> That pauses of deep silence mocked my skill,
> Then often in that silence, while I hung
> Listening, a sudden shock of mild surprize
> Would carry far into my heart the voice
> Of mountain torrents; (<u>Prelude</u> MS. JJ 15-20)

Considering that the Winander boy and Wordsworth were originally the same figure, it makes sense to read the 1805 poem as a dying-off of an earlier version of the poet's self. That is, by laying

the boy in the grave, Wordsworth bids farewell to his childhood self.

[7] My reading of the Winander Boy section is indebted to de Man's Gauss seminar. De Man discusses Wordsworth's use of the keyword "hang," and identifies the Boy's hanging in silence as a moment in which "the analogical stability of a world in which mind and nature reflect each other was shattered"(de Man 80). He also links Wordsworth's graveyard reflection upon this moment with the poet's consciousness of death - a "preknowledge of his mortality," that buffers against the vertigo of death by allowing Wordsworth to figure or imagine the unimaginable (80). I argue in the following text that Wordsworth's perception of death has a rather different psychological function.

Endpiece: Community in "The Prelude"

I have argued in the main part of this thesis that Wordsworth's social ideals work in tension with his perception of society, because he recognizes the disparity between his visionary projections and concrete reality. This section examines in closer detail how "The Prelude" constructs Wordsworth's social vision, and its uneasy relation to his experience of London and the Revolution. Wordsworth's portrayal of urban space and the Revolution has been recently debated by a number of critics, who observe that "The Prelude" privileges a social paradigm which is governed by the "order and relation" of nature, over against the unruly versions of society represented by London and Revolutionary France (7.730).[1] Thus the mountain's "steady form" imparts a lasting "grandeur" to both individual and collective existence, while the "transitory things" that litter the city debase its population (7.723, 724 and 740). Moreover, it is Wordsworth's faith in nature's virtuous influence that revives his sense of "true proportion" after his disastrous Revolutionary engagement, and moderates his passions to a more conservative pitch (12.65). The Revolution and urban society are therefore superseded by the poet's favoured model of community, which he equates with the socialized presence of "pure imagination" (12.55).

Philip Shaw's new historicist reading forcefully states the case "against" Wordsworth:

> To restore the sense of landscape to metaphorical

> perfection, the subject must gather the flow of trivial objects under the rubric of imagination. But at the end of the text, what has been restored is not the real landscape – not the space of daily life and practical relations – but the false, aesthetic landscape of pastoralism. Nature is placed by Wordsworth within the text as an artistic mark to distinguish the subject from the social body. (Shaw 92)

According to Shaw then, the pastoral perspective embodied by Book VIII's depiction of Cockermouth and the Grasmere Fair sets imagination apart from the hostile space of the city, and finally constitutes a personal zone of retreat from the vertiginous energies of the Revolution, a "social body" out of control. Shaw asserts furthermore that Wordsworth's characteristic use of pastoral landscapes is spurious, insofar as they replace the realities of human collectivity with a merely aesthetic figuration of social interaction.[2] Yet the assumption that Wordsworth successfully displaces urban and Revolutionary space does not necessarily obtain for the "The Prelude." To test Shaw's hypothesis, we need to investigate Wordsworth's attitude towards the rural and urban modes of life, and explore how this is reflected in "The Prelude."

I discussed in the previous segment how Wordsworth's social ideals are illustrated by his sketch of Cockermouth, in which individual needs and desires are shown to correlate harmoniously with cultural traditions and the activities of the whole

community. Nature's ennobling forms provide the ballast required to regulate man's thoughts and passions, and thereby guarantees social accord. This idyllic conception of society, centred on the vital role of nature as a guide for human conduct, is maintained by Wordsworth even following the breakdown of his Revolutionary aspirations, which profoundly challenged his trust in human nature.

The poet's continued faith in social perfectibility is evinced in his description of Grasmere Fair, as viewed from Helvellyn. Looking upon Grasmere, he sees the same kind of correspondence between nature and man that he witnessed in his childhood paradise:

> Immense
> Is the recess, the circumambient world
> Magnificent, by which they are embraced.
> They move about upon the soft green field;
> How little they, they and their doings, seem,
> Their herds and flocks about them, they themselves,
> And all which they can further or obstruct –
> Through utter weakness pitiably dear,
> As tender infants are – and yet how great,
> For all things serve them: (8.47-56)

This passage is one of the most striking in the poem. The muscular iamb, "immense," stands impressively alone in the first line, all the more conspicuous for being the only instance in the 1805 "Prelude" where Wordsworth uses a single word to introduce a

verse paragraph. The syllabic and expressive power of this word carries over into the two subsequent lines, where the five syllables of "circumambient" and the four of "magnificent" add further weight and dignity to the natural world they describe. Next to these elaborate and ponderous adjectives, which potently convey the expansiveness and beauty of the landscape, the mono- and di- syllables applied to the community seem "little" and meek. Sound thus echoes sense: for the cares and occupations of the community appear as "utter weakness" beside nature's almost imperious presence, which is greater and more reaching in effect than are human actions. Wordsworth tells us, however, that the Grasmere community participates in nature's greatness, since "all things" in nature serve it.

There is an interchange therefore between nature and man. But the balance of power clearly leans towards nature, because nature serves man only if he first defers to it. "The Prelude" often indicates that we depend on nature's superior, disciplinary influence to correct our excesses and to excite our virtuous passions, so that we can attain our own "genuine liberty" and power (13.122). This principle is active for instance when nature admonishes Wordsworth after he steals the shepherd's skiff, and so chastens his "devious mood" (2.383). Another aspect of nature's guidance is its regulation of human perception. The combination of continuity and variety found in nature, whereby "Scene [is] linked to scene," allows man to experience his passions among its unfolding displays of "ever-

growing change" without being overwhelmed by an accumulation of sights and sensations (8.129). Thus nature

> Holds up before the mind, intoxicate
> With present objects and the busy dance
> Of things that pass away, a temperate shew
> Of objects that endure – (12.33-36)

The mind is in this manner taught to discriminate the permanent from the transient, not only in nature, but in the "frame of life / Social and individual" as well (12.39-40). The love of nature's grandeur and diversity accordingly leads us to cherish those qualities as they exist in mankind.

So nature ensures the spiritual health of both the individual and the community, but as a patriarchal presence. Hence David Simpson writes of the Helvellyn passage:

> The mountains here function as a protective barrier, keeping out the negative influences of the urban life; but in making possible an egalitarian society for these few human beings, the landscape itself is imaged in a language deriving from a feudal tradition.
>
> (Wordsworth's 127)

In speaking of a "feudal" discourse, Simpson is referring to Wordsworth's description of Helvellyn as a sort of lordly figure who watches over the "little family" of his demesne in the "silence of his rest" (8.7 and 13). The traces of manorialism in the passage are significant, because they intimate Wordsworth's sympathy towards the old aristocratic tradition. A degree of

nostalgia is certainly manifest in a letter the poet wrote to Sir George Beaumont in October 1805. Wordsworth remarks in the letter that the distribution of land under the feudal arrangement had an advantage over the current property system, in that the landscape was left unmarred by the type of cultivation that has since occurred as a result of estate management. There were therefore no signs of authority forced onto the landscape, nothing "imposing to the imagination in the whole face of a district," which would make the common tenant feel subjugated by his "dependence on the Chief" (Letters 623). For Wordsworth then, it is not exactly the political structure of a community that counts, but rather the affective relations between the people and their environment.

The Guide through the District of the Lakes, the main body of which was written between 1809 and 1810, identifies the quickly fading Dales community of the Lake District as a near analogue for Wordsworth's ideal mountain society. Wordsworth writes in the Guide that before the region had been contaminated by industry, commerce and other elements of urban life, the chapel had been the prime cultural influence on the population. The Dalesmen were then

> like an ideal society or an organized community, whose constitution had been imposed and regulated by the mountains which protected it. Neither high-born nobleman, knight, nor esquire, was here; but many of these humble sons of the hills had a consciousness that

> the land, which they walked over and tilled, had for more than five hundred years been possessed by men of their name and blood; (Prose 2: 206)

Reading the Guide, one cannot be sure whether it is the chapel or the mountain that fosters and protects the republican spirit of the Dales community, since both are made to represent a form of absolute authority. In any case, the salient consideration is not what governs over the community (the Church, the State or Nature), but rather what acts to hold the community together through the daily course of their existence. On this last point, Wordsworth is unequivocal: it is the agriculturalist's sense of lineage, which is at the heart of his ties to the soil, that joins man to nature, and nature to the community.

With Wordsworth's traditionalism in mind, the role of feudal imagery in the Helvellyn passage becomes more clear. Given that Wordsworth shifted indifferently during a five or six year period (from writing Book VIII, to the early Guide) between nature, feudalism and the Church as the prime guarantor of social cohesion, it appears that the passage's feudalism is merely one of several strains of his then-current traditionalist discourse. What is essential to the passage therefore is its general connection to Wordsworth's discussions of land, property and polity. The key issue in this context is how Grasmere's landscape "serves" the community as a geophysical reference-point for collective interaction: for the Grasmere Fair, like the agriculturalist's attachment to his land in the Guide,

illustrates how the traditions of a community are linked to a particular locale. Finally, the Fair demonstrates how nature's scenes become "allied to the affections," and are transformed into a living record of cultural history (1.640).[3]

If the unspoiled Grasmere landscape enables a healthful association between the community and its environment, then London prevents any such relationship from developing. In the city, the "quick dance / Of colours, lights and forms" generated by the urban scramble confounds the senses, and uproots the social affections (7.156-57). Consider Wordsworth's description of the city:

> The wealth, the bustle and the eagerness,
> The glittering chariots with their pampered steeds,
> Stalls, barrows, porters, midway in the street
> The scavenger that begs with hat in hand,
> The labouring hackney-coaches, the rash speed
> Of coaches travelling far, . . .
> . . . . . .
> Here, there, and everywhere, a weary throng,
> The comers and the goers face to face —
> Face after face — the string of dazzling wares,
> Shop after shop, (7.161-74)

The heaping of definite articles ("the") prompts the reader to search for a focus or source for all of the activity, but there is only a growing accretion of nouns and headwords which is never attributed to a final agent or goal. Everything is "Here, there,

and everywhere," yet nowhere in particular. Lacking a determinate centre, objects and events seem to swirl without direction and are caught up in a constant flux of energy: hence the active adjectives ("glittering," "labouring," "dazzling") which further excite the impression of tumult. Things pass by with "rash speed," and do not connect in any meaningful way. Finally, the chaos of the urban environment translates into social alienation, as life is reduced to a numbing repetition of objects, "Face after face," "Shop after shop," within an "endless [perpetual, purposeless] stream of men and moving things" (7.158).

Ultimately the rush and roar of the city undermines the very possibility of meaningful social relations. There is in London no steady form, like a mountain, behind the changing scenes; there is only change, without order — an "unmanageable sight" (7.709). Consequently there is no basis for establishing communal traditions or histories, and therefore no way to bond the environment to the affections. Life is accordingly reduced to a brutish presentness, a mere clinging to transient things. Under such conditions, human community is cut down to a pantomimic shadow of its potential existence.

The trivialization of imagination in London is thematized by the spectacle of a public drama, in which "Jack the Giant-killer," hidden by a coat of darkness, has the word "INVISIBLE" in plain sight upon his chest (7.303 and 310). The nice irony of Jack's device bares the general superfluity of the sign in

London: the city-dwellers, especially the "untaught minds," are so accustomed to quick and shoddy illusions that they do not observe the redundancy of labelling an obvious situation (7.298). More disturbing than the crowd's gullible literality though, is the notion that if they are ready to accept a patent mirage then their personal realities might be made up of equally hollow fictions. And when so much "lies to every sense," and even the greatest minds must struggle to survive under the urban oppression, then there seems to be small hope for the integrity of the masses (7.575). Thus what we see on the stage is a window onto what is happening in London as a whole: the downgrading of imagination to an outward show, and the translation of community relations into a theatric farce.

Wordsworth's pessimism regarding the London crowds becomes poignant as he confronts the reader with the question,

> What say you then
> To times when half the city shall break out
> Full of one passion — vengeance, rage, or fear —
> To executions, to a street on fire,
> Mobs, riots, or rejoicings? (7.645-49)

The poet foregrounds here the potential for sudden and extreme violence on the part of the city populace. This latent unruliness is diametrically opposed to the Grasmere (or the Dales) community's peaceful co-habitation, which is moored by tradition and by historical attachments to the landscape. What appears to be critically lacking in the city therefore is the

disciplinary presence of tradition, as it exists among sparser populations in more pristine environments. London's population is too embroiled within the bustle of the here and now to attend to the enduring ties between man, nature and community that are crucial to fellow-feeling. There is accordingly a danger that a buildup of undisciplined passions could turn into ungovernable aggression.

The element of violence to city life suggests that there is a tie between the social turmoil of London and the events of the Revolution. This connection is bolstered by Wordsworth's comparison of both London and Revolutionary Paris to Chaos in "Paradise Lost." Wordsworth's description of heading through the "thickening hubbub" of London recalls Satan's trek through the "universal hubbub wild" (7.227; Milton 2.951). And his Paris excursion is reminiscent of what Satan sees in Chaos:

> I stared and listened with a stranger's ears,
> To hawkers and haranguers, hubbub wild,
> And hissing factionists with ardent eyes,
> In knots, or pairs, or single, ant-like swarms
> Of builders and subverters, every fact
> That hope or apprehension could put on — (9.55-60)

Satan meanwhile descries among the companions of Chaos

> Rumour next and Chance,
> And Tumult and Confusion all imbroil'd,
> And Discord with a thousand various mouths.
>
> (Milton 2.965-967)

Discord's thousand differing voices, and the other "noises loud and ruinous" filling Chaos, are thus linked with the "hubbub" of London and Paris (Milton 2.921). By associating the cacophony of words and images in London and Paris with the Chaotic din, Wordsworth stresses the unrestrained, disorderly state of both cities and the Revolution.

Wordsworth's choice of allusion suits his narrative scheme, which identifies peace with nature and tradition, and uprise with cities and constant change, or indeed revolution. In Chaos, nature is in a ferment:

> Into this wild Abyss,
> The Womb of nature and perhaps her Grave,
> Of neither Sea, nor Shore, nor Air, nor Fire,
> But all of these in thir pregnant causes mixt
> Confus'dly, and which thus must ever fight,
>
> (Milton 2.910-14)

The absence of form in Chaos is therefore partly a lack of natural order. Wordsworth's controlling metaphor (as it were) of nature-as-discipline is greatly enhanced by the Miltonic example of what happens when the natural design is not in place to give a pattern to things: progress is impossible, since everything is confused, self-defeating and ephemeral. For Wordsworth, the only possible outcome in such a situation is farce. Thus, just as culture descends into a tatty drama in London, so the Revolution rounds off in "The Prelude" as a cheap theatric effect, when

a Pope

> Is summoned in to crown an Emperor —
> This last opprobrium, when we see the dog
> Returning to his vomit, when the sun
> That rose in splendour, was alive, and moved
> In exultation among living clouds,
> Hath put his function and his glory off,
> And, turned into a gewgaw, a machine,
> Sets like an opera phantom. (10.932-40)

The universal and authentic "sun" of human nature that Wordsworth believed was destined to outshine all of the impediments to a successful Revolution is transformed into a poor opposite, a mechanical illusion, as history reveals its own inanity (10.140).

Given Wordsworth's dichotomization of the rural life on the one hand, and the city and the Revolution on the other, it is plain that he favours the former. However, it is not necessary to follow Shaw's assumption that Wordsworth displaces one by privileging the other. There are two reasons why we should not conclude that the poet elides society and history. One reason is that at the close of the poem Wordsworth has not actually found his new Cockermouth, but is wandering on "a public road" searching for confirmation of his social vision (12.145). While he does find enough evidence of native goodness in his encounters with "lowly men" to revive his aspirations, the examples are so few that he never really moves beyond the question that first sets him on his quest for the living ideal: "Why is this glorious creature to be found / One only in ten thousand?" (12.182 and 90-

1) The query is in fact rhetorical, for "The Prelude" supplies the answer. The pernicious influence of all things urban, and the self-consuming violence that they perpetuate, are largely responsible for the failure of humanity's social potential in the present age.

Lastly, Wordsworth's solitariness on the "lonely roads" illustrates the extent to which his imagination has retreated from the social sphere into the self (12.163). His is an imagination in exile from history and society, no longer ready or able to become involved in novel social schemes. The imagination is therefore restricted to relatively passive, philosophical social blueprints: nature, the individual soul and a specific paradigm of community. The Utopic moment when "Not favored spots alone, but the whole earth" showed signs of spiritual renovation is gone forever for Wordsworth (10.701). All that remains of that moment is a fragment of a dream – the favoured spot of Cockermouth – and the waking nightmare of London and the Revolution. The itinerant poet of "The Prelude" wanders restlessly between his dream and the reality, finding various means of stating his plight but never resolving it. Even the concrete manifestation of his ideals in the Dales community is seen to be quickly collapsing under the encroachment of industry and commerce. In the final analysis then, Wordsworth's poetics is in "The Prelude" one of doubt rather than certainty; of self-questioning rather than self-assertion. When he does proclaim his visionary beliefs, they are as bright flashes against a dark social canvas.

Notes

[1] Bourke (244-55), Kelley (109-16), Shaw (62-97), Simpson (Wordsworth 49-60 and Wordsworth's 121-33).

[2] Martin Danahay similarly asserts that "*The Prelude* is framed as an anti-urban retreat into an idealized memory of the landscape"(Danahay 55). This shift from city to nature, according to Danahay, furthermore signifies a displacement of the social and a retreat into the autonomous self. Danahay's reading balances the individualistic and social elements of the poem quite well, but insists that Wordsworth's poetics is based on an "individualist ideology" that operates strictly in reaction against the forces of collectivity represented by the city (64). See Danahay (55-65).

[3] See also "Home at Grasmere," where the notion of cultural memory offers Wordsworth a sense of consolation and of belonging:

> we do not tend a lamp
> Whose lustre we alone participate,
> Which shines dependent upon us alone,
> Mortal though bright, a dying, dying flame.
> Look where we will, some human hand has been
> Before us with its offering; not a tree
> Sprinkles these little pastures but the same
> Hath furnished matter for a thought; perchance
> For someone serves as a familiar friend.
>
> (Poetical 5: 436-444)

Conclusion and Summary

I have endeavoured in this thesis to produce a reading of "The Prelude" that takes into consideration the complex character of subjectivity in the poem. The main body of my text accordingly explores the intricate play of confidence and doubt, affirmation and uncertainty, that informs Wordsworth's poetics. One major source of disturbance for Wordsworth is his awareness of mortality. The notion of death represents a radical aspect of his consciousness, not merely as the signifier that marks the mind off from nature, but also as a symbol of the passing time that increasingly separates the poet from his ideal childhood being. Yet Wordsworth's sense of mortality is productive, because it reminds him of what has been lost, and of what he must struggle to regain. This simple life-against-death impulse conditions much of "The Prelude" and, if the preamble is trustworthy, is responsible for its genesis: it is Wordsworth's anxiety about heading uselessly toward the grave that sends him into the recesses of memory in search of inspiration. This will-to-imagination becomes especially potent in the Simplon passage, where Wordsworth simultaneously confronts the depths of his alienation from nature, and accesses a surge of creative power by tapping his childhood feeling of eternality.

But the stain of doubt always shows through the divine fabric of imagination, in one way or another. It appears for example in Wordsworth's recurrent expressions of concern about "The Recluse," or his growing inability to draw upon his

childhood memories. Therefore as Susan Wolfson observes, "The Prelude" does not unequivocally establish the poet's autonomy or ideal version of self. Rather, the autobiography shows

> a mind given to contrary promptings – reaching for imaginative equilibrium and closure but unable to achieve it in any absolute or determinate way, with the poetry itself retaining the trace of both impulses. (Wolfson 142)

Thus high points like Wordsworth's confidence at the beginning of the poem or in the Simplon vision, are complemented by equally profound moments of disquiet in which the poet inevitably encounters the limits of his creative self-sufficiency. Wordsworth's relationship with imaginative power is simply too unsteady, then, to provide a lasting basis for autonomy.[1]

Nevertheless new historicists like McGann, Levinson and Langan argue that Wordsworth constructs a model of autonomous imagination that elevates the mind over against socio-historical materiality. This assumption generally leads to the conclusion that Wordsworthian consciousness subsumes or elides the social in order to obtain its own unique objectivity. Hence Alan Liu's statement that in the Simplon Pass episode nature is at once deployed as a screen against history (which is backgrounded by the scenery), and as a passive mirror for a universalized imagination (registered in the passage's collective pronouns). In the apostrophe, the

> "I" thus comes into the majesty of objectivity

> seemingly without any further need for the mediation of the most human approach to objectivity: collectivity. History is denied, and the "I" engenders itself autogenetically as the very crown of . . . objectified subjectivity: a mind knowing itself only in the impersonal — (Liu 23)

"The Prelude" does not circumscribe an "objectified subjectivity" however, but instead limns an intense subjectivity that constantly interrogates its capacity for autonomy. Moreover, Wordsworth perceives the tension between his ideals and the socio-historical reality. Wordsworth recognizes from bitter experience the practical constraints on his vision, which are carefully outlined in his depiction of London and the Revolution. The social aspect of Wordsworth's imagination is therefore not only formed by social pressures (Cockermouth, Cambridge, London and the Revolution), but is furthermore open to the forces of collectivity, if in a mainly elegiac or adversarial mode.

The "Endpiece" concluding this thesis expands upon Wordsworth's representation of rural space, London and the Revolution. I present this brief discussion to provide a background for Wordsworth's attitudes regarding the rural and urban ways of life. This segment also adds to the primary body by elucidating Wordsworth's "disciplinary" concept of nature, and by detailing the thematic linkage between London and the Revolution. My final purpose here is to extend my basic position: that Wordsworth does not attempt to evade society and

history, but on the contrary constructs a narrative that aims to express his ideals within a social context.

I will close with some final comments on new historicism, and on my own methodological stance. The assumption that Wordsworth displaces the social for the sake of self-autonomy is, I believe, indicative of an exaggerated polarity in the critical discourse concerning the status of the textual subject. David Eakin describes this polarity as it exists relative to the study of autobiography. Eakin discerns two apparently divergent views of the autobiographical subject,

> dividing those who interpret the autobiographical act as the exercise of an autonomous subjectivity from those who see in it the workings of cultural (and specifically linguistic) determinism: the self who writes, or the self who is written. (Eakin 99)

I suggest that new historicist readings, in their query of the Wordsworth who writes, have commonly overemphasized his attempts to avoid the self that is written or determined by culture. In doing so, they interpret Wordsworth's antitheses — rural/urban, imagination/materialism, lasting/transitory, tradition/revolution — as an opposition of the self to the realities of community and history.

However, the poetics of self-autonomy by which Wordsworth supposedly separates himself from the social is never fulfilled in "The Prelude." Wordsworth's designs on transcendence are consigned to frustration, as Book I's self of "single and

determined bounds" is increasingly fractured over the course of the poem into the multiplex personality of "two consciousnesses" (1.669). In this manner the ideal of the unitary writing self, which Martin Danahay identifies as "a way of controlling the potential proliferation of subjects," is exploded by the dynamics of autobiographical consciousness (Danahay 51). The poet's imagination hardly seems, in consequence, to be the objectified monolith that new history makes it.

Finally, a second facet of "The Prelude" which is at odds with the notion that Wordsworth successfully transcends society is its recording of the social forces that oppress imagination. By foregrounding these pressures, Wordsworth bares the degree to which his pastoral landscapes are delimited or "written over" by the social. Thus the private paradise that the poet would have written into existence is troubled by the voices of the city and the Revolution. Voices that Wordsworth knows cannot be silenced. Realities that impinge upon his ideals.

In sum, "The Prelude" is not a poem that constructs a negative paradigm of the social only to justify and empower a self-absorbed idealism. To the contrary, Wordsworth's potent representation of his ideals enables him to expose and critique the dehumanizing effects of cities, industrialization and the misuse or abuse of power. And if Wordsworth is pushed into a state of relative isolation by his non-participation in mass society, then it must be remembered that he "withdrew unwillingly" from it (13.334) . Nor does he ultimately inhabit

the private landscape of his imagination, but instead wanders on the social outskirts, along a "public road" where he listens to the language of men. His is a reflective imagination then, one that dreams not to forget what man is, but to help show what he could become.

Notes

[1] Paul Privateer writes:

> in *The Prelude*, as with any autobiography, the past may be an uncontrollable resource, and while form suggests that an individual can totalize himself in discourse, the past may reconstruct a self or several selves different from the author's own temporal self-conception. (Privateer 132)

In my analysis, it is not so much that the recollection of the past may produce versions of the self that are different from the poet's ideal self-conception, but rather that he fails to achieve autonomy because he is unable to establish any reliable relationship with the past.

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