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Wordsworth's Decline: Self-editing and Editing the Self

Kenneth E. Morrison

Western Kentucky University, kenneth.morrison254@topper.wku.edu

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WORDSWORTH'S DECLINE: SELF-EDITING AND EDITING THE SELF

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Kenneth E. Morrison

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WORDSWORTH'S DECLINE: SELF-EDITING AND EDITING THE SELF

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Director of Thesis: Deborah Pagan

Lloyd Davis

Elyse W. Webb

Richard A. Bowler Jan 6, 2011
Dean, Graduate Studies and Research Date

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Given the tome-like length of what follows, and given the amount of time it has taken me to complete, it would probably be appropriate to keep these comments uncommonly brief. Yet as those who have been involved in this project know, concision is not one of my strengths. I can therefore only pledge my best effort: Economy, and plenty of it—or, as one committee member advised, “Channel Hemingway.”

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115 Pages

Directed By: Deborah Logan, Lloyd Davies, and Elizabeth Weston

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

In critical discourse surrounding the poetry of William Wordsworth, it has become generally acceptable to describe the course of the poet's career by means of a theory of "decline." In its most common form, this theory argues that Wordsworth's best poetry was written during one "Great Decade" (1798-1807)—an isolated epoch of prolificacy and genius. His subsequent works, it is argued, neither surpass nor equal his initial efforts; the course of his career after 1808 may be best described in terms of declivity, ebb, and decline.

Due to its ideological complicity with the very texts it engages, and due to its construction as a "myth" of criticism, the theory of decline ultimately becomes a reductive premise that precludes understanding Wordsworth's apparent downtrend as a complex but explicable process. This study therefore seeks to provide a *critical* explanation for the process of decline so often observed in Wordsworth's poetry. In essence, I contend that the perceptible downtrend in Wordsworth's verse is the direct consequence of continuous, career-long processes of revision or self-editing. This self-editing took two forms: First, the explicit form, whereby Wordsworth actually emended his poetry; and second, the implicit form, whereby Wordsworth sought, through his

poetry, to amend his self-image by constructing an autobiography tailored to fit an idealized poetic identity.

This analysis thus reveals and explicates Wordsworth's possible motives for revision—the fluctuating demands made upon the poet by the poet himself. Because these demands represent the operative (if unstable) principle underlying specific textual changes, one may infer from their character the reasons why Wordsworth's later poetry suffers in revision. By attending to the process whereby earlier verse was continually revised in order to fit a conceptual or poetic context for which it was not originally intended, I demonstrate how the actual substance of Wordsworth's poetry was compromised or attenuated through a reductive (re)appropriation of its own materials.

Unlike many critics, I do not treat Wordsworth's revisions as the signifiers of some external change. Instead, my approach keys upon the conflict between Wordsworth's efforts to realize a stable poetic identity and the representational and rhetorical limitations of poetic form, particularly with regards to autobiography. Drawing on the work of Susan Wolfson, Paul de Man, and Harold Bloom, I argue that Wordsworth's revisionary practices are motivated by an agonistic process best described as “autobiographical anxiety” or the “‘anxiety of influence’ turned inward.” Ultimately, I conclude that Wordsworth's decline was the consequence of an overarching ethic of composition which, because it privileged revision as a means of changing not only poetry but the poet himself, allowed self-consciousness to become a self-defeating agent.

Introduction

In book three of the 1805 version of *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth—poet, narrator, and explicit subject of the poem—pauses to survey his progress:

And here, O friend, have I retraced my life
Up to an eminence, and told a tale
Of matters which not falsely I may call
The glory of my youth. Of genius, power
Creation, and divinity itself,
I have been speaking, for my theme has been
What passed within me. . . .
Yet each man is a memory to himself,
And therefore, now that I must quit this theme,
I am not heartless; for there's not a man
That lives who hath not had his god-like hours . . . (1805 3.168-74, 189-92)

Despite the apparent finality of the lines above, and despite their almost epitaphic summation of a theme which, according to the poet, has now been “told” and must be “quit,” abandoned, and allowed to pass away and die, this particular “eminence” is only preliminary. We are only halfway to the crossing of the Alps in Book VI, ten books and thousands of lines removed from the climactic ascent of Mount Snowdon. The pinnacle above is but one of a series of interconnected peaks which punctuate Wordsworth’s sprawling autobiographical epic. One should not assume, however, that this moment’s anteriority precludes any relevance to the whole: ultimately, each eminence prefigures and contains its successor. The theme which Wordsworth seemingly quits does not perish but proliferates. Thus, while the poet’s childhood, like his “Residence at Cambridge,” may have passed, the concerns evident within that narrative—“the glory of . . . youth,” “genius, power, / Creation, and divinity itself”—are perpetually exigent. In *The Prelude*, chronology is a screen and a trope for the poet’s present; Wordsworth’s attempts to

reconstruct the past are genuine but always mediated. “Each man,” he declares, “is a memory to himself.”

For Wordsworth, memory is consistently the site and source of solace. Nevertheless, this moment, by acknowledging the distance between past and present selves, reveals his deeply ambivalent attitude toward retrospection. Delving into the past may be a restorative process, but it also produces an awareness of what has been lost. “Each man is a memory to himself,” removed from “the glory of youth,” and while the poet may profess faith in poetry’s capacity to bridge that gap and recoup former glory, his veneration of those “god-like hours” clearly implies profound doubt as to whether they can be equaled, much less surpassed.

The operative terms of this passage—binaries of youth and old age, past and present, loss and restoration—not only indicate many of the poet’s primary concerns, but also predict, with almost uncanny accuracy, the character of subsequent criticism. It is not simply that critics have treated these subjects in analysis--this is a given. Rather, a considerable body of critical discourse has actually internalized and reduplicated these terms, tropes, or patterns of thought, employing or applying them as frames for understanding the poet and his career. Wordsworth’s own modes of reflection, the conceptual apparatus of his consummately autobiographical verse, have structured the way critics think about his poetry. Just as the poet distinguishes between early and late selves, the critic divides the poet and his career into early and late phases; just as he speculates on the resplendent glory of youthful, “god-like” hours, the critic argues that his best work falls within one golden “Great Decade”; and just as the poet worries about loss, implicitly suggesting that one might not be able to recapture what once was, the

critic affirms that Wordsworth's later career is characterized by decisive decline in poetic power.

The "Great Decade" and its corollary, the theory of decline, have become pervasive presences in Wordsworth criticism. Yet despite their ubiquity, and despite notable efforts to justify—or reject—the implied binary view of the poet, the compositional processes behind the poet's alleged decline remain relatively unexplored. The goal of this study is therefore to provide a critical explanation for the *process* of decline so often observed in Wordsworth's poetry. I will uphold the widely accepted (though certainly not undisputed) judgment that his early poetry is of greater quality, but will qualify this assertion by describing *how* the quality of those initial poetic products was attenuated or otherwise compromised. Ultimately, I seek to demonstrate that the perceptible downtrend in Wordsworth's verse is the direct consequence of continuous, career-long processes of revision or self-editing. This self-editing took two forms: First, the explicit form, whereby Wordsworth actually emended his poetry; and second, the implicit form, whereby Wordsworth sought, through his poetry, to amend his self-image by constructing an autobiography tailored to fit an idealized poetic identity.

While a considerable amount of my argument will rely upon a comparative analysis of different versions or permutations of poetic texts, the point of the enterprise goes beyond simply tracking textual changes in order to pronounce one "better" than the other. Instead, analysis should reveal and explicate Wordsworth's possible motives for revision—the fluctuating, shifting, and evolving demands made upon the poet by the poet himself. Because these demands, which constitute the idealized poetic identity referenced above, represent the operative (if unstable) principle underlying specific textual changes,

one may infer from their character the reasons why Wordsworth's later poetry suffers in revision. The last portion of my argument confronts therein the ultimate contingency and uncertainty of all aesthetic judgment. Nevertheless, by attending to the process whereby earlier verse was continually revised in order to fit a conceptual or poetic context for which it was not originally intended, one can sufficiently demonstrate how the actual substance of Wordsworth's poetry was compromised or attenuated through a reductive (re)appropriation of its own materials. The diminishment of Wordsworth's poetic products was not (as many have speculated) a consequence of flagging "inspiration," or changing political perspectives, or the inevitable entropy of aging, but the effect of a continuous, overarching ethic of poetic composition which, because it privileged revision as a means of changing not only poetry but the poet himself, allowed artistic self-consciousness to eventually become a self-defeating agent. The process which would lead to Wordsworth's "decline" was present from the beginning, but the same revisionary ethic which initially yielded his best verse gradually became a burden too heavy for his poetry to bear.

Chapter 1:

Wordsworth's "Great Decade" and the Theory of Decline

Literary critics, although methodologically self-aware to a fault, are often hesitant to acknowledge their complicity with the texts they engage. We write *on* or *about* a given author or text, admitting and even celebrating our dependence upon literature, but nevertheless impose a boundary between our texts and their subjects, thereby creating Criticism as a genre apart, possessed of its own ethics, rhetoric, and methods. Although necessary and productive, this severing of critic and textual object often leads us to overlook the ways in which criticism engages in discursive practices either similar or analogous to those found within "primary" or "literary" texts. This is especially true of those works deemed "creative," for their discursive methods and purposes appear wholly dissimilar. Criticism judges, analyzes, and interprets; its purpose is exposition, not expression. Whereas the novelist, essayist, or poet composes a *literary* product, critics write in order to delineate how such products can or ought to be read.

Yet readings *are* narratives in their own right: the critic, like the author, crafts stories—meta-narratives whose plots center upon encounters with other texts and, through them, their creators. While we may question, reflect upon, or otherwise analyze these narratives with greater frequency and rigor, critical texts also function by means of trope, metaphor, and symbol. The various theoretical developments of the past sixty years, which have been especially attentive to the manner in which we construct and are constructed by language, only serve to amplify the point: Ours is a distinctly *literary* criticism.

While the literary qualities of criticism are eminently discernable in individual texts, the most pronounced evidence of these qualities emerges when critical discourse coalesces around specific works or authors. In such instances, what was originally the argument of an individual may, by means of repetition (whether positively or negatively construed), accrue enough weight, notoriety or influence to become part of the collective narrative, the “story” which defines an author or work and inflects subsequent readings. When applied to especially prominent authors and texts, the process becomes almost mythopoeic: like any sub-culture, criticism creates a narrative in order to understand the relevance and function of an iconic presence. Even when such a myth acts as a locus for iconoclasm, even when it occasions heated debate (as any “conventional” idea in criticism will), its power remains intact; for in the very act of engaging the icon, the critic will inevitably confront the myth. Criticism is not immune to the potency and efficacy of ideas which one might readily call, in another context, fictions. Just as an artificial world or a character may help one to understand “objective” realities, so may a constructed idea or narrative serve to illuminate a text or career. Without any implicit judgment regarding its validity, what is often described as a theory might well be called an *enabling fiction*.

Precisely such a fiction informs critical assessments of the poetic career of William Wordsworth, whose capacious influence and continuing importance to literary studies are, regardless of one’s opinion of his work, undeniable. Critical conversation surrounding his work remains vital, variegated, and manifold. Nevertheless, one finds within that polyvocal, sustained dialogue certain axiomatic continuities—ideas which, though certainly not new, “yet exist with independent life” and “know no decay” (Wordsworth 1799 1.286, 87). Perhaps the most prominent of these ideas manifests as a

narrative which seeks to explain an oft-cited aesthetic judgment concerning the disparity between his early and late poetry. In brief, it has become generally acceptable, when discussing the course of Wordsworth's career, to propound a theory of "decline." In its most common form, this theory argues that, while he enjoyed a relatively long and active career, Wordsworth's best poetry was written during one "Great Decade" (1798-1807)¹—an isolated epoch of prolificacy and genius. His subsequent works neither surpass nor equal his initial efforts, and thus, despite his substantial public reputation later in life, the course of his career after roughly 1808 may be best described in terms of declivity, ebb, and decline.

Despite its probable familiarity, the claim is striking, especially in terms of proportions. Unlike the majority of his Romantic compeers, Wordsworth lived a long life: born in 1770, he did not die until 1850—long enough to outlast the very literary movement which he had helped to found. Nevertheless, he was almost continually active as a poet, perhaps publishing even more during his late career than he had during the lauded early phase. To propose that Wordsworth's career is defined by one decade is therefore to assert that forty-two years of composition were more or less fruitless. The Great Decade theory isolates and elevates a considerable body of verse, but it concomitantly excludes an incredible amount of poetry. Wordsworth, according to the narrative, suffered from a forty-two year drought: he was in decline longer than Keats, Shelley, and Byron were alive.

¹ Although critics differ slightly in their dating of the Great Decade (some shifting its beginning to 1797 and some extending it until 1810), the range here mentioned is representative of majority opinion. Because 1798 is the year in which *Lyrical Ballads* was first published, it may serve as a fairly stable point of reference.

Granted, assent to this idea is by no means unanimous; even those critics who hold to such an assessment do not do so unequivocally. Permutations of the stock narrative abound, and one would be hard-pressed to locate a critic of Wordsworth who did not offer his or her own exception to the proposed parameters. Nevertheless, the essence of the myth—that Wordsworth’s poetry suffered from a terminal downtrend—remains intact and vital. The Great Decade has become a latent but potent rubric within Wordsworth criticism. Contemporary scholars, whatever the basis of their approach to or interest in Wordsworth’s poetry, often cite or allude to the phenomenon directly, as if it were tantamount to established fact; and even when the concept is not so explicit, one might detect its influence in a critic’s aesthetic judgments or selection of texts. Indeed, many would think it strange to deem the narrative of Wordsworth’s decline a “theory” at all, for the essential aesthetic preference it expresses has been integrated into the discipline as a whole. Susan Wolfson points out, for example, that the “story of [Wordsworth’s] decline” has led to a critical climate wherein

earlier and earliest versions gain praise for their vitality and fidelity to the best “Wordsworth.” Their recovery is the rationale of Cornell’s expensive and elaborate editions: “Wordsworth’s practice of leaving his poems unpublished for years after their completion, and his lifelong habit of revision . . . have obscured the original, often the best, versions of his work.” (75)

The judgments of one publication and its editors do not necessarily represent the views of an entire discipline. Nevertheless, the very fact that the field’s most rigorous exemplum of Wordsworth scholarship is dedicated to the “recovery” of “original” poetic products which have supposedly been “obscured” by “a lifelong habit of revision”² demonstrates the extent to which the idea has become an axiom of critical practice.

² The Cornell editors’ decision to characterize Wordsworth’s revisions as a “habit”—a word which carries rather obvious negative connotations—further confirms the theory’s predominance.

Unlike many critical concepts which have rather diffuse, uncertain geneses, the myth of Wordsworth's Great Decade may be traced to a single passage from an early critical work, Matthew Arnold's 1879 introduction to his selection of Wordsworth's poetry. The relevant paragraph, which merits being quoted in full, reads as follows:

Wordsworth composed verses during a space of some sixty years; and it is no exaggeration to say that within one single decade of those years, between 1798 and 1808, almost all his really first-rate work was produced. A mass of inferior work remains, work done before and after this golden prime, imbedding the first-rate work and clogging it, obstructing our approach to it, chilling, not unfrequently, the high-wrought mood with which we leave it. To be recognized far and wide as a great poet, to be possible and receivable as a classic, Wordsworth needs to be relieved of a great deal of the poetical baggage which now encumbers him. (Arnold 6)

Here, one finds the essence of the Great Decade myth: a comparative aesthetic assessment of Wordsworth's early and late poetry ending in the judgment that his corpus can be (or in Arnold's case, *must* be) organized by means of reference to a binary dynamic of vitality / decline—or, in Arnold's terms, of a "golden prime" followed by a "clogging . . . obstructing . . . chilling" mass of "poetical baggage." However, the most striking element of this passage is Arnold's rhetoric, which simultaneously invokes classical archetypes, seasonal motifs, and an entire complex of Romantic metaphors of poetic expression and inspiration. For example, the phrase "golden prime" is polyconnotative: it both contains an explicit reference to the archetypal "golden age" of antiquity (associated with innocence, youth, passion, liberty in the absence of encumbrance) and, by means of "prime," activates a polysemous chain of associations intimately linked to ideas of youth; seasonal fecundity, precedence, and order (e.g., spring); and primitive or primal states of existence. The verbs "clogging," "obstructing," and "chilling," though undoubtedly intended to add rhetorical flourish and force to Arnold's critique, are similarly resonant, for they invoke what M.H. Abrams has

described as Romantic “metaphors of expression”—complexes of imagery and diction which, in seeking to describe the process of composition or the essence of poetry, rely heavily upon “physical analogy” (*Mirror* 47). Wordsworth himself famously described poetry as “the spontaneous *overflow* of powerful feelings” (*Prose* 1:126), thereby figuring the poet as “a container—a fountain or natural spring, perhaps—from which water brims over” and creating a schema wherein “the internal [is] made external” (Abrams 47, 48). Arnold’s verbs of blockage and lethargy obviously embody the negative form of the same tropological tradition. They signify not only the lack of “overflow” but also its inverse: stagnant or *uninspired* expression, the poetic equivalent of death.

Youth as a “golden prime,” old-age as deterioration unto death: these are familiar terms telling perhaps the most common of stories. Yet the very fact that Arnold’s statement relies upon such generic registers of meaning begins to explain why the Great Decade is more than a quantitative assessment of a poet’s career. On the surface, it has the stark, localized character of an aesthetic judgment—and this is probably as Arnold intended it to be: simple, declarative, and resolute. But when considered as a function of the language which it elicits, the Great Decade becomes a richly symbolic gesture, the external signifier of those myths which still inform how we *read* poetry and poets. Notice, in the passage above, that it is not the poet who Arnold claims was “obstructed” but the “reader’s approach” to the poem; not Wordsworth whose “high-wrought mood” was spoiled but the reader’s that was “chilled.” This shift in subjects, though subtle, exposes the dialogic relationship between Wordsworth’s poetic language and Arnold’s critical response. The latter works *within* and *through* the former, appropriating its epistemology and rhetoric in an exchange which is advantageous yet unequal. Criticism

gains an idiom but concomitantly re-inscribes the limitations of poetic logic upon its own discourse.

Of course, Arnold's reliance upon Romantic epistemology and "metaphors of expression" is neither atypical of nineteenth-century criticism nor, by the standards of that time, problematic. Romanticism was both a literary and a theoretical phenomenon; its greatest practitioners were its most discerning and influential critics. One cannot cite Arnold's reliance upon Wordsworthian tropes of composition without simultaneously recognizing that he was heir to a critical tradition which arguably began with Wordsworth's 1800 *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*.

However, Arnold's proximity and debt to Romantic theory does not interpose a strict barrier between his concept of Wordsworth's Great Decade and later iterations of a theory of decline. Contemporary criticism has questioned, modified, and restructured the argument but never completely disavowed the central proposition or its premises. Consequently, one finds that even relatively current evaluations of Wordsworth's career retain a genetic resemblance to the theory in its first form. Given criticism's tendency to iconoclasm, as well as the sheer range and depth of theoretical developments since the late nineteenth-century, such longevity seems uncanny: any "myth" which supports an aesthetic judgment, it stands to reason, would have long ago been supplanted by rigorously qualified "objective" criteria.

The key to understanding the enduring import of the myth lies in a consideration of how it has continually acted as an *enabling* fiction. Ideas do not survive in an inherently skeptical climate unless they are practicable; whether they are accurate or speak to some enduring truth is secondary or perhaps even irrelevant. The theory of

Wordsworth's decline has endured because it provides an interpretive schema well-adapted to the specific exigencies of the surrounding critical conversation.

The exigencies that have not only preserved but amplified the relevance of the Great Decade stem from two interrelated critical developments which defined the parameters of twentieth century Wordsworth scholarship. The first consists of the redemption of a text Arnold deemed part of Wordsworth's "poetical baggage," *The Prelude*. Whereas many in the late nineteenth century had, like Arnold, deliberately isolated and elevated the youthful Wordsworth of *Lyrical Ballads* at the expense of the more philosophically-inclined, mature poet manifest in later works such as *Home at Grasmere*, *The Excursion*, and *The Prelude*, critics in the early twentieth century began to reverse this paradigm, arguing, as Tim Milne explains, "for Wordsworth's pre-eminent position in the canon, based on the value . . . of poems such as *The Excursion* and *The Prelude*" (30). This argument for the precedence of what A.C. Bradley calls the "Wordsworth of the yew-trees" over "the Wordsworth of the daffodils" became one of the most salient features of twentieth century criticism (qtd. in Milne 31). Largely thanks to Bradley's efforts to construct "a hermeneutic 'shrine' around *The Prelude*," the poem has become *the* central text in Wordsworth's corpus—an almost obligatory locus of study and scholarship (32).

At first, the new ascendancy of *The Prelude* appears to contravene the aesthetic primacy granted to Wordsworth's early poetry. The text of *The Prelude* upon which Bradley based his arguments was, after all, first published in 1850—forty-two years after the poet's supposed fizzling. Of course, it was well-known that the actual writing of *The Prelude* far predated its publication: an 1850 article from the *Eclectic Review*, for

example, begins by citing “the public curiosity” which for “well nigh thirty-four years . . . has been excited by the knowledge that there existed in MS. an unfinished poem, of very high pretensions, and extraordinary magnitude, from the pen of the late . . . poet-laureate of Britain” (*Norton* 547-48). Yet because the actual *text* of *The Prelude* was perceived as a product of Wordsworth’s late career, critics did not typically construe it as an early work. However, this perception was forever altered, or at least complicated, by Ernest de Selincourt’s 1926 publication of parallel texts of the 1805 and 1850 versions of *The Prelude*. Here, for the first time, *The Prelude* became both early poem and late publication: de Selincourt seemed to have revealed, in the very act of placing an “original” text next to the poem’s standard incarnation, that the work considered Wordsworth’s crowning achievement had in fact achieved substantial genesis at the crest of the poet’s early phase of poetic “genius.” The reaffirmation of Arnold’s original thesis, albeit according to different standards, was already implicit in the dynamic represented on the page: youth versus old-age, genius as opposed to stagnation, vitality ending in decline.

The tacit assertions of de Selincourt’s volume become explicit within his extensive introduction to the text. Although he attempts to maintain a balanced perspective, even occasionally admitting the superiority of the later poem with such brusque pronouncements as “No one would doubt that the 1850 version is a better composition” (lvii), de Selincourt’s ultimate verdict is unmistakable: The 1805 *Prelude* is the “original text” composed by a poet in “the fullness of his powers”; the 1850 text, one of the “more finished but less inspired writings of his later years,” attests to the poet’s “later deterioration” (xix, ix, lx). Although he cautions the reader not to accept with “too

much literalness” the superiority of the young Wordsworth, “the obvious truth,” de Selincourt writes, is “that what is greatest in Wordsworth belongs to a single decade (1798-1807)” (lix).

One should not hasten to accuse de Selincourt of unscholarly bias: his introduction, despite its clear preference for the 1805 *Prelude*, is hardly polemic; and his comparison of the 1805 and 1850 versions attempts to retain, for the most part, the balanced approach appropriate to a work of textual scholarship. Of course, other readers have disagreed: in a much later defense of the 1850 *Prelude*, Jeffrey Baker describes the ambivalence present in de Selincourt’s introduction (noted above) as “an astonishing piece of self-contradiction” and proceeds to locate in that contradiction, which he calls “the de-Selincourt paradox,” the “origins of the 1805 *cult*” (“Great Prelude Debate” 22, emphasis added).³ The paradox Baker cites is the result of a complex clash between scholarly standards, individual aesthetic judgment, and a modified but still potent version of the Great Decade myth. The introduction *attempts* to be objective, fair, and balanced in its presentation of the texts, but ultimately that objectivity is overridden by the happy concurrence of the author’s personal judgments and the now-pervasive narrative of Wordsworth’s career. In a somewhat oblique manner, the presence of the myth is announced even before de Selincourt’s introduction begins by means of the frontispiece—a tinted pencil portrait of Wordsworth. Purportedly drawn in 1805, the portrait presents an image not of the venerable poet laureate but of a youthful Wordsworth. In the Preface, de Selincourt glosses the frontispiece as follows: “This is the

³ Seemingly mystified by the existence of such a paradox, Baker attempts to explain its source by describing “the situation in human terms”: “How often,” he asks, “does a literary scholar burst upon the academic world and announce: ‘I have just discovered a hitherto early version of a well-known poem by X, and it’s rubbish!’ I don’t say this never happens, but it must be extremely rare” (22).

only known portrait of the poet in his prime, and its suitability as an illustration to this volume needs no emphasis” (x). The image thus becomes the icon.

As the portrait and explication make clear, de Selincourt’s version of the myth retains those basic paradigms established by Arnold. Yet the presentation, operative terms, character, and rhetoric of the myth have been altered. The most obvious change is a curtailment of explicitly metaphorical language. For example, de Selincourt does not appropriate Arnold’s corporealized description of poetic afflatus (e.g., clogging, obstructing), but instead relies upon a vocabulary consisting of such seemingly innocuous terms as “inspiration,” “creativity,” and “powers.” At once more direct and more abstract, such rigidly self-contained parameters seem to permit increasingly analytic distinctions regarding the object or content of an aesthetic judgment, including the distinction between “craftsmanship” and “creativity” which underlies the statement that so infuriated Baker, “that the 1850 version is a better *composition*” (de Selincourt lvii, emphasis added). Yet this apparently distilled language does not abandon metaphor so much as it *compresses* a complex of images and ideas. The same figures one finds in Arnold are therefore present in de Selincourt, but in a drastically more compact form.

Accordingly, the most important alteration to the myth consists of the development of a newly resonant set of descriptors which, though ensconced in the same conceptual frame as Arnold’s metaphors, manage to contain the myth in a more unobtrusive, self-effacing rhetoric. De Selincourt’s text repeatedly deploys such phrases as “*true* disciple,” “*sincerity* in style,” “the voice of the *authentic* Wordsworth,” “*original* thought,” “excrescences of a manner less *pure*” (lx, lxii, emphases added). Though employed in various contexts, these references to truth, sincerity, authenticity, originality,

and purity all share a common conceptual antecedent: the notion that what is “true” or “authentic” in Wordsworth’s poetry is both limited to a specific range or type of expression and (because it is concealed, distorted, or corrupted) must be actively sought out. By these means, we discover that de Selincourt perpetuates Arnold’s notion of “poetical baggage”: if the critic is to *isolate* and preserve the “authentic Wordsworth,” he or she must purge his corpus of the detritus left by decline.

The preferred texts have changed; the terms have shifted; the critic is no longer so unequivocal and brash in his judgments. Nevertheless, the myth endures, retaining—and in some cases, even amplifying—its genetic relationship to the Romantic tropes from whence it sprang. De Selincourt is not at all unique in this regard; even the work of his colleague and successor, Helen Darbishire—whose essay “Wordsworth’s *Prelude*” undertakes a much more rigorous analysis of the differences between the 1805 and 1850 texts—reveals the same pronounced debt to Romantic thought:

What matters to us is not so much to understand the experience as to realise it, not so much to solve the mystery as to see where it lies. This is what the early *Prelude* helps us to do. In it Wordsworth told the inner workings of his mind as nakedly and truthfully as he could; and the changes most to be deplored in the later text are those which overlay or obscure the naïve immediate expression. They generally mar the poetry; they always disguise the truth. (qtd. in Milne 33)

Darbishire’s “naïve immediate expression” clearly draws upon the sense of poetic propinquity manifest in Wordsworth’s own “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (*Prose* 1:126). According to both Wordsworth and Darbishire, poetry must maintain a correspondence or closeness to the object or occasion which it addresses; by these means it remains a “true” expression, an authentic feeling, and a sincere transcription of the original experience. The terms are nearly synonymous because they originate in the same fundamental idea, an idea which was more the creation of poets engaging their own

creative process(es) than the applied terminology of a separate, subsequent critical tradition.

After de Selincourt, the critical conversation surrounding Wordsworth's poetry, and especially *The Prelude*, was forever altered. The existence of two distinct versions of the work which had become, after Bradley, "the essential living document for the interpretation of Wordsworth's life and poetry," both complicated and enriched the field, offering critics an entirely new means of discerning "the curve of Wordsworth's poetic development" (de Selincourt xix, Milne 32). Yet the phenomenon which enabled so much valuable work also polarized readers, for even those who were led to view *The Prelude* as a poem in process felt compelled, as de Selincourt had, to declare one version superior to the other. For this reason, the theory of Wordsworth's decline became a more relevant and forceful idea than it had ever been. The Great Decade myth already promoted a dichotomous perspective on Wordsworth's career; now, it could be grafted upon a new frame. *The Prelude*—two poems turning upon the same axis yet representing two visions, two versions of the poet—was for many the concrete illustration of Wordsworth's decline. Even as critics probed the differences between the texts and sought to synthesize more thorough conclusions, the myth was reified, reiterated, and embodied in and through *The Prelude*.

The conflict or polarity implicit in the first parallel text edition of *The Prelude* became such a staple of Wordsworth studies that even by 1984, sixty years after the original publication of de Selincourt's edition, critical conflict was still lively enough to warrant a formal debate concerning the relative merits of the 1805 and 1850 versions. Entitled, appropriately enough, "The Great *Prelude* Debate," this transcribed

conversation between some of the most prominent critics in the field demonstrates how, despite the myriad and manifold theoretical developments of the later twentieth century, the essential terms of the debate have endured. Proponents of the 1805 *Prelude* thus tend to begin with the type of statement which we will, by now, find wholly familiar:

[T]he revisions demonstrate to me that the *great* poet in Wordsworth survived only in flashes after 1807, leaving behind an artist adrift, who consistently altered his early work for the worse, not solely because the Muse had abandoned him, but because he had abandoned the revolutionary programme of 1800, as set forth in the great Preface. (Fruman 7)

For Fruman, Wordsworth's later poetry thus represents not only a diminishment or decline, but a somewhat deliberate—and therefore more damning—*abandonment* or betrayal of the “revolutionary programme” which shaped the poet's great decade. His argument for the aesthetic primacy of the 1805 *Prelude* does not depend so much on figures of impersonalized inspiration (as announced by the inversion of agency above, wherein Wordsworth is not abandoned but *abandons*) as on a demonstration of the ways in which Wordsworth the laureate corrupted Wordsworth the ephebe. Herbert Lindenberger, who also speaks in defense of the 1805 version, reaches a similar conclusion, deeming the revisions a “betrayal of the image of man that dominates the poem” (2). Both critics provide ample justification for their judgments. Lindenberger, for example, cites the vitality of the early version, its willingness “to take risks” and “[strike] out boldly into new areas for poetry” (4)—qualities he finds preferable to the stylistic and semantic pieties of the 1850 version. Fruman echoes these sentiments, declaring the later revisions “act[s] of uniformity against the creative mind,” but also provides a rigorous analysis of the destructive, reductive principles underlying Wordsworth's changes to the text (7). These principles, he explains, “constantly promulgated in handbooks of rhetoric

in his own time and ours . . . work well enough in practical expository composition, but are hopelessly inappropriate to the work of a great poet, and especially one as strange, eccentric and original as Wordsworth” (7). As a result, the 1850 *Prelude* reveals “a poet engaged in tinkering which derive from the decayed vocabularies of thought and response which actually *precede* the linguistic adventures of his great years” (8). By 1850, Fruman asserts with pithy force, “Wordsworth was no longer a great architect, but had become an interior decorator” (8).

Despite the apparent efficacy of their analytic criteria, both critics’ arguments ultimately depend upon a highly contentious aesthetic and ideological axiom: the authority of the “original” Wordsworth. This is by no means a new development: Arnold’s “golden prime,” de Selincourt’s “sincerity” or “authenticity,” and Darbishire’s “naïve immediate expression” all reference the same idea, a notion of *primacy* which is both the fount and the primary expression of the myth. Yet for later critics—whose enterprise has been complicated by increasingly divergent theoretical assertions concerning the stability of texts, the precise role of the author / poet, and the nature of reading or interpretation—the matter of textual authority is at once more problematic and more urgent. In other words, the difficulty of declaring one text “authoritative” acts as an impetus to do precisely that. For this reason, while Fruman and Lindenberger are perfectly willing to concede their judgments’ contingency and characterize their support of the 1805 *Prelude* as subjective “preference,” they nevertheless work assiduously to qualify and cement the authority of the early Wordsworth. For them, “original” becomes a doubly potent concept signifying both what is prior—and therefore deserves *priority*—and what is new, innovative, or singular.

As a result, the crux of dissent between proponents of the 1805 *Prelude* and those who prefer the 1850 version is the question of textual authority. Summarizing the position of the latter group in the debate's closing remarks, Robert Barth seizes upon the evocation of *bildung* in the *Prelude*'s subtitle, "the growth of the poet's mind": supporters of the 1850 text, he proclaims, "argue for the priority of the later experience, because it is later, because it is a development out of earlier reflection experience" (36). Thus, according to Barth and his colleague Jeffrey Baker, the 1850 *Prelude* is the "authoritative text" both because it represents the "final" text directly authorized by Wordsworth and because it is a culmination or completion of the poem's own developmental schema. Though this line of argument seems rather doctrinal, and though one can easily object to such a developmental narrative on the grounds that it assumes "growth" to be a strictly teleological process, the model of authority proffered by Barth and Baker is ultimately no less contentious than the alternative, antithetical schema proposed by Lindenberger and Fruman. Both models privilege an extreme and both invert the other's parameters: once again, we find that Wordsworth and his poetry are subject to a bifurcating narrative of youth and old age, originality and finality, vitality and eminence. The participating critics' descriptions of the *Prelude* as a "poem in process" may complicate the discussion, but their polarized premises continue to reaffirm a binary conception of poet and poem. Paradoxically, the parameters of the myth are affirmed even as its thesis is denied.

Yet because they object to what has become the standard view of Wordsworth, Barth and Baker are especially aware of the ways in which the emphasis upon

“originality” has affected criticism and scholarship. “Since Wordsworth’s opinions supposedly grew more orthodox as he grew older,” Baker explains,

one can, by applying the doctrinal standard, develop a chronological reflex as a substitute for critical labor. Earlier is better because earlier is more orthodox, more spontaneous, more authentic. But one does not need to establish these qualities, one only needs to date the poem, or the passage, or the revision, and the judgment is pre-programmed. (22)

Baker’s diagnosis is accurate. The heart of the problem with the Great Decade myth and its corollary—the narrative of Wordsworth’s decline—does not lie in the aesthetic judgment it encourages but in the fact that this judgment has become a “doctrinal standard” or “chronological *reflex*” which is often applied without further thought, without sufficient justification, and without ample consideration of how or *why* such a process of decline might have taken place. To revise Baker’s phrasing, the myth or narrative has become the substitute for a *critical* explanation of Wordsworth’s career. The narrative in and of itself is not pernicious, and myths are not necessarily false. (Quite the contrary, a myth, even a myth of criticism, often represents a sound judgment or a point at which judgments converge.) But if such narratives or myths are allowed to harden into dogma, they become impediments to thought. Instead of acting as enabling fictions, they silence discussion and short-circuit genuine critical inquiry.

Yet the discussion cannot end here. The status of the Great Decade theory as myth, that myth’s proliferation in critical discourse, and the consequent “chronological reflex” are but symptoms of a more fundamental problem evident in the preceding analyses: the tendency of criticism, when it confronts the apparent disparity between Wordsworth’s early and late work, to adopt and rely upon patently *Romantic* tropes of inspiration, creativity, and genius. This is not to say that critics have completely

neglected to explain their judgments and/or preferences for particular works or versions of those works: both Lindenberger and Fruman, for example, provide thorough, convincing arguments to support their claim that the 1805 *Prelude* is superior to the 1850 version. But when one moves beyond the comparison of specific texts and comes to the heart of the matter—the overarching aesthetic thesis that *is* the Great Decade—explanations are either hasty, perfunctory, or completely absent. Thus, in the majority of cases, Wordsworth’s decline is deemed a self-evident fact; the ebb of his “poetic powers” stands as an unsubstantiated assumption. When a rationale is present, its matter and manner are almost formulaic: Wordsworth’s later poetry *lacks* “originality” “sincerity,” or “authenticity”; after 1807, the poet *somehow* lost his “inspiration,” that creative energy which animated the early verse; because this phenomenon became even more pronounced as the poet aged, it must be connected to the corrosive influence of time, which in depriving Wordsworth of his youth left him subject to the stagnation of old age.

Admittedly, this is a rather harsh synopsis. Nevertheless, it amply demonstrates how the Great Decade theory, when deployed, activates a series of ideas about the nature of poets and poetic production which prevent or supplant more rigorous inquiry into the antecedents or process(es) of Wordsworth’s alleged decline. The specifically Romantic genealogy of these ideas requires further explanation. Let us, then, consider yet another iteration of the Great Decade theory. In *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds*, Harold Bloom writes the following:

Everything that matters by Wordsworth was written in one decade, 1797-1807. The last forty-three years of his poetry were lamentable. . . . Wordsworth’s genius burned to the socket when he was thirty-seven. . . . But, with Wordsworth, the end was implicit always in the origins of his genius: a visionary radiance fiercely resplendent in his childhood, but then fading into the light of common day. If you invest everything in the “romance of nature,” . . . then you will lose everything when nature

eventually betrays the child who loved her. (377)

Although Bloom is often considered something of a critical apostate, the passage above is strikingly representative of the dominant means of explaining (or failing to explain) Wordsworth's decline. Like most critics, he does not describe the downtrend as a process but as the abrupt and premature absence, lack, or loss of poetic inspiration. The terminal date of the bracketed decade is inscribed upon Wordsworth's career as if it were his epitaph: the great poet, the "genius" died in 1807; all written afterward was but a posthumous echo. This description implicitly privileges a tropological model of inspiration as *afflatus*—an impersonal force (wind, fire, or current) which acts upon the poet's imagination, stimulating creativity and poetic production. The poet, in such a schema, is but the vessel that overflows or the lamp that burns: he is utterly subject to and dependent upon a fount or flame external to himself, an intangible impetus to creativity which can simply depart without warning or apparent cause, leaving him bereft and "burned to the socket." This latter phrase suggests another dimension of the master-metaphor: the fire, both source and Promethean forge of vital verse, feeds upon and consumes its bearer, whose capacity to sustain the flame diminishes as he ages. Youth is therefore the fuel and necessary prerequisite for poetry which sustains a "visionary radiance"; advanced age weakens the vessel, whose former resplendence dwindles to a low, common light.

Initially, Bloom's argument appears to be wholly dissimilar from other critics' references to the Great Decade. However, the obvious discursive differences between this and more "critical" approaches only conceal their common antecedents: Bloom's heavily figurative rationale merely unpacks the language of more austere formulae, divulging the

full context of such terms as “originality,” “inspiration,” or “creativity” and magnifying the metaphors of mind which, *regardless of the critic’s intent*, inhere in any discussion which characterizes the loss of poetic capacity as a sudden and largely inexplicable phenomenon.

But how is it possible that such ideas could enter into and inform critical discourse without the critic’s knowledge? How could blatantly figurative concepts of inspiration, creativity, and poetic production infiltrate a discipline so relentlessly attentive to its own language and methods?

First, one must take into account the sheer difficulty of quantifying the operative terms and processes. Both the production of poetry and the character of those mental/artistic faculties which either enable or inhibit “inspired” composition constitute irreducibly complex subjects. When confronting these issues, the critic is therefore more likely to rely on ideas or tropes which convey the sense that poetic processes are mysterious or ineffable (because this is indeed his or her impression). Second, one must recognize that many critics have been more concerned with either the consequences of the decline (how it actually affected the poetry) or the frame it offers for understanding Wordsworth’s career (the myth as an enabling fiction) than with the process of decline itself. Given these possibilities, some might argue that the perpetuation of metaphors of mind is accidental.

Yet, “accident,” however construed, does not suffice to explain critics’ pronounced dependence upon tropological (and unelaborated) models of poetic process as a means of explaining Wordsworth’s decline. The theory and the myth which is its vehicle have been too static and too stubbornly persistent to be written off as merely

collateral concerns. Instead, the perpetuation of the myth, and the dominant (albeit inadequate) explanation of the process it describes, are direct consequences of the highly problematic critical phenomenon first described by Jerome McGann in *The Romantic Ideology*. “[T]he scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and its works,” he writes, “are dominated by a Romantic ideology, by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representations” (1). This absorption has occurred because “[w]hen forms of thought enter our consciousness as forms (or ‘structures’) of feeling—which is what takes place through poetry and art—the forms threaten to reify as ideology in the secondary environment of criticism” (13).

McGann’s argument offers a solid explanation for most critics’ failure to move beyond reductive rationale when explicating Wordsworth’s decline. Criticism has been limited by a complex of internalized forms of thought and feeling—an ideology which, given its perspective on creativity and the process of composition, resists “non-poetic” descriptions of the poet’s work. The evidence of this complicity between Romantic poetry and its criticism emerges most clearly in their shared lexicon. Once again, Bloom’s brash statement discloses a process more subdued in other critical texts. For example, when he claims Wordsworth’s “end was implicit always in the origins of his genius,” Bloom defines those origins as “a visionary radiance fiercely resplendent in his childhood, but then fading into the light of the common day”—a statement which unabashedly appropriates the consummately Romantic imagery and diction of Wordsworth’s own “Intimations” ode, which also laments the loss of a “radiance which was so bright” and a “vision spending” as it “fade[s] into the light of common day” (*Longman* 530.175, 73, 76).

Of course, one cannot deny that Bloom has used this language with full recognition of its source, just as one cannot deny the critic an abstract language in which to couch discussions of such difficult concepts as “genius.” Yet the operative point is: If we continually define Wordsworth in Wordsworth’s own terms, thus locating genius outside of the poet and conceiving of it as an inspired quality possessed and not an actual artistic capacity enacted, we will be led to assume that his ability to compose superior poetry was only an intermittent brilliance which “burned to the socket” without warning or concrete cause. However attractive such an assessment may be to those of us who venerate individuals seemingly “electrocuted by the divine fire,” it ultimately becomes a rationalization, a reductive premise that precludes understanding Wordsworth’s apparent downtrend as a complex but *explicable* process.

Chapter 2

Autobiography and Poetic Self-Consciousness: The Causes and Costs of Revision

In an 1814 letter to Robert Pearce Gillies, Wordsworth offers his young admirer, an aspiring poet, the following advice:

do you simply mean, that such thoughts as arise in the progress of composition should be expressed in the first words that offer themselves, as being likely to be most energetic and natural? If so, this is not a rule to be followed without cautious exceptions. My first expressions I often find detestable; and it is frequently true of second words as of second thoughts, that they are the best. (Wordsworth, *Letters* 3:179)

Despite the obvious contradiction between the principle expressed above and Wordsworth's now canonized "poetics of inspiration and spontaneity," one is initially inclined to accept this statement as a relatively commonplace, perfectly sound bit of counsel (Bennett 12). Wordsworth's experience had taught him what all writers eventually realize: composition is a laborious, often recursive process, and one cannot always rely upon first drafts or first words. Romantic myths of divinely-inspired poetic composition, however attractive, are simply not practical in application; neither the contemporary critic nor the Romantic poet would deny the necessity of "second thoughts" and "second words." Ultimately, revision is an essential part of composition—so utterly common, in fact, that it seems a wholly unspectacular phenomenon.

Yet as critics have long recognized, Wordsworthian revision is anything but typical. The sheer volume of his alterations, rewritings, and versions; the frequency with which he applied himself to either editing or completely re-conceiving texts; the duration of his efforts with individual poems, many of which would be constantly reworked over the (considerable) span of his career—all are indications that, for Wordsworth, revision served some purpose far beyond the simple refinement or "correction" of texts. In the

introduction to his edition of Wordsworth's collected works, Ernest de Selincourt writes that "it is probable that no poet ever paid more meticulous or prolonged attention to his text" (qtd. in Leader 651). His assessment, already grounded in decades of editorial experience, has been borne out by subsequent efforts in textual scholarship. One need only glance at the immensely detailed apparatus in any volume of the Cornell Wordsworth to get a sense of the scope of the poet's revisions. His manuscripts are typically "disfigured with interlining, crossing out, and marginalia" (Gill, *Wordsworth* 191); they exist in multiple, usually contradictory versions; and substantial passages are frequently either protean or peripatetic, lacking a set form or location. Further, the complexity manifest in alterations to a single poem may be compounded by more holistic revisions, as a text is either subsumed by or extracted from a longer work. In Wordsworth's corpus, virtually no poem has a fixed, stable identity. Change—perpetual change—predominates.

Even more curious, however, is the *manner* in which Wordsworth revised, and the effects of that process upon him. As Stephen Gill recounts in *William Wordsworth: A Life*, for Wordsworth there was little or no distinction between the physical act of putting a poem to paper and the introduction of further changes: "copying out and fresh composition went on simultaneously," as if the poet could not tolerate a "final" version, even when the hand that copied (usually that of his sister, Dorothy, or wife, Mary) was not his own (81). Further, the act of writing and the labor of revision also negatively affected Wordsworth's physical well-being, eliciting "a series of physical, psychosomatic and psychological symptoms – including bad eyes, headaches, bowel complaints, chest pains, irritability, fatigue, insomnia –" which could be nearly debilitating (Bennett 3).

Such symptoms might be dismissed as the rather commonplace effects of excessive stress or strain were it not for the strangely immediate relationship between illness and writing.

For example, in a letter to Thomas de Quincey, Wordsworth divulges that he has

a kind of derangement in my stomach and digestive organs which makes writing painful to me, and indeed almost prevents me from holding correspondence with any body: and this (I mean to say the unpleasant feelings which I have connected with the act of holding a Pen) has been the chief cause of my long silence. (Wordsworth, *Letters* 1:453)

This is neither an isolated observation nor an affected excuse for lapsed communication: the correlation between writing and illness would be noted, repeatedly, by Dorothy and others in close proximity to the poet.

While Wordsworth's aversion to textual fixity doesn't amount to a neurosis, his demonstrable need to constantly revise does lend credence to the claims that the poet's attention to his texts was "obsessive" and that, for him, revision was nearly a "compulsion." All poets and all writers revise, but few have spent so much energy and effort in the service of "second thoughts." Consequently, Wordsworth's tendency to revision is one of the defining aspects of his poetic career, and the problems stemming from that revisionary dynamic constitute some of the most productive and contentious loci of critical discourse.

For these reasons, the question of how to read Wordsworth's revisions and the effort to understand the course and shape of his poetic career are inextricably intertwined. One cannot read "Wordsworth"—either the poet or the poetry—without entering into and engaging a complex network of discursive relationships: every reading represents a choice between texts, and every text a potentially different vision (and version) of its author. Though critics often remain silent concerning the problem of revision (an

agnosticism which is sometimes necessary if one is to accomplish anything else), many have chosen to confront the matter directly. The “Great *Prelude* Debate” is hardly an isolated critical event, for the issues which crystallize therein have a discursive history that extends both before and beyond that particular conversation.

For the sake of clarity, critical responses can be divided into two (admittedly unwieldy and codependent) categories. First, there are the theoretical and ethical debates elicited by both the practices and findings of textual scholarship. Initiated by de Selincourt’s watershed parallel text edition of *The Prelude*, this body of criticism both attempts to justify or rebuke editorial procedures and confronts what is at stake in those procedures—including, most particularly, matters of textual authority. The principal question here is: *Which* Wordsworth do we (or should we) read, and *whose* Wordsworth is that anyway—the editor’s, the author’s, or some joint creation of the two? In this species of criticism, Wordsworth’s revisions act primarily as an antagonistic catalyst for debate and are treated as problematic phenomena, obstacles which must be either negotiated or at least accounted for in the acts of reading and interpretation.

The second principal artery of discourse concerned with Wordsworth’s revisions encompasses biographical, historical, or new historicist approaches. While issues of textual authority are still at stake in such readings (and can often figure prominently in analysis), the role and function of Wordsworth’s revisions shifts therein: they become *evidence*—external signifiers of changes in the poet, his historical context, or the ideological complexes informing either the poet or his product. Critics writing in this category have frequently focused on such issues as the marked shift in Wordsworth’s

political and religious opinions, the way his poems engage and incorporate history, or shifts in modes of poetic self-representation.

Yet despite the vast breadth of approaches which have been brought to bear upon Wordsworth's revisions, one may still locate certain salient trends—themes, as it were, which unify the critical corpus. Susan Wolfson accurately summarizes these themes in the following:

In one long-standing tradition, revisions are read teleologically: they clarify an original intent and refine its “final” expression, each stage conveying the discipline and progress of a poet's mind. This evolutionary model is not the only one however, and *The Prelude*—perhaps more than any nineteenth-century text—poses a strong resistance to it. For many there is a devolutionary tale: the revisions seem less to signify improvement than a hardening sensibility, the story of decline, default, and anticlimax that gets told about the career as a whole; correspondingly, earlier and earliest versions gain praise for their vitality and fidelity to the best “Wordsworth.” (*Formal* 101)

Obviously, Wolfson's survey is a simplification: many degrees and shades of the above perspectives have been entertained, and critics (like Wolfson herself) have often sought to self-consciously interrogate the hermeneutics exercised in readings of Wordsworth. Nevertheless, an overwhelming majority of interpretations align with one of the two models. Textual scholars, depending on how they allocate editorial authority, tend to fixate on either the “original” versions of poems or supposedly authorized, “final” versions. Critics in the other mode are less explicit in their alignment, but the master-narratives are nonetheless active. For example, the common effort to track the changes in Wordsworth's politics—usually with an emphasis on the “revolutionary to conservative” thesis, however construed—prototypically culminates in the defense of a particular “Wordsworth.”

These diametrically opposed readings represent yet another iteration of the bifurcated image at the core of the mythico-critical construct of the “Great Decade.” Each perspective may privilege and enshrine a different “Wordsworth,” but both depend upon the same interpretive principle: binary division. Further, each reading is vulnerable to “McGann’s razor”—that problematic complicity between Romantic ideology and criticism consisting of “an uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representations” (McGann 1). The “evolutionary model” is complicit because it uncritically accepts Wordsworth’s own teleological schema of development (the “growth and progress of a poet’s mind”), the “devolutionary tale” because it relies heavily on Romantic tropes of inspiration, creativity, and imagination.

In place of the above static frame, I propose that one may understand the apparent disparity between Wordsworth’s early and late poetry as a consequence of continuous *processes* or career-long practices of revision. My goal is to erase the dichotomy between the two Wordsworths by means of an interpretive model which can account for difference, change, and even diminishment. Still, one might object that my argument merely represents a different means of preserving the prototypical division between the early and late Wordsworth(s): I support the basic aesthetic judgment underlying the theory of decline, and doing so presumably risks reifying the same “doctrinal standard” or “chronological reflex” embodied therein. The question thus becomes: How can one retain the essential thesis of the Great Decade without falling victim to its tendency to polarize the poet?⁴

⁴ As Lionel Trilling warns, “mechanical and simple notions of the mind, and of the poetic process are all too tempting to those who speculate on Wordsworth’s decline” (qtd in Leader 658).

The solution lies in *how* one chooses to address Wordsworth's revisions or, more accurately, the phenomenon of Wordsworthian revision. For what the aforementioned categories of criticism have in common, however diverse their purposes, is not simply a common frame of reference (the master-narratives of development or decline) but also a particular methodology with respect to textual changes. From both perspectives, revisions are objects or discrete phenomena—changes to be taken as either evidence of the status of the text or proof of the influence external events (historical, social, or psychological) have exercised upon Wordsworth's poetry. Such approaches therefore fail to consider how revision *qua* revision can at once provide the substance for analysis and serve as the operative principle of that analysis. In other words, they fail to consider how dynamics of reading and writing (for revision subsumes both) are not necessarily the manifest effects of some external cause, but simultaneously causes, motives, or catalysts *and* effects generated by the recursive movements of poetic production. This shortcoming may therefore be remedied by carefully tracing those processes of reading and writing which, in aggregate, provide a sufficiently accurate portrait of the poet's consciousness.

Undoubtedly, any critical effort which features "consciousness" as an analytical paradigm must proceed carefully: the term not only evokes what many consider an outmoded style of criticism but also threatens to lapse into the same hermeneutic circularity evinced by those former explanations of decline which interpreted Romantic poetry according to Romanticism's own epistemic or tropological models. However, this potential theoretical pitfall may be avoided by adopting an appropriately rigorous method of reading—an approach which maintains close attention to the text while also supplying

an appropriate *context* for such arguably “formalist” methodology. One must operate both within and without the text, reading on its terms while not becoming limited by them.

This approach is necessary for two reasons. First of all, either theoretical extreme—a consummately formalist method on the one hand, a thoroughly new historicist perspective on the other—becomes reductive in its reluctance to engage one half of the available context. The former, upholding the aesthetic or “organic” unity of the work, is limited to internal and ultimately subjective pronouncements concerning the structure and content of the poem; the latter, in emphasizing cultural, historical, or biographical factors, fails to consider that the poem itself—specifically, the act of *writing* the poem—exercises an influence upon the poet. While either approach limits the efficacy of interpretation, I find the latter especially dangerous because it provides a more theoretically “current” (and thus tempting) critical approach even as it imposes another restriction upon reading. Wordsworth’s poetry characteristically turns inward upon itself, reflexively critiquing its own content and form. One should not exclude this aspect of the text because it is representative of a “Romantic ideology” but evaluate how it reveals the implicit tensions of the text and their role in that text’s formation.

My reading of Wordsworth is indebted to Susan Wolfson’s *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism*. Therein, Wolfson employs a “contextualized formalist criticism” which, while retaining New Criticism’s “commitment to close reading and its care for poetic form,” seeks to avoid the insularity of that school by engaging how “formal actions and choices” themselves “were enmeshed in networks of social and historical conditions” (2, 4). I follow Wolfson in accepting that one may “contextualize” formalist criticism but, instead of attending to “social and historical

conditions,” my argument considers the context of poetic composition which arises when one collates and compares the variant texts of Wordsworth’s poems. In other words, the context of my own “formalism” becomes a network comprised of difference—a set of intertextual relationships which emerges when one analyzes how the poem has been altered, reshaped, and rewritten. This network is representative of both the poem’s and poet’s (discursive) history, and may provide a useful (if often evasive) image of the poet’s mind—a biography of a poetic consciousness in process.

Yet even a method predicated on process must establish a paradigm or point of reference. Wordsworth did not revise for revision’s own sake; to suggest as such would be to forward a rather reductive, mechanically psychoanalytic view of revision as an involuted form of repetition compulsion. But if we instead consider what is at stake for Wordsworth in each revision—what, precisely, is being modified through the acts of rereading and rewriting—revision becomes not a groundless and self-indulgent exercise but a value-laden attempt to articulate or realize a particular poetic goal. In the essay “Wordsworth Revisited,” Geoffrey Hartman avers that in Wordsworth’s poetry, “a new attitude toward consciousness—a radical consciousness of consciousness—is brought to light: [he] is truly a subjective thinker” (9). This distinctive characteristic of Wordsworth’s verse—its radical inwardness—is also indicative of its overriding purpose, the poetic and discursive end which subsumes all others: the need for self-articulation—or, in the words of Mary Jacobus, “the poet’s urgent need to constitute himself as poet” (128).

The struggle to attain and articulate a stable poetic identity permeates Wordsworth’s poetry. This is true not only of his lyrics, wherein the ever-present “I” is

always the manifest subject, but of narrative works which, due to their efforts to assume other voices (of pedlars, vagrants, or even children) might at first appear decidedly impersonal. The evidence of this struggle toward self-definition lies in the poetry's manifest methodology: subjectivity is not only the subject but the site of composition; memory, experience, and feeling are "read" through a versified phenomenology which draws material from the mind only to turn the mind inward upon itself (its text) once more. This movement is amplified and rendered explicit in the lyrics, where the "I" is not only a ubiquitous lens but an active, reflective voice at once forming and interrogating its own identity. Moreover, Wordsworth's ever-present "I" is specifically *textual*—an entity constructed within and by means of writing. As Andrew Bennett explains, "his topic is, above all, the way in which the poet, the man, is composed by, composed in, poetic composition, in writing" (6). Finally, we may deduce that the poetic identity represented in Wordsworth's poems is necessarily an *idealized* self—not only because the very concept of a unitary, transcendental ego is open to question, but also because of the supererogatory demands made upon that ego. Wordsworth's poetic self was expected not merely to speak but to constantly reaffirm the poet's vocation, his qualifications and capacities, his *right* to speak—meaning, to write—himself into being. In this light, revision becomes not only a process of emending the text but an effort to amend, reshape, reconstitute, and rewrite the self.

Wordsworth's project of perpetual self-(re)definition is discernable, to some extent, in all of his poetry. Even those poems which were not substantially altered (and this includes only a handful) were a part of the process, for they would inevitably be incorporated into the synchronic system of Wordsworth's corpus—a system wherein the

relationships *between* poems shaped (at least for the poet) the meaning of any individual text. The result of any substantial textual revision was, then, a concomitant revision of “Wordsworth,” of Wordsworth-as-Poet, of “Wordsworth-as-*oeuvre*: the Author as the Mastertext to which every individual text . . . ultimately refers” (Siskin 109).

The origin and the epicenter of this panoptic process is undoubtedly *The Prelude*. Tellingly subtitled “The Growth of the Poet’s Mind,”⁵ Wordsworth’s “great soliloquy” constitutes his most sustained engagement with a single text, both in terms of fresh composition and revision. It is at once a career-spanning and career-defining work, for it not only preoccupied Wordsworth for almost the whole of his poetic career (from roughly 1798 to 1850) but literally *was* his career. Clifford Siskin’s comment that *The Prelude* is “quite simply, the most extraordinary resume in English history” is only partially correct: the poem is not only the secondary account or “curriculum vitae-like detailing” of “an individual’s training and qualifications for performing his life’s work,” but the locus of those processes of becoming—the poet’s poet-hood (identity) made manifest or, to adopt an appropriately rhetorical characterization, the Poet’s synecdochic self (115).

But what kind of poem—or what kind of self—is *The Prelude*? In his introduction to *The Prelude: A Critical Casebook*, Stephen Gill summarizes the complicated circumstances surrounding the poem’s composition and publication as follows:

The many-sided oddness of *The Prelude* still confronts all new readers who probe into the poem at all and remains even now part of its essential being. And the oddness is? At least the following facts about the identity of what is routinely—and rightly—referred to as one of the greatest of Romantic poems: (1) that there is not one *Prelude* but many; (2) that the poem known by this title evolved over many years during the

⁵ Of course, this subtitle was not given to the poem by Wordsworth but by his executors. However, there is substantial evidence (within correspondence) to suggest that the poet himself referred to *The Prelude* as such. Even if this were not the case, the poem amply validates the designation by means of its content.

poet's lifetime and has continued to evolve until practically the present day; and (3) that the poem that student readers are most likely to encounter . . . was never authorized by the poet, exists in no incontrovertibly established text, and was not even known about until three-quarters of a century after the poet's death and the appearance of the poem he *did* authorize for publication. (Introduction 4)

Though often rehearsed, these facts are still startling. When Jonathan Arac declares that “[w]e ourselves hardly have the concepts to disentangle so complex a knot of intention, text, and history,” he is by no means exaggerating (36-37). Even if one ignores the myriad editions of the poem, the reader confronting *The Prelude* can (currently) expect to find at least three vastly different texts: the *Two-Part Prelude* of 1798; the 13 book *Prelude* of 1805; and the fourteen book poem of 1850. Many critics also recognize two additional versions: a “Five-Book *Prelude*” dating from approximately 1804 and an 1819-20 intermediate text of thirteen books.⁶ The complexity resulting from the sheer number of potential reading texts is only compounded when one considers precisely how different the respective versions are. As Zachary Leader explains,

From the time of the poem's publication in 1850, three months after Wordsworth's death, from a manuscript “left ready for the Press by the Author,” to 1926, when de Selincourt first made public, in a facing-text edition, the thirteen book version Wordsworth completed in 1805, *The Prelude* was known in its authorized or 1850 version, the result of thirty-four years of painstaking but intermittent revision, including three full-scale revisions (in 1816/19, 1832, and 1839) as well as numerous smaller alterations. Ultimately, these revisions involved nearly half of the 1805 version's 8000 or so lines. (667)

While it is helpful (and mostly accurate) to conceive of the poem in terms of those dates and versions which presumably represented—temporarily at least—what the poet considered a “completed” text, Leader's “numerous smaller alterations” is a decided understatement: most evidence indicates that Wordsworth returned to the poem quite frequently between these watershed revisions. Thus, the concept of a “finished” version

⁶ Compiled and edited by Duncan Wu and Mark Reed, respectively.

of *The Prelude* is by necessity a critical fiction. As Gill records when writing of the 1805 *Prelude*, “There is no single, unimpeachable text of this version, as Wordsworth subjected it to revision even as the manuscripts were being made” (Introduction 17).

The disagreement between Gill and Leader evident in the preceding quotations (concerning the existence of an “authorized” text) points to another dimension of the “problems” surrounding *The Prelude*: namely, that almost every aspect of its composition, publication, and subsequent editing has been (and still is) subject to heated critical debate. Indeed, “The Great *Prelude* Debate,” despite its considerable scope, addresses only a portion of the contested issues. As a result, *The Prelude* was not and will never be a “unified, discrete, finished, stable textual object” (Wolfson, “Revision” 101); it is a radically unstable text, a poem perpetually in flux.

Yet this is not the only instability characteristic of *The Prelude*. In addition to the pronounced differences between “versions,” one encounters in any given reading text an *internal* dialectic of competing ideas, images, and discourses.⁷ In her “‘Answering Questions and Questioning Answers’: The Interrogative Project of *The Prelude*,” Susan Wolfson draws upon the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer and the reader-response theories of Hans Robert Jauss to argue that *The Prelude* is “self-evidently a poem in the interrogative mode” which “despite its designs of resolution . . . habitually leaves its most critical questions unanswered, or answered with something less than full conviction and simplicity” (128). Further, she claims, the poem constantly critiques those propositions which it does permit to emerge: “Passages [will] rarely inscribe a conceptual pattern without destabilizing its authority—sometimes soon after, sometimes nearly

⁷ Because the 1799 “Two-Part *Prelude*,” is more internally consistent than the later, much longer versions of the poem, it represents a possible exception to this rule. Yet even in this early version—wherein the poetry is “all of a piece” (Wordsworth 570)—*The Prelude* contains conflicting discursive forces.

simultaneously” (131). Ultimately, this “dialogics of question and answer” creates a “destructive circularity” that precludes the possibility of any singular or stable (monologic) meaning (142, 152): the poem is inherently heteroglossic, sustaining “A tempest, a redundant energy, / vexing its own creation” (1805 l.46-7). In a much different context, William Galperin provides an apt description of the poem’s internal instability: *The Prelude* is “the autobiography that immediately deconstructed the very self it promoted” (166).

Any proposition about the poetic self which emerges from or within *The Prelude* is thus subject to compounded torsion. Outside of the text, Wordsworth-writing impinges upon the stability of the poetic line, altering the poem and thus altering the character of the poet portrayed therein; within the text, Wordsworth’s (lyric) “I” (in its perpetual present) questions, contests, and often dismantles the “props of [its own] affections,” at once testing identities and making any singular, logically consistent self impossible. This doubly-comprised semantic indeterminacy is further augmented by the indeterminacy of the poem’s *form*—a generic frame which might otherwise provide some ground (via convention) for stable signification. Leon Waldoff explains this phenomenon as follows:

The form of *The Prelude* is perhaps the most mixed of all Wordsworth’s poems, being at once autobiography, epic, elegy, verse epistle, romance, pastoral, and, of course, lyric, that most protean and versatile of forms. His reliance on more than one form—or, to be more accurate, more than one tradition of poetic forms—in each of the major lyrics and *The Prelude* suggests that it takes more than one poetic tradition to represent the subjectivity of the speaker in each work. Wordsworth adopts a form such as the ode or elegy or the epic, but he appropriates from various poetic traditions whenever is necessary, within certain generic and formal limits, to enable the “I” in its act of self-representation in each work to achieve its expressivist, constitutive, and self-transformative aims. (153)

While Waldoff provides a viable rationale for the formal heterogeneity of *The Prelude*,⁸ his explanation also grants Wordsworth's "expressivist, constitutive, and self-transformative aims" too much constancy. The poet's aims, though multiple and not necessarily compatible with each other, are presumed to be more or less stable. As such, Waldoff assumes that the self or subjectivity Wordsworth wishes to represent maintains a more or less constant (potential or desired) identity over time. Granted, Waldoff is careful to circumscribe the source of that discursive self as follows:

In the case of the major lyrics and *The Prelude*, the person whose feelings Wordsworth describes, identifies with, and conjures up the feelings of is less the empirical Wordsworth that he wanted his readers to think of when he used the phrase "the poet in his own person" than the imaginatively reconstituted self he prefers to remember or tries to become. (155)

But even the idea of an "imaginatively reconstituted self" (idealized "I" or Poet) implies a degree of conceptual integrity—in this case, a semi-platonic "I" who is ever being sought beyond the bounds of the cave. The desired self may be a "dramatized, transitional self," but the hint of transcendental unity remains: the idealized "I" is granted partial immunity to the instabilities permeating the text, a "special mode of being" which protects the (idea of the) Poet from any obstinate questionings (29).

That said, Waldoff's observations on *The Prelude*'s heterogeneous form still have merit; his discussion simply needs to be reoriented. Consider the identity *between* two forms of self-definition in the poem: self-definition as the poem's effort to articulate its own consummately idiosyncratic formal character; and self-definition as the realization of poetic identity, or the creation of "character" by means of form. In other words, there is no separation between the poem's means and its ends; therein, poetic forms or

⁸This is especially true of his description of the manner in which Wordsworth pragmatically "adopts" different forms/traditions for the purpose of self-representation, though I would suggest "appropriates" is a more accurate word.

traditions are not mustered toward representational aims so much as a consciousness is created of and structured by form. There is no “first” or “prior” term in this equation: consciousness is form and form consciousness. The Poet *is* the poem—both created by and through one another.

The quasi-Heideggerian circularity of these terms suggests a very pragmatic point: *The Prelude*, by virtue of its subject, form, and style, is as much creating the poet as it is being created by him. One could draw useful distinctions between the empirical Wordsworth (self-as-lived), Wordsworth-writing ((sense of) *self*-as-poet), and Wordsworth-as-Poet (the lyrical “I” or self-as-imagined); but regardless of how thoroughly one discriminates between “real” and “fictive” selves, the fact remains that both realms influence and shape one another. A poet’s self-image may well be a fictional construct, but it has very real ramifications. Wordsworth was shaped by *The Prelude*’s “Wordsworth” just as surely as a reader’s understanding of the poet is conditioned by the poem—and, as will be seen, by precisely the same means.

At this point, we have tentatively established the following:

- 1) *The Prelude* is not simply an individual poem by Wordsworth but, as a “mastertext” of poetic identity (the central preoccupation of the poet’s career), the functional center of the Wordsworthian corpus.
- 2) *The Prelude* is a radically unstable text in material, semantic, and formal registers.
- 3) *The Prelude* and Wordsworth’s poetic self—what Andrew Bennett calls, evocatively, “the *figure* of a poet, the self-figuring poet” (10)—are

essentially one and the same. The poem which claims to track “The Growth of the Poet’s Mind” shapes the very growth it wishes to describe. Given these suppositions, one can establish a motive principle for subsequent analysis: The efforts toward self-definition and the articulation of poetic identity manifest in *The Prelude* are not exclusive to or confined within the boundaries of that poem but reach outward toward the whole of the Wordsworthian corpus. This is a direct consequence of a) *The Prelude*’s explicit subject (the poet’s mind), which leads to the creation of an idea of a poetic identity or self-image that structures and informs other poetic production; and b) its plural, palimpsestuous text(s), which both indirectly and directly interact with other poetic texts—interpenetrating, shaping, and often wholly subsuming subsidiary verse. An analysis which seeks to understand the shape of the poet’s career may therefore begin *within* or, more accurately, *across* the *Prelude*(s), and derive thereof a method for reading the figure of the Poet as it develops over time.

When *time* (development, change, or potential discontinuity) becomes a consideration, Wordsworth’s revisionary practices—as well as the content of the revisions themselves (whether consisting of addition or deletion)—come to the fore. This is equally true of narrative time and real time: the lyric “I” questions and reorients itself as the poem proceeds through discursive time; Wordsworth the editor, the revisionist, and the *reader* questions and alters his text(s) over the course of his life. To a great extent, one can accurately define both these movements as types of revision: the first, as an internal revision of understanding; and the second, as an explicit and external revision of texts. However, the crucial realization is that the second process—whereby Wordsworth actually shapes the text and therefore the self—wholly determines the first. By becoming

the (re-)writer of himself, Wordsworth can direct the course of that textual self's becoming. With any act or instance of revision, Wordsworth-writing can impose or exercise a palpable design upon his poetic self.

In his landmark study *Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787-1814*, Geoffrey Hartman provides an apt characterization of *The Prelude*'s place in Wordsworth's corpus and, by extension, a means for understanding the effects of Wordsworth's revisionary practices:

And, by a curious irony, the unpublished *Prelude*, which is his greatest testimony to the living mind, now discourages further self-exploration. . . . [L]ater sentiments . . . do not rely, in their weakness, on the external authority of the church, but on the internal authority of his own greatest poem, which is kept private, and as scripture to himself abets the flat reiteration of his ideas in a slew of minor poems. (330)

Putting aside—for now—the aesthetic judgment(s) intimated here, the crucial idea is rather that of *The Prelude* as Wordsworth's "scripture to himself."

Hartman's metaphor is ample. The comparison of *The Prelude* to scripture both draws upon and draws out an immense chain of associations between the poem and biblical language, motifs, paradigms, and structural devices.⁹ However, the most important consideration is not the direct correspondences between biblical and poetic texts but the semantic character of the vehicle itself: Scripture is law, commandment, and Word; it claims to speak with the voice of God and thus with absolute authority over all creation. If one transposes this essence and function to the text of *The Prelude*, the poem figures not simply as a center but as an all-encompassing wholeness—the ur-text of all poetic creation. Due to the paradoxical internalization of the Word and its unequivocal authority, and given that Wordsworth literally writes *himself* (the poet, a textual creation) into being, this scripture is strangely contingent upon the will of the subject(ivity) it seeks

⁹ Indeed, the biblical resonances are doubly profuse; Wordsworth is also appropriating Milton, whose epic colludes with—or is almost tantamount to—scripture.

to command. Granted, contingency haunts both forms of scripture: the ultimate “meaning” of the Word always depends on how and by whom it is interpreted. Yet, in the case of *The Prelude*, scripture can literally and physically be rewritten.

Hartman’s metaphor provokes several important questions. For example, what problems emerge when he who wields the Word is subject to and determined by the boundaries and limitations of rhetoric? What effect do these boundaries and limitations have upon the thinking, writing subject? And what is the ultimate product of that process, in terms of its impact upon both poem and poet?

If the poem is created by the poet, and the Poet created by the poem, we can only know one *through the rhetoric of the other*. Therefore the question of revision must be addressed by way of an understanding of poetic form—the frames of interpretation, understanding, and representation which constitute and structure *The Prelude* and, by extension, the whole of Wordsworth’s poetry. Despite McGann’s assertions, this does not necessarily constitute a problematic complicity between criticism and a “Romantic ideology.” Wolfson demonstrates as such with her forceful reply to McGann’s critique: “Some [Romantic] poems do turn from social conflict, or use their forms to exile and displace disruptive knowledge; but other poems, far from concealing the problematic of form, provoke it anew, as a condition of their very composition” (15). Form in many Romantic poems necessarily functions as a critique of its own premises, opening them up to question: “designs of unity in . . . [many] Romantic poems *reflect on rather than conceal their constructedness*” (14; emphasis added).

Undoubtedly, *The Prelude* is the most reflective and inward-turning of the canonical works Wolfson references. As such, one can locate these moments of critique

and reflection in its text(s), and subsequently use the revealed problematic[s] of form as a means of approaching the much larger problem of Wordsworth's poetic decline. In the following, three key passages will open *The Prelude* to the problems which will preoccupy the remainder of this study.

We turn first to the “two consciousnesses” passage, found originally in the second part of the “Two-Part *Prelude*” and occupying an analogous position in the 1805 and 1850 texts:

A tranquilizing spirit presses now
 Upon my corporeal frame, so wide appears
 The vacancy between me and those days,
 Which yet have such self-presence in my heart
 That sometimes when I think of them I seem
 Two consciousnesses—conscious of myself,
 And of some other being. (1799 2.25-31)

This passage remains intact and relatively unchanged in all versions of *The Prelude*—a fact which, considering the radical instability of the poem, is highly significant. Through frequent (re)reading(s), critics have also made it something of a touchstone for analysis, adopting the rather useful figure of a radically divided self to illustrate various textual tensions and conflicts. Most commonly, though, it is taken to be a figure which addresses the ineluctable remove between a past and a present self and thus an illustration of a problematic mechanism central to most Wordsworth poems: memory. This interpretation finds abundant support in the passage, wherein Wordsworth's lines move between a present, active, self-conscious “I” and a static, stable Other; or, in Wolfson's words, “a speaking subject (‘me’) and textual object (‘those days’ of ‘some other being’)” (“Answering” 146). It is important to note that the two strongest verbs in the passage—“presses” and “think”—belong, respectively, to the “tranquilizing spirit” and the speaking

subject, both of which (though by no means equivalent) are essentially figures for the active mind. In the Norton edition of *The Prelude*, the editors further emphasize the role of mind, pointing out that the “corporeal frame” of these lines represents a “recollection of *Tintern Abbey* 44-46” wherein “the corporeality of the body is stressed to show the dominance of mind” (15, n.4). The speaking subject’s status as a *conscious*, reflexive self only serves to emphasize the width of the “vacancy” between present and past selves: “those days” have a “self-presence”—i.e., a nearly independent, tangible existence—in the speaker’s mind; he is studying them as he would unfamiliar phenomena because their distance in time makes them strange.

Yet the speaker’s “estrangement by vacancy” from his other, former self is not only a cognitive dilemma (Wolfson, “Answering” 146); it is a predicament of reading and writing. After all, the speaker is not simply thinking about “those days” but writing about them, and his study of those self-presences is fundamentally an act of reading the remembered past. For this reason, the aforementioned division of mind and body is analogous to the division between the self-writing and the corporealized text of the past, a text which has become Other—separate, distinct, and temporally immobile. From here, it is no great leap to move, as many critics have, to a consideration of the passage as expressive of a formal dilemma which haunts and permeates the whole of *The Prelude*: the problem of autobiography.

Wordsworth’s effort to read his past evokes an ineluctable “gap” or inadequacy inherent to all autobiography—an epistemic predicament Anne Mellor describes as “the uncertain relation between the self-as-lived and the self-as-imagined, between the referential and the written self, the gap or vacancy between ‘two consciousnesses’” (300).

Given this vacancy, she argues, the closure or unity of the self (and thus the text, which is presumed to be equivalent) becomes a virtual impossibility; the gap can only be bridged by the fiction of a “transcendental ego” or “unitary self that is maintained over time by the activity of memory” (293).

But this fiction is a tenuous remedy at best, and the passage’s insistence on binary division—on the presence of *two* consciousnesses—belies the poet’s insistence (note the emphatic “*such* self-presence”) that he can span the vacancy between selves by means of (re)reading the past. Wordsworth attempts to encompass present and past by means of the unitary “I,” but ultimately the “other being” gets the literal last word. In essence, the problem is that the past is *not* the corporealized, stable, *legible* text he wishes it to be; the vacancy is too wide, and his vision inadequate to the task. The poet is sufficiently reflexive or self-critical to openly acknowledge the autobiographical predicament but tries to subvert it nevertheless. Yet his effort ultimately fails, for the two consciousnesses remain, and remain separate and discrete. As Wolfson indicates, it is important that the only alteration to the passage in later versions of *The Prelude* is to change “heart” to “mind,” “as if to concede the cognitive dilemma against the emotional faith in one’s life as a coherent and legible text” (“Answering” 147).

By recognizing the problem of “two consciousnesses”—the fundamental problem of autobiography—*The Prelude* attempts to negotiate and circumvent (if not eliminate) the epistemic “vacancy” between present and past. The order of the latter terms is important: memory must always function in retrospect, moving from the I’s *now* to the Other’s *then* via the power of recollection; it cannot, strictly speaking, construct the past from the ground up but must reverse-engineer a history via narrative. Aware of this

problematic mechanism, Wordsworth's poem once again reflects upon a "cognitive dilemma" which informs its construction, attempting to subvert (or sublimate) the problem by subsumption:

Of these and other kindred notices
I cannot say what portion is in truth
The naked recollection of that time,
And what may rather have been called to life
By after-meditation. . . . (1805 3.644-48)

Here, Wordsworth essentially concedes that memory is a creative process: a "portion" of the experience, event, or object might have been "called *to life* / By after-meditation"—literally given life ("called") by the poet's Word. It is worth mentioning that this formulation appears to conform to one of Wordsworth's most famous poetic maxims: that "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (*Prose* 1:148.387-88). On the surface, then, Wordsworth appears to acknowledge and accept that the act of recall is inherently a creative—and thus technically "inaccurate"—process. Nevertheless, there is an implicit tension in these lines. The words in the phrase "naked recollection," rather than cooperatively signifying "the truth and only the truth," actually grate against one another: for against the starkness of "naked," to "*recollect*" implies at once a fragmentary and piecemeal procedure and a process that is repeated or secondary. And as the act of recall is an act of *reading* a past self, the poem once again confronts a dilemma endemic to autobiographical discourse.

The poet's meta-awareness of the quandaries inherent to the autobiographical form does not apply exclusively to reading: autobiography is not simply recollection but representation; it is reading *and* writing. In this way, the preceding passage reveals what Wolfson calls "the poem's larger questions about retrospective self-reading" (*Formal*

110). Quoting Jonathan Culler, she phrases the question thus: “to what degree are the events ‘determined by various narrative and discursive requirements?’” (qtd. in *Formal*

110). Paul de Man provides an unusually straightforward answer: Completely.

We assume that life *produces* autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? (“Autobiography” 69)

Although de Man phrases his answer (judiciously) as a question, the disproportionate weight of the sentence’s second half suggests what further consideration of de Man’s premises will confirm: that he conceives of autobiography as a form inextricably bound up in its own constructedness.

But for de Man, to refer to autobiography as a “form” at all is an equivocation.

Later in his essay, we find the following (re)definition of the term:

Autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. (70)

Given the predominance of reading and the equivocal identity of “the reader” (who can be at once the poet or the poet’s audience), de Man’s mention of “two subjects” has the potential to mislead. Here, Jon Cook’s explication of “Autobiography as De-Facement” is helpful:

The argument is that the sense of an identity, a subject, or a life produced by autobiography is a rhetorical effect. The rhetorical figure which creates autobiography is in the ‘alignment between the two subjects’, the one who writes, and the one who is written about, each determining the other in an endless and unresolvable play of difference and identity. . . . The rhetorical structure of autobiography divides the self in the act of composing it. (51)

Thus explicated, de Man's formulation is clearly evocative of the "two consciousnesses" passage: the moment of reading—i.e., the moment of Wordsworth's reading his past (which is the "auto-biographical moment")—*results in* the division of the poet into "I" and "some other being." According to de Man, Wordsworth's attempts to bridge the vacancy between these consciousnesses cannot possibly succeed: it is *within language* and therefore subject to the limitations of rhetoric, wherein "the non-coincidence of sign and meaning" precludes any possibility of an alignment between signifier and signified (Cook 37). In other words, *both* of Wordsworth's consciousnesses cease to refer to any empirical reality or self at the moment when they are written into the text: language is rhetoric and rhetoric does not mean, it *figures*, replacing any real referent with an arbitrary and intrinsically meaningless sign. As a result, the relationship between Wordsworth's two consciousnesses can never be resolved. Because neither figure has a discrete referent, they determine or depend upon one another, signifying only by means of "an endless and unresolvable play of difference and identity."¹⁰

De Man's autobiographical moment "happens as an alignment of two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution" (70). This moment, comparable to the alignment (and separation of) "two consciousnesses," creates a concomitant meta-textual moment: "The specular moment

¹⁰ In my estimation, the inherent negativity of de Man's theory of language renders it untenable. Regardless of how rigorously one argues for the complete divorce of sign from referent, the fact remains that there was an actual, material man named Wordsworth who composed *The Prelude*. Thus, I am not arguing from the perspective of deconstruction or of Paul de Man: I take issue with the indispensable axiom of his theory—namely, that language cannot possibly signify, mean, or refer to anything.

That said, de Man's theory of autobiography and the deconstructive modes of reading evinced therein are particularly effective and useful analytic tools in the context of my argument. This is true for two reasons: First, by focusing my analysis on Wordsworth-as-poet, and by attempting to track the consequences of revision *within* that textual system, I am adopting a rather Derridean maxim: *nothing* is outside of the text—especially not the "poet." And second, because de Man's theory of autobiography is predicated on the endless play of figuration, reading, and writing—an approach which emphasizes those *discursive* acts central to the process of revision and the *compositional* problems inherent therein.

that is part of all understanding reveals the tropological structure that underlies all cognitions, including knowledge of the self” (71). As Cook explains,

Doubleness and division creates what de Man describes as ‘a specular structure’ (1984: 70): autobiography is the equivalent of a mirror, but a mirror in which it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between reflection and reality. The writer looks back or looks at him- or herself in pursuit of finding or knowing a self. But this self is composed in writing. According to de Man, autobiographical writing turns around this moment. It is tropological, in a way that recalls the root meaning of ‘trope’ in the Greek word for ‘turn’. To read autobiography is to be caught up in this turning of the self and of language. (51)

The “specular structure”—a structure of seeing or, more appropriately, reading—enables self-awareness and reflection; but the insight gained is not “self-knowledge.” Instead, it is an awareness of the “tropological structure” or constructedness of autobiography, and thus an awareness of the contingency (i.e., written-ness) of the text. The fact that the self observed is a self that has been “composed” proves an ineluctable impediment to unclouded sight and coherent reading: one subject cannot “read” the other because language does not signify, but *tropes*, thereby turning away from meaning and substituting a figure.

Curiously enough (or perhaps purposefully), de Man does not address the passage of *The Prelude* which most clearly evinces a specular structure. That passage, another oft-analyzed sequence, reads as follows:

As one who hangs down-bending from the side
Of a slow-moving boat upon the breast
Of a still water, solacing himself
With such discoveries as his eye can make
Beneath him in the bottom of the deeps,
Sees many beauteous sights—weeds, fishes, flowers,
Grots, pebbles, roots of trees—and fancies more,
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,
 Impediments that make his task more sweet;
 Such pleasant office have we long pursued
 Incumbent o'er the surface of past time—
 With like success. (1805 4: 247-64)

To borrow from Wolfson, “[t]his is the epic simile . . . launched to image the perplexed epistemology of writing and reading autobiography” (*Formal* 128). The essential dynamics of the image are fairly uncomplicated: a man in a boat leans lazily over the side to gaze into the water. However, the optical dynamic of the passage (its “specular structure”) is complex and layered: the poet (object of the simile) first sees the bottom of the “still water,” which is populated with “weeds, fishes, flowers, / Grots, pebbles, roots of trees”; then he is “perplexed” by the surface of the water, which is reflecting “rocks and sky, / Mountains and clouds” and thus impeding his vision of the bottom; next, he sees in the water’s surface his own image, which *crosses* the former reflections; and finally, he is similarly “crossed” by a sunbeam and “motions that are sent he knows not whence.” If we begin by reading the simile literally, the passage may be said to move from “deeps” to surface to sky, pulling the observed object(s) or phenomena closer to the eye until they or their causes pass beyond visibility. However, it is even more crucial to note that each successive “level” of seeing impedes or obscures the former: “looking through” and seeing clearly is not an option after the eye is “perplexed” and then “crossed” because the layers interpenetrate, mix, and confound one another.

As Cook rightly observes, the analogical mechanism of the simile is to “transform temporal into spatial relations” (33): the poet is “Incumbent o’er the surface of *past time*,” and his vision moves from the depths (long ago) to the surface (the present) to the

unobservable (future) in an anti-regressive movement. Yet as vision is impeded by each successive level of time, the poet must attempt to “look through” and does so with decreasing efficacy. What we have, then, is a double movement: a movement *up* from the bottom which proceeds by means of the simile’s narrative, and an attempted movement *down into* the depths, which follows the poet’s field or range of vision. As he attempts to penetrate beneath the surface of past time, time moves up toward and beyond the present, progressively clouding and finally thwarting his vision altogether. Importantly, the two movements first “cross” when the poet sees a “gleam / Of his own image.” At this point, the depths become completely illegible.

The analogical identities of levels and objects are easily identified: for example, the “weeds, fishes, flowers, / Grotts, pebbles, roots of trees” in the depths are distant, discrete, *natural* objects which evoke Wordsworth’s ubiquitous vision of childhood and of the poet as a child, when he was yet Nature’s “favored being.” But the most resonant dynamic or moment of the passage arrives with that moment of self-recognition or (self)-reflection—the moment wherein the poet can see *nothing but* the image of himself looking back at him.

Clearly, this is a moment of (visual) recognition equivalent to what de Man called “the alignment of two subjects”: one movement—time—has brought the poet’s present self to the surface, where the poet-seeing observes not himself but the image, figure, or reflection of himself—a simulacrum. If these terms are transposed to the arena of texts and of reading and writing (which they never really left), the simulacrum of the poet becomes the figure-of-the-poet, a self written into being. It is this written self, the lyric

“I,” which ultimately obscures the poet’s vision, preventing him from seeing his own past clearly.

The passage thus constitutes a poeticized model of the processes of reading that both define and limit autobiographical discourse. The reflection, representative of Wordsworth’s present self, obscures the successive layers and depths of “past time,” which constitute an aggregate of former selves stretching back into childhood. As such, *the poet’s present self filters, shapes, constructs, and determines how he reads former selves*. The poet’s newly realized identity never really attains a stable state because it is quickly crossed and superseded by the upward thrust of time. Furthermore, that ephemeral “I” is necessarily a distorted or remade self—one comprised of the past but filtered through the demands and expedients of the narrative moment.

The “figure of reading” evident in this passage is also directly applicable to Wordsworth’s processes of revision (de Man 70). Every time the poet revisited and reread his text(s), he effectively added another layer of interpretation, another (re)figuring of poetic identity to the existing aggregate of selves/texts. Wordsworth’s revisions to *The Prelude* thus accumulate like sediment—at once adding new material to the whole and changing the shape of the previous text, now further within the deeps. This is not an inherently negative process: the change between the 1799 and 1805 *Preludes*, for example, creates an entirely new, much different poem. Nor is it uniform: portions of *The Prelude* are relatively stable throughout all versions. It is, however, a process which yields perpetual change in the name of realizing a present poetic self (“I”) which is ever-receding into the past. By the time *The Prelude* is in its “final,” 1850 incarnation, the poem has been subject to such substantial and continuous revision that “there are

frequent outcrops of several earlier formations, forming an almost geologic cross-section of earlier authorial selves” (Wood 8).

Ultimately, autobiographical self-representation and revision are equivalent. Indeed, Wordsworth’s efforts to write autobiography, to reflect upon and “revise his self-understanding” are inherently bound to more explicit revisionary processes (Hartman, “Introduction” xxv). Because Wordsworth’s poetic identity is realized through the text, he cannot update or amend the former without altering the latter. What’s more, the poet in the process of writing autobiography must remember, interpret, and incorporate a history which is *comprised* of texts and readings of texts. Wolfson explains this phenomenon as follows:

As poetic activity recollects, reviews, interprets, and reinterprets its phantoms of conceit, poetic composition produces revision as the enactment as well as the report of these processes. Scanning the surfaces and depths of time past, the “considerate and laborious work” of writing returns Wordsworth to manuscripts past, to re-peruse the surfaces and gaps of their texts. Manuscripts as well as memories constitute his past, and textual revision reduplicates, perpetuates, and enters into recollection. In this involute, revision is not just compositional; it is the very trope of autobiography. . . . (Formal 104)

If revision is the rhetorical mechanism of autobiography, then it follows that the problematics of form inherent in autobiographical writing are applicable to processes of revision. The preceding conclusions may therefore be applied directly to the text of Wordsworth’s *Prelude(s)* as rubrics or frames for further analysis. By addressing how time, constructedness, memory, and the limitations of rhetoric inform the relationship between versions of *The Prelude*, one can determine the ultimate impact and import of Wordsworth’s revisionary practices.

Yet even these conclusions are insufficient to support the contention that Wordsworth’s revisions were both the central cause and overt manifestation of his poetic

decline. However deeply the problematics of (autobiographical) form inform the shaping of poetic texts, they still do not *implicitly* explain how revision can compromise the quality of poetic production. In order to substantiate the link between revision and decline, one needs a means of demonstrating how revisionary practices can compromise or attenuate a poetic text.

Nigel Wood's discussion of retrospection and reordering in *The Prelude* provides a solid base for precisely such an effort. The relevant passages read as follows:

Retrospection reorders the events that contribute to the present 'self'. . . *The Prelude* represents, therefore, a proposition about the past that emerges from this anxiety to construct it *in the present*. . . 'Anxiety' is an apt word for this reordering, as it involves a working through of the displaced fears and repressed desires, a full coming to terms (in a quite literal sense) with these shadows of authority or Otherness that cannot be faced directly, either because they only now exist in a language that is metaphorical (and so require extensive interpretation) or because they need to be reassembled out of their chronological order in order that they can emerge for the conscious mind. (21)

One of the fundamental problems at work in autobiography is the inevitable constructedness of the life written therein—a life which is effectively “reordered” to suit the discursive or formal demands of narrative. When further figured as an act of reading, and as a *revisionary* act of reading which must, by necessity, be contingent upon the poet's present, the effort to compose or write oneself becomes identical to what Wood calls the “proposition about the past which emerges from this anxiety to construct it *in the present*.” The following chapter will explain how the concept of “anxiety,” adapted to autobiographical discourse, aptly characterizes the process that shapes and impels Wordsworth's revisionary practices.

Chapter 3: Anxiety and Autobiography

While anxiety is indeed an “apt word” for the agonistic process(es) or energies which conditioned the *Prelude*’s (re-)composition, it is also an incredibly ambiguous one. Even Nigel Wood’s formulation, which stolidly (and accurately) characterizes Wordsworth’s anxiety as a process of “reordering,” threatens to become nebulous due to the profuse connotations the word has accrued in post-Freudian discourse (Introduction 21). On the other hand, reductive definitions and an over-rigorous circumscription of meaning would inevitably collapse at the hands of the dynamic “working through” which at once constitutes and results from (an) anxiety. Ultimately, what one needs is an inclusive and flexible concept which may be *located* without becoming fixed; it is not necessary to know what anxiety “is” so long as one knows where and when it occurs.

According to Wood, Wordsworth’s anxiety was a discursive phenomenon which concomitantly subsumed and motivated a complex of psychological, temporal, and hermeneutic processes. However, Wood gives insufficient emphasis to what truly binds these processes—namely, their coincidence in what de Man calls the autobiographical or specular *moment*. As adduced in the previous chapter, this autobiographical moment “happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine one another by mutual reflexive substitution” (de Man “Autobiography” 70). Further, the alignment between the one who writes and the one who is written about is *specular* because it represents a moment of vision or insight that “reveals the tropological structure which underlies all cognitions, including knowledge of the self” (72). Autobiographical discourse always bifurcates the writing subject, creating a spatiotemporal difference which thwarts full representation. But in the very act of

dividing the self, writing also makes possible a moment of *reading* wherein the self-who-writes recognizes that the self-written-about is a rhetorical effect. The net result of this process is to make the poet *see* himself in the act of composing a self; he becomes aware of “his” constructedness. This “tropology of the subject” is poetic self-awareness or self-consciousness.

Anxiety happens in and at this moment of poetic self-consciousness. It is a turning-inward which enables awareness yet frustrates closure. This is not the more familiar, more tangible type of anxiety (which is a felt anxiety, or anxiety as a psychological and physiological state), though such considerations are certainly relevant.¹¹ Instead, *this* anxiety is explicitly linked to reading and writing autobiography: its character is distinctly discursive, for it arises from, is motivated by, and results in poetic production.

For de Man, all writing is inherently autobiographical. His treatment of Wordsworth and the *Prelude* is thus a means of adumbrating a “figure of reading” he thinks endemic to all literary texts. Of course, the first theorist to address the problem of autobiography in the “great soliloquy” was, in fact, Wordsworth himself: his treatments of the vacancy between “two consciousnesses,” the problem of “after-meditation,” and the “perplexed epistemology of autobiography” are all, appropriately enough, preludes to the readings of subsequent critics and theorists, de Man included (or even de Man especially). Though he may never have admitted the fact, Wordsworth *also* thought all writing autobiographical: the centrality and ubiquity of the *Prelude* in his career and corpus are testaments to that fact.

¹¹ See, for example, the preceding chapter’s discussion of the physical maladies which, for Wordsworth, often accompanied composition.

Yet ultimately, there is a crucial difference between Wordsworth-the-critic and Wordsworth's critics—a difference borne not only of time and “distance” from texts but from the poet's adamant resolve to overcome the vacancies, gaps, and lacunae which permeated his texts. Whereas we, as readers, can safely accept textual instability and indeterminacy, Wordsworth could not: to do so would have meant compromising the poetic identity he was constructing within those texts. For this reason, the textual predicament critics describe as “autobiographical discourse” was, for Wordsworth, the source and site of profound anxiety. Possessed of (and perhaps by) “the poet's urgent need to constitute himself as poet,” he developed a mode of poetic discourse which, because it took the poet's subjectivity as its subject, was perpetually subject to the ineluctable flux of a being-in-time (Jacobus 128). The mutability of the poet's mind and the evanescence of the temporal present thus yielded a poetry which was truly “never secure from the pressure of ‘second thoughts’” (Wolfson, *Formal* 109).

By means of this curious involute, Wordsworth's poetry continually reinscribes the very inadequacies and impasses it wishes to repair: writing is the agent of its own frustration, because “*acts* of writing – acts that do not just record memory but themselves perform, act out, enact commemoration – both produce a poetic self and, at the same time, disturb any possibility of a coherent articulation of such a self” (Bennett 12, emphasis added). Yet the impossibility of coherence or wholeness—and further, an awareness of that impossibility—does not appear to dissuade the poet from pursuing completion. Writing and rewriting, he struggles against both the self represented *within* the poem and that self who has written or is writing the poem. This collision of ends and means, content and form, creates a poetry which is antithetical unto itself, a poetry which

is never complete yet refuses to concede its contingency, a poetry which is inexorably and perpetually in *crisis*.

Of course, critics have long recognized the connection between Wordsworth's verse and a sense of crisis. Indeed, the term has been such a staple of commentary that it has become the defining element of two entire *genres* of poetry implicitly associated with Wordsworth: the crisis lyric and crisis autobiography. The most famous examples of poems in the former mode include such indispensable works as "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey," "Resolution and Independence," and "Ode: Intimations of Immortality"—all of which begin with or propose a creative dilemma and then proceed to offer, if not a solution, some means of compensatory solace. The term *crisis autobiography*, however, is consistently reserved for *The Prelude* itself, as Anne Mellor explains:

However fragile and tenuous the self linguistically constructed in *The Prelude*, the poem's overt rhetorical argument and structure locate it, as Meyer Abrams argued, within the genre of "crisis autobiography," a secularization of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious autobiographies grounded in a narrative of confession and conversion, of retrospection and introspection, based on the literary model of St. Augustine's *Confessions*. (294)

In contrast to de Man's "autobiography," which "is not a genre or mode, but a figure of reading," crisis autobiography has a much more specific (and therefore much more problematic) formal character. Indeed, given *The Prelude*'s heterogeneous, assimilative form, one might reasonably reject such a classification as altogether inadequate. But though there are problems inherent to applying such a label, one can preserve the fusion of *crisis* and *autobiography* in order to illustrate how "anxiety," which is an oblique and slightly askew synonym for "crisis" anyway, is at once manifest in and constituent of Wordsworth's *Prelude*.

In its initial two-book incarnation (1799), *The Prelude* could be aptly described as a crisis lyric rather than a crisis autobiography. This is not only a consequence of its “smaller scope and much more concentrated power” but of the manner in which it begins (J. Wordsworth 568)—namely, with an especially plaintive and urgent question:

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? (1799 1.1-6)

Wordsworth provides no context and offers no explanation: “this” is simply “*the* crisis”—unnamed, unspecified, and therefore all the more threatening; and the question which it elicits recurs, accrues more weight, and finally crests at the poem’s twenty-sixth line, where the poet at last rounds off his periodic question and assumes a declarative (though still tentative) voice. Although he never supplies a specific antecedent for “this,” the subsequent content of Part I makes the nature of the crisis it references abundantly clear: Wordsworth has in some sense “failed” to be the poet he aspires to be. He has balked in the face of his great task—which, of course, is his nonexistent (but also ubiquitous) opus, *The Recluse*, a “philosophical poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society” (Wordsworth, *Prose* 3:5). *The Prelude*, as both a literary product and as a narrative, thus begins at and begins with a manifest creative anxiety, or anxiety about writing: Wordsworth is, as Jonathan Wordsworth avers, “writing this poem to find out why he cannot write the one he should” (572). As is always the case in his poems, Wordsworth’s means of negotiating a present crisis is to return to the past: therein, he believes, he may find whatever information is necessary to justify himself as a poet,

reaffirm his vocation, and restore his confidence in those capacities which have been rendered suspect.

Yet “this” cannot be solved or effaced by any unswerving path from crisis to resolution or loss to restoration, for in the midst of that retrospective compensatory movement, Wordsworth must confront the limitations of autobiography—the problem of “two consciousnesses” which will be acknowledged for the first time in the 1799 *Prelude*’s second part. Thus, despite the 1799 poet’s concluding declaration that he has retained—or more accurately, recovered—a “more than Roman confidence, a faith / That fails not” (II.489-90), the problem initiated by the poem’s opening question does not end with or within the 1799 *Prelude*. In order to restore his faith in himself, Wordsworth has created “Wordsworth”: he has effectively *written* himself into existence—not only as the “favored being” or “naked savage in a thunder shower” of the poet’s childhood, but also as a distinct voice, a lyrical “I” who questions, interprets, and re-orders past experience (1799 I.70, 26). And as this “I” is a “Wordsworth” grounded in the narrative present of the current crisis—a Wordsworth who *reads* from a distinct perspective and within a particular moment—it represents a self which will inevitably become the prior term in the alignment between two consciousnesses. Ultimately, the text’s opening “this” is both semantically and *temporally* ambiguous: the antecedent which constitutes the crisis-at-hand must therefore shift with the passage of time.

The entirety of the *Prelude*—that is, *all* of the *Preludes*, the grand text which all of the poem’s individual texts become—might therefore be described as a type of compositional reaction-formation: With each fresh reading, and with each subsequent rewriting, Wordsworth is attempting to quell a crisis (or a felt anxiety) so that his “real”

work, which presupposes a fully-formed Poet, can proceed. But because *The Prelude* represents “a proposition about the past that emerges from this anxiety to construct it *in the present*,” it can no sooner dispel anxiety than it creates it anew (Wood 21).

Furthermore, because *The Prelude* allows for no distinction between artist and artifact, because it constructs the poet and thereby asserts that the Poet actually is the poem, there can be no correspondent separation between the poetic (thinking, writing) subject and the poem’s “subject.” Therefore, the poem is not simply about a crisis, it *is* the crisis; it does not only represent or address an anxiety, it *is* that anxiety.

However pithily described, autobiographical anxiety (as I conceive of it) is not a phenomenon which can be adequately conveyed in petrified grammatical constructions. It is dynamic by nature, and consists not of discrete texts but of relationships *between* texts, wherein Wordsworth’s (re)readings of himself are realized. Let us consider what happens to *The Prelude*’s opening sequence, the “glad preamble,” in the transition from the 1799 crisis lyric to 1805 crisis autobiography:

Then, last wish—
 My last and favorite aspiration—then
 I yearn towards some philosophic song
 Of truth . . .
 But from this awful burthen I full soon
 Take refuge, and beguile myself with trust
 That mellow years will bring a riper mind
 And clearer insight. Thus from day to day
 I live a mockery of the brotherhood
 Of vice and virtue, with no skill to part
 Vague longing bred by want of power
 From paramount impulse not to be withstood;
 A timorous capacity, from prudence;
 From circumspection, infinite delay.
 Humility and modest awe themselves
 Betray me, serving often for a cloak
 To a more subtle selfishness, that now
 Doth lock up my functions in a blank reserve,

Now dupes me with an overanxious eye . . .
 Far better to have never heard the name
 Of zeal and just ambition than to live
 Thus baffled by a mind that every hour
 Turns recreant to her task, takes heart again,
 Then feels immediately some hollow thought
 Hang like an interdict upon her hopes.
 This is my lot; for either still I find
 Some imperfection in the chosen theme,
 Or see of absolute accomplishment
 Much wanting—so much wanting—in myself
 That I recoil and droop, and seek repose
 In indolence from vain perplexity,
 Unprofitably travelling towards the grave,
 Like a false steward who hath much received
 And renders nothing back. (1805 I. 229-276)

In this particular case, Wordsworth's revisions consist almost wholly of addition.

Whereas the 1799 *Prelude* had opened with the “Was it for this” sequence, the 1805 version waits 271 lines to pose that most crucial question. In context, this seems a perfectly reasonable and relatively unremarkable occurrence: Wordsworth is moving from a poem of two parts and 1,000 lines to an *epic* poem of 13 books and over 8,000 lines; as the formal demands of a longer work are vastly different than those of a relatively self-contained (albeit expansive) lyric, the decision to reframe the opening simply makes sense.¹² However, such a substantial textual change can still teach us about the processes of reading which have informed the poem's re-conception. The “glad preamble” can therefore serve as a preliminary case study of Wordsworth's processes of revision. To begin with a deceptively simple question: in comparison to the opening of the two-part *Prelude*, what does the “glad preamble” actually *do*?

¹² One would be hard pressed to deny such an argument outright. Even Jonathan Wordsworth, a fierce proponent of the aesthetic superiority of the 1799 *Prelude*, feels compelled to concede that the two-part poem “does not constitute an alternative to 1805” (570).

First of all, the preamble supplies an ample antecedent for the first line's previously undefined "this," exhaustively describing the circumstances surrounding Wordsworth's creative consternation. With verbs such as "yearn," "beguile," "betray," "lock up," "dupes," "baffled by," "turns recreant," "recoil and droop," and descriptors like "awful burthen," "mockery," "infinite delay," "blank reserve," "interdict," "imperfection," "indolence," and "vain perplexity," the passage could hardly be more emphatically bleak in its portrayal of creative blockage. The descent toward the last line's "nothing" is thus meant to place as much rhetorical weight as possible on the ensuing question's formerly undefined pronoun. Eventually, this strategy provokes (or is meant to provoke) an equally forceful recovery: by the close of the first book the poet feels not only that his "mind hath been revived" but also that he has now fixed firmly on a "theme / Single and of determined bounds," thereby achieving a type of certainty which is the direct antidote to any lingering "vain perplexity" (1805 1.665, 668-69).

Yet even as it works so strenuously to establish the poem's archetypal pattern of fall and redemption, or crisis and recovery, or "imagination impaired" and "imagination restored," the preamble (explicitly modeled on the traditional epic's invocation) invokes a process that will ultimately threaten the stability of *The Prelude's* structural schema: that of "self-constituting self-address" or (less eloquently) "self-conscious poetic self-consciousness." While critics have adopted a variety of frames for understanding this discursive phenomenon, Mary Jacobus's explanation is perhaps most helpful. "The voice," she writes, "is always a doubling of self, and more often a multiplication or alienation" (132). For this reason, the doubly self-conscious turn (note: *troping*) of Wordsworth's lyric voice in the preamble does not so much unify *The Prelude* as it

creates or reveals certain gaps or “vacancies” inherent in its narrative scheme. Describing this turn as a “turning-away” or, in formal terms, *apostrophe*, Jacobus elaborates upon its consequences as follows:

Regarded as a digressive form, a sort of interruption, excess, or redundancy, apostrophe in *The Prelude* becomes the signal instance of the rupture of the temporal scheme of memory by the time of writing. Wordsworth’s ‘two consciousnesses’ (*Prel.* II, 32) can then be seen as a division, not simply between me-now and me-then, but between discursive time and narrative time—a radical discontinuity which ruptures the illusion of sequentiality and insists, embarrassingly, on self-presence and voice; insists too that invocation itself may be more important than what is invoked. (129)

It is important that the division between “discursive time and narrative time” does not simply replace or supplant the more simplistic “me-now and me-then” binary. Instead, apostrophe compounds or complicates the poem’s “temporal scheme” by “signaling” the presence of a meta-textual voice—the voice of the poet-writing, or what has formerly been identified as a mode of “self-constituting self-address.” By these means, Wordsworth’s “two-consciousnesses” have been re-doubled: rather than reveal a straightforward negotiation between “I” and “some other being,” the poem now evinces a much more “perplexed epistemology” wherein each successive self is othered by an auditing voice. Wordsworth writes about Wordsworth-writing who is in turn writing about Wordsworth: the lyric “I” is not a stable, singular subject but a reflexive fiction which continually divulges—or at least exposes—its own conceit(s).

The results of this internecine, inward-turning struggle are evident in the text of the preamble. The “mind” which “turns” and turns once again, cycling through despair and hope, is caught within a meditative loop which (re)duplicates or parallels the path of the poet-writing, who is likewise trying to fix upon some coherent, stable self so that he might proceed with the task at hand. Further, the lyric I’s lack of “skill to part” or parse

the emotional antecedents of his current crisis is analogous to the “circumspection” of the text itself, which, due to its consummate self-awareness, is enacting the very process(es) it describes. Ultimately, the “glad preamble” is not merely an introduction to Wordsworth’s “crisis autobiography” but also a catalyst which actuates the poem’s autobiographical crisis: as Jacobus writes, “the ‘glad preamble’ initiates not only *The Prelude*, but the problem of its composition” (130).

Yet, because “composition” never means *only* “writing” (i.e., the literal act of inscription) but always denotes tandem processes of reading and writing, it might be more accurate to say that the preamble initiates the problem of reading which in turn initiates (indeed, becomes) *The Prelude*. Of course, “reading” has a rather expansive definition here, at once signifying the physical act of reading a written text and more intangible processes of self-reading, including introspection, self-analysis, and memory. Nevertheless, the most crucial of these is still the physical act itself—the very literal (re)reading of poetic texts which accompanied the first major revision and expansion of *The Prelude* in 1804-05. By necessity, all other “types” of reading—and for that matter, all other “figures of reading”—converge in this act: Wordsworth’s “overanxious eye” yields an overanxious “I,” and the poet is thus compelled to unfix and remake the poem in order to remake the idea of the Poet found therein.

The importance of the text’s physicality cannot be overestimated. However ponderous our abstractions, however intricate our critical systems, they cannot outweigh the concrete, material reality of the text as an artifact or surface which can be touched, written upon, manipulated, or effaced. To speak of a poem and of “remaking” that poem is to speak not only of a process of rethinking or reconception, but also of a literal

reworking which visibly alters the text in order to realize a re-(en)visioned idea. Any reading of *The Prelude*—no matter how resolute its conviction that the poem is a plural, unstable text—must ultimately return to the physical site of reading and writing. This is true not only for the critic but for Wordsworth himself. Revision begins in an actual encounter between writer and writing, poet and poem. De Man’s “specular moment” of alignment; the divide between two consciousnesses; ruptures between poetic past and present or between discursive and narrative time: all are ways of construing and understanding the ostensibly simple, quotidian act of reading a manuscript.

This simplification does not trivialize that encounter. Quite the contrary, it helps to explain precisely how and why Wordsworth continually revised his texts. *The Prelude* is an “achieved anxiety” because it is at once a means of negotiating a crisis and the source of that crisis: the poem no sooner dispels anxiety than it creates it anew. However, one cannot completely understand why the supposedly purgative process of writing (the poet’s “talking cure,” as it were) would induce further turmoil until one considers the materiality of the text. As an artifact, as an object *external* to the poet, the poem becomes separate from the poet—a “not-me” or Other to the poet’s own person. In the case of *The Prelude*, wherein the poet is the poem, this means that with every rereading, Wordsworth was confronting a self now fixed in time and text—a former self or “other being” who was in the past and therefore subject to the same ineffable vacancy between two consciousnesses. Given Wordsworth’s implicit need to bridge that gap, to maintain the “unique, unitary, transcendental subjectivity” of the Poet despite his awareness of the difficulties therein, this means that rereading must *always* yield revision (Mellor 298). Ultimately, if the “I” of the poem is to keep up with the eye of the poet, it must be either

continually updated to reflect the present poet or *fixed* by some unchanging, stable center which can endure the passage of time and preserve the ideality of the poetic subject.

For Wordsworth, the present was always a crisis in waiting. His response to the mutability and impermanence of the lyric “I” was therefore to delve into his past, wherein he believed he could find sufficient stability to perpetually restore the present poetic self. This method is evident not only in *The Prelude* but across the whole of his corpus. As M.H. Abrams writes, in Wordsworth’s poetry “the scene is a scene revisited”: his “favorite device of *déjà vu*” is a structural device employed so that the past may *become* present and the present may be fixed in both space and time (“Structure” 211). As Wordsworth readily concedes, such revisitation invariably results in reinterpretation. The scene is “made new” not merely because it has been invoked or called forth, but because it has been *read* or tapped as a source of restoration.

Crucially, this type of “retrospective site reading” duplicates precisely what happens when Wordsworth revisits his texts. And since revisitation (or rereading) is almost always accompanied by revision, the structural device or organizing principle also determines the poet’s relationship with the text. Ultimately, *the poem itself* is a scene revisited: the “new” consciousness of the poet—his particular, present “I”—has been superimposed over the old.

In this way, Wordsworth’s poetry habitually subverts the disparity between present and past, not by denying that difference but by attempting to negate it through a rewriting of the landscape / text itself. Yet reworking is also destruction—of previous meaning(s), of former readings, and thus of a previous self. This scenario of revisitation

and “obliterated readings” is most evident in Wordsworth’s famous “spots of time,” which are the central structural device of the *Prelude* in all its incarnations:

There are in our existence spots of time,
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
By false opinion and contentious thought,
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight
In trivial occupations and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired— (1805 XI.257-64)

Wordsworth’s “spots” at once justify and constitute a method of reading or rereading the past: they are scenes or moments which “retain” their “renovating virtue” despite the vicissitudes of time and, therefore, offer a source and site of spiritual stability. Each representative “spot” follows a similar structure and scenario. First, the poet, wracked by current anxiety, uncertainty, or loss, describes a particularly poignant scene from his past (usually, childhood); then, in a representative moment of “after-meditation,” the poet reinterprets (often ambiguously) the scene so that it becomes a source of present succor, solace, or self-knowledge; finally, this knowledge is incorporated into the narrative thrust which constitutes the “growth of the poet’s mind.” The spot thereby becomes not simply an inert moment but an active “virtue” which restores, renovates, or repairs.

Yet the spots are much more than an anodyne for the poet’s beleaguered mind. As Geoffrey Hartman writes, they have a peculiarly potent (and ambiguous) formal character:

It is hard to decide whether the first or second member of the partitive construction “spots of time” should be emphasized. If we derive the origin of the notion from Wordsworth’s attraction to specific place (the omphalos or spot syndrome), and notice that “spot” is subtly used in two senses—as denoting particular *places* in nature, and fixed *points* in time (“islands in the unnavigable depth / Of our departed time”)—the emphasis would fall on the initial word. But the natural pull of the phrase, and the fact that these spots are not only *in* time, like islands, but also creative *of* time or of a

vivifying temporal consciousness, throws the emphasis to the second noun and evokes a beaoning “time-spot.” The concept is, in any case, very rich, fusing not only time and place but also stasis and continuity. The fixity or fixation that points to an apocalyptic consciousness of self is temporalized, reintegrated in the stream of life. (212)

The spots are not only in time but *of* time: they are focused “moments” of composition—moments of (specular) alignment between those “mutually reflexive” Wordsworths who stare back at one another from the surface of the stream. Moreover, as the spots are moments of writing, the various versions of the spots—as found within each successive *Prelude*—become “spots” in their own right, though constituted of non-narrative time. Instead, for the later Wordsworth, these early texts of the *Prelude* would consist of spots of *discursive* time. In this way, the “spots of time” trope structures both the poem and Wordsworth’s reading(s) of the poem: he has adopted or internalized the central figure of his own poem and made of it an active, applicable method or figure of reading. Thus, the mode of re-membering and re-enacting evident in the poetry itself is abstracted to Wordsworth’s compositional processes when re-experiencing (rereading) the poem as a whole. The poem itself provides the form or principle for the poet’s reconception of it; the formal aspects of the text(s) have become modes of thought.

But what process is at work here? What mechanism of (self-)consciousness is propelling revision? It is not enough to refer to the process as “anxiety” in a blanket sense; one must describe the relationship in terms which may eventually serve to explain not only the poet’s inward turn but the poetic atrophy which resulted from that turn. Wordsworth’s motivating anxiety was one of reading and writing, of autobiography, of the perceived vacancy between two consciousnesses—an anxiety which does not simply cause the poem but *is* the poem. But the precise nature of the conflict implicit within

those processes (for they are ongoing) is yet undefined. Autobiography may well be a highly problematic “figure of reading” and “revision . . . the very trope of autobiography,” but this merely suggests perpetual change without positing a trajectory. To explain how an “autobiographical anxiety” could become not only a force which yielded revision but a force which provoked an ultimately corrosive form of revision, one needs both a means of understanding precisely what is at stake in the confrontation between present and past poetic selves and a means of assessing that struggle’s costs and consequences. As the next chapter will demonstrate, an apt frame for such an analysis can be found in Harold Bloom’s theory of poetic influence, often called simply “the anxiety of influence.”

Chapter 4: The “Anxiety of Influence” Turned Inward

“Influence, as I conceive of it,” Harold Bloom writes, “means that there are *no* texts, but only relationships *between* texts” (*Map* 3). What precisely he means by “influence” will require much elaboration. Nevertheless, the connection between his theory of poetry and my reading of Wordsworth begins at this statement. For Bloom, whose entire system depends on the presence of what he calls “intra-poetic relationships,”¹³ it represents an indispensable axiom; for me, it constitutes a way of thinking especially well-suited to Wordsworth, who truly attempted to shape his corpus into a single, profusely connected (and internally coherent) body. In order to understand Wordsworthian revision, one must have a way of describing the relationships between his texts or textualized selves. This is the most basic way in which I wish to employ the term “influence”: as a comprehensive figure, concept, or descriptor of those elemental forces which characterize the relationship(s) between successive versions of a poem and of the successive Wordsworths realized therein.

To begin, one needs a working idea of Bloom’s theory of influence. Though highly complex and often abstruse, the essential argument in *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading* may be summarized as follows:

“Poetic influence” or “the anxiety of influence” refers primarily to the (ant)agonistic relationship between a new poet (the “ephebe” or “latecomer”) and an earlier poet (the “precursor”) wherein the ephebe, who implicitly feels overshadowed or overdetermined by the precursor, struggles to differentiate him- or herself from the

¹³ Curiously enough, and for reasons to be explained later, these relationships may also be accurately described as “inter-poetic” relationships. Presumably, Bloom’s adamant prefix is another means by which he reinforces the preceding axiom: as he allows for no discrete texts, any relationship between them would necessarily be “within.” This concept of a boundless inter-text also reveals the distinctly Deconstructive elements in Bloom’s theory—elements which, it seems to me, are often ignored by his readers.

precursor, thereby attaining creative autonomy and imaginative priority. This antithetical process both compels and results from a “complex act of strong misreading” or “creative interpretation” of the precursor poem which Bloom calls “poetic misprision.” According to Bloom, poetic misprision is only the first in an interlocking and antithetical series of psychopoetic tropes / defenses whereby the ephebe either becomes a “strong poet” or falls short of that achievement. The practical efficacy of this theory of poetry lies in the fact that these six tropes offer

six interpretations of influence, six ways of reading/misreading intra-poetic relationships, which means six ways of reading a poem, six ways that intend to combine into a single scheme of complete interpretations, at once rhetorical, psychological, imagistic and historical, though this is an historicism that deliberately reduces to the interplay of personalities. But because my tropes are not tropes only, but also psychic defenses, what I call “influence” is a figuration for poetry itself; not as the relation of product to source, or effect to cause, but as the greater relation of latecomer poet to precursor, or of reader to text, or of poem to the imagination, or of the imagination to the totality of our lives. (*Map 71*)

Bloom’s theory of intra-poetic relations thus aspires to become a totalizing, all-inclusive, omni-applicable trope of tropes which subsumes not only poetry qua poetry but also the Poet and the poetic psyche as such. Influence is conceived as a “metaphor for reading” in a context wherein “nothing is outside of the [poetic] text”:

Every poem we know begins as an encounter *between poems*. I am aware that poets and their readers prefer to believe otherwise, but acts, persons, and places, if they are to be handled by poems at all, must themselves be treated first as though they were already poems, or parts of poems. Contact, in a poem, means contact with another poem, even if that poem is called a deed, person, place or thing. What I mean by “influence” is the whole range of relationships between one poem and another, which means that my use of “influence” is itself a highly conscious trope, indeed a complex sixfold trope that intends to subsume six major tropes: irony, synecdoche, metonymy, hyperbole, metaphor, and metalepsis, and in just that ordering. (*Map 70*)

While we need not delve into these subsidiary tropes, it is worth noting that Bloom never attempts to deny the figurative or tropological nature—that is, the *literariness*—of his

own theory. “A theory which presents itself as a severe poem,” he declares, “may be judged, and ask to be judged, as argument” (*Anxiety* 13).

The avowedly rhetorical, self-consciously poetic character of the “anxiety of influence” comprises part of the reason why it constitutes an especially apposite means of addressing the problem of Wordsworth’s decline and the process of Wordsworthian revision. One does not need to accept Bloom’s argument in its entirety. Instead, one may adopt (and adapt) his theory based upon the efficacy of “influence” as a *figure for reading* Wordsworth within the decidedly rhetorical context of his poetic oeuvre.

Previously, I have concluded that because *The Prelude* is a poem which implicitly forms its Poet, the relationship between Wordsworth’s palimpsestuous selves is fundamentally a relationship between texts. I have also insisted that what happens to the Poet-in-a-poem can have a profound impact on the poet-without the poem (or the poet-writing). I have not, however, presumed to venture outside of a specifically poetic context, nor would I insist that these conclusions are necessarily transferrable to any poet other than Wordsworth. Instead, I am relying on what I believe to be a sound hermeneutic principle: that a “theory about the self, in some sense, becomes *the practice* of a self which conditions the forms of future theorization. The same is true of any practice, including that of literature, of writing” (Waugh 16).

Most critics consider Bloom’s theory especially problematic because it represents a highly suspect, even potentially dangerous sort of theory: namely, one which makes “evidence-free, globalizing pronouncements” and, because it cannot be tested (or refuted), is all too easily “regarded as a generalizing template” (Waugh 16). However, this problem may be avoided by coupling Bloom’s theory with a de Manian emphasis on

rhetoric. Indeed, in his original review of *The Anxiety of Influence*, de Man suggested that one might easily and usefully transfer Bloom's concept of influence—and its associated “revisionary ratios”—from a primarily psychological context to one which was explicitly linguistic or rhetorical:

What is achieved by thus translating back from a subject-centered vocabulary of intent and desire to a more linguistic terminology? If we admit that the term “influence” is itself a metaphor that dramatizes a linguistic structure into a diachronic narrative, then it follows that Bloom's categories of misreading not only operate between authors, but also between the various texts of a single author or, within a given text, between the different parts, down to each particular chapter, paragraph, sentence, and, finally, down to the interplay between literal and figurative meaning within a single word or grammatical sign. (*Blindness* 276)

De Man's statements must be tempered: there is no value in reducing influence to such a particularized interplay of minutiae that one attempts to discern it “within a single word or grammatical sign.” Nevertheless, his suggestion that influence may operate between the texts of a single author is pivotal, for it allows one to use Bloom's central concept (as well as many of its corollaries) while avoiding many of its pitfalls. The “anxiety of influence” may therefore lead us toward an understanding of the tropological agon manifest in Wordsworth's poetry. By these means, we can not only understand how Wordsworth's verse—in that autobiographical moment of anxiety—reacts upon itself and compels revision but also explain the motive force behind revision as a path to semantic and aesthetic decline.

The reason for combining Bloom's system and de Man's questioning perspective lies in what each “system” lacks: a degree of balance between skepticism and aesthetic positivism. While de Man grates against any “referential” function in literature, Bloom grants that a theory of criticism reliant on metaphor can nevertheless become a practical criticism. He therefore allows a rhetorical effect to radiate outward and affect the poet

himself (who is a rhetorical effect anyway, though a substantial one). This allowance for a link between between textual effects and a more or less empirical, writing self allows one to demonstrate that what occurred within Wordsworth's poetry, as a rhetorical effect, actually resulted in a substantial and real decline in the poet himself.

Yet even with that delimited context, I do not wish to appropriate Bloom's theory wholesale. For this reason, I will not use the entirety of his "system" (including the majority of his revisionary ratios and their psychoanalytic or kabbalistic compliments). Instead, I will make use of his concept of misreading—of creative misreading as an attempt to "swerve" from one's precursor and thereby sublimate anxiety; of "misprision" as an act of reading which seeks to create difference for the sake of maintaining the ephebe's (illusions of) autonomy and priority; of influence itself, which is a "metaphor for reading" as a process which may limit and encumber the poet who does not manage to overcome his precursor. In and across the plural texts of the *Prelude*, the ongoing conflict between Wordsworth-reading and Wordsworth-writing (i.e., between the poet-writing and the poet figured in the text) at different "spots" in time enacts the dynamic of influence Bloom detects between ephebe and the poetic precursor. This schema of inter-poetic relationships¹⁴ is applicable because it reaches toward certain axiomatic characteristics of Wordsworth's revisionary processes—including, most notably, the fact that those processes are generated by mechanisms of self-consciousness produced by and constituent of autobiographical discourse.

According to Bloom, "Poetic influence, or . . . poetic misprision is necessarily the study of the life-cycle of the poet-as-poet" (*Anxiety* 7). On this basis, he appropriates (and heavily revises) Freud, "predicating that these revisionary ratios have the same function

¹⁴ I have deliberately altered Bloom's "intra-poetic" for the sake of clarity.

in intra-poetic relations that defense mechanisms have in our psychic life” (*Anxiety* 88). Reaction-formation, regression, repression, sublimation, introjections and projection—all are subsumed by Bloom’s “map of misreading,” which is essentially a deliberate and self-conscious figure (“trope of tropes”) for the motions of the poetic ego. Perhaps as a result of his Freudian appropriations, Bloom is insistent that the anxiety of influence must *necessarily* arise from an encounter with poetic precursor or semi-Oedipal father: “We need to stop thinking of any poet as an autonomous ego, however solipsistic the strongest of poets may be,” he writes; “[e]very poet is a being caught up in a dialectical relationship (transference, repetition, error, communication) with another poet or poets” (*Anxiety* 91). To some extent, this represents an eminently reasonable demystification of the poetic subject: poets are not, after all, formed in a vacuum, and the poetic psyche is just as subject to external stimuli as any other.

Yet even as it appears to demystify poetic production, this movement outward towards *other poets* creates a similarly obscure rubric for the operation of influence within that “intra-poetic” network. Ultimately, what is left to chance—or, rather, left to the discretion of the critic—is the identification of an individual poet’s poetic precursor(s). And as the identification of influence-anxiety does not, as Bloom openly admits, necessarily depend on the critic’s identification of specific textual affinities, one is left with a substantial “gray area” wherein the only force at work is the critic’s own “I.” At this point, Bloom’s pronouncements become untenable. His readings of poets and their precursors, while often insightful, are questionable both because they lack a means of explicitly connecting the poems at hand and because they allow the network of influence-anxiety to be at once incredibly nebulous and strangely exclusive. Additionally,

though his theory depends explicitly on a precursor / ephebe dyad, he never conclusively demonstrates what, specifically, links these particular poets nor why one poetic father is any more dominant than another. The terms of each agon he cites are perpetually open to question. Thus, as the network expands outward to subsume a greater scope of intra-poetic relationships, it becomes progressively more insubstantial.

But what if we ground our judgments in an intra-poetic network we can be sure *did* exist? If influence is “a metaphor for reading,” then it stands to reason that one could both detect influence anxiety at work *and* trace its consequences with greater certainty when the processes of that reading are visible to the critical eye (*Map* 73). Bloom would no doubt object, as he does in response to de Man’s aforementioned proposal, that this represents a dangerously reductive perspective:

Paul de Man would insist that in the study of this struggle for reversal, the linguistic model usurps the psychological one because language is a substitute system responsive to the will, but the psyche is not. But that is to interpret the term “influence” as one trope only, as a metaphor that transforms encounters between linguistic structures into diachronic narratives. Influence would thus be reduced to semantic tension, to an interplay between literal and figurative meanings. As the sixfold, composite trope outlines above, influence remains subject-centered, a person-to-person relationship, not to be reduced to the problematic of language. From the viewpoint of criticism, a trope is just as much a concealed mechanism of defense, as a defense is a concealed trope. The burden for readers continues to be that poetry, despite all its protests, continues to be a discursive mode, whose structures evade the language that would confine them. (*Map* 76-7)

Bloom’s rebuttal, though forceful, relies too heavily upon a weak assumption: that to internalize influence-anxiety (in any sense) would necessarily mean its *reduction* to a purely “linguistic model” wherein the only tension at work is “semantic” and a “problem of language.” Granted, this is perhaps an apt response to de Man, for whom *all* (quite literally) is rhetoric. But if we accept that influence can remain “subject-centered” when it pertains to a mind actively reflecting *upon itself*, then there need be no diminution.

“Poems,” Blooms writes, “are neither about ‘subjects’ nor about ‘themselves.’ They are necessarily about *other poems*; a poem is a response to a poem, as a poet is a response to a poet, as a person to his parent” (*Map* 18). Very well. But what happens when a poem is divided from itself and a poet from himself by the “vacancy” which intrudes between “two consciousnesses”? He also writes that “influence anxiety does not so much concern the forerunner but rather is an anxiety achieved in and by the story, novel, play, poem, or essay” (*Anxiety* xxiii). If, by means of this perpetual synecdoche, poets indeed *are* their poems, and if influence is a transaction between poems which occurs primarily because those poems are separated by *time* (which creates one precursor and one latecomer), then why could a poet (re)reading himself not be subject to the same sense of *otherness*, difference, and distance?

Autobiography inevitably bifurcates the writing subject; Wordsworth-writing is not a single, unitary, transcendental self but a self radically divided in the very act of composing itself. When one adds to this the fact that Wordsworth, when he revised, was separated from a former self by “vacancies” of up to forty years, then there is no reason why one cannot internalize influence without any egregious reduction of the concept. Admittedly, *some* reduction is evident: one is no longer speaking of relationships across the ages but of *only* “the life-cycle of the poet as poet.” But this does not “cheapen” that process or reduce its visible impact upon the poem: an internalized anxiety of influence may well *begin* at semantic tension, but its impact is felt by the very real, very substantial poet himself. Circumscribing influence in such a way represents a more stable application of Bloom’s figure of reading. Poetic influence is indeed “a disease of self-consciousness” and “a part, of which self-revisionism and self-rebegetting is the whole” (*Map* 72), but it

need not consist of such an obscure relationship between disparate persons. Wordsworth, whom Bloom calls “the great revisionist,” was very much driven by the need to overcome a precursor, but that precursor was not an external, spectral poetic father. Instead, the “Great Original” from which Wordsworth sought to wrest priority was a past version of himself—a Poet begat of a poem, *fixed* within that poem, and thereby antithetical to Wordsworth’s most urgent need, “the constant need to reaffirm his own genius and difference” (Hartman, “Revisited” 13).

In summary: *The Prelude* is a poem born of crisis, of doubt, and of “the poet’s urgent need to constitute himself as poet” (Jacobus 128); its ends are poetic priority and creative autonomy, its means a return to, and creative (mis)reading of, the past. Yet because autobiography is never simply “about” the past but about the present, and because the poem could not suppress its awareness of the “vacancies”¹⁵ inherent to that form, Wordsworth was compelled to remake the poem each time the Poet therein appeared to countermand the poet-writing. In this context, previous texts were necessarily (re)figured as errors—misrepresentations of the poet Wordsworth wished himself to be. Other poems are therefore *threats*; for Wordsworth, this held true even when—*especially* when—those poems were his own. The resulting struggle for priority, fundamentally a struggle between texts, not only produces fresh composition but creates a need for difference. Rereading and rewriting thus converge in a comprehensive attempt to “swerve” from previous poem and Poet—or, more accurately, from the previous poet’s reading of the prior poem. Each successive version of *The Prelude* is essentially a “creative interpretation” or misreading of its precursor (*Anxiety* xxiii).

¹⁵ The term is Wordsworth’s, as used in the “two consciousnesses” passage (*1805* 2.29).

That said, misreading is not by default a constrictive or corrosive process. Quite to the contrary, it is often both a necessary *and* productive “revisionary ratio.” Further, to call the *Prelude*’s successive versions “misreadings” is not necessarily to suggest that there is an original, stable, superior meaning which the revised texts have somehow compromised: autobiographical writing always imposes difference, and thus a search for any unequivocal ur-text of past experience (even by the poet himself) seeks that which does not exist. Zachary Leader’s response to entrenched “earlier-is-better” arguments is correct: “there is no necessary reason why poetry written ‘closer’ to the sources of Wordsworth’s inspiration should be any better than poetry written ‘further’ from it, particularly when we are talking—as is often the case with variant readings—of very short distances in time” (658-59). However, Leader has failed to recognize that Wordsworth’s revisions are not responses to or reinterpretations of any unmitigated, uncompromised “source” but rather responses to other readings. As Wordsworth himself so readily points out, memory is inherently a creative faculty that (re)interprets experience even in the act of recall. The temporal distance between experience and text or between text and revised text, though undeniably important, is therefore not the sole force driving and shaping revision. Instead, the distance between Wordsworth’s texts is a result of, first, the semantic polyphony which emerges in the act of reading; and second, the consequent imposition of layers of interpretation—layers which vitiate and obscure meaning not because they fail to capture any essential center, but because they introduce readings which incessantly question the very grounds of their own existence. As Susan Wolfson writes, “Wordsworth’s sensitivity to ‘other possible answers’ remains an interference that results in continued and prolonged revisions” (“Answering” 45). Such a

“deconstructive questioning” yields a mode of poetry which first figures past readings as errors only to then reinscribe a new error via misreading which will, in turn, subsequently be subject to the same self-conscious critique. Ultimately, the quality of Wordsworth’s poetry suffers not because the poet has grown old, but because the poem, site and source of anxiety, has taken its own methods of reading to an unparalleled extreme. The scene has become a scene too often revisited, and the resulting traffic of readings overwhelms gestures toward clarity and fixity. With every revision, *The Prelude* attempts to claim imaginative priority for *this* moment and *this* poet, but the changes necessary to do so usurp the basis of their own textual authority.

In the following, the goal will *not* be to look for changes to the text which explicitly demonstrate qualitative decline. Because it treats revisions as effects of an extraneous diminishment, such a “comparative” reading would inevitably fail to consider how those revisions are causes of the same process they signify. Instead, I am looking for moments of alignment between “two consciousnesses,” moments of (self-)reading wherein the differences between the *Prelude*’s plural texts divulge the poet-writing’s literal re-visioning of a previous textual self. In these moments, one can track the ongoing struggle between the poet-writing and precursor texts. Ultimately, this will make it possible to not only detect the presence of an “anxiety of influence” but to reach certain conclusions about the effects, costs, and consequences of that anxiety.

Since one cannot possibly attend to every significant moment of revision in *The Prelude*, it is necessary to focus on a small number of representative sites or scenes of misreading. As it happens, the poem itself provides a principal of selection via its reliance on “spots of time.” Just as *The Prelude* is the center and “scripture” of Wordsworth’s

corpus, the “spots of time” are the functional center of *The Prelude*. Within the poem, they act as both the dominant structural motif and the central trope, organizing and producing meaning. Further, the “spots of time” are present in all versions of the *Prelude*, and in every version they are the bedrock upon which the rest of the poem is built, either functioning as semantic centers (“primal scenes,” as it were) or climactic sequences.

In the 1799 *Prelude*, the spots are not only key moments, but constitute the bulk of the text. The most prominent of these sequences include the “Drowned Man of Esthwaite Water,” the “Murderer at Penrith / Beacon on the Summit,” “Waiting for Horses,” and the “Stolen Boat”; but practically every significant movement of the poem abides by the pattern of description and reflection essential to a “spot.” In the transition to the intermediate five book version of 1804, all of the spots are retained and some dispersed, but now the previously quoted spots of time “thesis” and its contiguous episodes (the “Murderer at Penrith” and “Waiting for Horses”) become the terminal movement of the poem, thus amplifying their importance. Concomitantly, the ascent of Mount Snowdon, which first appears at the opening of the fifth book of the *Five Book Prelude* (notably, as the climax which precedes the resolution formed by the central spot sequence), is itself another instance of a “spot of time”—a scene meant to become, as it were, the “highest” spot of the poem as a whole. And although this arrangement will be further altered with the expansion to thirteen and finally fourteen books (in 1805 and 1850, respectively), the spots will once again retain their importance: they are, evocatively, the means by which an “impaired” imagination is “restored.”

Given all of these facts, it is clear that the spots are focal points for revision—both in terms of their actual content and their position in the poem. One may therefore turn to

them in order to track the processes of misreading constituent of and produced by Wordsworth's revisions. To further narrow analysis and facilitate inter-textual reading, the remainder of my argument will focus on the central "spots of time" sequence, which contains the "spots of time" thesis, "Murderer at Penrith," and "Waiting for Horses." The sequence may be found at the following points in the texts of *The Prelude: 1799*: I.288-374; *Five Book Prelude*: V.280-389; *1805*: XI.257-395; and *1850*: XII.208-335.

We have already discussed the extra-textual importance of the "spots of time" trope and considered the structure of that "epic simile" which was "launched to image the perplexed epistemology of writing and reading autobiography" (Wolfson, *Formal* 128). We have also concluded (tentatively) that Wordsworth's explication of the formal problems implicit to autobiography provides the most accessible (and internally coherent) means of reading *The Prelude*. Thus, prior to reading the spots as they exist in different versions of the poem, we may describe the following scenario: The different texts of the "spots" are themselves "spots" (places, times) of reading, and constitute an enacted "specular moment" wherein the poet, "incumbent o'er the surface of past time," attempts to read what he believes to be an "original" experience. However, this reading is frustrated and impaired because the texts and their implicit interpretations are interfering with his vision: he is effectively reading *through* the Wordsworth on the surface—i.e., the Wordsworth-writing in the past. As versions multiply and interpretations compound, the surface becomes more complex and more opaque, and the anxiety of "other selves" grows more acute. Wordsworth's attempts to penetrate the patina of "after-meditation" must follow suit, and therefore grow increasingly more forceful and intricate. The complexity of these rereadings, though constituent of a strong interpretive offense, serves

to ensure that later revisitations of the spot or scene will be even more difficult. In an attempt to fend off the volleys of these accrued selves, the character of subsequent revisions will become increasingly more *defensive*. Difference is imposed as a bulwark against an incipient deluge of former readings.

Although the combative terms of this description might make it appear hyperbolic, such rhetoric is justified given the extrinsic and intrinsic torsion of the spots of time. To begin, consider the central statement of Wordsworth's master-trope. In the inaugural "Two-Part *Prelude*," the "spots of time" thesis reads as follows:

There are in our existence spots of time
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed
By trivial occupations and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds—
Especially the imaginative power—
Are nourished and invisibly repaired;
Such moments chiefly seem to have their date
In our first childhood. (1.288-96)

In the "Five Book *Prelude*," the line is end-stopped at "repaired" and the terminal clause opened up:

Such moments, worthy of all gratitude,
Are scattered everywhere, and take their date
In our first childhood – in our childhood even
Perhaps are most conspicuous. (5.287-89)

But the only significant change is the suggestion that the spots are more numerous and diffuse in memory than previously supposed. However, by 1805 the passage has been altered to include a more substantial, rhetorically weighty description of the forces "depressing" the mind and a second iteration of the sentence's principal subject, "virtue":

There are in our existence spots of time,
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence, depressed

By false opinion and contentious thought,
 Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight
 In trivial occupations and the round
 Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
 Are nourished and invisibly repaired—
 A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
 That penetrates, enables us to mount
 When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen. (1805 XI.257-67)

In and of itself, this revision places considerably more emphasis upon the spot's "renovating" potential: "virtue" is supplied with not only two restorative functions ("nourished" and "repaired") but also with a series of brusque, forceful, ameliorative verbs ("enhanced," "penetrates," "enables," "mount," "lifts") which, accompanying the rolling rhythm of the line, ascend toward a tranquil yet triumphant syntactical plateau. Yet what is even more significant is the exclusion of the formerly brisk transition into the first actual "spot." In 1799, the "Murderer at Penrith" begins immediately after the conclusion of the opening sentence (at "childhood"); in the "Five Book *Prelude*," the onset of the spot is delayed only slightly; but in the 1805 text, one finds a newly interpolated passage of eleven lines and three sentences, which reads as follows:

This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
 Among those passages of life in which
 We have had deepest feeling that the mind
 Is lord and master, and that outward sense
 Is but the obedient servant of her will.
 Such moments, worthy of all gratitude,
 Are scattered everywhere, taking their date
 From our first childhood—in our childhood even
 Perhaps are most conspicuous. Life with me,
 As far as memory can look back, is full
 Of this beneficent influence. (1805, XI.268-78)

This extended description of the "efficacious spirit" amplifies the potential strength of the spots but concomitantly circumscribes where or what they may be: they are to consist of moments wherein the poetic mind, now "lord and master," rules "outward sense"

(sensory experience) by fiat, subjugating everything extrinsic to its will. Though accomplished in relatively few lines, Wordsworth's rereading of the master-trope will inflect the entirety of the principal "spots of time" sequence and do so in a manner which amply evinces influence-anxiety at work. His revisions reveal the following:

First, a more deliberate, drastic, and even violent attempt to compensate for some perceived loss. In the first version of the passage, the mind is "depressed" only by the quotidian motions of "trivial occupations and the round / Of ordinary intercourse," and the "fructifying virtue" of the spot is sufficient to nourish and invisibly repair any consequent impairment of the imaginative power. In later versions, the weight of depressive forces becomes "heavier" and even "deadly," and the equal and opposite compensatory motion redoubles as well, gaining sufficient force to become not only strong but overpowering. The mind is no longer a passive entity which receives or absorbs the healing influx of memory, but a tyrannical agent which accomplishes what Geoffrey Hartman has famously termed the "apocalypse of the imagination"—an absolute domination over external phenomena. This shift is also evident in the subtle but incredibly significant change from "*fructifying* virtue" to "*vivifying* virtue"¹⁶ to "*renovating* virtue": whereas "fructifying," in context, would mean that the mind is made more fruitful and productive, and "vivifying" would signify an animating, quickening virtue which brightens or sharpens the mind, "renovating" implies a more decisive sort of repair—repair not only as the literal mending of what is present, but as a literal *remaking* or making anew. The difference lies in the perceived depth of the wound or loss which each sort of virtue is meant to address: the first reactivates, the second enlivens, the third

¹⁶ According to the editors of the Norton edition, "vivifying" was employed in an intermediate manuscript of the 1805 *Prelude* (see 428, n.2). Duncan Wu's version of the "Five Book *Prelude*" corroborates this judgment, as the adjective is still "fructifying" in that even earlier intermediate text.

literally rebuilds. By the 1805 version, then, Wordsworth's text implies that some creative cataclysm has taken place, and that the damage must be countered by an equally potent compensatory agent. The height of the poet's climb in the second iteration of "virtue" is a direct consequence of the depth of his descent.

Having taken note of this amplified sense of loss, we are naturally directed back to the actual content of the crisis at hand—which (although easy to lose sight of when reading in isolation) is the "impairment of imagination" or the sudden stymieing of the creative faculty. In 1799, *The Prelude* begins on a note of crisis: Wordsworth has failed to write the poem he thinks he ought to (*The Recluse*), and thus he asks—in the midst of that creative anxiety—if it was for *this* sad state of creative anxiety, idleness, or consternation that he had been tutored by his beloved River Derwent. In this instance, the crisis is very much a *present* crisis: the poem sets out to bridge the poetic impasse introduced by its opening question. Yet in the 1805 text, where the sequence is not only removed to the eleventh book but wholly divorced from such immediacy, loss is something which has already happened: the mind does not need to be merely opened up or revitalized, but actively *rebuilt* and made new again. What's more, the expected result of that process of remaking is *apotheosis*—a state high as the lowest lows (actually, even "more high"), and of disproportionate positive strength. The "virtue" at hand is thus afforded an increasing amount of semantic and structural heft. It is as if the poet is trying to not simply achieve imaginative priority but to *seize* it by means of decisive and unilateral action.

The revisions to this opening sequence thus evince a misreading which amplifies or hyperbolizes the function of memory and its constituent "spots" so that the poet might

master a present anxiety. Yet this anxiety has already been amplified by the very act of revisiting that scene of creative stagnation: the scene gains force through repetition.¹⁷

Whereas the “virtue” of the time-spots was once contained in a relatively terse and almost organic formula, it is now figured as a polymorphous form or source of discursive power which above all seeks to be “penetrating” and “efficacious.” This more authoritarian, positivistic interpretation of the spots trope is fundamentally a defense against anteriority: the “spots” are at once brought more forcefully into *this* present and adapted to the (formal, semantic) demands of the remade *Prelude*, which has a vastly enlarged scope. The poet is not the old poet and the poem not the old poem; the immediacy of the 1799 spots sequence—with its spare definition and clearly defined, unembellished edges—has been supplanted by a reading which attempts to more decisively fix function and meaning.

Turning to the 1850 text, we find that another decisive shift—this time, perhaps a hardening—has occurred. The newly revised passage reads as follows:

This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
 Among those passages of life that give
 Profoundest knowledge to what point, and how,
 The mind is lord and master—outward sense
 The obedient servant of her will. Such moments
 Are scattered everywhere, taking their date
 From our first childhood. I remember well, . . . (1850 12.19-25)

For the most part, this version of the passage appears to be a taut, economical rendering of the 1805 text. Despite condensing eleven lines to seven and three sentences to two, it retains many of the elements introduced by its precursor. However, the slight differences

¹⁷ In returning to the poem, Wordsworth is experiencing that state of blockage *again*, not only in figurative terms but also literally. Recall, for example, that evidence points to a scenario wherein every time progress on *The Recluse* was stifled (as it would be again and again), Wordsworth would turn to his autobiographical poem for solace and succor. The irony of the situation is that this defense and supposed comfort would actually compound influence-anxiety.

are telling. For example, consider the change from “those passages of life *in which* / We *have had* deepest feeling that the mind / Is lord and master” to “those passages of life that *give* / Profoundest knowledge *to what point, and how,* / The mind is lord and master . . .” (emphasis added). In the former version, the “passages of life” (the spots) are located *in* a moment wherein we “*have had* deepest feeling”—meaning, they are coincident with that feeling. In the latter, these same passages “*give*” instead, which implies a separation (temporal or spatial) between the spot or experience which is giving and the mind which is receiving (emphasis added). When coupled with the contrast between “deepest feeling” and “Profoundest knowledge,” this revision suggests an attempt to fix the spots in / as an external “source” which might be interpreted, manipulated, and controlled according to the will of the poet. Knowing “to what point, and how” something works is the equivalent of making it an impersonalized object of study. Paradoxically, this attempt to control the spots on one front is coupled with a diminishment of the apparent authority granted the mind; the poet’s deepest feeling no longer tells him that the mind is unequivocally lord and master but instead presupposes that there is a point (an upper limit) and a way (a delimited means of operation) determining how extensive the mind’s government over “outward sense” can actually be.

Though it may appear to contradict previous comments about the control a subsequent text attempts to exercise over its precursor, one must realize that a tempering or lessening is also a form of interpretive control. “All restitutions or representations,” Bloom writes, “induce fresh anxieties, and the influence process continues by a compensatory fresh limitation . . .” (*Map* 72). In other words, one poem’s defense against the threat of (an)other—its attempt to seize priority over the precursor poem—

will not always be an act of overt domination. Often, it will take the form of an antithetical movement (or swerve) *away from* the previous poem, even if the specific limitation, substitution, or restitution appears to be a concession to the precursor's potency. Furthermore, Wordsworth's implicit doubt concerning the extent of the mind's power to dominate "outward sense"—however stringent his control of syntax—speaks to a discernable pattern in the relationship(s) between his texts: a supplementary yet often unpredictable vacillation between what Wolfson terms "floating and fixing" (*Formal* 101). One must keep this antinomy in mind; patterns of misreading may not abide by static principles. Instead, the shape of the text's movement away from its precursor, and the result(s) of that movement, will always depend upon a very specific collision of contexts.

Involuted questionings aside, the "lord and master" addition to the "spots of time" sequence also initiates another consummately Wordsworthian response to the anxiety of influence: a reflexive or inward turn wherein poetry becomes meta-poetic—or, in simpler terms, a moment of writing about writing. Whereas the 1799 *Prelude*, as Jonathan Wordsworth aptly observes, contains very little material which is explicitly *about* writing, the superbly self-conscious 1805 *Prelude* continually reflects upon its own compositional processes. Thus, when one encounters the phrase "*passages* of life" at line 269 (emphasis added), the double entendre can hardly be a coincidence. "Manuscripts as well as memories constitute [Wordsworth's] past," and the passages of his life are at once analogous to and enshrined within the lines of his poetry (Wolfson, *Formal* 104). Given the shift toward poetry as a subsurface subject, the shift from "deepest feeling" to "profoundest knowledge" is a sign of the elder ephebe's shifting priorities or, to come

back around to a previous interpretation, more evidence of the poet's attempt to distance himself from (and thus defend himself against) the 1805 *Prelude*'s forceful reading of the potency of the poetic mind. Yet the hint present in "passages" mostly anticipates the much more explicit and resonant meta-poetic meditations beginning at line 293 in the 1805 *Prelude*:

The gibbet-mast was mouldered down, the bones
 And iron case were gone, but on the turf
 Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought,
 Some unknown hand had carved the murderer's name.
 The monumental writing was engraven
 In times long past, and still from year to year
 By superstition of the neighborhood
 The grass is cleared away; and to this hour
 The letters are all fresh and visible.
 Faltering, and ignorant where I was, at length
 I chanced to espy those characters inscribed
 On the green sod: (1805 11.293-301)

The equivalent passage in the 1850 text reads as follows:

The gibbet-mast had mouldered down, the bones
 And iron case were gone; but on the turf,
 Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought,
 Some unknown hand had carved the murderer's name.
 The monumental letters were inscribed
 In times long past; but still, from year to year,
 By superstition of the neighborhood,
 The grass is cleared away, and to that hour
 The characters were fresh and visible:
 A casual glance had shown them, and I fled,
 Faltering and fain, and ignorant of the road: (1850 12. 237-47)

Significantly, this portion of the main descriptive sequence constituting the "Murderer at Penrith" episode is absent from the five book and two book versions of *The Prelude*. As such, it constitutes an entirely different reading of the scene. While the early incarnations of the poem fix the murderer's resting place in a "long green ridge of turf . . . / Whose shape was like a grave," the 1805 and 1850 *Preludes* identify the scene of his death by

means of a *written* marker. Moreover, this shift in the means whereby death is “read” is accompanied by an equally significant alteration to the tone of the passage: whereas the young Wordsworth simply departs the site of the murderer’s death in the early versions with no mention of panic or fear (“I left the spot / And, reascending the bare slope . . .”), the child in the later versions is obviously frightened. Although both texts explicitly connect the child’s panic to the writing (the writing is mentioned prior to his leaving the spot, and thus becomes a possible cause by proximity), and although both mention a hasty retreat from the scene, the 1850 text makes this much more explicit: “Faltering, and ignorant where I was, at length / I chanced to espy those characters inscribed / On the green sod: *forthwith* I left the spot” becomes “A casual glance had shown them, and I *fled* / Faltering and fain, and ignorant of the road” (emphasis added).

Of course, the child’s fear is perfectly explicable, and one might well read the 1850 text’s emphasis on panic as Wordsworth’s attempt to make the scene more dynamic or dramatic. Nevertheless, this sense of apprehension, urgency, and *anxiety* is connected explicitly to written language; it is as if this particular passage of life has internalized the anxieties of the mature poet, substantiating his fear not only of crises related to writing but of stagnant, static, “engraven,” “inscribed,” or fixed letters and language. The name carved on the turf (notably, a name omitted from the text) is Death metonymically configured; by extension, mortality consists of being written down—permanently—in a form which cannot be altered or revised. In her study of Wordsworthian revision, Susan Wolfson explains this aversion to textual fixity as follows:

Once a specter shape is given a definite form and is turned into a simulacrum of a literary artifact, the life of the subjective eye and I, produced by motion and ferment, dies. Long before de Man articulated the negativity behind language, Wordsworth staged as much in passages such as this: mastery is death. (*Formal* 131)

Without venturing too deeply into a discussion of the alignment between fixity and death (note Wordsworth's famous line, "lifeless as a written book"), and of revision as "the energy which postpones death and quickens the mind"¹⁸ (Wolfson, *Formal* 131), it is nevertheless important to note how this interpretation of "monumental writing" pertains to our discussion of "spots of time" (in all of the aforementioned senses) and spots, or moments, of self-reading. To put it succinctly, the amplified sense of panic visible in the 1850 text is, first, a manifestation of Wordsworth's anxieties concerning the viability of his efforts to read the past; and second, a sign and exemplary instance of the revisionary ratio (or mode of misreading) which dominates and eventually attenuates Wordsworth's later poetry. Here, in the transition from the 1805 to 1850 texts, there is a discernable pattern of "fixing" sites, spots, and scenes that reveals the later Wordsworth's attempts to stabilize, clarify, and therefore usurp previous readings. However, the poet's effort to refine and preserve the spots of time has an unintended consequence: "monumental writing" becomes one of the text's dominant *figures of / for reading*, and that figure enacts the duality the phrase portends.

The evidence for this pattern of misreading is profuse. First, one finds explicit indicators in a series of grammatical changes: "The gibbet-mast *was* mouldered down" becomes "the gibbet-mast *had* mouldered down," suggesting, by means of a tense shift, that the later narrator has extirpated himself from the scene. This is reinforced by the change, a few lines later, from "to *this* hour / The letters *are* all fresh and visible" to "to *that* hour / The characters *were* all fresh and visible." Though subtle, these alterations drastically alter the dynamic of Wordsworth's spot-reading: in the 1805 text, he revisits

¹⁸ Wolfson has already covered this territory quite thoroughly. For more information, see the fourth chapter of *Formal Charges*, entitled "Revision as Form: Wordsworth's Drowned Man."

the scene and actively participates in it; in the 1850 text, the scene is placed at arm's length—still possessed of potency, no doubt, but diluted. Even more curious, however, is the puzzling transposition of the terms used to describe the murderer's epitaph: "monumental writing" becomes "monumental letters"; "engraven" becomes "inscribed"; "letters" become "characters"; and the 1805's final, direct reference to the writing—"to espy those characters inscribed"—is effaced entirely in favor of the anomalous, pronoun-dulled phrase "A casual glance had shown them." In concert, these changes enact a *disintegration* of language into its component parts: "Writing," which suggests the possibility of reading and therefore of discernable meaning, deconstructs into "letters," which are but disconnected symbols when not put into a viable order; likewise, "letters" (already disconnected symbols) become completely undefined "characters" which, despite being "fresh and visible," are basically meaningless. While one could argue convincingly that the disintegration of language here is symbolic of the de-facement imposed by death (once again, the murderer is never named), the combined weight of the child's panic at the sight of writing and this linguistic disintegration *also* justify a more meta-poetic reading. Ultimately, the 1850 *Prelude* refigures language as an inherently diminished thing. The fact that the letters and characters cannot be put into order or even identified is evocative of the illegibility of the past. Like this spot, texts cannot be fully or accurately read.

Despite Wordsworth's acute awareness of fundamental (and perhaps ineradicable) "vacancies" permeating autobiographical discourse, the text of *The Prelude* refuses to completely abandon the attempt to read and derive value from the spots of time. As a result, the revisions to the text prevent the very goal they seek to accomplish. Even as

they are presumably “enshrining, / . . . the spirit of the Past / For future restoration,” Wordsworth’s revisions work to countermand the spots’ restorative potential by disabling their viability in the present. By virtue of Wordsworth’s alterations, the 1850 text interposes an insurmountable distance between the reader / poet (who is attempting to derive value from them) and the source or site of the “renovating virtue.” Just before the opening to the 1850 reading of “Waiting for Horses,” Wordsworth interjects a rather hasty, abrupt, and unbalanced transition which reads, “Yet another of these *memorials*.” This apparently inconsequential segue is an uncannily apt description of the consequences of Wordsworth’s misreading: the spots of time, conceived and implemented as a means of *actively* restoring the imagination to its full potential, are essentially petrified—writ large, yes, but also written *down* and *engraven* in a manner which no longer permits them to adapt to the exigencies of the poet’s present. Reading these spots is not the active, phenomenological exercise it once was; it has now become an exercise in reading gravestones, epitaphs, and “memorials”—static, dead things. Given these conclusions, the effect of influence-anxiety and the consequences of Wordsworth’s misreading of his previous self are clear. In the effort to render himself a “monumental” presence, to “enshrine” his poetry and preserve it for posterity, Wordsworth has also opened his text to a stultifying and deadening process of reification: images harden, metaphor and symbol solidify, and the “spots of time” become memories which *were* and not the perpetually active founts of “something evermore about to be” (1805 6.542)

Frances Ferguson’s comments on this matter are especially apt:

The poet’s spiritual autobiography virtually constitutes a series of epitaphs spoken upon former selves, “other Beings,” who can be approached only across vacancies almost as wide as those between the living and the dead. And Wordsworth’s revisions substantiate this link between autobiography and epitaph which implies that the

themes of growth and immortality never stand far from the theme of death. (155)

Of course, this is not an all-encompassing, omni-vitiating process: even by 1850—indeed, even today—Wordsworth’s poetry still “lives.” Nevertheless, this aspect of the text exemplifies the process of involuted self-questioning which ultimately led Wordsworth not just to compulsively revise his material but to attempt to change it by means of imposing obfuscating layers of (re)interpretation.

One might object that Wordsworth is renowned for his ability to make dead things speak: Margaret of *The Ruined Cottage*, Lucy, the various solitaries and wraiths and vagrants spread throughout his corpus—all are examples of the productive use of prosopopoeia, which makes epitaphs (of whatever type) much more than simply collections of static, anonymous “characters.” The evidence to support this point is undeniable. Nevertheless, the torpor of “monumental writing” is not the only process of misreading at work in the central “spots of time” sequence. Other moments therein exemplify the same internecine struggle.

The most important of these moments consists of the following:

When in blessed season,
 With those two dear ones—to my heart so dear—
 When, in the blessed time of early love,
 Long afterwards I roamed about
 In daily presence of this very scene,
 Upon the naked pool and dreary crags,
 And on the melancholy beacon, fell
 The spirit of pleasure and youth’s golden gleam—
 And think ye not with radiance more divine
 From these remembrances, and from the power
 They left behind? So feeling comes in aid
 Of feeling, and diversity of strength
 Attends us, if but once we have been strong. (1805 11.315-27)

The equivalent passage in the 1850 *Prelude* reads:

When, in the blessed hours
 Of early love, the loved one at my side,
 I roamed, in daily presence of this scene,
 Upon the naked pool and dreary crags,
 And on the melancholy beacon fell
 A spirit of pleasure and youth's golden gleam;
 And think ye not with radiance more sublime
 For these remembrances, and for the power
 They had left behind? So feeling comes in aid
 Of feeling, and diversity of strength
 Attends us, if but once we have been strong. (1850 12.261-71)

Right away, one detects the same sort of diminishment cited previously: a period described as a “blessed season” and “blessed time” in 1805 becomes 1850’s paltry “blessed hours.” Time itself has atrophied, and the spot where Wordsworth “roamed about / In daily presence of this very scene” seems hardly capable of providing or sustaining any type of restorative power. However, the more crucial difference is found between the following lines:

And think ye not with radiance more divine
From these remembrances, and *from* the power
 They left behind? (emphasis added)

And think ye not with radiance more sublime
For these remembrances, and *for* the power
 They *had left* behind? (emphasis added)

The choice to replace “divine” with “sublime” is curious in and of itself, and perhaps indicates Wordsworth’s later reluctance to ascribe absolute “divinity” to a faculty of the human mind. That said, this passage is especially pivotal because it defines how the “power” of the spots actually operates. Such a need for definition is, first of all, illustrative of the poet’s inward-turning mind: Wordsworth has essentially become a critical reader of his own master trope. The difference between the definitions offered here, though ostensibly slight, is striking when properly explicated, for what initially

seems a rather innocent alteration in prepositions actually alters the entire character of a “spot of time.”

First, consider the prepositions encompassing and linking the most crucial terms in the passage, “remembrances” and “power.” “From,” in the 1805 text, characterizes the spot and its constituent site, memory, or scene as the *origin* of “radiance divine.” The spot is therefore *spatiotemporal*: it is a place and a time wherein a time-spot (memory, or the “remembrances”) has become a localized scene (spot of time), and thereby permitted a doubly productive and doubly powerful fusion of past and place. The “remembrances” therein described are still available as sources of restorative radiance, for the power they “left behind” persists.

On the other hand, 1850’s “For” disables the present viability of the spot. It signifies “because of” and therefore imposes a separation between the spot (cause) and “radiance sublime” (effect). The remembrances have become reasons or causes *for* radiance: they are no longer doubly resonant; they are solely temporal (fixed in time) and not spatial, which deprives them of the capacity to act as a scene or text revisited. The effect of the preposition is only enhanced by the shift from “they left behind” to “they had left behind.” Moving from the simple past to the past perfect, the emended text looks back from a certain time in the past to tell what *had happened* before. This means that the spot or memory is no longer happening, and thus no longer viable. Revision therefore renders the spot’s power belated and impotent: it is, as it were, a static memorial.

This reading of belatedness finds further support a few lines later in the following lines, first from 1805:

The days gone by
Come back upon me from the dawn almost

Of life; the hiding-places of my power
Seem open, I approach, and then they close; (1805 11.333-36)

And then from 1850:

The days gone by
Return upon me almost from the dawn
Of life: the hiding-places of man's power
Open; I would approach them, but they close. (1850 12.277-80)

Once again, the actual changes are slight, but the effect of those changes is considerable. In 1805, Wordsworth actually *attempts* to approach the “hiding places” of his power, but they close before he can reach them. By 1850, the power has not only been impersonalized (no longer “my” power but “man’s”), but the poet also no longer even attempts to approach: he *would* do so, but they have already closed. Further, although it might initially seem to undermine such a reading, the absence of “seems” in the later text actually amplifies the effect of the poet’s immobility. In 1850 the “hiding places” definitely “open,” but they do so only to close with equal force and thus blatantly rebuke the poet. Once again, the 1850 *Prelude* demonstrates its tendency to fix scenes, images, and (here) positions in a more definitive form. The purgation of “seems” from the text—in all senses—means that any perceived lack, any failure, and any closing must be more final.

That said, the aforementioned change is significant predominantly because of how it inflects the lines which follow in both the 1805 and 1850 texts: “I see by glimpses now, when age comes on / May scarcely see at all . . .” In 1805, the poet’s anxiety is potent enough; but by 1850, his blindness has become more severe. The later poet is immobile, and the gravity fixing him in place further darkens the sense of his capacity to “see” in the visionary mode offered by those powers formerly open to him.

Ultimately, these lines represent Wordsworth's most direct (and poignant) lament at a perceived lack of poetic authority or priority—losses he, like his later readers, believes to be the consequence of age and a perceived lack of vision. He will, however, struggle for priority all the same—indeed, he is doing precisely that by doing what his younger self cannot: rewriting the poem. This portion is conspicuously absent in the 1799 and the five-book versions: in 1805, therefore, one witnesses for the first time a new anxiety of “sight” (or priority, or poetic vision) and a consequently magnified fear of mortality.

Finally, we have the closing portions of the central “spots of time” sequence, first in 1805:

All these were spectacles and sounds to which
I often would repair, and thence would drink
As at a fountain. And I do not doubt
That in this later time, when storm and rain
Beat on my roof at midnight, or by day
When I am in the woods, unknown to me
The workings of my spirit thence are brought. (*1805* 11.82-88)

And in 1850:

All these were kindred spectacles and sounds
To which I oft repaired, and thence would drink,
As at a fountain; and on winter nights,
Down to this very time, when storm and rain
Beat on my roof, or, haply, at noon-day,
While in a grove I walk, whose lofty trees,
Laden with summer's thickest foliage, rock
In a strong wind, some workings of the spirit,
Some inward agitations thence are brought,
Whate'er their office, whether to beguile
Thoughts over busy in the course they took,
Or animate an hour of vacant ease. (*1850* 12.324-35)

Until 1805, this passage persists in a more or less stable form, though a subsequent address to Coleridge does (in comparison to the end-stopped five-book version)

somewhat weaken their net effect. However, in 1850 he expands and drastically attenuates the lines, adding excessive qualification in an attempt to describe how (and why), exactly, these spectacles and sounds returned. As a result, the preceding spots of time are rendered somewhat impotent, or at least of vastly diminished importance. In these revised lines, the “spots of time” sequence—structural and semantic center of *The Prelude*—has become something which simply permits the Poet to calm unruly thoughts or enliven “an hour of vacant ease.” Of course, such hours of ease or tranquility frequently have great significance for Wordsworth; after all, it is the emotions recollected in those moments which gather to form a poem. Nevertheless, one cannot completely disregard the sense of loss or diminishment which emerges from a parallel reading: the moments which previously evinced such urgency have somehow been domesticated. “Animate” may be an inherently lively verb, but it cannot thwart the semantic complacency of “beguile.” As such, the “vacant ease” these lines reference indicates less a serene interval of tranquility than a period of manifest boredom.

This terminal deflation is the sequence’s final and perhaps most pronounced instance of misreading. Wordsworth is not deliberately subverting his own master-trope, but simply attempting to bring it under control by means of reinterpretation. Yet that imposition, and the layering of selves which results, can only obscure. It is not any illusory “original” which has been lost but a manifest sense of the “spots of time” as an active, fructifying source of imaginative restoration. In trying to control interpretation and fix meaning, Wordsworth has opened up his verse to the lifelessness of a written book.

Coda: The Anxiety of Design

In comparison to the other spots of time, the famous ascent of Mount Snowdon has a relatively stable structural location and function in all versions of *The Prelude*: it was designed to serve as a climax, and it remains a climax in all manuscripts after the interim *Five Book Prelude* of 1804. Even its precise location within the text—at the onset of the concluding book—remains the same across all versions. In a poem subject to almost constant change, this is no mean feat: indeed, the ascent of Snowdon is perhaps *The Prelude*'s only *fixed* spot. Yet within that set space and location, Snowdon is more protean, more heavily altered and rewritten (at least between 1805 and 1850) than any other passage in the *Prelude*. As the editors of the Norton *Prelude* put it, “None of the other great passages of *The Prelude*—indeed of Wordsworth’s poetry as a whole—suffered in revision as did the Ascent of Snowdon. From the earliest reworkings . . . to the final concession to orthodoxy . . . alterations are consistently for the worse” (461).

This raises an important question: Snowdon has the most clearly defined function and the most constant location of any “spot of time.” It stands to reason that it ought to be relatively free from (or perhaps “above”?) the semantic torsion visited upon the other spots by means of relocation and retasking. Why, then, was this passage so repeatedly and heavily revised?

The preceding discussion suggests an answer: the greater the narrative, structural, or semantic pressure on the spot, the greater the poet’s anxiety. For Wordsworth, the spots are defining moments or loci of poetic identity. As the grand climax of the poem, Snowdon therefore has a more pivotal role in the figuring or construction of Wordsworth-the-Poet than any other spot or, for that matter, any other passage in *The Prelude*. It holds

the greatest potential to alter the idea of the poet which emerges from the poem and is the final justification of his power, his priority, and his autonomy as a creative consciousness. For this reason, it bears the brunt of Wordsworth's anxiety—indeed, is the representative climax of that anxiety. All of Wordsworth's writing selves converge on this moment and struggle for ascendancy. The result is a passage which is so heavily revised that it loses almost all of its initial meaning. This is not simply a question of a noticeable decline in quality, but of a manifest anxiety which distorts the very point of the sequence as a whole. Each respective Wordsworth attempts to accomplish his own "apocalypse of the imagination," and the result is not a passage which expresses the dominance of mind over nature but a sequence which illustrates the internecine conflict between disparate selves who are successively demolishing and obliterating previous readings. The point of the passage, by its own admission, is to both justify and depict (via the resonant image of a "mighty mind") the authority, autonomy, and ultimate creative potential of the poetic mind. The problem is that Wordsworth has taken his own message quite literally with each successive reading: the text too is something which must be subverted to the authority of the current poetic self. And in the attempt to swerve from those representative poetic precursors (a psycho-rhetorical motion rendered hyperbolic due to the passage's semantic heft), Wordsworth creates a misreading which is so drastically different that it can no longer perform its intended function. The poetry no longer "fits": the text has been folded upon itself too many times, and the resulting lines and fractures cannot be effaced.

On the whole, these lines and fractures evince patterns of misreading similar to those found within the central "spots of time" sequence. Indeed, in the transition from the

1805 to 1850 Snowdon sequence Wordsworth's "self-conscious self-consciousness" is even more acute, as one finds him, for example, worrying openly about his poetic legacy.

Thus the "higher" or poetic minds described in the sequence are, by 1850,

. . . made more prompt
To hold fit converse with the spiritual world,
And with generations of mankind
Spread over time, past, present, and to come,
Age after age, till Time shall be no more. (1850 14.107-11)

Of course, the absence of such reflections on posterity in 1805 isn't terribly surprising: at the time of his later revisions, Wordsworth was closer to death and thus more prone to consider how he might be remembered. Nevertheless, the interposition of this auxiliary anxiety significantly alters the character of the passage. A similar sentiment is found in the lines which close the 1805 Snowdon sequence, but what was a positive slant upon posterity has become (in 1850) an especially urgent question which reaches back toward the very origins of *The Prelude* and the Poet himself:

Where is the favored being who hath held
That course unchecked, unerring, and untired,
In one perpetual progress smooth and bright?—
A humbler destiny have we retraced,
And told of lapse and hesitating choice,
And backward wanderings along thorny ways:
Yet—compassed round by mountain solitudes,
Within whose solemn temple I received
My earliest visitations, careless then
Of what was given me; and which now I range,
A meditative, oft a suffering man—. (1850 14.133-43)

Here, Wordsworth essentially de-idealizes the "favored being" whose development was the *Prelude*'s point of origin and still is, in many senses, the basis of the poem's personal mythology. Instead of positioning himself as one divinely ordained, Wordsworth recounts a "humbler destiny" wherein the poet has stalled, halted, or been forced to retrace his

own steps by means of “backwards wanderings along thorny ways.” One might argue that this thinly-veiled account of the writing of the poem itself is more honest than the mythologized version—and I cannot disagree. However, the most integral fact about this passage is that it represents yet another “layering” of consciousness: a meta- which has metastasized and thus formed another frame of interpretation. Wordsworth’s final “swerve” is a further movement away from, and defense against, the ecstatic character of that former “favored being.” Nothing could make this more evident than the 1850’s conspicuous excision of a line which, in previous versions, held immense significance. Formerly, Wordsworth had described himself as a “meditative, oft a suffering man,” but this suffering was offset in the following line: “And yet I trust with undiminished powers” (1805 13.126-7). In 1850, the latter line does not exist. Wordsworth leaves his Poet a “meditative, oft a suffering man” and, while subsequent passages will attempt to recoup this loss, the lingering echoes of diminishment never completely fade.

Yet there is another anxiety at work in the Snowdon sequence—one which cannot be completely subsumed or described by means of an “anxiety of influence.” It is related to the latter, even dependent upon it, but the two cannot be conflated. Briefly described, this second anxiety is that which emerges when one looks beyond the bounds of *The Prelude* and toward the body of Wordsworth’s poetry. It is a consequence of the fact that Wordsworth does not simply want to write a Poet’s autobiography, but to put that Poet to work in myriad other capacities. The “anxiety of influence” works from within; what I would like to call “the anxiety of design” spirals outward from *The Prelude* to subsume or impose itself upon the entirety of Wordsworth’s corpus. One finds the clearest

evidence of its existence in a famous passage from Wordsworth's 1815 Preface to *The*

Excursion:

Several years ago, when the Author retired to his native mountains with the hope of being enabled to construct a literary work that might live, it was a reasonable thing that he should take a review of his own mind, and examine how far Nature and Education had qualified him for such an employment. As subsidiary to this preparation, he undertook to record, in verse, the origin and progress of his own powers, as far as he was acquainted with them. That work, addressed to a dear friend, most distinguished for his knowledge and genius, and to whom the Author's intellect is deeply indebted, has been long finished; and the result of the investigation which gave rise to it, was a determination to compose a philosophical Poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society, and to be entitled the 'Recluse'; as having for its principal subject the sensations and opinions of a poet living in retirement. The preparatory poem is biographical, and conducts the history of the Author's mind to the point when he was emboldened to hope that his faculties were sufficiently matured for entering upon the arduous labour which he had proposed to himself; and the two works have the same kind of relation to each other, if he may so express himself, as the Ante-chapel has to the body of a Gothic church. Continuing this allusion, he may be permitted to add, that his minor pieces, which have been long before the public, when they shall be properly arranged, will be found by the attentive reader to have such connection with the main work as may give them claim to be likened to the little cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses, ordinarily included in those edifices. (*Prose* 3:5)

Such an immense and sprawling design—and this, in addition to (or as an extension of) *The Prelude*'s own schema—could hardly fail to yield an anxiety of its own. What's more, this anxiety of design and the “anxiety of influence” are bound to clash and interpenetrate: two discursive forces so titanic could hardly miss one another.

Both of these anxieties result in discernable, substantial, and even drastic revisions to *The Prelude*. Further, they are complementary, one working from within and one from without, but both exerting pressure upon the poet and poem to reconstruct his past in the textual present. In order to attain a thorough picture of Wordsworth's revisionary processes, one would need to follow both of them, ascertain how they collude or conflict, and apply those insights across the broader scope of the Wordsworthian

corpus. For now, such an effort is outside the bounds of this study and shall have to be put on hold. But it remains a work in progress, as I think it ought to be. Wordsworth's poetry does not easily permit closure, and neither should his critics. The effort to understand his ever-unstable texts should remain "something evermore about to be."

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