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Locating the Self in Temporality: The Wordsworthian Self and *The Prelude*

Chia-jung Lee[*]

ABSTRACT

The article mainly describes the way in which time fractures Wordsworth's consciousness and examines how he uses language to both stabilize and problematize his identity in *The Prelude*. Such temporal overlayings produce expressions of uncertainty and doubt even about the poem's central project, and push *The Prelude* into ambiguous visions of fragmented selfhood. The self formed through Wordsworth's consciousness of temporality is built upon an intricate and dynamic interplay between various temporal moments in which his self lives in changeable relationships with the selves of other moments. This article argues that Wordsworth attempts to build and stabilizes a sense of self through his use of language. He projects a continuity of self by looking back to "a dark / Invisible workmanship" in his childhood communion with nature, which generated the aspiration to "some philosophic Song" that he, now, still feels and acts upon. I go on to explore how Wordsworth tries to establish his identity in the very act of rising to the challenge of being a poet posed by the French Revolution by aligning both his early support for the Revolution and its failure to the lessons taught by nature. Wordsworth's complex feelings towards this historical event add further fragmentations of identity to be dealt with in his large project of self-identification. Wordsworth's lifelong re-interpretation and re-evaluation of his project constitute an identity that is perpetually shifting, evolving, self-transforming. The uncertain fissures between past and present are *The Prelude*'s greatest philosophical problem—but they also give the poem some of its greatest poetic opportunities.

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Chia-jung Lee, Assistant Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, National Sun Yat-sen University, Taiwan (chiajungl@mail.nsysu.edu.tw).

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I. Introduction: self, time, and language

In *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth seeks to establish a stable poetic identity for himself through the examination of recollected earlier selves. My study will describe how the poet develops his poetic identity by attempting to stabilize it against but also within the mutability of time. I argue that the inherent contradictions involved in doing this—and doing it in language—force Wordsworth to situate this "stable" self in what is highly unstable: to locate it "between" past and present. In examining Wordsworth's attempts to inject "timely utterances" into the lapse of time as a means of constructing—and stabilizing—an identity for himself, I will be especially interested in his inevitable failures to do so, and his poetic responses to these failures. The issue of time, then, plays a key role in my examination of Wordsworth's poetic utterances. In *The Prelude* there are transitions between a range of temporalities and these lead Wordsworth, again and again, to a sense of being "two consciousnesses"—"conscious of myself / And of some other Being" (II. 32, 32-33).[1] Such temporal overlayings produce expressions of uncertainty and doubt even about the poem's central project, and push *The Prelude* into ambiguous visions of fragmented selfhood. It is the fracturing of an earlier, naive sense of coherent identity produced by Wordsworth's experience of the French Revolution that simultaneously makes *The Prelude* possible and makes its project—the formation of a sustainable and stable identity for the poet—impossible.

This article focuses to a large extent on the internal dynamics of the 1805 version of the poem, partly because it is in this version of *The Prelude* that Wordsworth most prominently makes his engagement with time, language, and their relationship a central thematic concern in the poem,[2] and partly in order to demonstrate just how early in the poem's composition this engagement became one of the poem's dominant themes. My study is situated within critical debates about Wordsworth and *The Prelude* from Deconstruction to New Historicism. Numerous studies well illustrate and usefully analyze the existence of temporal discrepancy in Wordsworth's writing and how it baffles his use of language. For example, Paul de Man

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[1] Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from *The Prelude* are taken from the first volume of *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, edited by Mark L. Reed.

[2] Stephen Gill points out that the 1805 text is "formally much more ambitious than the versions in two or five books, but more important, it is successfully ambitious" (19).

talks about Wordsworth's "consciousness of temporality" in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*; he points out that "The content of [past experience] is perhaps less important than the fact that [Wordsworth has] experienced it in its passing away, and that it thereby has contributed in an unmediated way (that is, in the form of an act) to the constitution of our own consciousness of temporality" (50). My study attempts to go further than de Man in exploring how the various temporal standpoints within *The Prelude* shape not only Wordsworth's "consciousness of temporality" but also his whole sense of identity, which, as a linguistic construction, partakes of and engages with both his poetic "task" and existential "lot" but is identical to neither (VII. 53, I. 264).

The adult Wordsworth, in the act of writing, seeks to build a link with the past when he, as a "natural [being] in the strength of nature," possessed "visionary power" (III. 194). At the same time, his writing articulates his ambition to write "some philosophic Song / Of Truth that cherishes our daily life" (I. 231-32) and is concerned with social involvement. He says that "I essay'd / To give relief, began to deem myself / A moral agent, judging between good / And evil" for the human community (VIII. 666-69). Once the French Revolution had led to his baffled awareness of the "wide" "vacancy" (II. 28, 29) between past idealism and present reality, he was afraid that the "one life" might not exist (II. 430). Between past and present, he endeavors in this poem to explore and maintain the relationship between his private intercourse with nature ("the self-sufficing power of solitude" [II. 78]) and his commitment to the social community (writing a prophetic poem for humankind when "call'd / To take a station among Men" to "speak of things / Common to all" [XIII. 325-26, VIII. 665-66]).

This article will show, then, that in response to the temporal fracturing of self into "two consciousnesses" (II. 32), Wordsworth builds an identity for himself based on his own anxiety about the change(s) brought by time, an anxiety which enables him to project an ongoing self that lives a life of mutability rather than one of sustained communion with a Nature conceived of as being eternal. M. H. Abrams observes that *The Prelude* "moves by an immanent teleology," one which "controls Wordsworth's account and shapes it into a structure in which the protagonist is put forward as one who has been elected to play a special role in a providential plot" (178, 176). That is, Wordsworth's "passionate utterance" creates "a providential plot" and moves by a "teleology" that has been "immanent"—existing and inherent—since the

beginning of his autobiographical writing. However, this article will argue that "temporality" is more intrinsic than "teleology" to the textual meaning that forms an identity for Wordsworth. The instant of *temporal transition* between two discrete moments brings together but also separates Wordsworth's "writing self" from his "written self." This distance troubles Wordsworth's poetic construction of his identity, in which he is at once himself now and that "some other Being" he was. Looking back to Abrams' account of "a providential plot" in *The Prelude*, I would suggest that it is Wordsworth's consciousness of temporality rather than providence that drives this plot. In this sense, there is nothing predetermined in the plot except for change itself, and it is through temporal change or transformation that Wordsworth endeavors to construct his role as a "poet-prophet."

I will build on, but also move forward from, the insights of Abrams and de Man by further tracing and investigating the way Wordsworth develops an identity for his self in his obsessive textual engagement with time and language. In part I will do this by extending my analysis of *The Prelude* beyond the 1805 version of the poem to include not just the 1799 and 1850 versions of the poem but also Wordsworth's revisions of each of these. This is a body of material that Abrams and de Man have not fully consulted. I would suggest that neither of these readers sufficiently acknowledges the extent to which Wordsworth recognizes that his textual identity is to be created in the ongoing act of writing, and not through establishing some timeless relationship with his past selves or with nature.

This paper, then, offers a reading of Wordsworth's negative and positive views of language as a tool for self-definition in his continual act of writing, a reading which goes against the prevailing critical view of Wordsworth's largely negative relationship to linguistic self-definition. For example, de Man views Wordsworth's poetic utterance as a "rhetoric of temporality" that seeks to re-link the present self-representation to past selves, see *Blindness* 187-228. At the same time, de Man sees in Wordsworth's "providential plot" an "authentically temporal predicament" and a desperate "defensive strategy that tries to hide from this negative self-knowledge" (*Blindness* 208).[3] Here, then, I want to offer a corrective to de Man by arguing that Wordsworth's "rhetoric

[3] De Man defines "a truly temporal predicament" as "the narrowing spiral of a linguistic sign that becomes more and more remote from its meaning, and [that] can find no escape from this spiral" (222).

of temporality" does not seek to hide from, or even to overcome, the "negative . . . knowledge" of the self's "authentically temporal predicament" but rather seeks to engage with both this knowledge and this temporality. Moreover, in Hartman's view, Wordsworth's "timely utterance[s]" in *The Prelude* are "not only qualified by being timely; they are unified by being timely"; for "[t]hat is their essential quality, or the predicate pointing to a predicament" (156-57).

As a result, Hartman thinks that "[t]he *untimely* is never far away" (156) in Wordsworth's poetic utterances. As Wordsworth writes in *The Prelude* as

> Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe!
> . . . .
> . . . from my first dawn
> Of Childhood didst Thou intertwine for me
> The passions that build up our human Soul,
> . . . .
> . . . With life and nature. (I. 429-38)

Such a "timely utterance" maintains the bond between the mind and nature only through a sense of timelessness that "unifie[s]" different temporal selves into a never-failing correspondence with nature. De Man, however, argues that it is not this bond with nature but "the relationship between imagination and time" ("Time" 16) that is at stake in Wordsworth's writing. Both Hartman and de Man spot the temporal "predicament" that is constantly at work in Wordsworth's language. However, my reading of *The Prelude*, moving on from their readings, shows the dynamics of and within Wordsworth's retrospective account of his communion with nature from childhood to adulthood. It is this resignation to time's mutability (to "the [changeable] relationship between imagination and time") that allows Wordsworth to infer continuity from his ongoing obsessive insistence on temporality and difference—to the extent that he can do this within *The Prelude*. What de Man most usefully adds to our understanding of Wordsworth is the need to see this relationship as existing very much in time.

Concerning the negative power of language, Andrew Bennett also remarks that:

> It is precisely Wordsworth's resistance to this conception of poetry as written—a resistance complicated by his fascination with . . . the act and process of writing itself, and by the simple fact of writing, by his seemingly endless acts of writing—that productively skews his own poetry. (4-5)

On this idea of "resistance," Bennett goes further to suggest that "it is in the gap between an ideal of poetry as a form of speech on the one hand and the notion that speech involves a **'sad incompetence,'** a fundamental, undeniable inadequacy of language to thought or conception or emotion . . . that writing may be said to emerge in Wordsworth's poetics" (5).[4] Writing, with its "supplementary nature," re-iterates, doubles, fragments, and replaces any original unrepresentable experience, and, with de Man and Bennett in mind, this article is interested in examining how Wordsworth, in his incessant "acts of writing," engages with "the deferral and delay" of a written text.

Wordsworth writes his ambiguous view of language into his revisions of *The Prelude*. He claims that:

Such moments worthy of all gratitude
ing
Are scatter'd every where . . . tak{e their date
From our first childhood in our childhood
~~At a time~~ even
~~Vividly~~
Perhaps are most conspicuous. { ~~At a time~~
Life with me
~~How vividly in one particular scene~~
As far as memory can look back is full
~~Now present to my memory did I feel~~
beneficient influence A /
Of ~~this deep animation.~~ { at a time /

[4] Concerning the "inadequacy of speech" to present one's thought, Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* offers a deconstruction of traditional Western logocentric speech by famously claiming that "*There is nothing outside of the text.* . . . [T]here has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references . . ." (158-59). In Derrida's view, "Any attempt to return toward the untouched, proper intimacy of some presence or some self-presence is played out in *illusion*" (*Dissemination* 297; emphasis added).

such beneficent influence /
~~This fructifying ^ influence At a time~~ [MS. Z, 12^{r}][5]

If we look at this manuscript we can see that de Man's reading is incomplete when he states that "literature [cannot be] a reliable source of information about anything but its own language" (*The Resistance* 11). De Man's exclusive focus on the working of language *per se*[6] neglects the poem's ability to record Wordsworth's inner vexation and bafflement at language's power to usurp and replace "moments worth of all gratitude" ("spots of time") with its own creations. As we can see, the erased lines show a (failed) attempt to preserve one specific moment of the past and make it "present" for the reader. However, that "one particular scene," as Wordsworth himself knows, is actually "hidden from all search," lying silently in the past. It is no longer "vivid" and "present." The inaccessibility of that particular moment so haunts Wordsworth that he oscillates back and forth between "as far as memory can look back" and "now present to my memory." The former moments are fading away, exerting neither "deep animation" nor "fructifying influence" (which is creative rather than being merely "beneficent") ([MS. Z, 12^{r}]). At the end, all that is left in our reading of this passage appears to be Wordsworth's endlessly frustrated longing for the past: "at a time." It is Wordsworth's intense consciousness of time, not simply a quality inherent in his "rhetoric of temporality," that brings "the persistent indetermination" (de Man, "Process" 66-67) of temporality to his autobiographical writing. Wordsworth's self is built upon an intricate, complex, and dynamic interplay of discrete temporal moments, in and through which a new sense of self is created during the very process of writing.

This leads directly back to the central claim of my study: it is in and through his continuous development—and "revision"—of his poetic identity that Wordsworth eventually finds that identity, locating it in change and the flow of time, in the continual and continuing "growth" of his mind.

[5] This comes from the MS.Z version in Wordsworth's *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*.

[6] Under the usurping power of language, as Derrida declares in *Of Grammatology*, ". . . the absolute present . . . [has] always already escaped" (159). Asserting the existing discrepancy between the signifier and the signified, Derrida refuses to acknowledge any possibility of explicit statement. He sees "dissemination" at work in the operation of language and "difference" as problematizing the link between the representation and the unrepresentable. "Without the possibility of difference, the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing-space. . . . Difference produces what it forbids, making possible the very thing that it makes impossible" (143).

Wordsworth's endeavours to maintain his identity as a prophetic poet of nature writing for humankind are constantly discouraged by his increasing consciousness of divided selves, to which the French Revolution first alerts him, but which he then finds to be replicated everywhere in his existence—in his relationships to time, language, nature, past and present. Wordsworth's sense of his poetic project changes in response to his writing of the revolutionary experience, and he is thus forced to rethink his own understanding of the language needed for any poetic project that is intimately concerned with the continual formation of the self. Here my reading of *The Prelude* differs sharply from New Historicist readings of Wordsworth: I am arguing that the New Historicist response to Wordsworth's poem does not allow for a full understanding of its construction of an identity for the poet as he undergoes a significant transition from the experience to the recollection of the French Revolution.

For example, Jerome McGann famously emphasizes the poet's ideological evasion of history in *The Romantic Ideology*, but does so without considering the extent to which the passage of time changes Wordsworth's relation to such events as the revolution in France. McGann points out that Wordsworth's poem is "the transformation of fact into idea, and of experience into ideology" (90). McGann thinks that "the Romantic position" epitomized by Wordsworth is "that the poet operates at such intense levels of reality, and hence that poetry by its nature can transcend the conflicts and transciences of this time and that place" (68-69). However, according to my reading Wordsworth writes his conflicting thoughts about the self and its relation to history into the very formation of his identity, rather than displacing these conflicts with an ideology based on an "obsession" with "restoring" the "harmony" and "unity" of his childhood. McGann's reading underestimates the poet's "true voice of feeling" when he talks about the replacing of social and historical reality with "the landscape of [his] emotional needs" (87).

In addition, while New Historicism criticizes Wordsworth's vision as being private, not social, a close reading of the poet's writing shows that his *act of writing* also makes the private social through its sense of commitment to being a poet for humankind. In fact, there is actually a more intricate relationship between the private and the social in Wordsworth's language than readers such as McGann would allow for: the poet, as "a moral agent" (VIII. 668), hopes to bring redemption to the social community. Nevertheless, he is

also uncertain as to whether his own internal experience is sharable with and communicable to others. Wordsworth thus, once again, locates his identity in his evolving and conflicting ideas about the self—in the hopeful aspiration to a social vision on the one hand, and the fear that what he has to say has no relation to the social and to humanity at large on the other.

Another New Historicist, Marjorie Levinson, attempts to "explain the particular and particularly constrained manner in which Wordsworth sought figurally, mythically, or formally to resolve" the ideological conflicts generated by the French Revolution (3). My reading argues that the poet constructs his own sense of self not by resolving such conflicts but by thinking about his own movement, in time, through the irreconcilable difference between his feelings before and after the French Revolution. I do not think that Wordsworth seeks to "de- and re-figure the real" (Levinson 5) so much as to create a sustainable sense of self that is capable of directly facing the fractured social reality. That is, Wordsworth offers a response to the Revolution by establishing a connection between Revolution and nature, between historical "accidents" and the redemptive possibilities of nature's teaching. Thus I claim that the "writing-up" of his revolutionary experience helps to drive Wordsworth towards a lifelong engagement with the ongoing formation of his identity as a poet of nature, so that *The Prelude*—precisely because that writing-up of experience, like the writing-up of so much else in the poem, constantly destabilizes the experience itself through the language Wordsworth uses to describe it—destabilizes the poet's sense of identity with that language's powers of fragmentation and discontinuity. It is, in the end, Wordsworth's determination to incorporate into *The Prelude* all sorts of "instabilities of self"—and to think deeply about their causes—that spurs his ongoing reflections on, and revisions of, his poetic self—reflections and revisions that continue right through to the 1850 version of the poem, and that ultimately define the poem as a lifelong project.

II. A growing sense of the self as existing in a changing relationship with the past self

Though finding "the self-congratulation, the complete / Composure, and the happiness entire," Wordsworth claims in Book One that "Speedily a longing in me rose, / To brace myself to some *determin'd* aim" (I. 122-23, 124-25; emphasis added). He also admits that "my hope has been that I . . . /

Might fix the wavering balance of my mind" (I. 649-51). These statements manifest his eagerness and "passionate wish" (Hartman 156) to secure and establish a "determin'd" identity for himself with his free will. Rather than concentrating on the "rhetorical power of language" at work here, I intend to focus on the sense of self formed in Wordsworth's writing at this point. The poet deliberately leaves the descriptions of his "vocation" vague in such phrases as "some determin'd aim" and "may fix my habitation where I will" (I. 10). He hopes to freely develop a role for himself, but he refrains from defining its "aim" and "habitation." Wordsworth strategically denies the necessity of, or any responsibility for, setting and achieving a specific goal for his life. He thus moves beyond de Man by creating an identity that is open-ended, subject to change and development—that is, subject to time.

Wordsworth, in looking back, comes to a new sense of his self in its direct confrontations with time. The poet himself remarks that "Yet, I remember, . . . the changeful earth, / And twice five seasons on my mind had stamp'd / The faces of the moving year" (I. 586-88). Wordsworth fixes the transition between moments within this "moving year," which "mov[es]" through "the faces" of "seasons." The poet's memory ("I remember") is formed by tying together the "remaining . . . faces [of] seasons" which were "stamp'd" on his "mind" and together form the progressive movement of time. This writing of memory forces Wordsworth to suggest that his identity was simply formed by the immanent force of "the moving year" itself, and not along a predestined, transcendent path set in childhood that aimed him toward becoming a poet. This is where my reading of Wordsworth departs from both Abrams' idea of "a providential plot" and de Man's account of Wordsworth's language. For even though the poet fails to sustain his vision of his childhood self as a "favor'd Being," he forms himself as nature's poet in his active, immanent writing of his self in the moment, in the moment-to-moment flow. That is, his self, connected to but different from the early self or earlier selves, is being developed and created as he writes, in and by "the moving year," in order—if now still a sort of indeterminate force—to ultimately achieve "some determin'd aim" of which the poet is as yet unaware.

Instead of using "the rhetoric of temporality," Wordsworth therefore writes "the persistent indetermination" of temporality into the poetic formation of his self, problematizing his relationship to past, present, and future. In this act of problematization, a new sense of self is gradually being

created, a self that exists exactly in a changeable, undetermined relationship to the past and future. In this respect, Bennett's account of Wordsworth's writing fails to offer a full insight into the latter's poetic formation of self. Bennett views "the originary moment" in Wordsworth's text as "a moment of obscurity or ignorance, a blank"; he asserts that "the loss of Wordsworth's autobiographical poems may be conceived of as a loss of—a loss constituted by—writing," and that "writing, the act of writing, is precisely the loss that it—that writing—articulates, confronts and laments" (174). But here I want to suggest that Wordsworth's writing "confronts" but does not "lament" the "loss constituted by writing." Rather, the poet creates a presence of self from this sense of loss, forming a self that exists in a changeable relationship with its own past self. Moreover, Wordsworth's particular obscuration of the relationship between past and present protects him from any vulnerable claim of a timeless link between his present self and his lost, thus unrecoverable self. The issue at stake is not "a loss constituted—by writing" but rather a new self-understanding that emerges in the process of textual composition. The poet states:

> How Nature by extrinsic passion first
> Peopled my mind with beauteous forms or grand,
> And made me love them, may I well forget
> How other pleasures have been mine, and joys
> Of subtler origin; how I have felt,
> Not seldom, even in that tempestuous time,
> Those hallow'd and pure emotions of the sense
> Which seem, in their simplicity, to own
> An intellectual charm, that calm delight
> Which, if I err not, surely must belong
> To those first-born affinities that fit
> Our new existence to existing things,
> And, in our dawn of being, constitute
> The bond of union betwixt life and joy. (I. 573-85)

For Wordsworth, there are "pleasures" that "have been [his]" in addition to those given by nature's "beauteous forms or grand" through "extrinsic passion." These "pleasures" give him "joys / Of *subtler* origin" (emphasis added). They give a spiritual "charm" to his retrospectively-viewed childhood

experiences. Wordsworth's utterances here are not, as Hartman suggests, aimed at a reconnection to "the first-born affinities" of his mind and nature in childhood. His writing here ("may I well forget," "how I have felt") shows that it is only through the retrospective interpretation of the past that he comes to envisage "an intellectual charm." This "charm," evoked through the writing of memory, "surely must belong / To those first-born affinities," the poet now asserts. Wordsworth is claiming to remember that, through the "workmanship" going on outside him and the "auxiliary light" from his own mind, these "affinities" and "the bond of union" are established. But it is in "recollecting" this that the poet experiences "joys / Of subtler origin." It is also through the act of "recollecting" that he is able to claim that "bond unknown to me / Was given, that I should be . . . / A dedicated Spirit" (IV. 342-44). This is Wordsworth's most idealized utterance about his childhood—"if he err[s] not" (I. 581). What is important here, however, is not the substance of the claim, but the act of claiming it in this present moment and in writing a poem to express this. It is this act that gives him an identity as a poet. It is not the childhood gift of a bond that makes Wordsworth the poet he is; it is the adult claim, in a poem, to have been given the gift.

III. "A stride at once / Into another region"

The French Revolution threatens this claim to a "bond of union" by showing man breaking from nature and "breaking" society. Wordsworth envisages in the Revolution's idealism a hope that corresponds to his "philosophic Song" for humankind, but is also disillusioned by its straying "out of [its] right course" (X. 639). In writing of the Revolution, he shows how his vehement aspiration for universal change ("a new transition" that "had assumed with joy / The body and the venerable name / Of a Republic" [X. 29, 29-31]) has been discouraged by the revolutionaries' oppressive violence. The poet finds that "even when the public welfare is their aim," the plans of revolutionaries are "without thought, or bottom'd on false thought / And false philosophy" (XII. 75, 76-77). In the Revolution's aftermath, he finds that his idea of "one society" not only vulnerable but perhaps entirely illusionary. The violence of the revolutionaries' misdeeds and the disappointing outcome of the Revolution relentlessly attack Wordsworth's faith in the human mind and spirit. In the 1850 version of *The Prelude*, "the immortal Spirit" replaces "the mind of Man" to "[grow] / Like harmony of

music" (I. 340, 340-41). This indicates the adult Wordsworth's diminishing confidence in "the mind of Man" ["dust as we are" (1850, I. 340)], though he retained his faith in "the immortal Spirit" of the universe. Even in 1805, he is viewing the task of composing his "philosophic Song" as an "awful burthen" and finds that his "auxiliary . . . plastic power" is "acting in a devious mood" (I. 230, 235, II. 387, 381, 383).

The feeling of being "wearied out with contraries" is most conspicuous when Wordsworth talks about the time when "the strength of Britain was put forth / In league with the confederated Host" (X. 899, 229-30). This is one significant stage not only in the course of the French Revolution but also in the "growth" of the poet's mind. He remarks:

> . . . no shock
> Given to my moral nature had I known
> Down to that very moment; neither lapse
> Nor turn of sentiment that might be nam'd
> A revolution save at this one time,
> All else was progress on the self-same path
> On which with a diversity of pace
> I had been travelling; this a stride at once
> Into another region. (X. 233-41)

The fact that Britain is in league against France shocks the poet. Wordsworth's use of words here testifies to his sense of this crucial "revolution" in his life: "shock," "save at this one time," "a stride at once / Into another region." For Wordsworth, except for the early "lapse [and] turn of sentiment" and "diversity of pace" in his life, "all else [were] progress on the self-same path" except for the Revolution's "shock" to his "moral nature," which makes his "pace" "a stride" into a completely different realm. With the decision to write about the Revolution, Wordsworth now sees his pre-revolutionary self as "look[ing] for good by light / Of rational experience . . . in the spirit of past aims" (X. 570-71, 572), and claims that in the aftermath of the revolution his "sentiments" are changed into "their opposites," so that "a way was opened for mistakes / And false conclusions of the intellect" (X. 762, 764, 765-66). Sadly, "the immediate proof of principles no more / Could be entrusted" and "sentiments / Could through my understanding's natural growth / No longer justify themselves through faith / Of inward consciousness"

(X. 781-82, 784-87).[7] He feels as if "cut off . . . / From all the sources of [his] former strength" (XI. 77-78)—the "strength" endowed by his early interaction with nature. However, it is also this textual representation of the "revolution" of his self that spurs Wordsworth's ongoing writing of his life: instead of a "retreat" into his "inward consciousness," as suggested by the New Historicists, he steps "into another region" with "a stride at once" (X. 241, 240).

If Wordsworth's earlier sense of the cosmic "workmanship" is false, perhaps his idea of his "destiny" as a poet is an illusion, too. He counters this threat to his identity as a poet by recalling that nature fostered him not just through beauty but also through fear. This idea of "fear" relates to those "unknown modes of being" that haunted and "strode after" him in the stolen boat episode, for example. In the "fair seed-time" of his "soul," Wordsworth was "foster'd alike by beauty and by fear" (I. 307). With "beauty," nature "seek[s] him / With gentlest visitation"; as for "fear" however, nature's "ministry" now appears "more palpable" in his recollection of earlier days (I. 307, 367-68, 307, 371, 372). Here we note how the poet emphasizes that nature's fearful "interventions" are "severer" (I. 371) and more conspicuous when he looks back on his childhood *now*, after the events of the French Revolution (Hartman 3).

As for this "beauty"/"fear" duality, David B. Pirie suggests that "[i]t signals a profoundly thoughtful attempt to expose the dream-like incongruities of those moments which Wordsworth most vividly remembers" (244). In the act of writing, the poet is remembering "the dream-like incongruities" of previous moments, but, unavoidably, remembering these means changing them. His adult interpretation of them now leads to ambivalent visions of his identity-formation between past and present:

> Much of [the poem's] strength lies in its closeness to the dilemmas of experience, and neither in his feeling for the One Life nor in his brooding over the problems of perception could Wordsworth in the years 1804-05, when most of the poem was written, see that experience in the perspective it had for him in the winter of 1798/9. (Gaskell 57)

[7] In retrospect, Wordsworth calls "the immediate proof of principles . . . wild theories" (X. 774). This refers to his former belief in and subjection to Godwinian principles. For a discussion of Wordsworth's Godwinism, see the note on "wild theories" in de Selincourt and Gill 305-08.

His selves at various temporal moments drive Wordsworth to give different and even incongruous interpretations of the same experience. These various readings of the past are not only where "much of [the poem's] strength lies" but are stimulants that provoke further acts of imaginative self-formation. Ross Hamilton remarks that the "Combined sensation of trouble and joy that accompanies the boy's hunt and subsequent theft communicates his adult encounters with the slipperiness of human life. Nature's moral system reveals the troubling outcome of acts undertaken from 'a strong desire' that overpowers 'better reason'" (Hamilton 465). The writing poet analyzes the past moments of his "boyish sports" from an adult perspective that seeks to link "the slipperiness of human life" to "nature's moral system." By doing this, he can create a vision of (his) childhood that may help to mediate his sense of fear and despair in adulthood.

Nicholas Roe explains:

> In retrospect, childish experience offers an uncanny forecast of crises and disappointments known in later life. . . . The formative memory of guilt associated with bird-trapping overlaps with Wordsworth's later involvement in the events of the French Revolution. The two memories are simultaneous, merged together to imply a pattern in childhood and adult life in which overweening expectation is self-deceiving, self-betrayed. And the ultimate cause of that betrayal is the tragic delinquency of human nature: the "strong desire / Resistless" that overpowered the child, and which later became the destructive virtue of the French Revolution. (*Politics* 152)

Writing *The Prelude* as a recollection of his life, Wordsworth hopes to "be defined" and "interpreted . . . in relation to [particular] experiences that slip into the past" (de Man, *Rhetoric* 50). In this narrative about the past, "two memories" of childhood and of the Revolution are "merged together." And Wordsworth thinks that childhood experiences[8] foreshadow the "crises and disappointments [of] later life," claiming that they do so through "nature's moral system." Moments of childhood and adulthood are "merged" and

[8] For example, in the stolen boat episode, the boy "heard among the solitary hills / Low breathings coming after [him]" (I. 329-30). This thought of "fear" is interweaved with "danger" and "desire" (I. 498), which results in the boy's "troubled pleasure."

interpreted by the writing poet. This interaction between "the two memories" manifests the illusion of man's arrogant ambition and the wrongdoing of human deeds, and this "tragic delinquency of human nature" constitutes part of "human life." Wordsworth comes to recognize that his communion with nature in past days has given him both an idealistic view of "one life" and an awareness of "the tragic delinquency of human nature." This is Wordsworth's way of being "defined" and "interpreted [in relation to] the past."

IV. The fostering of self in "two consciousnesses"

The poet attempts to retain his sense of being fostered by nature as a poet via an interpretation of his experiences that reveals this experience in his present awareness of "two consciousnesses." Wordsworth recognizes that, going from past to present, he "might . . . haply meet reproaches, too, whose power / May spur [him] on, in manhood now mature, / To honorable toil" (I. 651, 652-53). Through the "ministry [of] fear," Nature "admonished" him with "the troubling outcome [of] desire" but also, paradoxically, might motivate the adult Wordsworth to continue with his poetic work. But the poet does not speak of "progress" here, just "honorable toil." Wordsworth says that both the "gentlest visitation" and "severe intervention" by nature are "aiming at the self-same end" (I. 369), but this end is not an ultimate destination; rather, its purpose is just to spur him on to further "toil"—for his poetic work is one that is honorable and worthy, but still "toil."

Uncovering the "reproaches" of the past also, of course, allows Wordsworth to recover his sense both of a sort of cosmic workmanship building one society and of being made a poet by nature. It does this by, first, aligning the Revolution to the "fear" side of nature's teaching—the violence has a purpose, a "lesson" for society. Recollecting his experience of this social change, the poet is simultaneously reframing and rewriting it:

> . . . amid the awe
> Of unintelligible chastisement,
> I felt a kind of sympathy with power,
> Motions rais'd up within me, nevertheless,
> Which had relationship to highest things.
> Wild blasts of music thus did find their way
> Into the midst of terrible events,

> So that worst tempests might be listen'd to:
> Then was the truth received into my heart,
> That under heaviest sorrow earth can bring,
> Griefs bitterest of ourselves or of our Kind,
> If from the affliction somewhere do not grow
> Honour which could not else have been, a faith,
> An elevation, and a sanctity,
> If new strength be not given, or old restored
> The blame is ours not Nature's. (X. 414-29)

The whole passage is Wordsworth's writing of his *positive* response to the Revolution. It is in the terror of "unintelligible chastisement" that he feels "a kind of sympathy with power"—a "power" that is like, and related to, nature's power. Representing the dreadful "awe" of the Revolution in the poem, Wordsworth claims that he can feel "motions rais'd up" within him that have "relationship to highest things." He seems to envisage something promising in revolutionary "chastisement," which has a power similar to nature's power of "admonitions." He received this "ministry" of nature in his childhood, but now he comes to recognize its operation in adulthood.

Wordsworth's recognition of "power" now foreshadows the question he puts in the 1850 *Prelude*: "Motions not treacherous or profane, else why / Within the folds of no ungentle breast / Their dread vibration to this hour prolonged?" (X. 458-60). It is "the wild blasts of music" that enable him to "[listen] to . . . worst tempests [in] the midst of terrible events" and thus to receive "truth" into his "heart."[9] The words "blasts" and "tempests" are important here because they strengthen the connection between Revolution and nature. In this way, Wordsworth leaves the "reasonings false" and "false imagination" of his revolutionary self behind to claim an intuitive sympathy with "highest things, the truth, an elevation, and a sanctity." In this sense, I disagree with Levinson's statement that Wordsworth's writing suggests "our greatest power, clearest amplitude, was in a past we can barely recall, much less recover," and thus it sets "a regressive ideal for mankind" (95).

Wordsworth's sense of "fear" becomes "ennobling [and] venerable" (X. 399) through his very experience of revolutionary terror—not through the "past." The revolutionary power turns out to be a version of the sublime ("in

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[9] See Roe's *The Politics of Nature* for a discussion of Wordsworth's "shadow or phantom story" (116).

the order of sublimest laws" [X. 413])—good in itself but turned bad by us. The problem is the division between humankind and nature. The poet confesses: "if new strength be not given, or old restored / The blame is ours not Nature's." Wordsworth attributes the "heaviest sorrow earth can bring" and "griefs bitterest of ourselves or of our Kind" to a humanity inspired by, but forgetful of, nature. Forgetting nature, we human beings cut ourselves from "an elevation, and a sanctity."

Secondly, Wordsworth sees that nature revealed the potential for bad in him as a child ("the formative memory of guilt") by admonishing him for it ("haunting" him with the "ministry [of] fear"). The French Revolution is the same human evil on a larger scale—and if nature can teach him not to be bad, it can teach mankind. He says:

> But now there open'd on me *other thoughts*,
> Of change, congratulation, and regret,
> *A new-born feeling*. It spread far and wide;
> . . . .
> Whatever shadings of mortality
> Had fallen upon these objects heretofore
> Were *different* in kind; not tender: strong,
> Deep, gloomy were they and severe; the scatterings
> Of Childhood; and, moreover, had given way,
> In later youth, to beauty, and to love
> Enthusiastic, to delight and joy. (IV. 231-46; emphasis added)

"Now . . . a new-born feeling" emerges in his mind and brings to him a host of contradictory thoughts—thoughts of the variations of change, accomplishments, repentance and despair. Amid these different thoughts, he finds that the "shadings of mortality" (which "had fallen upon these [present] objects") were "different in kind." In other words, it was after the "shadings of mortality had fallen upon these objects" that Wordsworth came to "a new-born feeling [of their] differen[ce]." In his retrospective view of them, surprisingly, these "shadings" appear to be "strong, / Deep, gloomy, [and] severe." They appear to be admonitions from the early days, in which feelings of desire and guilt foreshadow the terror and grief of adulthood. Now he finds that nature visited him with "such discipline, / Both pain and fear" (I. 439-40), and that no "tender" feeling of childhood remains. Thus this

"autobiographical myth-making" is not "a rediscovery of inner continuities" (Hartman 6), but rather a movement beginning with "other thoughts" and "a new-born feeling." The progress from past to present in Wordsworth's autobiographical writing demonstrates a changing relationship to his previous self, and through these differences the poet reclaims his role as a poet fostered by nature.

McGann insists that Wordsworth's poem "would lose all its force and character did it not operate at an ideological level"—"at the level of the mind's idea or the hearts' desire"; he believes that "the Romantic position . . . is that the poet operates at such levels of reality, and hence that poetry by its nature can transcend the conflicts and transiences of this time and that place" (68-69). This scholar asserts that the textual criticism of Romantic writing has uncritically absorbed the latter's implicit self-representation, and thus discounted the social and historical contexts[10] of textual production. As he puts it, "The [Romantic] poem generalizes . . . all its conflicts, or rather resituates those conflicts out of a sociohistorical context and into an ideological one" (McGann 89). McGann says of Wordsworth's "Romantic ideology" that when it "deal[s] with Nature and Imagination, . . . [it is] invoking a specific network of doctrinal material. Ecological Nature is the locus of what is stable and orderly, and it is related to Imagination as a set of vital hieroglyphs is related to an interpretive key" (69).

However, my discussion opposes McGann's idea of "the Romantic ideology" for two reasons. First, it is exactly this "ideology" that Wordsworth's poem doubts. The Revolution threatens Wordsworth's vision of the "bond of union" in his childhood spiritual communion with nature by showing man breaking from nature. His confidence in "the individual mind" and its secure relation to nature becomes unstable when he sadly recognizes "our animal wants and . . . necessities" (XII. 94). Looking back to the social turmoil at that time, Wordsworth, in the act of writing, shows how his belief in the "stable and orderly . . . network" of Nature and Imagination becomes destabilized because of his intense awareness of the gradually enlarged distance between his childhood intimacy with nature and adulthood involvement in the social community. Secondly, this doubting of his own

[10] Levinson defines "context" as "the place of political realities and of the ideological pressure that organizes this material into determinate sociopsychic experience" (and thus as "something closer to an 'extrinsic' referential universe") (1).

private bond with nature also produces a sense of uncertainty about being a poet, so we should read the way Wordsworth writes his conflicting thoughts about the self into *The Prelude* instead of focusing on his "obsession with restoring" the "harmony" and "unity" of his childhood (McGann 40). That is, in Wordsworth's writing, there is no simple "return" to private ideology and no safe "transcending of social reality" but rather an ongoing development of self in constant engagement with a baffled awareness of the "forbidding" aspects of the French Revolution (IX. 17).

Through this political revolution the "growth" of Wordsworth's mind undergoes a significant transition between past and present. His vision of self is "clouded," and a conflicted self is formed between the "natural graciousness of mind" then and "his own unquiet heart" now (X. 917, 917, XI. 19). This very consciousness of a divided self is testified to by his use of language, which articulates an unresolvable tension between past and present, private and social. Furthermore, the poet's revolutionary experience propels the evolution of his identity-formation. As Roe puts it, "at the deepest level, Wordsworth's quest for the origin of his imaginative power was a fulfillment of revolutionary history" ("Revising" 92-93). Wordsworth's imagination does not simply or straightforwardly operate "at an ideological level" but stands "the test of . . . a trial" through spiritual crisis when he moves towards what he calls the "highest truth" of our life (XII. 62, III. 120).

Wordsworth, in the act of writing, subtly weaves a link between past and present by following a path established through the temporal incongruity of various moments. I thus disagree with de Man's idea that "what Wordsworth strives to conquer, on the relentless fall into death, is the time" ("Time" 9). Indeed, the poet engages closely with time in his developing of an identity for his self. With his new understanding of the self as something "foster'd alike by beauty and by fear," Wordsworth reaffirms his identity as a poet of Nature (and of the imagination) by showing mankind nature's power to heal and teach through the changes that time brings. For nature to do this, humanity must become receptive to it, which it does through the imagination. Wordsworth says that nature:

> . . . composed my thoughts
> To more than infant softness, giving me,
> Among the fretful dwellings of mankind,
> A knowledge, a dim earnest of the calm

Which Nature breathes among the hills and groves. (I. 282-86)

Going from his private sojourning in the landscape to “the fretful dwellings of mankind,” the poet suggests that nature gives rise not only to the formation of “infant softness” but also to the cultivation of “a knowledge, a dim earnest” in his adult thoughts.

Richard J. Onorato suggests that “[i]f these lines were composed on the way to Grasmere in 1799, then we have as early as that an indication of the unconscious intention to return through imagination to the past, for the journey to contentment is a return” (617). However, in this passage, Wordsworth makes it clear that what nature gives him “among the fretful dwellings of mankind” is “*more* than infant softness” (emphasis added), which indicates an ongoing route into adulthood rather than “a return.” Traumatic and turbulent social experiences create in Wordsworth’s mind a sense of “pain and fear,” but they also drive him to a more mature and meditative reflection upon how real human life works. His “infant” sensuous contact with nature grows into a comprehensive understanding of it as that which endows him with “a knowledge” of human nature.

“In this time / Of dereliction and dismay,” Wordsworth says, “I yet / Despair not of our nature; but retain / . . . a faith / That fails not, in all sorrow my support,” because he recognizes that “the blessing of my life, the gift is yours, / Ye mountains! thine, O Nature!” (II. 456-57, 457-60, 461-62) Through “a knowledge, a dim earnest” given by nature, then, Wordsworth wishfully attempts to claim that he has lost no hope in “our nature” and retains “a faith” that never fails. Now he says that he is absorbing this “knowledge—until we recognize / A grandeur in the beatings of the heart” (I. 441). This insight into the greatness and dignity of the human heart constitutes, after all, Wordsworth’s “philosophic Song,” and he is aware that, by writing this poem, he can show humankind how to maintain and “work” its imaginative power (an inner power that echoes the power of cosmic “workmanship”) in order to enjoy the healing effect of “the calm / Which Nature breathes among the hills and groves.”

The plural form of the word “beatings” indicates that “a grandeur in the [human] heart” comes to be “recognize[d]” through stages of our life rather than at any distinct moment. Developing a “philosophic Song” for humankind based on his own life experience and nature’s teaching, then, Wordsworth shows us that

The seasons came,
And every season to my notice brought
A store of transitory qualities
. . . [but also]
left a register
Of permanent relations, else unknown,
Hence life, and change, and beauty, solitude
More active, even, than "best society"
. . . [and furthermore]
Gentle agitations of the mind
From manifold distinctions, difference
Perceived in things where to the common eye
No difference is; and hence, *from the same source*
Sublimer joy. (II. 307-21; emphasis added)

In this passage, Wordsworth claims a sense of continuity—"permanent relations" to "the same source" in his childhood—between and among the "transitory qualities" and "manifold distinctions" of human life. As time goes by, memory leaves in his mind "a store of transitory qualities" and "stamp[s]" on his mind "the faces of the moving year." It is through these changeable and mutable qualities of temporality that he comes to recognize "a grandeur in the beating*s* of the heart" and "a register / Of permanent relations." The word "relations" is important here because it is reconnected to the "affinities" created by the "workmanship" of childhood. Through "permanent relations," the poet seeks a connection with his "sense" of cosmic workmanship.

According to Roe, "his self-awareness was the melancholy lesson of revolution, although it generated his affirmative realization that the histories of personal and political dislocation may be reconciled in an imaginative continuity" (*Politics* 152). "An imaginative continuity" means a continuity of "transitory qualities" built on the shared human capacity to imagine. In Wordsworth's view, the permanence of these "relations" between/among "transitory qualities," "register[ed]" in the mutability of time, links these "qualities" to "the same source"—the imagination ("my first creative sensibility" [II. 379])—within his childhood. Hence, he is able to obtain a "sublimer joy" which evolves from "the same source," the imagination that perceives "first-born affinities" connecting him with the world. This "register . . . spake perpetual logic to [his] soul" (III. 165). As Wordsworth

says, “I had an eye / Which in my strongest workings, evermore / Was looking for the shades of difference / As they lie hid in all exterior forms” (III. 156-59). These “shades of difference,” for Wordsworth, “did bind my feelings, even as in a chain” (III. 167)—a chain of feelings bound by “perpetual logic” and built upon “permanent relations [of] difference” which relate back to the “source” of his life. Within these relations of difference the poet, using the highest power of his inner “eye,” sees a continuity based on the “grandeur” of all the various “beatings of the [human] heart.”

In this respect, my idea of Wordsworth’s “two consciousnesses” differs from Bennett’s. Bennett claims that “[i]t is the ‘self-presence’ in his mind of those past days that yet gives Wordsworth a sense of vacancy, of a doubled and therefore split consciousness, a doubling caused by . . . the radical absence of then” (167).[11] But I would suggest that this “self-presence” forever in Wordsworth’s mind not only haunts him with “the radical absence [of] the original moment” but also compels his ongoing writing of an imaginative interaction between past and present. In the poet’s writing, then, the moments of the past do not have to be *present* to be connected to “the same source” through “permanent relations” because these relations are built upon “a chain of feelings” that exists exactly in the “difference” of temporalities. Wordsworth’s writing creates, from out of the inherent “temporal predicament [of the] rhetoric of temporality,” a dynamic interplay of temporalities through which “permanent relations” (III. 562) are established and his sense of self is gradually formed.

V. The challenge of being a poet composing a new self

Moving from “the story of my life” to “some philosophic Song,” from a prophetic hope for humankind to a disheartened vision of “the fretful dwellings of mankind” (I. 284), “Wordsworth composes himself—he becomes himself, becomes conscious, in an act of composition” (Bennett 161). Bennett refers to the poet’s becoming conscious of the impossibility of “a coherent articulation of . . . a self” (12) in the face of his split and doubled selves. He remarks that Wordsworth’s autobiographical writing is about “a loss constituted by an obscure sense of something . . . that has been lost”

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[11] Derrida has already asserted in *Dissemination* that “Presence is never present. The possibility—or the potency—of the present is but its own limit, its inner fold, its impossibility—or its impotence” (303).

(Bennett 167). But here I would add that the poet also "becomes conscious [that his] nature's outward coat / *Changed* also, slowly and insensibly" (III. 218-19; emphasis added). We might interpret Wordsworth's "obscure sense [of] an obscure loss" (for example, his "obscure feeling representative / Of joys that were forgotten") as his rhetorical strategy that seeks to "obscure" the relationship between past and present.

New Historicism criticizes Wordsworth's vision as being private, not social; for example, Levinson finds that his representation of the world "resides in its originary function: to transfer ideologically *possessed* material from public to private domain" (83). But I think that his act of writing also makes the private social because of his commitment to being a poet for humankind (even though he never published *The Prelude*). Wordsworth uses "I" rather than "we" in the sentence "when I / Am worthy of myself." He appears to attribute the vision of "sublimer joy" to his own personal experience while he focuses on the "build[ing] up [of] our human soul" in *The Prelude*. Thus Hartman points out that Wordsworth tends to "enter the solitude he then intuited, the 'I' rather than the 'we'" (11).

However, I want to suggest that there is a more intricate relationship between the private and the social in Wordsworth's language. The poet, as a "moral agent," hopes to bring redemption to the social community, but he is also uncertain as to whether his own internal experience is sharable with and communicable to others. This uncertainty is revealed through his ambiguous and inconsistent use of the words "I" and "we." In fact, Wordsworth tends to replace "I" with "we" in the 1850 *Prelude*. For example, "How could *I* believe" in the 1805 version of the poem becomes "How might *we* believe" (1805, X. 627; 1850, XI. 44), "no few / Of *my* opinions had been just" is revised as "no few / Of *our* opinions had been just" (1805, X. 630-31; 1850, XI. 47-48), and "Now do I feel how *I* have been deceived" is replaced by "now do I feel how *all men* are deceived" (1805, IX. 173; 1850, IX. 170, emphasis added). However, Wordsworth's doubts remain hidden within his attempt to make his personal vision public. This is evident in his emphasis on the word "may" in the sentence "my trust / In what we *may* become" (1850, VIII. 650). He has "trust," but he cannot be overconfident in talking about "what we *may* become." His uncertainty is further revealed through his anxious hope that his "willing audience fail not" (1850, XI. 349).

And here a new sense of the difficulty emerges—the challenge of being a poet under these circumstances and of writing a new self. Wordsworth locates his identity in conflicting ideas about the self—in the hopeful aspiration to a social vision but also in the fear that those ideas are wrong in relation to the social and humanity. A series of words in Book X—"confound," "misguided," and "obscurities"—defines the poet's increasingly perplexed vision of identity but also testifies to the fact that he is coming closer to his ultimate understanding of self, of a self subject to continual revisions of his poetic "self" in *The Prelude*. It is precisely such fragmentations, multiplicities, and contradictions that keep Wordsworth's writing moving forward and give it a challenge it can never overcome but which it insists on meeting—as a worthy, perhaps the most worthy, challenge to any poet.

VI. Conclusion

Reading Wordsworth's retrospective examination of earlier selves, I conclude that his poetic response to his failure to stabilize an identity for himself constitutes the most "vital [function] of the soul." In this response, he knows that there is hope from our childhood but also recognizes the value of changes brought by time. His "worthy . . . existence" is made up of both private and social experiences which he has undergone. Thus I agree with Mary Jacobus that it is "the writing of the past" that "writes [him]" and "determines what [he] may become" (127). As Laura Marcus puts it, "[t]o some extent, 'Romantic autobiography' becomes the model of autobiography in general, in its development of self-consciousness, self-division and the impossibility of giving priority to 'self' in the self-language relationship" (203).

The Prelude can be said to be an exemplary type of "Romantic autobiography" because of its development of an identity based on the poet's continual self-becoming in the very act of memory-writing. Wordsworth's increasing awareness of "self-division" ("two consciousnesses") motivates his desire to construct an articulation of an ongoing self formed in time. However, at the same time, as Bennett puts it, "composition—writing—is itself, we might say, the originary trauma that grounds and ungrounds *The Prelude*"; "It is . . . exactly the physical, scriptural act, writing itself, that *produces* these disturbances" (142, 150). The "problem of writing," along with "the impossibility of giving priority to 'self' in the self-language relationship,"

needs to be “formulated . . . around the multiple moments of composition, inscription, revision” (Bennett 150, 174). In his writing of the past, Wordsworth reaffirms his task—his identity as a destined poet teaching humankind nature’s lesson. But, at the same time, he is aware that his task to teach humankind to be imaginative and receptive to nature’s teaching is urgently necessary, and not nearly complete.

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