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## Lake Methodism

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## Chapter 3

# Wordsworth and the Ragged Legion

## Poets, Priests, and Preachers

My subject isn't *The Prelude*, so much as its absence: the half-century in which Wordsworth's spiritual autobiography was kept private, if not exactly secret. For Wordsworth's biographers, his self-silencing remains "one of the most puzzling phenomena . . . of literary history," though there's been no shortage of explanations.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps *The Prelude* was a welcome, lifelong distraction from the enduring failure of *The Recluse*; belated publication in 1850 was certainly meant as a commercial bequest in verse to the surviving family, an end run around unsympathetic copyright laws. But if the reasons behind the delay may have been quietly domestic, they quickly took on heroic significance. Both *The Prelude* and its suppression were made "phenomena of literary history" from the very beginning, when Wordsworth rationalized his decision not to publish the poem, conceding to Sir George Beaumont in 1805 that it was "a thing unprecedented in literary history that a man should talk

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1. Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 230.

so much about himself.”<sup>2</sup> There may well be self-deprecating irony in this ritualistically conventional invocation of things unattempted yet in *Prose* or *Rhime*. The similar claim opening Rousseau’s *Confessions* is, Eugene Stelzig argues, at once “the most inaccurate,” and the most typical, “statement about the genre on record.”<sup>3</sup> Droll wit, however, tended to become full-throated apologia. The “high hopes in the poetic future that lay before him, and the spiritual history on which those hopes were founded,” writes the editor who brought the 1805 *Prelude* out into the open in 1926, “could not, without arrogance, be proclaimed to the world before he had given some solid earnest of their fulfillment.”<sup>4</sup>

Even “without arrogance,” this is majesty cloaked as modesty. Paratextual restraint hardly impeded Wordsworth’s self-characterization as “a prophet sent by Providence to effect the work of his countrymen’s redemption.”<sup>5</sup> *The Prelude* often recasts such privilege as sacerdotal devotion: when Wordsworth thought of himself as a poet, he thought of himself as a priest. He and Coleridge were to be the “most assiduous ministers” in “Nature’s temple” (1850 *Prelude* 2:463–64); if he “made no vows,” nonetheless “vows / Were then made for me . . . that I should be—else sinning greatly— / A dedicated spirit” (1805 *Prelude* 4:341–45). The temple may be Nature’s, but its attendant belongs to the supernatural, daring “to tread holy ground, / Speaking no dream but things oracular” (1805 *Prelude* 12:251–52). While the poem records lessons learned and mis-learned under the sometimes competing tutelages of Man and Nature, Wordsworth’s education often matters insofar as it testifies to that which is before and beyond education, the poet’s aboriginal election as “a chosen son / . . . with holy powers / And faculties” (1805 *Prelude* 3:82–84). David G. Riede argues that this dignity has a mystifying agenda, displacing the social into the sacred, and reifying human hierarchy as immune to correction. In the population of “uncouth vagrants,” Riede observes, “Wordsworth’s differentiation of himself from other wanderers is asserted . . . with the force of dogma—he was, he repeatedly assures us, a ‘chosen son,’ a ‘favored being,’ one ‘singled out’ for a high purpose.”<sup>6</sup>

2. *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787–1805*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 586.

3. Eugene Stelzig, “Romantic Autobiography in England: Exploring its Range and Variety,” in *Romantic Autobiography in England*, ed. Eugene Stelzig (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 1.

4. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude (Text of 1805)*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Helen Darbishire (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), xvi.

5. Ryan, *Romantic Reformation*, 100.

6. Riede, *Oracles and Hierophants*, 116–17.

Yet this story of election comes with “high, often fearful obligations”: the gentleman’s burden of living up to gifts so generous that the only adequate measure is grace, dispensed along with the rebuking query, Was it for this?<sup>7</sup>

In this chapter, I reorient the “high argument” of ordination, “assiduous ministers,” “holy powers,” and “things oracular” away from the pleasures and pathologies of privilege, and toward its unexpected counterweight in the embarrassments and enthusiasms of Methodism. The providential and clerical assertions that fill *The Prelude*, I’ll argue, have a social history at odds with the ways the scholarship of Romanticism has come to understand them. At the turn of the nineteenth century, these sorts of declarations were not likely to be “high” (or any) argument in respectable circles. They verged on a countercode to politeness, slogans in a very palpable class struggle, signaling a motivated popular insurgency. If this smacks of the “dogma” David Riede identifies, it was dogma explicitly forbidden not only by the Church of England but also by “reasonable” Dissenters.

As we’ll see, the language of self-consecration was the universally recognized cant of those “uncouth vagrants” and itinerant preachers from whom Wordsworth supposedly “differentiated” himself. Absent many of the texts—most notably *The Prelude*—now conflated with it, this “Romantic Imaginary” belonged instead to those irregularly anointed “dedicated spirits” whom the wealthy evangelical Rowland Hill dismissed as laughably “Inspired Ministers”: “WESLEY’S ragged legion of preaching barbers, cobblers, tinkers, scavengers, draymen, and chimney-sweepers.”<sup>8</sup> Sounding like a convocation of the casts of *Lyrical Ballads* and Blake’s *Songs*, here were men speaking to men, after a fashion—a fashion often “without,” as an anonymous satire warbled in 1778, “Wit, Shirts, or Shoes.”<sup>9</sup>

My story parts ways with the tradition that reads the sacralizing hallmarks of Romantic verse as celebrations of masculine, bourgeois or gentry subjectivity. This critique, I think, puts the cart before the horse, mistaking Wordsworth’s private usages for the Spirit of the Age from which they

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7. Charles J. Rzepka, “Wordsworth Between God and Mammon: The Early ‘Spots of Time’ and the Sublime as Sacramental Commodity,” in *The Fountain Light: Studies in Romanticism and Religion, in Honor of John L. Mahoney*, ed. J. Robert Barth (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 73–89 (74).

8. Rowland Hill, *Imposture Detected, and the Dead Vindicated* (London, 1777), 21. No fan of the “Ragged Legion,” Leigh Hunt still thought Hill “a Theological Buffoon” (“On the Ignorance and Vulgarly of the Methodists,” 301).

9. Anon., *The Love-Feast: A Poem*, 10.

hid. If anything, Wordsworth's keywords scripted another conversation his poetry was willing to figure, but not join. The smoldering enthusiasm of *Home at Grasmere*—closeted until 1888—wasn't likely to assist a reputation that was, for much of his life, uncertain. Its Poet is a man raised out of all avenues of human comprehension, catapulted beyond Miltonic, even Biblical canon, into titanic and frankly blasphemous uniqueness:

What Being, therefore, since the birth of Man  
 Had ever more abundant cause to speak  
 Thanks . . .  
 The boon is absolute; surpassing grace  
 To me hath been vouchsafed; among the bowers  
 Of blissful Eden this was neither given  
 Nor could be given. (*Home at Grasmere*, MS. B: 117–25)

The problem of grace so surpassing wasn't its absolute arrogance, but the abundant ignorance of the people who were actually making—or more to the point, actually publishing—similar assertions throughout the Romantic period. What Wordsworth might have pitched as high argument retailed far more successfully as high camp among knowing consumers. *La Belle Assemblée*, a self-styled “Court and Fashionable Magazine,” regaled its readers with the unintentional absurdities of one of Joanna Southcott's letters, in which she, rather like the poet of *Home at Grasmere*, “modestly averred, that she had met with an ‘instance such as had never happened to any human being since earth's *foundation was placed before.*’”<sup>10</sup> Though the letter dated from 1799, *La Belle Assemblée's* extensive coverage was from 1814, a year which saw “The ‘Prospectus’ to *The Recluse*” as well as Southcott's annunciation of her own long-awaited (and long-delayed) work, the Coming of Shiloh, the Prince of Peace. The magazine, like most parts of English culture, was interested only in the latter.

As I'll show in chapter five, Southcott, as much as Milton, was the contemporary for the sort of extravagances Wordsworth typically kept safely to himself and his coterie.<sup>11</sup> But even without the full evidences of either

10. *La Belle Assemblée; being Bell's Court and Fashionable Magazine* (London: September 1814), 104.

11. For an account of more respectable—especially Augustinian—resonances in spiritual autobiography and providential self-assertion, see Frank D. McConnell, *The Confessional Imagination: A Reading of Wordsworth's Prelude* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), as well as Susan M. Levin, *The Romantic Art of Confession: De Quincey, Musset, Sand, Lamb, Hogg, Frémy, Soulié, Janin* (Columbia, SC: Camden House,

*Home at Grasmere* or *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's somewhat baffling sympathies with demotic enthusiasms were apparent to his contemporaries. Francis Jeffrey's fight against "the mystical verbiage of the Methodist pulpit" that disfigured Wordsworth's work was no isolated battle, but part of a much wider campaign.<sup>12</sup> In 1818, the otherwise friendly pages of *Blackwood's* accused Wordsworth of versifying a "volume of sermons" on spiritual, emotional, and potentially social revolt, in which "the lower and coarser feelings, stirred up into activity, lose their subordination and rise up."<sup>13</sup> Even Coleridge, thinking of *The Excursion* as well as *Peter Bell*, would complain in 1820 of "the odd occasional introduction of the popular, almost the vulgar, Religion in his later publications."<sup>14</sup>

Coleridge knew better than anyone the company Wordsworth's rhetoric kept, and was kept away from. But what was "odd" and "occasional" for *The Excursion* would have read programmatically in the "high argument" of *The Prelude* in 1805, and for decades after. To sober Christians, "dispositions . . . mine, almost / Through grace of heaven" (1805 *Prelude* 6:188–89) would have sounded—despite the qualifying "almost"—very much like the declarations of war by the "saints" and "elect" on the Church of England. The Church held as its "most important Doctrine, viz. *the cessation of the miraculous operations of the Holy Spirit after the establishment of the Christian faith.*"<sup>15</sup> If Lakers and Methodists thought otherwise, only the latter had the courage to print their convictions. Three years before Wordsworth completed the first draft of *The Prelude*, an Anglican parson complained that Methodism widely "misapplies words and terms" from the Apostolic "condition of the first Christians," "terms applied in the primitive ages, such as saints, elect, chosen generation, &c."<sup>16</sup> The particular egotistical sublime of Wordsworth's "ministry / More palpable," framing "A favor'd Being," was unknown even to Keats, who first intuited it in 1818 (1805 *Prelude* 1:364–72). But as Joseph Butler exclaimed decades earlier, the type was as well-known as it was mortifying:

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12. [Jeffrey], "Wordsworth's *Excursion*," *Edinburgh Review, or Critical Journal* 47 (November 1814): 1–30 (4).

13. "Essays on the Lake School of Poetry, No. II. On the Habits of Thought Inculcated by Wordsworth," in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 4 (December 1818): 257–63 (258).

14. *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956–71), 5:95.

15. Warburton, *Doctrine of Grace*, 76.

16. George Croft, *Thoughts Concerning the Methodists and the Established Clergy*, iii.

Mr. Whitefield says in his Journal, “There are promises still to be fulfilled in me.” Sir, the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost is a horrid thing, a very horrid thing!<sup>17</sup>

Butler was a cultural arbiter more important than any reviewer, Scotch or English. His *Analogy*, along with William Paley’s *Natural Theology*, comprised most of the very short list of required readings at both Oxford and Cambridge throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Together, Paley and Butler forbade their readers—which is to say, nearly every gentleman—the lexicon of spiritual power that would form the core of *The Prelude*.

This hegemonic censure, I think, went a long way toward rendering the poem uncomfortable, if not quite unpublishable. Paley’s *Caution recommended in the Use and Application of Scripture Language*, running to four editions by 1790, was willing to grant that early Christians, “in opposition to the unbelieving world, . . . were denominated in scriptures by titles of great seeming dignity and import—they were ‘elect,’ ‘called,’ ‘saints’ . . . they were ‘a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people.’” But precisely because early Christians used such discourse, it was off-limits for everyone else. These “titles” did not “have a perpetual meaning,” and were “in a great measure exhausted and insignificant” by the foundation of the Church. By the end of the eighteenth century, they were radically inappropriate for any use, figural or literal. Now, “the most flattering of these names, ‘the elect,’ ‘called,’ ‘saints,’ have by bold and unlearned men been appropriated to themselves and their own party with a presumption and conceit, injurious to the reputation of our religion amongst ‘them that are without,’ and extremely disgusting to the sober part of its professors.”<sup>19</sup>

*The Excursion* might never do, but with much of the Anglican hierarchy finding spiritual self-congratulation “extremely disgusting” and “injurious to the reputation,” the prospects of *The Prelude* were even dimmer. “High argument” was often a shabby thing in Romantic England, its loudest polemicists usually condemned as fools at best, charlatans at worst. But this wasn’t an idle squabble over theological abstractions. It was political

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17. *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872), 13:500.

18. On the formal curriculum for clerical training at both universities, see Knight, *Nineteenth-Century Church*, 110–11. It wasn’t onerous, largely amounting to reading four or five specialized books, and attending the very infrequent Norrisian or Regius lectures.

19. William Paley, *Caution recommended in the Use and Application of Scripture Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1777), 3–4.

speech as the early nineteenth century would have recognized it, extreme enough that only the most committed partisans went public with it during the years of revolution and war. The now-familiar variants of “high argument,” secularized and metaphorized, were substantially marginal to their moment; only long after the fact did poetical crowd out literal usage. Such conceits placed their propounder squarely within—or, in Wordsworth’s case, sometimes on the wrong side of—the brawl over the nature of priestly identity and authority that rocked, and ultimately dissolved, the Anglican constitution. This struggle is as much my story as *The Prelude*. The absence of the poem lets us read “inspiration” as it was understood by hundreds of thousands of men and women who didn’t much care about experimental verse, yet whose lives were organized by the division between a professionalized, de-supernaturalized clergy and the “Ragged Legion” of transcendently sanctioned Spiritual Redressers.

But this divide between profession and inspiration is the story of *The Prelude*, as well. The poem internalizes the social conflicts its textual history avoided, staging in its recollections of Cambridge the debate between Establishmentarian credentials and visionary power. The poem, I think, finds this debate no easier to conclude than did the nation. If, as Jon Mee argues, “*The Prelude* is constantly attempting to show that its prophetic pretensions are properly disciplined,” discipline, management, and regulation may not have been the sum of its project.<sup>20</sup> Even after fifty years of revision, *The Prelude* never entirely controlled the enthusiasms of its high argument, to which it often harnessed a clustering of forces: rhetorical sublimity, spiritual potency, social abjection, and political subversion. All of these modes shape Wordsworth’s thinking on the work of the poet, and the ironies of cultural production. The Methodistical securities of an elect or chosen status, like many Wordsworthian “securities,” play into their own undoing, as the same figures simultaneously sound, across different but equally resonant registers, the undeniable force as well as the tragicomic vulnerability of the poet’s self. For Wordsworth, “high argument” was never a confession of faith, or a declaration of solidarity; as Coleridge reminds us in “Frost at Midnight,” even “secret ministries” are still “performances.” But “high argument” does carry with it a social history every bit as disruptive as the figural and psychological traumas explored in other critical treatments of *The Prelude*. It is a problematic discourse of privilege, within Wordsworth’s much deeper instinct for privileging the problematic.

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20. Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*, 237.

## Natural Piety

Modern readings of *The Prelude* have shown, time and again, its ironies of confirmation: the discourses that develop and stabilize the self also unnerve, and may even humiliate and damage that self, in the “turns and counter-turns, the strife / And various trials of our complex being” (1805 *Prelude* 11:195–96). This is especially true for the poem’s highest arguments, which are possessed by enthusiasms that rupture the social and poetic propriety they nominally endorse. The “inspiration” opening *The Prelude* is dangerously Pentecostal, promoting the most recognizable Methodist figures to Miltonic “apt Numbers”:

To the open fields I told  
A prophecy; poetic numbers came  
Spontaneously, and clothed in priestly robe  
My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem,  
For holy services. (1805 *Prelude* 1:59–63)

This portrait of the poet as field preacher is among the most famous in *The Prelude*. But its force is dissipated by its familiar identification as “possibly Jacobinical pantheism, certainly . . . Unitarian and Dissenting Deism,”<sup>21</sup> and Mark Canuel’s sense that “Wordsworth calls upon nature as a place where there are no requirements on belief” may let go of the moment’s doctrinal nuance.<sup>22</sup> The subversions here are real enough, but they have little in common with secularizing tolerance, intellectualized spirituality, or nonspecific “Dissent.” Preaching (let alone prophesying) in the open fields had been an intensively legislated (and intensively stigmatized) practice since the Restoration, evidence (in real courts of law, not just courts of opinion) of very specific theological and political enthusiasms, rather than emancipation from either. “Holy services” in nature were social forms of some urgency.

In 1744, the Bishop of London censured the Methodists for “the Boldness to preach in *the Fields* and other open Places, and by publick Advertisments to invite the *Rabble* to be their Hearers; notwithstanding an express Declaration in a Statute (22 Car. II. c. 1.) against assembling in a FIELD, by Name.”<sup>23</sup> The censure had hardly abated by 1811, when Henry

21. Miles, *Romantic Misfits*, 92.

22. Canuel, *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing*, 193.

23. [Edmund Gibson, Lord Bishop of London], *Observations upon the Conduct and Behavior of a Certain Sect, Usually distinguished by the Name of Methodists*, 2nd ed. (London: E. Owen, 1744), 4.

Addington, Viscount Sidmouth, advanced newly draconian legislation against itinerant field preachers.<sup>24</sup> In this, and this only, Leigh Hunt could sympathize with Addington: “If Mr. Whitfield had been an obedient member of the Church, he would not have commenced field-preacher, when the churches were denied him.”<sup>25</sup> This was 1808, only three years after Wordsworth completed the first version of *The Prelude*, which he opened with this deliberate array of transgressions: prophesying, field preaching, clerical ordination impelled by the Spirit rather than the Church, and a providential “singling out.” Each stance was more subject to official attention and public debate than the boyhood adventures of poaching, egg-thievery, or boat-stealing which introduce other seminal moments of poetic ordering and disordering. The preamble was the real illegality, and the brashly foregrounded seediness of its sanctifications much of their significance. The poem often casts imaginative activity as both disruptive and disrupted, but this is one of its most acute socio-rhetorical crises, as plebeian vulgarity frames poetical authority.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, when *The Prelude* was finally published and read, this dimension was fading, faint, or altogether invisible. Radical transformations in the relationship between church and state, as well as in the ideologies which governed the nature and functions of priests, allowed Victorian piety to see its reflection in its beloved Laureate. Wordsworth, argues Mark Canuel, “had become nothing less than a national icon of social conformity” and decently unexceptionable Christianity.<sup>26</sup> “No poet, perhaps, is so evidently filled with a new and sacred energy when the inspiration is upon him,” said Matthew Arnold, celebrating “the peculiar importance . . . of inspiration” to Wordsworth.<sup>27</sup> Even more heterodox disciples such as Pater cherished the notion that the “old fancy which made the poet’s art an enthusiasm, a form of divine possession, seems almost literally true of him.”<sup>28</sup>

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24. Sidmouth’s proposal, it should be noted, wasn’t well received—his own party forced the withdrawal of the bill without a vote. There is, however, quite a bit of evidence that many JPs acted for several years *as though* it had passed, and prosecuted and convicted accordingly. For the shifting political and legal status of Methodist preaching and preachers, see David Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion c. 1750–1900*, 145–61, and Clark, *English Society*, 501–64.

25. Leigh Hunt, “On the hatred of the Methodists against Moral Preaching,” *Examiner* 20 (May 15, 1808): 317–19 (317).

26. Canuel, *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing*, 162. See also Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

27. *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super, 11 vols. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960–77), 9:36

28. Walter Pater, *Appreciations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 41.

The Victorian deployment of Wordsworth as the forlorn hope of Culture's opposition to Society took place on a profoundly altered terrain of theological and political discourse, in which the Church of England's established powers had been fatally curtailed. But Georgian England was governed by the Anglican constitution, and this establishment was far less hospitable to claims of "sacred energy" or "divine possession," which had yet to die into metaphor. What was morally benevolent, emotionally tranquilizing, and ideologically conservative in 1879 was precipitating a crisis in national security in 1799, when a Yorkshire parson rehearsed his fears of "inspiration" in a letter to Parliament:

In these days of Fanaticism, it highly imports the members of the Established Church of this Kingdom to have right notions respecting inspiration; because the better they are grounded in the truth concerning it, the better they will be secured against the seduction of those fanatical Preachers, who want to persuade the world, and who too often succeed in persuading weak minds, that they are more inspired than the Ministers of the National Church.<sup>29</sup>

During the Romantic period, the Church of England was deeply suspicious of the sort of "prophecy" told in fields. Unbridled inspiration, averred another clergyman in 1795, was "a leveling Principle in Religion" and a lethal threat "to King and Constitution," the leading edge in the Methodist program for the destruction of the Church and responsible Christianity—no trivial terms two years after England declared war on the French Republic.<sup>30</sup> The most powerful ideological apparatus in England between 1780 and 1820 relentlessly assaulted—and represented itself as under relentless assault by—the enthusiasms which were savored by Pater and Arnold as politically innocent soporifics. As Thomas Ludlam made clear in his *Four Essays* (1797), the Anglican order was firmly united in treating such discourse as a heretical disease "belong[ing] to the imagination . . . consist[ing] in a conceit of and claim to apostolic or prophetic powers, unattended with the possession of apostolical or prophetic credentials."<sup>31</sup>

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29. Joseph Entwisle, *A Letter to the Author of An Anonymous Treatise on Inspiration, Lately Printed at York* (York: Thomas Wilson and Robert Spence, 1799), 6.

30. Croft, *Thoughts Concerning the Methodists and the Established Clergy*, 49.

31. Ludlam, *Four Essays: On the Ordinary and Extraordinary Operations of the Holy Spirit*, 68–69.

## Ministries, Professional and More Palpable

Romantic England was convulsed by the apparent incompatibility of social “*credentials*” and spiritual “*powers*.” The “priest” focused conflicts of agenda between polite and plebeian classes, and the opposition between Anglican “vocation” and Methodist “calling” was as significant as that between Jacobin and loyalist. This historical tumult, I think, powers the rhetorical dynamism of the poet-priest in *The Prelude*. Wordsworth is often read as an exemplary theorist of what Paul Keen calls “the most powerful ideological achievement of the long middle-class revolution: the prestige of the professional.”<sup>32</sup> But a play on Mark Schoenfield’s thesis that “William Wordsworth was the most methodically professional of the major romantics” better captures the poet’s hybridity, since this professionalism often assumed an antithetically Methodistical method.<sup>33</sup> If Wordsworth was eager to “give the poet respectable status, while rejecting the institutional bases for authority . . . Church and University in particular,” it’s important to recognize that the language of the spirit rejected such institutions *precisely because* it also rejected (and was rejected by) “respectable status.”<sup>34</sup> In binding the power of his spontaneous “poetic numbers” to an equally spontaneous ordination into “holy services” and “priestly robes,” Wordsworth established himself through powerful figures of cultural, political, and religious disestablishment.

There was real hazard to this irony, in an age when the most influential “professionalism” was structured by its hostility to “holy powers.” While the secularized roles of lawyers and doctors are heavily featured in many recent critical accounts, the Anglican clergy were not only the largest body among the “high-status occupational groups,” they were also “possibly larger than all the other professions put together.”<sup>35</sup> Formal academic training by and large meant religious training under the auspices of the Church of England, and the universities still could be characterized with some accuracy as seminaries: throughout the eighteenth century, sixty percent of Oxbridge graduates were ordained as Anglican deacons, a figure which had fallen only to fifty percent by 1840.<sup>36</sup> All clergymen held degrees from either university, as bishops refused ordination

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32. Keen, *Crisis of Literature*, 78.

33. Mark Schoenfield, *The Professional Wordsworth: Law, Labor & the Poet’s Contract* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 2.

34. Goldberg, *Lake Poets*, 220.

35. Russell, *Clerical Profession*, 19.

36. Knight, *Nineteenth-Century Church*, 107.

to men otherwise educated until the middle of the nineteenth century. Advanced degrees mainly operated as status signals within the Church hierarchy, since they were automatically awarded upon promotion to the rank of canon or above.<sup>37</sup> Expanding enrollments at both universities in the Romantic era created a crisis for hopeful clergymen not unfamiliar to modern academics, as accelerating supply rapidly began to outstrip inelastic demand. The 1820s saw twice as many applicants for entry-level curacies as did the 1770s, but since the designation of a new parish required an Act of Parliament, the number of available livings remained almost entirely static from 1700 to 1830.<sup>38</sup>

The clerical profession was thus awkwardly situated at the turn of the century. It was institutionally dominant yet increasingly insecure about its own authority and socioeconomic prospects, especially as the “occupational professionalism” of surgeons, attorneys, and civil servants emerged at the expense of the “status professionalism” of the gentleman-cleric, who had often been his parish’s main legal, medical, and bureaucratic functionary.<sup>39</sup> In response, clerical training became increasingly regulated (if not more rigorous), with more emphasis placed on examinations of sacred and secular knowledge, and instruction in pastoral ministry and parochial maintenance, especially visiting the sick, alleviating financial distress, and conducting catechisms.<sup>40</sup> Training and technique mattered most to the lowest levels of the hierarchy, and Deryck Lovegrove reports that the majority of vocational publications from 1790 to 1815 came from the parish clergy, “whose position and credibility were most immediately affected” by the transformations in their professional role.<sup>41</sup>

But curates and vicars understood these transformations in terms strikingly different from narratives of a shift in social capital from inherited privileges to technical skills. In its own self-representations, the newfound “occupationalism” of Anglicanism was instead a rejoinder to the topsy-turvy “status” of illiterate men who offered only hierophantic recom-

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37. Viviane Barrie-Curien, “Clerical Recruitment and Career Patterns in the Church of England during the Eighteenth Century,” in Jacob and Yates, *Crown and Mitre: Religion and Society in Northern Europe since the Reformation*, 93–104.

38. Knight, *Nineteenth-Century Church*, 107–8.

39. For an account of the functional transformation of the Anglican clergy in the nineteenth century, and the frictions which attended this transformation, see Brian Heeney, *A Different Kind of Gentleman: Parish Clergy as Professional Men in Early and Mid-Victorian England* (Hamden and Springfield: Archon Books, 1976).

40. See Jeremy Gregory, “The Eighteenth-Century Reformation,” 67–85.

41. Lovegrove, *Established Church, Sectarian People*, 58.

mendations.<sup>42</sup> In 1792, Edward Tatham symptomatically warned against anyone who claimed “extraordinary gifts” and “a greater degree of illumination” from the Spirit.<sup>43</sup> “The best qualified to be teachers in one of the most difficult and learned of all professions,” Tatham went on, were only those “bred and educated . . . in the study of languages, sciences, and other necessary parts of learning.”<sup>44</sup> Inverting the old Horatian logic, a proper man of God was made, not born, and “inspiration” was a social disability. “To commission men notoriously illiterate, under the idea of being divinely inspired,” argued another cleric in 1795, “is a notorious offence, not only against God, but against the general order of society.”<sup>45</sup>

Southey thought this the admirable skepticism of a Church ready to meet modernity on its own terms; as he “safely affirmed” in 1818, “at no time since the foundation of the English Church, have men been more diligently trained for holy orders than in these, our days; nor has promotion in the church been ever so generally bestowed according to desert.”<sup>46</sup> But for the Methodists so reproached, the Anglican affection for sober diligence was a pious fraud. The itinerant John Nelson, having been illegally pressed by a cabal of parsons, was carted in chains to York and imprisoned. When one cleric violently denied the value of “Inspiration” and “the Holy Spirit,” the caged Methodist bit back:

Here he stormed at me, and called me an enthusiast, and said, “To talk of the Spirit is all a delusion.” “Hold sir,” I replied, “or I shall expose you before the people, which I did not design to do. How could you affirm, before God and the congregation, that you were inwardly moved by the Holy Spirit to take upon you the office of a deacon; and now testify there is no such thing as being moved by the Holy Spirit?” He said, “Did I say so?” “Yes, sir,” I answered, “you did, when you received holy orders.” He turned pale, spake not ten words more, but went away.<sup>47</sup>

There was, as Nelson pointed out, plenty of residual thaumaturgy underneath the Anglican vocational pretense: clergymen were still required at ordination to profess their “calling” as ultimately one from God rather

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42. See Russell, *Clerical Profession*, for the transformation of the “priest” into the “clergyman,” in which the self-consciously sociological function of the latter replaced the mysterious powers of the former.

43. Tatham, *A Sermon Suitable to the Times*, 12.

44. Tatham, *A Sermon Suitable to the Times*, 8–9.

45. Croft, *Thoughts Concerning the Methodists*, 33.

46. Southey, “New Churches,” 580.

47. *WV* 3:126.

than man. Though bishops and deacons treated this as a polite fiction solemnizing the formal examinations, for the Methodists, it was an ideological fissure in which they made themselves comfortable. Preachers such as Nelson cannily took the Church's dead-letter teachings more seriously than did the Church, which let them dismiss any polite opprobrium as motivated by bigotry rather than by sound doctrine. "Men of all ranks," declared Christopher Hopper in 1781, had "dispensed with two or three awakened clergymen tolerably well: these were regularly ordained, men of learning, gentlemen, and divines; but to see a ploughman, or an honest mechanic, stand up to preach the gospel, it was insufferable."<sup>48</sup>

These ploughmen and mechanics would introduce a host of impressive innovations in labor organization and compensation, including the first pension plan, and the highly efficient itinerants were arguably the earliest group to realize fully the transformative possibilities of the new national turnpike system.<sup>49</sup> But the preachers imagined themselves as the "chosen sons" and "favor'd beings" of a sacred order, not as members of a technocratic occupation. In 1816, the Methodist Conference officially denounced Daniel Isaac, whose *Investigation of Ecclesiastical Claims* had heretically (at least to Methodist orthodoxy) classed as "nonsense" the notion that "priests are a distinct body of men, specifically designated by heaven to their holy employment, and solemnly set apart."<sup>50</sup> Two decades earlier, George Shadford bore witness to the Pentecostal authority of another preacher who annihilated earthly—meaning, Established—power: "I did not suppose he had very learned abilities, or that he had studied either at Oxford or Cambridge; but something struck me, '*This is the Gift of God, this is the Gift of God.*'"<sup>51</sup> Even John Wesley, though always careful to appear in the vestments that marked him as an ordained Anglican cleric, laughed away the professionalizing strategies of the Church of England:

Certainly the practice and the direction of the Apostle Paul was to *prove* a man before he was ordained at all. . . . Proved? How? By setting them to construe a sentence of Greek? And asking them a few commonplace questions? O amazing proof of a minister of Christ!<sup>52</sup>

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48. WV 1:120.

49. On the connection between infrastructural improvements in Britain and the rise of the very possibility of a national itinerancy, see Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 73.

50. See Hempton, *Religion of the People*, 106–7, for an account of these proceedings.

51. WV 2:175.

52. Wesley, "A Caution Against Bigotry," in *Sermons IV*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1987), 75.

Inflected by the Spirit rather than the classics, the most famous lay preachers carried marks of their otherworldly difference, and even the faithful were wary of their flashing eyes and floating hair. Richard Whatcoat was described shortly after his death as being a second St. Basil, “that so much divine majesty and luster appeared in him it made the wicked tremble to behold.”<sup>53</sup>

Anglican churchmen—not without reason—saw in such “luster” the darkness of the Civil Wars, when the universities had been vilified and partly conquered by uncompromising “reformers.” Wesley’s own contempt for the institution of which he had been a Fellow had worrisome precedents. It was, after all, a Master of Gonville and Caius who in the 1650s had declared Cambridge “the throne of the Beast,” and the idea “that universities are the fountain of the ministers of the Gospel” to be “one of the grossest errors that ever reigned under Antichrist’s Kingdom.”<sup>54</sup> As the Rev. W. Woolley mocked in 1794, the Methodists had adopted the tone of Rant, and its politics would follow soon enough: “[I] et those . . . consult the primitive fathers, or pore their eyes out over the volumes of a Lowth, an Atterbury, a Sherlock, a Tillotson, who cannot trust to their own strength of lungs, violence of gesture, and an unceasing hurly-burly of sounds for an hour or two upon any emergency.”<sup>55</sup>

Bookish wisdom paled for most Methodists before dramatic oratory, which was more obviously inspired the less manicured its source. As Peter Jaco testified in 1778, it was only when he went “to hear Stephen Nicols, a plain, honest tinner, [that] the word took strange hold on me, and seemed like fire in my bones.”<sup>56</sup> Jaco’s encounter with the arresting power of the Word, which—often without warning for the audience, or preparation by the preacher—mysteriously shook bones and limbs along with hearts and minds, was very common. In Shadford’s 1790 account of his own first, fumbling attempt at preaching, an unsought Eolism transformed an untutored peasant lad into a vessel for holy wrath: “When I began again to speak for Him His word was like the flaming sword, which turned every way to every heart; for sinners trembled and fell before it, and were both convinced and converted to God.”<sup>57</sup> Clergymen habituated

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53. WV 2:226.

54. Christopher Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 140.

55. W. Woolley, *A Cure for Canting; Or, the Grand Impostors . . . Unmasked* (London: Jordan and Ridgeway, 1794), 4.

56. WV 2:9.

57. WV 2:193.

to receive public rhetoric as Ciceronian technique, mastered through serious application, were rather less taken by these spontaneous overflows.<sup>58</sup> Enthusiasts might be impressed by “something like inspiration,” scoffed the Rev. Croft, but the “truth is, the common extemporaneous effusions of the Methodists are an insult upon the understanding, and to ascribe them to inspiration, is little short of blasphemy.”<sup>59</sup>

But “an insult upon the understanding,” insofar as “the understanding” was the mystification of gentry interests into the grammar for thought and speech, was much of the point and most of the pleasure of Methodistical “inspiration.” In 1763, Warburton fretted over the “many well attested cases in modern History, . . . where Enthusiasts, in their extasies, have talked fluently in the learned languages, of which they had a very imperfect knowledge in their sober intervals.”<sup>60</sup> Even the most staid Anglican doctrine conceded that the Pentecostal Gift of Tongues had been the original intervention of the Holy Spirit; its recurrence would prove God’s approbation for the Methodist attack on the Establishment. Warburton’s (unsurprising) verdict was that such attestations were inevitably perjured—yet in truth, Methodist preachers rarely had much interest in claiming an ecstatic power in the “learned languages,” or the cultural capital they contained. The itinerants often came from semi-literate backgrounds, and could not always boast even of that “solid and religious EDUCATION, which has rendered few books familiar, but the bible, and the liturgy or hymn book.” Coleridge argued in the *Biographia* that this was the bare minimum by which “a rustic’s language” might be “purified from all provincialism and grossness” into something like “the Language of Real Life.”<sup>61</sup> But for the Methodists, this Reality was aspiration, not assumption. Their English was parochial in vocabulary and dialectal in accent, a far cry from the nationally standardized and textually informed speech the universities imparted to even the most worn curate. For the preachers, speaking in Greek, Aramaic, or Ur had little appeal when rhetorical success in what Coleridge called “ordinary” English was so improbable as to seem supernatural.<sup>62</sup> The obligations of itinerancy, in which a gardener from Yorkshire would be expected to convert and comfort the families

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58. For a sensitive reading of the “negotiations” between Methodist oratory and polite literature in the mid-eighteenth century, see Goring, *Rhetoric of Sensibility*, 60–90.

59. George Croft, *Thoughts Concerning the Methodists*, 21.

60. Warburton, *Doctrine of Grace*, 12.

61. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 2:44, 52.

62. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2:56.

of Cornish miners, posed sociolectal challenges that could only be solved with divine help. Fifty—or even five—people, earnestly attending to the extemporaneous exhortations of a cobbler or field-hand, often felt like a miracle to everyone involved. As the itinerant Thomas Olivers sighed in 1779:

Nor shall I ever forget the last sermon I preached in that town [Dundee]: such liberty I never felt before or since. I had such an absolute command of my ideas, language, voice, and gesture that I could say what I would, and also in what manner I pleased!<sup>63</sup>

As Olivers's nostalgia underscores, such rhetorical "liberty" was inexplicable in production and incapable of emulation, a fleeting Gift rather than a consciously managed technique of "language, voice, and gesture." "Inspired speech" was wistful memory, not program for future practice.

These irregular gifts were the most public examples of the special providences and palpable ministries we now associate with *The Prelude*. They were also often as pedestrian as they were public. While the soldier John Haime told a harrowing story of God on the battlefield of Fontenoy,<sup>64</sup> John Pawson's 1806 account of a "very narrow escape indeed" from a "very small bit of potato stuck in my throat, as I was eating my supper," was more typical, and typically moralizing. The tuber, Pawson solemnly reflected, was an unexpected lesson, placed and then removed by God in order to impress that "in the midst of life we are in death."<sup>65</sup> If this seems like uncontrolled bathos rather than serious theology, it was still in communion with the Methodist doctrine that the quotidian was rife with transcendental significance. The smallest incident, Wesley taught, could surpass the grandest event on the world-historical stage, since "the eye of God see[s] everything through the whole extent of creation," a gaze that telescoped with "particular notice" onto the "souls" and "bodies" of His favored children, and "all their tempers, desires, and thoughts, all their words and actions."<sup>66</sup> This metaphysic was increasingly isolated from most respectable Christianities, which attempted "reasonable" reconcili-

63. *WV* 1:236.

64. According to Haime, God both saved him and chastised the wicked in one economical intervention: "After about seven hours, a cannon-ball killed my horse under me. An officer cried aloud, 'Haime, where is your God now?' I answered, 'Sir, He is here with me; and He will bring me out of this battle.' Presently a cannon-ball took off his head." *WV* 1:34.

65. *WV* 4:54.

66. Wesley, *Sermons* II, 538, 543.

ations with the predictabilities of the Newtonian physics across the long eighteenth century. But it was also a metaphysic long-cherished by many popular Protestantisms, ennobling men and women whose lives were constrained to a narrow round of enervating labor. A potato might figure more largely in God's plan than any potentate, a nourishing bit of natural piety for those on a restricted diet. As Bunyan had taught a century before, though once the Spirit had called out of Palestine from the height of "*Hill Mizar*," personal revelation could now be sought and found more readily in "*the Close, the Milk-house, the Stable, the Barn*."<sup>67</sup>

By the end of the eighteenth century, providential exaltation was powerfully associated with social humiliation. The doctrine of "special providence" was abandoned by both the Church and middle-class Dissent; its survival among the poorer readers of Wesley and Bunyan began to imply that peculiar ministrations were found not only in low places, but also perhaps *only* in low places. This, I think, explains Wordsworth's anxiety over the "vulgar hope" behind the spiritual "ministry" that

Impress'd upon all forms the characters  
Of danger and desire, and thus did make  
The surface of the universal earth  
With triumph, and delight, and hope, and fear  
Work like a sea. (1805 *Prelude* 1:497–501)

Wordsworth may try to evacuate any theology into a secularized appreciation of the "Presences of Nature," but as Southey argued five years later, too much emphasis on the special purposes guiding the natural world suggested only cultural and historical backwardness. The spiritual autobiographies in the *Arminian* and *Methodist* magazines continually claimed "that the itinerant preachers have a special gift for obtaining rain in dry seasons, and that when they prayed against a plague of caterpillars, an army of crows came and cleared the country." This was unnatural superstition, not pantheistic sophistication: such sensibility, Southey warned, could only "bring back into the world the baneful faith in dreams, tokens, apparitions, and witchcraft."<sup>68</sup> But while reasonable Christians scoffed, this sort of magic was still hugely influential—and very real—for most of the country's rural inhabitants. The success of the Methodist preachers often sprang from their ability to read "the characters / Of danger and

67. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, ed. John Stachniewski and Anita Pacheco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5.

68. Southey, "On the Evangelical Sects," 508.

desire” that many people assumed God and Satan had written around them. The itinerants easily filled positions only recently vacated by wise-women and sorcerers in the early nineteenth century, arriving “as the interpreter, or even agency, of God’s will, just as witches or conjurers were agencies through which darker powers operated.”<sup>69</sup>

Alexander Knox, Wesley’s loyal friend, worked mightily to convince Southey that the children were not the father of the man. Though Wesley had “conceived himself providentially called” to reanimate the church, “as if he had been commissioned by a voice from heaven,” Knox assured Southey that “in this material respect John Wesley differed from all vulgar enthusiasts—that he did not imagine any such voice, nor had he the slightest thought of either impulse or intimation from above.”<sup>70</sup> But Southey’s *Life of Wesley* drew upon Wesley’s own *Journal* for countless counterexamples, anecdotes of divine intervention and “vulgar enthusiasm,” in which “even frenzy was rebuked before him,” as madhouse riots were calmed with a word, rabid dogs with a glance.<sup>71</sup> Accused of both witchcraft and mesmerism, Wesley’s explanation was simpler, grander, and rather Wordsworthian. Where the poet “felt / Incumbences more awful, visitings / Of the upholder” (1805 *Prelude* 3:114–16), the preacher knew the “*Spirit is upon me, because he hath anointed me.*”<sup>72</sup> Behind this confident grandeur, however, was the horde of lesser men Wesley had moved to similar declarations. So many men styled themselves “inspired, anointed, and elect” that, between 1800 and 1820, the Justices of the Peace were swamped by petitions for preaching licenses. Here is another demographic for the Romantic imagination:

One magistrate in the county of Middlesex licensed fourteen hundred preachers in the course of five years. Of six-and-thirty persons who obtained licenses at one sessions, six spelled “ministers of the gospel” in six different ways, and seven signed their mark! One fellow, who applied for a license, being asked if he could read, replied, “Mother reads, and I ’spounds and ’splains.”<sup>73</sup>

As the anti-Methodist satire *The Expounder Expounded*—it should have been *The ’Spounder ’Splained*—grumbled earlier, it was impossible

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69. Rule, “Methodism, Popular Beliefs and Village Culture,” 65.

70. Knox, “Remarks,” 310.

71. Southey, *Life of Wesley*, 1:198.

72. Southey, *Life of Wesley*, 1:218.

73. Southey, *Life of Wesley*, 2:388.

to maintain the dignity of the sacerdotal profession in the face of these “inspired fellows”: they “are well known to be the most senseless and illiterate Part of the human Species.”<sup>74</sup>

## Illiteral Poetics

“Senseless” and “illiterate”: in what might be a spectacular pun, or a peculiarly Freudian printer’s slip, *The Expounder Expounded* dramatized the conjunction between ignorance and metaphoricity active across the long eighteenth century. “Inspiration” was an unreliable vessel for cultural distinction, as itinerant preachers—whether devoted Wesleyans or coniving mountebanks—outnumbered and out-wrote authors of more self-consciously rarefied (if still rhetorically adjacent) poetical enthusiasms. By the time Wordsworth began *The Prelude*, the case had become acute. Worshipping at the altar of spontaneous power and providential selection was a direct affront, not just to the hegemony of the Church of England, but to the ideology of polite professionalism increasingly essential to it. The spiritual autobiographies in the *Arminian* and then *Methodist* magazines had become so widely read—Lackington was sure that they “circulated with the greatest avidity, to the private emolument of the editors, and doubtless to the great edification of all sinners”—that they set terms for the genre.<sup>75</sup> By 1827, the *Quarterly* flatly declared that only “pick-pockets,” “our weakest mob-orators,” and “cabin-boys and drummers” stooped to publish their own lives, replete with “imbecility, quackery, and vice”: “few great men—none of the very highest order—have chosen to paint otherwise than indirectly, and through the shadows of imaginary forms, the secret workings of their own minds; nor is it likely that genius will ever be found altogether divested of this proud modesty.”<sup>76</sup>

If the “Life” rendered in *The Prelude* was meant to be exemplary, this was following the example of the Methodist “Lives.” The pedagogical hallmarks were so reiterated as to be a convention: ministrations of the Holy Spirit transformed reprobate sinner into wayfaring Christian, who then “examine[d] how far Nature”—though the Wesleyans would prefer

74. R—ph J—ps—n, *The expounder expounded: or, annotations upon that incomparable piece, intituled, A short account of God’s dealings with the Rev. Mr. G——e W—f—d. Wherein Several profound Mysteries, which were greatly subject to Misconception, are set in a clear Light; and the abominable secret Sin, therein mentioned, is particularly illustrated and explained* (London: T. Payne, 1740), 2.

75. Lackington, *Memoirs*, 182.

76. “Autobiography,” in *Quarterly Review* 35 (January 1827): 148–65 (149, 164).

“Providence”—“and Education had qualified him for such employment” (“Preface” to *The Excursion, Prose Works* 3:5).<sup>77</sup> To be asked to write an autobiography was the final earthly reward for an itinerant. “For a Methodist a place in the Magazine was something like a niche in the Abbey for a statesman or a poet,” John Telford remarked in 1898, when Wordsworth, though interred home at Grasmere, could have claimed a laureate niche.<sup>78</sup> But in fact, this kind of self-confirmatory autobiography was likely to get a gentleman-poet ejected from Westminster. William Cowper provided a sobering example of the damage enthusiastic postures could inflict even on immensely popular poets. When his *Memoirs* were published in a variety of editions between 1814 and 1816, periodicals collectively recoiled from the disgusting spectacle of his addiction to the providential myopia peculiar to Methodist self-fashioning.<sup>79</sup> Pondering the “forced and unnatural connexion” between Cowper’s poetical and religious enthusiasms, the *Quarterly* confessed, “We do not like to be carried back to all the particulars. . . . When they are pressed once more upon our notice, they have a tendency . . . to detract somewhat from our respect.”<sup>80</sup> *The Monthly Review*’s diagnosis was even harsher: “The secret sufferings of the gifted but most unhappy subject . . . were detailed with a minuteness, which nothing but the unsocial and indelicate taste of *methodism* could for one instance have endured.”<sup>81</sup>

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77. Lackington opens his autobiography parodying this conventional providentialism, while begging the question, “was it for this?”: “I shall there not trouble you with a history of predictions which foretold the future greatness of your humble servant, nor with a minute account of the aspects of the planets at the very auspicious and important crisis when I first inhaled the air of this bustling orb; for, extraordinary as it may appear, it has never yet occurred to me that any of the adepts in the astrological science have made a calculation of my nativity.” As we learn shortly thereafter, the patrimonial stock of the Lackingtons was not high. His grandfather, “a good honest man,” came to “remarkable” end, “though not very fortunate; in the road between Taunton and Wellington, he was found drowned in a ditch, where the water scarcely covered his face: He was, ’tis conjectured, ‘—Drunk when he died’” (*Memoirs*, 7–9).

78. John Telford, *The Life of John Wesley* (New York: Eaton and Maine, 1898 [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1886]), 326–27.

79. For an engaging argument that the Methodist *Lives* generated “an acceptable genre of autobiographical writing,” adopted by figures outside of the itinerancy, see Helen Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives: Transatlantic Testimonies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 48–81. My reservation is that the reception histories of Thomas’s key examples—Joanna Southcott and William Cowper—suggest, on the contrary, the profound *unacceptability* of Methodist models to polite sensibilities.

80. “Cowper’s *Poems and Life*,” *Quarterly Review* 16.31 (October 1816): 116–29 (123).

81. “*The Rural Walks of Cowper*,” *Monthly Review* vol. C (January 1823): 111–12 (111). For this review in a different (and captivating) critical context, see Andrew Elfenbein,

By and large, Wordsworth took the hint. His most public navigations of the intersections between poets and priests carefully evaded the spiritual poses which might damage the respectability of either vocation. By the end of the French Wars, the established poet was doing his part for established priest-craft. One climax of *The Excursion*, the Wordsworthian epic well into the twentieth century, is this hymn to the Anglican Church in general, and to its uncompromisingly trained priests in particular.

And, as on earth it is the doom of Truth  
 To be perpetually attacked by foes  
 Open or covert, be that Priesthood still,  
 For defence, replenished with a Band  
 Of strenuous Champions, in scholastic arts  
 Thoroughly disciplined. (1814 *Excursion* 6:53–58)

Though the Church was in danger “perpetually,” the adoration of “scholastic arts” and “thorough discipline” here suggests that the most dangerous “foes” were neither ferociously learned Dissenters nor university-educated Solitaries wallowing in continental atheism, but rather those inspired preachers more invested in overturning the professionalizing protocols of the “Priesthood” than in assaulting Christianity itself. Enthusiasm, not secularism, was the enemy best fought by clerical discipline, but this isn’t just late-onset conservatism. Since 1802, with the second edition of the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*, many of Wordsworth’s public definitions of the “Poet” drew on the occupational ideology of the Anglican priest, to credit the cultural value of the poet in the company of “a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a natural philosopher” (*Prose Works* [PW] 1:139).

“Taking up the subject, then, upon general grounds, let me ask, what is meant by the word Poet? What is a Poet?” (PW 1:138). The question answers itself: the Poet’s intellectual precision parses word from thing, forcing the distinction between the arbitrary (“what is *meant* by the *word* Poet?”) and the essential (“What *is* a *Poet*?”) into difference. The Poet is a coolly skilled practitioner, not an untutored enthusiast: “[h]owever exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of a Poet, it is obvious, that while he describes and imitates passions, his employment is in some degree mechanical” (PW 1:138). The “Preface” is of a type with the “gentrified,

late eighteenth-century grammar prefaces,” and its prose enacts its own ironic ideal.<sup>82</sup> The argument for plain-speaking unfolds in the syntax of Burkean periodicity, quietly dramatizing the sophistication necessary to arrange “greater simplicity”:

Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that situation of life our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and from the necessary character of rural occupations are more easily comprehended; and are more durable; and lastly, because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. (*PW* 1:124)

The “real language of men” turns out to have a surprising affinity for semicolons. Following Coleridge’s critique in the *Biographia*, John Guillory identifies this “unacknowledged idealization of the bourgeois sociolect” in the “literalization of pastoral speech.”<sup>83</sup> I cavil only at “unacknowledged.” This is Wordsworth’s deliberate poetics: ostensibly in opposition to the artifices of eighteenth-century diction and the false refinements of modern urbanity, but also—and perhaps more deliberately unacknowledged—the low and rustic company of inspiration. So when Wordsworth pits his manly and “accurate taste in poetry” against the emotional excesses of “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies” (*PW* 1:128), he sounds for all the world like Lord Bishop Gibson, who valued “due and regular Attendance, paid by good Men in a serious and composed Way,” against “those sudden Agonies, Roarings and Screaming, Tremblings, Droppings-Down, Ravings and Madnesses” that typified the Methodist experience.<sup>84</sup>

And Wordsworth was alert to the need to manage this affinity. Not for nothing did *The Excursion* appear in expensive quarto. This was the armature of its ideological safety: at more than two pounds, it was

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82. Carey McIntosh, *The Evolution of English Prose, 1700–1800: Style, Politeness, and Print Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 48.

83. Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, 126.

84. [Edmund Gibson], *Observations upon the Conduct and Behavior of a Certain Sect*, 10.

“for its length, perhaps the most expensive work of literature ever published in England,” probably priced beyond the reach of its own author.<sup>85</sup> It was just this cover that Jeffrey suspected as a high-class disguise for a covertly Methodist operation. *The Excursion* wouldn’t do, not because it was dull, but because (like Cowper’s *Memoirs*) it bored in such a denominationally identifiable manner. Enthusiasm led to tedium as easily as agitation: Wesley’s own *Journal* had reached one million words, while the diary of Howell Harris sprawled to an improbable 284 volumes.<sup>86</sup> Jeffrey thought Wordsworth’s “preposterous minuteness” similarly motivated by “moral and religious enthusiasm,” which, “though undoubtedly poetical emotions, are at the same time but dangerous inspirers of poetry; nothing being so apt to run into interminable dullness or mellifluous extravagance, without giving the unfortunate author the slightest intimation of his danger.”<sup>87</sup> The threatened *Recluse* and unnamed *Prelude*, advertised by *The Excursion* as the “history of the author’s mind,” were proof *avant la lettre* that Wordsworth’s spiritual narcissism was a private derangement with a public history. Since the 440-page “quarto now before us” contained “an account of one of his youthful rambles in the vales of Cumberland, and occupies precisely the period of three days; so that, by the use of a very powerful *calculus*, some estimate may be formed of the probable extent of the entire biography.”<sup>88</sup>

Even more irritating than the length of *The Excursion*, however, was its hero. The Wanderer, the poem’s rebranding of the earlier Pedlar into a more glamorously metaphysical itinerancy, has impressed later critics. Philip Connell and Nigel Leask find him “impeccably respectable,”<sup>89</sup> and Jon Mee draws our attention to his “philosophical discipline . . . as a meditative thinker much like Wordsworth himself.”<sup>90</sup> Jeffrey, however, read the Wanderer not only as transparently Wordsworth, but, more disagreeably yet, as patently Methodistical, a “moral teacher . . . willfully debased . . . by low occupation,” who proselytized the “moral and devotional ravings” all too familiar in the fields of the Wesleyan ministry. The “radical intellectual poet and the itinerant cleric were,” observes

85. St. Clair, *Reading Nation*, 201.

86. On Harris, see Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 129.

87. Jeffrey, “Wordsworth’s *Excursion*,” 7, 4.

88. Jeffrey, “Wordsworth’s *Excursion*,” 4.

89. Connell and Leask, “What Is the People?” 23.

90. Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*, 229. For a very different but stimulating account of itinerancy, see Celeste Langan, *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Brian Goldberg, equally “alienated from establishment authority.”<sup>91</sup> Or not equally, exactly: as Sir Frederic Morton Eden reminded his readers in 1797, roving preachers were formally “rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars,” of a piece with “Fencers, bearwards, strolling players of interludes or other entertainments, . . . persons who run away and leave their wives and children upon the parish, . . . persons having implements of house-breaking, or offensive weapons.”<sup>92</sup> Such was clearly the company in which Jeffrey located the Wanderer.

Like any itinerant moralizer—and by extension, his excursioning poet—he “entertains no doubt that he is the elected organ of divine truth and persuasion.” Jeffrey was aghast at the “most wretched and provoking perversity of taste and judgment” which would entrust an entire theo-poetical system to the brittle dignity of a “superannuated Pedlar.”<sup>93</sup> Wordsworth felt the heat, and after 1814, he excised a footnote labeling the Wanderer “strongly disposed to enthusiasm poetical and religious.”<sup>94</sup> The rough reception for this conjunction of enthusiasms “poetical and religious” may have made publishing *The Prelude* implausible in the poet’s lifetime. Had he owned such discourse in his own voice, undisguised by dramatic figuration, Wordsworth would have appeared (or could have been made to appear) entirely conscripted by the Methodist empire of spiritual autobiography that had arisen in the years in which *The Prelude* was written.

Jeffrey’s reaction is all the more noteworthy, given Wordsworth’s pains to ally with and celebrate the Church of England. *The Excursion* is a deeply establishmentarian poem of catholic reconciliations within Anglicanism, thematized in the gentle compulsion of the parson’s garden (rather

91. Goldberg, *Lake Poets*, 133.

92. Eden, *State of the Poor*, 1:307–9.

93. Jeffrey, “Wordsworth’s *Excursion*,” 30, 4.

94. “In Heron’s Tour in Scotland is given an intelligent account of the qualities by which this class of men used to be, and still are, in some degree, distinguished, and of the benefits which Society derives from their labours. Among their characteristics, he does not omit to mention that, from being obliged to pass so much of their time in solitary wandering among rural objects, they frequently acquire meditative habits of mind, and are strongly disposed to enthusiasm poetical and religious. I regret that I have not the book at hand to quote the passage, as it is interesting on many accounts.” The note has attracted little critical attention, as it was suppressed in favor of its revision until very recently. For the original note, see Wordsworth, *The Excursion, Being a Portion of The Recluse, A Poem* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1814), 425; absent in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969) 5:411–12; restored in *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye with the assistance of David García (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 298.

than the confines of the stone church), a space for conversations that never quite become confrontations.<sup>95</sup> The resolution of enthusiasm, atheism, and establishment over tea advertises its own fancifulness; parsons and preachers might still trade blows as easily as pleasantries, and the itinerant Christopher Hopper insisted that his meetings with clergymen inevitably ended in “dirt, rotten eggs, brickbats, stones, and cudgels.”<sup>96</sup> But even with the reticent enthusiasm of the Wanderer, the poem identifies less with any of its characters, and more with an attenuated Anglicanism of reasonable sociability. What the Vicar calls “Narratives [*sic*] of calm and humble life,” and the “sympathy bestowed” in “patient listening,” rather than what Jeffrey identified as “the mystical verbiage of the Methodist pulpit,”<sup>97</sup> seem the poem’s ideological and affective aspirations (1814 *Excursion* 8:6–9).

Jeffrey prevailed, however, and the satires in the *Edinburgh* probably had a much wider readership than the poem itself. *The Excursion* sold weakly, with some of its 500 quartos remaindered twenty years later.<sup>98</sup> A fashionable narrative took hold: in his swiftly advancing dotage, Wordsworth had confused Methodistical cant for sound poetics. In 1819, *Peter Bell* was further confirmation: its surprising success was an irresistible target for men eager to burnish their *bona fides* at the expense of the ridiculous marriage between lowbrow evangelicalism and High Toryism. Hunt, no less an enemy of the Wesleyans than a champion of political liberty, was appalled by “the bewitching principles of fear, bigotry, and diseased impulses. . . . We are really and most unaffectedly sorry to see an excellent poet like Mr. Wordsworth returning, in vulgar despair, to such half-witted prejudices.”<sup>99</sup> The dramatic distance between Wordsworth and his enthusiastic figures was perilously narrow, and in 1823, Hazlitt closed the gap even further. Trading on an insider’s “First Acquaintance,” he recounted the queer mixture of stuffy self-importance and uncontained farce that resulted from Wordsworth’s identification with his anti-hero. The poet couldn’t read the earthy ballad as anything less than holy “*chaunt*,” which worked “as a spell upon the hearer, and disarms the judgment.” But even

95. Mark Canuel argues that *The Excursion* inevitably subordinates heterodoxy to the national church which “absorbs, encloses, and directs it” (*Religion, Toleration, and British Writing*, 163).

96. WV 1:121.

97. Jeffrey, “Wordsworth’s *Excursion*,” 4.

98. The octavo edition of 1820 performed better, selling out its run of 500 by 1824; see St. Clair, *Reading Nation*, 661–62.

99. [Hunt], *Examiner* 592 (May 2, 1819): 282. For a still useful compendium of the many parodies of *Peter Bell*, see A. E. H. Swann, “*Peter Bell*,” *Anglia* 47 (1923): 136–84.

disarmed, Hazlitt's wit kept its edge. He mordantly scored the enthusiastic fit which rewrote the poet's body into contrarian gloss—"the comment made upon it by his face and voice was very different from that of some later critics!"—and finally collapsed fiction into an unexpectedly palpable autobiography: there "was something of a roll, a lounge in his gait, not unlike his own Peter Bell."<sup>100</sup>

## Collegiate Methodism

Yet Wordsworth himself privately suggested that the vitality of his poetic vocation sprang from the communications between religious enthusiasm and establishmentarian orthodoxy, most strikingly in the unpublished autobiography. If *The Excursion* and the "Preface" shift the image of the "Poet" on a map of itinerant power, occupational rigor, irregular consecration, and polite decency, "Book Third" of *The Prelude* locates this map within the poet's self, and against the training ground of university education. In the 1805 telling, Wordsworth learns just what Cambridge was designed not to teach, the "higher language" of heart religion:

Of genius, power,  
Creation, and divinity itself,  
I have been speaking, for my theme has been  
What passed within me. Not of outward things  
Done visibly for other minds—words, signs,  
Symbols or actions—but of my own heart  
Have I been speaking, and my youthful mind. (1805 *Prelude* 3:171–77)

"Outward things," the practiced civilities of masculine gentility, have charms, as well as limits. But as this style of self is denominationally positioned—a Cambridge man is by necessity a churchman—so too is its critique. The turn from the public rituals of "signs" and "symbols," to the "divinity" of "my own heart," is the turn from Establishment to Dissent that elsewhere describes, at once playfully and quite seriously, the face-off between "loyal students faithful to their books" and "hardy recusants" (1805 *Prelude* 3:62–63). Accomplishment within the university entails the accommodation of its agenda, and when Wordsworth fails to emerge from Cambridge fully conditioned by the professional Anglicanism it institu-

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100. *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 17:117–18.

tionalizes, he gives this emancipatory failure a doctrinal cast: not just a crypto-Catholic “recusancy,” or a vague “nonconformity,” but the Methodisms of spiritual calling and special powers, which constituted the university’s most explicit antagonists.

Going up to Cambridge, Wordsworth recalls that “My spirit was up” likewise, a quiet equivocation that presents the Book’s drift between an adolescent’s boisterous accession to adulthood, and his embrace of more provocative spiritual inflations, discovered in the cloisters intended to evaporate such enthusiasm (1805 *Prelude* 3:16). Initially, the university encourages social life at the expense of the life of the mind or spirit, status rather than knowledge, and “politeness” is the real object of attention.

[T]o myself I seemed  
 A man of business and expense, and went  
 From shop to shop about my own affairs,  
 To tutors or to tailors as befel,  
 From street to street with loose and careless heart . . .  
 Strange transformation for a mountain youth,  
 A northern villager. As if by word  
 Of magic or some fairy’s power, at once  
 Behold me rich in monies and attired  
 In splendid clothes, with hose of silk, and hair  
 Glittering like rimy trees when frost is keen—  
 My lordly dressing gown, I pass it by,  
 With other signs of manhood which supplied  
 The lack of beard. (1805 *Prelude* 3:23–27; 32–40)

In the passage’s gentle self-mockery, the “mountain youth” reads the part of a “man of business,” learning the “signs of manhood” and manly privilege as a callow parvenu, rather than to the manner born. Tutors and tailors, “as befel,” are casually equivalent for a young man learning to be a gentleman—a study that begins by understanding gentility as an economic rhetoric as well as genetic inheritance, the mystification of the hard force of “monies” into the “magic” of “some fairy’s power,” and the recognition that purchasing power over the empty “signs” of silk, powder, and robe in fact constitutes maturity more completely than any “beard.” The university’s most valuable reading list covers the pressures, protocols, and exchanges that bond men with men—the “weekly round” of “invitations, suppers, wine, and fruit,” all “Liberal and suiting gentleman’s array” (1805 *Prelude* 3:40–43).

This generous spread is worldly, but it's Anglican, not secular, in color. The jumbled table is a still-life for the wider "motley spectacle" of Cambridge, and its cornucopia of "Gowns grave or gaudy, doctors, students, streets, / Lamps, gateways, flocks of churches, courts and towers" (1805 *Prelude* 3:29–31). Just as there's no hierarchy among tutors and tailors, churches join lamps and courts as one architecture of power among many, with neither peculiar attraction nor obvious sanctity, having lost their ministerial function: absent congregants, these "churches" stand as their own "flocks" in self-reflexive institutionalism. But this portrait of the Church—social rather than sacred, massively built and personally distant—is securely establishmentarian. Reasonable indifference is also good Anglicanism, which deliberately dampens the holy, and grants sacerdotal distinction only when unaccompanied by supernatural investment. Wordsworth impresses this lesson most deeply when, reeling from Milton's "apartments," the turn from poetical, spiritual and spirituous enthusiasms to "our chapel door" distills the "place itself and fashion of the rites" (1805 *Prelude* 3:297–315).

Upshouldering in a dislocated lump  
 With shallow ostentatious carelessness  
 My surplice, gloried in and yet despised,  
 I clove in pride through the inferior throng  
 Of the plain burghers, who in audience stood  
 On the last skirts of their permitted ground,  
 Beneath the pealing organ. Empty thoughts,  
 I am ashamed of them. . . . (1805 *Prelude* 3:316–23)

The rumbled "surplice" is a meticulously arranged metaphor for the Anglican priesthood, which "gloried in" material powers and responsibilities, "and yet despised" their derivation from thaumaturgical pretenses. The very "carelessness" of the ostentation reminds everyone involved that this isn't some divine parting of mystified priests from a credulously "inferior throng," but rather an explicitly—and merely—political division between "plain burghers" and privileged students. If it's all "empty thoughts" and "unworthy vanities" (1805 *Prelude* 3:327), spiritual vacuity and social surplus are the essential forms of establishment professionalism. A jauntily "dislocated lump" of clerical linens suits the Church's ideological fashion admirably.

Wordsworth shrinks from "the weakness of that hour" (1805 *Prelude* 3:326), partly out of moralizing antipathy, and partly out of a recognition

that this cheerful veniality was always more mirage than promise. A clergyman ensconced in a comfortable living might have the luxury of playing the gentleman, letting the niceties of the Articles slip from attention better spent managing parishioners and parsonage. But it's a university Fellowship, not a rectory, that provokes "melancholy thoughts" over the stifling obligations and transformations necessary for "my future worldly maintenance" (1805 *Prelude* 3:75–78). Though it wasn't uncommon for Fellows eventually to retire to extramural livings, the position itself compounded the pressures of Anglican conformity with few of its relaxations. The ritualized license tacitly encouraged in students and many clerics would be forbidden by the Fellowship for which Wordsworth had "to hope without hope" (1805 *Prelude* 3:77), since it required wholehearted—and substantially more supervised—subscription to the Articles, and an assumption of celibacy as long as the position was held.<sup>101</sup> Wordsworth's "Cambridge" intensifies the aggravations of family expectations, academic strictures, and vocational determination with the prospect of ordination into one of the most spiritually and personally demanding roles within the Church. The price of admission to the teasing banquet of "signs of manhood" offered by the university is the internalization of Anglican vocational ideology at its most intense and uncompromising.

Unlike the "Preface," *The Prelude* rejects this path, while attempting to imagine a calling that might capture some of the heady promise of adult potency that had first excited the poet. In demonstrating his categorical unfitness for Anglican orthodoxy, Wordsworth erupts into its most violent opposite, sounding a series of extraordinary enthusiasms within the institutional heart of the establishment. Abandoning the social and economic foundations of Cambridge with some wit—"I was otherwise endowed" (1805 *Prelude* 3:93)—the poet "dare[s] to speak / A higher language" against the "unworthy vanities" of polite decorum (1805 *Prelude* 3:106–7). Wordsworth himself knew the "strangeness in my mind,"

A feeling that I was not for that hour  
Nor for that place. But wherefore be cast down,  
Why should I grieve?—I was a chosen son.

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101. Queen Elizabeth had barred Fellows from marriage in 1570, an ordinance repealed only after Wordsworth's death. Fellowships were often exchanged for parish livings in order to marry. Wesley, for example, resigned his position at Lincoln in 1751 in order to embark on a spectacularly miserable union, not out of any doctrinal difference from the Church.

For hither had I come with holy powers  
 And faculties, whether to work or feel . . . (1805 *Prelude* 3:79–84)

This is vocational confidence, but its verbal tense is pure Methodism, repudiating the ideological ground of Cambridge. The University generated a reliable professionalism that might, as the culmination of a deliberate and replicable program of instruction, be dignified with formal sacerdotal powers—all while emphasizing such distinction as socially constructed, rather than naturally inherent. Wordsworth’s arrival at Cambridge, *already* arrayed “with holy powers / And faculties” unsupervised by University or Church, resists the link between the two exactly as a Methodist might; puns on alternative “endowments” and “faculties,” against the academic “learning, moral truth / Or understanding” of clerical identity, only strengthen the sympathy (1805 *Prelude* 3:91–92).

Sympathy—or at least opportunism. Wordsworth’s enthusiastic turn isn’t conversion: “Methodism” is a uniquely convenient rhetoric with which to enunciate separation from the demands of Anglican and professional conformity, not an object of attraction in itself. So it’s no surprise when the poet is as skeptical of “holy powers,” as of the fate from which they liberate. His argument may be hubris, but the grandeur is more Wesleyan than classical, and the anonymous carping of “some” evokes the abstracted ideological conventions that Wordsworth flaunts knowingly, and somewhat guiltily:

Some called it madness; such indeed it was,  
 If childlike fruitfulness in passing joy,  
 If steady moods of thoughtfulness matured  
 To inspiration, sort with such a name;  
 If prophesy be madness; if things viewed  
 By poets of old time, and higher up  
 By the first men, earth’s first inhabitants,  
 May in these tutored days no more be seen  
 With undisordered sight. But leaving this,  
 It was no madness . . . (1805 *Prelude* 3:147–56)

The distance between “old time” and “tutored days” is denominational as well as temporal, playing on an Anglicized modernity that’s organized by an establishmentarian pedagogy designed to block things once viewed. Poetical community might be one thing—but communion with the “first

men” was the sort of fraternizing university tutors took very seriously. For Paley, as we’ve seen, such connections were “injurious” and “disgusting.” For Bishop Warburton, they were imaginary absurdities:

These men read the History of the dispensations to the first Propagators of our holy Faith: They look with admiration on the privileges and powers conferred on those chosen Instruments: their imagination grows heated: they forget the difference between the *present* and the *past* Oeconomy of things; they seem to feel the impressions they read of; and they assume the airs, and mimic the Authority of Prophets and Apostles.<sup>102</sup>

With rhetorical daring, Wordsworth’s own writing admits these reservations—“Some called it madness; such indeed it was”—so that they might be squelched, yet the obliquely concessionary “*if*”-syntax strings together qualifications that do as much harm as good. Within the Methodistical framing that provoked this outburst in the first place, “if prophesy be madness,” and whether the spiritual vision of “earth’s first inhabitants” still blessed “these tutored days” were hardly open questions for responsible thinkers, but rather the precise issues which divided the Ragged Legion from reasonable Christendom. Wordsworth’s implied answers—“madness,” *no*; “seen / With undisordered sight,” *yes*—for queries left diplomatically rhetorical are diametrically opposed to those that might assuage worries over the moral threat of enthusiasm. The conclusion lamely grants as much, slinking away from an argument that only complicates itself in its execution, “leaving this” game of coy deflection: “It was no madness.”

In its largest perspective, the spiritual election to which Wordsworth graduates exalts and embarrasses to equal degrees. If a Methodistical manner helps construct the poet’s irregular authority, such manner can’t be assumed in good society, whose reaction—“madness,” not of the *genus irritabile vatum*, but of the muddy preacher—this passage easily forecasts. Preparing *The Prelude* for publication, Wordsworth revised what he couldn’t resolve, attaching doctrinal qualifiers to some enthusiasms, canceling others entirely. The emendations of 1838–39 discard Cambridge’s “chosen son,” and bracket his enthusiasm with a parenthesis:

But wherefore be cast down?  
For (not to speak of Reason and her pure

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102. Warburton, *Doctrine of Grace*, 86.

Reflective acts to fix the moral law  
 Deep in the conscience nor of Christian Hope,  
 Bowing her head before her sister Faith  
 As one far mightier), hither I had come,  
 Bear witness Truth, endowed with holy powers  
 And faculties, whether to work or feel. (1850 *Prelude* 3:82–89)

The poetry of the parenthesis, spilling over five of the eight lines of this sentence, has its own effect, syntactically and ideologically overwhelming the “holy powers” that “endow” the poetical self, while retrospectively identifying the socio-doctrinal problem posed by its earlier version. This conflict of poetry and statement is the symptom of an epic negotiation of two politically divergent, but equally “spiritual” discourses. If, as we often hear, the poem of 1850 is more “religious,” this is only a matter of being more establishmentarian, and less enthusiastic. But this is a difference between two of the nineteenth century’s most substantial religious categories, not between the secular and the sacred, or the pantheistic and the orthodox. Much of the poem’s restlessness, both in its initial incarnation, and in its sustained revision, springs from the poet’s lifelong struggle with the enthusiasm that made *The Prelude* at once rhetorically arresting and culturally unacceptable. Wordsworth’s corrections follow the pattern set by the changes to Book First: the “corresponding mild creative breeze,” working the “power” of “storm” and “vernal promises” into “The holy life of music and verse,” gets shifted into the high-church “punctual service high, / Matins and vespers, of harmonious verse!” (1805 *Prelude* 1:43–54; 1850 *Prelude* 1:44–45).

Wordsworth relied increasingly on ostentatiously churchy figures to neutralize the theo-political unorthodoxy that might be imputed to his verse. In the 1810s, Parliament was alarmed by census data showing the irregular houses of Dissenting worship superseding the cathedrals of Anglicanism. Yet Wordsworth opened *The Excursion* with a comfortingly immovable image, envisioning his poetry as a structure of scrupulous conformity:

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 mature 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 antechapel 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 a 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 Works* 3:5–6)

Here is an architecture of perfect service to the national church, which stability Wordsworth prays will not be “madly overturned” by “the blinder rage / Of bigot zeal” (1814 *Excursion* 6:33–34). The “spiritual Fabric” of England’s only (and fully Anglican) “Church” was “Founded in truth,” and proceeds “In beauty of Holiness, with order’d pomp, / Decent and unproved” (1814 *Excursion* 6:8–12).

Wordsworth’s greatest affection, however, was reserved for his parish church, not the National—the humble yet “reverend Pile, / With bold projections and recesses deep” in Grasmere (1814 *Excursion* 8:461–62). Yet this too is fissured with national conflict, recreating within itself all the contests between establishment and enthusiasm that *The Excursion*, and ultimately *The Prelude*, worked over.

The interior of it has been improved lately—made warmer by under-drawing the roof and raising the floor, but the rude and antique majesty of its former appearance has been impaired by the painting of the rafters; and the oak benches, with a simple rail at the back dividing them from each other, have given way to seats that have more the appearance of pews. It is remarkable that, excepting only the pew belonging to Rydal Hall, that to Rydal Mount, the one to the Parsonage, and I believe another, the men and women still continue, as used to be the custom in Wales, to sit separate from each other. Is this practice as old as the Reformation? And when and how did it originate? In the Jewish synagogues and in Lady Huntingdon’s Chapels the sexes are divided in the same way. (*PW* 5:443)

Smuggled in among the abandoned customs of the Welsh, the old practices of the Reformation, and the long history of the Jewish synagogues are the very recent, and very contentious chapels of Lady Huntingdon’s Connexion, the division of the Methodist movement directed by George Whitefield. Here what would prove to be a familiar, conflicted practice in Wordsworth’s verse asserts itself. While *The Excursion* loudly supports the Church of England, his private, long-unpublished recollections dote on this hidden chapel, which verges on the enthusiastic in its organization and practice. Yet even Wordsworth’s admiration is ambiguous, as he keeps

himself politely removed from the popular energies that otherwise fill the church: it's only the pews unaffiliated with the Wordsworth family, or the handful of other gentry, which are tainted with the possible Methodism of separated genders.

The need to discriminate Establishment from enthusiasm, both in Wordsworth's poetry and in the nation at large, faded as Dissent rose "from contemptible insignificance to the full flower of Victorian Non-conformity," providing England with a new set of religious norms.<sup>103</sup> Jeffrey's campaign against Methodistical excess was gradually abandoned, and Wordsworth's press went from friendly to fetishistic, as *Blackwood's* found in "his most felicitous poetry" a second Scripture, rivaling "the most touching and beautiful passages in the Sacred Page."<sup>104</sup> Despite its revisions, *The Prelude* may have changed less than its England, and it's the poem's richest irony to have been greeted at its Victorian publication in the terms that would have been its Georgian scandal. F. D. Maurice heard in it "the dying utterance of the half century we have just passed through, the expression—the English expression at least—of all that self-building process in which, according to their different schemes and principles, Byron, Goethe, Wordsworth, the Evangelicals (Protestant and Romanist), were all engaged."<sup>105</sup>

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103. Lovegrove, *Established Church, Sectarian People*, 14.

104. "Essays on the Lake School of Poetry, No. I. Wordsworth's *White Doe of Rylstone*," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 3 (July 1818): 369–81 (371).

105. *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice*, ed. Frederick Maurice, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1884), 2:59.