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## Narrative Means, Lyric Ends

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## PLOT ANTICIPATION AND LYRIC ASSOCIATION IN *THE PRELUDE*

something evermore about to be

—William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 6.609

Ever since William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* was first published in 1850, after half a lifetime of revision, there has been controversy about its genre. Early reviewers, perhaps taking their cues from the subtitle ("The Growth of a Poet's Mind"), quite correctly identify its primary subject as the thoughts and emotions of the poet. They also rightly assert that the poem is not, nor was meant to be, plot-driven; that it is not an exciting *narrative* in any usual sense of the word. The *Eclectic Review*, for example, warns its readers, "In reading the 'Prelude,' we should never forget that his object is not to weave an artful and amusing story, but sternly and elaborately to trace the 'growth of a poet's mind.' . . . He leads us accordingly, not so much from incident to incident, as from thought to thought, along the salient points of his mental history."<sup>1</sup> *Tait's Edinburgh*

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1. Review of *The Prelude*, by William Wordsworth, *Eclectic Review* 27 (1850): 550–62, quoted in *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 555.

*Magazine* laments: "As 'The Prelude' is not, nor pretends to be, a tale of stirring interest, and as it is also of very considerable length, it necessarily requires all legitimate aids of poetic art to sustain the continued interest of the reader. Unfortunately, Wordsworth never attributed to these their just importance."<sup>2</sup> The reviewer in *Graham's Magazine* notes that the events in the poem are not so much interesting in themselves, but rather are presented in relation to their psychological effect on Wordsworth. He complains, however, that the poem lacks a "sustained richness of diction and imagery," does not often indulge in the "easy yielding of the mind to the inspiration of objects," and excludes "ecstatic utterance of the emotions."<sup>3</sup> *The Prelude* fails, in the reviewer's opinion, because it lacks the basic elements of lyric.

Herbert Lindenberger gives a provisional explanation for this early hostility towards the poem now regarded as Wordsworth's masterpiece: "To what, then, must we attribute the failure of the Victorians to grasp *The Prelude*? The problem is at least partly one of genre classification: the poem somehow refused to fit into any of the established categories, at least as they were defined in 1850. If taken as a poem, why could its passion not be sustained? If an autobiography, why did it not possess the richness of detail of such models as *Dichtung und Wahrheit*? If a commentary on great men and events, why so many trivial incidents?"<sup>4</sup> For the Victorians, then, *The Prelude* would not fit into any one genre as neatly as they desired, for it is missing both sustained narrative interest, and the sustained passion of lyric poetry. Twentieth-century critics also debate the generic classification of *The Prelude*, but they are more flexible in their classifications, allowing that the poem may fit most but not all of the criteria for a particular genre, or that the poem may have marked allegiances to more than one genre. Lindenberger himself asserts the multiplicity of forms which the poem fits, comparing it to epics, idylls, didactic poems, and satires, and calling it "a poem in search of a genre."<sup>5</sup> Many contemporary critics of *The Prelude* focus on only two of its generic possibilities, either identifying it as a string of disconnected short lyrics, or a unified epic of unusually personal subject matter, or

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2. Review of *The Prelude*, by William Wordsworth, *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* 17.201 (Sept. 1850): 521.

3. Review of *The Prelude*, by William Wordsworth, *Graham's Magazine* (Philadelphia) 37.5 (Nov. 1850): 322.

4. Herbert Lindenberger, "The Reception of *The Prelude*," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 64 (1960): 205.

5. Herbert Lindenberger, *On Wordsworth's Prelude* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 14.

both at once.<sup>6</sup> I contend that the poem is a series of short lyrics united by an unusual narrative structure, which creates complex temporal movements and allows the work as a whole to function as one large lyric.

The temporal complexities of *The Prelude* have also long attracted critical attention. M. H. Abrams, in his foundational study *Natural Supernaturalism*, notes, "The construction of *The Prelude* is radically achronological, starting not at the beginning, but at the end—during Wordsworth's walk to 'the Vale that I had chosen,'" and he further observes that "in the course of *The Prelude* Wordsworth repeatedly drops the clue that his work has been designed to round back to its point of departure."<sup>7</sup> That is, the episode which comes last in a chronological reconstruction of story events—the walk to the chosen vale—is narrated twice, at the beginning and again at the end of the discourse. In the course of this walk Wordsworth finds inspiration in the breeze, which "assures him of his poetic mission and, though it is fitful, eventually leads to his undertaking *The Prelude* itself"; as a result, "*The Prelude* . . . is an involuted poem which is about its own genesis—a prelude to itself."<sup>8</sup> Much of the poem consists of Wordsworth's interactions with nature, which "assure[d] him of his poetic mission." The goal of the poem is to demonstrate his fitness to produce great poetry, and *The Prelude* itself becomes evidence of that fitness. Wordsworth alerts readers to this teleological drive of the poem in its opening book, when he asks, "Was it for this / That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved / To blend his murmurs with my Nurse's song?"<sup>9</sup> As Geoffrey Hartman explicates the rhetoric of this

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6. As a small sample of such arguments for genre, Lindenberger often treats *The Prelude* "as a group of great lyrical passages," David Bromwich emphasizes *The Prelude*'s "tone of lyric apology," Karl Kroeber thinks "in essence *The Prelude* is a narrative poem" which "is epic in its rejection of the traditional principles of epic narrative," and Mary Jacobus believes there is an "incompatibility between the lyric voice of *The Prelude* and its much-desired, 'distracting' epic progress," but eventually settles on calling it "an extended personal lyric." See Lindenberger, *On Wordsworth's Prelude*, 102; David Bromwich, *Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth's Poetry of the 1790's* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 172; Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), 104, 102; Mary Jacobus, "Apostrophe and Lyric Voice in *The Prelude*," in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, eds. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 172, 181.

7. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971), 74, 79.

8. *Ibid.*, 75, 79.

9. William Wordsworth, *The Fourteen-Book Prelude*, ed. W. J. B. Owen (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 1.269–71. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent citations are from the Cornell edition of the 1850 version; book and line numbers will be cited parenthetically. Citations marked as the 1805 version of *The Prelude* are taken from William Wordsworth, "AB-Stage Reading Text," *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed, 2 vols. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), vol. 1. I have chosen the 1850 version as my base text because

passage, "'Was it for this' potentially simplifies into 'it was for this' and even 'it was.' The question wants to be a statement about an 'it' (nature) that 'was' (acted in the past) 'for this' (a poetry it calls to birth)."<sup>10</sup>

In this chapter, I revisit such discussions of *The Prelude's* temporality and teleology from the perspective of narrative theory, in the belief that Wordsworth's poem and narratology can shed light on each other. *The Prelude* qualifies generalizations about the retrospective nature of narrative, throws into high relief some of the characteristics of confessional literature, and troubles some of Gérard Genette's categories for prolepsis. Narrative theory illuminates the unusual causal relations among *The Prelude's* story events, and the importance of the river metaphor used to describe those causal relations. *The Prelude's* rhetoric and narrative structure also exert a powerful influence over the temporality of the reading process, create an ambiguous temporal relationship between the narrator and the poem's endpoint, and produce a specific hybrid of lyric and narrative. All of these implications depend on one central argument: Wordsworth encourages his audience to read prospectively, constantly looking forward to a conclusion the reader knows from the very start—Wordsworth's status as a great poet, fostered by nature.<sup>11</sup> And yet Geoffrey Hartman is right to assert that "[r]anged against this affirmation are not only doubts about the tendency of the past but also about the poetry it fosters."<sup>12</sup> Richard Onorato has shown that Wordsworth compensates for such doubts by creating an idealized, fictitious version of himself, a fiction which the reader can see through: "To the reader, it is always plain that Nature's choice of Wordsworth is Wordsworth's imaginative choice of Nature."<sup>13</sup> Wordsworth's doubts about his past and about his poetry have received so much commentary that Tilottama Rajan has declared, "A study of *The Prelude* could not now take literally its figures of genesis and memory, which claim to ground Wordsworth's

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I emphasize ways the poem directs the reader's temporal and intellectual experience, and it seems fitting to use the version crafted for public dissemination.

10. Geoffrey Hartman, "'Was it for this . . .?': Wordsworth and the Birth of the Gods," in *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory*, eds. Kenneth R. Johnston et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 14.

11. Several critics have called *The Prelude* prospective or forward-looking, but in the context of Wordsworth looking forward to a possible future, rather than the reader looking forward to a future of which she is constantly assured. See, for instance, Abrams, *Natural*, 37; Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787–1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 29–30; and Susan J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 129.

12. Hartman, "Was it for this . . .?" 14.

13. Richard J. Onorato, *The Character of the Poet: Wordsworth in The Prelude* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 268.

interpretation of his life by attributing causality and factuality to something he himself was always revising."<sup>14</sup> This chapter certainly does not assume that Wordsworth's interpretation of his life is literally true, but it does explore the consequences of Wordsworth's explicit rhetoric for readers who suspend their disbelief and allow themselves to be guided by his rhetoric.

## PROSPECTIVE READING

*The Prelude* quite explicitly advertises its subject matter as the growth of the poet's mind, giving a clear teleology with a clear endpoint—Wordsworth's status as a mature poet. When the poem was published in 1850 shortly after the poet's death, Wordsworth's status as a much beloved poet laureate would be strong evidence that Wordsworth's goal was reached. More importantly, within the text Wordsworth ensures that the reader is certain of the end of the plot, from the very beginning of the reading experience. This certainty results from a constant tendency in the poem to look forward to the outcome,<sup>15</sup> even when the poet is examining the distant past of his childhood. It allows even a first-time reader to know the end to which each episode tends, and hence to know its significance even before reading an individual episode, rather than

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14. Tilottama Rajan, "The Erasure of Narrative in Post-Structuralist Representations of Wordsworth," in *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory*, eds. Kenneth R. Johnston et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 365.

15. A. D. Nuttall has a reading of the poem contradictory to mine. He claims, "*The Prelude* ends in the future tense because it is exactly what its name tells us: all proem, all exordium. Therefore even when one quotes the conclusion one is still quoting from an opening. The poet is still clearing his throat, preparing to sing." A. D. Nuttall, *Openings: Narrative Beginnings from the Epic to the Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 115. Rather than seeing the poem as constantly oriented toward its own end, he sees it as stuck in its own beginning. Perhaps this is due to Nuttall's greater emphasis on *The Prelude* as preparatory to *The Recluse*, and hence as falling short of its promises of what will follow it. Thus, in Nuttall's view, "The work proposed my [*sic*] be described as imminent, but the future tenses somehow work in a contrary direction, suggesting an ever-growing distance between the poet and his design." Nuttall, 118. By choosing to emphasize the successful completion of *The Prelude* itself as confirmation of Wordsworth's poetic powers, I see an ever-narrowing distance between the poet and his design. Joseph Sitterson also has an interpretation of *The Prelude* apparently in contradiction to mine: "The meaning is in the search, and narration, not in the end or origin toward which we are always arriving." Joseph C. Sitterson, Jr., *Romantic Poems, Poets, and Narrators* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2000), 86. But if the end and meaning of the poem is Wordsworth's status as a poet, then the very process of narration *is* the end, the goal, of the poem, for the act of poetic composition is the best evidence of the author's status as poet. Sitterson's distinction is thus dissolved.

having to wait until the end of the text for a retrospective significance to be conferred on what preceded it.

The structure and content of book 1 reveal the goal and purpose of the poem. After briefly celebrating his escape from the city and his burst of poetic energy and confidence (1.1–96), Wordsworth laments that his creative energy is vexed and unproductive, creating in him the desire to write without the present ability to do so (1.96–145). He then briefly lists reasons he should be an able poet, and lists at length possible topics for a poem, all of which he has rejected (1.146–233). After confessing himself a mockery to his profession (1.234–69), Wordsworth exclaims, “Was it for this / That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved / To blend his murmurs with my Nurse’s song” (1.269–71). The remainder of book 1 consists mainly of additional ways nature influenced him as a child. The logic of the progression is clear: the focus is on Wordsworth’s as-yet-unfulfilled ability to write a great poem. By asking “Was it for this” that nature ministered to him, Wordsworth clearly shows his belief that nature has fitted him to be a great poet, and his feeling that he has not yet lived up to this potential. This unambiguously tells the reader that the experiences which follow will illustrate *how* nature has fitted him for poetry. To reinforce that he does, in fact, achieve this final goal of poetic greatness, at the end of book 1 Wordsworth feels that his faculties are rejuvenated and that he will finish this poem on the growth of his own mind, a confidence that is obviously confirmed by the very existence of the poem his audience is reading (1.637–47). As Susan Wolfson observes, “To begin the poem this way, with the protagonist in full possession of his powers, is to premise the investigation on its outcome. Wordsworth’s goal, in other words, becomes his inspiration.”<sup>16</sup>

Between book 1’s descriptions of his boyhood experiences with nature, Wordsworth repeatedly reminds us of the relationships among the experiences, his mental development, and his final status as a poet.<sup>17</sup> Wordsworth tells us explicitly, and repeatedly, that nature has fostered and guided the growth of his mind. For example, the narrator declares, “Sedulous . . . I have been to trace / How Nature by extrinsic passion first / Peopled the mind with forms sublime or fair / And made me love them . . .” (1.544–47). The passage emphasizes nature’s agency in several ways: “Nature” is the grammatical subject governing the verbs “peopled” and “made,” its capitalization implies its personification, and nature seems almost coercive in making Wordsworth love these forms.

16. Wolfson, *Questioning*, 153.

17. The line numbers in book 1 of the 1850 versions are 340–56, 401–16, 464–75, 544–58, and 581–612.

These lines also clearly argue that nature directs its agency toward Wordsworth's "mind" and emotions, and they suggest that it provides specifically aesthetic direction. It fills his mind with "forms sublime or fair," with embodiments of the two most highly valued aesthetic concepts of the Romantic period—the sublime and the beautiful. This dual aesthetic development is reiterated when the narrator states, "Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up / Fostered alike by beauty and by fear" (1.301–2). Here, the poem explicitly names the category of the beautiful, and strongly implies the category of the sublime through the emotion it inspires: fear. The combination of the organic development implied by the metaphor of soul as seed, and nature's maternal, nurturing influence implied by the verb "fostered," again portrays nature's intervention as conscious and directed, rather than accidental. This, in turn, creates a greater sense of the sureness, even inevitability, of the outcome.

Other reminders in book 1 more explicitly announce that the outcome nature desires is, specifically, Wordsworth's success as a poet. Within the first 50 lines of the poem, the author gives thanks for the gentle breeze, and for his new-found liberty in the countryside, away from the stultifying city:

Thanks to both,  
 And their congenial powers that, while they join  
 In breaking up a long continued frost,  
 Bring with them vernal promises, the hope  
 Of active days urged on by flying hours;  
 Days of sweet leisure taxed with patient thought  
 Abstruse, nor wanting punctual service high,  
 Matins and vespers, of harmonious verse!  
 (1.38–45)

The regenerative natural surroundings suggest to Wordsworth that his activity and thought will produce "harmonious verse,"<sup>18</sup> and the impor-

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18. This passage does, obviously, refer to his "hope" that he will produce poetry, rather than guaranteeing he will, which suggests (contrary to what I have argued thus far) some uncertainty in the poem's outcome. The disjunction between the reader's position of certainty toward the poem's outcome, and the narrator's position of uncertain anticipation toward it, will be discussed in detail later in this chapter. Lorne Mook reads this passage very differently, minimizing its goal-oriented quality: "The two breezes bring, in short, not hope of days spent working toward a goal but spent in leisure and leisurely thought, not poetry that will be driven by any desire to put together over time a great work but poetry that will, like morning and evening prayers, have a ritualizing and steadying effect on each day." Lorne Mook, "The Everyday and the Teleological: Time-conflict, Progression, and Affect in Books 1 and 2 of *The Prelude*," *European Romantic Review* 17.5 (December 2006): 596.

tance he places on such poetic production emerges from the metaphors of religious service he uses to describe it (verse as morning and evening prayer).

The reader receives additional guidance, and an unambiguous explanation of the poem's goal, before the poem even begins. In fact, Wordsworth explains the endpoint and significance of *The Prelude* long before the poem is published, in the 1814 preface to *The Excursion*:

Several years ago, when the Author retired to his native mountains, with the hope of being enabled to construct a literary Work that might live, it was a reasonable thing that he should take a review of his own mind, and examine how far Nature and Education had qualified him for such employment. As subsidiary to this preparation, he undertook to record, in verse, the origin and progress of his own powers, as far as he was acquainted with them. That Work, addressed to a dear Friend . . . has long been finished. . . .— The . . . 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.<sup>19</sup>

The purpose of *The Prelude*, the "biographical" poem "addressed to a dear Friend," is clearly to give a "history of the Author's mind" and to trace "the origin and progress of his own [poetic] powers." Wordsworth's readers thus have a blueprint of how to read *The Prelude* before they have the poem itself.

Given the thirty-six year lag time between the publication of this preface and the publication of *The Prelude*, many of the latter's readers might have been unfamiliar with the preface, or might have forgotten it in the interim. But this possibility was avoided, because the first edition of *The Prelude* reprints four paragraphs from the preface to *The Excursion*, including the above quotation.<sup>20</sup> This addition provides the published poem's first readers with a clear explanation of the poem's goal and the story's end before the poem begins. It also indicates that Wordsworth's ideas about the poem were apparent to those who were close to him and responsible for the poem's posthumous publication. *The Prelude's* title and subtitle—"The Growth of a Poet's Mind"—were chosen by his

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19. William Wordsworth, "Preface to *The Excursion* (1814)," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, vol. 3, eds. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 5.

20. "Advertisement," in *The Prelude: Or, Growth of a Poet's Mind*, by William Wordsworth (London: Edward Moxon, 1850).

widow, Mary, although Wordsworth did himself refer to it as the poem on the growth of his mind. Mary's choice of subtitle suggests that she clearly understood the poem's point, and that she wanted to make it unmistakable for the poem's other readers.

## A MODEL OF PROSPECTIVE READING: THE RIVER

*The Prelude* not only encourages a strongly prospective reading experience; it also offers the reader a metaphorical model of its atypical narrative structure. Both the difficulties of employing traditional narrative techniques to Wordsworth's chosen topic, and his alternative method of structuring a narrative, are illustrated in the following passage:

But who shall parcel out  
His intellect, by geometric rules,  
Split like a province into round and square?  
Who knows the individual hour in which  
His habits were first sown, even as a seed?  
Who that shall point, as with a wand, and say,  
"This portion of the river of my mind  
Came from yon fountain"? Thou, my friend! . . .  
. . .  
. . . No officious slave  
Art thou of that false secondary power  
By which we multiply distinctions . . .  
. . .  
And thou wilt doubt with me, less aptly skilled  
Than many are to range the faculties  
In scale and order, class the cabinet  
Of their sensations, and in voluble phrase  
Run through the history and birth of each  
As of a single independent thing.  
Hard task, vain hope, to analyse the mind,  
If each most obvious and particular thought,  
Not in a mystical and idle sense,  
But in the words of reason deeply weighed,  
Hath no beginning.  
(2.203–32)

The passage clearly states the purpose of the poem—to trace the progress of the poet's "intellect," to "analyse [his] mind"—but the topic does not lend itself to typical methods of narration. Since Wordsworth cannot identify the "individual hour in which / His habits were first sown, even as a seed," he cannot depict an event of limited duration, an "individual hour," in clear causal relation to the outcome. His chosen topic lacks the distinct events that would easily identify it as a story. He reiterates this point when he says of his sensations that he is unable to "Run through the history and birth of each / As of a single independent thing."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, this passage emphasizes another departure of *The Prelude* from standard narrative—the poem's dearth of characters. It is not individual people whose births and histories Wordsworth is unable to tell; he instead is unable to give precise histories to his own sensations. His mind and its components are the real, very unorthodox, characters of this tale. These 'characters'—his "thoughts" and "faculties"—have "no beginning," no point at which everything that precedes it lacks causality or necessity, nowhere from which to start a standard causal narrative. What Wordsworth offers up instead is exemplified by an image that dominates *The Prelude*: a river.

Wordsworth asks if anyone is able to "point, as with a wand, and say, / 'This portion of the river of my mind / Came from yon fountain,'" clearly implying that for himself such a division is impossible. This again emphasizes the unfitness of a usual narrative structure for his topic, but also suggests a positive alternative: the metaphor of the river of the mind describes the narrative project Wordsworth envisions. A river's path is determined and teleological, not governed by a series of independent choices, with many influences adding to and intermixing with the main stream. The various tributaries by which elements arrived

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21. In his study of *The Prelude* as confessional literature, Frank McConnell gives a very different reading of this passage. He thinks Wordsworth writes a retrospective narrative in *The Prelude*, and that the negative alternative discussed in this passage, the attempt to "Run through the history and birth of each, / As of a single independent thing," refers to the "Lockean epistemology and associationism gone mad" exemplified by *Tristram Shandy*. Frank D. McConnell, *The Confessional Imagination: A Reading of Wordsworth's Prelude* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 51–53. I believe it is traditional narrative structure which is being rejected. Kenneth Johnston also thinks this passage questions "whether narrative per se is the appropriate form for the representation of mental growth." Johnston argues, however, that Wordsworth does not reject narrative and instead decides that "the problem of not being able to tell his story's beginning may be solved by refusing to admit it ever ends—a solution good for continuing *The Prelude* but fatal to starting *The Recluse*." Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 74, 76.

can be noticed by tracing backwards, but which individual parts of the river were contributed by each stream is impossible to discover retrospectively. This is a vivid and suggestive analogy for Wordsworth's view of personal history as an accretive, inextricably fused set of associations, rather than as a chain of discrete causes and effects. The river is emblematic of the growth of the poet's mind and the structure of the poem that describes that growth.<sup>22</sup> While M. H. Abrams may be right that the poem has a "circular shape" at the level of discourse since it begins and ends by narrating the same event,<sup>23</sup> if we reconstruct the temporal and causal relations among story events they will more closely resemble a river. Wordsworth's arrangement of his narrative has an associative logic that unites each episode to the final goal, rather than a causal logic that would directly link each episode to the next. This repeatedly impels the reader to think forward to the poem's end, processing and understanding the narrative prospectively, rather than retrospectively.

The shape of a river and its tributaries is similar to that of a much more common metaphor for narrative structure—a repeatedly forking

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22. I agree with Richard Onorato that "the fusion of the character created and the poet creating him is to be understood by understanding the significance of recurrent metaphors and the associational nature of metaphor itself." Onorato, 20–21. Onorato, however, emphasizes metaphors of rootedness and of foot journeys, and only mentions the "stream of mind" in passing. Onorato, 169. M. H. Abrams remarks upon the water imagery used to represent Wordsworth's mental development, noting that in book 13, "Abruptly, Wordsworth now discloses . . . that what he has all along been narrating is the story of the birth, growth, disappearance, and resurrection of imagination. He represents this faculty in the metaphor of a stream." Abrams, 118. He does not pursue the implications of this metaphor, however, nor does he acknowledge that this metaphor is established much earlier (in book 2), or that it applies to all of Wordsworth's mental faculties (imagination being one important stream flowing into the broader river). Kenneth Johnston recognizes that the river is a dominant metaphor for the poem itself and briefly discusses several of its appearances. Johnston, 131, 157–58, 210, 213–14. Geoffrey Hartman has, in passing, compared the poem itself to a river: "A poem without a proper name, of obscure origin, mazy as a river, stretches its casual magnificence to epic length. It has never been subdued to one great theme." Hartman, *Wordsworth's*, 208. Hartman, however, emphasizes the meandering aspects of a river, whereas I emphasize its clearly determined end. Lorne Mook notes the "teleological implications" of the River Derwent in the "Was it for this?" section of the poem. Mook, 599. And two early reviews of *The Prelude* adopt the river metaphor to describe Wordsworth's mind or the poem itself but do not pursue the metaphor's implications. See Review of *The Prelude, Eclectic*, 548, 549; Review of *The Prelude, Tait's*, 526. For a more general discussion of water imagery and its temporal implications in Wordsworth's poetry, see John Beer, *Wordsworth in Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 60, 70, 170–83, 190–91. In the course of arguing that Wordsworth denies history by transmuting it into lyric, Alan Liu discusses the association of rivers with riots and revolutionary violence, and notes examples of both turbulence and stillness in Wordsworth's water imagery. Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 362–65.

23. Abrams, 79.

path. As we saw in chapter 1,<sup>24</sup> each fork represents a decision or event with several possible outcomes, depicted by the branching paths. At each fork, only one path can be followed, and as the narrative progresses, the remaining paths that could be followed are fewer and fewer. It is only when this final outcome has been reached that it seems inevitable, and it is only from the vantage point of the ending that we can retrace the steps of the plot and judge its coherence and probability. The forking path model is well-suited to many narratives which invite a primarily retrospective, rather than prospective, response from the reader. But such an emphasis on retrospection sometimes becomes strongly affiliated with most or all narratives, so much so that narrative has been called “in essence a retrospective mode.”<sup>25</sup> For theorists who require causation in addition to chronology in defining narrative, retrospection becomes especially important. In this view, what distinguishes a narrative from a mere series of events is the overall structure and meaning that can be conferred only from a backward-looking gaze; this gaze can occur both within and outside the text. First, narrators often assume a retrospective position toward story events: the time of discourse is subsequent to the time of story. As Seymour Chatman remarks, “Most narratives set their story-NOW at . . . ‘past time’; verbal narratives usually show it by the preterite.”<sup>26</sup> Linguist Suzanne Fleishman provides a stronger statement of the case: “Narration is a verbal icon of experience viewed from a *retrospective* vantage; the experience is by definition ‘past.’ . . . The tenses appropriate to the verbal activity of narrating are accordingly tenses that include past time reference as part of their basic meaning.”<sup>27</sup> But as Uri Margolin has persuasively argued, this is not always the case. Some acts of narration are nearly concurrent with the events told, as in epistolary novels, and in other cases the narrator tells a story prospectively, taking a prophetic or hypothetical stance toward events which have not yet happened.<sup>28</sup> In addition, Dorrit Cohn and James Phelan have investigated the recent phenomenon of simultaneous narration—a narrative

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24. See especially pages 26–27, 29, and 64–65.

25. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 77.

26. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 80.

27. Suzanne Fleishman, *Tense and Narrativity: From Medieval Performance to Modern Fiction* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 23–24.

28. Uri Margolin, “Of What Is Past, Is Passing, or to Come: Temporality, Aspectuality, Modality, and the Nature of Literary Narrative,” in *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, ed. David Herman (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1999), 150–59.

situation that cannot be understood mimetically, in which a first-person narrator tells his or her story entirely in the present tense, experiencing events and narrating them simultaneously.<sup>29</sup> Despite these important exceptions, the majority of narratives are retrospective in terms of the narrator's relation to events.

Usually, retrospection is also important for the reader's relationship to the narrative as a whole. During the process of reading, we provisionally evaluate how one event or element relates to another, and we might speculate on how the story may end, but we usually cannot predict the ending with complete confidence. Only after we have read the ending do we feel its necessity, and only then can we look back and assign probable causes for the end result, and identify which incidents were crucial for the final outcome and which were irrelevant. When encountering a story, we usually assume that "the end of the story is the retrospective revelation of the law of the whole."<sup>30</sup> In most cases, this emphasis on the reader's retrospection is well justified, most obviously because a first-time reader will necessarily be missing information until he or she reaches the end of a narrative, and we usually assume that, at a minimum, a reader must be familiar with all the parts in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the whole. The value placed on readerly retrospection may also derive, in part, from the reader's desire to assume a similar viewpoint as the narrator (unless the reader has perceived the narrator as unreliable). Typically, when reading a story told by a retrospective narrator, the audience can only take a similar position as the narrator's after reading through to the end.

This concept of narrative is not universally applicable, though. Rather, it is a twentieth-century articulation of a structure developed in the literature of the previous two centuries. Generally, the notion of a strongly causal and retrospectively understood plot is primarily derived from, and best applies to, the realist novel of the mid-eighteenth to early-twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> Peter Brooks freely admits that "our common

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29. Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 96–108; James Phelan, "Present Tense Narration, Mimesis, the Narrative Norm, and the Positioning of the Reader in *Waiting for the Barbarians*," in *Understanding Narrative*, eds. James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1994), 222–45. Phelan uses simultaneous narration to modify some of Suzanne Fleishman's claims about tense and narrative.

30. J. Hillis Miller, "Ariadne's Thread: Repetition and the Narrative Line," in *Interpretation of Narrative*, eds. Mario J. Valdés and Owen J. Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 158. In his essay, Miller complicates this idea by questioning linearity and simple causation, emphasizing repetition instead of succession.

31. It is true that a similar notion of plot has sometimes been inferred from Aristotle's comments on tragedy. Aristotle enjoins, "It is the function of a poet to relate . . . things

sense of plot. . . . has been molded by the great nineteenth-century narrative tradition," and that he gets his premises from and focuses on this tradition.<sup>32</sup> Although many other narrative theorists share these predispositions, not all openly acknowledge them, and ideas derived from realist novels are sometimes presented as more broadly applicable. Scholes and Kellogg react against precisely this, and they undertake their study in order to "put the novel in its place . . . seeing the novel as only one of a number of narrative possibilities," because "the tendency to apply the standards of nineteenth-century realism to all fiction naturally has disadvantages for our understanding of every other kind of narrative."<sup>33</sup>

*The Prelude* serves as a counterexample to the necessity of reader retrospection. Wordsworth encourages his audience to read prospectively, constantly looking forward to a conclusion the reader knows from the very beginning of the poem. Wordsworth's chosen model for his narrative structure—a river—emphasizes the differences between his text and retrospectively processed narratives. With a river, the flow happens in the opposite direction from a forking path, which changes the implications of the model and makes a river a more apt metaphor for prospective texts. With a path, the possible options are ever increasing when looking to the future, but only one option can be followed; the person traveling has a series of choices that decide an otherwise indeterminate future. A river emphasizes instead the simultaneous contributions of many small tributaries, all of which travel inexorably toward the same predetermined end. In a text with a plot structured like a river, there is no guesswork involved about which path the plot might follow, because there is always only one point toward which all the plot elements could and will converge.

## TEMPORAL BLURRING AND LYRICAL EFFECTS

*The Prelude's* temporality becomes much more complex at the local level of an individual episode. The ice-skating section exemplifies such temporal complexity, and the poet's concluding gloss of the episode

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that may happen, i.e. that are possible in accordance with probability or necessity," and he denigrates episodic plots "in which there is neither probability nor necessity that the episodes follow one another." See Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987) 12, 13.

32. Brooks, xi, xii.

33. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) 3, 6.

provides strong guidance to the reader. As a boy, Wordsworth and his friends stay out late to play on the frozen lake:

for me

It was a time of rapture!—Clear and loud  
 The village Clock toll'd six—I wheeled about,  
 Proud and exulting like an untired horse  
 That cares not for his home. . . .  
 . . .  
 So through the darkness and the cold we flew,  
 And not a voice was idle: with the din  
 Smitten, the precipices rang aloud;  
 . . .

. . . while the stars,  
 Eastward, were sparkling clear, and in the west  
 The orange sky of evening died away.  
 Not seldom from the uproar I retired  
 Into a silent bay,—or sportively  
 Glanced sideways, leaving the tumultuous throng  
 To cut across the reflex of a star  
 That fled, and, flying still before me, gleamed  
 Upon the glassy plain: and oftentimes,  
 When we had given our bodies to the wind,  
 And all the shadowy banks on either side  
 Came sweeping through the darkness, spinning still  
 The rapid line of motion, then at once  
 Have I, reclining back upon my heels,  
 Stopped short; yet still the solitary cliffs  
 Wheeled by me—even as if the earth had rolled  
 With visible motion her diurnal round!  
 Behind me did they stretch in solemn train,  
 Feebler and feebler, and I stood and watched  
 Till all was tranquil as a dreamless sleep.  
 (1.429–63)

Early in the episode Wordsworth overtly describes what he felt at the time of the experience: “it was a time of rapture,” and he was “proud and exulting.” This mood colors the entire episode, but rather than continuing to state directly what he felt as a boy, Wordsworth begins to embody the emotion in his language. He implies the exultation of the actions through verbs like we “flew” and the banks “came sweeping

through the darkness," and expresses it in the phrase, "we had given our bodies to the wind." As Geoffrey Hartman notes, "Nature soon responds to the activity of the skaters. . . . The precipices ring" and "even the cliffs, which most easily give the impression of stock-still solitude, are now seen to participate in the general movement that informs the earth."<sup>34</sup> By the end of the episode it is not only nature that identifies with the emotions of the young boy; the older narrating Wordsworth has identified with his younger self, re-experiencing the rapture and steeping his language with the exultation he once again feels. As M. H. Abrams characterizes this phenomenon, "Wordsworth does not tell his life as a simple narrative in past time but as the present remembrance of things past, in which forms and sensations . . . evoke the former self which coexists with the altered present self in a multiple awareness."<sup>35</sup> Abrams maintains, however, that "there is a wide 'vacancy' between the I now and the I then."<sup>36</sup> Here the relationship between the "I now" and the "I then," between Wordsworth as narrator and Wordsworth as character, changes noticeably over time, within a single episode. The emotional distance between the narrating and the narrated Wordsworth that we may infer at the opening of the ice-skating passage, has vanished by the end of it. The double consciousness associated with narrative retrospection, the "wide 'vacancy,'" thus disappears as the episode progresses.

Just as the emotional gap between narrator and character closes, so, too, does the temporal gap between discourse and story. The verbs are in the past tense, but it is an iterative past: the episode first implies, and later explicitly says, the described event has occurred numerous times.<sup>37</sup> This passage uses simple past tenses ("the . . . Clock toll'd," "I wheeled," "we flew"), which in itself allows for the possibility of either singular actions, or single representative examples of repeated actions.<sup>38</sup> Each

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34. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision: An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke, and Valéry* [1954] (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 18.

35. Abrams, 75.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Gérard Genette points out the importance of iterative narrative. See *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 113–60.

38. W. H. Hirtle writes, "In our discussion of the simple and progressive forms . . . it was pointed out that the former often expressed a customary event, that is, an event which gives the impression of regular recurrence, or even of such a possibility." W. H. Hirtle, *Time, Aspect, and the Verb* (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1975), 72. Laurel Brinton remarks, "In the simple past, there is no distinction between single situations and habits." Laurel Brinton, *The Development of English Aspectual Systems: Aspectualizers and Post-Verbal Particles* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 250. Of course, a few moments' reflection on English usage corroborates these claims.

action within the episode is thus directly and vividly presented, and seems like a particular event, even though the action might be iterative rather than singular. The temporal setting of the episode intensifies this ambiguity. We are given the very precise detail that “the village Clock toll’d six,” and we know that the events occur during the brief period of twilight when stars are visible in the east but the west is still orange from the just-set sun. Despite this specificity of time of day, other temporal information is quite vague. It is winter, but we do not know what month or date. We know Wordsworth is a young boy, but we do not know the specific year. The temporal setting thus associates the actions with a particular time of evening, but suggests that there were many such evenings in Wordsworth’s boyhood. This suggestion is confirmed by adverbs such as “not seldom” and “oftentimes” mentioned relatively late in the passage, which make explicit the iterative nature of this episode. The overall effect is to give the individual actions the vividness of singularity, but to unmoor from time the episode as a whole.<sup>39</sup>

The episode is not attached to any particular past moment, but it has the vividness of particularity—and it can thus seem almost present to readers.<sup>40</sup> The combined emotional and temporal immediacy achieved by the end of the passage shifts its mode from narrative to lyric. As we have seen in the previous two chapters, lyric creates a sense of presentness in its illusion of simultaneity and its stress on the “now” of the poem’s creation or transmission. By the end of the ice-skating episode, Wordsworth has collapsed the emotional and temporal distance between his narrating self and the narrated boy. The reader, by extension, encounters Wordsworth’s perceptions and emotions as if they were related in the suspended present moment of lyric discourse. Herbert Lindenberger’s comment on the Dawn Dedication is equally appropriate to this and many other episodes: the passage moves “from a world of transitory

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39. David Bromwich has noticed a similar iterativity, and a similar blurring of present and past tenses, in “Tintern Abbey,” where he finds “the invention of a grammatical tense that seems to cover both present and past.” Bromwich, 86.

40. The effect is similar to one described by Uri Margolin in his examples of verb tenses which do not match the temporal relationship between utterance and event. He categorizes these types of tense shifts, and some of their possible rhetorical effects, claiming that “in retrospective first-person narratives the historical present is clearly associated with the narrator’s reliving a past situation in its affective immediacy.” Uri Margolin, “Shifted (Displaced) Temporal Perspective in Narrative,” *Narrative* 9.2 (May 2001): 199. One type of historical present occurs in first-person retrospective narratives when “the speaker’s past state of consciousness act[s] as deictic center.” Margolin, “Shifted,” 199. I argue that in the skating episode (and in many other episodes in *The Prelude*), such a shift of consciousness occurs, and the narrator “reliv[es] a past situation in its affective immediacy,” but without a concomitant shift in verb tenses.

things to intimations of a more eternal realm . . . from the language of prose . . . through a landscape appropriate to the short lyric. . . . In time the passage moves from a sense of great distance between Wordsworth's present state and the event he is depicting . . . to a gradual apprehension of the oneness of past and present."<sup>41</sup> Wordsworth has found a way to give the narrated event the timelessness and intensity of lyric.

There are indeed narrated events, at least at a minimal level, within this particular episode, and within the lyric episodes generally. The episode involves characters who perform actions, and it implies basic causality. But if the narrative itself is extracted from the episode and examined on its own, the story is a terribly impoverished one, and has very little intrinsic interest or meaning. When the emotional and spiritual impact on Wordsworth is taken into account, the episode is of great significance. In *The Prelude*, as in the *Lyrical Ballads*, "the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and the situation and not the action and situation to the feeling."<sup>42</sup> The focus of the episode, what makes it so memorable, is the emotional effect of the events on Wordsworth. He puts the events of narrative in the service of the intense, subjective feeling of lyric.

The content of the skating episode could be seen as an allegory of Wordsworth's use of narrative elements to create lyric moments. For the first half of the episode, the young Wordsworth is in the company of his friends, surrounded by other characters. Half way through, he "leav[es] the tumultuous throng" and skates by himself, shifting away from the initial gesture toward social interaction and moving toward isolated subjective experience. While alone, Wordsworth tries "to cut across the reflex of a star / That fled, and, flying still before [him], gleamed / Upon the glassy plain." He pursues a star—perhaps the closest thing in our experience to something fixed, permanent, and transcendent. In doing so, he actively moves in relation to the objects that surround him (the borders of the lake, the other skaters, etc.), but his changing relation to them is unimportant and does not influence the fixed distance between him and the image of the star. The unchanging relation between his subject position and the transcendent image is crucial. This mimics the poem's abandonment of actions and characters to pursue the poet's subjective relationship to what is permanent and transcendent, and consequently his status as lyric subject. A second optical curiosity described

41. Lindenberger, *On Wordsworth's Prelude*, 146.

42. William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, vol.1, eds. W. J. B Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 128.

in the skating episode reiterates this point. Wordsworth skates very fast in a circle, then “stop[s] short; yet still the solitary cliffs / Wheeled by [him]—even as if the earth had rolled / With visible motion her diurnal round!” Wordsworth is initially active and in motion in relation to the outside world. When Wordsworth stops and is still, the entire world seems to revolve around him. Action is used to bring about the appearance of a solitary, motionless subject in whose perception the objective world swirls and coalesces around him. The action of narrative thus ends in the extreme subjectivity of lyric, and the frenetic motion of the narrated event yields to the tranquility Wordsworth associates with poetic composition.<sup>43</sup>

As we have seen, Wordsworth recreates the emotional intensity of the original experience by blurring the narrating speaker into the narrated figure. The lyricization of the passage heightens the emotional intensity and creates a sense of atemporality and immediacy. The reader, however, is then invited to reinforce the continuity of the speaker’s personality by temporally blurring the episode in the opposite direction, moving from Wordsworth then to the Wordsworth now undertaking the narration. The ice-skating episode itself is immediately followed by an apostrophic rhetorical question:

Ye presences of Nature, in the sky,  
 And on the earth! Ye visions of the hills!  
 And Souls of lonely places! can I think  
 A vulgar hope was yours when ye employed  
 Such ministry, when ye, through many a year  
 Haunt[ed] me thus among my boyish sports . . . ?  
 (1.464–69)<sup>44</sup>

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43. In his complementary reading of the ice-skating episode, Jeffrey Baker argues that the young Wordsworth defies both human time (by ignoring the church bells) and natural time (by staying out past sunset), and through this defiance achieves “a kind of liberation from time” in his visionary experience. Jeffrey Baker, *Time and Mind in Wordsworth’s Poetry* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980), 134. Christopher Miller thinks this episode “exemplifies the poetics of evening” by depicting “a dilation of time,” but puts more emphasis than I on how “the lapse of time is registered” in such evening scenes. Christopher R. Miller, *The Invention of Evening: Perception and Time in Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 101, 6.

44. This is one of many instances that prompt Geoffrey Hartman to note, “The episodes that constitute [Wordsworth’s narrative] run off into apostrophe and didactic speech . . . shifting from narrative to apostrophe, from description to an interpretation that assumes a ‘fellowship’ between nature and the developing poet.” Hartman, “Was it for this,” 18.

The reference to nature's "ministry" recalls previous associations of worship with poetry, suggesting that Wordsworth's required response to nature's ministrations is the creation of verse.<sup>45</sup> Wordsworth presents poetry as the clear spiritual goal of nature's intervention in his life, yet by phrasing it as a question he is inviting the reader's participation in reaffirming the answer. We are spurred to think forward from this description of his "boyish sports" to the endpoint of *The Prelude* itself—Wordsworth's status as a mature poet. The temporal unmooring of the episode facilitates this movement forward; because Wordsworth deemphasizes and renders ambiguous its precise chronological relationship to other episodes, the reader can more easily focus on its relationship to the ending.

Since the goal toward which *The Prelude* tends is made explicit at the beginning rather than withheld until the end, there is little gap between the knowledge of the narrator and that of the reader. Wordsworth may have built into the poem an intellectual alliance with his audience, an immediate exchange of knowledge, to foster the reader's own poetic development. For him, a poet has the same faculties as other men, albeit some of those faculties are more strongly developed. In the 1850 preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, after listing the characteristics of a poet, Wordsworth explains, "Among the qualities there enumerated as principally conducing to form a Poet, is implied nothing differing in kind from other men, but only in degree."<sup>46</sup> If the structure of *The Prelude* encourages readers to follow closely and empathize with his development as a poet, then the poem might be meant to stimulate a similar development of the reader's imaginative potential.<sup>47</sup> As M. H. Abrams reminds

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45. Metaphors of poetry as a form of worship, or a type of religious vocation, occur frequently in *The Prelude*, as when the narrator declares, "To the open fields I told / A prophecy:—poetic numbers came / Spontaneously, to clothe in priestly robe / A renovated Spirit singled out, / Such hope was mine, for holy services" (1.50–54).

46. William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1850)," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, vol. 1, eds. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 142.

47. The frequent addresses to Coleridge as an intended recipient of the poem suggest that Wordsworth's ideal audience has both imaginative potential and empathy for him. But what Sarah Zimmerman says of Dorothy Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey" might also be true of Coleridge in *The Prelude*: "[H]er suitability for the role of reader raises questions about the extent to which she can then represent an audience, and hence a social arena, in the poem." Sarah M. Zimmerman, *Romanticism, Lyricism, and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 99. Nevertheless, *The Prelude*'s orientation toward the reader contradicts the school of thought, exemplified by J. S. Mill, that poetry in general, and lyric poetry in particular, is unconscious of an audience, is overheard rather than heard. Kenneth Johnston emphasizes the social arena of *The Prelude* by placing it in the context of *The Recluse*'s broader scope, and by exploring within *The Prelude* itself the interactions among

us in his discussion of the *Essay* of 1815, "Above all, Wordsworth says, his task is difficult because his poetry cannot appeal to a ready-made, hence passive, sensibility, but must communicate to the reader an active 'power' to cooperate with the 'powers' of the poet as applied 'to objects on which they had not before been exercised.'"48

Wordsworth leaves his readers ample space to exercise their powers: we are left free to speculate precisely *how* this and other interactions with nature fostered his poetic development. Wordsworth himself says remarkably little about the precise causal connections. Susan Wolfson has noted, "For many readers—perhaps even for Wordsworth himself—the passages of intense recollection retain a certain distance from the glosses crowded around them."<sup>49</sup> As is frequently the case in Wordsworth's poetry, the question of why he is moved by something in nature is subordinated to the fact that he is moved.<sup>50</sup> Whereas Geoffrey Hartman argues that in such cases we only accept or reject Wordsworth's statements that something is so, but do not question its mechanisms, Susan Wolfson suggests that "Wordsworth's own restrictive interpretations open up, rather than close off, a reader's inquiries."<sup>51</sup>

What form might such inquiry take? One could look for evidence that nature influences Wordsworth's choice of a poetic vocation in the events themselves, but some of them (including the ice-skating episode) seem too common and unremarkable. Wordsworth, of course, does remark

"the three terms of Wordsworth's epic project—Man, Nature, and Human Life." Johnston, 195

48. Abrams, 397–98. In his study of the lyric turn in nineteenth-century literature and twentieth-century criticism, Clifford Siskin suggests that Wordsworthian lyric "undermines the inherited distinction of kind between poet and reader by inducing the sympathetic participation of the latter in the supposedly liberating act of 'making' the poem." Clifford Siskin, *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 55.

49. Wolfson, *Questioning*, 164.

50. Hartman, *Wordsworth's*, 7. Geoffrey Hartman's comment on "Tintern Abbey" applies equally well to many episodes in *The Prelude*: "The description of objects and the statement of emotion that these objects bring are expressed by separate operations. There is no attempt to relate anything specific in the description to any specific feeling in statement, no simple or complex attempt to reconstitute some nexus of cause and effect." Hartman, *Unmediated*, 4. Whereas Hartman here emphasizes the interpretive gap between natural description and emotion, elsewhere he discusses the gap between these elements and their stated significance: in *The Prelude* "the moral message, whenever explicit, is kept causally separate from the narrated experience." Hartman, *Unmediated*, 15.

51. Hartman, *Unmediated*, 38; Wolfson, *Questioning*, 165. Wolfson goes on to claim, "It is this excess [of meaning] that is the impulse of the Romantic lyric, and it is with this that the narrative argument remains at odds." Wolfson, *Questioning*, 165. I will argue that the narrative argument is put in the service of lyric excess, that the particular narrative structure of *The Prelude* is meant to foster the associational logic and atemporality of lyric.

them, and the very fact that he notices what so many others would overlook could be the basis for connecting an episode to Wordsworth's poetic ability. The detail in which he describes events then becomes further proof of his careful attention and poetic sensitivity. Other readers might find evidence in the lyric sensibility and emotional intensity Wordsworth brings to the events. The poet's audience may also turn away from the story level altogether, and instead look for confirmation of his poetic greatness in the skilful construction of the discourse, in the poet's use of language in the act of narrating. One could also construct connections between an episode and the endpoint through a careful consideration of the relationships among event, initial emotional response, memory, and later emotional response, taking into account alterations that Wordsworth makes (with or without conscious awareness), an approach taken by many of Wordsworth's best critics.

The poem's prospective narrative structure not only encourages the reader's active, imaginative engagement, but also creates an associative logic which has more in common with lyric than with traditional narrative, and which provides the large-scale structure necessary to a long poem while allowing the poem as a whole to function as one extended lyric. In his study of the poem, Herbert Lindenberger proposes "to look at each spot of time throughout *The Prelude* as a repetition of the last, in fact, to look at the poem as saying essentially the same thing again and again. . . . There is no real progression in *The Prelude*."<sup>52</sup> I agree that the poem has no easily identifiable progression; it certainly does not develop a plot as one usually expects in a narrative. And the episodes are repetitious, "saying essentially the same thing"—that Wordsworth's interaction with nature contributed to his growth as a poet. But, as Lindenberger has also noticed, "To repeat means also to accumulate. The difference between a single spot of time . . . and *The Prelude* as a whole is more than a difference in degree; the accumulation, one after another, of visionary moments produces an illusion of heroic enterprise that no work of narrower breadth can match."<sup>53</sup> Thus, in the process of asserting the prodigiousness of his poetic powers and describing their growth, Wordsworth creates a work that is itself prodigious both in length and in seeming grandeur. The individual experiences accumulate to foster Wordsworth's poetic development, and the narration of these accumulated episodes provides increasing proof of Wordsworth's poetic prowess. The episodes all directly relate only to their common

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52. Lindenberger, *On Wordsworth's Prelude*, 188.

53. *Ibid.*, 193.

endpoint—Wordsworth’s status as a poet, but have no direct causal relation to each other. Rather than forming a causal chain, the individual parts of *The Prelude* are loosely but suggestively associated with each other to form a nuanced and convincing meditation on the author’s poetic abilities. The poem as a whole functions according to the logic of lyric, not the logic of retrospectively read narrative. Thus *The Prelude* uses narrative means to achieve lyric ends. Each individual episode tends toward the lyric suspension of time. And rather than functioning as a straightforward narrative progression in time, the poem as a whole strives for lyric simultaneity: the focus is on each episode’s contribution to the suspended moment of composition, rather than on temporal disjunctions among episodes. The end result is a general sense of timelessness in *The Prelude*, an eternal suspension of time. Yet this is combined with the forward-looking structure that encourages prospective reading. Taken together, these two effects make *The Prelude* itself feel like “something evermore about to be” (6.609), something both eternal and anticipatory.

Wordsworth himself seems to have a similar feeling about the poem. Although he desires completion and fulfillment of his poetic potential, it seems that he paradoxically wants to avoid completion of this particular poetic work, that he only wants to anticipate its completion. Biographical information could easily be invoked to support this: Wordsworth spent over half a century composing and revising *The Prelude*, and it was not published during his lifetime. But there is also evidence within the poem. Wordsworth expresses his preference for anticipation rather than completion in a passage describing the first years of the French Revolution:

Not favored spots alone, but the whole earth  
 The beauty wore of promise—that which sets  
 (As at some moments might not be unfelt  
 Among the bowers of Paradise itself)  
 The budding rose above the rose full blown.  
 (11.117–21)

The initial glory of the Revolution is in part due to the promise, the anticipation, it confers to the world. The higher value of growth toward a specific end, over an end fulfilled, is not limited to the time of the Revolution. Rather, the poem attributes it to humanity’s progenitors, Adam and Eve, and thus makes it seemingly universal. The strange-

ness of this attribution draws attention to the image and idea: paradise is usually associated with timelessness and an utter lack of change, but Wordsworth speculates that promised change is desirable even in Eden. To further emphasize mankind's attraction to what is not yet, but soon to be, fulfilled, Wordsworth constructs lines that approximate their subject. The promised illustration which starts in the second line with "that which sets" is followed by a self-conscious aside that delays the fulfillment of the illustrative image. When the image is given in the final line, it culminates in three consecutive stresses ("rose full blown"), bringing the line to a ponderous halt after the lilting and regular movement of "the budding rose above."

The preference for the promising but incomplete over the finished but inert might also extend to literary creations, including Wordsworth's own work. The description of Yordas Cave has a telling analogy; the cave contains:

. . . shapes and forms, and tendencies to shape  
 That shift and vanish, change and interchange  
 Like Spectres, ferment silent and sublime!  
 That, after a short space, works less and less  
 Till, every effort, every motion gone,  
 The scene before him stands in perfect view,  
 Exposed, and lifeless as a written book!  
 (8.570–76)

If a written book is lifeless, then so, too, would be the completed *Prelude*. Such a comparison is strengthened by the ease with which the description of the cave could be instead a description of *The Prelude*. The poem, too, shape-shifts, often has "tendencies to shape" rather than any clear form, and contains much sublime ferment. Once the poet's efforts and the poem's motions cease, that is, once the work is written and complete, a deadness ensues. Wordsworth wishes to defer this deadness of completion, to add incessantly to and change the poem, to delay indefinitely the closure that other forms of narrative require.<sup>54</sup> The prospective structure that Wordsworth uses lends itself to almost interminable extension, to the repeated deferral of closure, without veering from the central subject or invoking unlikely or contrived plot twists.

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54. As Lindenberger has remarked, "there is no real conclusion" to *The Prelude*, and the poem "might as well go on indefinitely." Lindenberger, *On Wordsworth's Prelude*, 191.

## THE NARRATOR'S TEMPORAL RELATIONSHIP TO EVENTS

Although the reader receives sufficient guidance to process the meaning of events prospectively, Wordsworth obviously writes about these life events retrospectively. At times, the narrative voice calls attention to the gap in time, and the gap in knowledge, between Wordsworth as narrator and Wordsworth as character. One such self-consciously retrospective moment occurs when he returns home for the summer after his unprofitable and unpoetic first year at Cambridge. He describes:

The froward Brook; which, soon as he was box'd  
Within our Garden, found himself at once,  
As if by trick insidious and unkind,  
Stripp'd of his voice, and left to dimple down,  
Without an effort, and without a will,  
A channel paved by the hand of man.

. . .

And now, reviewing soberly that hour  
I marvel that a fancy did not flash  
Upon me, and a strong desire, straitway  
At sight of such an emblem that shew'd forth  
So aptly my late course of even days  
And all their smooth enthrallment, to pen down  
A satire on myself. . . .

(1805, 4.40–55)<sup>55</sup>

This passage is one of the most explicit disjunctions between the awareness of the narrator and the awareness of the former self he narrates. Karl Kroeber has remarked, "Until the last books of *The Prelude* . . . the reader is given a double vision of the action of the poem: what Wordsworth experienced at the time and what he now realizes the significance of that experience to have been."<sup>56</sup> At the time of this incident, the

55. I quote the 1805 version here because metrical irregularities I analyze are reduced in the 1850 version, making the passage, in my opinion, much less effective.

56. Kroeber, 96–97. I think Kroeber elsewhere overstates the disjunction between the narrator and narrated character: "The principal fact about all of the poet's early experiences described in Books I–VI is that he did not, at the time of their occurrence, understand their meaning and significance. In retrospect he sees how they contributed to the development of his imaginative power. But until that power had developed he had no means of fully understanding what had happened to him. He was the victim of experience, not its master." Kroeber, 96. Wordsworth may not have fully understood the significance of the experiences

full force of the comparison between himself and the muted brook did not strike Wordsworth, but the event has gained greater importance in retrospect. Only the narrator can see how far from his natural path he had strayed during his Cambridge days, and only the narrator knows for certain that he would find his path again.

If we keep in mind the river's status as a model for Wordsworth's narrative, then the use of a brook as the vehicle for this lesson is quite appropriate. *The Prelude* contains several examples in which the natural flow of a river or stream is impeded, by the whirl of an eddy, by man-made dams, by backward-flowing tides. These examples show that the metaphor of a flowing river may not always imply a steady course toward a known and natural end. Just as a river's flow can be diverted, so could Wordsworth have been diverted from his progress toward his poetic vocation. Through his choices, Wordsworth might have ignored, minimized, or even counteracted the poetic influence he attributes to nature. The river metaphor usually allays Wordsworth's anxieties by presenting his poetic greatness as preordained, but as we see here water imagery can also express his fear of wasting nature's ministrations. This particular "emblem" of his "late course of even days" is especially apt since the stream is "stripp'd of his voice"—a disastrous state for a poet.

Scansion of these lines dramatizes the conflict between voiceless regularity and a more natural forcefulness, and displays Wordsworth's current poetic control, perhaps to alleviate the anxiety created by his admission of past inarticulateness:

Stripp'd of | his voice, | | and left | to dim | ple down,

Without | an ef | fort, | | and | without | a will,

A chan | nel paved | by the hand | of man.

Added emphasis, and perhaps a greater sense of violence, is given to "Stripp'd of his voice" because of the initial trochee. The line "Without an effort . . ." seems to imitate the listlessness it describes due to the use of a pyrrhic as the central foot and the caesura that divides the pyrrhic.

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when they happened, but they were the very *source* of his developing understanding; I do not, therefore, see him as the "victim" of these experiences.

The final line is irregular because it has only nine syllables, only four of which are stressed, and this irregularity may emphasize Wordsworth's need as a poet for freedom from undue constraint. If his verse had to be as regular and measured as the brook, he too might be voiceless.<sup>57</sup>

Irregularity is used to wonderful effect in the following lines:

˘ /      ˘ /      ˘ /      ˘              ˘      / /  
At sight | of such | an em | blem | | that | shew'd forth

˘ /      ˘      ˘ /      /      ˘ /      ˘      /  
So apt | ly my | late course | of e | ven days

˘      /      ˘              /      ˘              /      ˘              ˘      /      /  
And all | their smooth | enthral | ment, | | to | pen down

These lines are rich in spondees which call attention to some key phrases. The stressed syllables of "shew'd forth" emphasize how forceful the emblem should have been, while the stress on "late course" amplifies the double meaning of "late," indicating both that this lifestyle was in the recent past (in respect to the visit home being narrated), and that he was tardy in his progress down his life's course. A final spondee occurs with "pen down," which stresses the act of writing which the narrating Wordsworth now undertakes, and perhaps echoes the idea that the brook has been penned in, thus holding together both the idea of restriction and the activity which finally freed Wordsworth of the impediment. All of these spondees are especially strong because each follows a pyrrhic. In the midst of these doubly stressed feet are five perfect iambs, all with equal stress ("of even days / And all their smooth enthrallment"), perfectly mimicking the smoothness they describe.

Since Wordsworth describes a time at which he is voiceless, his forward-looking narrative, which depends on an anticipated and inevitable outcome, entertains the possibility that the expected outcome may never be reached. Of course, many of the described events of Wordsworth's life did not, at the time that they happened, point inevitably to his future as a poet. But before Wordsworth begins writing *The Prelude*, he has committed himself to his poetic vocation and to asserting retrospectively the importance of past moments in contributing to this goal.<sup>58</sup> This is

57. In 1850, however, Wordsworth regularizes the line to five iambs by changing it to "A channel paved by man's officious care." Wordsworth's revision here seems officious, but it falls in line with his general tendency to make the meter more regular: the later Wordsworth seems to be more at ease with the constraints of meter.

58. For M. H. Abrams, this retrospective assertion of design helps explain the discrep-

not to say, however, that Wordsworth always asserts the relationship between past and present to be simple and continuous; many critics have focused attention on his direct and indirect admissions of doubt and discontinuity. Susan Wolfson argues that "*The Prelude* is a poem informed by questions . . . despite its author's eager hopes and manifest strategies of resolution" and that it presents a "world of uncertain retrospect."<sup>59</sup> In chapter 4 of *Formal Charges*, she notes several ways in which Wordsworth disrupts his own plot of poetic development: Wordsworth includes or adverts to extraneous and disturbing material, sometimes suggests that nature may be forgetful of her charge, or that nature's teachings must be corrected by books, and includes accidents that "threaten the possibility of coherent self-knowledge."<sup>60</sup> While I agree with Wolfson that Wordsworth's poem features "the interplay between his voices of didactic determination and indeterminate self-inquiry," I wish to explore the structural, temporal, and rhetorical effects of his "didactic determination."<sup>61</sup> While I do not deny his often subtle and indirect expressions of doubt, his "manifest strategies of resolution" and their consequences are made more prominent by *The Prelude's* very existence and its place in the English canon.<sup>62</sup>

Geoffrey Hartman's assessment of Wordsworth's poetry may appear to pose a more serious challenge to my argument, in that he claims, "Wordsworth's childhood experiences work in two conflicting ways, they (1) prophesy the independence from nature of his imaginative powers, and (2) impress nature ineradicably on them. His genius as a poet arises primarily from the first of these actions; through the second, he becomes an inmate of the world, a man speaking to men."<sup>63</sup> By stressing the tension in Wordsworth's poetry between a dependence on nature and the autonomous exercise of the imagination, Hartman raises the possibility that nature's interventions may have been at cross purposes with Wordsworth's poetic development, that the relationship between *The Prelude's* episodes and its endpoint is one of conflict rather than

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ancies between Wordsworth's account and the facts of his biography: "The major alterations and dislocations of the events of Wordsworth's life are imposed deliberately, in order that the design inherent in that life, which has become apparent only to his mature awareness, may stand revealed as a principle which was invisibly operative from the beginning." Abrams, 76.

59. Wolfson, *Questioning*, 131, 129.

60. Susan J. Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 110–11, 115, 117, 118.

61. Wolfson, *Questioning*, 92.

62. *Ibid.*, 131.

63. Hartman, *Wordsworth's*, 218.

continuity.<sup>64</sup> Yet Hartman does recognize a continuity between the two. He argues that as the poem progresses, nature gently instructs Wordsworth to grow independent of her instruction eventually, and claims that “it is not nature as such but nature indistinguishably blended with imagination that compels the poet along.”<sup>65</sup> While I find much value and insight in Hartman’s analysis of Wordsworth’s descriptions of the imaginative faculty, I am less concerned with how an individual reader interprets the relationship between a given episode of *The Prelude* and nature’s ministrations, and more concerned with the larger structures that encourage the poem’s readers constantly to seek such relationships. In addition, my focus is on Wordsworth’s conscious rhetoric, rather than on a disjunction between poetry and nature which Hartman acknowledges is largely suppressed.

Although Wordsworth does clearly assume a retrospective vantage toward the individual episodes of his past personal history, and tries to marshal all the certainty retrospection usually implies, his temporal and epistemological relationship to the endpoint of the poem is more ambiguous. Wordsworth’s position toward the poem’s goal depends heavily upon precisely how we define that goal, and upon historical context and the author’s psychology. Textual evidence supports at least three ways of defining the endpoint towards which *The Prelude*’s readers prospectively direct their attention.

First, we could say that the poem’s goal is to demonstrate beyond any doubt Wordsworth’s *potential* to be a great poet. That is, the endpoint is the maturity of the mental faculties necessary to produce poetry, rather than the actual production of poems. This interpretation gains support from the narrator’s explicit identification of the poem’s goal in its final book:

. . . We have reached  
 The time (our guiding object from the first)  
 When we may, not presumptuously, I hope,  
 Suppose my powers so far confirmed, and such  
 My knowledge, as to make me capable  
 Of building up a Work that shall endure;  
 (14.306–11)

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64. Richard Onorato has a similar argument that Wordsworth’s “inspired belief in the powers of the poet necessitated beliefs that went beyond Nature and which came unaccountably from his own imagination,” creating a “need to be independent of her [nature] and even superior to her.” Onorato, 263.

65. Hartman, *Wordsworth’s*, 48.

Here, the emphasis falls on his mental powers and capability, rather than on the completion of any one poetic work. If we label the poem's endpoint as Wordsworth's poetic potential, then presumably the goal has been reached before he begins composing the poem, and hence the narrator assumes a retrospective position toward the entirety of the poem, including its end. In Gérard Genette's terminology, the early references to the poem's endpoint would then be internal prolepses, temporally located within the main sequence of story events.<sup>66</sup> And yet if we assume that the narrator's proleptic comments refer to Wordsworth being fully endowed with poetic potential, then we find it difficult to imagine how such an event or state could be fully narrated in its "proper" chronological place at or near the poem's end. Because Wordsworth presents his poetic faculties as fostered by a gradual, cumulative series of events (the significance of which often became apparent only retrospectively), it would seem impossible to pinpoint a precise moment at which his poetic potential became complete. That is, neither he nor his readers can locate the crucial tipping point, the event through which he became capable of writing "a Work that shall endure," but prior to which he was not fully capable. If such an event exists, then Wordsworth may very well have included it as one of *The Prelude's* episodes, but he does not (and perhaps cannot) explicitly label it as the single narrative moment to which he has proleptically alluded throughout the poem. Genette's distinction between completing prolepses which "fill in ahead of time a later blank" that is not later narrated in its "proper" chronological place, and repeating prolepses which "still ahead of time—double, however slightly, a narrative section to come," does not seem adequate to this scenario (or at the very least, the reader cannot confidently decide which of the two labels to apply).<sup>67</sup> Given this definition of the poem's endpoint, perhaps all that Wordsworth can do is to advert repeatedly to a moment that can never properly be narrated.

Carlyle remarked, "Between vague wavering Capability and fixed indubitable Performance, what a difference!"<sup>68</sup>—a difference which leads us to the second likely definition of the poem's endpoint. Wordsworth articulates this difference when he repeatedly mentions the philosophical poem *The Recluse*, which he hopes to write after completing *The Prelude*:

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66. Genette, 49, 68–71.

67. *Ibid.*, 71.

68. Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, eds. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 126.

Then, a wish,  
 My last and favourite aspiration, mounts,  
 With yearning, tow' rds some philosophic Song  
 Of Truth that cherishes our daily life;  
 With meditations passionate, from deep  
 Recesses in man's heart, immortal verse  
 Thoughtfully fitted to the Orphean lyre;  
 But from this awful burthen I full soon  
 Take refuge, and beguile myself with trust  
 That mellow years will bring a riper mind  
 And clearer insight.  
 (1.227–37)

If Wordsworth saw the composition of *The Recluse*, and only *The Recluse*, as his “work that shall endure,” as the true goal and endpoint of *The Prelude*, then the narrator has not yet reached the goal. In this second case of how to define the endpoint, *The Prelude* features retrospective narration of most story events, but a prospective narration (in Uri Margolin’s sense of “a narrative of that which has not yet occurred at speech time”<sup>69</sup>) of a conclusion that lies outside of the text. *The Prelude*’s proleptic allusions to *The Recluse* would function as a type of lyric-narrative hybrid which Heather Dubrow terms an “anticipatory amalgam.” Such texts “combine qualities of narrative and lyric by referring to events that generally are explicitly or implicitly flagged as not having occurred in what is diegetically identified as a ‘real’ world—and that may . . . or may not do so at some point.”<sup>70</sup> They are “located both in the mind in the present and in a physical space that may exist in the future. . . . [T]hey typically heighten the speaker’s agency (though in so doing they may also draw attention to its limits), manipulate the listener, and both rely on and thematize shifts in temporality.”<sup>71</sup> Since readers of the posthumously published *Prelude* know that Wordsworth never actually finished *The Recluse*, we can safely assume that this anticipated event does not happen, and that the proleptic references to it are completing, rather than repeating. That is, we know we will never be given a full narration of this event in its “proper” chronological place, simply because the event never happened and so *has* no “proper” chronological place. Readers then experience a tension between Wordsworth’s confident rhetoric pointing us forward

69. Margolin, “Of What,” 153.

70. Heather Dubrow, “The Interplay of Narrative and Lyric: Competition, Cooperation, and the Case of the Anticipatory Amalgam,” *Narrative* 14.3 (Oct. 2006): 265.

71. *Ibid.*, 268.

to the fulfillment of his poetic powers, and our own knowledge that he would never fulfill them through the work he intended to be his masterpiece. Wordsworth's expressions of doubt gain more importance, and pathos, in this reading.

We may decide, of course, that Wordsworth's *other* works amply fulfill his potential. A third definition of the poem's goal is thus possible if we focus on the actual production of great poetry in general, rather than on the potential for poetic production, or on the production of *The Recluse* in particular. A passage that supports this option occurs near the end of book 1 when the narrator comments on the value of recalling his childhood and writing *The Prelude*:

Meanwhile, my hope has been, that I might fetch  
 Invigorating thoughts from former years;  
 Might fix the wavering balance of my mind,  
 And haply meet reproaches too, whose power  
 May spur me on, in manhood now mature,  
 To honourable toil. Yet should these hopes  
 Prove vain, and thus should neither I be taught  
 To understand myself, nor thou to know  
 With better knowledge how the heart was framed  
 Of him thou lovest, need I dread from thee  
 Harsh judgements. . . .  
 (1.621–31)

Here the narrator focuses on "honourable toil" rather than on mere potential, but the worthy poetic production he desires is not explicitly linked to *The Recluse*. Rather, the narrator suggests that his toil, if successful, will teach him to understand himself and show his audience how his inner being was formed: the poem he here hopes to complete is *The Prelude*. As M. H. Abrams aptly states, Wordsworth "announces the end of his long preparation for writing his masterpiece. But in describing that preparation Wordsworth . . . has achieved the masterpiece itself."<sup>72</sup> In narratological terms, Wordsworth narrates the poem's goal concurrently; that particular story event is simultaneous with the act of narration. More precisely, the discourse itself is the fulfillment of the goal. The frequent prolepses would then place us in the narrator's present moment, in the time of narration. This possibility is acknowledged by Gérard Genette and Teresa Bridgeman, but has special resonance for

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72. Abrams, 117.

*The Prelude*, because in this context the narrator's present moment could be thought of as the lyric time of discourse.<sup>73</sup> The proleptic references would then, in themselves, be one of several narrative techniques which Wordsworth uses to create lyric effects.

As we have seen, each of the three possible definitions of the poem's endpoint is supported by textual evidence. Which of the three we find most compelling depends in part on Wordsworth's biography and psychology. He began *The Prelude* in 1798, the year *Lyrical Ballads* was published. Though he was a practicing poet, his reputation was by no means well established. At this point, Wordsworth could have been certain only of his poetic potential; he could not yet know whether or not any of his works would endure. By 1804 when he returned to and expanded *The Prelude*, he had increased his poetic output and enhanced his reputation. At this point, however, Wordsworth himself emphasized *The Recluse* as the motivation for and the proper sequel to *The Prelude*. In an 1804 letter to Richard Sharp, Wordsworth says of *The Prelude*, "It seems a frightful deal to say about one's self, and of course will never be published, (during my lifetime I mean), till another work [*The Recluse*] has been written and published, of sufficient importance to justify me in giving my own history to the world."<sup>74</sup> He deems *The Prelude* insufficient to be an end in itself. Given the importance Wordsworth placed on the unfinished *Recluse*, he likely tried so hard to convince *The Prelude's* audience that he would finish his philosophical masterpiece in order to convince *himself* that he would finish it.

For Wordsworth, one of the chief virtues of *The Prelude's* prospective structure is the relief it seems to provide for the anxiety displayed at the poem's start. "Was it for this?" exclaims Wordsworth at the opening of the Two-Part *Prelude*, lamenting that his poetic achievements thus far do not live up to the potential he associates with his childhood relationship with nature. Although this question is placed less prominently in later versions of the work, the anxiety it displays is still prominent in both the 1805 and 1850 versions of book 1. Almost 150 lines (1850 1.114–269) are spent enumerating the vexations, delays, and insecurities attending the troubled birth of the poem, providing a disheartening context for the question which follows: was it for this? Consider this characteristically anxious moment:

73. Genette, 69; Teresa Bridgeman, "Thinking Ahead: A Cognitive Approach to Prolepsis," *Narrative* 13.2 (May 2005): 132.

74. William Wordsworth to Richard Sharp, 29 April 1804, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years 1787–1805*, edited by Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd ed., revised by Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 470.

That hope hath been discouraged; welcome light  
 Dawns from the East, but dawns—to disappear  
 And mock me with a sky that ripens not  
 Into a steady morning. . . .  
 (1.124–27)

Here one of the most common and clear natural indicators of things to come—light in the east portending the coming dawn—has become deceptive, and the event it promises does not follow. This false dawn is an emblem for both Wordsworth's recent false starts in writing a work of large scope, and for the fear that nature's promises of poetic greatness will indefinitely remain unfulfilled. The many assertions of the aim of *The Prelude* as demonstrating the growth of a poet's mind, and hence the author's status as a great poet as the goal to which the poem tends, may counteract Wordsworth's own anxieties about the accuracy of such claims.<sup>75</sup> By repeatedly and forcefully asserting poetic greatness as the demonstrated end of the poem, he can convince himself (and others) that nature's promises will be fulfilled, and he can continue writing this work, which will stand as further proof of his gift for poetry. It is as if by continually stating that the dawn will come, Wordsworth can force the sun to rise.

As the years passed and *The Recluse* remained unfinished, its future completion became less and less likely, but still remained a possibility. Only Wordsworth's death foreclosed this possibility, and guaranteed that this goal of *The Prelude* would not be attained. Curiously, then, *The Prelude's* readers have greater certainty about its conclusion (even before they finish the poem) than the narrator does, at least if the conclusion is taken to be the completion of *The Recluse*. Even if we define the poem's endpoint as the production of lasting poetry in general, readers may be more certain of the outcome than Wordsworth was, despite his high estimation of himself.<sup>76</sup> Wordsworth may have died a respected poet laureate, but the reputations of laureates can quickly decline, as was the case with Wordsworth's predecessor, Robert Southey. The more time passes with Wordsworth's canonical status unchallenged, the more certain are

75. Many critics have noted the tension between Wordsworth's confident assertions and his nagging doubts, but Susan Wolfson's *The Questioning Presence* and Richard Onorato's *The Character of the Poet* feature especially subtle and extensive discussions of this topic.

76. I thus disagree with Richard Onorato's claim that "whatever questions we may feel *The Prelude* answers, it did not answer satisfyingly the question that led him to write it in place of the projected *Recluse*: 'to determine how far Nature and education had qualified him for such employment.' He was depressed by his answer." Onorato, 89.

his readers that he has written works that shall endure. And in the case of poetic potential being the poem's goal, readers are at least equally certain as Wordsworth of this outcome. *The Prelude's* prolepses could serve as a counterexample to Teresa Bridgeman's claim that "the chief feature of the proleptic frame is its *provisional* nature, its inbuilt 'reactivability.' For we cannot know, as readers, whether this prolepsis is repeating or completing, not having yet read the rest of the text, nor can we tell whether it is internal or external for the same reason (this is not to say that we do not make reasonable guesses . . .)."<sup>77</sup> Those first-time readers of *The Prelude* who define the poem's goal as the completion of *The Recluse* will know from the start that the prolepses are completing and external.

## THE PRELUDE'S STRUCTURAL SIMILARITIES TO OTHER TEXTS

*The Prelude* differs from many other narratives not because it invites readers to think prospectively, but rather because of the prominence and frequency of those invitations, and because of the readers' certainty in their prospective knowledge. The reader of any text looks forward as well as back. Even in an essentially retrospective reading experience, in which we arrive at the full meaning at the end only through a backward gaze, the audience can construct provisional meanings at earlier points in the text. That is, the reader can speculate on the meaning of what has passed and can look forward to possible outcomes that will make sense of what has gone before. Peter Brooks has coined the apt phrase "the anticipation of retrospection" to describe this forward-looking phenomenon.<sup>78</sup> And Paul Ricoeur claims that anticipation and retrospection are intimately connected, that the "backward look [of retrospection] is made possible by the teleological movement directed by our expectations when we follow the story," by our anticipation of a satisfying ending.<sup>79</sup> But this phenomenon differs from how a reader experiences *The Prelude*. Wordsworth gives us a much stronger version of prospectivity: the reader does not *guess* a possible end, but rather each reader *knows* the end of *The Prelude* from the very beginning (though there may be some disagreement among readers as to precisely how to define that end).

77. Bridgeman, 130.

78. Brooks, 23.

79. Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980–81), 170.

There are, of course, some texts that predate *The Prelude* in which the end is known from the beginning: most notably, epic myths, which tell stories that are already quite familiar to their audiences. An epic allows the audience to analyze each episode for the ways in which it demonstrates the hero's exemplarity, and the ways in which it leads to (or delays) the story's ultimate end. As Paul Ricoeur describes it, "As soon as a story is well known—and such is the case with most traditional and popular narratives as well as with the national chronicles of the founding events of a given community—retelling takes the place of telling. Then following the story is less important than apprehending the well-known end as implied in the beginning and the well-known episodes as leading to this end."<sup>80</sup> In national epics, then, the audience's task is to understand how the early events in the tale contributed to the ending. Similarly, in Wordsworth's poem, the emphasis is not on what happened but on how it happened: the proleptic evocations of the poem's endpoint create what Meir Sternberg calls "retardatory suspense."<sup>81</sup> Epics also often feature an episodic structure, comparable to *The Prelude*. But there are two key differences from Wordsworth's text: in many epics, the episodes delay the ending, rather than fostering the ending; and the audience of an epic is familiar not only with the ending but also with every episode. A first-time reader of *The Prelude*, in contrast, may know the endpoint but is unfamiliar with the individual episodes, and can thus experience a sense of novelty and wonder similar to what Wordsworth initially experienced. While the prospectivity of epic depends upon knowledge gained previous to an encounter with a particular version of the myth, the prospectivity of Wordsworth's text is built into the poem itself.

Autobiographical writings about theological or artistic vocations also have endings which are known from the beginning, and share other similarities with *The Prelude*. Critics often view Wordsworth's project as a secularized outgrowth of confession literature that dates back to St. Augustine. This, in turn, influenced later writers on artistic vocation, most notably in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Remembrance of Things Past*. Other texts in this genealogy exhibit some prospectivity: certainly a reader of a confession understands from the beginning that the episodes will all relate to sin or salvation, and that the point of the

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80. *Ibid.*, 175.

81. Sternberg claims, "overt anticipation . . . has the power to evoke suspense—or, where more reliable, the power to modulate genuine into retardatory suspense: 'What will happen?' into 'How?'" Meir Sternberg, "Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity," *Poetics Today* 13.3 (Autumn 1992): 536.

text is the author's conversion. These narratives share another key element: an associative, rather than causal, logic. In the case of *The Prelude*, the individual experiences accumulate to foster Wordsworth's poetic development, and the narration of these episodes provides increasing proof of Wordsworth's poetic prowess. More generally, in such texts the episodes all directly relate only to their common endpoint, the attainment of religious or artistic vocation, but the individual episodes may not have a direct causal relation to each other. This direct linkage to the endpoint fosters the forward movement of prospective reading.

Given these similarities, the prospective structure of *The Prelude* clearly has antecedents in the confessional genre, and it, in turn, influenced later artists' autobiographical works. *The Prelude*, however, is more purely prospective than many other histories of artists because Wordsworth carefully selects which character traits he presents, and specifies the kind of artist he is. By contrast, Rousseau in his *Confessions* presents himself as multifaceted and contradictory. As John Freccero remarks, Rousseau wants to differentiate himself from his readers to mark himself as a unique individual.<sup>82</sup> The text through which Rousseau presents his complex, contradictory personality is itself complex and contradictory: "To understand me, Rousseau says more than once in the *Confessions*, most impressively at the close of book 4, the reader must follow me at every moment of my existence; and it will be up to the reader, not Rousseau, to assemble the elements of the narrative and determine what they mean."<sup>83</sup> Wordsworth gives us a more simplified story, but this simplicity results from Wordsworth's work in shaping his story into a coherent whole; whereas Rousseau leaves the work of organization and meaning production largely up to his reader, Wordsworth carefully guides his audience.<sup>84</sup> *The Prelude* thus gives us a stronger sense

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82. John Freccero, "Autobiography and Narrative," in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, eds. Thomas C. Heller et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 23.

83. Brooks, 33.

84. I believe this also explains the difference between *The Prelude* and what Seymour Chatman calls "the modern plot of revelation." Chatman, 48. Chatman says of revelatory plots, "Early on we gather that things will stay pretty much the same. It is not that events are resolved (happily or tragically), but rather that a state of affairs is revealed. Thus a strong sense of temporal order is more significant in resolved than in revealed plots. . . . Revelatory plots tend to be strongly character-oriented." Chatman, 48. I would argue that in most revelatory plots, the character revealed is much more multifaceted and contradictory than the aspects of himself Wordsworth presents in *The Prelude*. As a result, readers of *The Prelude* are more assured of the ending than in plots which present a more surprising revelation of character (with the changes in understanding as time passes implied by the word "revelation").

of the end at the beginning, and the associations from each episode to the end are more predictable.

In the case of religious confessions like Augustine's, the distinction between past and present selves is striking. In fact, the radical division between the past sinner and the present saint often makes it difficult to see the continuity between the two selves, and hence to see the end as immanent in the beginning. As M. H. Abrams remarks, "An important difference [from *The Prelude*] is that in Augustine's account, although his spiritual preparation has been long, the conversion is instant and absolute, an accession of grace which takes place at a precise point in time . . . and effects at a stroke the destruction of the old creature and the birth of the new."<sup>85</sup> John Freccero also emphasizes this disjunction between selves, but goes on to see it as a necessary feature of all first-person retrospective narration. Freccero claims that Augustine's *Confessions* is "the paradigm for all representations of the self in a retrospective literary structure."<sup>86</sup> He sees a split between the narrated self and the narrating self as the defining characteristic of this paradigm. According to Freccero: "[The destruction of the self is a] theme inherent in the autobiographical genre, which, when it claims to be true, definitive, and concluded, implies the death of the self as character and the resurrection of the self as author. In theological terms, conversion is the separation of the self as sinner from the self as saint; but in logical, or narratological, terms, this separation founds the possibility of any self-portraiture, a separation between the self as object and the self as subject when the two are claimed to be the same person."<sup>87</sup> Wordsworth does occasionally manifest this division of selves, by acknowledging that the self as retrospective narrator understands more or differently than the self as character, as in the penned brook anecdote. But much more often, he elides the differences between the narrating man and the narrated youth by focusing on continuity rather than radical change. In fact, the major-

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85. Abrams, 113. Geoffrey Hartman, in contrast, stresses the similarity between Wordsworth and Augustine: "Wordsworth's experience, like Petrarch's or Augustine's, is a conversion: a turning about of the mind as from one belief to its opposite." Hartman, *Wordsworth's*, 49. Susan Wolfson claims that Wordsworth differs from Augustine in the uncertainty of the former's conversion: "The deeper subject of *The Prelude* is Wordsworth's uncertain negotiations with the providential plot . . . of his argumentative intention. . . . *The Prelude* reads less like 'spiritual autobiography' and more like the dramatic monologue of a poet struggling to compose his life in such terms." Wolfson, *Questioning*, 138.

86. Freccero, 17.

87. *Ibid.*, 16-17. Susan Wolfson makes the opposite argument from Freccero: "It is the informing condition of autobiography that its aim is radically implicated with its means, that its agent of inquiry is continuous with its object of inquiry." Wolfson, *Questioning*, 150.

ity of the text virtually eliminates the split between selves.<sup>88</sup> The resulting homogeneity of character allows the reader to project forward to the text's end much more smoothly and consistently. *The Prelude* spans the autobiographical gulf between narrating and narrated self, serving as an interesting counterexample to Freccero's analysis of the genre. The poem is a purer, more simplified exemplar of prospective reading than previous texts in the literary tradition of confessions and tales of artistic vocation. Wordsworth's confidence as a retrospective author usually seeps into his presentation of his younger self, creating the impression that even as a young boy experiencing the described events, he understood that nature was forming him for poetry. Yet Wordsworth's mode of presentation also preserves the sense of surprise and wonder he felt at the time of each experience, and recreates that sense so vividly that the older narrator seems to re-experience his initial emotional response. He may begin to recollect an emotion in tranquility, but through the process of description the powerful feeling once again spontaneously overflows.

## CHANGES IN THE 1850 *PRELUDE*

The use of a prospective structure to replace a traditional retrospective reading experience and to push *The Prelude* toward lyric is very well-developed in both the 1805 and 1850 versions. The 1850 version further undermines novelistic, retrospective narrative in two distinct ways: it reduces embedded retrospective narratives, and it reduces direct discourse. Many sections of the 1805 *Prelude* that could be considered traditional retrospective narratives are shortened or eliminated in the 1850 version. These stories include the Discharged Soldier (1805, 4.361–504), the Maid of Buttermere (1805, 7.311–60), and the Matron's Tale (1805, 8.222–311). They are all easily recognizable as typical narratives with multiple characters acting and being acted upon in a causal chain of

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88. Clifford Siskin notes that by tracing his imagination, Wordsworth emphasizes continuity within the "chronological chaos of lyrical autobiography." Siskin, 18. The exceptions to such continuity occur most frequently in the books on the French Revolution and its aftermath, a period that constitutes, for Abrams and many others, Wordsworth's spiritual and political crisis. As Sarah Zimmerman suggests, "What Wordsworth discovers in lyricism . . . is its capacity to accommodate both his radical and conservative selves, and not just consecutively, but simultaneously, as ambivalence." Zimmerman, 82. Nonetheless, much of the poem uses lyric association to reduce ambivalence and to enlist the reader in asserting the continuity and necessity of Wordsworth's poetic development (if not his political development).

events, structured to have a beginning, middle, and end, with the end of the story revealed only at the end of the discourse, at which time it can retrospectively confer greater significance on the events that came before. Brief plot summaries of these tales should provide a concrete sense of their recognizability as stories, that is, as standard retrospective narratives.<sup>89</sup> In the first story, Wordsworth comes across a discharged soldier, recently returned to England from the tropics, walking his long journey homeward, and Wordsworth insists on leading the man to a nearby cottage where he can get food and shelter for the night; yet the soldier resists Wordsworth's entreaties that in the future he will ask for assistance. In the Maid of Buttermere, the title character is wooed into a sham wedding ceremony with a man who is already married to another woman; but the deceived girl goes on to be a model of feminine modesty. In the Matron's Tale, a shepherd's young son goes looking for a stray sheep during a fierce storm and, in attempting to rescue the sheep, becomes stranded amidst torrential waters but is saved by his father. All three constitute short, yet complete and followable, stories that obey the usual conventions of narrative. Together, they comprise a very small percentage of the 1805 *Prelude*, but in the 1850 version these traditional narratives are noticeably diminished and are even more negligible to the poem as a whole. The tale of the Discharged Soldier is shortened by 42 lines, a reduction of a third, and the story of the Maid of Buttermere is shortened by 8 lines, a reduction of one sixth. The Matron's Tale is completely eliminated.

But the most notable and substantial expurgation is the story of Vaudracour and Julia, which, in the 1805 version, consists of 380 lines and comprises nearly half of book 9. In the tale, Vaudracour is a young man of noble birth who falls in love with a commoner named Julia. Knowing that their marriage would be forbidden by his father, they pursue their passion, and Julia becomes pregnant. Vaudracour's father is incensed

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89. It might be objected that one could just as easily provide a plot summary for *The Prelude* as a whole. Such a summary might look something like this: as a young boy, Wordsworth had an unthinking but intimate and beneficent relationship with nature, which cultivated his poetic sensibility. When he went to college, this relationship became temporarily estranged, and Wordsworth's experience with the French Revolution further disillusioned him. Yet under the influence of nature (and Coleridge and Dorothy), Wordsworth is rejuvenated and begins to be worthy of nature's gifts by becoming a great poet. This is indeed a story, but the brevity of it compared to the expansiveness of the actual poem clearly shows that this thread of traditional narrative is not enough to sustain *The Prelude*. I argue that prospective narration strengthens the poem's otherwise flimsy structure and allows the poem's extensive elaborations to seem much more central and necessary than they would in a more traditional narrative framework, largely because the poem's reader knows in advance the end to which all the episodes relate.

and sends men to arrest his son, but Vaudracour resists and kills one of them. As a result, Vaudracour spends time in and out of prison, but he is able to return to Julia to see their son born. Soon after, Julia's mother sends her to a convent, and Vaudracour chooses to raise the child alone. The baby soon dies by an unspecified unfortunate accident, and Vaudracour ends an utter recluse. This plot is developed, clearly causal, and fairly complex, and bears all the marks of a conventional narrative. Vaudracour and Julia is by far the longest of the embedded traditional narratives in the 1805 *Prelude*, and it is entirely eliminated in 1850. Yet the story leaves some marks in the 1850 version; its expurgation is not smoothly and silently effected. In fact, Wordsworth explicitly notes its absence in the later version, composing this awkward transition where the tale once was: "So might—and with that prelude *did* begin / The Record; and in faithful Verse was given / The doleful sequel" (1850, 9.557–59). Further attention is drawn to the omission, and his editorial decision is partly explained, by the analogy that follows:

... But our little Bark  
 On a strong River boldly hath been launched,  
 And from the driving current should we turn  
 To loiter wilfully within a Creek,  
 Howe'er attractive, Fellow Voyager!  
 Would'st thou not chide? . . .  
 (1850, 9.559–64)

Wordsworth assumes that the reader would have chided the inclusion of the Vaudracour and Julia episode, and hence the reader will agree his editorial decision to omit it is a wise choice. The reader, as the "Fellow Voyager" of the narrator, shares his knowledge of what material is important for this poetic project and what is tangential to it. In this case, the reader even shares knowledge of some of Wordsworth's editorial practices in revising the poem. This passage, then, is a strong statement of the alliance on equal terms between the narrator and reader that is fostered by Wordsworth's prospective guidance.

This self-conscious, explicitly stated rationale for the change in narrative content of the poem is also noteworthy because it reinvoles the crucial river metaphor. The passage compares the main subject of the poem to a mighty river and denigrates the embedded tale of Vaudracour and Julia as a dribbling creek that only distracts from the progression of the main current. Rather than emphasizing that the stream, in its small way, contributes to the strength of the river, Wordsworth says the

stream is a turn from the river, and that following it would be a willful avoidance of his bold task. By the logic of prospective reading and the poem's subject, if an episode contributes nothing to the growth of the poet's mind, it does not belong in *The Prelude*. And if the story of Vaudracour and Julia is taken at face value, it is hard to see how it would contribute,<sup>90</sup> except perhaps as strengthening Wordsworth's support of the French Revolution by illustrating the wrongs of the class system under the Ancien Régime. The story is told entirely in the third person, and Wordsworth has never directly interacted with, or even seen, the characters it depicts. This would make difficult Wordsworth's subjective appropriation of their objective experiences—an important reason for the dearth of novelistic third-person narratives in *The Prelude*.

One side effect of these expurgations of narratives is a notable decrease in direct quotations of characters other than Wordsworth himself. The tale of Vaudracour and Julia contains three direct quotations of Vaudracour and one of Julia, and the episode known as the Matron's Tale contains one direct quotation each from the matron and from the shepherd's son.<sup>91</sup> All six of these instances are clearly absent from the 1850 *Prelude*, and the 1850 version also eliminates a direct quotation in the section commonly referred to as the Dream of the Arab, discussed in detail below.<sup>92</sup> These seven eliminations are more surprising when another statistic is kept in mind: only seven of the direct quotations of characters other than Wordsworth that appear in the 1805 version are retained in the 1850.<sup>93</sup> A full half of the direct quotations are eliminated

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90. Of course, many critics view the Vaudracour and Julia episode as a veiled expression of Wordsworth's affair with Annette Vallon, and hence as very significant for the development of the poet's mind. Whether or not the episode is a conscious or subconscious venue for confronting his feelings about Annette, it would not have been perceived as such by his readers in 1850. I thus consider the Vaudracour episode not in terms of its psychological value for Wordsworth, but rather in terms of its overt place in the poem's narrative structure and the importance assigned to it by Wordsworth's anticipated audience.

91. The line numbers are 9.707–11, 9.799–810, 9.818–19, 9.775, 8.252–57, and 8.248–52. See "Transcription of MS. A," in *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, vol. 2, ed. Mark L. Reed (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 471–993.

92. In MS. A, the friend who had the dream is directly quoted from line 5.110–39, although a quotation mark appears only at the beginning of the quotation. In later revisions, the quotation mark is eliminated, as shown in lines 5.113–43 of Manuscript D. See "Transcription of MS. D," in *The Fourteen-Book Prelude*, ed. W. J. B. Owen (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 347–1167.

93. Quotation marks are placed around these seven quotations in the Cornell edition transcriptions of both the Manuscript A version of the 1805 *Prelude*, and Manuscript D, which became the 1850 *Prelude*. The line numbers in Manuscript A are 5.88–90, 5.130–31, 9.519–20, 10.87–88, 10.100, 10.431–32, and 10.501. The corresponding lines in Manuscript D are 5.88–90, 5.134–35, 9.515–16, 10.93–94, 10.106, 10.433–34, and 10.498.

in the later version.<sup>94</sup> Even taking into account the overwhelming dominance of Wordsworth as the central character of the poem and the small space given to other characters, the initial number of direct quotations of other characters is surprisingly small, and the number is even further reduced in 1850. This scarcity could stem from the same cause that I think underlies the dearth of third-person narratives—Wordsworth’s inability to appropriate subjectively these objectively presented experiences. A direct quotation presents the particular words used by another character, and its visual presentation stresses its separation from the language of the narrator. Direct quotations carry an air of objectivity, and independence from the thought and language of the narrator, that make them difficult to subsume under Wordsworth’s experience and the language through which he expresses it.

Rather than simply eliminating these troublesome quotations, Wordsworth could have subjectively appropriated them by transforming them into indirect discourse, subordinating them within his own language and thought patterns. Wordsworth does not use this potential solution, preferring instead the eliminations discussed above. There is, however, one stunning example of the appropriation of another character’s experience, one that goes beyond the grammatical change from direct to indirect discourse, found in the Dream of the Arab episode (1805, 5.49–139). The dream as a whole is attributed to a friend in the 1805 version and largely presented as a direct quotation of the friend’s recitation of the dream. In the 1850 version, Wordsworth does not merely change the dream to an indirect report in his own words—he now appropriates the dream itself, claiming that he, and not his friend, was the dreamer. The original says of the friend, “Sleep seiz’d him, and he pass’d into

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94. There is one line that appears as an indirect quotation in 1805 and is changed to a direct quotation in 1850. The earlier version states, “. . . he replied / In the familiar language of the day / That ‘Robespierre was dead!’” (10.533–35). Though the italics and quotation marks denote a direct quotation, the verb tense of “was” and the use of “that” to introduce the quoted phrase strongly suggest the utterance is indirect. The quotation is made unambiguously direct in the 1850 version: “In the familiar language of the day / Cried, ‘Robespierre is dead!’” This one change from indirect to direct is counterbalanced, however, by the elimination of two other phrases that seem to be marked as direct in the 1805 version, but are somewhat ambiguous due to the absence of quotation marks. In 1805 the poem states that shepherds feed their flocks in coves “long as the storm is lock’d / (So do they phrase it)” (8.363–64), clearly marking the word “lock’d” as terminology specific to the shepherds. The 1805 version also implies that the Matron’s Tale is a direct quote of the matron by inserting the parenthetical aside “(thus did the Matron’s Tale begin)” (8.224). Both these quotations are entirely eliminated from the 1850 version. If these three slightly ambiguous cases are added to the tally, the 1805 version contains sixteen direct quotations from characters other than Wordsworth, and the 1850 version contains only eight.

a dream" (1805, 5.70), after which the narrator spends 18 lines setting the scene of the dream in a third person narration of what his friend saw. The poem then directly quotes the Bedouin's words, and promptly switches to an extended 50-line first person narration by the friend. That is, the 1805 poem shifts from an indirect report of the friend's dream to a direct quotation of the friend's recitation of the dream. This version is quite strongly marked as the friend's report of his experience; the interjections "said my Friend continuing" (1805, 5.91) and "My Friend continued" (1805, 5.110) are clearly meant to remind the reader that these words, and this experience, belong to a third person and not to Wordsworth. In the 1850 version Wordsworth appropriates the words *and* the experience. The narrator now says, "Sleep seized *me*, and I passed into a dream" (1850, 5.70, emphasis mine). The change clearly indicates that at least one of the versions must be historically inaccurate: the dream could not have been dreamt by both Wordsworth and his friend.<sup>95</sup>

Despite this biographical illogicality, the change in attribution neatly follows the logic of Wordsworth's poetic project in *The Prelude*. The importance of the dream does not come from providing an objective report of what was told to Wordsworth, from the identity of the friend who tells it, or from the relationship between Wordsworth and his friend. The dream's significance is its suitability as an allegory for Wordsworth's thoughts and feelings about poetry and science, as a manifestation of Wordsworth's subjective experience. Even in the 1805 version, Wordsworth stresses how congenial the dream is to his own thoughts. Wordsworth tells his friend about his anxiety over the frailty of books as repositories of man's knowledge, and the friend confesses that he experienced "kindred hauntings" before having the dream (1805, 5.55). The dream, then, stems from concerns shared by the two men, and afterwards Wordsworth is bemused by his friend's vision, often thinking of the Arab and "fanc[ying] him a living man" (1805, 5.143). Wordsworth even identifies with the Bedouin, confessing, "I, methinks / Could share that Maniac's anxiousness, could go / Upon like errand" (1805, 5.159–61). If Wordsworth so closely identifies with the dreamer and the dream, the change in attribution of the dream to Wordsworth himself is a logical extension. His appropriation of the episode further emphasizes the relation of the dream to Wordsworth, his particular subjective reaction to it, and its relation to his thoughts. The 1850 version hence eliminates

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95. In fact, it was dreamt by neither Wordsworth nor a friend of his. The episode is an elaboration of a dream of Descartes, as is demonstrated by Jane Worthington Smyser in "Wordsworth's Dream of Poetry and Science," *PMLA* 71 (1956): 269–75.

the surrounding narrative implied by the friend's existence and instead emphasizes the subjective vision of lyric, and the growth of the mind toward which the prospective structure tends.

## THE NARRATIVE VALUE OF PERSONIFICATION

Because it diminishes the importance of traditional narrative and increases the importance of prospectivity and lyricism, the 1850 version has an even greater dearth of characters and of readily identifiable actions than the 1805 version. In both versions, this lack is somewhat compensated by the projection of activity and human character onto natural objects—by personification. That Wordsworth frequently animates and humanizes the natural landscape is no surprise to his later readers. After all, Ruskin did cite Wordsworth as one of the poets to whom the pathetic fallacy, in which strong emotion prompts a poet to “attribut[e] . . . characters of a living creature” to an inanimate object,<sup>96</sup> is most congenial. Wordsworth acknowledges this predilection in a passage from book 3:

To every natural form, rock, fruit or flower,  
Even the loose stones that cover the high-way,  
I gave a moral life; I saw them feel,  
Or linked them to some feeling. . . .  
(1850, 3.130–33)

By giving a moral life to natural objects, Wordsworth can make more tangible nature's capacity for moral instruction, which is so central to Wordsworth's thought. By claiming that he “saw them feel, / Or linked them to some feeling,” he juxtaposes perception and creation. But since the latter phrase likely functions as an appositive, rather than as an exclusive alternative, to the former phrase, the pairing blurs the line between perception and creation in a way that is consistent with Wordsworth's larger philosophy, and blurs the distinction between literal and figurative language. An animated, personified natural landscape is well-suited to Wordsworth's ideas about nature, perception, and language, and this suitability is a basic tenet of Wordsworth criticism.<sup>97</sup> What remains to be

96. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 3, ed. John D. Rosenberg (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 65.

97. For instance, Roger N. Murray comments, “The Wordsworthian vision is a seeing of the middle ground where man and nature approach a common degree of animation;

explored is its suitability to Wordsworth's experiments with genre. For the blurring between "saw them feel" and "linked them to some feeling" allows personification both to present objects as active characters and to link these objects to Wordsworth's subjective feelings. This partly compensates for the paucity of genuine narrative characters, and allows the projection of inner emotion and the display of poetic craftedness that are associated with lyric.<sup>98</sup>

Similar advantages might be reaped from two notable extensions of personification in the 1850 version. The first is a regular pattern of pronoun changes: "it" is changed to "her," or "itself" to "herself," fourteen times in the 1850 version. Five of these refer to the "mind," two to "church," one each to "heart," "man's nature," "earth," "bird," "glow worm," and "ear," and in one instance an "it" referring to "mind" is changed to a "her" referring to the revised "soul."<sup>99</sup> In some cases, an ungendered noun, such as "heart" or "mind," is gendered by the pronoun change, and is thus humanized and given a very low level of personification that was absent before. In other cases, the noun that functions as the pronoun's referent was already overtly personified in the 1805 version, and the pronoun change reinforces that personification. One of the more interesting examples of the latter case reads "I saw the snow-white Church upon its hill / Sit like a throned Lady, sending out / A gracious look all over its domain" in the 1805 version (4.13–15).

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the life of things becomes more evident when the discontinuity between man and nature is overcome, and this can be partially accomplished either by animating things or by deanimating man." Roger N. Murray, *Wordsworth's Style: Figures and Themes in the Lyrical Ballads of 1800* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 47. Herbert Lindenberger notes, "This habit of interchanging qualities of the animate and inanimate, of the mind and external nature, is central to *The Prelude*. . . . It is the natural method with which he communicates his early spiritual experiences and accounts in poetic terms for his mental and emotional development; above all, it is his way of recapturing poetically that sense of the unity of all existence which he had felt on so intuitive a level in early childhood." He also states, "It is difficult to distinguish between the literal and the metaphorical level in Wordsworth, for the literal becomes figurative and then literal again." Lindenberger, *On Wordsworth's Prelude*, 44–45, 69. Geoffrey Hartman notes Wordsworth's tendency to describe the way a scene impresses his perception and then attribute that impression as a quality of the scene. Hartman, *Unmediated*, 22–23. Hartman elsewhere links the "dizzy openness of relation between the human mind and nature" to the blurring of literal and figurative. Hartman, *Wordsworth's*, 66.

98. M. H. Abrams notes that "on the recurrent level of narration in which mind and nature must suffice to generate the plot of *The Prelude*, a heavy requisition is placed on nature." He also observes, "In many passages, for example, nature is endowed with the attributes and powers of a mother, father, nurse, teacher, lover, as well as a deity (or deities)." Abrams, 94, 92.

99. In the 1805 version, the respective line numbers are 3.112, 3.369, 6.180, 6.314, 6.667; 4.13, 4.15; 4.139; 5.18; 6.591; 2.133; 7.44; 2.434; 6.545.

When both “its” are changed to “her,” the church is personified even before the simile of the “throned Lady” begins—the vehicle very subtly spills over into the tenor. This both enhances the activeness of the object, making it a stronger stand-in for actual characters, and enhances the metaphoric, noticeably poetic, element of the phrase. It thus, albeit in a limited way, counteracts the absence of the events of traditionally structured narratives, and emphasizes the lyric time of the writing and experiencing of the poem *as* poem.

A second extension of personification in the 1850 version is its application to abstract concepts, in addition to inanimate objects. This extension is surprising, because Wordsworth vehemently objects to the overuse of abstract personifications in his 1800 “Preface to the Second Edition of the Lyrical Ballads”:

The Reader will find that personifications of abstract ideas rarely occur in these volumes. . . . My purpose was to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men; and assuredly such personifications do not make any natural or regular part of that language. They are, indeed, a figure of speech occasionally prompted by passion, and I have made use of them as such; but have endeavoured utterly to reject them as a mechanical device of style. . . . I have wished to keep the Reader in the company of flesh and blood, persuaded that by doing so I shall interest him.<sup>100</sup>

Wordsworth clearly objects to the “mechanical,” conventional use of abstract personification so common in eighteenth-century poetry. In place of poetic convention, Wordsworth establishes “the very language of men” as the standard by which poetic diction must be chosen and judged. In *The Prelude*, however, we are only in the company of the poet’s flesh and blood: the poem does not contain the wealth of striking characters that we find in the *Lyrical Ballads*. Instead of allowing a variety of characters to speak in “the very language of men,” *The Prelude* is overwhelmingly dominated by the language of one man—Wordsworth. Because the poetic experiments being undertaken in the two works differ, one of the grounds for Wordsworth’s earlier objection to abstract personifications no longer holds, and a greater need for the illusion of character and action provided by personification is created.

The 1805 *Prelude*, although it incessantly personifies natural objects, contains only four passages with personifications of abstract concepts.<sup>101</sup>

100. William Wordsworth, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1850),” *Prose Works*, vol. 1, 131.

101. In the 1805 version, the line numbers are 3.630–43, 6.99, 10.287, and 10.697.

The less overtly narrative 1850 version keeps all four passages of abstract personification, and adds seven more.<sup>102</sup> In one such addition, Wordsworth says of the streets of Paris, “. . . Not a look / Hope takes, or Doubt or Fear are forced to wear, / But seemed there present . . .” (1850, 9.60–62). These personifications are quite conventional and minimally drawn, yet in this context they could be viewed as effective shorthand for the human character types who display these traits. Many of Wordsworth’s other added personifications are not as felicitous, however. When he states that summer “. . . lacked not intervals / When Folly from the frown of fleeting Time / Shrunk . . .” (1850, 4.347–49), the figures have the disadvantage of being conventional and cursory, without providing any semantic or stylistic advantages. In at least one case, a personification added to the 1850 version unintentionally undermines its meaning. Wordsworth praises the work of a shepherd by intoning, “Philosophy, methinks, at Fancy’s call, / Might deign to follow him through what he does / Or sees in his day’s march . . .” (1850, 8.249–51). What philosophy can learn from a shepherd is the value of simplicity and naturalness; yet there is nothing simple or natural about the language in which the sentiment is expressed.

These added personifications are often infelicitous, and it is tempting merely to write them off to the later Wordsworth’s habit of making damaging revisions. I suggest, however, that a more constructive motivation underlies these changes, and that the motivation may best be inferred from two of the most extreme examples of added abstract personifications. The first is a vehement exclamation: “—‘Stay, stay your sacrilegious hands!’—the voice / Was Nature’s, uttered from her Alpine throne;” (1850, 6.431–32). Here “Nature” is not only given distinctly human characteristics; she is also given a voice. Her words have the independent status conferred by direct quotation, making her seem even more objectively embodied. Finally, “Nature” is placed in a dramatic situation: her outcry is against a band of French soldiers who, in the midst of the Revolution, are expelling the monks from the Chartreuse monastery. Wordsworth added a similar abstract personification to the description of how the pent-up brook should have been an admonishing symbol of his regular days at Cambridge:

Well might sarcastic Fancy then have whispered,  
 ‘An emblem here behold of thy own life  
 In its late course of even days, with all

102. The relevant line numbers for these 1850 additions are 4.60–64, 4.347–49, 4.356–57, 6.430–31, 8.249–50, 9.60–62, and 10.237–38.

Their smooth enthralment' . . .  
(1850, 4.60–63)

The passage embodies fancy as human and gives it an independent voice presented in direct quotation. The sentiment it expresses, however, is clearly Wordsworth's own. The same is obviously true of the previous example: it is Wordsworth who feels regret at the attack on Chartreuse. In both cases, the personification allows him to project his sentiments onto an abstract character of his creation. It also allows him to create a dramatic situation where none existed. Wordsworth was not actually present when the monks were expelled from Chartreuse, but his description of nature's outcry allows an imagined intervention that Wordsworth himself could not have accomplished. In the example of fancy's reprimand, Wordsworth retrospectively creates a tension that was not present in the lived experience, and makes the conflict between his narrating self and narrated self more embodied and more firmly rooted in one temporal frame by describing the conflict as between himself and a personified fancy. The use of personification thus creates pseudo-characters, direct quotations of others, and dramatic conflicts that are otherwise lacking in *The Prelude*. At the same time, these episodes clearly embody Wordsworth's internal conflicts; readers know that the sentiments expressed are his, and that he is the writer creating these elaborate and easily recognizable poetic figures. Personification fills some of the gaps left by the absence of typical narrative, in a way that serves the ends of lyric—the presentation of subjective experience, and attention to the craftedness of the poem itself.



Although *The Prelude* is primarily lyric in nature, it is far from a simple poem. Each episode begins with some narrative elements, but quickly subsumes them to the subjective intensity and temporal suspension of lyric. And despite taking the unprecedented step of writing so much poetry about himself, Wordsworth does not create a solipsistic poem. Rather, *The Prelude* actively guides its readers, and discloses as much as it can as early as it can, creating a sense of equality between author and public. By borrowing a narrative structure latent in another form of literary self-examination—the confession—and taking it to an extreme, Wordsworth is able poetically to edify his readers. This unusual narrative strategy alters the reading experience, giving a first-time reader the complete confidence about the story's end that is usually reserved

for a retrospective view. *The Prelude's* prospective structure provides a counterexample to the assumption that all narrative forms must be a retrospective experience for the reader, and it unites a series of short lyrics into one prodigious lyric.

In the next chapter, we shall see how Elizabeth Barrett Browning takes issue with such extreme confidence about a life's endpoint, and with the narrative structures that embody that confidence. She uses *Aurora Leigh* to interweave several sets of narrative conventions in a way that highlights the shortcomings of each narrative strategy, and she strikes a more even balance between lyric and narrative.