Mutable Images
Voice and Figure
The Accidents of Disfiguration
Limits to Literal and Figurative Reading of Wordworth’s “Books”

The grounds are so disposed as to disguise and to hide: something, always a body in some way. But also to disguise the act of hiding and to hide the disguise: the crypt hides as it holds. Carved out of nature, sometimes making use of probability or facts, these grounds are not natural.

-Derrida, “Fors”

Book 5 of Wordworth’s Prelude begins with a lament for the fragility of its titular topic, for an utter vulnerability to damaging accidents:

Why, gifted with such powers to send abroad
Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail?

(1805, 5.47-48)

With this prologue, the poem opens into a dream of a final fatal accident, a flood effacing the surface of the earth and all man’s works, including the privileged creations of “poetry and geometric truth.” The remainder of book 5 displays the fragility of Wordworth’s own most geometric truths, as the poetry shifts from the lament and celebration of “works” to a defense and an enactment of “accidents.” Finally, the fatal accident to take place in these pages is an accident to the book’s primary imagination of a dream, the dream of an apocalyptic loss and an ultimate rescue effort. The book of “Books” succumbs to a peculiar subversion of intentionality, its effects produced through a process at once overdetermined and accidental, keyed to repetition rather than recovery.

The accident can be located in a certain passage in book 5 that
repeats the imagination of calamity in an insistently literal mode. It is Wordsworth’s description of the recovery of a corpse from the waters of a local lake, written in a bare, literal language setting it apart from the adjacent passages. What surfaces in the poem with the drowned man’s “ghastly face” is effaced figure-lines one can trace neither as literal nor as figurative language, wording that, like the desert traveler in the poet’s dream, “Of these was neither, and was both at once.” The difficulty in interpreting this episode chances to exemplify a general predicament of the reader of Romantic texts: an erosion of the distinction between literal and figurative modes on which recovery of meaning depends. The text both requires that it be read literally and thwarts attempts to fix its referential status. Trying to retrace Wordsworth’s effaced figure discloses the limits of rhetorical categories. A reading of this passage, then, may be offered as an example of what the poet calls accidents in the writing and the reading of literature.

Wordsworth uses the word *accidents* in a defense of the haphazard, spontaneous development of mind, in a polemic against the systematizing educators of the age, “Sages who in their prescience would control/All accidents.” The version of 1798–99 mentions “such effects as cannot here/Be regularly classed,” which elude Wordsworth’s own simple systematizing, “yet tend no less/To the same point, the growth of mental power/And love of Nature’s works” (first part, ll. 255-58). When *accidents* appears a few lines later in this version, it carries a concrete, colloquial signification: “numerous accidents in flood or field,/Quarry or moor, or ’mid the winter snows,/Distresses and disasters.” The shift in meaning between these two uses of the word marks the peculiar slide of Wordsworth’s argument in book 5: a defense of benign chance turns into a defense of chance disasters. Implicitly proffering these episodes as instances of exemplary childhood fostered by accidental influences, Wordsworth in fact recounts two deaths, or two different kinds of fatal accident: that of the Boy of Winander and that of the drowned man whom Wordsworth saw drawn up from Esthwaite Lake. This latter passage—without the elegiac rhythm that makes the Boy’s death a destiny—impels us to question how we can account for an accident:

Seeking I knew not what, I chanced to cross
One of those open fields, which, shaped like ears,
Make green peninsulas on Esthwaite’s Lake.
Twilight was coming on, yet through the gloom
I saw distinctly on the opposite shore
A heap of garments, left as I supposed
By one who there was bathing. Long I watched,
But no one owned them; meanwhile the calm lake
Grew dark, with all the shadows on its breast,
And now and then a fish up-leaping snapped
The breathless stillness. The succeeding day—
Those unclaimed garments telling a plain tale—
Went there a company, and in their boat
Sounded with grappling-irons and long poles:
At length, the dead man, 'mid that beauteous scene
Of trees and hills and water, bolt upright
Rose, with his ghastly face, a spectre shape—
Of terror even. And yet no vulgar fear,
Young as I was, a child not nine years old,
Possessed me, for my inner eye had seen
Such sights before among the shining streams
Of fairyland, the forests of romance—
Thence came a spirit hallowing what I saw
With decoration and ideal grace,
A dignity, a smoothness, like the works
Of Grecian art and purest poesy.

(1805, 5.456-81)

Wordsworth’s closing lines ostensibly provide an answer: he could read this like a book. But for us, the contingencies of critical reading and writing will coincide in such a way that the book is irrecuperable. Instead we retrieve a “ghastly face”; we glimpse the surfacing of a disfiguration.

We see written out here the “numerous accidents” of passages: that of the vanished bather, of the boy Wordsworth, who “chanced to cross” beside the lake, and of the language of the passage itself, which succumbs to a spare literalness differentiating it from the surrounding sections of the poem. Words that elsewhere in the book of “Books” resonate with symbolic meaning or imaginative significance here mean physical objects and actions and no more. The effacement of figurative meaning is conspicuous, for these words figure in other passages that are not forgettable:

Thou also, man, hast wrought,
For commerce of thy nature with itself,
Things worthy of unconquerable life:
And yet we feel—we cannot chuse but feel—
That these must perish. Tremblings of the heart
It gives, to think that the immortal being
No more shall need such garments;

(1805, 5.17-23)

Faced with the “heap of garments, left as I supposed/By one who there was bathing” (1805, 5.461-62), one cannot choose but feel the divestment of figurative meaning in the literal recurrence of the noun garments.² One feels initially, too, a parodic effect in the ironic repetition of an action: garments are needed no more here not by an immortal being but by a bather, because he is presently a corpse. The literal action of drowning also repeats a poetic figure: a report of a drowned man instead of the vision of “the drowning world” that opens the book.

Another sort of repetition disconnects this passage and the evocation of the Boy of Winander. That text subtly invokes conceptions of depth and immersion, in naming the imaginative moment that interrupts the mutual mimicry of the boy and the owls:

And when it chanced
That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill,
Then sometimes in that silence, while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received
Into the bosom of the steady lake.

(1805, 5.404-13)

After the blank that supersedes between verse paragraphs, the Boy’s death is named with a gentleness that echoes the gentle reception of the “uncertain heaven . . . into . . . the steady lake”;

Fair are the woods, and beauteous is the spot,
The vale where he was born; the churchyard hangs
Upon a slope above the village school. . . .

(ll. 416-18)

The recurrence of figurative “hanging” suggests a coincidence between the “pauses of deep silence” and the extended pause of death. The
recurring suspensions of the listening Boy, of the village churchyard, and of “that uncertain heaven” suggest a death by immersion—as if the Boy, suspended in silence, were “received/Into the bosom of the steady lake.” The literal repetition of silence and immersion in the episode of the drowned man does violence to these recurrences. One feels a loss of resonance, if not, strangely, of intensity. The coincidence of interruptions, of “chanced” silence and fatality, gets reinscribed as the report: someone had an accident.

The drowned man episode repeats the crucial motions of the Winander Boy’s story; interruption, or a thwarting of expectation, and the emergence of death by immersion. The Boy of Winander trusts to an intrinsic responsiveness and continual renewal of exchange with natural voice. The boy Wordsworth expects the reappearance of the bather indicated by the pile of clothes on the shore. Lines among the first of The Prelude of 1798–99, which recur in book 1 of 1805 (ll. 291–304), suggest the intimately troubling implications of that particular interruption, the disruption of the continuity of bathing:

Was it for this that I, a four years’ child,
A naked boy, among thy silent pools
Made one long bathing of a summer’s day,
Basked in the sun, or plunged into thy streams,
Alternate, all a summer’s day... .

(1798–9, first part, ll. 17–21)

The text of the drowned man episode, though, is as devoid of these suggestions as it is devoid of the suggestiveness of the “pause” of the Boy of Winander. While the Boy of Winander, like the “naked boy,” is as intimate as “I” with Wordsworth, the drowned man is someone else. The difference between the two texts is that the one invites and the other resists figurative interpretation. Wordsworth sees a great deal at stake in that difference: he identifies it with Imagination itself. In the “Preface of 1815,” he delineates the distinction between literal and figurative usage as the difference between ordinary nonpoetic language and the language of the Imagination.

Imagination... has no reference to images that are merely a faithful copy, existing in the mind, of absent external objects; but is a word of higher import, denoting operations of the mind upon those objects, and processes of creation or of composition, governed by certain fixed laws. I proceed to illustrate my meaning by instances. A parrot hangs from the wires of his cage by his beak or by his claws; or a monkey from the bough of a tree by his paws
or his tail. Each creature does so literally and actually. In the first Eclogue of Virgil, the shepherd, thinking of the time when he is to take leave of his farm, thus addresses his goats:

“Non ego vos posthac viridi projectus in antro
Dumosa pendere procul de rupe videbo.”

—“half way down

Hangs one who gathers samphire,”

is the well-known expression of Shakspeare, delineating an ordinary image upon the cliffs of Dover. In these two instances is a slight exertion of the faculty which I denominate imagination, in the use of one word: neither the goats nor the samphire-gatherer do literally hang, as does the parrot or monkey; but, presenting to the senses something of such an appearance, the mind in its activity, for its own gratification, contemplates them as hanging.\(^4\)

This passage reasserts a habitual distinction between literal and figurative language, and characterizes the Imagination itself in terms of fixed functional distinctions between types of word usage. Yet Wordsworth’s own examples of word usage here hang between two different kinds of explanatory power. On the one hand they are meant to be neutral examples, the content of which is unimportant. On the other hand, however, they draw a crucial supplementary power of persuasion from their content, which is not neutral at all. Thus parrots and monkeys not only “hang” literally; they are literalists, mimics who produce sounds or gestures that “render a faithful copy” of what they imitate. There is a collusion of two kinds of significance here: type of word usage in the immediate context, and conspicuous connotations of the content, drawn from other contexts. A collusion of the same kind adds portent to Wordsworth’s description of imaginative activity: “the mind in its own activity, for its own gratification, contemplates them as hanging,” and in the lines that tell how the Boy “hung/Listening” in silence, hanging is suggested to be the distinctive situation of Imagination as such. These coincidences lend the argument supplementary meaning and force; they imply, and insist, that non-imaginative language is parrotlike, while imagination is a choice of precarious suspension. Yet they also subvert the poet’s argument. For the persistent power of sheer reference undermines Wordsworth’s claim to situate the Imagination according to determinate distinctions between figurative and literal word usage. Thus the critical text tells a story that differs from the kind of account it ostensibly attempts.

By this very duplicity, the poet’s account raises issues crucial to our own critical reading. For the coincidences and collusions of meaning it displays are very like those that frustrate attempts at either
literal or rhetorical reading of Wordsworth's poetic text, the passage on the drowned man. We are challenged, too, to come to terms with the implied judgment that that passage is strictly non-imaginative (since it lacks figurative language). It thus poses the dilemma of how to read poetry that is literal. How can one read literally, except by merely re-duplicating the gestures of the writer—like Wordsworth’s hanging monkey?

That dilemma will become more awkward as we begin a reading of the drowned man episode. We might first take note of an episode juxtaposed to it in the 1798-99 Prelude in which “hanging” imposes itself literally: the “spot of time” in which Wordsworth confronts the gibbet on the moor where a murderer had been hung in chains. The texts of 1798-99 and of 1805 offer two different versions of the literal, which here, too, Wordsworth “stumbles” on as if by accident:

We had not travelled long ere some mischance
Disjoined me from my comrade, and, through fear
Dismounting, down the rough and stony moor
I led my horse, and stumbling on, at length
Came to a bottom where in former times
A man, the murderer of his wife, was hung
In irons. Mouldered was the gibbet-mast;
The bones were gone, the iron and the wood;
Only a long green ridge of turf remained
Whose shape was like a grave. I left the spot, . . .

(1798-99, first part, ll. 304-13)

The spot is a scene of effacement, the erosion of the remnants of an execution, itself the effacement of a murder. Calculated to coincide and cancel each other, the matched annihilations leave remains instead—a residue that, strangely, consists not in the instruments or objects of annihilation ("The bones were gone, the iron and the wood") but in its site, the spot “Whose shape was like a grave.” Nature here, the “long green ridge of turf,” is figured as the remnant of repeated effacements. Repeating his reading of the “spot” for the version of 1805, Wordsworth rewrites these remains as literal letters:

Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought,
Some unknown hand had carved the murderer’s name.
The monumental writing was engraven
In times long past, and still from year to year
By superstition of the neighborhood
The grass is cleared away; and to this hour
The letters are all fresh and visible.

(1805, 11.292-98)

The residue is writing. It persists through repeated defacements (of the moor’s surface) and effacements (of the letters, as the grass grows back). “Monumental writing” is maintained as the memento of a hanging: the text repeats in a literal mode the message of the Boy “hung/Listening,” the theme of how poetic language is produced by a choice of imaginative suspension.

The “long green ridge of turf” and the carved letters are the same residual “spot,” the siting or citing of an effacement. Insisting on the citing of the executed murderer’s name, Wordworth’s second version exploits the peculiar referential status of the proper name. Semiotics distinguishes four kinds of reference, according to four different combinations of “message” and “code.” This message can refer to a message, as in reported speech; it can refer to the code, as in definitions; the code (or elements of the code) can refer to a message, as in the case of pronouns; or the code can refer to the code, as in proper names. The proper name is the effect of a binary relation in which the “message” is missing. It designates a class of objects definable only as those objects designated by that proper name. The “proper name” thus entails a peculiarly resistant mode of reference, as the Prelude passage suggests in remarking the chronically “fresh and visible” scars that must be repeated recurrently on the spot. Wordsworth comes upon a code without a message, a spot where the medium is the message: letters.

“Letters” and “shape” recur in a different way in the drowned man episode, in a further move by which this passage repeats the story of the Winander Boy. Not just literalization is involved here. Another repetition affects the theme of sound important in the resonant remembrance of the Boy: Wordsworth reports, “I chanced to cross/One of those open fields ... shaped like ears”; and “a company ... /Sounded with grappling-irons and long poles” (my italics). The literal report is not a precise denomination of proper meanings but an exploitation of approximations. The principal quality of ears, their power of hearing, is without relevance, the word’s usage here referring only to the accidental fact of their shape. The principal meaning of sound, its power of resounding, has no pertinence in this usage of the verb that borrows not its sense but only its letters. Sound “sounded” becomes a mute catachresis, the derived literal verb for soundless probing. In the accidents of repetition, literal language as well as figural is displaced and eroded.
Erosions of significance characterize not only the differences between the drowned man episode and other passages, but also the variations among different versions of the episode. In 1850 Wordsworth writes:

Those unclaimed garments telling a plain tale
Drew to the spot an anxious crowd; some looked
In passive expectation from the shore,
While from a boat others hung o’er the deep,
Sounding with grappling irons and long poles.

(1850, 5.443-47)

Mentioning words that carry a powerful charge elsewhere in his poetry—a spot, a drawing to the spot, and anxiety—Wordsworth’s revised version displays another reduction of poetic significance. We can draw a distinction between this miniaturizing and the askesis of figural meaning that generally characterizes the passage. The revision of 1850 is a kind of corruption of the text. “There is something peculiar,” as Geoffrey Hartman writes, “in the way his text corrupts itself: the freshness of earlier versions is dimmed by scruples and qualifications, by revisions that usually overlay rather than deepen insight.”

The self-corrupting text: Hartman’s phrase tells of too much in this passage, after all, for us to restrict its relevance to revision. Decay is a fact of the episode. By mere paraphrase, we can state that Wordsworth reports a chance encounter with the emergence of the possibility of corruption. Just how that factual restatement is factitious requires interpretation. The corruption of the text, nevertheless, can be a phrase for two kinds of operation in the paragraph on the drowned man: the recurrence, disfigured, of figures—the dissolution of images in the accidents of repetition; and the refiguring of a total text, a revaluation of the textual currency so that it can serve “for commerce of thy nature with itself.” To appreciate the persistence of these two operations (a decay and an inflation) we must engage in a reading of the passage.

The language of the passage is literal. It is also about an encounter with the literal, with a literal corpse, not; that is, a figure for death (such as a sunset) or a figural representation of death, like the story of the Boy of Winander. The language of the passage displays an effacement of figure. It is also about the surfacing of an effaced figure, or “ghastly face.” In this episode Wordsworth leaves unreclaimed the tropes, or “garments,” that would mediate the naked facts; and “unclaimed garments” are also the revealing fact in his narrative. We can interpret the episode as a disruption of the specular structure of
figuration: the effaced figure, or the dead letter, fractures the surface of the space that places sign and meaning. What emerges and breaks the liquid mirror of mimetic or metaphoric reflection is a disfigured face—itsle a broken surface. Thus there emerges in the text something that disrupts our conception of literal language in contradistinction to figure. For the literal is revealed as effaced figure, rather than a primary, integral, proper condition of language. Language is from the start the production of decayed or abused figures: not “proper” naming, but catachresis, like Wordsworth’s word here—*sounded*—for the act of finding the figure effaced. If Wordsworth’s language in this passage is literal, “ordinary” language is not. Language ordinarily covers up the effects of effaced figuration; it erases the effacement of figure. In this text the cover is canceled and the erased effacement re-inscribed, in an act of disfiguration.

The “ghastly face” is, however, only one aspect of Wordsworth’s statement on the drowned man. Encountering the problem of interpreting an accident, and the very problem of his reader, that of reading literal writing, Wordsworth concludes the passage with an explanation that restores metaphorical status to the episode. As Geoffrey Hartman recapitulates,

> The landscape of fairy story and romance, says Wordsworth, had anticipated such terrors; that ghastly face was, therefore, a poetic rather than soul-debasing spectacle. This interpretation of the episode harmonizes with the argument that imaginative literature continues the child’s “natural” maturation by keeping it from being plunged too quickly into the adult world.⁷

The psychological version that Hartman here paraphrases does not figure in the early version of the passage but was composed for *The Prelude* of 1805, to retrieve the episode for Wordsworth’s explicit educational theme, “Books.” The more fundamental function of the lines is simply to provide a reading of a memory that threatens to remain unreadable. The salient question is not how Wordsworth was able to cope with the corpse as a boy, but how he copes now, as a poet, with that ghastly figure, that literal instance. Referring his explanations to that question, one can infer that what he represents as a series of childhood experiences, an effect of biography, is instead an effect of composition.

Wordsworth identifies as fairy tales and romances, or allegories, the works that enabled him to see the disfigured face as a figure. Allegory is the activity that orders literal language into a sequence of prominent figures, and Wordsworth is engaged in it here, allegorizing
in retrospect the literalization he had so literally described. If we must read literally Wordsworth’s report of the literal, we should read allegorically his reference to allegory. How can we take at face value Wordsworth’s invocation of others’ romances? What is the value of such an explanation? Face value, evidently: the interpretation puts a face on the effaced figure of the drowned man. To put it another way, the lines restore “A dignity, a smoothness” to the broken surface of reflection: they resurface eroded figure. Writing “smoothness,” Wordsworth enables us to visualize his rhetorical gesture here in the very terms of the literal narrative: poetry smoothes the troubled surface of the lake, smoothes the disfigured features of the ghastly face. Conceived in its rhetorical function, read as allegory, Wordsworth’s explanation provides an account of how literal text is interpreted. It is viewed by the “I” as something read before. The relevant “romances” seemingly repeated in the drowned man’s surfacing are not, primarily, other books, but this book 5, the book of “Books.” What makes the drowned man’s “ghastly face” appear as a poetic figure is not the reading of the boy Wordsworth, but the writing—of the Boy of Winander, of the prologue on abandoned garments, and of the dream of drowning books. These are the texts that provide the figures that he rereads in the effaced figure of the drowned man. What Wordsworth explains in terms of sequential recurrence and reclaims as proof of progress in reading ability is, rather, a nonprogressive, atemporal repetition of wording from one passage to another, a repetition at once overdetermined and contingent. Reconstruing effaced figure as the dis-figuration of a previous figure supposes a process of recognition, a perception of the affinity between two different modes of presence, figurative and literal (and past and present), of the same signification. Refiguration, after the effacement and disfiguration of figure, takes the form of a claim of prefiguration. As Wordsworth’s explanation proceeds with this recuperative process, the emergence of the drowned man becomes the uncanny appearance, in the real world, of a figure, a “romance,” a fiction—but an intact and familiar figure, “hallowed,” as Wordsworth says, with the prestige of art. Along with this recovery of figure, the disrupted specular space is also reconstructed, with its familiar distinctions between inside and outside, depth and surface. The figure can now be seen to emerge from the depths of the poet’s “inner eye” (which had “seen such sights before”) to the surface of external visibility. The episode is also replaced in a coherent temporal scheme: first I read, then eye saw. This reconnects it to The Prelude’s intended theme, “the growth of a poet’s mind.” The poet is enabled to recognize himself even in the broken mirror of the accident.
Even as he makes such a claim, however, Wordsworth is writing something different. He writes that the dead figure's "dignity, or smoothness" is "like works of Grecian art." In this context one can infer that the simile refers particularly to marble statues, to antique nudes. In making such a comparison, the poet invokes a classic strategy for relating loss to value, or effacement to intensity; within a certain long-lasting literary and historical tradition, the sculpture of classical antiquity is treasured precisely in the condition of defacement or fragmentation in which many such works were found. The poet implies that the effaced figure of the risen corpse could produce a similar effect. On the one hand, then, the comparison reintroduces a suggestion of the defacement of the figure at the very moment that it seemingly celebrates it. The very reassertion of the integrity of the figure simultaneously redesignates its effacement. On the other hand, this very reintroduction of the possibility of defacement also functions to lend the effaced figure a supremely high value, which such sculptural figures traditionally take on through their very status as effaced fragments, as if their effacement empowered the viewer's "inner eye" to recognize its own work of recreation.

The perfect duplicity of the gesture performed by the analogy is perhaps Wordsworth's distinction as the poet of *The Prelude*. But the text should have warned us sufficiently against claiming to recognize distinctive features. The recurrence of effacement is a textual effect. It is a matter of the corruption of the text, which is endemic—interminable, even, so this episode suggests, by death. Another such effect is the double reading provided by allegory. Thus Wordsworth's allegory of interpretation in these concluding lines both enacts a retrieval of figurative significance and displays that retrieval as merely an act. As our subsequent self-reading will show, Wordsworth's explanation also predicts the interpretive retrievals of the critical reader.

Wordsworth's explanatory conclusion to the passage first appears in *The Prelude* of 1805, as the episode is shifted from its grouping with the spots of time, in the first part of the 1798-99 *Prelude*, to its position next to the story of the Winander Boy in the book on "Books." As the new context intensifies the effect of repetition, and makes the text's effacement of figure newly conspicuous, the task of refiguration is made more urgent, and the new line on "romance" and reading fulfills that function. In the earlier version, repetition appears differently. It is almost explicitly identified in Wordsworth's concluding remark, which declines to explicate the episode, reading merely:
I might advert
To numerous accidents in flood or field,
Quarry or moor, or 'mid the winter snows,
Distresses and disasters, tragic facts
Of rural history, that impressed my mind
With images to which in following years
Far other feelings were attached—with forms
That yet exist with independent life,
And, like their archetypes, know no decay.

(1798–99, first part, ll. 279–87)

Wordsworth turns from the drowned man to the possibility of turning to other accidents, like this one, that stamp the mind with images linked later and contingently to other forms and feelings. He writes of no feelings initially and intrinsically responsive to the episode, but only of “far other feelings” that became “attached”: “facts,” “images,” “feelings,” and “forms” are linked in an associative chain fastened merely by metonymy. The passage asserts a repetition of difference. The last line alone implies an affirmation of value, a value in the mode of persistence of the enumerated terms. Shifting diction noticeably, Wordsworth cites as “archetypes” the “numerous accidents” that were the initial instances: he reclaims as models, as metaphor, the initial links of the metonymic chain. Here too then, as in the conclusion to the version of 1805, the refiguration of splintered figure takes place through an assertion of prefiguration. Here too, the repetition of impressions or inscriptions gets represented as a genealogy of readings.

Wordsworth’s declaration that they “know no decay” would seem to affirm a kind of immortality for the mind’s images, and to celebrate the potency that enables his associations to resist “the decay of images in the mind” described by Locke. But the philosophical term shares the virulence of poetic discourse: the insistent literalism of decay refers back to the decay of the risen corpse. The statement becomes an assertion that forms or images cannot figure (cannot “know”) the literal decay that was a fact. Or, rather, the statement simply displays so conspicuously the “decay” denied by its syntax that it compels repeated rereading. By disfiguring the syntax of the sentence, shifting its subject, we can read it as the poet’s assertion that he knows (recognizes), in these images, no decay—a literal report of the gesture of denial that the line performs. What is the matter here is a certain repetition: (k)no(w)—no—decay. There is only decay: the decay of
the “ghastly face,” of figuration, of the individual incident dissolved among “numerous accidents,” and of the initial “facts of rural history” (Wordsworth’s phrase in ll. 282-83 of the 1798-99 text) fracturing into “far other” forms. The phrase evokes the mode of persistency that in book 6 of the 1805 Prelude will define the Ravine of Gondo: “woods decaying, never to be decayed.” “Archetypes,” too, will find their place in that context, as “Characters of the great apocalypse.”

The phrase “forms that know no decay” means “forms that undergo no decay.” We could read this as Wordsworth’s attempt to suppress the decay that will not go under, or to “know no” in order not to go under himself. What he writes, though, brings to the very surface the distinctive effect of metaphor. For Wordsworth’s particular example of “know” for “undergo” calls attention to metaphor’s power to confer prestige by giving an aura of intentionality to the action or object in which the metaphor focuses. Metaphor converts undergoing to knowing: it ascribes consciousness. The relation between to “know” and to “undergo” surfaced over in Wordsworth’s conclusion poses questions relevant to the initial accident: To “know” that encounter, was it sufficient for him to undergo it? What could it mean to know such an accident? The text of 1798–99 makes these rhetorical questions, repeating the issue in the form of a rhetorical figure. The version of 1805 deals with the issue in another way. The notion of insistent metonymies “which yet exist with independent life,” detached from the subject, is not simply reorganized by a final invocation of metaphoric “archetypes”; as statement it disappears altogether, for Wordsworth instead concludes the paragraph with an explanatory reference to reading. The notion of “forms that know no decay” recurs in a new version—in which another use of “knowledge” stresses its proper sense:

May books and Nature be their early joy,  
And knowledge, rightly honored with that name—
Knowledge not purchased with the loss of power!

(1805, 5.447-49)

The poet convokes directly knowledge not purchased with decay, or knowledge that does not recognize decay. What is willed in these lines is the reversal of a power structure, a conversion of knowing as undergoing to “knowledge with power.” The lines still circumscribe the project of knowing the book of accidents that “Nature” shows itself to be in book 5 of The Prelude. The text insists on the rhetorical question. How can we face, or how can we manage not to face, an effaced figure?
This chapter has insistently exploited the collusion of literal reference and illustrative significance that we found noteworthy in Wordsworth’s “Preface of 1815.” Critical writing can try for an effect of happy coincidence by using terms that coincide with the wording of the poetic text. We ought to examine the nature of this coincidence and the situation of the critical text it generates.

What happens in lines 454–72 of book 5 of The Prelude is the surfacing of effaced figure. That statement—a critical reader’s interpretive summary—names three different things at once. It describes the mode and quality of the language of the passage, the poet’s style; it interprets the significance of the episode read allegorically; and it paraphrases the poem’s literal report of the event. This situation cannot be ascribed to an ideal transparency of the poetic text (as the density, if not opacity, of the present paraphrase perhaps sufficiently suggests). It should not be construed, either, as an instance of the perfect solidarity of signs and meanings, between surface features of style and the sense and significance of the referents. The coincidence of mode and meaning is due not to a smooth continuity between style and theme, but to a displacement between a fictional event in the past, to which Wordsworth refers certain qualities, and another kind of fictional event that does have those qualities, the writing and reading of the poetic text itself. This is no language of symbol in which one phrase might mean simultaneously all it means, and the meaning be present to the word itself. The structure is, rather, that of homonym, in which disparate meanings happen to be expressed by the same word. By accident, here, the signs for the meaning and the signs for the sign can coincide. Meanings and signs are linked not by intrinsic resemblance but by the accident of identity.

The coincidence of signs is not a windfall but a dilemma for the interpreter of Wordsworth’s text. The discontinuous sameness of the passage divides the interpretive act from itself. The pointed accuracy and multiple relevancy of the poet’s words leave one unable to say what one means, by making one mean several different things at once. The passage at once requires to be read literally and makes literal reading impossible. It is impossible first of all just because of the conspicuous traces of the effaced figures that provide the key terms of the text. Reading of “a heap of garments,” we necessarily recall the symbolic “garments” of the book’s opening; understanding the phrase’s peculiar literalness actually necessitates that we appreciate the repetition and the difference between the two. Yet we thereby appreciate “garments” as a figure for the literal and not as an effaced figure, literal itself. In a similar way, in his concluding comment on the episode,
Wordsworth appreciated the sight of the risen corpse as a literal appearance in the world of a poetic figure from books. We misread the literal as a figure for the literal; Wordsworth misread the literal as a literal manifestation of figure. Thus we duplicate in inverse the very error we claimed to perceive in the poet’s reading of the episode. Wordsworth’s misreading is a powerful example, a literally compelling rhetorical model. We may see his mistake, but we are bound to repeat it. Monkey see, monkey do.

This encounter with Wordsworth displays how our general dilemma as interpretive readers of poetry is compounded by our unfailing predicament as critical writers about it. The writer cannot state the literal meaning of a passage without simultaneously stating a figurative interpretation, for the rhetorical status of critical discourse automatically lends figurative significance to its terms. Writing figuratively, then, one fails to read literally, and so misses the point of the passage even while focusing on it directly. To read literally would be to halt one’s inference at the literal referents of a passage literally written. What is the referent, though? Just the literal; the literal is what the passage is about. Wordsworth’s text withholds from us a referent distinct from the literalism of the passage itself. The text not only makes a monkey of us, but leaves us hanging. Reading literally, one manages only to read to the letter; and the letter reinscribes the figure it repeats. Yet the other aspect of this critical predicament is that the writer can do nothing but interpret literally. Not only does interpretive transfiguration thwart nonfigurative paraphrase, but literal paraphrase reabsorbs and erases interpretation. For the literal language of the poetic narrative still insists within the figural language of the interpretive text. Writing out our interpretation of the surfacing of effaced figure, we are copying out what is literally written in the poem. Just as the poetic figure of abandoned mortal garments gets literalized, in further writing, as actual clothes; just as the figure of the Winander Boy hanging silent above the lake recurs in some sense, literalized, as an actual corpse; so the interpretive concepts of abandoned tropes and dead figures also get literalized, in the same way, in the process of writing about them with reference to the passage on the drowned man. The slip from figural to literal—the accident—befalls the critical, as well as the poetic, figure. It is as true to say that Wordsworth’s text reads its interpretation literally as to say that the interpretation literally reads Wordsworth’s text.

While Wordsworth’s literal report eludes accurate description, the explanatory section of the passage resists interpretive mastery in another way. For in taking the explanation as a rhetorical gesture, and
reading it allegorically, the meaning we thereby infer from it is an account of the error—and the inevitability—of allegorical reading. The passage enables us to construe the disparity between the textual effect of a repetition of wording between different parts of *The Prelude* itself, and the poetic realignment of the episode in a sequence of anticipation and fulfillment, the “romance” of recognition that Wordsworth outlines even as he makes reference to “the forests of romance.” We learn from this passage that figurative reading of a literal instance involves the construction of allegories, the inference of a sequence of statements or figures forming a narrative—more precisely, a narrative that one has read before. But figurative reading, and the construction of a narrative sequence, is just what we have been doing—most patently in the very reading of this explanatory passage, articulating its relationship to the preceding narrative as an allegory of reading and misreading. We mimic the misreading we discover, even in the process of discovering it.

At this point the reflexive structure of our own text reaches a certain critical density: we must acknowledge that while we can claim to recognize that our interpretive error merely *mimics* Wordsworth, the recognition really at stake—what lures us to make that claim—is our recognition of our own critical narrative in the mirror of Wordsworth’s poem. It is that wish that impels us to demonstrate how the poet himself strives to make the accident into an occasion for self-recognition, seeing himself seeing his own reading in the “ghastly face” before him. If we involuntarily recognize a romance in the drowned man episode, it is not simply Wordsworth’s Romantic elegy on Winander, but the romance of our own doomed acts of interpretation. We too would cut a critical figure like the figure of the Winander Boy, and our self-criticism covertly luxuriates in the pathos of that factitious correspondence: if our jocund mimicry of Wordsworth’s call is checked, if inexpressible discontinuities baffle our best skill, we console ourselves with the recollection of these memorable Wordsworthian precedents, with a sense of “cutting across the reflex of a star.” The seduction of coincidence persists in spite of the fact that the passage we are explicating tells a grimly literal story about accidents. If critical readers are bound to identify with some figure of Wordsworth’s, then it ought to be not the youths baffled by silence or unstartled by a corpse, but the trivially exotic pets of the critical “Preface of 1815,” who “render a faithful copy of external objects.” Thus, we are reduced to saying: better a live parrot or monkey than a dead Boy.

Following through, then, the ambiguous project of noting how our reading of the accident mimics Wordsworth’s and how his rhetorical
gesture elicits and predicts our own, we may remark another coincidence: the theme of books as such. Our interpretation, like Wordsworth's, implicitly places this episode in a context of educational development. If Wordsworth recognizes in the risen corpse figures familiar to him from allegorical romances, we recognize, in the broken surface of his text, a figuration familiar to us from allegories of Romanticism—from the interpretive books that are our own most saving fairy tales. The disruption of the specular surface, the rising of the dead letter, and the fatality of misreading, all this we have read before, and that fact alone allows us to see it, hallowing what we read "With decoration and ideal grace," as "purest poesy."

For us as for Wordsworth, the act of reading a particular effaced figure comes to be assimilated to an ongoing educational process, "the growth of a... mind." Yet the book of "Books" begins with a sharp opposition between books and educators, "accidents" and "sages," reading process and educational system. The assumption of antagonism between education and fiction has a long history, and Wordsworth's revision contributes heavily to a prevalent contemporary conception of their relationship: his animus against "Sages who in their prescience would control/All accidents" is echoed in a current critique of educator-readers who oversimplify the complex contingencies of literary texts. Radicalized, the opposition of educational process to reading process emerges as an opposition between reading and books, and a valuing of texts for their very resistance to reading, their persistence as accidents that elude our accounting. In this perspective, encountering the impossibility of reading is itself authentic knowledge of literature. Critical interpretation comes to be distinguished, then, by the implicit claim that to "undergo" is to "know": undergoing the exigencies of reading the text, the interpreter comes to know the disfiguring accidents of its writing. Such a project can resume a place within a systematic educational process. A poet can have a critic; a critic can have a student.

Yet such a conception of interpretation is a seductive delusion comparable to the illusion that the identity of the poet's and the critic's wordings could be a happy coincidence rather than a collusion or collision with fatal effects. Moreover, it is a seduction that always partly fails to work. What the student knows after undergoing it is that "undergoing" and "knowing" are incommensurable, cleaved by an unnatural act of reading and failing to form an experience, which would be that of literature, or of education. What happens to take place instead is that one or the other goes under: one writer or reader must take his place under the other—an imposition that impels
readers of Romantic texts, like Wordsworth, to convoke the inversion of power structures and conversion to the experience of “knowledge . . . with . . . power.” The outcome of reading in the book on “Books” is an experience that Wordsworth’s story leaves unmentioned. One feels impelled to advert to it here.

Hitherto,
In progress through this verse my mind hath looked
Upon the speaking face of earth and heaven
As her prime teacher. . . .

(1805, 5.10-13)

So Wordsworth writes at the beginning of book 5; now, as he goes on to say, he will acknowledge the precious tutelage of books. The resonant metaphor of a “speaking face” ascribes a human power to nature. In the defense of accidents that becomes the format of his celebration of books, Wordsworth comes to write,

At length, the dead man, ’mid that beauteous scene
Of trees and hills and water, bolt upright
Rose, with his ghastly face. . . .

(1805, 5.470-72)

Here, too, nature gets a human face, but quite literally; and not a speaking face but a mute one—an effaced figure unable to articulate any lesson. Annotated texts of The Prelude provide us with information about this effaced figure that comes out second as candidate for the writer’s “prime teacher”; the drowned man was, in fact, a local schoolmaster. Wordworth’s polemical argument—do away with the schoolmasters!—gets transformed in the course of book 5 into an incident that literally does away with one. The exemplary educational episode consists in seeing a teacher as a dead man. Literary education proves its efficacy in the ability to circumvent mere “vulgar fear” of the “ghastly face” of the schoolmaster risen again. And the effect of writing, as we have written, is the duplicity of a gesture that simultaneously hallows the lost teacher and reinscribes his statuesque disfigurement.