The Confessional Imagination
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The Confessional Imagination: A Reading of Wordsworth's Prelude.

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"What Mr. Wordsworth will produce, it is not for me to prophecy: but I could pronounce with the liveliest convictions what he is capable of producing. It is the FIRST GENUINE PHILOSOPHICAL POEM." This was Coleridge's judgment in the Biographia Literaria. And he wrote better than he knew, though not better than he might have known. For though, by 1817, his great friend was already well into that long last phase of his career so many critics call "the decline," and though Wordsworth was never to complete the philosophical epic he himself projected as his magnum opus, yet The Prelude had been and was being written. Coleridge had heard Wordsworth read the first, 1805 version of the poem, and Wordsworth was in process of that forty-year revision, realignment, and tinkering with his masterpiece which is one of the oddest stories in English literary history. Thinking of Lucretius, Dante, or Spenser, we may not wish to call The Prelude the first genuine philosophical poem. But there can be little doubt that The Prelude stands in an almost archetypal relationship to all that has come since.

It is one of the assumptions of this book, at any rate, that The Prelude represents not only a magisterial triumph in Wordsworth's own imaginative life but a problematic pattern for the entire imaginative and philosophical tradition of "the modern." To read the poem at all is to invoke, at a rather serious level, the question of Romanticism, its nature, extent, and continuing power over our own best writing. Harold Bloom has recently argued that literary inheritances in our tradition are a matter of the "anxiety of influ-
ence": each generation of poets, that is, struggling against and willfully deforming the great accomplishments of their predecessors. In such a reading, *The Prelude* should stand not only as archetype but also as countertype to the achievements of Shelley, Keats, and Whitman or, in our time, to the shattered, despairing confessions of Hart Crane's *The Bridge* and John Berryman's *The Dream Songs*. But my concern here is primarily with the archetypal quality of the poem, the ways in which it develops and defines concepts of language, time, and narrative which inevitably guide and influence—whatever the degree of their anxiety—the writers who succeed Wordsworth.

It is interesting that both Coleridge and Wordsworth should have failed to recognize the "first genuine philosophical poem"—at least of Romanticism—when it was, so to speak, locked in the poet's desk all along. For at the heart of their error is a crucial, epoch-making transformation of the sense of the word *philosophical*: a transformation whose prime movers include Wordsworth and Coleridge themselves. If *philosophy* is what Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Sartre, or the structuralists do, it is a philosophy much closer to the erratic narrative explorations of the *Biographia* or *The Prelude* than to the discursive structures of Hume, Berkeley, or Hartley: closer not simply in form but in the inevitable pressure of form upon thought. What has been heralded as the "death of metaphysics" in the modern era is not, indeed, a death but the distinctively Romantic growth of a metaphysics of the individual personality, a philosophy whose central methods are introspection and self-examination, along with an acute sense of the interchange between abstract speculation and the most idiosyncratic structures of the single self. Under such a dispensation, philosophical writing cannot help but become a much more meditative—in fact, confessional—activity, in which the theoretical content of assertion comes to rely more and more profoundly upon the imaginative, self-conscious *act* of assertion itself. *The Prelude*, to which Wordsworth habitually referred as "the poem on the growth of my own mind," illuminates and is illuminated by the intellectual history which it helped transform.

There is, however, an inherent danger in such a reading of this,

or any, poem. We have learned over the last two decades that the tools of psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and structural linguistics immeasurably deepen our understanding of the key works of Romanticism. And this is so, I suggest, precisely because these disciplines are Romanticism’s still vital manifestations, its more professorial godchildren, just as so many contemporary fictions are its more cantankerous grandchildren. But whenever we locate the influence, the living continuation of a text or body of texts, we run the risk of losing the original in the mob of its offspring—of losing, indeed, the “tradition” we seek to describe by losing the sense of individual, independent works which realize and incarnate that tradition. In the wealth of new lights currently being focused on Romanticism, it is possible to feel, sometimes, that the lights are perhaps too bright: that the tools of analysis borrowed from contemporary modes of thought, by being overemployed, in fact over-contemporize their object, thereby obscuring the very historical inheritance from Romanticism to modernism which they seek to clarify. It is to our advantage to recognize the family resemblance between *The Prelude* and *The Dream Songs* or the *Philosophical Investigations*; but it is at our peril that we forget the gulfs which separate them.

Yeats observed that we make poetry out of our quarrel with ourselves, rhetoric out of our quarrel with others. Criticism is, or should be, made out of the quarrel between poetry and rhetoric: the creative tension in the reader’s mind between the text in its own immitigable inwardness and the text as unit of a larger, public literary continuity. The second, rhetorical aspect of *The Prelude* involves the considerations we have already invoked, the poem’s identity as shaping agent and ancestor of the modern tradition. The first aspect—the inwardness of *The Prelude*—involves, in my reading, close attention to the literary and psychological conventions which underlie and—perhaps unconsciously—shape the language structures of the poem itself and which the poem, in its turn, transforms through its own distinctive vision. These inner pressures on the poem I identify specifically as the tradition of Augustinian and English Protestant religious confession.

Like M. H. Abrams in his recent book, *Natural Supernaturalism*, I find in St. Augustine one of the most suggestive analogues for the Wordsworthian quest for lost time and for the redemptive power
4 Introduction

of memory. Unlike Abrams, however, I am more concerned with similarities between the two writers than with the differences between them: I am more concerned, therefore, with the Augustinian tradition of confession in England during the two centuries immediately preceding Wordsworth. The idea of Romanticism, particularly in its Wordsworthian variety, as a secularization of Protestant piety is no new thing, of course, among critics of the age. But it has not been sufficiently noticed that radical Protestantism itself, particularly the great movements of the Society of Friends and the Methodists, is a first, highly subtle and self-conscious version of exactly this secularizing process. The progressive rejection by the Friends and the Methodists of sacramental and liturgical forms of worship, and their resolute insistence on an inward Kingdom of God in this world, is one of the most crucial and least-examined phases in the transformation of the post-Renaissance English mind. And the distinctive art form of these men, the art of confession founded upon the ideal of Augustinian piety, may well prove to be an even more vital force in the genesis of the Romantic imagination than the philosophy of Locke or Berkeley or the poetry of Cowper or Smart.

In religious confession the central narrative impulse is best described in that favorite term of the confessants themselves, justification. It is possible for the confessant to own his past only because the plot of his past is a divinely ordained plot manifesting the grace of God: the confessant experiences a sense of being written by the divine Author Himself. Confession, then, is to be distinguished from the less specifically determined art of autobiography, as we find it in Gibbon, Hume, or even—despite the title—the Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is, most centrally, a self-ratifying statement of election. "Is it better to call upon you, to know you, or to love you?" Augustine asks his God on the first page of the Confessions. What he discovers—and what largely characterizes all Protestant piety since Luther—is that these three acts are indistinguishable from each other. The movement of heart, will, and intellect is, for the true Protestant confessant, a single act of speech; and if it fails to become such, if it fragments itself into "head-knowledge" as opposed to "heart-knowledge," then the confessant knows that something is wrong, that his election is not yet complete. Eschewing the more conservative, sacramentally tinged
quest for "evidences of election" in the outer world (as with Donne or Vaughan), the confessant leaves himself nowhere to look for his proof of salvation except within his own heart or—most crucially—within the language of his own heart. Such English confessants as John Newton, William Nelson, and Silas Told were capable, indeed, of extraordinarily bad writing and sometimes extraordinarily off-putting pietism. But they were also capable of a truly astounding narrative self-consciousness and control, a sense of the rightness of language which arises, surely, from the exigencies of their chosen form—one of the most demanding, murderously self-critical forms of religious writing we know.

The fundamental similarity between the general shape of confession and the concerns and procedures of *The Prelude* is striking. It becomes even more striking as one realizes that this cannot be a matter of Wordsworth's consciously copying the techniques of the Protestant confessants; rather, the similarity springs from a shared concern, a psychic isomorphism between the radical Protestants and this most radical of poets. Anyone who has taught Wordsworth's poetry to undergraduates has had to face the widespread cliché (or prejudice) about Wordsworth as "nature poet." He is a "nature poet" only in the most difficult, most contradictory way: the same way in which we might choose to call George Fox, founder of the Society of Friends, a "churchman" or a "minister." Wordsworth's attempt to redeem nature—to integrate it with the rhythms of his own consciousness—finally led him to a vision of self-in-nature which all but obscures the conventional imagery and existence of the natural world, turning that world rather into an almost abstract principle of otherness, of alternate resistance and support to the life of the mind, whose sensory qualities are important mainly for their functioning within this eternal give-and-take. It is the same deeply motivated response which the confessants have to sacramental "evidences of election," turning them to use only as elements in the inner tension between the mind, the heart, and the memory.

One example will suffice to indicate the kinds of connections I am concerned with. It is the example which was, in fact, the genesis of this book, Wordsworth's short poem "Nutting." There he relates how one morning, as a boy, he left home early on a nutting expedition:
Tricked out in proud disguise of cast-off weeds
Which for that service had been husbanded,
By exhortation of my frugal Dame—
Motley accoutrement, of power to smile
At thorns, and brakes, and brambles,—and in truth
More ragged than need was!

(9–14)

He came to a secluded bower, isolated and luxuriant:

A little while I stood,
Breathing with such suppression of the heart
As joy delights in; and with wise restraint
Voluptuous, fearless of a rival, eyed
The banquet;—or beneath the trees I sate
Among the flowers, and with the flowers I played;
A temper known to those who, after long
And weary expectation, have been blest
With sudden happiness beyond all hope.

(21–29)

This idyllic and incipiently sexual state of enjoyment lasted only for a short while, however, for soon the boy erupted into a wanton, absolutely unmotivated act of destruction:

Then up I rose,
And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash
And merciless ravage: and the shady nook
Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower,
Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up
Their quiet being: and unless I now
Confound my present feelings with the past,
Ere from the mutilated bower I turned
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings,
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees, and saw the intruding sky.

(43–53)

In the last three lines of the poem, the poet turns to his auditor (obviously Dorothy) in much the same surprising, yet completely
natural, way he turns to his sister in the last section of "Tintern Abbey":

Then, dearest Maiden, move along these shades
In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand
Touch—for there is a spirit in the woods.

(54-56)

This remarkable poem “belongs” to The Prelude in a number of important ways. It was included in manuscript in a December 1798 letter from the Wordsworths to Coleridge, along with the Stolen Boat and Skating episodes from book 1 of The Prelude and two Lucy poems. “Few before him,” one critic writes of Wordsworth, “would have been inspired by the event recorded in ‘Nutting.’”2 This is true, of course, of the history of English, and for that matter, of European, poetry. But at least one very remarkable man both could have been and was inspired deeply by an experience quite like that of “Nutting.” The man was St. Augustine and the experience was the episode of the pear tree, perhaps the most famous passage in the Confessions:

For I stole that, of which I had enough, and much better. Nor cared I to enjoy what I stole, but joyed in the theft and sin itself. A pear tree there was near our vineyard, laden with fruit, tempting neither for colour nor taste. To shake and rob this, some lewd young fellows of us went, late one night (having according to our pestilent custom prolonged our sports in the streets till then), and took huge loads, not for our eating, but to fling to the very hogs, having only tasted them. And this, but to do what we liked only, because it was misliked. Behold my heart, O God, behold my heart, which Thou hadst pity upon in the bottom of the bottomless pit.

(2. 9)3

3. The Confessions of Saint Augustine, trans. Edward B. Pusey (New York, 1958). I use the Pusey translation throughout, for its convenience and close (if plodding) accuracy; references to the conventional paragraph numeration of the Latin text are my own interpolation and follow references to chapter.
There are significant differences of circumstance here, of course, from "Nutting": Wordsworth goes out in the morning, Augustine at night; Wordsworth is alone, Augustine with his "pestilent" boyhood companions; Wordsworth is entranced by the natural object of his appetite, while Augustine takes pains to note the plainness and commonness of the pear tree. But these circumstantial divergences only underscore the nearly identical imaginative form of the episodes. In both instances, a grown man relates how, as a boy, he once approached nature as the object of his appetites; how this appetitive approach transformed itself, apparently without rational motivation, into a violently destructive impulse; and how now, as a man ("unless I now / Confound my present feelings with the past"), he realizes this apparently trivial act to have been a signal of something crucial in his moral life. For both men, the true, life-giving relationship between mind and experience, soul and nature, is caught in the formulation from "Tintern Abbey":

\[\ldots\] all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive \ldots\]

(105–107)

although of course for Augustine the "creation" is a secondary creation, a recognition of the inspiriting power of God. The beautiful and seductive forms of the world become changed, through the confessant's narrative, into the mental forms of the writer's struggle to

\[\ldots\] recognize
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

(107–111)

This struggle, the struggle of the religious confessant or the confessional poet, is linguistic in an especially intense manner. We have observed that, for the confessant, there is no guarantee of his salvation except the carefully maintained rectitude of his own confession, his own language. Throughout my reading of The Prelude, I concentrate upon the verbal texture of the poem, its own
evolving sense of the proper language for poetic celebration, as one of its most intensely confessional aspects and also one of its most creative anticipations of later modes of thought and writing. A number of recent studies of Wordsworth have emphasized a more or less psychoanalytic approach to the poet: tracing the ways in which his emotional and intellectual problems shape the language of his poetry. But my interest here is in the ways language itself shapes consciousness, not the other way around. Whether we are speaking simply of language or of the rather specific linguistic sanctions of confessional rhetoric, we need to realize that the grammar of our experience, the verbal grid through which we receive and shape the world, goes far toward determining the nature of the experience itself. As Wittgenstein observes at several points in *The Brown Book* and *The Philosophical Investigations*, to imagine a language is to imagine a way of life. And, indeed, our own century has grown increasingly aware of the primacy of linguistic controls over our attempts to name the "real" world. Wittgenstein is a particularly dramatic instance of this concern, since his major work, like that of Wordsworth and the confessants, is a lifelong attempt to discover the underlying conditions of speech which will allow him to believe in, to trust, his own self-consciousness: *bene dicere* leading to and constituting *bene esse*.

A reading of "Nutting" first led me to notice the remarkable similarities between that poem and Augustine's practice in the *Confessions*. Then, speculating on *The Prelude* as a whole and, later, on English religious confessions, I was led to reexamine the idea of language in these works, and I turned to Wittgenstein, among other writers, for a better grasp of modern viewpoints on the problem of language. And at this point in my reading, I was struck and excited by a coincidence which is not, I think, simply a *post hoc* justification of my research, for not only Wordsworth but Wittgenstein too is "Augustinian" in a peculiar manner. We know that Wittgenstein was fascinated with Augustine's power of faith—a faith the later thinker could never quite attain—and that the epigraph to the *Philosophical Investigations*, the springboard for that whole immense exploration of language, is a passage from the *Confessions*

on the validity and meaning of words. But this quest itself leads Wittgenstein at points into an uncannily Wordsworthian—not Augustinian—diction. The final goal of the confessant’s speech is what I call in my fourth chapter “Edenic Words”: a language, that is, which recreates the lost Eden of Man’s innocence within the successful narrative of each man’s private life. And Wittgenstein, revising his early positivism, writes at the beginning of the Philosophische Bemerkungen: “Phenomenological or ‘primary’ speech, as I called it, is not now my concern; I no longer think it important. All that is possible or necessary is to distinguish the inmost nature of our speech [das Wesentliche unserer Sprache] from its nonessentials.”5 This important passage, and especially the key phrase das Wesentliche unserer Sprache, inevitably and astoundingly reminds the reader of Wordsworth of the poet’s own announced hopes for a purified, Edenic language in the Prospectus to The Excursion:

Paradise, and groves
Elysian, Fortunate Fields—like those of old
Sought in the Atlantic Main—why should they be
A history only of departed things,
Or a mere fiction of what never was?
For the discerning intellect of Man,
When wedded to this goodly universe
In love and holy passion, shall find these
A simple produce of the common day.
—I, long before the blissful hour arrives,
Would chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse
Of this great consummation—and, by words
Whose speak of nothing more than what we are,
Would I arouse the sensual from their sleep
Of death. . . .

(47–61, italics mine)

It is similarities such as these—and, of course, their attendant dissimilarities—which the present study attempts to map, always keeping its central focus upon an attempt to understand and read

efficiently *The Prelude* itself. Each chapter is intended to center upon a basic aspect of Wordsworth's confessional procedure in writing the poem. Thus, he is confessing to someone; he is confessing his past life from the viewpoint of the present; he is confessing a life which he regards mainly as a development and refinement of his perception of the outer and inner worlds; and finally, most radically, he is confessing through words, he is *speaking*. Chapter 1 is an examination of the peculiarities involved in the mode of address to *The Prelude*’s definitive auditor, Coleridge, and of the ways this auditor, as felt presence, shapes the overall form of the poem. Chapter 2 is a general discussion of the confessional—and Wordsworthian—view of the human career, contrasting the holistic and organic ideal of man's development with a more ancient and allegorical, or *daemonic*, view against which the confessional vision struggles. Chapter 3 carries the argument to the more fundamental level of the *shape* of the experiences narrated: it is necessarily a discussion of the senses of sight and hearing, since these are the "real" senses for Wordworth’s pre-Proustian and, indeed, pre-Keatsian kind of poetry. And chapter 4 deals with language itself, the irreducible counters of Wordsworth's vision, and the highly specialized confessional language of "Edenic words." The general direction of my reading, then, is a narrowing of focus from the most general to the most specific, definitive features of the confessional act.

I have attempted, following the example of my great primary texts, to avoid a specialized, technical diction and to use words which speak of nothing more than what *The Prelude*, in my view at least, is. But there is one term, in frequent use in this study, which deserves some initial clarification: the *daemonic*.

*Daemon*, in pre-Olympian Greek mythology, refers to a kind of supernatural agent, less than divine and more than human, capable of compelling human beings to act in certain obsessive, excessive ways. The daemon is the linguistic ancestor of our *demon*, of course; but he is not primarily an agent of evil. The compulsion through which the daemon possesses and drives a man may be for either good or evil, but it is fundamentally something which comes to a man from *outside* himself, something which seems to force him to act despite his conscious will. The wrath—the *Ménin*—of Achilles announced as the subject of the *Iliad*, for example, is not
simply Achilles' anger but a daemonic principle of wrath, a semi-detached agent which possesses the Achaean hero. The daemonic, then, describes a state of mind in which one sees his best or worst actions as, in some way, not part of himself but thrust upon him from without. The Freudian idea of obsession-compulsion is a good analogue to this sense of the daemonic, although obsessive-compulsive actions are always accompanied, in our culture, with a feeling of guilt. And the very nature of the daemonic is, really, to deny the possibility of guilt. E. R. Dodds, in his magisterial book *The Greeks and the Irrational*, discusses the daemon as the central figure of a primitive Greek "shame-culture": a culture, that is, in which shame or embarrassment, rather than the sense of sin or guilt, is the prime motivating factor of ethics: "This daemon has, apparently, nothing to do with perception or thought, which Empedocles held to be mechanically determined; the function of the daemon is to be the carrier of man's potential divinity and actual guilt. It is nearer in some ways to the indwelling spirit which the shaman inherits from other shamans than it is to the rational 'soul' in which Socrates believed. . . ." Dodds's thesis is that the great accomplishments of fifth-century Athenian culture transformed the Greek moral universe from "shame-culture" to "guilt-culture." Through the morality of Socrates and Aeschylus, among others, the daemon was denuded of his role as guilt-carrier, and the sense of sin, of personal responsibility for one's actions and therefore of the need for purification and penance, was introduced into Western culture.

We may remark that the daemonic, as Dodds describes it, is by no means an obsolete notion. Indeed, it seems to be a perennial possibility of moral thought, in constant battle with the more unitary vision of the soul as creator of its own guilts and triumphs. If the daemon finds his most receptive host in the figure of the shaman, the soul in need of purification is ministered to most efficiently by the shaman's historical successor, the priest. But our own century, both in literature and in politics, has seen how easy it is for the shaman and his attendant daemons to reassert their hegemony over the mind.

At any rate, the daemonic, as undying competitor of the unified moral soul, is a particularly important attitude for the confessant—

recorder and narrator of the progress of the soul toward unity—to overcome. Augustine's quarrel with the Manichaeans, the quarrels of the English confessants with various forms of sacramental “superstition,” and Wordsworth's quarrel with the obsessive, disembodied rationalism of David Hartley, are all versions of the struggle against the daemonic. In fact, the confessant’s progress toward a true vision of unity-in-time almost always becomes, in this way, a minihistory of the cultural upheaval Dodds traces. The confessor needs to establish his own guilt as real guilt precisely so that he can overcome it through the saving speech of his confession. And in order to do this, he needs to find a stage in his past where he was under a daemonic dispensation: a dispensation, that is, which would not allow him to recognize the true processes of his soul.

Milton, one of the few great poets who is also a great theologian, was acutely aware of this problem, both in his own life and in the great celebratory work of his life. I preface my discussion, in the second chapter, of Wordsworth's sense of the daemonic with a discussion of *Paradise Regained*. It is perhaps the profoundest myth we have of a battle, in the persons of Satan and the Son of God, between the principles of daemonism and moral unity. It is a “preconfessional” poem, since it works out, with extraordinary clarity and precision, those moral and verbal oppositions which underlie the techniques of confessional writing for invoking and then circumventing daemonism.\(^7\)

The term has, in fact, recently become rather current in literary criticism. Angus Fletcher's *Allegory* and Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, among other books, use daemonism in immensely suggestive ways to describe processes and techniques basic to all poetic creation. My own use of the term is intended to suggest both its general relevance to certain eternal problems of moral thought and writing and its particular usefulness in dealing with Wordsworth's narrative of the growth of his own—archetypally modern—mind. The struggle in Yeats between Self and Soul and in Robert

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Lowell between the will to sanity and the dementia of "Skunk Hour"—indeed, the great warfare in contemporary writing between poetry as cure and poetry as deep disease—are all among the directions in which this Wordsworthian and confessional strife seems to survive and develop.

As a final point, I wish to reemphasize my subtitle: this is a reading of *The Prelude*, one which I think makes good sense of the poem but which would not be possible without a great body of Wordsworth criticism, although, indeed, it sometimes contradicts it. Wordsworth has been blessed, among a number of ways, in the critics who have written about him: I think it would be difficult to find another author whose modern commentators include so many readers of such a consistently high level of perception. And in an age not distinguished by the generosity of its literary critics, it is refreshing to note the tone of most discussions of, and even debates over, the nature of his work. Perhaps the poet's personality—at least, his literary personality—has a gentling effect on writers who approach it. Or perhaps his work, and especially *The Prelude*, is simply capacious enough to allow even antithetical interpreters to dwell in fellowship. Whatever the cause, the effect cannot but be to inspire further study in the same spirit of reasoned, generous, and humane criticism. I have attempted, in my reading, to be faithful to the high standard of that exegesis as well as to *The Prelude*. 