Taking up the subject, then, upon general grounds, I ask what is meant by the word Poet? What is a poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him? He is a man speaking to men. . . .

Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*

Nothing is more familiar or characteristic among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions, and you take away Christianity. Why, the Holy Spirit is given to Christians from heaven in order that He may glorify Christ and in them confess Him even unto death. . . .

Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*

Perhaps the greatest irony we encounter in *The Prelude* is the poem's title. Wordsworth, of course, originally did think of it as a
prelude to his proposed philosophical epic. But that later epic he never found the strength to complete, and the title so suggestive of promise and beginnings was given the poem by his wife on its posthumous publication in 1850. It was actually called, in William and Dorothy's letters, "the Poem on his own Life" or "the poem on the growth of my own mind." But it has a different, much more interesting, name on the title page of the 1805-6 manuscripts:

Poem
Title not yet fixed upon
by
William Wordsworth
Addressed to
S. T. Coleridge

This "title," which corresponds closely to Wordsworth's habitual reference within his own household to "the poem to Coleridge," is reproduced in de Selincourt's editions of the 1805 and the combined 1805 and 1850 texts. And in its refusal to settle on a conventional title, it may be the most meaningful name we have for the poem. For as the "Poem Addressed to S. T. Coleridge," The Prelude reveals the first of its distinctively confessional aspects: its sense of an audience as necessary not only for the rhetorical decorum of the poem but for the poem's very existence. The phrase, "Title not yet fixed upon," is in fact an admission of uncertainty which finally belies its own diffidence. For Coleridge, in all he represented for Wordsworth, is in a profound way the only fact in the poem which can be "fixed upon" in the way we normally fix upon the title of a major work of imagination.

To understand the novelty of this, we must understand the importance of titles in Western epic tradition—the tradition in which, rightly or wrongly, Wordsworth thought he was working. Kenneth Burke and Francis Fergusson have both pointed out the importance of title in conventional epic as the identification of a central action, a dynamic paradigm which, repeated in varying modalities (high, middle, or low style) and intensities (successful,
abortive, or equivocal), defines the moral universe or the theme of the work.  

Thus, for example, in *The Iliad*, the paradigmatic action of "destruction of a city" ramifies itself throughout the action in various versions of subjection or cruelty. (This process is brilliantly described by Simone Weil, who calls *The Iliad* "The Poem of Force."  

*Gerusalemme Liberata* and *Paradise Lost* exemplify titles which are actually paradigms of an action to be replayed, in one way or another, throughout their narratives. And epics titled after heroic central characters, such as *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, and even *Beowulf*, display the same principle of paradigmatic organization, with the added sophistication of epitomizing the central action as a dramatic characteristic of a single man.

The "Romance" epics of the Renaissance, however, present a special problem for this sort of interpretation. And one such epic, which Wordsworth knew intimately—Spenser's *Faerie Queene*—may be allowed to stand for this class and to introduce an interesting perspective on *The Prelude*.

In Spenser's poem, the exuberant projection of ideal types around—and symbolically within—the elusive Gloriana tends to split the poem into a series of more or less independent paradigms of action and to suggest that the unfinished epic may be virtually untitled, or without an analogical, paradigmatic center. Most responsible lines of interpretation of *The Faerie Queene* confront this problem and suggest that the poet's continuing address to Elizabeth provides a clue to its total organization. If this is correct, then the paradigmatic action of *The Faerie Queene* is not an action described but an action performed in the telling of the tale: the action of courtly praise, whose roots have been traced by such scholars as E. R. Curtius to the centrality of epideictic oratory in medieval Latin literature. The key passage here would perhaps be the chronicles of British and Elvin kings in the House of Alma (book 2, canto 10), itself a series of praises, where we learn that

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the quest of Arthur for Gloriana is, in its full meaning, the quest of historical process for the purity of moral ideas, of mutability for permanence. So that the deification of Elizabeth, her symbolic conversion into ideality, becomes the prime motive of *The Faerie Queene*, unifying the legends of allegorical knights of virtue, the exercises in political commentary, and the occasional neoplatonic pastorals of Spenser’s book. In some sense, then, Spenser’s impulse to *address*, as itself an epic action, serves to de-allegorize or de-mythologize even his own supreme exercises in allegory. This itself is significant, since I shall have much to say in this study about the way Wordsworth’s poem, an even more radical version of address as action, resolutely opposes itself to the resources and techniques of moral allegory, of verbal daemonism.

*The Faerie Queene*, then, is an important predecessor of *The Prelude* in epic tradition precisely because it, like *The Prelude*, appears to be an epic whose sense of address is crucial for the whole fabric of the poetry (it will be remembered that Wordsworth’s early *Guilt and Sorrow* is a highly Spenserian, though not imitative, poem). Indeed, Janet Spens, in her study of Spenser, devotes some suggestive pages to the mutual illumination of the two poets. Even more useful, however, is the way the comparison emphasizes the real newness of Wordsworth’s practice. His poem is not “dedicated” but “addressed” to S. T. Coleridge, and in that choice of word and attitude lies one source of a new mode in English poetry.

As subtle as is Spenser’s modulation of epic action from the matter to the manner of praise, that praise remains an essentially public act, dignified and constituted by the importance of Queen Elizabeth. Praise, both as a classical *topos* and as a human activity, necessitates the fixation and isolation of the person praised:

And with them [the gods and Muses] eke, O Goddesse
heauenly bright,
Mirrour of grace and Maiestie diuine,
Great Lady of the greatest lsle, whose light
Like *Phoebus* lampe throughout the world doth shine,
Shed thy faire beames into my feeble eync,
And raise my thoughts too humble and too vile,

To thinke of that true glorious type of thine,
The argument of mine afflicted stile:
The which to heare, vouchsafe, O dearest dred a-while.

(1, Induction. 4)8

In this passage the epic of praise achieves its barest articulation: the poem, as private encomium of a public exemplar of virtue, is imaginatively determined by the exaltation of its auditor—not necessarily her personality, that is, but the very fact of her great distance from the poet. Thus the poem seeks to transcend its own subjectivity by the public ratification of its auditor. In a great age of patronage, it is among the most subtle and eloquent defenses of preferment for art's sake.

But now compare Wordsworth, at an analogous stage of The Prelude, the end of book 1, and his musings on a proper theme for his poem:

Nor will it seem to thee, O Friend! so prompt
In sympathy, that I have lengthened out
With fond and feeble tongue a tedious tale.
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 judgments, if the song be loth to quit
Those recollected hours that have the charm
Of visionary things, those lovely forms
And sweet sensations that throw back our life,
And almost make remotest infancy
A visible scene, on which the sun is shining?

(617–635)

The opening of the passage is remarkable for its simultaneous dependence upon and easy assumption of the approval of the "Friend so prompt in sympathy," and even more for the use of the word "Meanwhile" at line 620. That word is obviously used to differentiate two temporal sequences: first, the narrating of the "tedious tale" of Wordsworth's youth and, second, his reexamination of his earliest memories for renewed stability and purpose. In actual fact, however, the two sequences have been, throughout book 1, not only parallel but identical. The "Meanwhile," then, is disturbingly difficult to understand, because it takes account of a disjunction in the poetry of book 1 which had not been previously acknowledged: the disjunction between expression and intent, between speech and the purpose of speech.

It is necessary, as we shall see in the following chapter, that Wordsworth make such an admission at this point, but here it is important to note that the admission itself is couched in a curious dubiety. The "tedious tale," the personal recitation of past experience, certainly in one sense belongs to the private sphere, while the purpose of the tale's being told, as a preparation for a fully epic work, surely belongs to the public. But this ostensive organization contradicts the speech itself, since it is the address to the Friend which, in normal rhetoric, would be the public element of speech, while the purpose of that address, as all purposes, is a private intention. The pivotal point for this transvaluation of public and private is simply that the speaker identifies his auditor as a "Friend"—with all the inherent ambiguities of that word, implying an intimacy at once more than courtly and less than passionate. Unlike the rhetoric of Spenser, here the action of address does not limit and define the rhetorical status of the poetry but rather becomes the poetry itself as a necessary transaction between impulse and achievement. The personality of the auditor does not determine the nature of the discourse: the discourse, with its typical Wordsworthian drive toward "images of interaction" between the self and the other, interacts so strongly with the "other" person to whom it is addressed that, in an inevitable manner, it determines him.

The last eleven lines of the passage cited are a more striking

9. The phrase is from Herbert Lindenberger, On Wordsworth's Prelude (Princeton, 1963), the title of chapter 2.
instance of this technique. For there the poet begins with the admission of possible failure in his public task and moves, through the medium of address, to an intimation of what is to be the triumphant myth of renewal and salvation of *The Prelude*. Certainly, to make

... remotest infancy

A visible scene, on which the sun is shining

is Wordsworth's central accomplishment and the first tentative intimation of the idea of “spots of time,” described by Hartman as temporalized liberations of spatial experiences.\(^\text{10}\) It is also one of the most arresting single images of the whole poem. What makes it so is the extraordinary fashion in which it is contained and, in the full sense of the word, articulated by the activity of address to a friend. Grammatically, the image of the “visible scene” is the weakest member of an already too subordinated sentence: it is the end phrase of a question too long to be read as a question. And this is precisely its strength, since poetically it is the most assertive phrase of the whole self-effacing and apologetic passage. The question asked by Wordsworth of Coleridge, “Need I dread from thee / Harsh judgments,” is not what we would term a rhetorical question, since its demand for an appropriate answer is stronger than that of the normal rhetorical question.

The rhetorical question, in fact, is a homely paradigm of Spenserian epic, since its answer, while implied, depends upon the personality of the auditor as somehow outside the world of discourse for its effectiveness. In the classical example, Cicero asks Catiline, “Do not the night watches on the Palatine, do not the vigils of the city, does not the fear of the people . . . move you?” and the implied force of the questions is in the silence following their utterance—a silence filled in, as it were, by the presence of the auditor. But Wordsworth writes differently: he continues to talk after finishing his question, and each addition to the question tends to answer it more definitely. In an inversion of periodic style, he moves into ever looser subordinate clauses and into more and more confident assertions of the value of his art: from “song” to “recol-

lected hours” to “visionary things” to “lovely forms” and finally to the powerful last couplet. That couplet does end in a question, however, and the mark of interrogation serves to reenclose, with rather a jolt, the progressive expansion of the sentence in the movement of conversation and of public-private address.

Indeed, the presentation of the “visible scene” tends to annihilate the third dimension, for the phrase which gives us that scene, in terms of the grammar of the sentence, is the most heavily subordinated and therefore, in a “normal” reading, the most dispensable piece of information. And yet, poetically, it is the most arresting image of the passage: it is both subordinate to and subordinates the rest of its sentence, depending upon whether we read it grammatically or imagistically. The double existence of the “visible scene,” as detail in the poet’s narrative and as visually striking “spot of time,” is beautifully articulated through Wordsworth’s syntax here: the phrase itself vibrates between existences as an element of process (the unfolding of grammar) and a fixed, stable image. This use of the speaking voice to overcome or integrate the fixedness of the visual is one which we shall see to have profound implications for Wordsworth’s procedure in The Prelude. And it is suggestive that here, in one of its first occurrences, it should be manifested through the form of a question to the “Friend,” Coleridge.

The importance of Coleridge as auditor of The Prelude has been noted by a number of critics. Herbert Lindenberger, whose valuable study On Wordsworth’s Prelude reads the poem more or less within the canons of traditional epic, describes the poet’s “use” of Coleridge as a technique approximating Horatian epistle:

What goes on in the poem is a constant flight from the subjectivity of private experience to the assertion of publicly communicable and valid truths. The epistolary convention becomes a means of achieving the sense of an audience—if only an audience of one—and thus of giving a public definition to a state of mind which might otherwise have remained meaningful to the poet alone.\(^{11}\)

Another critic, however, Francis Christensen, sees Coleridge as the vehicle of an intellectual love which converts Wordsworth away

\(^{11}\) Lindenberger, On Wordsworth’s Prelude, p. 7.
from public address to a "gentle and tender" quietism and conserv­
ervative humility. Christensen's concern is with the themes of 
*The Prelude*, as opposed to Lindenberger's interest in its rhetoric, 
and he bases his argument upon the passage toward the end of the 
poem:

> Imagination having been our theme  
> So also hath that intellectual Love,  
> For they are each in each, and cannot stand  
> Dividually.

(14. 206–209)

But we have already seen how theme and rhetoric—private 
purpose and public articulation—tend to change roles in Words­
worth's poem. Lindenberger's Horatian poet and Christensen's 
quietist one are, in this way, both combined and transcended in 
the speaker of *The Prelude*. And the passage Christensen cites 
should probably be read as another instance of what we have 
already seen occurring at the end of book 1: a momentary division 
of elements which have been imaginatively identical in the poetry 
itself, whose retrospective separation only serves to underscore the 
binding energy of the poetry. The lines immediately preceding this 
passage, in fact, make explicit the identity of "imagination" and 
"intellectual love." And the fact that they are "addressed to S. T. 
Coleridge" abrogates the distinction between public and private 
inspiration:

> This spiritual Love acts not nor can exist  
> Without Imagination, which, in truth,  
> Is but another name for absolute power  
> And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,  
> And Reason in her most exalted mood.  
> This faculty hath been the feeding source  
> Of our long labour: we have traced the stream  
> From the blind cavern whence is faintly heard  
> Its natal murmur; followed it to light  
> And open day; accompanied its course

12. Francis Christensen, "Intellectual Love: The Second Theme of *The 
Among the ways of Nature, for a time
Lost sight of it bewildered and engulfed:
Then given it greeting as it rose once more
In strength, reflecting from its placid breast
The works of man and face of human life. . . .

(14. 188–202)

When Wordsworth describes the creation of *The Prelude* as "our labour," he is employing more than an editorial plural, for Coleridge is surely here being absorbed into the Wordsworthian personality. But it is an absorption which includes a graceful compliment, for the course of "imagination" in the passage is a reprise of Coleridge's description, in *Kubla Khan*, of the course of the sacred river Alph. Characteristically, too, Wordsworth revises Coleridge's image of the river as an emblem of the fitful and potentially violent power of poetry. Its emergence from concealment is not in a disruptive fountain but in a smooth flow, reflecting not the dark caverns and lifeless ocean of imaginative occlusion but the one face of human community—"The works of man and face of human life." *Kubla Khan* ends with a vision of society as necessarily inimical to, since threatened by, the power of the poet: "All should cry, Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, His floating hair!" But Wordsworth tries to reconcile the energies of independent imagination and social morality, not only through, but largely because of, his sense of the poem as an intimate dialogue with a "Friend."

There is, quite simply, no real analogue in previous English poetry for the speaker-audience relationship in *The Prelude*. Critics like Lindenberger and Christensen, who attempt to describe that relationship by reference to conventions of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century lyric or epic, inevitably distort it, for in the major traditions of English verse, as with Spenser, the existence of an audience is a definitive but external context for the rhetorical motives of the poem: the audience determines the role of the poet. But it is a central aspect of the speech of *The Prelude* that the speaker in the act of speaking constitutes his audience. As we shall see, Wordsworth's effort to recreate his own past is inseparable from his effort to remake the personality of his friend Coleridge, and a prime implication of this motive is that the standard of success which *The Prelude* poses for itself is a kind of edification
previously unattempted by serious—that is, professional—English poets.

David Ferry, in *The Limits of Mortality*, comes close to describing this "rhetoric of edification" when he says that Wordsworth's view of human nature required a complete revision of what we normally understand as human, in order for the poet to regard it as at all worthy of love. But the closest approximation to the view I am maintaining is made by a critic who is, on the whole, unsympathetic to its literary and ethical implications. F. W. Bateson writes in *Wordsworth: A Reinterpretation*,

[Wordsworth's relationship with his public] was a poet-audience relationship different in kind from that of a Spenser, a Milton, a Dryden or a Pope, partly because of its oral basis and partly because of its emotional overtones. To a typical Wordsworthian Wordsworth was so much more than just another good poet. The process of discovering his poetry was more like a religious conversion, an experience from which the convert emerged with the whole of his way of looking at the world permanently and profoundly changed.

"Religious conversion" is precisely the term. And throughout the nineteenth century, the recorded instances of "Wordsworthian" experiences—by Hazlitt, De Quincey, Mill, Arnold, and even Oscar Wilde—testify to the power and resiliency of Wordsworth's imagination along this line. But in *The Prelude* itself, the intended and crucial convert is Coleridge. And Coleridge, in a moving document, records his reaction to the poem addressed to him in terms which illuminate our own reading of it.

"To William Wordsworth" is Coleridge's description of hearing the 1805 "Poem on the Growth of an Individual Mind." He recapitulates briefly the story of *The Prelude*, from Wordsworth's youth to his disappointment with the French Revolution to his return to "the dread watchtower of man's absolute self," and he then

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turns to a reflection upon his own imaginative life. This reflection is described as occurring while Wordsworth reads his own retrospect aloud, but its outcome is painfully contrary to Wordsworth’s own eventual triumph:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sense of past Youth, and Manhood come in vain,} \\
\text{And Genius given, and Knowledge won in vain;} \\
\text{And all which I had culled in wood-walks wild,} \\
\text{And all which patient toil had reared, and all,} \\
\text{Commune with thee had opened out—but flowers} \\
\text{Strewed on my corse, and borne upon my bier} \\
\text{In the same coffin, for the self-same grave!} \\
\text{That way no more! and ill beseems it me,} \\
\text{Who came a welcomer in herald’s guise,} \\
\text{Singing of Glory, and Futurity,} \\
\text{To wander back on such unhealthful road,} \\
\text{Plucking the poisons of self-harm! And ill} \\
\text{Such intertwine beseems triumphal wreaths} \\
\text{Strew’d before thy advancing!}
\end{align*}
\]

This vision, culminating in the image of Coleridge literally being plowed under by Wordsworth’s greater genius, is an eloquent testimonial to *The Prelude* as the record of a conversion. For the aim of conversion-narrative is not so much to spur others to greater effort as to reshape their imaginative and spiritual world and lead them, too, into the difficult experiences of retrospect and the memory of guilt. Confession addresses itself not so much to the pragmatic will of its audience as to their affective intellect. In fact, confession, regarded as the distinctively radical Protestant narrative technique, is fundamentally inimical to the idea of pragmatic will, since such will is thought to interfere with the affective reconstitution of its audience. As the nonconformist divine John Newton writes at the beginning of his own confession:

\[
\text{We may collect indisputable proof, from the narrow circle of our own concerns, that the wise and good providence of God watches over his people from the earliest moment of their life, overrules and guards them through all their wanderings in a state of ignorance,}
\]

(69–82)
leads them in a way they know not, till at length his providence and grace concur in those events and impressions, which bring them to a knowledge of him and themselves.¹⁶

This is precisely the effect we can see in Coleridge’s poem on *The Prelude*: he has literally remade himself, for the moment, into the image of the “Friend” which Wordsworth has projected through the long personal confession which is his poem. But at this point it is necessary to examine more closely the characteristics of confession itself.

The literature of Protestant confession is immense—it is probably one of the few bodies of writing not, in our time, overbalanced by the volume of latter-day commentary. In the case of the Quakers, for example, who account for by far the greater bulk of religious confessions before the rise of Methodism in the mid-eighteenth century, Luella M. Wright, in *The Literary Life of the Early Friends*, estimates that between 1653 and 1725 from two and a half to four million tracts were printed and issued by the Friends.¹⁷ Even allowing for high percentages of polemical essays and sermons among these works, the number of books which either in whole or in part may be termed “confessions” is considerable. And as the creative energy of dissenting Protestantism passed from the Quakers to the Methodists in the middle of the century, so the impulse to confession and “accounts of convincement” flourished within the younger movement: besides the individually published narratives, Wesley’s *Arminian Magazine* (first issued in 1778) contained in every issue the serialized journal of a prominent Wesleyan preacher. These were collected in 1837 by Thomas Jackson in *The Lives of the Early Methodist Preachers* in six volumes.

That these books are important for the history of English


autobiography, few scholars have questioned. But small account has been taken of the fact that they also form an original and highly consistent subgenre of narrative art and that, indeed, they are in the best sense of the word an important version of fictive technique. This, rather than their frequent implication of egalitarian sentiments, their predilection for humble style, or their general aura of enthusiasm, is the focal point of their significance for English Romantic poetry, particularly for Wordsworth. Demonstration of a continuity of thought between the confessing Protestants and the Romantics—the approach loosely called "history of ideas"—has been attempted frequently and with interesting but equivocal results. But while it is alarming (though intriguing) to claim that "an atmosphere of Quakerism was felt among the literary celebrities of the Lake School of Poets and Writers,"\(^\text{18}\) what is demonstrable is the extent to which the distinctive narrative form of a religion contributes to the distinctive poetic form of a revolution in secular imagination. And though styles of expression, if they are meaningful, necessarily arise from modes of thought, we can usefully discuss such styles while keeping speculation about ideological forms to a minimum.

We are concerned with the relationships between the distinctive sense of audience exhibited by *The Prelude* and similar forms of public-private address in the religious confessions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. How does the Wordsworthian technique resemble the sensibility which informed these confessions, and how does it differ from it? The key concept, for both *The Prelude* and Protestant confession, is that of edification: confession seeks a mode of conviction beyond rhetoric, since it attempts to confront human form with human form, consciousness with consciousness at the most introspective level. Thereby the will is moved to action and the perception, memory, and sense of self to literal re-formation. Newton, whose confession is notable both because of its intrinsic power and because of the influence Newton had as a preacher during the late eighteenth century, distinguishes two sorts of

Christian conversion: the gradual, an imperceptible turning to God of which the converted “can give little account,” and the exemplary, done “in thunder and tempest” after the pattern of Paul, Augustine, and Luther.\textsuperscript{19} It is the latter form—the form, of course, of Newton's own experience—which is, he asserts, the more valuable to tell of, precisely because of its potential influence for edification, an influence he specifically relates to the creative power of the divine Word:

They [the exemplary] are, beyond expectation, convinced, pardoned, and changed. A case of this sort indicates a divine power no less than the creation of a world: and it is evidently the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in the eyes of all those, who are not blinded by prejudice and unbelief.\textsuperscript{20}

Edification, then, implies in the confessions a closer and more aggressive relationship of speaker to auditor or auditors than is implied in other, more meditative styles of devotional writing. Ideally, the confession does not issue in an impulse toward conversion but actually \textit{is} a conversion for the auditor. In the journal of John Nelson, one of Wesley's most energetic and effective disciples, we have an important account of the process whereby the confession of another becomes the content and motive of one's own conversion experience. Nelson's narrative deserves discussion in some detail.

Nelson begins life in a state highly receptive to radical Protestant ideas of the efficacious and overpowering Word: he relates how, at nine years, as his father was reading aloud from the twentieth chapter of Revelation (the Last Judgment), “the word came with such light and power to my soul, that it made me tremble. . . .”\textsuperscript{21} The years of his early manhood were spent, as is typical among the confessants, in a search for convictions of justification and what Thomas Traherne and John Wesley both call “the riches of the full assurance.” As is also typical, he does not seem to have found in his marriage a great deal of spiritual companionship, and he constantly bemoans his lack of a sympathetic auditor and counselor for his difficulties:

\textsuperscript{19} Newton, “An Authentic Narrative, &c.,” p. 80.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
In all these troubles I had none to open my mind to, so I wandered up and down in the fields when I had done my work, meditating what course to take to save my soul.  

Nelson examines carefully all possible forms of religious belief and finds none of them satisfying, although the Quakers seem to offer him more solace than anyone else. Then Whitefield comes to preach in his vicinity, and Nelson feels the first stirrings of his attraction to Methodism; a short while later Wesley himself arrives, and the stirrings grow stronger, more personal. For some time afterward, Nelson wrestles manfully with his conviction of guilt, trying to accept faith in his redemption by Christ, but he cannot. Then one day, "a little after Michaelmas," leaving the Park at Westminster, he is attracted to a crowd gathered about a soldier who is confessing the history of his own conversion to Methodism by Charles Wesley. Nelson takes pains to record in his own narrative this soldier's oral confession, as nearly as possible verbatim. It is evidently a crystallizing experience for him, and within two weeks, after some final struggles with despair, he pronounces himself converted.

What is important here is that Nelson, in relating his experience, structures it around three distinct versions of the Word—those of Whitefield, Wesley, and the anonymous soldier—and gives us what almost amounts to a thumbnail *ars rhetorica* of radical Protestant speech. Of the three speakers who shape Nelson's convictions, Whitefield, the most poised rhetorician and "public" reformer, comes off the poorest:

*He was to me as a man that could play well on an instrument, for his preaching was pleasant to me, and I loved the man. . . . But I did not understand him, though I might hear him twenty times for aught I know. . . .*  

Wesley, the great journal-writer and advocate of plain, forthright style, moves Nelson in a manner beyond public persuasion and closer, in Nelson's mind at least, to direct personal confrontation:

22. Ibid., pp. 13–14.
23. Ibid., p. 16.
O that was a blessed morning to my soul! As soon as he got upon the stand, he stroked back his hair, and turned his face toward where I stood, and I thought fixed his eyes on me: his countenance struck such an awful dread upon me, before I heard him speak, that it made my heart beat like the pendulum of a clock; and when he had done, I said, this man can tell the secrets of my heart. . . .

But the soldier whose tale Nelson repeats is presented with a minimum of description, in spite of his catalytic influence on Nelson's conversion. His story is repeated at length, and Nelson says:

These sayings of the soldier were a blessing to me, for they sunk deep into my mind, and made me cry more earnestly, that God would work the same change in my heart.

Personal confrontation has here passed the boundaries of its normal state and become a kind of total intercourse which, since it leaves out nothing which is an essential aspect of the self, cannot be successfully paraphrased or described but only repeated. Paradoxically, though it is given in a public context more open than the sermons of Whitefield and Wesley—in modern England the soldier would speak in Hyde Park from a soapbox—the soldier's confession so fills Nelson that he apparently does not even approach him after the speech for more personal counsel. It is obviously a model of what effective—and affective—confession should be, and immediately after his own conversion Nelson begins not only to rejoice in the Methodist style of life but to rehearse the style of discourse in which that life, at its fullest, issues. His landlord and landlady, noticing the change in his spiritual outlook, question him about it:

So I sat down with them, and told them of God's dealing with my soul, and prayed with them; soon after which they both went to hear Mr. Wesley preach, when the woman was made partaker of the same grace; and I hope to meet them both in heaven.

In many ways, the antitype of the radical Protestant confession discussed here is the Roman- and Anglo-Catholic form of medit-
tion, which was current in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and which is discussed most completely in Louis L. Martz's *The Poetry of Meditation*. The comparison of the two forms, confession and meditation, serves greatly to clarify the salient characteristics of confession. In the matter of address as a constituent element of the religious work, Martz is especially helpful in his discussion of the part of meditation called *colloquy*. As meditation, in the view of most of the major writers of devotional manuals, directs itself to the “three parts” of the Platonic-Christian soul, the understanding, the memory, and the will, so is the typical process of a meditation tripartite: the composition of place, or setting of the imaginative scene; the reflection upon the theological and personal implications of that scene; and the colloquy, or individual prayer of thanksgiving and petition arising from what has been learned in the reflection. In other words, as the whole art of meditation is directed toward the motivation of the will to praise God, so the prayer in which the meditation issues is necessarily a form of address highly structured and formalized—that is, definitively willed. It is a highly Catholic mode of speech, with significant overtones of the Counter-Reformation emphasis upon the efficaciousness of works, and imbued with a sense of the object of address—God—as irrevocably other. Spenser's use of Gloriana in *The Faerie Queene* is one important analogue for this technique, as I have already indicated. Another—as Martz's study makes pellucidly clear—is the poetry of the “metaphysicals” of the seventeenth century. George Herbert's lyrics, particularly, are most often subtle expansions of the meditative colloquy, evolving from private disruption toward the resolution of decorous prayer. Thus “Jordan (I)” and “The Collar,” both poems about the religious duties of a priest-poet, develop respectively toward the decorum of full rhyme and regular meter.

Protestant confession, on the other hand, transforms the conscious will to praise into the compulsion to recount. The epigraph to Hester Ann Roger's *Short Account*, also quoted in Newton's confession, gives perhaps the archetypal pattern for confessional address:

Come and hear, all ye that fear God; and I will declare what he hath done for my soul. (Psalm lxvi. 16)²⁸

Prayer as a willed, formal structure of address plays at best a minor role in the confession—because the confession, as personal record of salvation achieved, is precisely the personal and social fruit of prayer and strivings. The assumption, as in Nelson’s encounter with his landlord, is always that the confessant’s speech arises naturally and spontaneously from his joy in God, celebrating the healing of that gap between self and creator which makes willed prayer necessary to the unregenerate. John Bunyan’s highly influential *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* makes it quite clear that his confession is in fact a distillation of the strivings of the will, transforming them into the sweetness of the full assurance:

I have sent you here enclosed, a drop of that honey, that I have taken out of the carcase of a lion (Judges xiv. 5–9). I have eaten thereof myself also, and am much refreshed thereby. . . . It is something of a relation of the work of God upon my own soul, even from the very first, till now; wherein you may perceive my castings down, and raisings up; for he woundeth, and his hands make whole. . . . Yet, it was for this reason I lay so long at Sinai (Deut. iv. 10, 11), to see the fire, and the cloud, and the darkness, that I might fear the Lord all the days of my life upon earth, and tell of his wondrous works to my children (Ps. lxxviii. 3–5).²⁹

And George Fox’s doctrine of the Inner Light provided a spiritual epistemology for the literary form Bunyan had perfected: an idea of the indwelling of the person of Christ at once intensely private with each individual and yet shared and celebrated by all the community of the elect, by—most Wordsworthian of phrases—the Society of Friends.

As opposed to the careful subordination and decorum of meditational style, then, confession is marked by a deliberate interplay between public and private modes of address, introspective com-

position and other-directed prayer. It is the same kind of internalization of the audience which we have already seen at work in *The Prelude*, in Wordsworth's complex use of Coleridge in two important passages. Without asserting direct stylistic or intellectual influence, we may at least say this much: that the Protestant confessants' variation of Catholic and Anglo-Catholic prayer and Wordsworth's variation of conventional courtly address both involve the same linguistic, structural transformations. But this degree of parallelism is, in fact, an indication of an even deeper formal resemblance, one which involves the sense of audience not simply as a rhetorical trope but as a crucial means of imaginative mediation.

Much has been written in recent years about the importance of "mediation" in Wordsworth's poetry and in Romantic and post-Romantic poetry generally. Paul de Man's "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image" and Geoffrey Hartman's *The Unmediated Vision* both indicate the ways in which, for the Romantic poet, language and imagery simultaneously facilitate and frustrate his desired confrontation with the "really real," the splendor of pure phenomena. And certainly *The Prelude*, as an enthusiastic celebration and preparation for the "great philosophic poem" *The Recluse*, participates in this double sense of language:

How strange that all  
The terrors, pains, and early miseries,  
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes interfused  
Within my mind, should e'er have borne a part,  
And that a needful part, in making up  
The calm existence that is mine when I  
Am worthy of myself! Praise to the end!  
Thanks to the means which Nature deigned to employ;  
Whether her fearless visitings, or those  
That came with soft alarm, like hurtless light  
Opening the peaceful clouds. . . .

(1. 344–354)

The resemblance between the theme of these lines and some of the confessional passages we have examined is, of course, striking. But

the passage's subtle power arises, even more than from its announced theme, from the remarkable way in which the language seems to imitate the calm assurance of which it speaks. Here as so often, Wordsworth's genius consists largely in his acceptance and use of that inevitable mediating power of language which was so to torment such later Romantics as Shelley, Mallarmé, and Hart Crane. The enthusiastic center of the passage, the moment of confrontation with the immortal spirit (1. 340), is of course the salutation "Praise to the end!" But this brief burst of praise derives its energy, stylistic as well as autobiographical, precisely from the long and carefully prosaic sentence which precedes it. That is, the "means which Nature deigned to employ" for the blessedness of the poet must be taken not only as the "terrors, pains," and so on, of the poet's past but also as the "means"—the words for those experiences—which now allow him to articulate his gratitude to the spirit moving behind and within both mind and world. Immediately upon the utterance of "Praise to the end," then, the poet returns to the mediated narrative of Nature's visitations, but now in a sentence which is itself interfused with imagery and rhetorical cadence, a heightened recapitulation of the first sentence. One of Wordsworth's most fascinating and consistent habits is his avoidance of conventional metaphor. And as the present passage makes clear, one reason for that avoidance is simply that in an epistemological structure like The Prelude, whose polar terms are man's absolute self and the very existence of a world or a history, language itself assumes the role of metaphor (translatio, "carrying across"), or mediation.

Hartman, in Wordsworth's Poetry, discusses this sort of acceptance of—and even reliance upon—varieties of mediation as Wordsworth's impulse toward evasion of direct confrontation with the immortal spirit. In his highly suggestive terms, the mental warfare within the poet is between apocalypse, or the drive toward direct confrontation and transcendence, and akedah (Hebrew, "binding"), or the drive toward evasion, mediation, the world of everyday objects.31 In his reading, then, the paradigmatic action of The Prelude is the continual displacement of apocalypse into akedah. What I wish to suggest here, however, is a significant revision of Hartman's schema, for seen in its confessional aspect, the drive of

The Confessional Imagination

The Prelude toward mediation is not an evasion or refusal of visionary power but a means to that power.

We have already seen how the Protestant confessants, in transforming prayer into narrative, engage in a process much like the intentional structure of Wordsworth's "Praise to the end." In fact, Hartman's biblical terms for this process are even more appropriate to the confessants: in Nelson, Bunyan, and Fox the apocalyptic entry of Christ into the soul issues not in prophetic fury but in the very real binding of the convert to the church of the just. But in order fully to understand the nature of confessional mediation—and particularly the crucial role played in such mediation by the confessant's audience—it is helpful to turn to the book which literally invents the confessional form for Western culture, the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine.

It is nearly as correct, of course, to say that Augustine invents Western culture. At least, one can track so many later and seminal ideas and attitudes within the creations of his astounding spirit that any specific claim for his patronage is likely to seem suspiciously partial and suspect. But the *Confessions* are surely, on one level, radically individualist, Protestant, and "confessional" in the sense we have been discussing. They are addressed, not to the community of the elect, but to God himself: a temerity to which no seventeenth- or eighteenth-century confessant can quite steel himself. But in the very audacity of such address, the magnificent opening of the *Confessions* makes clear the function of auditor in confession as both means and end of mediation:

Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Thy power, and Thy wisdom infinite. And Thee would man praise; man, but a particle of Thy creation; man, that bears about him his mortality, the witness of his sin, the witness that Thou resistest the proud: yet would man praise Thee; he, but a particle of Thy creation. Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our Heart is restless, until it repose in Thee. Grant me, Lord, to know and understand which is first, to call on Thee or to praise Thee? and, again, to know Thee or to call on Thee? for who can call on Thee, not knowing Thee? for he that knoweth Thee not, may call on Thee as other than Thou art. Or, is it rather, that we call on Thee that we may know Thee? but how
shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? or how shall they believe without a preacher? and they that seek the Lord shall praise Him: for they that seek shall find Him, and they that find shall praise Him. I will seek Thee, Lord, by calling on Thee; and will call on Thee, believing in Thee; for to us hast Thou been preached. My faith, Lord, shall call on Thee, which Thou hast given me, wherewith Thou hast inspired me, through the Incarnation of Thy Son, through the ministry of the Preacher.

(1.1)

So powerful is the rush of this opening passage that the exuberance of its rhetoric cannot be muted even in translation. It need hardly be said that with such an explicit audience “edification” ceases to be a relevant description of the book’s primary motivation. This complex eloquence, however, centers dynamically on two verbs, “to praise” (laudare) and “to call on” (invocare), which between themselves indicate an extraordinary dimension of this kind of address to God.

As the motive of praise dominates the first half of the paragraph, that of calling on God—literally summoning Him—dominates the second: the center of energy passes from the one verb to the other in the almost exactly centered question, “which is first, to call on Thee or to praise Thee?”—the only time these two verbs meet in the same sentence. Both acts, praising and calling, are normally willed but are here deprived of their willful implications through the supervening agency of grace (“Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise. . . . I will seek Thee, Lord, by calling on Thee; and will call on Thee, believing in Thee . . .”), so that the Confessions become a long and quasi-spontaneous outpouring of thanks for Augustine’s conversion. But that thanksgiving, like other confessions we have seen, is still a constitution of the confessor’s audience: praise, for Augustine, necessarily becomes summoning, because it is only the converted soul, conscious of his salvation and his oneness with the grace of Christ, who can bridge the unbridgeable gap between God and man, “a particle of His creation,” and make praise a fully meaningful human activity. “How shall they believe without a preacher?” Thus the passage quite literally moves from the object of praise, the Lord, through the subject of calling, the regenerate “I” of Augustine, to issue in the image of the nearly
divinized man who combines the two movements, the Preacher (Ambrose, and by tactful implication, Augustine himself). The movement, as with all confessions, is toward the complex interrelation of inner- and outer-directed speech: Kenneth Burke has suggested that the great number of words in the first book with the prefix in- may indeed amount to a subtle pun on the Latin in of subjectivization and the privative in of objective moral negation.\(^{32}\)

Edification—the conversion of others through the recitation of one’s own conversion—is of course present as a secondary effect, an overflow, as it were, of the saint’s address to God. The confessor is here overheard by his human auditors.

It is through the exemplary transaction between God and the Augustinian “I” that the public, the City of God, becomes transformed. But this transaction itself is made possible only by Augustine’s assumption of the role of Preacher: a role which is literally a dramatic performance, a kind of baptism of the saint’s previous, pagan enthusiasm for the theater. For while the Preacher’s audience, as eavesdroppers upon his prayer, mediate between him and the pure confrontation of his divine auditor, so the Preacher himself mediates between the congregation and the God whom he addresses, as their human representative before the Throne. The audience saves the Preacher from the sin of presumption, and he saves them from the sin of idolatry.

This displacement of unmediated prayer through confessional preaching, intimated in Augustine, becomes a central and explicit technique in the works of the radical English Protestants. Stephen Crisp, for example, one of the most intelligent and literate of the early Quaker confessants, opens his journal with a passage which closely parallels the opening of Augustine’s *Confessions* but is much more deliberately displaced:

Oh! all ye Saints, and all ye Inhabitants of the Earth, let the Name of Jehovah be famous among you, for there is no God like unto him; and let his Mercies and Judgments be remembered and Recorded from Generation [sic] to Generation: For Infinit is his Goodness, and his Loving Kindness Unspeakable. And although no man can fully recount his Loving Kindness to him reached out,

yet let all men Testify of his Goodness, and Declare of his Mercies, 
by which he is Engaging the Sons of Men to Himself. . . . And 
who can feel his Goodness, and partake of his Love, but it will 
constrain a Testimony to him? And in the sweet remembrance of 
his manifold Innumerable Mercies, I am even overcome.33

Significantly, the great age of religious confession in England 
coincides, in its beginnings, with the decline and fall of the Pro­
tectorate. As the hopes of the radical sects for a visible kingdom 
of God on earth were crushed, the need for an invisible church, a 
societal mediation with God to replace the lost political one, became 
all the more acute. Even the Quakers, who as a group were less 
concerned with the theology of mediation—actually, less Christ­
centered—than their spiritual heirs the Methodists, demonstrate a 
high degree of conformity to public standards of confessional 
experience, as well as the usual insistence upon the private nature 
of revelation. As Luella M. Wright discusses it: “These confessions 
are unmistakably dominated by a prevailing consciousness of the 
group mind. The dominance of the Society intervenes between the 
personality of the writer and the mind of the reader [and, we would 
further suggest, the mind of an omniscient God]. The Quaker 
memorandist constantly played a double role.”34

Among the Romantics, the turn to inwardness upon the dis­
appointment of political aspirations, especially the French Revolu­
tion, has been eloquently documented in such essays as M. H. 
Abrams’s “English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age.”35 But again, 
and especially in the case of Wordsworth, the Protestant confessional 
alogue helps rectify the partiality of this insight. For the turn was 
not to sheer inwardness, not to what some critics, after Keats, have 
called the “egotistical sublime,” but to a myth of minimal but 
sympathetic community which, as audience, made possible that 
inwardness which the poetry so brilliantly achieves.

33. A Memorable Account of the Christian Experiences, Gospel Labours, 
Travels and Sufferings of That Ancient Servant of Christ Stephen Crisp 
34. Wright, The Literary Life of the Early Friends, p. 11.
35. M. H. Abrams, “English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age,” in 
91-119.
The specific kind of apocalypse against which Wordsworth's poetry is designed to mediate is the apocalyptic power of the eighteenth-century sublime. And Wordsworth's quarrel with the poetry of the sublime is probably best interpreted as a quarrel with madness—specifically, the madness attendant upon a vision which attempts to be purely, absolutely unmediated. "Resolution and Independence" is perhaps the central lyric of this quarrel, especially important since it subtly allies Coleridge himself with the unhealthy, presumptuous solitude of the earlier sublime poets:

VI
My whole life I have lived in pleasant thought,
As if life's business were a summer mood;
As if all needful things would come unsought
To genial faith, still rich in genial good;
But how can He expect that others should
Build for him, sow for him and at his call
Love him, who for himself will take no heed at all?

VII
I thought of Chatterton, the marvellous Boy,
The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride;
Of Him who walked in glory and in joy
Following his plough, along the mountain-side:
By our own spirits are we deified:
We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;
But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.

The last three lines of the passage are the most important, both for the poem and for Wordsworth's entire major period: the final alexandrine literally breaks out of regular meter and insists on being read as a series of spondees. It is a grim statement of despair, all the more moving since it is a statement, not a cry. The self-deification of the spirit, typified by the mad solitude of Chatterton, while it may be a precondition for the poetic act, condemns the poet himself to solitary confinement, with no one and nothing to talk to. It is like the vexing problem of overenthusiasm among some of the
Quakers and Wesleyans: a too literal acceptance of the Inner Light, leading to the terrible loneliness of the man who thinks he has become God.

It is difficult, furthermore, not to see the figure of Chatterton here as partly a polite displacement of the figure of Coleridge. For at the time of the poem's composition, the spring of 1802, Coleridge himself was experiencing some of his most profound difficulties with the experience of the sublime, difficulties reflected in the great but despairing power of his "Dejection: An Ode." Coleridge's own difficulties with the sublime, or the idea of the autonomous Romantic imagination, were further complicated by his growing opium addiction, as Wordsworth well knew, for the ecstatic but unproductive visions of opium, like the lonely eminence of sublime sensibility, are an important analogue for the distinctively modern theme of the self-trapped poet. And if Coleridge's predicament in "Dejection" derives from the experience of such as Chatterton and Cowper, it also anticipates such later varieties of drug-induced Romanticism as the work of De Quincey, Baudelaire, and Malcolm Lowry. Like the associationist and sensationalist sublime of the eighteenth century, the pharmacological sublime of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries raises radical new problems of communication which Wordsworth is perhaps the first man fully to understand.

One of the reasons why "Resolution and Independence," great lyric that it is, trembles so close to the verge of triviality and has been the most parodied of Wordsworth's poems is that it is about the possibility of communication at the most minimal, primary level. How does the mind full of itself speak? How does it listen? That it listens at all is miraculous, a recovery like the grace of God:

XVI
The old Man still stood talking by my side;
But now his voice to me was like a stream
Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;
And the whole body of the Man did seem
Like one whom I had met with in a dream;
Or like a man from some far region sent,
To give me human strength, by apt admonishment.

The poet is barely able to listen to what the old man says, but that "barely" is just enough. For the "far region" from which the old
man is sent is, surely, the far region of the world of other people, that region whose deep and unbearable mystery has been the object of so much modern thought. And that such communication can take place between two people at all is the "strength" and the "admonishment" which the old man's muddled speech gives Wordsworth: a guarantee of the possibility of contact with others which saves the poet from the grim fate of the Chattertons, Cowpers, and Coleridges. "Resolution and Independence" is not itself a confessional poem, but it does represent a moment of conversion—a saving spot of time—which reinforces the poet's trust both in life and in his own gift. And it is significant that this conversion, too, is made possible through a careful management of the poet's relationship with his auditor, through a "socialization of the sublime."

But these energies find their fullest expression, of course, in The Prelude itself, where Wordsworth, recounting the career of his blessing, finds it possible to listen and to speak to other people with an assurance seldom found elsewhere in his, or any, poetry. Book 14 is, in large part, a hymn of thanks to both Dorothy and Coleridge for their restorative influence upon Wordsworth. And speaking to Dorothy, he again deals with the traditions of the sublime:

For, spite of thy sweet influence and the touch
Of kindred hands that opened out the springs
Of genial thought in childhood, and in spite
Of all that unassisted I had marked
In life or nature of those charms minute
That win their way into the heart by stealth
(Still to the very going-out of youth),
I too exclusively esteemed that love,
And sought that beauty, which, as Milton sings,
Hath terror in it. Thou didst soften down
This over-sternness; but for thee, dear Friend!
My soul, too reckless of mild grace, had stood
In her original self too confident,
Retained too long a countenance severe;
A rock with torrents roaring, with the clouds
Familiar, and a favourite of the stars:
But thou didst plant its crevices with flowers,
Hang it with shrubs that twinkle in the breeze,
And teach the little birds to build their nests
And warble in its chambers.

(14. 237–256)

The submerged metaphor here is that of “Paradise Regained”: both of Milton’s poem itself and of the whole concept of a new Eden. Somewhat in the manner of the passage from book 1 culminating in “a visible scene, on which the sun is shining,” Wordsworth here constructs a pastoral landscape within the mode and syntax of personal address. Most interesting is the reference to Milton: that love and that beauty which have terror in them are spoken of by Satan in book 9 of *Paradise Lost*. Directly before the climactic moment of the poem, the temptation of Eve, Satan discovers her among the paradisiacal flowers and stands, momentarily, “Stupidly good, of enmitie disarm’d” (465) before the vision of innocence. He soon talks himself back into his purpose, however:

Shee fair, divinely fair, fit Love for Gods,
Not terrible, though terrour be in Love
And beautie, not approacht by stronger hate,
Hate stronger, under shew of Love well feign’d
The way which to her ruin now I tend.

(489–493)

This is of course a “Satanic” view of the possibilities of love and beauty—Satan always sees such things strategically, as more powerful for his divisive purposes than open hostility. But precisely because of its Satanic slant, the statement is a perfect type of one of the aspects of sublime beauty with which Wordsworth has a permanent quarrel. The beauty of the sublime odes is Satanic precisely in its insistence on an autistic imaginative experience, its heroic, exciting, but self-thwarting assertion that “The mind is its own place” (*PL*. 1, 254). Wordsworth would have been in fundamental agreement with the instinct which led Blake, in *Milton*, to identify Satan with that most well-meaning and most monstrously egocentric of sublime “appreciators,” William Hayley. A further importance of the passage from *Paradise Lost* is that Satan’s main reason for attacking Eve at this point is that she herself is separated, for the moment, from the company of Adam (479–488); and surely Wordsworth’s address to
Dorothy is a suggestion, tactful but definite, that she has functioned rather as a “Second Eve” (the traditional nomination of the Virgin) who, by renewing his powers of human intercourse, has reunited him to the race and thence to the prelapsarian state of imagination.

But if this passage from book 14 is a gracious identification of Dorothy with the supreme Mediatrix of Christianity, it is also the only extended address to her in the poem and the sole attribution to her, in the poem, of the important title “Friend.” Otherwise that title is Coleridge’s alone, and it is to the importance of Coleridge as the confessional audience of The Prelude that we must now turn again.

As we have seen, the relationship between the confessor and his audience is an ambivalent one: the confessor, in the very act of writing a confession, sets himself as in some respect a mediator of grace to his audience; while the audience, as a displacement of psalmodic direct address to God, plays a mediatory role between the confessor and the full acceptance of his semidivine status. The audience, that is, is simultaneously a projection of the confessor’s personality and a strict limit to that personality’s expansion.

It is precisely such an ambivalent relationship which Wordsworth, in the years after the great collaborations of 1797–98, was coming increasingly to hold toward Coleridge. As Coleridge’s poetic energies declined while Wordsworth’s grew ever stronger, and as the personal misfortunes of Coleridge, his addiction and his unhappy marriage, seemed increasingly to mark his older friend as destiny’s chosen, the mentor-disciple relationship which had held between them was being reversed.

The Prelude, certainly, could not exist in its present form had it not been for the growth of such an ambivalent but affectionate relationship. If anything, indeed, the importance of Coleridge for the poem seems to have increased with the years. The last lines of book 1 in the 1850 version:

> And certain hopes are with me, that to thee
> This labour will be welcome, honoured Friend!

(645–646)

are not present in the 1805 text.

Another and more significant addition to the 1805 version occurs at the end of book 13: Wordsworth is speaking of his early
poetic efforts (*Guilt and Sorrow*, specifically) and their favorable, flattering reception by Coleridge. I quote first the 1805 text:

This for the past, and things that may be view'd
Or fancied, in the obscurities of time.
Nor is it, Friend, unknown to thee, at least
Thyself delighted, who for my delight
Hast said, perusing some imperfect verse
Which in that lonesome journey was composed,
That also then I must have exercised
Upon the vulgar forms of present things
And actual world of our familiar days,
A higher power, have caught from them a tone,
An image, and a character, by books
Not hitherto reflected. Call we this
But a persuasion taken up by Thee
In friendship. . . .

(12. 354–367)

The 1850 text, however, adds the following lines:

Call we this
A partial judgment—and yet why? for *then*
We were as strangers; and I may not speak
Thus wrongfully of verse, however rude,
Which on thy young imagination, trained
In the great City, broke like light from far.

(13. 360–365)

De Selincourt remarks that, since Wordsworth and Coleridge were indeed not strangers when Coleridge encountered *Guilt and Sorrow*, Wordsworth must be confusing, in the added passage, *Guilt and Sorrow* with his first publication, *Descriptive Sketches*.36 The conjecture is perhaps accurate, but it is difficult, in the present context, to regard Wordsworth’s activity as a confusion: he had, after all, as de Selincourt himself points out, Coleridge’s own account in *Biographia Literaria*, chapter 4, to aid his memory of what particular poem had first brought him to Coleridge’s attention. The passage—

which on the face of it is certainly a strong argument for Wordsworth’s overweening egotism—is best taken as a deliberate conflation of his early work in general, in order to clarify and consolidate both the permanently efficacious, “chosen” nature of his poetic genius and the edifying design upon Coleridge which is so central to The Prelude. The fact that the passage is a product of later years may be an indication, not of a lapse of memory, but rather of the power with which the motive of confessional address enables the poet to control memory, to use it rather than be used by it.

It is interesting that Wordsworth refers to Coleridge’s “young imagination, trained / In the great City”: Coleridge, when he encountered Descriptive Sketches, was not in London but in his last year of studies at Cambridge (1793). The description of Coleridge as reared far from Nature in the “great City” is one of Wordsworth’s favorite modes of reference to his friend in The Prelude (cf. 2. 452; 6. 265; 8. 435); it is probably influenced by Coleridge’s own description of himself in “Frost at Midnight”:

> For I was reared  
> In the great city, pent ’mid cloisters dim,  
> And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.

(51-53)

But the source of the motif is undoubtedly Paradise Lost, again in the crucial narration preceding Satan’s temptation of Eve in book 9. As Satan stands “stupidly good” in Paradise, momentarily liberated from the devouring energies of his egotism, Milton remarks that he is

> As one who long in populous City pent,  
> Where Houses thick and Sewers annoy the Aire,  
> Forth issuing on a Summers Morn to breathe  
> Among the pleasant Villages and Farmes  
> Adjoynd, from each thing met conceaves delight,  
> The smell of Grain, or tedded Grass, or Kine.

(445-450)

The sentiment itself is a conventional version of pastoral release, dating at least from Vergil’s Tenth Eclogue (Gallus); applied to
Satan himself, however, it represents the remarkable extension and transfiguration of the powers of pastoral which is going on throughout *Paradise Lost*. And Wordsworth uses the allusion, consciously or not, as a subtle and pervasive undercurrent to the major movements of *The Prelude*. The distinction between himself as country-bred and Coleridge as city-bred is at once a way of determining the source of his natural powers of imagination (the audience as mediator) and a way of verifying their force for good in liberating Coleridge from the specter of his own doubts (the confessor as mediator):

> Thou, my Friend! wert reared  
> In the great city, 'mid far other scenes;  
> But we, by different roads, at length have gained  
> The self-same bourne. And for this cause to thee  
> I speak, unapprehensive of contempt,  
> The insinuated scoff of coward tongues,  
> And all that silent language which so oft  
> In conversation between man and man  
> Blots from the human countenance all trace  
> Of beauty and of love. For thou hast sought  
> The truth in solitude, and, since the days  
> That gave thee liberty, full long desired  
> To serve in Nature's temple, thou hast been  
> The most assiduous of her ministers;  
> In many things my brother, chiefly here  
> In this our deep devotion.

(2. 451–466)

*The Prelude*, in its assured and complex use of audience, represents a personal assurance and technical skill even greater than that of the lyrics of the major period. For these lyrics, too, especially “Tintern Abbey,” “Stepping Westward,” and “The Solitary Reaper,” depend upon a named or implied personal audience for much of their distinctive power. But often their invocation of audience seems to be a *plea* for the ratification of human company rather than the triumphant assertion of community which is *The Prelude*. This quality in the lyrics, in fact, has led John Edward Hardy, in a little-known but important essay on “Tintern Abbey,” to remark
that the quality of Wordsworth's imagination is that "he was actually terrified of being alone—in a world without meaning."\textsuperscript{37}

Hardy's description, though, applies better to Coleridge than it does to Wordsworth, particularly the Coleridge of the Conversation Poems. Many critics have remarked the importance of these poems for understanding Wordsworth's own career. But in the context of a confessional reading of \textit{The Prelude}, their importance becomes crucial, for if Wordsworth set himself the task of mediating between Coleridge and the universal power of imagination, it was at least partly because Coleridge himself was predisposed toward such an act of mediation. And a poem like “The Eolian Harp” demonstrates how and why that mediation failed in Coleridge's own career: it actually appears to be a kind of confessional lyricism manqué. Carefully building, on the pretext of idle conversation with his “pensive Sara,” toward the magnificent vision of the universal Harp, Coleridge suddenly pulls himself back from this full imaginative confrontation, through the agency of his audience:

\begin{quote}
And what if all of animated nature  
Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,  
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps  
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,  
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?  

But they more serious eye a mild reproof  
Darts, O beloved Woman! nor such thoughts  
Dim and unhallow'd dost thou not reject,  
And biddest me walk humbly with my God.  
Meek Daughter in the family of Christ!  
Well hast thou said and holily disprais'd  
These shapings of the unregenerate mind;  
Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break  
On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.  
For never guiltless may I speak of him,  
The Incomprehensible!
\end{quote}

(44–59)

Confession as a mode of address, of course, has as its purpose precisely to allow one, though guiltless, to speak of the Incompre-

\textsuperscript{37} John Edward Hardy, \textit{The Curious Frame} (South Bend, Ind., 1962), pp. 79–80.
hensible; but here the mediating function of the audience has gone too far. Coleridge has let his “pensive Sara” act as a block between himself and his own powers rather than as a medium through which to achieve them more fully. Coleridge, always a more consciously Christian poet than Wordsworth, uses a set of terms (“the family of Christ,” “unregenerate,” “guiltless”) which are the stock-in-trade of the religious confessants. But the confessional stance—its concentration upon an auditor—in Coleridge occludes that celebration of self and world which is, after all, the prime motive of confession. “The Eolian Harp” is a brilliant poem, but it is a poem of renunciation, of the conscious choice not to risk all that might be risked.

In *The Prelude*, of course, Coleridge is most frequently addressed as “O Friend!” Most such addresses, to be sure, are simply unembellished apostrophe, supporting the constant undercurrent of confessional speech necessary to the poem’s momentum. But in a number of cases, Wordsworth addresses his Friend at sustained length. And these passages bring the elements of confessional address we have been discussing to their highest pitch of self-consciousness, both in Romantic poetry and in the religious confessions of the time. It is to these I now turn. The most important sustained address to Coleridge occurs in book 6—in the original version, the center of *The Prelude*, and in the 1850 version, still in many ways its imaginative center.

Book 6, “Cambridge and the Alps,” is remarkable for two important acts of naming. In the Simplon Pass episode, Wordsworth confronts and names for the first and only time

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Imagination—here the Power so called
Through sad incompetence of human speech,
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(592–593)

the direct, unmediated, apocalyptic power of the creative intellect. But earlier in the book, he also confronts and names for the first time the Friend who is his central auditor. He is speaking of his summer vacations, 1787–91:

```
Another maid there was, who also shed
A gladness o’er that season, then to me,
By her exulting outside look of youth
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And placid under-countenance, first endeared;
That other spirit, Coleridge! who is now
So near to us, that meek confiding heart,
So reverenced by us both. . . .

(224-230)

The reader who has followed *The Prelude* to this point cannot help hearing a certain ring of triumphant recognition, a sudden access of affection, in the proper name. (Whether for this reason, or simply to clarify the syntax, Wordsworth changes the comma after "Coleridge" in the 1805 text to a mark of exclamation.) At any rate, the naming of Coleridge and consequent change from the "me" of line 225 to the "us" of 230 is the signal for a pause in the narration and reflection upon its memorial structure—an afterthought-afterimage construction closely anticipating the Simplon Pass section:

O Friend! we had not seen thee at that time,
And yet a power is on me, and a strong
Confusion, and I seem to plant thee there.
Far art thou wandered now in search of health
And milder breezes,—melancholy lot!
But thou art with us, with us in the past,
The present, with us in the times to come.
There is no grief, no sorrow, no despair,
No languor, no dejection, no dismay,
No absence scarcely can there be, for those
Who love as we do. Speed thee well! divide
With us thy pleasure; thy returning strength,
Receive it daily as a joy of ours;
Share with us thy fresh spirits, whether gift
Of gales Etesian or of tender thoughts.

(237-251)

The by now familiar pattern of confessional address is retraced here, but with a higher degree of self-consciousness than is usual, even for Wordsworth. The next sixty-five lines are a further elaboration on this passage and perhaps the most explicit separation in *The Prelude* of the two complementary functions of address to Coleridge. Coleridge organizes the aim of the poem, i.e., therapy,
Throughout this narrative,
Else sooner ended, I have borne in mind
For whom it registers the birth, and marks the growth,
Of gentleness, simplicity, and truth,
And joyous loves, that hallow innocent days
Of peace and self-command. Of river, fields,
And groves I speak to thee, my Friend! to thee,
Who, yet a liveried schoolboy, in the depths
Of the huge city, on the leaded roof
Of that wide edifice, thy school and home,
Wert used to lie and gaze upon the clouds
Moving in heaven . . .

(259–270)

and its means, the sense of present time-in-nature which allows Wordsworth to place such high hopes in the power of memory:

Through this retrospect
Of my collegiate life I still have had
Thy after-sojourn in the self-same place
Present before my eyes, have played with times
And accidents as children do with cards,
Or as a man, who, when his house is built,
A frame locked up in wood and stone, doth still,
As impotent fancy prompts, by his fireside,
Rebuild it to his liking.

(286–294)

It is worth noting that Wordsworth uses the term “narrative” for the poem considered as edifying and the term “retrospect” for the poem considered as mediating: the distinction is a very precise one. Retrospect both arises from and controls narrative by implying a definite now, an end point, which gives a meaningful shape to narration.

The alternative to this sort of retrospect-narrative Wordsworth has already made clear, in book 2 (again addressing Coleridge):

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?
What that shall point as with a wand and say
"This portion of the river of my mind
Came from yon fountain?" Thou, my Friend! art one
More deeply read in thy own thoughts; to thee
Science appears but what in truth she is,
Not as our glory and our absolute boast,
But as a succedaneum, and a prop
To our infirmity.

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.

It is difficult, reading these lines, not to think of *Tristram Shandy*. Indeed, Wordsworth very probably has *Shandy* in mind here; for Tristram begins his story *ab homunculo* and in many ways never gets past, never escapes from, that beginning:

I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly consider'd how much depended upon what they were then doing;—that not only the production of a rational Being was concern'd in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind . . . might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost . . . I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that, in which the reader is likely to see me.38

The importance of Sterne's book for Wordsworth is interesting. As a young man, if we can trust his own statement, it would have literally formed his conception of "contemporary literature": asked by his friend William Mathews, in 1791, to comment on some aspects of modern literature, he replied, "God knows my incursion

into the fields of modern literature—excepting in our own language three volumes of Tristram Shandy, and two or three papers of the Spectator, half subdued—are absolutely nothing.” The relevance of Shandy in the present context should be obvious. For Shandy is itself an antitype of the Romantic confession: an attempt at confession which, imprisoned in a surrealistic structure of Lockean epistemology and associationism gone mad, of “that false secondary power / By which we multiply distinction” (2. 216-217), can never break through narrative into retrospect, never fully establish the present personality of Sterne-Tristram. Thus, as Victor Shklovsky indicates in his remarkable essay on the novel, conversation—both between characters and between Sterne and his audience—becomes a technique not of communication but of “defamiliarization.” What has been called the “continuous present” experience of the art of the sublime is perhaps, in this respect, misnamed. For the present which is truly continuous simply annihilates time—which is tantamount, furthermore, to the annihilation of human personality. Thus Tristram, desperately promising to write two volumes of his story in every year, is in a frantic race with his own life, for by definition, when the time of the narrative coincides with the “real” time of Tristram’s present, his life is at an end. This is life-in-death in its distinctively Enlightenment permutation. Tristram is like Gray’s Bard, to whom all things are present and who, because he cannot relate meaningfully to any conceivable audience, ends his prophecy with unmediated self-confrontation and suicide:

“Enough for me: With joy I see
“The different doom our Fates assign.
“Be thine Despair, and scept’red Care,
“To triumph, and to die, are mine.”
He spoke, and headlong from the mountain’s height
Deep in the roaring tide he plung’d to endless night.

(139-144)

41. Frye, Fables of Identity, p. 133.
We have already seen the manner in which Wordsworth, through the invoked presence of Coleridge, avoids such confrontation with and assimilation into his literary doppelgänger. That he was fully aware of the poetic necessity of his technique is indicated in the famous passage in book 3 where he first “discovers” his true theme:

And here, O friend! have I retraced my life
Up to an eminence, and told a tale
Of matters which not falsely may be called
The glory of my youth. Of genius, power,
Creation and divinity itself
I have been speaking, for my theme has been
What passed within me.

(170–176)

Wordsworth here, through the mediary of the Friend, discovers another, more efficient title for his great retrospect. And returning to the idea of title as paradigm for action, we may now attempt a large—and admittedly rather freehand—sketch of The Prelude as a whole. This sketch witnesses the paradigmatic act of conversation at three points, all three of which are, in a sense, the same narrative present of the poem. We will be tracing Wordsworth’s address to Coleridge, of course, under two confessional aspects: edification and mediation. The subtle interplay of these aspects is, in fact, an important principle of the poem’s unity.

Most of the primarily edifying addresses to Coleridge are in the middle and most heavily storied books of The Prelude. Certainly, at the opening of book 7, which consciously resumes the materials of book 1 in a fresh beginning, Wordsworth explicitly identifies his resumption of the poem with his concern for his friend:

Six changeful years have vanished since I first
Poured out (saluted by that quickening breeze
Which met me issuing from the City’s walls)
A glad preamble to this Verse: I sang
Aloud, with fervour irresistible
Of short-lived transport, like a torrent bursting,
From a black thunder-cloud, down Scafell’s side
To rush and disappear. But soon broke forth
The Poem to Coleridge

(55)

(So willed the Muse) a less impetuous stream,
That flowed awhile with unabating strength,
Then stopped for years; not audible again
Before last primrose-time. Beloved Friend!
The assurance which then cheered some heavy thoughts
On thy departure to a foreign land
Has failed; too slowly moves the promised work.

(1–15)

Here, Wordsworth's expectations for The Prelude—and beyond that, The Recluse—are indistinguishable from his hopes for Coleridge's recovery, and the very affecting line, "too slowly moves the promised work," transvalues the work of Coleridge's imaginative and personal reconstitution—a transvaluation strengthened by the change of the line from its 1805 version: "for slowly doth this work advance."

Symmetrically at either end of The Prelude from this central vision of the poem as life-giving to Coleridge are the other two points of the sketch. In book 1, after the so-called preamble of 45 lines, faced with the occlusion of his imaginative power, Wordsworth turns to Coleridge for the first time:

Thus far, O Friend! did I, not used to make
A present joy the matter of a song,
Pour forth that day my soul in measured strains
That would not be forgotten, and are here
Recorded.

(46–51)

The sudden—and radically innovative—leap from an indeterminate "present joy" to a present defined by memory and the mediatory presence of an auditor is heightened in the 1850 version. The 1805 reads:

... measur'd strains
Even in the very words which I have here
Recorded.

It is the extreme case of mediacy, as the preamble is the extreme case of nonmemorial lyricism. Coleridge is here giving life to
Wordsworth, making it possible for the work of composition to go on at all. And from the juxtaposition of these two limiting cases of imaginative activity, *The Prelude* begins its long work of integration.

The last passage to be examined here, like the second of the triad, is one in which the mediatory impulse in address predominates over the edifying. It is Wordsworth's last speech to Coleridge, at the end of book 14:

```
Oh! yet a few short years of useful life,
And all will be complete, thy race be run,
Thy monument of glory will be raised;
Then, though (too weak to tread the ways of truth)
This age fall back to old idolatry,
Though men return to servitude as fast
As the tide ebbs, to ignominy and shame
By nations sink together, we shall still
Find solace—knowing what we have learnt to know,
Rich in true happiness if allowed to be
Faithful alike in forwarding a day
Of firmer trust, joint labourers in the work
(Should Providence such grace to us vouchsafe)
Of their deliverance, surely yet to come.
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(430-443)

The triumphant sweep of this remarkable passage is built on images of minimal hope, the most startling of which is certainly the projection of Coleridge's own death. As Coleridge realized, in "To William Wordsworth," though in a rather different sense, *The Prelude* finally involves his dissolution. And, as always, Wordsworth uses the precise term for this death: "complete." For this death is a completion and perfection of Coleridge's role as auditor, a perfection necessitated by his function as mediator of that imaginative Eternity which is "first, and last, and midst, and without end."

Wordsworth again, as in book 1, looks to the future and the great work to come. But this time, with full assurance of his past blessings and present power, he envisions also the end of his address to his friend—that is, a friend who has been reconverted to the glory of the imagination and who now defines the present and future of the narrator by himself passing into a memorial timelessness.
If we wish to be graphic about the three pivot points discussed, coordinating the time of Wordsworth's narrated experience with the time period of Coleridge's life to which that experience is related, the scheme is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Future</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wordsworth</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Future</td>
<td>Perfected (Memorial) Past</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coleridge

The final passage, from book 14, is structurally necessary as the last term in a set of tense permutations which exhausts the possibilities of narrative versus auditory versus "real" time for *The Prelude*. This again is a phenomenon reminiscent of *Shandy*, for it is a brilliant inversion and solution of the problem which threatens silence and extinction for Tristram, that of bringing the book finally up to date. More importantly, however, as a macroscopic analogue of the act of confessional address, it shows marked similarities to the general movement of almost all the enthusiastic confessions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, developing from an exhortation to the worship of God on the basis of past trials and blessings, through the kerygmatic narration of the speaker's career, and culminating in a final forward-looking, implicitly apocalyptic praise of Providence or, more simply (and effectively), in a single "Amen" committing narrator, audience, and text to their definitive and timeless constellation in the Divine Field of Being.

With this much said about the nature of *The Prelude*’s mode of address, we can proceed to a discussion of its other confessional qualities—the first of which is the complex problem of the daemonic and the strategies for overcoming or circumventing it.