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

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I know not whether my reader is aware that many children, perhaps most, have a power of painting, as it were, upon the darkness, all sorts of phantoms; in some that power is simply a mechanic affection of the eye; others have a voluntary or semi-voluntary power to dismiss or summon them, or, as a child once said to me when I questioned him on this matter, "I can tell them to go, and they go; but sometimes they come when I don't tell them to come."

Thomas De Quincey, Confessions of an English Opium-Eater

That good and delightful affection, which you sometimes feel, is the effect of present grace, and a sort of foretaste of your heavenly country. You ought not to lean too much upon it, because it comes and goes.

Thomas a Kempis, Of the Imitation of Christ
The central motive of this study is to locate some of the guiding principles of unity in The Prelude. To attempt this is, of course, to take part in a critical debate which has been going on almost since the poem's first publication—a debate which, in its way, is one of the marks of The Prelude's continuing importance for the modern imagination.

While The Prelude's influence upon later English poetry and thought is amply documented, it remains, formally, one of the most difficult and strangest poems of the last two centuries. Partly this is a simple result of the sheer bulk of the work: few readers, even on a second or third reading, could really claim to hold the whole development of the poem clearly in memory. But the difficulty is qualitatively different even from that presented by other long poems, such as Hyperion, The Ring and the Book, or—unlikely though it may seem at first blush—The Bridge. In these other poems there is at least an objective plot—the Titanic myth, a murder trial, the history of America—a "public" structure upon which one can batten. And this, at the simplest level, is what we normally understand by the literary term form: a mnemonic, a handle with which to grasp the core of a work.

In The Prelude, however, such an objectively verifiable structure is only fleetingly present. What was said in the last chapter about the interchange of public and private in its mode of address applies equally to its method of dealing with history, so much so that the French Revolution itself, the traumatic core of Wordsworth's mental life and of English Romanticism generally, is almost completely assimilated into a series of personal responses which frequently obscure what is being responded to. Autobiography naturally tends to be circumstantial and rambling, of course. But The Prelude, as a confession, is an autobiography of states of consciousness rather than of facts, so that the problem of locating a form—even a private one—becomes much more challenging. It is understandable, then, why critics from Matthew Arnold to T. S. Eliot have found the poem a mélange of sporadic lyrical brilliance, flat autobiography, and second-rate metaphysical speculation. And it is equally understandable why critics arguing for the poem's
unity have sometimes been led into formulations whose subtlety greatly exceeds their accuracy. Hartman’s analysis of *The Prelude* as the warfare of apocalypse and akedah, to which I have already alluded, is perhaps the best example of this kind of criticism. For while his analysis is strikingly original and illuminating for certain aspects of the Wordsworthian spirit, it tends to transform *The Prelude* into an allegory. And as I shall attempt to indicate in this and the following chapter, *The Prelude* derives its distinctive power and most profound unity precisely from its transformation of allegorical or daemonic forms of consciousness.

In discussing *The Prelude* as a confessional form, then, I am attempting to describe what I feel to be the poem’s essential unity in terms that are less recherché than those of many recent approaches to Romanticism but which still indicate the innovative role of the poem in the forming of the modern consciousness. We have seen how Wordsworth’s original sense of personal address provides one basic unifying structure for the poem. And having explored the importance of confessional art as speech to someone, we now turn to an examination of what, exactly, the confessant has to speak about.

The basic subject of confession is easy to name. Paul in 1 Corinthians and Wordsworth at the end of *The Prelude* are in remarkable agreement about it:

But when that which is perfect has come, that which is imperfect will be done away with. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I thought as a child. Now that I have become a man, I have put away the things of a child.

(13: 10-11)

And now, O Friend! this history is brought
To its appointed close: the discipline
And consummation of a Poet’s mind,
In everything that stood most prominent.
Have faithfully been pictured; we have reached
The time (our guiding object from the first)
When we may, not presumptuously, I hope,
Support my powers so far confirmed, and such
My knowledge, as to make me capable
Of building up a Work that shall endure.

(14. 302-311)
Both men are concerned with describing to themselves and to others the nature and quality of their maturity, their achievement of spiritual manhood. And the ability to perceive, in one's own self, the complex interrelationship and the great difference between childhood and maturity is, for the confessant, a serious test of his powers. Wordsworth's discovery of childhood for literature has, of course, become almost a critical cliché; but it should be equally obvious that, like Paul, like Augustine, and even like Freud, he invents the state of childhood primarily to realize its development into a responsible prophetic maturity.

The confessant's full realization of maturity, though, is made difficult precisely by that childhood which is its precondition. Wordsworth, in "Tintern Abbey," speaks of his youth as a time when Nature was

An appetite; a feeling and a love,  
That had no need of a remoter charm,  
By thought supplied, nor any interest  
Unborrowed from the eye.  

(80–83)

But this is childhood imagined as more than simply a time of life: it is a state of consciousness and not necessarily one which disappears in later life. It is, to be exact, the state of mind we all have experienced, of exalted joys, exalted despairs, exalted terrors, which needs no thought and no language because it is an immediate time-annihilating presentness. And Wordsworth, here as at the beginning of the Intimations Ode, laments not so much the disappearance of this state in adulthood as the terrible nostalgia of adulthood which leads a man to long for youth's constant excitement rather than to accept growth into something different but greater. We need to include Freud in the catalog of Wordsworth's confessional analogues, for Freud, too, realized that childhood is another of our names for the magical, the sublime, and the daemonic which persist within us. And the concern of this chapter will be with seeing how Wordsworth came to confront the daemonic child within him and to integrate that disruptive vision into the fabric of his myth of maturity, The Prelude.

Before turning to The Prelude, however, I would like to
examine the previous growth of the problem in Wordsworth’s own verse and in the poems which were his imaginative patrimony. An especially important version of the quest for imaginative maturity—and one cast in archetypal terms of religious conversion—is the epic I have already alluded to in connection with *The Prelude*, Milton’s *Paradise Regained*. It, too, is a poem about the growth from childhood into adulthood—specifically, the childhood of the Son of God. And it will help clarify the way in which this problem of growth is actually a special case of the major problem of the daemonic.

*Paradise Regained* is, to paraphrase John Crowe Ransom’s designation of *Lycidas*, “a poem nearly confessional.” Louis Martz, in his valuable commentary on the poem, writes:

> In such a poem we are bound to hear throughout a personal voice. . . . That is why the poem never shows any extended effort to present a drama of characters in the usual sense. Satan and the Son of God in this poem speak within the mind of one who hopes to be himself a Son of God; both these actors use the human voice that this particular possible Son of God, John Milton, possesses. . . .

The epic is written in middle style—*sermoni propriora*—the exultant energies of the line of *Paradise Lost* being here chastened and subdued for a theme which is, paradoxically, far greater than that of the earlier and longer story:

> Thou Spirit who ledst this glorious Eremite
> Into the Desert, his Victorious Field
> Against the Spiritual Foe, and broughtst him thence
> By proof the undoubted Son of God, inspire,
> As thou art wont, my prompted Song else mute,
> And bear through highth or depth of natures bounds
> With prosperous wing full summ’d to tell of deeds

Above Heroic, though in secret done,
And unrecorded left through many an Age,
Worthy t' have not remain'd so long unsung.

(1. 8–17)

This middle style of narration, in its constant pressure against
the more than heroic theme of the myth itself, is a source of tension
throughout the poem. More significantly, however, it is a strategy
on the part of the narrator to contain and discipline his own Satanic
or non-Christian self. Such containment, furthermore, is surely
related to Milton's refusal to admit that the soul can live on,
separated from the body. The theme of the poem is Eden restored,
but more specifically,

_Eden_ rais'd in the wast Wilderness.

(1. 7)

This is an impulse which is shared by the early Wordsworth, who
believed firmly that man's paradise, if it is to be built at all, is
to be built

Not in Utopia,—subterranean fields,—
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world, which is the world
Of all of us,—the place where, in the end,
We find our happiness, or not at all!

(Prel. 11. 140–144)

We have already spoken of the importance of mediation in
the typical religious confession and of the sense of audience as one
method of achieving this mediation. Without such saving mediation,
the perversion of confession is the sin of presumption, the sin which
Christ explicitly rejects at the outset of His ministry during His
temptation in the wilderness. And when Milton, as a poet, attempts
to discover through the figure of Christ his own sonship to God,
he sees this temptation as an analogue to the problems of his own
poetry: the penultimate resource of the tempter becomes epic style.
In a moment which must have had enormous poignance for John
Milton the humanist, when all temptations but the last have failed,
Satan extends to the Son the prospect of all that was best and noblest in the ancient world:

There thou shalt hear and learn the secret power
Of harmony in tones and numbers hit
By voice or land, and various-measur'd verse,
AEolian charms and Dorian Lyric Odes,
And his who gave them breath, but higher sung,
Blind Melesigenes thence Homer call'd,
Whose Poem Phoebus challeng'd for his own.

(4. 254–260)

The Son's reply is immediate and surprisingly acerbic, an impassioned defense of the superiority of biblical style over classical fable:

All our Law and Story strew'd
With Hymns, our Psalms with artful terms inscrib'd,
Our Hebrew Songs and Harps in Babylon,
That pleas'd so well our Victors ear, declare
That rather Greece from us these Arts deriv'd;
Ill imitated, while they loudest sing
The vices of thir Deiries, and thir own
In Fable, Hymn, or Song, so personating
Thir Gods ridiculous, and themselves past shame.
Remove their swelling Epithetes thick laid
As varnish on a Harlots cheek, the rest,
Thin sown with aught of profit or delight,
Will far be found unworthy to compare
With Sion's songs, to all true tastes excelling,
Where God is prais'd aright, and Godlike men. . . .

(4. 334–348)

Martz discusses the way Milton qualifies this repudiation of Hellenism through the Son's final speech in book 2 (457–483); but this qualification is itself a subordination of Socrates, the most "Christian" figure of the Golden Age, to the type of the Christian metahero, showing "how the Socratic reliance on the inner man . . . leads onward into the Christian concept of highest kingship. . . ."^2

2. Ibid., pp. 188–89.
The definition of style in *Paradise Regained* is central to that poem's movement as a fundamental gesture toward mediation and human wholeness in much the same way as the development of a viable mode of conversation functions for the myth of recall and renewal in *The Prelude*. The crucial Miltonic theme of temptation has here undergone a transformation beyond even the subtlety of its presentation in *Paradise Lost* or in the great passages on Christian moral empiricism in the *Areopagitica*. For here temptation is not only of a moral intellect but of the typological moral intellect of the Son of God, who is, by implication, all the Sons of God. The temptation, accordingly, is more complex than ever before in Milton's poetry or prose, for the choice is not between good and evil:

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What doubts the Son of God to sit and eat?
These are not Fruits forbidden, no interdict
Defends the touching of these viands pure,
Thir taste no knowledge works, at least of evil,
But life preserves, destroys life's enemy,
Hunger, with sweet restorative delight.
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(2. 368–373)

The choice lies, rather, between different ways of affirming the good:

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To whom thus Jesus temperately reply'd:
Said'st thou not that to all things I had right?
And who withholds my pow'r that right to use?
Shall I receive by gift what of my own,
When and where likes me best, I can command?
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(2. 378–382)

Presumption is one of the nastiest of sins precisely because it is a sin committed only by men convinced—almost rightly—of their own justice.

But given this much about the moral and poetic energy of *Paradise Regained*, it may be asked, How does the mediation of style ensure the narrator's safety from presumption? What, exactly, is being mediated against? which is the same thing as asking, What are the different modes of affirming the good between which one has a choice? The answer to these questions is crucial for under-
standing the more fully confessional "Paradise Regained" of The Prelude. To discover that answer, one more question must be asked, the question which, in many ways, is the creative impulse of Milton's poem: Who is the Son of God?

This is Satan's question from the beginning to the end of the poem, and it is answered not so much in terms of any direct reply of the Son or of the narrator as by Satan's continually asking it. We see who the Son is by seeing Satan's inability to cope with Him:

His Mother then is mortal, but his Sire,
He who obtains the Monarchy of Heav'n,
And what will he not do to advance his Son?
His first-begot we know, and sore have felt,
When his fierce thunder drove us to the deep;
Who this is we must learn, for man he seems
In all his lineaments, though in his face
The glimpses of his Fathers glory shine.

(1. 86–93)

Satan is unable to connect the various and accurate pieces of information he has at his command; his ignorance, that is, is the result of a deeper flaw, stupidity. And Satan's stupidity about the Son is the effect of his existence as an antinatural, discontinuous force trying to inhabit a poem about continuity and dominated by an antitype—the Son—who is the incarnation of universal process. This interpretation of the Son is substantiated by Milton's own exposition, in The Christian Doctrine, of his complex interpretation of the Trinity. He refuses to accept the generation ab eterno of the Son from the Father, and his refusal is, in its simplest terms, an argument for the personality of the Son as process, a literal natura naturans:

Thus the Son was begotten of the Father in consequence of his decree, and therefore within the limits of time, for the decree itself must have been anterior to the execution of the decree, as is sufficiently clear from the insertion [in Heb. 1:5] of the word to-day.3

The Son is, then, in an important way, history itself. For while Milton insists that the Father's act of generating the Son is not determined by necessity but is a free act of the will, nevertheless that generation, once committed, necessitates of and by itself the processes of the natural universe. The Son is the fact of mediation whereby the unknowable and eternal Father confronts His intelligible and historical emanation. And it is this historicity, the unity-in-time of the Son, which Satan cannot possibly comprehend. His questioning of the Son is a constant demand to be shown, outside historical process, the identity of the being who is mediatory history itself. His final questioning, immediately before the last temptation, is an extraordinary performance: the picture of a mind which, with full awareness of discrete historical facts, cannot translate them into meaningful historical events:

Then hear, O Son of David, Virgin-born;
For Son of God to me is yet in doubt,
Of the Messiah I have heard foretold
By all the Prophets; of thy birth at length
Announc't by Gabriel with the first I knew,
And of the Angelic Song in Bethelem field,
From that time seldom have I ceas'd to eye
Thy infancy, thy childhood, and thy youth,
Thy manhood last, though yet in private bred;
Till at the Ford of Jordan whither all
Flock'd to the Baptist, I among the rest,
Though not to be Baptiz'd, by voice from Heav'n
Heard thee pronounc'd the Son of God belov'd.
Thenceforth I thought thee worth my nearer view
And narrower Scrutiny, that I might learn
In what degree or meaning thou art call'd
The Son of God, which bears no single sence;
The Son of God I also am, or was,
And if I was, I am; relation stands;
All men are Sons of God; yet thee I thought
In some respects far higher so declar'd.

(4. 500–520)

"If I was, I am; relation stands": it is the same Satan speaking as in the defiant speeches of Paradise Lost 1, with his absolute refusal.
to concede the power of the temporal within the context of the eternal. The paratactic construction of his speech is worth noting. He refuses to admit the possibility of time leading into time, and he sees the career of Jesus, His growth into His messianic role, much as a series of newsreel scenes, juxtaposed without sense of subordination or development. (The only time words in the whole passage—"From that time," "till," "Thenceforth"—refer to Satan's own self-perception, and he, of course, assumes his character to be constant and immutable.)

His sense of time, that is to say, is demonic—and the inevitable pun is highly instructive—for the demonic is precisely the realm in which "terms for order" become separated by an incalculable gulf from "terms for narrative."4 The demon (or daemon, since this discussion applies to the eudaemonic also) is pure potentiality, frozen and obsessively fixated. It can define itself only in schematic opposition to another equally daemonic and contrary power. For it, "relation [and relationship] stands" as rigid and determined but does not move or progress in any human manner.

The daemonism of Satan in Paradise Regained, furthermore, seems to be the chief reason for what Martz has called the poem's lack of dramatic energy. For the poem makes explicit the daemonic qualities inherent in classical drama and tests these qualities by a standard which is antidaemonic, more than heroic. Thus it becomes a kind of predrama, a ritual contest which finally transcends ritual forms for a more fully human perspective on man's fate. Satan, prisoner of his style, behaves as if he were in a dramatic situation; while the Son, developing instead in the direction of a growing self-knowledge which is beyond the inherent daemonism of drama, never meets him on these terms:

... hee unobserv'd
Home to his Mothers house private return'd.

(4. 638–639)

4. These phrases are from Kenneth Burke's Introduction to The Rhetoric of Religion (Boston, 1961).
Milton's poem, besides placing the problem of the daemonic in a Protestant theological context, also helps demonstrate its permanence in human thought and imagination. For the daemonic and its contrary, the unitary, are more than simply alternative modes of vision which carry on an everlasting psychic war. They need each other and, in mature minds as in mature cultures, they generate and support each other in that higher complexity which is, precisely, "maturity." Claude Lévi-Strauss has written of the way in which primordial ideas of "opposite" and "same"—myths of daemonism and myths of consubstantiality—reduce "to a particular fashion of formulating a general problem, viz., how to make opposition, instead of being an obstacle to integration, serve rather to produce it."5 One impulse or the other, daemonic or unitary, may predominate at a given time; but the critic always deals, as does the poet, with both. In terms that are by now familiar, Wordsworthian apocalypse and Wordsworthian akedah must be seen not as canceling each other but as developing, mutually and naturally, toward that full vision of manhood which The Prelude seeks to record.

Wordsworth's growth toward the integration of the daemonic, however, was not an easy one. And his intense self-consciousness about the path he followed is important not only for The Prelude but for the history of English Romanticism. For the precise version of the daemonic which he sought, in his career, to humanize, involved not only the tyranny of the sublime over the human but the mutual tyrannies of phenomenal reality over the intellect and the intellect over phenomenal reality. Both, for him, merged and became one monstrous error in the system of Godwin; it was Godwin's revolutionary necessitarianism, coupled with his own disappointment in the French Revolution, which led Wordsworth into what he describes in The Prelude as the most abject intellectual and poetic despair of his life:

This was the crisis of that strong disease,
This the soul's last and lowest ebb; I drooped,

Deeming our blessed reason of least use
Where wanted most: "The lordly attributes
Of will and choice," I bitterly exclaimed,
“What are they but a mockery of a Being
Who hath in no concerns of his a test
Of good and evil; knows not what to fear
Or hope for, what to covet or to shun;
And who, if those could be discerned, would yet
Be little profited, would see, and ask
Where is the obligation to enforce?
And, to acknowledged law rebellious, still,
As selfish passion urged, would act amiss;
The dupe of folly, or the slave of crime.”

(11. 306–320)

The process of Wordsworth's disaffiliation with Godwin has been mapped many times, though never perhaps with more clarity and conviction than in Arthur Beatty’s pioneering study. It is interesting to note here, however, that the two classes of men Wordsworth bitterly envisions existing under the philosophy of Godwin, “the dupe of folly” and “the slave of crime,” are characters inevitably suggestive of the main characters Marmaduke and Oswald in Wordsworth’s early play The Borderers, a work which Beatty first identified as the poet’s definitive break from the ideas of Political Justice.

The Borderers (1795–96) is far from a great play, although not nearly so bad as some of Wordsworth’s commentators have made it out to be. It is, furthermore, nearly an anatomy of that “strong disease” from which Wordsworth was in process of recovering at the time and against which he was to struggle with growing confidence and grace during his great years.

Coleridge, in Biographia Literaria, notes that Wordsworth’s greatest strength does not lie in the dramatic. It is a significant remark, especially in the light of what has been said concerning Paradise Regained about drama as a form with strong daemonic overtones. The story of Christ’s temptation by Satan, we have suggested, may be called a predrama or a metadrama in that it implies a standard of humanity beyond the daemonism of the

conventional tragic hero. In the same fashion, *The Borderers* might best be described as a hyperdrama, for it contains no projection of a transcendent human form reconciling the daemonic oppositions of its plot—that, in Wordsworth's life as well as his verse, was to come later. But the very ferocity of those oppositions finally breaks down the dramatic structure itself in a kind of exhausted expectation of something better, fuller, and more integrated to come. The tragedy of *The Borderers*, then, fails not through a weakness of the dramatic sense but rather through a fierce concentration of dramatic elements which amounts to a criticism of the form. As a cure from the strong disease, the disease of obsessive rationalism and obsessive revolutionism, it is homeopathic and a fascinating exercise in self-analysis and self-criticism through traditional, non-confessional literary forms.

The plot itself is somewhat feverishly muddled: Marmaduke, the virtuous and innocent leader of an outlaw band of borderers, is persuaded by his sinister lieutenant, Oswald, that Baron Herbert, the father of Idonea (whom Marmaduke loves), is in reality not her father at all but an evil old lecher planning to sell Idonea's chastity for preferment. Marmaduke and Oswald meet with the blind Herbert and offer to conduct him along his road; Oswald urges Marmaduke to kill the old man, but Marmaduke, unable to overcome his scruples, decides to abandon him instead to the elements as a trial by ordeal of his honor. Naturally, the old man dies; but not before Oswald has revealed his treachery to Marmaduke. In the denouement, Oswald is outlawed by all the band, and Marmaduke, having revealed his part in the action to Idonea, resolves on a lifelong and silent journey of penance.

It all sounds very much like a conflation of *Othello* and *King Lear*; but in fact, it is an even more unusual combination of motifs—as if Iago had corrupted Robin Hood while a sinless Oedipus Coloneus died separated from Antigone. And this sense, pervasive throughout *The Borderers*, that all manner of dramatic archetypes have become jumbled together is an essential part of what I regard as its remarkable power. It is not merely that Oswald, the most vivid character in the play, is an incarnation of Godwinian necessitarianism and hence a single daemonic character in a world of milder spirits. In the beginning, Marmaduke, too, is a tacit allegory of Godwinianism, of that part of the system which holds, paradoxically
contrary to the necessitarian ideal, that man can effect a real and total change in the injustices of the political world. That both men are paralyzed by their own excessive energy is the daemonic point of the tragedy.

The only speech of the play frequently quoted in studies of Wordsworth is Oswald’s in act 3, when he thinks Marmaduke has killed Herbert:

Action is transitory—a step, a blow,
The motion of a muscle—this way or that—
'Tis done, and in the after-vacancy
We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed:
Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,
And shares the nature of infinity.

(1539–1544)

It is a striking passage with important links to the vision of man and nature in other early poems, such as the Convict’s tale in Guilt and Sorrow and The Old Cumberland Beggar. It is also highly daemonic in a necessitarian way, suggesting a kind of Satanic commitment to action despite all action’s senselessness. But we must set against this passage an equally important one earlier in the play in which Marmaduke, beginning to feel the first effects of Oswald’s deception, suddenly realizes the hidden nature of his own benevolent revolutionary activity and sees the waste which lies beneath all efforts at renovation:

Lacy! we look
But at the surfaces of things; we hear
Of towns in flames, fields ravaged, young and old
Driven out in troops to want and nakedness;
We grasp our swords and rush upon a cure
That flatters us, because it asks not thought:
The deeper malady is better hid;
The world is poisoned at the heart.

(Act 2, ll. 1029–36)

While Oswald’s purpose in the drama is to bring Marmaduke from this despair of meaningful action to the Satanic energy he himself enjoys, he fails to do more than simply destroy Marmaduke’s trust
in direct and purposeful political action. And this failure—the fact that Marmaduke never really acts, since the only alternative actions allowed him are all daemonic to some degree—is a marginal salvation for Marmaduke. He cannot be said to be fully humanized at the end of the tragedy, but his suffering and self-isolation—which adumbrate the figure of the Wanderer in *The Excursion*—present, literally, a path out of the world of the drama into the possibility of a more fully human experience:

A hermitage has furnished fit relief
To some offenders; other penitents,
Less patient in their wretchedness, have fallen,
Like the old Roman, on their own sword’s point.
They had their choice: a wanderer *must* I go,
The Spectre of that innocent Man, my guide.
No human ear shall ever hear me speak;
No human dwelling ever give me food,
Or sleep, or rest: but over waste and wild,
In search of nothing that this earth can give,
But expiation, will I wander on—
A Man by pain and thought compelled to live,
Yet loathing life—till anger is appeased
In Heaven, and Mercy gives me leave to die.

(Act 5, ll. 2340–2353)

This is still a vision of compulsion, of course, but of a compulsion which arises, ironically, out of an awareness of guilt and of the inhumanity of his previous attitudes to experience. It is like the first conviction of sin in Quaker or Methodist religious typology, which is essentially a daemonic self-accusation of having acted daemonically. And to make a leap which is not as abrupt as it may seem, it is with essentially the same sort of figure that *The Prelude* begins—a figure who is experiencing not compulsive guilt but compulsive joy at his release into nature but who faces the same basic problem of humanization: how to reconcile the elements of will and necessity in one’s relationship to the natural and human world, and how to achieve a stance toward experience which fulfills the internal requisites for complete integration; how, in other words, to become truly a son of the difficult god of this universe.
In *The Borderers*, Wordsworth splits the obsessive, self-contradictory energy of Godwinian radicalism into the contrary figures of Oswald and Marmaduke. This split itself, as much as the system it seeks to dramatize, is daemonic. For, as we have intimated, the daemonic is definitively the realm of two-ness, of Manicheanism, of morality as psychomachia, while its contrary is the realm of spiritual autonomy and of morality as decision.

In this context, the common epithet for those enigmatic figures of Wordsworth's later poetry—his "solitaries"—takes on new meaning as a sign of the poet's growing command over the chaotic, divisive energies of his youth. Figures like Michael, the Old Cumbreland Beggar, the Leech-gatherer, and the Solitary Singer are mysteriously solitary in their unification of such dramatic opposites as simplicity and profundity, ignorance and enlightenment, the quotidian and the supernatural. In many cases, in fact, one can even imagine Wordsworth consciously transforming dramatic dialogue into the distinctive form of mediating address we have already discussed at length. This process, whereby what would normally be a dramatic interlocutor becomes a curiously admonitory auditor, has already been spoken of in relation to "Resolution and Independence." And in a poem like "We Are Seven," at once moving and ludicrous, it can be seen in an even more crudely incipient state, as the poet argues of life and death with the solitary little girl for whom arithmetic is an intimation of immortality. Wordsworth is experimenting not with form but with a release from form, a mode which will allow him to fuse memory and imagination in a language whose "intent . . . is to originate like the flower, [in] that it strives to banish all metaphor, to become entirely literal."7

It is useful to see how, in the mode of personal address, the unitary language of *The Prelude* differs from the similar, but ultimately nonunitary, speech of Coleridge in a Conversation Poem like "The Eolian Harp." The contrast in that poem between the exalted,

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visionary Coleridge and his orthodox, humble Sara is a version of daemonic opposition which itself undercuts the all-embracing expansiveness of the "universal harp" theme. The development of Coleridge's own thought, in fact, once again offers an illuminating contrast to Wordsworth's growth during roughly the same period. Particularly, it helps highlight the next, post-Borderers stage of his quarrel with the daemonic, a stage achieved as early as Lyrical Ballads but reaching full maturity in The Prelude.

Coleridge, like Wordsworth, wrote some of his most powerful poetry out of a distaste for the mechanistic, hyperrationalist beliefs of his youth. In the case of Coleridge, however, this reaction against a materialist absolutism was coupled with a faith in the (for Coleridge) ironically named doctrines of Unitarianism. And his reaction against such beliefs, while striving toward a unitary vision both of man-in-nature and of his own past, inevitably and frustratingly fell back into varieties of opposition, two-ness, and the daemonic. A number of critics have cited Coleridge's continual uneasiness with his early tenets of faith. James D. Boulger writes:

There was one area in which the theory [mechanism] continued to be important for him, to awaken in him the most violent annoyance, and that was in its connection with Socinianism and Unitarianism. In attacking Unitarianism and mechanism with such violence . . . he exhibited a mea culpa attitude not unlike that of anticommunists who were fellow travelers in the 1930's.8

And J. B. Beer indicates a complementary, even more significant aspect of this difficulty: that Coleridge, even during the height of his commitment to Unitarianism, was drawn strongly to more mystical, less thoroughly rationalistic religious systems.9 The opposition itself, between reason and mysticism, would have imposed an inevitable dichotomy in his later questionings. Religious Musings, written during Coleridge's disenchantment with Unitarianism (1794–96), makes this divisiveness agonizingly clear. Beer cites the description of Christ in the poem:

The Sense of the Human

Holy with power
He on the thought-benighted Sceptic beamed
Manifest Godhead, melting into day
What floating mists of dark idolatry
Broke and misshaped the omnipresent Sire...

(29-33)

These lines are a good deal more christological than orthodox Unitarianism would find comfortable. And the lines that follow, which Beer does not cite, emphasize yet more strongly Coleridge's attraction to an explicitly numinous Christ:

And first by Fear uncharmed the drowsed Soul.
Till of its nobler nature it 'gan feel
Dim recollections; and then soared to Hope.
Strong to believe whate'er of mystic good
The Eternal dooms for His immortal sons.
From Hope and firmer Faith to perfect Love
Attracted and absorbed: and centered there
God only to behold, and know, and feel,
Till by exclusive consciousness of God
All self-annihilated it shall make
God its Identity: God all in all!
We and our Father one!

(34-45)

As the last line indicates, this passage too, like Paradise Regained, is an attempt to answer the crucial question, Who is the Son of God? Notably, however, the dim recollections of line 36 strike a chord which is Wordsworthian and not really consistent with the movement of the passage as a whole. The saving memory of a better self is a myth of human continuity in time. But it is set in precarious equilibrium with the twin daemonisms of skepticism (identified, in a Blakean way, with "dark idolatry") and the via negativa of self-annihilation.

Indeed, this passage from Religious Musings is almost an unintentional allegory-in-small of the course of Coleridge's imaginative and religious career. It moves from an uneasy materialism and associationism to what Carlyle calls a "centre of indifference" in which the poet recognizes the contradictions of that earlier com-
mitment and then into a new orthodoxy which becomes itself increasingly daemonic with the years. It is to the period of the centre of indifference—distinctively, the period of the Conversation Poems—that Coleridge’s closest poetic approach to Wordsworth can be assigned; and conversely, it is during this period that Wordsworth’s poetic differences from Coleridge can be most profitably examined. The final passage of Religious Musings, for example, offers a striking contrast with Wordsworth in the matter of animism—Christian or otherwise:

Contemplant Spirits! ye that hover o’er
With untired gaze the immeasurable fount
Ebullient with creative Deity!
And ye of plastic power, that interfused
Roll through the grosser and material mass
In organizing surge! Holies of God!
(And what if Monads of the infinite mind?)
I haply journeying my immortal course
Shall sometime join your mystic choir! Till then
I discipline my young and novice thought
In ministeries of heart-stirring song,
And aye on Meditation’s heaven-ward wing
Soaring aloft I breathe the empyreal air
Of Love, omnific, omnipresent Love,
Whose day-spring rises glorious in my soul
As the great Sun, when he his influence
Sheds on the frost-bound waters—The glad stream
Flows to the ray and warbles as it flows.

The immediate analogue, of course, is the famous passage from “Tintern Abbey”:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
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.

The first notable thing about the two passages—something
whose larger implications have been discussed in the preceding
chapter—is, of course, that Coleridge's passage is an apostrophe in
the manner of the sublime ode, while Wordsworth's is in the middle
mode of address. In fact, it immediately precedes the poet's sudden
and daring importation of an auditor into the lyric, his address to
Dorothy. More important for our present concerns is the way in
which Wordsworth, with remarkable subtlety, skirts the elements
of religious and materialistic daemonism which are so pervasive
in the Coleridge passage. The "Monads of the infinite mind" of
Coleridge's poem become "something far more deeply interfused"
with Wordsworth; the refusal to give the "something" a more
definite name and also the compression of plurality into singularity
are crucial.

The animizing power of names in both primitive religions and
Western allegory is by now an anthropological and critical truism.
What has not yet been made clear, at least in criticism, is the
extent to which the magic act of naming, as a kind of semantic
daemonism or fixation, is tinged with the ambivalence of all
daemonism. To name an object is not only to exert a certain control
over it but also irrevocably to sacrifice a certain amount of autonomy
in return for that control. An example is the common practice in
primitive societies of making magic against an enemy by destroying
an article of his clothing or clippings from his nails or hair or by
destroying a doll or artifact with his name written on it.

This is a psychic and linguistic problem which does not appear
to become fully realized until the advent of Romanticism, and the
passage cited from Religious Musings must be one of its earliest
and most graphic presentations. It will be noted that Coleridge
seems almost to try not to give a name to his nature daemons—
they are first addressed as "ye of plastic power"—and that he slips into the animizing epithets "Holies of God" and "Monads," as is symptomatic of his weaker poetry, out of a kind of desperation: a failure of the will toward the fully human. The two epithets are syntactically outside the structure of the thought; they are appendages in the most unfortunate sense. Wordsworth, on the other hand, by positioning the "presence" and the "something" within the past of his experience ("And I have felt"), avoids apostrophe. And in doing this, he tactfully contains the daemonic energies inherent in the concept within a dense syntax whose chief energy is that of imaginative unification. "A sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused" is impossible to read logically—or should be, since worrying out the grammatical reference of "more" militates against the real purpose of the phrase, which is, as Carl Woodring says, "intensive . . . not toward limited comparison, but toward the unlimited."10 It is a placing of energy in a frame which avoids the oppositions inherent in Coleridge's differentiation of "plastic power" and the "grosser and material mass." Syntax imitates meaning here and imitates it brilliantly. The "something" is "far more deeply interfused" not only throughout the material universe but, by the absence of a clear reference for the word "more," throughout the verbal universe of the sentence itself. Lacking such a clear reference, the word can only refer back to the entire sentence, including the light of setting suns, the round ocean, the living air, the blue sky, and even the mind of man in a unitary image. Such an image makes the projection of a daemonic nature, a two-ness in mind and phenomenal world, at once impossible to affirm and yet strongly suggested as an undertone of the poem. This is the "language of the sense" in a highly original and self-conscious formulation, one which can meaningfully articulate the poet's "purest thoughts" and "moral being" simultaneously within and beyond "the mighty world / Of eye, and ear."

The antitype of this vision of nature is the conclusion of Coleridge's passage. Here the final natural image—"The glad stream / Flows to the ray and warbles as it flows"—is an affecting but uneasy return to natural process, but only after a spiraling vision of the beatified soul in which natural symbols, such as the day-spring, the sun, and the melting waters, function as more or

less conventional mystical analogues for a fundamentally antinatural, nonhistorical eternity. Indeed, comparing the use of names in the two passages from Coleridge and Wordsworth, suggests what Donald Davie has already described as the characteristic syntax of *The Prelude*: concrete verb forms coupled with abstract, indeterminate substantives.\(^\text{11}\) And it enables us to see how this stylistic habit is, for Wordsworth, an important way of integrating opposites and, as such, a necessary precondition for the unified narrative of *The Prelude*.\(^\text{12}\)

It is *The Prelude*, of course, which represents Wordsworth's fullest triumph over the daemonic, as it is his fullest release from the exigencies of conventional narrative form. The two victories are the same, for Wordsworth, in *The Prelude*, integrates and unifies the daemonic elements of his personality precisely by narrating how he has come, through severe psychic trials, to integrate and unify the daemonic elements of his personality. In other words, the "iconic" imitation of meaning by language which we saw operating in "Tintern Abbey" has become more than a tour de force; it is now a central principle of the poetry, annihilating even that most primal and perennial of literary daemonisms, the opposition between form and content.

Such an effect is an inevitable result, to be sure, of the fully confessional mode. For the religious confessant, too, demonstrates to himself and his audience—and his God—that he has integrated the indwelling of Christ with his daily life by narrating the process of that integration. Furthermore, both "Christ" for the confessants and "imagination" for Wordsworth appear, in retrospect, in the natural and highly traditional image of a light shining into the darkness of earthly life, but unusually, a light originating within the human self embedded in time. Both the confessants and Words-


worth speak in very similar terms of this assurance of divinity-within-humanity:

A plastic power
Abode with me; a forming hand, at time
Rebellious, acting in a devious mood;
A local spirit of his own, at war
With general tendency, but, for the most,
Subservient strictly to external things
With which it communed. An auxiliar light
Came from my mind, which on the setting sun
Bestowed new splendour; the melodious birds,
The fluttering breezes, fountains that run on
Murmuring so sweetly in themselves, obeyed
A like dominion, and the midnight storm
Grew darker in the presence of my eye:
Hence my obeisance, my devotion hence,
And hence my transport.

(2. 362–376)

This “auxiliar light”—which achieves perhaps its most magnificent articulation in the final lines of the *Intimations Ode*—is both necessary and highly dangerous to the fully human imagination. For while it ensures the unity-in-time and unity-in-place of the human experience, its very insistence on the ability of unassisted human power to make a livable world can easily become a new version of daemonism which turns the human faculty into a divisive, world-devouring force.

This history of radical Protestantism offers a number of examples of the potentially destructive, daemonic force of the Inner Light of private revelation. The most notorious example—and one which continually embarrassed radical Protestants of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—was probably James Nayler, whose literal acceptance of Fox’s doctrines led him finally to an inability to distinguish between himself and Christ as historical personages.\(^\text{13}\)

Such sensational events as Nayler’s garish heresy trial and his terrible public mutilation helped give the word *enthusiasm* the disreputable tinge it had indelibly acquired by Wordsworth’s day.

The great confessants of the Society of Friends and the

\(^{13}\) See appendix 1.
Wesleyan Movement, of course, were very careful in their narratives to avoid the excesses implied by the vulgar term *enthusiasm*. And it was the technique of narrative itself, the anchoring of personal revelation in the story of a developing personality-within-history, which was their chief resource in this integration of the transcendent. E. D. Hirsch, whose book *Wordsworth and Schelling* is a valuable exploratory study in the relationships we are discussing here, writes of the integrative imagination of the eighteenth-century reformers:

"Sometimes, indeed, Enthusiasm may experience a mystical fusion with the beyond, but this is merely a moment within its experience as a whole. . . . The subject is always faced with distinctions to be overcome, distinctions like that between life and death, the ideal and the real. Yet, at the same time, the task of overcoming distinctions is already implicitly accomplished by the beyond. The both-and motif underlies every aspect of experience."  

One student of autobiography, disparagingly contrasting the confessants with Gibbon and Hume, has spoken of their “static representation of the personality.” Precisely. But it is a stasis dynamic rather than inert, necessitated by the exigency of taming the daemonic and readjusting and integrating the past. Such stasis is not merely a prerogative but a sine qua non for the radical confessant. We shall now examine one such confession and its startling similarity to narrative procedures in *The Prelude*.

George Fox, certainly one of the most “enthusiastic” and numinous of all confessors, relates throughout his journal strange and apparently unmotivated urgings of an inner voice. With equal thoroughness, however, the journal seeks to contain these urgings within a context of freedom of development. In 1656, for example, preaching to the people of Wales, he projects a Christology purified of its atemporal types and figures:

"I opened also to them the types, figures, and shadows of Christ, in the time of the law; and showed them that Christ was come, and had ended the types, shadows, tithes, and oaths, and put down"

swearing; and had set up yea and nay instead of it, and a free ministry. For He was now come to teach the people Himself, and His heavenly day was springing from on high. 16

Fox’s awareness of the danger of a daemonic Christology is apparent, of course, in his estrangement from Nayler and the careful tact of his own christological references to his career in the journal. Even more striking than this, however, is a remarkable passage early in the journal where Fox faces and overcomes the contrary version of daemonism, the temptation to believe in an absolutely determinative and possessive natural universe:

One morning, as I was sitting by the fire, a great cloud came over me, and a temptation beset me; and I sat still. It was said, “All things come by nature”; and the elements and stars came over me, so that I was in a manner quite clouded with it. But as I sat still and said nothing, the people of the house perceived nothing. And as I sat still under it and let it alone, a living hope and a true voice arose in me, which said, “There is a living God who made all things.” Immediately the cloud and temptation vanished away, and life rose over it all; my heart was glad, and I praised the living God. 17

It would of course be a violence to the text to call this passage “Wordsworthian”; but it seems undeniable that the shape of the experience Fox undergoes is very like that progressive assimilation of daemonic attitudes which forms the general narrative shape of The Prelude—a shape of experience which Fox and his followers were to make commonplace in Protestant belief and which Wordsworth was to articulate in a purely secular poetic form.

A final example from Fox will suffice for our present point; it is one of the most surprising and subtle uses of narrative in the journal. In 1652 Fox was on his way to Westmoreland, the territory where he was to make his most faithful converts, meet the woman who was to become his wife, and establish Quakerism as a full-fledged movement. In retrospect, he sees it as a portentous moment, perhaps the most portentous in his career as a preacher. On the way

17. Ibid., p. 94.
there, he had climbed Pendle Hill, and he begins the story with that incident. What follows must be quoted at length:

As we travelled we came near a very great hill, called Pendle Hill, and I was moved of the Lord to go up to the top of it; which I did with difficulty, it was so very steep and high. When I was come to the top, I saw the sea bordering upon Lancashire. From the top of this hill the Lord let me see in what places he had a great people to be gathered. As I went down, I found a spring of water in the side of the hill, with which I refreshed myself, having eaten or drunk but little for several days before.

At night we came to an inn, and declared truth to the man of the house, and wrote a paper to the priests and professors, declaring the day of the Lord, and that Christ was come to teach people Himself, by His power and Spirit in their hearts, and to bring people off from all the world’s ways and teachers, to His own free teaching, who had bought them, and was the Saviour of all them that believed in Him. The man of the house spread the paper abroad, and was mightily affected with the truth. Here the Lord opened unto me, and let me see a great people in white rainment by a river side, coming to the Lord; and the place that I saw them in was about Wensleydale and Sedbergh.18

We may accurately describe this narrative as apocalypse turned into akedah through the very process of matter-of-fact narrative. But it is even subtler than that. The central experience of the passage is the vision of that key motif of Revelations, the gathering of the peoples. This apocalyptic sight begins to appear on the top of Pendle Hill (the mountaintop being the archetypal place for such a revelation) but is thwarted, with a definite narrative wrench, as Fox turns aside to his descent from the mountain and to the strangely vivid detail of the spring (which is still called “George Fox’s well”). The night at the inn is then described as one of especially productive evangelical excitement. Then, and only then, is the apocalyptic vision allowed to complete itself in the “people in white rainment.” It seems, by implication, to be a visionary dream of Fox’s rather than a waking vision, but this is not finally important. What is important is that the vision has been deliberately

18. Ibid., pp. 150-51.
embedded in narrative process and that, even in its second and fuller articulation, it is once more anchored to the naturalistic world by the reference to "Wensleydale and Sedbergh."

The unmistakable analogue to this experience in *The Prelude* is, surely, the Simpton Pass episode. It is, of course, with the possible exception of the ascent of Mount Snowdon in book 14, the single most intricate moment of the poem and inexhaustible by any amount of commentary or analogy. But here we may notice that the whole episode takes its energy from Wordsworth's original desire to ascend to the top of the Alps and confront the natural world at its most sublime—which is to say, its most important. It is a daemonic

... under-thirst
Of vigour seldom utterly allayed.
And from that source how different a sadness
Would issue. . .

(6. 558–561)

Lost in the dark, however, Wordsworth and his companion wander along the mountain roads until they meet a peasant and learn from him that they have already crossed the Alps. What follows the realization that "we had crossed the Alps" (591) is a very important bit of textual reorganization. In the initial composition, line 591 led directly into the downward-moving vision published in 1845 as "The Simploc Pass (composed about 1799), the vision of an ongoing apocalypse within nature in recompense for the poet's own thwarted will:

Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

(635–640)

In composing the sequence for *The Prelude*, however, Wordsworth breaks the narrative time of the episode to describe his present reaction to the memory of the experience. But the famous apostrophe

to Imagination, following line 591, is very easy to misread, as R. A.
Foakes has pointed out, as referring to the past time of the experi­
ence itself. The imagery is precisely that of the poet’s wandering
over the Alps:

Imagination—here the Power so called
Through sad incompetence of human speech,
That awful Power rose from the mind’s abyss
Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost;
Halted without an effort to break through;
But to my conscious soul I now can say—
“I recognize thy glory” . . .

(592–599)

That the final collation of the episode seems inevitable rather than
patchy is partly due to this deliberate imagistic connection. But
more meaningfully, it is a result of the fact that Wordsworth, like
Fox in the Pendle Hill story, is utilizing narrative and time sense
to discipline the daemonic tendencies of his experience. Both the
description of the autonomous power of Imagination and the
description of the great Apocalypse of natural decay and regenera­
tion are, from the vantage of the present-tense narrator, versions
of the daemonically complementary extremes of experience: limits
of human existence. The poet in his descent from the mountain and
in his retrospective coupling of these two extremes does not impose,
but rather extrapolates, a narrative sequence out of them—a sequence
which enriches the sense of his present humanity without annihi­
lating it in the face of either experience. For if the Imagination section,
as a rupture in the narrative time, radically qualifies the inhuman
vision of the natural apocalypse, that vision itself serves as a qualifi­
cation to the vision of Imagination, following it in the “spoken”
time of the passage.

In a passage like the Simplon Pass episode, ideas of form have
found a definition which provides the poet with, simultaneously,
total release from one kind of history and total bondage to another.
For the principle of formal organization by this point has become
at once the most primal and most tenuous of principles—the poet’s
own sense of his remembering, reflecting, speaking self. It is a

method of integrating the timeless, daemonic energies of inspiration which succeeds by pretending to be no method at all but simply the casual reminiscences of an inspired mind whose inspiration is already assimilated into the daily processes of living and speaking. Wordsworth is never clearer about his own sense of this method than in the brilliant conclusion to book 5 of *The Prelude*:

**Visionary power**

Attends the motions of the viewless winds,  
Embodied in the mystery of words:  
There, darkness makes abode, and all the host  
Of shadowy things work endless changes,—there,  
As in a mansion like their proper home,  
Even forms and substances are circumfused  
By that transparent veil with light divine,  
And, through the turnings intricate of verse,  
Present themselves as objects recognised,  
In flashes, and with glory not their own.

(595–605)

To make “forms and substances”—the substratum of our common world—“circumfused” with the glory of the sublime, but yet to make them remain “as objects recognized,” is surely the fully articulated goal not only of the passage but of the whole poem. And the “turnings intricate of verse”—a phrase which, by the poetic transposition of adjective and noun, does exactly what it says—are crucial in this transformation and transfiguration. For the memorial verse of the poet localizes and embeds the sublime “mystery of words” in the convolutions of his confessional narrative. And at the same time, the phrase describing the “turnings intricate,” interposed between the two phrases describing the resplendence of the numinous in the everyday, enforces a pause in the narration which perfectly imitates the mediating, integrative power of language which is being spoken of.

This is an approach to imaginative form which, by asserting the constitutive centrality of the self in history, is itself monumentally constitutive of the modern temper. Robert Langbaum, in a perceptive essay on “The Evolution of Soul in Wordsworth’s Poetry,” has compared the method of *The Prelude* to the investigations of twentieth-century information theory and mathematical linguistics. Wordsworth, Langbaum argues, is trying to assert the
continuity and independence of human speech against the impinge-ments, which we would call daemonic, of associationism and mechanism.21 And surely he is right in seeing this assertion as fundamentally the one made by contemporary “mathematical” grammarians, whose systematization of language is designed explicitly to isolate and affirm the unsystematized, integrative role of human will in the act of speech.22 In much the same way F. A. Pottle has demonstrated that the much-vaunted “fidelity to the object” of Wordsworth’s descriptions is actually a fidelity not to the object as such but to the process whereby the object comes to be perceived.23 And it is difficult not to see in this aspect of Wordsworth’s imagination an anticipation of another distinctively modern reaction against daemonism, Wolfgang Köhler’s refutation of behaviorist theories of perception: “Instead of reacting to local stimuli by local and mutually independent events, the organism responds to the pattern of stimuli to which it is exposed; and . . . this answer is a unitary process, a functional whole, which gives, in experience, a sensory scene rather than a mosaic of local sensations.”24 Köhler’s phrase for the unitary process of gestalt perception is, in fact, startlingly Wordsworthian: “a sensory scene.”

The following chapters will extend this description of the formal principle of The Prelude into a more specific analysis of its narrative structure and language. But for the present, it will be useful to examine in detail one incident of the integration of the daemonic in the poem, both as a way of concluding the description of Wordsworth’s experiments with form which we have been tracing and as itself a prelude to the discussion to follow.

Perhaps the most celebrated “daemonic” moment in The Prelude is the episode of the Stolen Boat in book 1. It is an important

moment in the poem, for in it Wordsworth relates not only one of his earliest visitations by a sublime power beyond nature but also one of his earliest—and most permanently refreshing—intimations of how to integrate that power into a myth of human continuity. The introduction of the episode has already been discussed in the last chapter: in it Wordsworth, through the medium of address to his Friend, channels the prophetic energy of “Praise to the end!” into a sustained and poised autobiographical discourse. The sequel to this address, the episode itself, achieves the same effect, but on the much greater scale of the poet’s unity with his own remembered experience of nature, the divine, and himself. I quote the episode in full. 25

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; or she may use
Severer interventions, ministry
More palpable, as best might suit her aim.

One summer evening (led by her) I found
A little boat tied to a willow tree
Within a rocky cave, its usual home.
Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping in
Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth
And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice
Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on;
Leaving behind her still, on either side,
Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
Until they melted all into one track
Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,
Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point
With an unswerving line, I fixed my view
Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,
The horizon’s utmost boundary; far above
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
She was an elfin pinnace; lustily

25. For much of my information concerning this episode, I am indebted to an absorbing and suggestive conversation with Professor Ephim G. Fogel of Cornell University.
The Sense of the Human

I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
Went heaving through the water like a swan;
When, from behind that craggy steep till then
The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
And growing still in stature the grim shape
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned,
And through the silent water stole my way,
Back to the covert of the willow tree;
There in her mooring-place I left my bark,—
And through the meadows homeward went, in grave
And serious mood; but after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

(350–400)

This great passage is easy to interpret as what Edward E. Bostetter calls "Wordsworth's basic experience, stripped of its civilized abstractions . . . an elemental primitive rite in which he absorbs nature into himself. . . ."26 It is one of nature's "severer interventions" in the education of the poet, and the huge black peak, "as if with voluntary power instinct," certainly seems a nature daemon of some sort, a disruption of the natural order of things by a higher and "other" power. Robert Langbaum, in The Poetry of Experience, gives a cogent version of this reading, locating the daemonic element primarily in the sense of landscape perspective:

The revelation proceeds from an optical illusion which, by disrupting the ordinary appearance of things, allows the imagination to transform them into significance. The effect of the revelation is to make us feel that so extraordinary a perspective is no less true to the reality of the object than an ordinary perspective, that it is even in a sense truer.27

To what extent, however, is the vision an optical illusion? Wordsworth is an unusually careful observer not of natural phenomena as they appear but as they come to be perceived—an important distinction which should make us wary, in any passage, of assuming that Wordsworth means more than he describes. In the present case, the crucial fact to remember—one which Langbaum, among others, does not develop—is that as he rows Wordsworth is facing away from the direction of the boat’s movement and thus sees, during the entire incident, only the shore he is leaving. Like a rower striving to reach a fixed point in a straight line, he sights not over his back at the direction in which he is rowing but at the highest point of the receding horizon. As he gets farther and farther from the shore, his view of “the horizon’s utmost boundary” becomes more panoramic, and the black peak begins to appear over the craggy ridge. It is huge, growing still in stature not in itself but precisely in relation to the ridge on which the rower has taken a fix. Far from being, as Langbaum implies, a violation of natural perspective, this is an effect so common as to be normally unnoticeable. What brings it into consciousness for the rower—and for anyone who will take the trouble to focus on two close objects, the taller behind the shorter (e.g., a telephone pole in front of a house), and then walk backward away from them for twenty steps—is that the vision is fixed on the shorter and closer of the two objects rather than ranging freely over the horizon. Hence the relative heights of the objects are seen to vary abruptly with each stroke of the oar rather than gradually with the general recession of the horizon.

It is important not to misunderstand what Wordsworth means when he says that the stature of the peak grows steadily. For stature is a carefully relative term for size and means precisely what

it says. Thus everything on the horizon, perceived singly, is becoming smaller; but in configuration, with the craggy ridge as the center of the pattern (not the peak itself), the peak’s relative stature over the ridge grows ever more impressive. When the peak is said to tower between the rower and the stars, we must not assume that it is in any way blacking out the heavens. The stars involved must be those along the angle of vision which had originally included the craggy ridge as the biggest thing in sight. In fact, Wordsworth skillfully ensures this interpretation by all but describing the critical angle of vision at the beginning of the narration.

In saying this much about the episode, however, we have not denied the presence of a strong animistic or daemonic element in the narration. We have only discovered that, if it is to be located and understood fully, it must be interpreted in a context more complex than the primitivism of either Wordsworth the narrator or Wordsworth the boy rower. Reading the poet’s vision of the pursuing cliff as a kind of gestalt perception is in no way a domestication of the passage; it is simply an attempt to get the terms of the problem in a clearer perspective than, it seems, they have often enjoyed. Returning again to the stages of the episode, we notice that the carefully schematic outline of the rower’s experience—his angle of vision, the configuration of his objects of sight—is deeply involved with another, subtle movement that can only be described as psychophysical.

We have already mentioned that the most important visual component of the rower’s experience—what actually lifts the black peak into its threatening predominance over his field of vision—is the act of fixing his sight on the craggy ridge. This establishes the angle of vision upon which the peak impinges. The fixing of this angle of vision, however, is accompanied by a shift in the rower’s purposiveness and in his whole muscular sense of the boat in the water. The base line is also and necessarily the leisurely, unpurposive movement of the boat toward no particular point at all. The “small circles glittering idly in the moon” which describe the line of the boat’s movement at this stage are the small circles caused by barely dipping the oars in the water, letting it have its own way. And Wordsworth, at this point, studiously avoids using the word I; it is the boat itself which moves to the sound of mountain echoes.

With the fixing of the second line of the angle, however, a
new sense of purposiveness enters the narration, changing the whole feeling of the episode. The rower behaves like one who strives to reach a goal with unswerving line. It is important that he actually has no such goal in mind but is rather performing strenuous activity in, as it were, a logical vacuum, with no motivation outside the activity itself. Now the narrator's I becomes explicit, and Wordsworth seems to emphasize the disjunction between this and the previous leisurely vision with the “But now, like one who rows . . .” of the 1850 text (1805 has “And now . . .”). What is really remarkable, and distinctively Wordsworthian, about this sudden shift is the way all the modulations of tone form an instantaneous and unified movement. One is not aware of a change of perspective, followed by a playful adoption of mock purpose (as boys will run an imaginary race with themselves downhill), increased muscular exertion, and stronger muscular imagery in the narration. Rather, the boy's raising his eyes to the craggly ridge is so presented as to constitute, rather than occasion, his adoption of mock purpose. And the grammatical frame of the whole action (“But now . . . I fixed my view”), especially after the calm anonymity of the preceding sentence, syntactically suggests the increased exertion of this part of the episode. The act of rowing is exertive, willful, disruptive. But it is here contained by a retrospective narrative form which subtly asserts the identity of intent and action in a movement which is not disruptive but unifying.

It has been necessary to spend so much time on one section of the Stolen Boat episode, in order to develop as fully as possible the complexities of Wordsworth's handling of his daemonic experience. But now we reverse our context, for if the episode is not animistic or primitive in the sense we have presented, neither is it a case of subconscious projection, later recognized as such by the narrator himself. Wordsworth is not saying, that is, that as a boy he once went rowing and thought he saw a mountain peak come alive with mysterious force but that now he recognizes that it was all an illusion fostered by the concurrence of his guilt at stealing the boat and his sudden access of physical energy in rowing. Such an interpretation simply substitutes for the primitive, Lawrentian Wordsworth of some interpretations another equally unsatisfying Wordsworth who, like a contemporary armchair Freudian, assumes that to examine and explain the workings of the dark daemonic
self is also somehow to explain away or at least render harmless its existence.

The lines of the passage we are considering which most lend themselves to such interpretation are, of course, those describing the growth of the black peak:

I struck and struck again,
And growing still in stature the grim shape
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me.

From what we have already seen of the operation of perspective in this vision, it is easy to read these lines as a powerful conflation of the rower's own muscular energy ("I struck and struck again") and the apparent "measured motion" of the growth of the daemonic peak. It is an image nearly Dantesque in its precision, for in the situation Wordsworth describes, the increase in stature of the peak would follow not only the linear movement of the boat away from the horizon but also the steady pulse of the boat's rise and fall in the water. But is this, in the final analysis, simply projection? Surprisingly, the effect of the lines is not to diminish but rather to make more oppressive the sense of a substantive, "other" presence in the very act of describing its correlation to the nervous system of its observer. It seems that the peculiar terror of the episode—and it is, we should note, a very terrifying experience—is neither in the animism of primitive nature-worship nor in the intellectualism of sense analysis. Rather, it is in the startling recognition that they are fundamentally the same thing, fundamentally both daemonic ways of experiencing the world.

The recognition, of course, is that of Wordsworth the narrator; Wordsworth the boy rower and subject of the episode does not take time to worry whether his fright is the result of a pursuing nemesis or of his own subjective guilt feelings but rather reacts like a boy, turning his boat around and heading for shore. This is not, however, to dismiss the boy's own experience as secondary to the episode. If the boy does not bother to separate the natural-daemonic and the rational-daemonic, he nevertheless inevitably feels both these drives in an instinctive way; he must, of course, for the
mature Wordsworth to be able to look back on the episode and shape it in the way he has. But more significantly, the boy’s very reaction to the frightening vision is an indication of his confused sense of the two complementary daemons who are pursuing him. He turns around (i.e., turns his back to the apparition) and “with trembling oars” makes for the shore. Either action alone would have stopped the terrifying effect: ceasing to look at the threatening peak or slowing down the precipitate motion of the boat. That the boy does both indicates his intuitive awareness of the twin sources, visual and muscular, of his experience.

For days afterward, we are told, the boy’s perception of nature was transformed into an unfamiliar, disturbing sense of “unknown modes of being” and “mighty forms, that do not live / Like living men.” Harold Bloom writes of this final section of the episode: “This is a fundamental paganism, so primitive that it cannot yield to any more sophisticated description without distortion. It is like the Titanism of Blake, with its Giant Forms like the Zoas wandering in a world substantially our own.”28 But surely this is too simple. It is true that, as the young Wordsworth’s earliest intimation of visionary power behind his normal perception of nature, the incident of the boat necessarily issues in a sense of the life force as world annihilating. It might reasonably be called a sensory magic, with the “unknown modes of being” operating rather like mana, destroying, in their constant transaction between the mind’s imaginings and the nature behind nature, the ordinary world of sight and hearing, of familiar forms. I do not think it a distortion of this moving passage, however, to note that its necessary assertion of the daemonic principle is carefully combined within what we have been describing as the fundamentally antidaemonic movement of the whole episode. The “huge and mighty forms” bear a recognizable relationship to the “Huge peak, black and huge” of the experience proper—but a recognizable relationship of abstraction.

Wordsworth implies a strong disjunction between the experience on the lake and its aftereffect: a disjunction which is itself another narrative device for containing and channeling the energies released. The Stolen Boat episode apparently had tremendous importance for the young Wordsworth: he seems to have regarded it poetically somewhat as we have been regarding it critically, as

a paradigm for handling certain crucial problems in his narration. An examination of Wordsworth's Goslar notebook—de Selincourt's MS "JJ" of *The Prelude* reveals two versions of the episode. In the first version, one can feel the poet wrestling with the daemonic implications of the experience as he repeats obsessively the striking lines:

And growing still (in) stature the huge (cliff)
With measured motion like a living thing
Strode after (me)
Rose up between me & the stars & still
With measured motion like a living thing
Strode after me.

(JJ, p. S verso)

In this first version, furthermore, the narration of the effect of the experience precedes the narration of the rower's return to shore: the pagan and animistic implications of the experience on the lake are unabsorbed into the episode and literally break through the narrated sequence of the incident. The return itself, both as a completion of the story and as a necessary breaking of the spell of the daemonic—the way out of the experience—is correspondingly truncated and uncertain:

with trembling hands I turn'd
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the cavern of the willow
And to my [ age] in

(JJ, p. T verso)

The second version follows the final order of the episode, narrating the return to the shore before the aftereffect of the experience, with one curious difference. In this version we are told how the boy returned to shore, then how the experience exercised its apocalyptic effect on his perception for days afterward, and then how, after returning to the shore, the boy made his way homeward through the meadows (JJ, p. R verso). Wordsworth is still having trouble, that is, containing the aftereffect within the narrative time of the episode. Shortly after these entries in the Goslar notebook,

however, the episode seems to have achieved nearly its final form; it is included, along with two Lucy poems, "Nutting," and the Skating episode from Prelude in a letter of William and Dorothy's to Coleridge,\textsuperscript{30} with only slight variations from the 1805 version.

There is one last adjustment in the episode, however, as it appears in the 1850 text: the smallest and yet most important of changes. The 1805 text has:

\begin{quote}
There, in her mooring-place, I left my Bark,
And, through the meadows homeward went, with grave
And serious thoughts; and after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Work'd with a dim and undetermin'd sense
Of unknown modes of being...
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
(1805, 415-420)
\end{flushright}

In 1850, the only variation from this text is that the second "and" of the third line is changed to "but." This change provides the ultimate narrative control over the daemonic energy of the Stolen Boat episode, precisely because, in replacing the alogical and paratactic "and," it strengthens the disjunction between experience and aftereffect. Thereby Wordsworth implies more strongly a present narrator who absorbs the timeless and world-destroying "blank desertion" into a retrospective process. "But," as used here, is far from simply the logical equivalent of "and" and farther still from its common implication of strong parataxis. Since it points to a present-tense, fully humanized narrator who can see the disjunction it implies, it is the strongest of connectives: it establishes the unity and maturity of the narrator himself not in the grammar of causality but precisely in the grammar of confession.

There is, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, no mnemonic formula for the profound narrative unity of The Prelude. But, on the basis of the Stolen Boat episode, we may locate at least two crucial elements of remembered and narrated experience for Wordsworth's fiction of continuity. They are the memory of obsessive vision and the integrating, reminiscent speech which disciplines that memory, that vision.