The Confessional Imagination

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

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Mit deinen Augen, welche müde kaum 
von der verbrauchten Schwelle sich befrein, 
hebst du ganz langsam einen schwarzen Baum, 
und stellst ihn vor den Himmel: schlank, allein. 
Und hast die Welt gemacht. 

Rilke, “Eingang”

And if thy eye is an occasion of sin to thee, pluck it out! It is 
better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, 
than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire. 

Mark 9:47

The memory of vision, disciplined by narrative speech, is a formula 
which conceals a fascinating history, both in Wordsworth’s own 
development and in the long tradition of self-analysis and self-
definition which is so crucial for understanding Wordsworth. The 
present chapter will concentrate on the first part of the phrase:
the shape of remembered experience, the scenes of the past, what was seen as opposed to what is said. But of course we will be dealing with the memory of vision precisely through the mediating language of the poet's present speech—the speech of *The Prelude*—so that the concerns of this and the following chapter will, quite naturally, tend to merge as the discussion proceeds.

We have already seen, from a number of passages, that the daemonic in Wordsworth's poetry tends almost exclusively to take the form of the visual rather than the other senses. And, correspondingly, we have been examining for some time now the mediating, unitary function of speech in *The Prelude*: how the visual is overcome by the aural, by what radical Protestants before Wordsworth had referred to as the life-giving, invisible manifestation of the Word. We shall examine, shortly, the curious development of this visual-aural distinction in the history of radical Protestant thought, for that development throws particularly clear light upon Wordsworth's own way of defining "the visual" in *The Prelude*.

But before this general survey of the problem, I wish once again to examine the peculiar development of Wordsworth's own imagination. For, from *The Borderers* onward, we can observe the poet defining and reworking his ideas about the nature and meaning of the sense of sight until, about the time of *The Prelude*, he comes upon the critical distinction between "sight" and "vision," a distinction about which we shall have much to say.

If sight for Wordsworth is the daemonic sense par excellence, it is so because of the power that beautiful or gigantic or terrifying sights have to rivet our attention, taking us out of ourselves in that transport which so fascinated the eighteenth-century theorists of the sublime. For Wordsworth, however, such experience comes to represent a paralysis of the imagination, a freezing of natural mental growth which, as we saw in the Stolen Boat episode, is intimately connected with the idea of "fixing" the sight on a particular object. The next stage of this argument, quite natural from Wordsworth's special point of view, is to assert that the fixation of the eye, obsession with the visual scene, is in fact a form of blindness, both because overreliance upon any sense transforms that sense into a limitation of the spirit, and because such overreliance blocks the apparition of the inner vision, the "auxiliar light" so central to the poetry of the great decade. We shall now
examine three Wordsworthian pictures of “blind” characters, in order to graph the development of his complicated and original attitude toward the faculty of sight.

Baron Herbert in The Borderers is blind. Abandoned to his trial by ordeal in the wilderness, he wanders through a storm toward what he thinks is the tolling of a chapel bell to signal a refuge for wanderers:

That Chapel-bell in mercy seemed to guide me,
But now it mocks my steps; its fitful stroke
Can scarcely be the work of human hands.
Hear me, ye Men upon the cliffs, if such
There be who pray nightly before the Altar.
Oh that I had but strength to reach that place!
My Child—my Child—dark—dark—I faint—this wind—
These stifling blasts—God help Me!

(Act 4, ll. 1651–58)

Ironically, we discover that the chapel is deserted and that it is only the wind, in a cruel parody of the aeolian-harp theme, which lures the old man to his exhaustion and death. This blindness is fully “natural,” then. Its pathetic overtones for the tragedy do not arise from the quality of blindness itself but rather from the barbaric use which Herbert’s sighted persecutors make of it.

Counterpointing Herbert’s blindness, though, is a series of implications about the relationship of the visible to the true, as befits a tragedy whose jealousy motif derives so strongly from Othello. As Oswald plots the corruption of Marmaduke, he reflects:

I have left him
To solitary meditation;—now
For a few swelling phrases, and a flash
Of truth, enough to dazzle and to blind,
And he is mine for ever. . . .

(Act 2, ll. 561–65)

The flash of truth is provided by a Female Beggar whom Oswald hires to impersonate a ruined mother betrayed by Herbert. It is a figure reminiscent of the Mad Mother or the Margaret of later poems but, like every typical “Wordsworthian” element in The
Borderers, diabolically inverted. Later, as Marmaduke describes the fabricated sins of Herbert to his band, one of them is led to exclaim with an irony the rest of the play bears out:

The whole visible world
Contains not such a Monster!

(Act 2, lI. 1056-7)

I have already indicated that The Borderers is an important document in the history of Wordsworth's general quarrel with the daemonic. It is equally important in the crucial area of his handling of the sense and the imagery of sight, because it organizes itself around the pathetic image of the sightless man preyed upon by daemonic characters. Such characters, ironically, so trust visual evidences and the whole world of the visual that they become possessed (either as manipulators or gulls) by its prejudices and thus destroy any truly human behavior or relationship. Lacy is right that the visible world cannot contain such a monster as the Herbert fabricated by Oswald; but it is precisely the visible world which allows Oswald to fabricate him, and the visible world which becomes for the unhappy Marmaduke "poisoned at the heart," incapable of sustaining evidences of its own benevolence or transcendence.

The Borderers, of course, represents a dead-end version of experience for Wordsworth, a bitter revision of his necessitarianism which holds out the possibility of only a marginal salvage. But its central dramatic element, the figure of the blind man in the wilderness, is one which continues to hold a fascination for the poet and develops into one of his most suggestive images of man in The Prelude.

The next time he appears is in the fascinating, disturbing shape of The Old Cumberland Beggar. Here the wilderness solitary is stripped of his royal rank, of his power of articulate speech, and most subly, of his blindness itself:

He travels on, a solitary Man;
His age has no companion. On the ground
His eyes are turned, and, as he moves along,
They move along the ground; and, evermore,
Instead of common and habitual sight
Of fields with rural works, of hill and dale,
And the blue sky, one little span of earth
Is all his prospect.

As has often been remarked, this is a minimal humanity, so totally alien to our normal assumptions as to appear almost, but not quite, fantastic. Unlike Herbert, the Beggar need not be physically blind, since he is so far down the scale of human intelligence as not to desire sight in any conventional manner. What in *The Borderers* had been an external deformation of the senses, and served to reveal the intrinsic viciousness of one kind of character, becomes here something quite different. It is a way of examining the limits of the human, whose effect is to enrich the visual and spiritual perception of the more normally sighted people in the neighborhood:

... all behold in him
A silent monitor, which on their minds
Must needs impress a transitory thought
Of self-congratulation, to the heart
Of each recalling his peculiar boons,
His charters and exemptions; and perchance,
Though he to no one give the fortitude
And circumspection needful to preserve
His present blessings, and to husband up
The respite of the season, he, at least,
And 'tis no vulgar service, makes them felt.

We have not read the poem correctly if we are not shocked by these sentiments. Our own age is in fundamental agreement, at least, with Blake that

Pity would be no more,
If we did not make somebody Poor;
And Mercy no more could be,
If all were as happy as we.

and such a frankly egocentric celebration of feelings of benevolence is distasteful. But thinking of *The Borderers*, we can see that the
old beggar represents a considerable advance in Wordsworth's ethics of vision. He is moving toward his great theme of continuity, toward a poetry in which the visible world is robbed of its tyrannous and divisive power and is interfused with a unitary perception:

And let him, where and when he will, sit down
Beneath the trees, or on a grassy bank
Of highway side, and with the little birds
Share his chance-gathered meal; and, finally,
As in the eye of Nature he has lived,
So in the eye of Nature let him die!

The "eye of Nature" here is a new formulation for Wordsworth and one which he might have developed into a very different mature vision than the one we have in The Prelude. It is an approach to an absolutely minimal poetry, testing a lower limit for the transforming power of imagination and memory. The beggar is not transformed in himself or in the sensibility of the observer; nor is the operation of the natural world redeemed in any perceptible way, since the eye of nature continues to manifest itself in the winds that will blow against the old man and the rains that will beat against him. We need only compare this uncompromising conclusion to the end of Resolution and Independence, where the poet feels compelled to state a personal, memorial profit from the experience, to understand the radical change in Wordsworth's vision of man's fate around the time of Lyrical Ballads.

What is important in The Old Cumberland Beggar, however, what does continue into the later poetry and especially The Prelude, is the peculiar articulation of the act of sight which Wordsworth gives us. Seeing is a block to vision in this poem in a much more radical way than in The Borderers. For here the life of sight, of everyday trust in the visual, is not simply deceptive but what a psychologist would call overdetermined. The sight of the beggar, a customary phenomenon in the villages, tends to be emptied of its high significance exactly because it is so clearly and fully seen by all the inhabitants—including the poet. Roughly the first half of the poem is a series of images of the old man of startling clarity, made the sharper for their intense matter-of-factness. The progress of the poem is really an attempt by the observer to get beyond this
fullness of visualization, not to a generalization about the human condition, but to a vision, a way of seeing, which can bear such generalization. The poles of the poem are the statement that the beggar “travels on, a solitary Man” (44) and the statement that “we have all of us one human heart” (153). Between these poles the speaker struggles to transvalue the world of the visual without ever transcending it or denying its tyrannical primacy.

A third version of blind solitude, this one from The Prelude, will show what I take to be Wordsworth’s fully mature handling of the visual sense. Toward the end of book 7 Wordsworth narrates one of his most striking experiences in London:

As the black storm upon the mountain top
Sets off the sunbeam in the valley, so
That huge fermenting mass of human-kind
Serves as a solemn back-ground, or relief,
To single forms and objects, whence they draw,
For feeling and contemplative regard,
More than inherent liveliness and power.
How oft, amid those overflowing streets,
Have I gone forward with the crowd, and said
Unto myself, “The face of every one
That passes by me is a mystery!”
Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed
By thoughts of what and whither, when and how,
Until the shapes before my eyes became
A second-sight procession, such as glides
Over still mountains, or appears in dreams;
And once, far-travelled in such mood, beyond
The reach of common indication, lost
Amid the moving pageant, I was smitten
Abruptly, with the view (a sight not rare)
Of a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,
Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest
Wearing a written paper, to explain
His story, whence he came, and who he was.
Caught by the spectacle my mind turned round
As with the might of waters; an apt type
This label seemed of the utmost we can know,
Both of ourselves and of the universe;
And, on the shape of that unmoving man,
His steadfast face and sightless eyes, I gazed,
As if admonished from another world.

(619–649)

This beggar, like the Old Cumberland Beggar, is “a sight not rare” in the city, a common inhabitant of the visible world; but his everyday nature is set off here by the crowd of sights among which he moves—or rather, does not move—like a single ray of light against a black cloud. Sight, in fact, through the medium of memory, is being used to baffle sight: the beggar, who would normally be invisible through his very obviousness, is rendered surrealistically clear by the swarm of life which surrounds him—and more importantly, by the alien sensibility of the rural narrator, for whom the whole vision is a moment of conversion. It is a union of the matter-of-fact and the wonderful in a single vision and represents for Wordsworth a way of approaching the visual which can include both antitheses of the paradox of seeing. “I was smitten / Abruptly, with the view (a sight not rare),” he says, and the distinction between view (or vision) and sight is operative at the heart of the passage (a distinction not explicitly present in the parallel lines from the 1805 version and which Wordsworth obviously felt compelled to point up). It is the same dialectic we have already seen operating in the Stolen Boat episode, with the narrator simultaneously aware of the naturalistic workings of his perception and of the usurping, daemonic power of that perception. Here, though, the perception is more complicated: it is not simply of motion—sight and muscular effort combined—but of perception itself—sight as motion and effort.

The lines leading up to the apparition of the beggar, interestingly, remind one of the technique known to film viewers as a pan: a rapid camera survey of a broad scene—literally, a panorama—coming to rest in a single shot. The parallel, indeed, is more than coincidence, for the movie—a rapid series of still photos not qualitatively different from the magic lantern of the late nineteenth century—is a mechanical analogue of Wordsworth’s narrative problem: how to bring continuity and change out of a universe which at every instant tends to congeal into the frozen, fixed, and daemonic. A succession of fixed images, speeded up enough, becomes truly “a second-sight procession, such as . . . appears in dreams,” but only
by continually triumphing over its own inertia, its own tendency to settle into the frozen image.

Something very like this trompe-l’oeil—an appropriate name for Wordsworth’s attitude toward the eye—occurs in the movement of the passage as a whole. For the panorama of city sights comes to rest, startlingly and fixedly, on the image of the blind beggar. And this image becomes even more fixated, more obsessively visible, in the written paper on his chest: man with label takes on the reductive, minimal identity of man as label. But at this last fixation, the moment of maximum inertia in the passage, the narrator shifts to the aural image of the “might of waters”—always an intimation of life and grace in Wordsworth. And the beggar himself begins to be transformed, through the narrator’s consciousness, into a force beyond the phenomenal, an energy which is not daemonic because it manifests itself as the obliteration of daemonic imagery.

It is an unpleasant but undeniable fact of human nature that the blind man among the sighted is more visible because of his privation. It is necessary for the sense of the passage that we understand the beggar as being rendered more fixed but not more eternal for his blindness. Geoffrey Hartman is right in seeing the passage as an event “that enters through, yet overpowers, the eye.”1 The written paper, which is almost a magic talisman for the beggar, actually does represent “the utmost we can know, / Both of ourselves and of the universe.” The mystery within the beggar, the intimation of a power beyond sight, eternal like the apocalyptic might of waters, is the gift not of his own condition but of the radical change that has taken place within the vision of the observer. The beggar himself is “fixed,” a word we have seen Wordsworth use before to suggest the sense of the visual as obsessive, imprisoning: he is “propped against a wall,” unmoving only because of the precarious imbalance of his sightless condition. It is Wordsworth the observer who translates this fixedness into the very different kind of stillness of the last lines, a translation which is like grace in that it follows the exhaustion of the powers of the visual world. Wordsworth changed the final description of the beggar’s face from “fixed” in 1805 to “steadfast” in the 1850 text; and we must not miss the irony of this word, in its root meaning, contrasted to

the earlier description of the beggar’s precarious “stead,” leaning against a wall.

What I am suggesting is that the blind beggar passage, as a kind of terminal point in Wordsworth’s treatment of blindness—and metonymically, of the sense of sight—represents both a radical advance over the formulation in his earlier poetry and also the peculiar, confessional strength of *The Prelude* as Wordsworth’s necessary form for his mature vision. For it is the confessional voice of the observer which effects the final liberation of the image from sight into vision. That liberation is the direct result of a narrative poise (lacking, in any full sense, in *The Old Cumberland Beggar*) which makes it possible for the observer to look back from the label on the man’s chest to the whole “shape of that unmoving man.” The vision, finally, is “mediated” precisely by the mediatory, confessional voice itself. Or, as Wordsworth himself has it in the lines immediately following the passage:


Though reared upon the base of outward things,
Structures like these the excited spirit mainly
Builds for herself. . . .  

(650–652)

The distinction between the “structures” of the mind and the supporting “base” of outward things expands the difference between the old beggar as “propped” or “prop” and the mind’s earned vision of a “steadfast” shape and intimation of eternity.

Wordsworth’s original, epoch-making attitude toward the sense of sight has, of course, been discussed frequently by his commentators. Probably the most important discussion, Basil Willey’s “Wordsworth and the Locke Tradition” in *The Seventeenth Century Background*, presents the poet’s handling of the visual as an inheritance from and reaction against the epistemology of Locke and his school. The Lockean doctrine regards “primary qualities” of objects—length, weight, etc.—as the really real and “secondary qualities”—color, texture—as illusory. Such a doctrine, according to Willey, left the natural world devoid of its former sensual vitality, thus preparing the ground for Wordsworth’s poetry as a way of regaining a sense of that vitality without restoring an unquestioning trust in the images of the eye.
In fact, however, the radical mistrust of the eye—or at least of the blandishments of the visible world—is at least as old as the saying of Christ I have used as an epigraph to this chapter. And the specifically Protestant, confessional version of that mistrust lies not only behind the mature Wordsworth's poetry but in some ways even behind the "Locke tradition" identified by Willey (Berkeley, for one, seems to have been quite aware of the connection).

St. Augustine, in the *Confessions* (10, 54), names the thirst for earthly knowledge at the expense of the divine "the lust of the eyes," "sight being the sense chiefly used for attaining knowledge." In Augustine's own experience, furthermore, this lust after knowledge is indissolubly linked to his early love of the daemonic and hypervisual astral imagery of the Manichaeans:

Yet they still set before me in those dishes, glittering fantasies, than which better were it to love this very sun (which is real to our sight at least), than those fantasies which by our eyes deceive our mind....

(3. 10)

Augustine's conversion to the true God, it will be remembered, is phrased in terms of his learning to listen to the invisible voice of the spirit within him, turning away from the soul-freezing images of his early deceivers.

For the confessant Augustine, then, the visual is defined as an intellectual error, leading man to fixation on the things of this world rather than upon the God within him. This is nowhere more apparent than in the famous description of the corruption of Alypius at the Circus. Alypius, Augustine's friend (and surely his surrogate here as elsewhere in the *Confessions*) enters the Circus determined not to watch the carnage and closes his eyes piously. But aroused to curiosity by the shouts of the crowd, he begins to look—and is lost:

For so soon as he saw that blood, he therewith drunk down savageness; nor turned away, but fixed his eye, drinking in frenzy, unawares, and was delighted with that guilty fight, and intoxicated with the bloody pastime.

(6. 13)
Here again the motif of fixing the eye is both central and disastrous. In fact, Alypius, who is led to fix his eye because of what he has previously heard, represents an exact daemonic inversion of the rhythm of salvation (sight overcome by pure sound) we have seen at work in both Augustine’s conversion and the Blind Beggar passage in The Prelude.

What Augustine and Wordsworth—and the Lockean tradition—have in common here is not simply a sense that appearances may deceive or even the more serious sense that they may corrupt. Referring to the “sense of the human” discussed in the last chapter, we can see that these thinkers all use the sense of sight as a type, and a crucial type, of intellectual and spiritual rigidity which undermines the fluid, dynamic life of the mature soul. For Augustine, that maturity is defined primarily as the consciousness of the living God; for Locke, it is the very different consciousness of one’s own perceptive processes; and for Wordsworth, it is the complex sense of poetry and life which he seeks to describe in his poem. But for all three, it involves the deep awareness that a man, to achieve vision, must sometimes turn away his eyes from what he thinks is this world. Modern, phenomenological descriptions of the tyranny of object-consciousness—Heidegger’s Existenz or Sartre’s être en soi—are in this way not so much discoveries as rediscoveries of an ancient and radical wisdom about human life as becoming-and-being in one.

The continuity of this wisdom is nowhere stronger than in the writings of the Protestant confessants, whose lack of epistemological sophistication is more than compensated for by their sheer narrative power. Two passages from the English confessants particularly enrich not only the historical background but the reading of the “visual-daemonic” sense we have seen in Wordsworth’s poetry.

We have already marked, in George Fox’s journal, the conscious deflection of visual revelation in the ascent of Pendle Hill. But perhaps the most powerful example of the tyranny of the eye in Fox’s narrative is his experience at Lichfield in 1651. It is a famous passage, cited by William James at the opening of The Varieties of Religious Experience. For our purposes, the most important part of it is its beginning, where Fox feels himself literally attacked by the church spires of Lichfield—what Fox always called and abomi-
nated as “steeple-houses,” visual incarnations of the presumption and “towering” pride of the English Church:

As I was walking with several Friends, I lifted up my head and saw three steeple-house spires, and they struck at my life. I asked them what place that was. They said, “Lichfield.” Immediately the Word of the Lord came to me that I must go hither. . . . As soon as I was got within the city, the Word of the Lord came to me again, saying, “Cry, ‘Woe to the bloody city of Lichfield!’” So I went up and down the streets, crying with a loud voice, “Woe to the bloody city of Lichfield!” . . . As I went thus crying through the streets, there seemed to me to be a channel of blood running down the streets, and the market-place appeared like a pool of blood.  

We cannot help but remark, as with an earlier passage from Fox, the similarity between the shape of this experience and the shape of the Blind Beggar passage. The form of the “steeple house,” surely an imposing visual image, is the immediate cause of the whole action—and leads directly to a compensatory revelation to the aural sense. The Word of God serves here the same apocalyptic and transforming function as the sound of the “might of waters” for Wordsworth. This oral-aural formula, furthermore, leads to Fox’s second “sight” of Lichfield as a bloody trough of martyrs: a vision sub specie aeternitatis after the manner of Wordsworth’s transforming the blind beggar from “fixed” to “steadfast” avatar of another more permanent world.

John Bunyan, in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, gives another powerful example of the malign ambience of the sense of sight. At the first stage of his conversion to Christ, the stage usually described as the “conviction of guilt,” he tells us how he had delighted in ringing the bells at his local church:

But my conscience beginning to be tender, I thought such practice was but vain, and therefore forced myself to leave it, yet my mind hankered; wherefore I should go to the steeple house, and look on it, though I durst not ring. But I thought this did not become religion neither, yet I forced myself, and would look on still; but quickly after, I began to think, How, if one of the bells should

fall? Then I chose to stand under a main beam, that lay overthwart the steeple, from side to side, thinking there I might stand sure, but then I should think again, should the bell fall with a swing, it might first hit the wall, and then rebounding upon me, might kill me for all this beam. This made me stand in the steeple door; and now, thought I, I am safe enough; for, if a bell should then fall, I can slip out behind these thick walls, and so be preserved notwithstanding.

34. So, after this, I would yet go to see them ring, but would not go farther than the steeple door; but then it came into my head, How, if the steeple itself should fall? And this thought, it may fall for aught I know, when I stood and looked on, did continually so shake my mind, that I durst not stand at the steeple door any longer, but was forced to flee, for fear the steeple should fall upon my head.3

This remarkable passage may, of course, be viewed simply as a version of the psychopathology of religious belief. For the experience Bunyan is describing is one we have all had: the illusion, looking up at a tall object from very close to it, that the object is actually beginning to fall toward us. And we can easily see how this common optical trick is transvalued by Bunyan's latent guilt feelings at being near the now "sinful" steeple bells. But to do this is, I think, to approach the text from exactly the wrong end of an argument. For while this certainly is projection in the strict psychoanalytic sense of that word, it is also projection within confession, within explicit and firm narrative control over the experience. The point is, in fact, that Bunyan employs such an exclusively visual set of sensations as the basis of the episode. Nowhere does he describe himself as pursued by the sound of the steeple bells—an alternative certainly as natural to simple projection—but only by the obsessive, accusing vision of them.

Between Augustine and the seventeenth century confessants, however, another radically innovative theologian complicates even farther the daemonism of the "lust of the eyes." Martin Luther has been identified by many critics as crucial to the growth of the modern self: J. H. van den Berg is particularly revealing as he

traces Luther's discovery of private revelation to his terror at the sight of sacramental Catholicism:

Luther said: The robes, candles, and relics are matter, nothing else; anything else that is said about it is a human creation, vanity. Luther did not know the word, projection. . . . Did Luther transfer things to a hastily constructed area called the "inner self," because his contemporaries were escaping from an all-embracing totality and were threatening to come adrift? One remembers how much against a rupture he was. "Do not leave each other," was what, after all, his aversion towards candles and robes meant. "Let the objects become poor—so long as we can stay together."4

For Luther, that is, the visual-daemonic is no longer simply the seductive world of matter or even the idolatry of false religions: it has penetrated within the sanctuary of the true church itself, as an overreliance upon the visible sacraments and allegories of liturgy. The "inner self" which Luther discovers for European culture, then, while Augustinian in parentage, quests for an even subtler, even more difficult discrimination between its proper humanity and the daemonic temptations which impede its progress. Sacrament, ceremony, even the most apparently certain signs of grace—all of these may now deceive, may lead the believer into unwilling but poisonous idolatry.

There is another name, of course, for the daemonism discovered and abominated by Luther. It is, simply, the allegorical temperament. And the radical Protestants of the eighteenth century are as opposed to allegory as they are to sacramentalism or to conventional evidences. Almost invariably, in Quaker and Methodist confessions, allegorical passages are also passages describing lapses into a sacramental mentality, an overreliance on the power of human will, or simply a state of divided consciousness. Here is Stephen Crisp, for example, describing his brief relapse into reliance on human will:

So I took up that Ordinance . . . of Water Baptism, expecting then to have found more Power than before. And my will wrought strongly to Bridle and keep down that Airy part and sinful nature. . . . But these Reasons held but for a Season, before the Temptation

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grew too strong for my Will, and the Devil entered [sic] his own Ground, and prevailed upon me. . . .

Or Frances Paxton, describing how at the urgings of her family before her conversion, she

passively gave way to the persuasions of my intimates, to try if the strictest life in the way of the Church of England would not excuse me in the sight of my Maker and meet with his approbation. O the forbearance of a merciful Father to me in that time of probation, that He did not consume me by the breath of His displeasure! . . . Sacrifice and meat offerings thou wouldest not accept. . . .

These confessants avoid the sacramental, the allegorical, and the visual—even in a Christian form—as fervidly as they would outright sin or the Devil himself. Not to do so would be to betray not only their own souls but the form in which they write. For the confession is the confessant's evidence of election; and to rely upon another kind of proof would be to demonstrate how little the speaker actually has acquired the Inner Light, which, for both Fox and John Wesley, must ratify itself or not be ratified at all. This is the point of Wesley's famous dialogue with the Moravian Peter Böhler, in which Böhler uttered the counsel which was finally to save Wesley: "Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith." One remembers Augustine's decision, at the opening of the Confessions, that to call upon, know, and praise God is a single verbal act. If reliance upon visible evidences implies a daemonic fixation of the will, the confessant's speech overcomes such fixation by its insistence on continuity: by insisting that to choose grace is already to be in the state of grace (even if unconsciously), and to be in the state of grace is necessarily to confess that state.

We have already seen many of the same attitudes at work in

The Prelude. But an especially illuminating working-out of the problem is "The Solitary Reaper," a lyric composed in November 1805, perhaps six months after the completion of Prelude 11 and Wordsworth's articulation of his central myth of recovery and continuity, the "spots of time."

"The Solitary Reaper" has always had a special fascination for readers of Wordsworth. Geoffrey Hartman, for example, builds much of the argument of his book *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1797–1814* upon the insights of his particularly fine reading of the lyric. But in terms of the present study, that reading deserves some qualification. Hartman writes of Wordsworth's minute examination of his own emotional responses:

... Its only real justification ... was that it carried the Puritan quest for evidences of election into the most ordinary emotional contexts. Wordsworth did not himself talk of election or salvation but ... of renovation (regeneration), and he did not seem to be directly aware of his Puritan heritage, although the *Poems* of 1807 ... shows a heightened intimacy with seventeenth-century traditions.8

The use of the word "regeneration" inevitably brings to mind the poetry of Henry Vaughan, who is frequently cited as a seventeenth-century anticipation of Wordsworth. But Vaughan's central poem, "Regeneration," is valuable here precisely as an indication of the gulf between the later poet and the quest for evidences. In Vaughan's poem, in the heart of a natural chapel on a mountaintop, the soul-sick speaker hears the Pentecostal wind of God:

I turn'd me round, and to each shade
    Dispatch'd an Eye,
To see, if any leafe had made
    Least motion, or Reply,
But while I listning sought
    My mind to ease
By knowing, where 'twas, or where not,
    It whisper'd; *Where I please*.

Lord, then said I, *On me one breath*,
*And let me dye before my death!*

(73–82)

But compare the end of Vaughan’s poem with the last stanza of “The Solitary Reaper”:

Whate’er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o’er her sickle bending;—
I listened, motionless and still;
And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

(25–32)

Vaughan, in a way, is looking for precisely the correspondent breeze in nature which will constitute an evidence of election; the wind’s “*Where I please*” is a nearly literal translation of God’s “I am that I am” or “I will be wherever I choose to be”—*eyeh asher eyeh*—in *Exodus*. But Vaughan does not find the breeze and therefore prays for a death to the natural world, which will save the soul from the second death in a fallen universe. For the orthodox Protestant, the search for evidences of election is itself penitential, an admission of banishment into an unfamiliar world where the road signs are necessary but painful reminders of the distance from home; “Regeneration” is a grimly and touchingly ironic title, since it is just what the speaker does not and cannot attain in a pastoral context. The wind, simply, is spiritually not at home in the heavily visual and allegorical world in which Vaughan finds it.

Wordsworth, on the other hand, is recording, not a quest for evidences, but a real renovation of a peculiar sort. Vaughan and Wordsworth both show the radical Protestant predilection for aural experience, but Wordsworth is prepared to trust it to a much greater degree. For him, the sound is an image neither of phenomenal experience nor of apocalyptic visitation; in traditional terms, indeed, although it behaves deceptively like the conceit of a metaphysical poem, it is hardly an image at all. It is a unit of continuity, for if “the Maiden sang” in the past “As if her song
could have no ending,” one of the functions of the poem is to demonstrate the still unending quality of it as present music. The shifting of verb tenses in the poem has been often enough remarked; but note that, in the movement from present in the first three stanzas to past in the final stanza, the last two lines define what is really another—and the most important—time frame. This is the characteristic confessional tense. Wordsworth says he “bore” the music in his heart long after he ceased to hear it. But of course he is still bearing it in his heart, since his poem itself is not merely inspired by but is a real reincarnation in time of the song whose anonymity is so strongly suggestive. The reason he can put this climactic and exquisitely understated formula in a past tense is that the whole song has by this time become both the maiden’s and his own, demonstrating not only the ability of the past to determine the present (the natural order of experience) but the ability of the present to penetrate and make meaningful the past (the classical strategy of confession). The Wordsworth who says “bore” is really neither the Wordsworth who long ago heard the lass singing, nor yet the Wordsworth who has just completed “The Solitary Reaper,” but a Wordsworth who, from the vantage point of his regeneration in and through history, can observe both the other time experiences as interpenetrating and continuous.

Wordsworth, working through a purely aural experience (since he cannot understand the Maiden’s language), has reduced the experience to the minimal condition of recorded, printed fact and thereby transcended fact for an experience on a higher level, that of imaginative salvation. And the terms of that salvation are the terms of his ability to control memorial time, to remake the experiential world.

In this connection, our own most important fact about “The Solitary Reaper” is the well-known one that Wordsworth did not really have the experience but cribbed it from Wilkinson’s “Tour of Scotland”: “The last line,” Wordsworth says in his note to the 1807 edition, “being taken verbatim.” And it is precisely the last line of the poem, as I have just discussed it, in which the confessional, unifying force of the lyric chiefly resides. Wordsworth’s audacity and genius allow him to take a line from a minor prose piece and transform it into the very fabric of his own vision. Such daring is made possible by a sense of writing we have seen operating also in
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the Simplon Pass episode. For with both experiences, Wordsworth is able at a point in the narration (the "Imagination" passage, the last line of "The Solitary Reaper") to translate memory into the present experience of writing, of trying to write, or of quoting another's writing. What we have said about the mediating power of confessional speech, then, is here operating at its most basic level: first denuding remembered experience of its separate daemonic energy by reducing it to the lowest common denominator of written matter and then informing that lifeless, written matter with the new, unitary power of the narrator's present health and wholeness.

This technique—which is also foreshadowed in the use of the "written paper" in the Blind Beggar episode—depends, furthermore, upon yet another definition of the visual. It is a sense of the visual, which, like the antisacramental, seems to achieve its first full articulation in the work of Luther and which, as we shall see, is intimately connected with the progress of The Prelude. From the idea of the "tyranny of the eye," then, we now move to examine its most important corollary, "the tyranny of the book."

Luther's revolutionary insistence upon private interpretation of Scripture is famous. The complexity of this idea and its relation to Luther's experience of "The Book" is nowhere more fully documented than in his polemic against Erasmus, The Bondage of the Will. It is a passionately antischolastic book, written in Luther's most exuberant style. But it becomes apparent early in the work that Luther and Erasmus have, really, no chance of beginning to understand each other.

In terms recently popularized by communications theorists, The Bondage of the Will represents a baffled confrontation between a man of "manuscript culture" (Erasmus) and a man of "print culture" (Luther). Erasmus had asserted in The Freedom of the Will that Luther's theology failed to take account of the frequent difficulty and ambiguity of Scripture. Luther's reply goes to the heart of the whole problem:
Here is my distinction (for I am going to do a little lecturing—or chop a little logic, should I say?): God and His Scripture are two things, just as the Creator and His creation are two things. Now, nobody questions that there is a great deal hid in God of which we know nothing. . . . But the notion that in Scripture some things are recondite and all is not plain was spread by the godless Sophists (whom you now echo, Erasmus)—who have never yet cited a single item to prove their crazy view. . . . I certainly grant that many passages in the Scriptures are obscure and hard to elucidate, but that is due, not to the exalted nature of their subject, but to our own linguistic and grammatical ignorance; and it does not in any way prevent our knowing all the contents of Scripture. For what solemn truth can the Scriptures still be concealing, now that the seals are broken, the stone rolled away from the door of the tomb, and that greatest of all mysteries brought to light . . . that Christ suffered for us, and will reign for ever?

I quote this passage at some length, since it foreshadows a sensibility that will be seen to have enormous importance for Wordsworth's poetry. Luther here is actually redefining "Scripture" as a working term and giving a new answer to that basic question of all critical activity, theological or literary: "Where is the book?" This is the same fundamental question raised by René Wellek's influential essay "The Mode of Existence of a Literary Work of Art": "What is the 'real' poem; where should we look for it; how does it exist?" And as Wellek's essay makes abundantly clear, the answer we give to such a question determines the characteristic shape of our insight into the text.

Now in a culture oriented around the book as manuscript, which was a highly aural version of text (grammatica arising originally from the pedagogical device of learning by taking down dictation), the answer to this question tends to involve a strong sense of the text as the Word—of the book as literally speaking to the reader. And this is the sense in which Erasmus criticizes Luther. But Luther himself, a denizen of the Gutenberg galaxy, makes a distinction between text and Scripture, between grammatica and meaning,

which is like, he says, the distinction between Creator and Creation—and which generates, finally, a split between visual and aural. The visual text is not the Word—not, finally, the “Scripture” upon which Lutheran Christianity relies so strongly.

To the question, “Where is the book [or The Book]?” a Lutheran critic’s reply would be something like this: “Certainly not in the text in any important sense. For while the Book, the efficient Word of God, is crystal clear to any reader with a well-formed heart, nevertheless the text may still present ‘grammatical’—i.e., visual—difficulties of interpretation; these, however, have nothing to do with the essential meaning of the Book, being simply surface encumbrances to the transmission of its pure spirit. So though Book and text are ‘substantially’ one, by the very paradox of the word substance the Book cannot be the text.”

What Luther discovers for exegesis and Wordsworth discovers for poetry is the simple and astounding fact, in the post-Gutenberg era, of the omnipresence of print. If there is a primary from which the visual-daemonic takes for the last four book-ridden centuries, it is surely the fixity and rigidity of the printed word. And for both Luther and Wordsworth, that rigidity must at all costs be liberated into the fluid vitality, spoken and heard, of words and images as aural.

Wordsworth’s sense of his past has been so universally spoken of by critics as a memory of Nature that even to invoke the cliché seems a cliché itself. But the memory of Nature, at least as described and epitomized in The Prelude, is equally a memory of literary ideas of Nature, a highly self-conscious narrative of stylistic development—a biographia literaria at least as subtle as Coleridge’s.

Before proceeding to a general discussion of the “history of the eye” in The Prelude, then, I wish to examine those passages in which Wordsworth most explicitly deals with the existence of his own manuscript and the act of writing itself as varieties of the visual-daemonic to be confronted and overcome. They form a crucial backdrop to the larger history of the poet as man in The Prelude. And the first of them, the first passage to deal with “writing the book” as a form of—and possible liberation from—the daemonic, is also the first passage in the poem.11

11. See appendix 2.
We have already written of the opening of book 1 of *The Prelude*—the "preamble"—in connection with the mediatory function of the audience in confession. It is an equally important example of the radical sense of the book as visual and therefore to be overcome. The recovery from the preamble, lines 46–58, continually proves one of the most inexhaustible passages in the whole of *The Prelude*:

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: to the open fields I told
A prophecy; poetic numbers came
Spontaneously to clothe in priestly robe
A renovated spirit singled out,
Such hope was mine, for holy services.
My own voice cheered me, and, far more, the mind's
Internal echo of the imperfect sound;
To both I listened, drawing from them both
A cheerful confidence in things to come.

In the light of what has been discussed in the last two chapters, we can see so many confessional strains operating here that it is difficult to begin sorting them out. For the present, working exclusively with the idea of the visible, we can note that the violent reversal of the first lines—from present rapture into memorial verse and from lyric outpouring to specific second person address—is poetically identical with a shift from the quasi-sublime vista of the agitated landscape to the astringent visibility of the printed lines. "Are here / Recorded" is one of those retroactive shifts of perspective which is so characteristic of Wordsworth's lyricism. It asks us, through Coleridge, effectively to translate the vicarious sight of the landscape in the first 45 lines into its minimal terms, literally, our sight of the lines on the page—surely one of the most brutally honest self-reductions in the history of lyric. Its poignancy and its relevance, of course, loom even greater when we consider the peculiar circumstances of *The Prelude*’s "mode of existence as a literary work of art": a life-long, continually revised manuscript straining for the condition of printed book. Furthermore, the
reduction from paean to memorial “recording” prepares us for the slow decline of poetic fervor and will which is documented in the section immediately following his passage.

“To the open fields I told / A prophecy” has a special subtlety here, since it both carries over the mood of ebullience from the opening and, under pressure of the bookish transvaluation, contains an inevitable hint of one of the most despairing of prophecies to “the open fields.” Jeremiah, most compulsive of the prophets, in his despair at the ignorance of the people and of the King of Judea, is moved to address the stones themselves:

Why are they cast out, he and his seed, and are cast into a land which they know not? O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord: Write this man barren, a man that shall not prosper in his days. . . .

(Jeremiah 22:28–30)

Here the sense of the visual and another aspect of confessional verse, the sense of an auditor, inevitably coincide. For the prophecy told to the open fields carries an undeniable weight of reflexive irony. It is both an overreliance on the visual and a speech without the mediation of an auditor; assigning logical primacy to either error is impossible since each, really, is the cause of the other.

In fact, as we have already intimated, we can see here one of the most subtle methods of unification in *The Prelude*: Wordsworth’s drive toward the state of book, toward the minimal visual-literary experience, thence to transcend the state of bookishness in the same way we have seen the printed religious confessions striving to transform themselves from public commodity into effectual ways of salvation.

The book of *The Prelude* entitled “Books” (book 5) is, of course, notorious for having very little at all to do with books—a common estimate which we shall have occasion later to disagree with. But for the present we can accept it provisionally and proceed from book 1 to book 8, “Retrospect,” which is the most explicitly bookish section of *The Prelude*. Book 8 is a retrospect, in fact, in a curiously reflexive way: a retrospect within the great retrospect which is the whole poem. The poet literally looks back upon his written book and tries to evaluate it, and naturally, images of the
book present themselves to him. Reflecting on what he has said of the mysterious idyll of childhood, he pauses to address the hypothetical skeptics in his audience:

Call ye these appearances—
Which I beheld of shepherds in my youth,
The sanctity of Nature given to man—
A shadow, a delusion, ye who pore
On the dead letter, miss the spirit of things;
Whose truth is not a motion or a shape
Instinct with vital functions, but a block
Or waxen image which yourselves have made,
And ye adore!

(8. 293–301)

Wordsworth is not usually remarkable for his use of irony in the complex and highly punning sense given that term by the New Critics. But it is impossible not to notice here, in the context we have been sketching, the weight of the word block in this passage; coming as it does at the crucial end point of the line, it may suggest a block of wood from which one would carve an idol (a visual and solipsistic daemonism), a block in the sense of an occlusion of vision (in the way we have seen that, for Wordsworth, sight can block vision), or finally, referring back to the “dead letter” of the printed book, a block of type. And, as we have seen, all three overtones are necessary and inevitable ones to Wordsworth’s imagination.

This sense of the dead letter is continued and elaborated a few lines later when Wordsworth describes his first poetic efforts—which he here regards as a false, “sublime” lyricism, explicitly linking it to a “bookish” Muse. His soul, he says,

Ventured, at some rash Muse’s earnest call,
To try her strength among harmonious words;
And to book-notions and the rules of art
Did knowingly conform itself; there came
Among the simple shapes of human life
A wilfulness of fancy and conceit;
And Nature and her objects beautified
These fictions, as in some sort, in their turn,
They burnished her. From touch of this new power
Nothing was safe: the elder-tree that grew
Beside the well-known charnel-house had then
A dismal look: the yew-tree had its ghost,
That took his station there for ornament:
The dignities of plain occurrence then
Were tasteless, and truth's golden mean, a point
Where no sufficient pleasure could be found.
Then, if a widow, staggering with the blow
Of her distress, was known to have turned her steps
To the cold grave in which her husband slept,
One night, or haply more than one, through pain
Or half-insensate impotence of mind,
The fact was caught at greedily, and there
She must be visitant the whole year through,
Wetting the turf with never-ending tears.

It is doubtful that Wordsworth could have given us, as retrospect upon his half-completed confession, a more convincing or intelligent analysis of his poetic progress. We begin again with the reference to "book-notions" of a compulsively overblown Muse; and the crude folksiness of "book-notions" (a substitute for 1805's "The notions and the images of books") is certainly deliberate. From this center the poet proceeds in widening generalizations to describe not only his own earlier poetry but his critical sense of the poetry of the sublime. The feeling is strong that the sublime (and here, of course, Wordsworth is obviously including such poems as Guilt and Sorrow and The Borderers), through its exaggeration of the visual image, involves a daemonic fixation of human fate which is egocentric and debasing. It is a charge to which Wordsworth himself has often been liable from almost the first criticisms of his work; and his awareness of its terms here is the best refutation of the charge.

And finally, at the end of the section, we see the visual-daemonic attitude as a disfigurement of one of Wordsworth's most permanent symbols, the bereaved widow. This is a significant development in the passage, furthermore, bearing out what was said in the previous chapter about the daemonic as an occlusion of continuity. For as Wordsworth describes the phenomenon, it is pri-
marily a fixation of the eye and the sensibility militating against story: a fixation insisting that the hypothetical widow's grief be of such an overweening and unconsolable variety as to prevent her ever doing anything except feed it. It is a reduction of the widow's history to the conditions prescribed by a bookish muse, a conversion of story into text; and Wordsworth, after the manner of Luther, will insist that the story is of, but not in, the text.

The final book passage to be discussed here is the most subtle and far-reaching: it can serve as a reunification of our concern for the visible text with the more general problem of the visible world in *The Prelude*. And, since it occurs in the “Retrospect” as a reflection on the poet's first sojourn in London, it can also tie the argument back to the episode with which we began this chapter, the blind beggar incident in book 7. Wordsworth again, as in book 7, is talking about the experience of looking at a panorama until the eye defeats itself and becomes a “second-sight procession” of objects.

The curious traveler, who, from open day,
Hath passed with torches into some huge cave,
The grotto of Antiparos, or the Den
In old time haunted by that Danish Witch,
Yordas; he looks around and sees the vault
Widening on all sides; sees, or thinks he sees,
Erelong, the massy roof above his head,
That instantly unsettles and recedes,—
Substance and shadow, light and darkness, all
Commingled, making up a canopy
Of shapes and forms and tendencies to shape
That shift and vanish, change and interchange
Like spectres,—ferment silent and sublime!
That after a short space works less and less,
Till, every effort, every motion gone,
The scene before him stands in perfect view
Exposed, and lifeless as a written book!—
But let him pause awhile, and look again,
And a new quickening shall succeed, at first
Beginning timidly, then creeping fast,
Till the whole cave, so late a senseless mass,
Busies the eye with images and forms
Boldly assembled,—here is shadowed forth
From the projections, wrinkles, cavities,
A variegated landscape,—there the shape
Of some gigantic warrior clad in mail,
The ghostly semblance of a hooded monk,
Veiled nun, or pilgrim resting on his staff:
Strange congregation! yet not slow to meet
Eyes that perceive through minds that can inspire.

This, much like Bunyan's illusion that the church spire was falling on him, is a more or less common visual occurrence raised to the level of the numinous. The eye observing the walls of the cave passes through a kind of "centre of indifference," exhausting itself through its automatic attempts to focus until it does indeed perceive the "perfect view / Exposed, and lifeless as a written book." Perfect, we might add, in almost the same sense Wordsworth envisions the perfection of his auditor Coleridge at the end of *The Prelude*: unchanging and hence dead. Once through this experiential center, however, the second-sight procession of visual images presents itself, not as an imposition of the mind on reality but rather as a real interaction. The cave "busies the eye" and, in busying the eye rather than fixing it, allows latitude for the inspiring mind to impregnate and be impregnated by the structure of outward things. This is a microscopic version, in fact, of the suspension of the will to creation which will be seen to play such a crucial part in the Wordsworthian imaginative synthesis. For what Wordsworth had earlier called a "wilfulness of fancy and conceit"—the will, literally, to excite the mind through the agency of the sublime imagination—is here suspended. And the magic show of ghostly figures, far from being daemonic, comes upon the mind and the eye as a free and unexpected gift. In the same way, the "Retrospect" of book 8 and *The Prelude* as a whole may be seen as a written book studiously avoiding imaginative finality in order to prepare itself for the gift of imaginative wholeness which is its completion. In other words, what we have before described as *The Prelude*’s "straining for the condition of printed book" is equally a straining away from that condition—Wordsworth never being quite ready to stop revising and commit the book to the press—since it finally repudiates the visuality of the printed book and opts for an aural, antivisual, confessional mode of existence.
An enlightening countertype to Wordsworth's use of the book as symbol is found in Blake's Milton—in many ways Blake's own prelude to the final articulation of his myth in Jerusalem. Blake, fundamentally a more "traditional" moralist and stylist than Wordsworth, envisions at the end of Milton the descent of Milton's emanation Ololon, her imaginative reunion with Milton-Blake, and the subsequent apparition of the "true" Jesus of Blake's revolutionary imagination:

... with one accord the Starry Eight became
One Man Jesus the Saviour. wonderful! round his limbs
The Clouds of Ololon folded as a Garment dipped in blood
Written within & without in woven letters: & the Writing
Is the Divine Revelation in the Litteral expression:
A Garment of War, I heard it named the Woof of Six Thousand Years.

(plate 42, 10–15)

The Garment of Ololon, unmistakably, becomes here the literal expression which is the book, Milton itself; that is, the poem, on one level, is an attempt to transform the physical prop into the poetry which it contains and to challenge Luther's answer to the question, "Where is the Book?" Blake, as visual allegorist, painter, and above all, engraver of his own poetry, has a much more sympathetic—or at least, more ambiguous—attitude toward the sublime than does his great contemporary. We shall return to this important distinction between the two pioneers of English Romanticism in the next chapter, when we examine Wordsworth's formation of a distinctive language and linguistic mythology of human continuity.

But at this point it seems appropriate to examine, over the expanse of the whole Prelude, Wordsworth's growth in understanding of and control over the visual.

In tracing the history of the eye in Wordsworth's imaginative growth, we will actually be describing two movements of thought, one narrated, one narrative. For if The Prelude as exemplary history
is the story of how Wordsworth was once freed from enslavement to the daemonic and visual, *The Prelude* as confession is a present-tense imitation, a single long metaphor for that very process of enslavement and release. *The Prelude*, that is, is in a profound way an image of its own theme, self-referential in the way only the most radical acts of creation can be. Such a reading of the poem is quite in accordance with Wordsworth’s own distinction between the confessional “now” and the recorded “then”—if only we remember that it is the then which is the only available, necessary *image* of the liberated now:

A tranquillising spirit presses now
   On my corporeal frame, so wide appears
   The vacancy between me and those days
   Which yet have such self-presence in my mind,
   That, musing on them, often do I seem
   Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
   And of some other Being.

(2. 27–33)

We will be looking, then, for both a series to describe the progressive enslavement of the imagination to the power of the “tyrant eye” and a series to describe the present, redeemed imagination’s transcendence of that power for a higher kind of vision. And furthermore, since both these series finally refer to a single exemplary person (and since *The Prelude* is in every sense “one” poem), we shall look for a point of transcendence, or what the Christian imagination would call an access of grace, in which the two consciousnesses become in some sense one. This involves, in all, seven passages. I begin with the past-tense series describing the enslavement of the eye, since its content is the basic, raw material of Wordsworth’s experience in *The Prelude*.

The first stage of the series has already been implied: it is roughly traceable, on Wordsworth’s own authority, to his sojourn at Cambridge and the beginnings of a bookish or traditional eighteenth-century attitude toward nature. It is a time of waning imagination and increasing vacillation of the creative will:

It hath been told, that when the first delight
   That flashed upon me from this novel show
Had failed, the mind returned into herself;  
Yet true it is, that I had made a change  
In climate, and my nature's outward coat  
Changed also slowly and insensibly.  
Full oft the quiet and exalted thoughts  
Of loneliness gave way to empty noise  
And superficial pastimes; now and then  
Forced labour, and more frequently forced hopes;  
And, worst of all, a treasonable growth  
Of indecisive judgments, that impaired  
And shook the mind's simplicity.

(3. 205–216)

In spite of the young student's joyous discovery of the majesty of English literary history—most pleasantly realized in the picture of the young Wordsworth getting slightly tipsy drinking to the memory of Milton—something is beginning to go wrong here, something not wholly corrected by his visit back home over "Summer Vacation" (book 4).

The pivotal point in this series, however, is book 5, "Books"; and referring back once more to what we have said about Wordsworth's acute sense of the book as minimum visibility, I think we can see this section of The Prelude as being very much about its announced subject, in spite of frequent protestations about its rambling character. The most striking segment of book 5, of course, is the dream with which it opens. This passage has been subjected to exhaustive examination by Geoffrey Hartman. According to him,

Wordsworth's dream transcends the subject it is supposed to illustrate. The perishability of books contrasted with the imperishable character of nature (the book of God) is at most its occasional cause. Read in the context of The Prelude as a whole, rather than in the frame of its own preface and epilogue, it shows its kinship with experiences by which imagination reveals its distinctness from nature.¹²

For Hartman, that is, the implications of the dream are fundamentally benign: it represents one of the poet's few confrontations

with the autonomous, antinatural power of his imagination and therefore the permanent possibility of apocalypse as a constant undertheme of the poem.

But to say that the dream transcends the subject of books runs counter to one of the main assumptions of this study: that the printed book has a crucial imaginative importance for Wordsworth's mature poetry. And indeed the subject, "books," is intimately involved with the immediate narrative context of the dream. That context is Wordsworth's description of the perishability of imagination's repositories—books, paintings, temples—and his closest approach to a central theme of later Romantic poetry:

But all the meditations of mankind,
Yea, all the adamantine holds of truth
By reason built, or passion, which itself
Is highest reason in a soul sublime;
The consecrated works of Bard and Sage,
Sensuous or intellectual, wrought by men,
Twin labourers and heirs of the same hopes;
Where would they be? Oh! why hath not the Mind
Some element to stamp her image on
In nature somewhat nearer to her own?
Why, gifted with such powers to send abroad
Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail?

Implicitly, this is a vision of the end of the world, inextricably intertwined with a sense of the disparity between imagination and the products of imagination—an exaggerated summary of the "treasonable growth / Of indecisive judgments" we had seen growing in book 3. It also represents the real and immediate content of the dream that is to follow; the poet is here bracing himself to confront the dream, which is obviously one of his most unsettling experiences. But this is not the only strategy of containment and purification involved in presenting the dream. We must take note of the curious Chinese-box narrative in which the dream itself is set:

One day, when from my lips a like complaint
Had fallen in presence of a studious friend,
He with a smile made answer, that in truth
'Twas going far to seek disquietude;
But on the front of his reproof confessed
That he himself had oftentimes given way
To kindred hauntings. Whereupon I told,
That once in the stillness of a summer's noon,
While I was seated in a rocky cave
By the sea-side, perusing, so it chanced,
The famous history of the errant knight
Recorded by Cervantes, these same thoughts
Beset me, and to height unusual rose,
While listlessly I sate, and, having closed
The book, had turned my eyes toward the wide sea.

(5. 50–64)

The present Wordsworth relates how an earlier Wordsworth related how an earlier Wordsworth had the dream. It is an extremely careful placement of the experience in the memorial time of the book, very like that reduction of lyricism to print we have seen operating at other points in *The Prelude*. The reason is obvious, for the dream is, indeed, “a spot of eternity,”¹³ a usurpation of the imagination which would be dangerous if it were any closer to everyday consciousness. But whether it is a usurpation of the naturalistic imagination is doubtful. The progress of the dream is fairly straightforward: the dreamer, on a desert plain, encounters an Arab on a camel who reminds him of Don Quixote and who is carrying a stone and a bright shell. The Arab explains that the stone is “Euclid’s Elements” and that the shell is a book of apocalyptic poetry:

An Ode, in passion uttered, which foretold
Destruction to the children of the earth
By deluge, now at hand.

(5. 96–98)

The Arab is going to bury these two “books” against the destruction foretold. The dreamer wishes to accompany him, but the Arab flees, and as he flees, the dreamer, looking behind him, sees the gathering waters of catastrophe:

He left me: I called after him aloud;
He heeded not; but, with his twofold charge

¹³. Ibid., p. 227.
Still in his grasp, before me, full in view,
Went hurrying o’er the illimitable waste,
With the fleet waters of a drowning world
In chase of him; whereat I waked in terror,
And saw the sea before me, and the book,
In which I had been reading, at my side.

The final lines are another strategy of placement, of immediate contextualization, and they present a brilliant reversal of the dream image: the pursuing sea now before the dreamer, the obsessive and threatened book now resting at his side.

This reversal, furthermore, as an important change in the perspective of the dream, should weigh heavily in any attempt to interpret the dream. What does the sea in the dream represent, and how does it differ from the sea outside the dream, the sea Wordsworth confronts upon waking? Hartman feels that the sea in the dream is “Wordsworth’s recognition of a power in him (imagination) which implies and even prophesies nature’s death.”\(^\text{14}\) I think, however, we shall do better with the more straightforward interpretation of R. A. Foakes that “the sea here represents that necessary involvement in the life of the world from which it is impossible to preserve inviolate truth and poetry.”\(^\text{15}\) For the sea in this dream is not the apocalyptic “might of waters” so frequent in Wordsworth’s poetry but rather a symbol of another order altogether. It is not an image of sound at all, in fact, but a hard, bright visual image:

\[
\text{over half the wilderness diffused,} \\
\text{A bed of glittering light. . . .} \\
\]

And this is perhaps the most remarkable thing about the whole dream: that, instinctively or deliberately, Wordsworth makes it a daemonic reduction of his most powerful symbol of imaginative life. I am suggesting, to be precise, that the sea in the dream represents the destructive power of the phenomenal world—and that power apprehended under the aspect of the visual. The inter-

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pretation of the sea as imagination involves a contradiction, since the book of apocalyptic poetry is also certainly an imagination symbol, and neither dream- nor poetic-logic seems to countenance the kind of doubling such an interpretation suggests. The proper relationship between the dream book and the dream sea, however, is an important one. For, in perfect conformity with the logic of dreams, the prophetic ode uttered by the shell not only foretells but actually generates the destructive deluge: the apocalyptic impulse (here as elsewhere under the sign of the book, the visual, and the sublime) generates the sort of radical and daemonic split between the imagination and the phenomenal world which insures an “end of the world” situation and the consequent annihilation of all the products of human imagination. The dream is a parable of the poet’s confrontation with the world-destructive power of the imagination. And this confrontation is dramatized through techniques of visuality-as-daemonic and of self-reductive allegory. For the imagination Wordsworth here fears to confront is exactly the visual, sublime imagination implied by the dream book itself—and the unifying act of the dream is not the rising of the waters but the reading of the book, which, in the speaker’s waking context, contains the stuff of the dream, which generates the climactic moment of the dream itself, and which finally is brought back into manageable dimensions in the conclusion to the episode.

Wordsworth says, finally, that the quixotic Arab became a figure of great poignance for him:

A gentle dweller in the desert, crazed
By love and feeling, and internal thought
Protracted among endless solitudes;
Have shaped him wandering upon this quest!
Nor have I pitied him; but rather felt
Reverence was due to a being thus employed;
And thought that, in the blind and awful lair
Of such a madness, reason did lie couch'd.

(5. 145-152)

In fact, looking for the most general plot of the dream, we might see it as the curve of Wordsworth’s attempt to identify with the Arab and his inevitable separation from that exotic self-projection. The Arab obviously represents the visual-daemonic element we
have been discussing for two chapters now: indeed, he is the most obsessive character of Wordsworth's mature poetry (I except here the characters from "The White Doe of Rylstone"). And it is an essential part of the dream's meaning that Wordsworth cannot fully become his projection. Finally the apocalyptic waters are seen as being in pursuit of him, the Arab, but Wordsworth the dreamer shows surprisingly little concern for his own position vis-à-vis the deluge—an emblem of health that prepares for the final vision of the dreamer awakened and staring at the real waters before him.

Attempting now to reintegrate the dream passage into our putative series of transformations of the eye, we can see it pretty clearly as an increase of the power of the tyrant eye over the imagination's freedom and as an indication of Wordsworth's own growing awareness of the losses involved in the life of vision. The young poet is more and more torn between an orthodox eighteenth-century urge to participate in the poetry of the eye and a sense of betrayal of his own powers, of guilt at the terms involved in such poetry.

The passage represents an even more fascinating stage in Wordsworth's history, however, if one applies to it certain findings of twentieth-century psychoanalysis. Theodor Reik, in The Compulsion to Confess, discusses the dream mechanism in terms which significantly qualify Freud's pronouncements upon that subject. For Reik, while the content of the dream may represent uncensored wish fulfillment, the narrative form of the dream—what he calls the "dream-work"—may be taken to represent a confession of those wishes, that is, a self-generated acknowledgment of guilt at the heart of the dream itself. In this way, the dream of the Arab, which certainly represents Wordsworth's growing enslavement to the visual and the daemonic, is nevertheless presented in the form of an allegory—that very form which he elsewhere eschews so vigorously and which is the most blatant manifestation of the visual and the daemonic as literary resources. So that one may say of the dream of the Arab that, while manifesting the deteriorating power of the young Wordsworth's imagination, it manifests itself in such a self-criticizing form as to hold out a subtle hope for

release from psychic bondage. It is a hope which the conclusion of the episode, the waking to the natural sea and to continuity, certainly substantiates.

The third passage in our series is from book 9, “Residence in France.” The France books of The Prelude are a curious anomaly, for in any study of The Prelude as confession or poetic autobiography, they are bound to loom large in consideration of what was, for Wordsworth, the major conscious crisis of his life. But the books themselves—9, 10, and 11—have a singular air of exhaustion about them, as if written at a much lower state of agitation than anything else in the poem. It is a striking example of dichotomy between explicit and inner form in narrative; like Falstaff’s Mistress Quickly, one does not know where to have them.

The split, of course, is symptomatic of English Romantic poetry. For most of the English Romantics, as for Wordsworth, England’s intervention in the course of the French Revolution at the urging of Pitt and the Revolution’s degeneration into the Terror represented a national and personal trauma. And the creations directly traceable to this trauma—Blake’s Orc cycle, Coleridge’s “Fears in Solitude,” and Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound—are among the archetypes of the Romantic experience. But explicit poetic confrontations with the historical fact itself are both scarce and, when found, nearly always imaginative failures.

In terms of our history of the eye, perhaps the most important passage from the France section is the famous incident that occurred during one of Wordsworth’s ambulatory conversations with the revolutionary Beaupuis:

Hatred of absolute rule, where will of one
Is law for all, and of that barren pride
In them who, by immunities unjust,
Between the sovereign and the people stand,
His helper and not theirs, laid stronger hold
Daily upon me, mixed with pity too
And love; for where hope is, there love will be
For the abject multitude. And when we chanced
One day to meet a hunger-bitten girl,
Who crept along fitting her languid gait
Unto a heifer’s motion, by a cord
Tied to her arm, and picking thus from the lane
Its sustenance, while the girl with pallid hands
Was busy knitting in a heartless mood
Of solitude, and at the sight my friend
In agitation said, "Tis against that
That we are fighting," I with him believed
That a benignant spirit was abroad
Which might not be withstood, that poverty
Abject as this would in a little time
Be found no more, that we should see the earth
Unthwarted in her wish to recompense
The meek, the lowly, patient child of toil.

(9. 502-524)

It is a brilliant passage, since the excitement and nobility of
the visionary politics with which it concludes—more than a little
reminiscent of the tone of the Fourth Vergilian Eclogue—are firmly
qualified by the vision which inspires them. The peasant girl is
another of those rural solitaries who people Wordsworth's major
poetry and are such an important part of the fabric of his vision.
But in this case the final word on the image is given by Beaupuis—
"Tis against that / That we are fighting"—and the italicized that
perfectly conveys the mixture of scorn and humanitarianism implicit
in the revolutionary's attitude. To fight against that is to fight not
only against the social cause of the girl's misery but in some degree
against the vision itself—to transform it into an allegorical, i.e.,
hortatory, image which can be solved or alleviated only by being
banished. It is an attitude which, besides being revolutionary, is
also very close to the myth of conventional pastoral; and as we
shall see in the next chapter, Wordsworth's final attitude toward
traditional pastoral is one of rejection.\(^{17}\)

In this passage, then, Wordsworth's subjection to the power of
the untransfigured eye has reached a condition much like that of the
humanitarian revolutionary Marmaduke with whom we began this
chapter: a dead-level confusion which inevitably thwarts itself,
since it cannot transcend the world of the eye for any broader
form, and which effectively eliminates the oppressed with the
oppression and stifles imagination with its own materials. Words-

\(^{17}\) It is interesting in this connection that Marxism itself contains a strong
pastoral sensibility in its vision of proletarian revolution.
worth later writes of his disillusionment with the course of the Revolution and subsequent abandonment of humanitarian goals:

I speak in recollection of a time
When the bodily eye, in every stage of life
The most despotic of our senses, gained
Such strength in me as often held my mind
In absolute dominion.

I roamed from hill to hill, from rock to rock,
Still craving combinations of new forms,
New pleasure, wider empire for the sight,
Proud of her own endowments, and rejoiced
To lay the inner faculties asleep.

But it would be a mistake to see this crisis simply as a revulsion against his revolutionary fervor: for his espousal and rejection of the Revolution are part of one movement and share the common ground of a hypervisual imaginative despair.

This brings us to the point of Wordsworth’s recovery, around 1798, through the spiritual ministrations of Dorothy and Coleridge, and brings us equally to the last books and the first book of The Prelude, since the end of the poem is a return to the poetic present of the opening lines and a vindication of their exuberant optimism. It also brings us to the second series of eye passages we set ourselves to describe, those which refer not to the history of Wordsworth’s developing vision but to the characteristic process of that vision in its reformed state. Here we may move somewhat more quickly than before, since the general morphology of that process has already been described from a great number of perspectives. In its starkest form, as seen in the Blind Beggar passage from book 7, it is a three-part progress:

Fixation of the eye on the object in its surface or daemonic aspects, leading to a

Darkening of the eye, and consequent nonvisual (primarily aural) admonishment by the inner powers of imagination, issuing in a
Transformed vision of the object, not as image, but as integral part, of the imaginative salvation of the personality.

We can readily identify three passages in *The Prelude* which appear, in the extended narrative time of the whole poem, to correspond to these stages. The first, of course, is the celebrated “false dawn” of *Prelude* 1, roughly the first half of the book, describing Wordsworth’s failure to celebrate the present joy of his release from the city into the country. A great deal has been written about the opening of *The Prelude*; it probably remains, no matter how many readings we give the whole poem, the single most fascinating section of the work. In one of the most influential essays on book 1, M. H. Abrams identifies the “correspondent breeze” of 1. 35, as a major symbol not only of Wordsworth’s career but of the entire Romantic movement. Abrams’s essay is the best one we have on the relations between Romanticism and radical Protestant traditions of thought—especially under the aspect of the Augustinian influence. But however important the correspondent breeze is in the history of the period, in *Prelude* 1 it is inevitably linked to an imaginative failure by the poet, his inability to sustain the powerful lyric confidence with which he begins. Richard Stang, in a valuable essay on the same passage, indicates why the breeze is an image of defeat:

There is a very real reason why the breeze, which seems like a heavenly visitant, does not act as the quickening wind, the breath of the spirit. Such an impulse cannot come from without. The whole logic of the poem and the position Wordsworth is developing at this point in his career demands that it be an inner movement of his own spirit, *i.e.*, the stream which is his total past, and that it be unconscious.

“Unconscious” is perhaps an inappropriate word to describe the state of mind Wordsworth is evolving in *The Prelude* for his imaginative health. It is nevertheless true that the failure of the opening of *The Prelude* is profoundly involved with an act of overweening, conscious will on the part of the poet, a desire to

convert the present prospect into immediate lyrical energy and, thus, a fixation of the eye. As Wordsworth describes his rambling in the countryside:

Content and not unwilling now to give
A respite to this passion, I paced on
With brisk and eager steps; and came, at length,
To a green shady place, where down I sate
Beneath a tree, slackening my thoughts by choice,
And settling into gentler happiness.
'Twas autumn, and a clear and placid day,
With warmth, as much as needed, from a sun
Two hours declined towards the west; a day
With silver clouds, and sunshine on the grass,
And in the sheltered and the sheltering grove
A perfect stillness. Many were the thoughts
Encouraged and dismissed, till choice was made
Of a known Vale, whither my feet should turn,
Nor rest till they had reached the very door
Of the one cottage methought I saw.
No picture of mere memory ever looked
So fair. . . .

(1. 59–76)

The last lines, with their implied abandonment of the power of memory and consequent reliance on present sight for inspiration, are unmistakably bad auspices for what is to follow. This is a Wordsworth attempting to turn nature into sacrament—visible outward sign of grace. We can see the first hundred lines of Prelude 1 as an inversion of the sort of nature poetry which finds its finest expression in Marvell’s “The Garden” or Upon Appleton House. The reason it is doomed to failure in terms of Wordsworth’s characteristic vision, furthermore, is an index of the distance between the conservative Puritanism which informs Marvell’s vision and the radical Protestantism which informs Wordsworth’s. The sacramental stance which leads Wordsworth to declare,

Poetic numbers came
Spontaneously to clothe in priestly robe
A renovated spirit singled out,
Such hope was mine, for holy services.

(1. 51–54)
is, as we have pointed out before, a kind of daemonism. And the extent of its daemonic force is made clearer later in book 1 when Wordsworth, under the spell of his present joy, projects a series of subjects for his epic, all of whom are famous and bloody conquerors, prime avatars of the daemonic, fixated will to domination.

So much, then, for the stage of the fixating of the eye. The middle stage of the process occurs in a brilliant passage beginning book 7—the center of the 1850 poem. Wordsworth is noting the fact that for too long the promised work has lain unattended:

Through the whole summer have I been at rest,  
Partly from voluntary holiday,  
And part through outward hindrance. But I heard,  
After the hour of sunset yester-even,  
Sitting within doors between light and dark,  
A choir of redbreasts gathered somewhere near  
My threshold,—minstrels from the distant woods  
Sent in on Winter’s service, to announce,  
With preparation artful and benign,  
That the rough lord had left the surly North  
On his accustomed journey. The delight,  
Due to this timely notice, unawares  
Smote me, and, listening, I in whispers said,  
“Ye heartsome Choristers, ye and I will be  
Associates, and, unscared by blustering winds,  
Will chant together.” Thereafter, as the shades  
Of twilight deepened, going forth, I spied  
A glow-worm underneath a dusky plume  
Or canopy of yet unwithered fern,  
Clear-shining, like a hermit’s taper seen  
Through a thick forest. Silence touched me here  
No less than sound had done before; the child  
Of summer, lingering, shining, by herself,  
The voiceless worm on the unfrequented hills,  
Seemed sent on the same errand with the choir  
Of Winter that had warbled at my door,  
And the whole year breathed tenderness and love.

(7. 16–42)

This, a deliberate reprise of the “false dawn” of The Prelude’s opening, is a magnificent version of the darkening of the eye—not
only the personal eye of the poet but the eye also of day and indeed
of the whole year, since winter is setting in. It startlingly converts
the images of book 1 into sounds: birdsong and the primal sound,
silence itself. The effect is a purification and "outering" of the
 correspondent breeze; for while in book 1 it is the interior breeze
which turns into a tempest vexing its own creation, here it is the
external gust of winter which brings turbulence and which leads
to the poet's renewed dedication to his task:

The last night's genial feeling overflowed
Upon this morning, and my favourite grove,
Tossing in sunshine its dark boughs aloft,
As if to make the strong wind visible,
Makes in me agitations like its own,
A spirit friendly to the Poet's task,
Which we will now resume with lively hope,
Nor checked by aught of tamer argument
That lies before us, needful to be told.

(7. 43-51)

The breeze comes in a state of suspension of the will rather than
an access of willed energy—in fact, as a gift of grace.

But the darkening of the eye is not the whole Wordsworthian
process of vision. There is also a final stage at which the sense of
sight is transformed by the darkening and becomes a "true" poetic
fact. The effect is that described by a confessant such as the
eighteenth-century Quaker Elizabeth Webb, the conversion of a
previously daemonic nature into something very different through
the act of confession:

And I remember after I had made public confession to the goodness
of God, my soul was as if it had been in another world: it was so
enlightened and enlivened by the divine love, that I was in love
with the whole creation of God. . . . So everything began to preach
to me; the very fragrant herbs, and beautiful, innocent flowers had
a speaking voice in them to my soul, and things seemed to have
another relish with them than before.20

20. In Thomas Chalk, ed., Autobiographical Narratives of the Convince-
ment and Other Religious Experience of Samuel Crisp, Elizabeth Webb, Evan
Bevan, Margaret Lucas, and Frederick Smith (London, 1848), pp. 68–69.
Wordsworth is a considerably more tough-minded observer of the phenomenal world than Mistress Webb or most Quaker and Methodist religionists, but we can see the same basic shape of experience in a passage like the first spot of time of book 12.

The spots of time, of course, raise perhaps the single most vexed question in *Prelude* criticism, and their rich and elusive suggestiveness may never—and never need—be satisfactorily explicated. Their first appearance, in book 12, is one of Wordsworth’s most characteristic articulations of interaction between mind and world:

There are in our existence spots of time,
That with distinct pre-eminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence depressed
By false opinion and contentious thought,
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,
In trivial occupations, and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired;
A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
That penetrates, enables us to mount,
When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.
This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
Among those passages of life that give
Profoundest knowledge to what point, and how,
The mind is lord and master—outward sense
The obedient servant of her will.

(12. 208-223)

The 1805 version (book 11) has for the last three lines:

We have had deepest feeling that the mind
Is lord and master, and that outward sense
Is but the obedient servant of her will.

And however much the more ambiguous construction of 1850 may be a result of Wordsworth’s imaginative decline, I think it is also undeniably more appropriate to what follows. For the spots of time represent, in the series we have been describing, the return of the soul from the darkening of the eye to a new and fruitful relationship with the world of sight. The spots of time are a recovery, not only in the narrated sequence of Wordsworth’s enslavement
to the tyrant eye, but also in the narrative sequence (of fixation-
darkening-reillumination) we have been tracing. The phrase “spot
of time” is in fact a deliberate version of the kind of verbal mis-
understanding of problems of time that Ludwig Wittgenstein liked
to call a “muddle,” imposing a spatial, visual, scenic definition on
a dimension of experience which is fundamentally devoid of all
three elements. But, to exploit for the moment the possibilities of
typography, it is important for us to understand that these are not
spots of time as much as they are spots of time. That is, their
renovating virtue proceeds from the fact that they are visual mani-
festations seen precisely under the sign of the temporal, as units of
continuity, rather than under the sign of the visual. They reproduce
the difference we noted in Wordsworth’s two words for the blind
beggar in London: not fixed (i.e., daemonic, precarious surface
disruptions) but steadfast (the “fixed” as viewed primarily in a
time continuum). In the first spot of time, for example, Wordsworth
tells how as a boy he became lost, and in his attempts to get home:

Came to a bottom, where in former times
A murderer had been hung in iron chains.
The gibbet-mast had mouldered down, the bones
And iron case were gone; but on the turf,
Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought,
Some unknown hand had carved the murderer’s name.
The monumental letters were inscribed
In times long past; but still, from year to year,
By superstitition of the neighborhood,
The grass is cleared away, and to this hour
The characters are fresh and visible:
A casual glance had shown them, and I fled,
Faltering and faint, and ignorant of the road:
Then, reascending the bare common, saw
A naked pool that lay beneath the hills,
The beacon on the summit, and, more near,
A girl, who bore a pitcher on her head,
And seemed with difficult steps to force her way
Against the blowing wind. It was, in truth,
An ordinary sight; but I should need
Colours and words that are unknown to man,
To paint the visionary dreariness
Which, while I looked all round for my lost guide,
Invested moorland waste, and naked pool,
The beacon drowning the lone eminence,
The female and her garments vexed and tossed
By the strong wind. When, in the blessed hours
Of early love, the loved one at my side,
I roamed, in daily presence of this scene,
Upon the naked pool and dreary crags,
And on the melancholy beacon fell
A spirit of pleasure and youth's golden gleam;
And think ye not with radiance more sublime
For these remembrances, and for the power
They had left behind? So feeling comes in aid
Of feeling, and diversity of strength
Attends us, if but once we have been strong.

(12. 235–271)

It is necessary to quote this very great passage at length, in order to observe all the strains of imagery and thought which find release and renewal in it. The monumental letters, kept fresh through time by the strong power of local superstition, represent a reprise and transformation of the minimum visibility of the beggar's label and of writing itself. And the peasant girl, struggling against the wind, is almost certainly a visionary, antidaemonic reprise of the French peasant Wordsworth had encountered with Beaupuis. Both are resolutely antiallegorical and carefully placed in a context of permanence which works subtly against the linear movement implicit in the passage.

Janet Spens has written a highly valuable commentary on this spot of time in her study of The Faerie Queene, noting that a possible source for the image of the girl with the pitcher is Spenser's figure of Corceca, or Superstition, encountered by Una in FQ 1. 3. 3–12, but that Wordsworth's treatment of the figure is a nearly complete inversion of the allegorical method. And when Wordsworth notes that later, in a completely different mood (being "found" in love rather than lost from his father), he revisited the same scene and drew a special imaginative strength from it, he is asserting finally that the scene, and implicitly all the visual world, is benign when encountered as an avatar of time and of the con-

tinuity of the integrated self. In other words, the world of evidences is safe for the regenerated man precisely because he has no need of them as evidences. It is notable that he repeats all the elements of the scene twice, as if insisting on their visual permanence within his reintegrated consciousness—except, of course, for the perishable and central figure of the solitary peasant girl. But the girl’s very omission in the second rehearsal of the scene is an assertion of her continued presence as a spot of time: much as the song of the Solitary Reaper continues, though finished, in the song of the retrospective narrator.

These, then, are the two series in the history of the eye which we set out to trace. The seventh passage is the point of transcendence, of the merging of the two series in a single unitary vision, the moment at which the poem redeems its beginning and takes full possession of its implicit form. It is the passage describing the ascent of Mount Snowdon in book 14. But to discuss it is also to discuss the second phrase of the formula I have drawn for *The Prelude* as confession: remembered vision, disciplined and unified by narrative speech. And to touch on this matter is also to confront, finally, the inmost confessional form of the work, its transfiguration of language into mythology, of memorial narrative into agency of salvation.